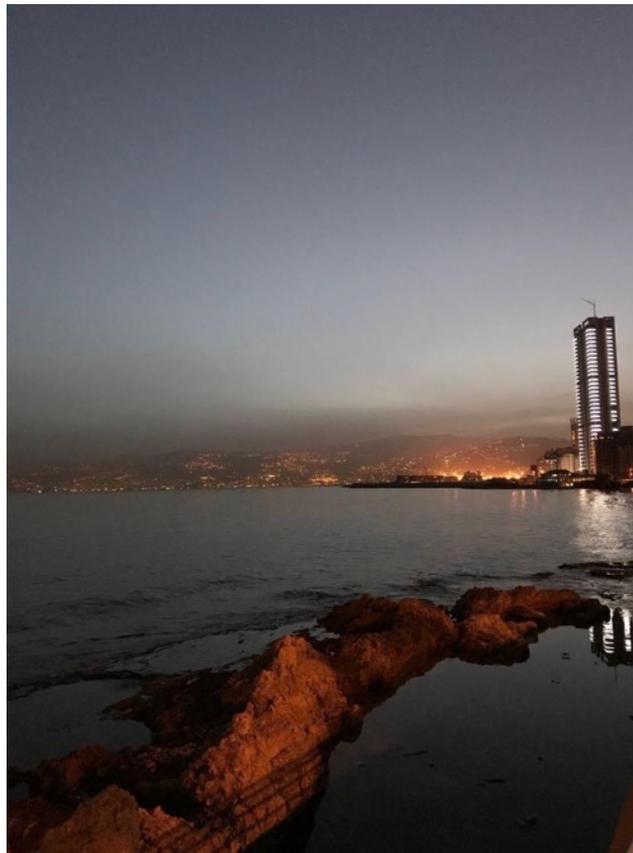


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After the Sea: a Photo Essay



I want to begin with a poem that I wrote after our boat excursion:

Full Fathom Five

So many hours I spent as a child
Building common castles in the sand
On beaches that were over-developed and bland
Collecting shells and never acting wild.

So many writers turn us toward the sea
With language that both frightens and inspires
Confront its majesty, its beauty, and its ire
Its rime, its reason, its rhythm, and its glee

So many scientists explore the salt,
Study the creatures living in the sand
In a language that I cannot understand
But value, and acknowledge who's at fault.

Yet my heart still soars whenever I face those waves
Sometimes the familiar moves us, dares, and saves.

This photo essay aims to tell the story of two images, taken approximately 12 hours apart within walking distance from each other. The first image was taken on our class boat trip--we embarked on our trip from a traditional fisherman port in small boats carrying four, in the middle of the afternoon on a warm sunny day. Later on that same day I stayed up all night with some close friends, walking around the Corniche, and eventually watching the sunrise. At both hours, the color of the sea was utterly enchanting: the deep saturated teal of daytime was replaced by a shimmering golden navy at dawn. Even in the dark, I could see the impact of human enterprise on the sea; the rocks were covered with plastic bottles, bags, and candy wrappers. As I waited for the sun to rise, I had time to observe the many people who spend time at the Corniche at such a bewitching hour, and I was shocked to see that the Corniche was still bustling with activity. After

some reflection, it is ultimately clear to me that the story these two images tell is one of juxtaposition and fluctuation, a story of both implicit and explicit resistance to the illegal and unethical privatization of Beirut's shores.

As we listened to the dictaphone tour podcast during our boat trip I was struck by how the shores of Beirut have come to tell a narrative of contested cultural heritage and capitalist brutality. I was immediately reminded of guest lecturer Abir Saksouk's talk titled "Developing or Destroying Beirut's Coast?" Saksouk told us that the research and performance collective titled "The Sea is Mine" (هذا البحر لي) conducted research on space from a multidisciplinary perspective, employing legal research, ethnographic accounts, and interviews with residents to learn about residents' relationship to natural sites. Perhaps most interestingly, Saksouk talked to us about sites that were not necessarily considered public parks but held important cultural value. Saksouk stressed to us not just the illegality, but also the deep immorality--of the contemporary development of Beirut shores. Indeed, as we boated around I was able to see the effects of such development: in the first photograph, you can see the hypermodern, ultra-developed coast, contrasted with small-scale fishermen deploying a simple set-up on an offshore rock, using the sea and in a sense, claiming it as their own-- a small act of resistance to the private shore. This is a marginal economy, to be sure, but it reminds us of how regularly and doggedly individuals and small groups will resist the rapacious appetite of capitalist development.

The work of "The Sea is Mine" resonates with the maritime theory of Iain Chambers, who argues for a "fluid archive" in his essay "Maritime Criticism and Lessons from the Sea," asserting that the fluid archive "suggests a historiography of not how things actually were, as though fixed in time, the impossible objects of historicist desire and 'scientific' pretensions, but

rather of how things exist in a complex but contemporary space that we call the world” (Chambers 6). Here, “The Sea is Mine” project comes to function in and of itself as a fluid archive--the goal is not to draw immutable maps or final versions but to capture the contingency of life at the edge of the sea.

In their essay “Capitalism and the Sea: Sovereignty, Territory, and Appropriation in the Global Ocean,” Liam Campling and Alejandro Colas discuss how “Oceanic property” is “contested” (7), and they use the phrase “terraqueous territoriality” to show the “relationship between capitalism as a social formation” and “the sea as a natural force” (Campling et al 1). This is sharply manifested in a case study of Beirut: the sea is never from sight and acts, at once, as a “natural” resource, a workplace, and a social and economic battleground where multinational corporations face small acts of resistance on a round-the-clock basis.

It is important to theorize, in a deeply historicized way, how these moments of contact--defined by asymmetrical power relations--have been organized on the shores of Beirut. As such, I want to apply Renisa Mawani’s research on settler colonialism to the illegal privatization of Beirut’s shores. In a sense the privatized forces of capital are the successor to the imperial power of French and British colonialism. In her essay “Law, Settler Colonialism, and ‘the Forgotten Space’ of Maritime Worlds,” Mawani comments that if “settler colonialism is a “distinct social, cultural, and historical formation with ongoing political effects” then “rethinking the dispossession of indigenous peoples across land and sea can never be a historical project alone. Indigenous scholars... have emphasized the interdependence of land and sea as sites of indigenous histories and cosmologies and as spaces of colonial violence” (Mawani 125). Rather

than indulge in older modes of cultural analysis that construct distinct terrestrial and maritime histories, Mawani's work reminds us to look directly at the space where the land meets the water.

It is clear from these two pictures that Beirut's sea always retains its natural force while never becoming detached by all of the human (and especially commercial) activity that structures it. In fact, I would argue that the sea (and the shore) reflect human projects in this way both literally and figuratively: this is demonstrated most obviously in the second photograph, where you can see the reflection of a huge skyscraper in the water. But we do not just see the negative impact that humans have on the space where the sea meets the land. Though its status is complicated to say the least, Dalieh has always "been a place for "swimming, promenading and fishing that is engraved in the memory of Beirut and the Beirutis, a landmark and a landscape heritage ensemble that is of ecological and social significance" (The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche). I am confident that activists and even everyday citizens will continue to advocate for the sea, giving it the role it *should* have: a communal space for denizens of Beirut. In 2014, activists from the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh went so far as to sue the state over illegal privatization of Beirut's shores, alleging that the state had "illegally provided tens of thousands of square meters of public shoreline to well-connected investors" (Beirut Report). While so much nefarious corporate activity is carried out in hidden private spaces, my pictures of the shoreline in Beirut help remind us of how the battle over the Sea cannot help but remain public.

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