

CRITICS' FORUM
PHOTOGRAPHY

**BOURJ HAMMOUD AS A PALIMPSEST OF CULTURE
IN ARA MADZOUNIAN'S "BIRDS' NEST"**

by Talar Chahinian

Having emerged out of the refugee camps near the eastern port of Beirut, the district of Bourj Hammoud holds a unique place in the history of post-genocide dispersion and in the making of a collective Armenian diasporic identity. Often referred to as the "Armenian quarter" or the "Armenian ghetto" of Beirut, the small plot of land served as a site where lost Armenian villages and towns were resurrected in the form of renamed neighborhoods in the aftermath of 1915. The vibrant and diverse community forged in the following decades allows Bourj Hammoud to be read as a metaphor for the possibility of "Little Armenias." Ara Madzounian's "Birds' Nest: A Photographic Essay of Bourj Hammoud" captures the almost mythical regard with which Bourj Hammoud is revered as a place of origin for diasporic belonging.

Madzounian, who is a native of Bourj Hammoud, moved to Los Angeles at the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. "Birds' Nest" exhibits a collection of photographs taken between 2008 and 2009, upon the photographer's return to his hometown to visit his terminally ill brother, to whom the book is dedicated. With his camera, he documents the neighborhoods of the district at the threshold of dramatic changes to its demographic landscape due to the rapid migration of the Armenian population. Although the poignant photographs archive and document, they do not reflect an attempt to search for or to preserve a sense of a lost past. Neither do they project a tone of protest against time's relentless flow. Instead, they are graceful portraits that bow to the transitional nature of their present moment. Through them, the residents of Bourj Hammoud speak, often looking defiantly at the camera, challenging our outsider's gaze.

While the photographs capture the district's fleeting present, the short essays that accompany the collection of photographs are filled with nostalgia for Bourj Hammoud of the past. Written by filmmakers, cultural critics, writers, and actors living in the western diaspora communities, the essays highlight the cultural significance of "the Bourj Hammoud phenomenon" (39), as Razmig Shirinian puts it, within the history of the Armenian diaspora. They characterize the district of the pre-civil war years as a site for nation-building in the diaspora, for the birth of new myths and street culture, and for the revival of schools, churches and theaters.

As many of the essayists note, the notion of contradiction is key to understanding the essence of Bourj Hammoud. The Los Angeles-based writer Vahe Berberian remembers fondly the commercial spaces of the district where "cultures merged, intertwined and became Armenianized" (107) and where one could find, on a storefront,

an Armenian genocide poster next to a poster of Raquel Welch or a poster of the famous hero St. Vartan Mamigonian positioned next to a picture of Elvis Presley. Madzounian's photographs echo a similar sentiment and present Bourj Hammoud as a space of convergence for contradictory elements. Old, worn-out building facades and cluttered telephone lines form the backdrop of images that showcase urban mobility and digital technologies. The elderly and the young lay equal claim to both internal and external spaces of the district. A photo, for instance, which peers into a bakery through a street window depicts three generations involved in making *lahmajun*, a popular regional dish made of a thin piece of dough topped with minced meat and herbs. In another photograph, an old man sits in front of an artisan's shop, amidst handcrafted traditional brass goods and a hand-welded *manghal* (Arabic for barbecue grill). In the reflection of the store window behind him, an advertising billboard glares back at the viewer, juxtaposing the worlds of tradition and modernity. Billboards, signs, and storefront names in general appear in multiple languages throughout the photographs. In fact, Arabic, French, English, and Armenian are mingled together so seamlessly that they eventually appear as interchangeable languages in the background of the shots.

Many of the photographs and the places they feature are presented as interchangeable or indistinguishable. While the images demonstrate the centrality of micro-neighborhoods to Bourj Hammoud, the photographs themselves are untitled, though an index in the back of the book names their district origins. A satellite image of Bourj Hammoud prefaces the collection, and the series of photographs that follows maintains the aerial view, while zooming in further and further. This approach offers the viewer the opportunity to peer and peek. Through the photographer's lens, the viewer stands at a threshold and looks into stores, bakeries, and restaurants or peeks at balconies and rooftops. In these liminal spaces, thresholds are crossed from the opposite direction as well: the contents of buildings always seem to be spilling into the streets.

In Madzounian's photographs, the streets of Bourj Hammoud perform, reverberating with Hagop Papazian's essay that refers to the district as "street theater" and explores the influence of cinema on the Bourj Hammoud community of the '50s and '60s. Similarly, the French-Armenian actor Simon Abkarian writes of his childhood memories saying, "the real film was not inside the theater, but outside in the streets" (93). The collection showcases images of vendors, artisans, shoe shiners, mechanics, shoppers, and backgammon players occupying sidewalks, against the backdrop of cars, scooters, and laundry hanging from balconies.

While the colorful images bring to life the smells and sounds of a bustling, working-class city center, they simultaneously invite the viewer to do his or her own digging. The photographs require chipping away, unpacking. Their subtext lies in the layering of content captured in one shot, which demands a confrontation with the invisible history of the place. For example, bullet holes in the facade of background buildings may go unnoticed at first glance but remind the viewer of the 15-year civil war that the city's inhabitants survived in their recent past.

Madzounian's photographs in "Birds' Nest" function as palimpsests, revealing in the forefront as much as they do in the hidden layers underneath. They document Bourj Hammoud's capacity to rewrite itself with the ebb and flow of migration and in keeping up with the times as well as holding onto tradition. The work is an important archive of a district that has played a key role in the making of the Armenian diaspora's narrative. Yet Bourj Hammoud, which the filmmaker Hrayr Eulmessekiian calls "a synecdoche for the diaspora" (133), speaks to the broader narrative of the region. In the book's preface, Joanne Nucho claims that to understand the histories that have produced the Lebanon of today, we have to understand Bourj Hammoud. The statement highlights the relevance and timeliness of Madzounian's project and weighs heavy in light of the rapidly changing demographic landscape of Lebanon as a result of the influx of Syrian refugees.

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