

Responding to *Negotiating Conflict in Lebanon: Bordering Practices in a Divided Beirut* in Three Acts

ACT ONE

Two women, academics and artists, meet during the time of the 2020 University and College Union strikes to discuss a book they have just read and been asked to review. They meet in a café on a cold wet day in February in central London. While their closed umbrellas drip rainwater onto the floor at their feet, they wait for their coffee.

WOMAN 1: What a book.

WOMAN 2: What a book!

WOMAN 1: Where to begin? ... I mean, where to begin responding?

The barista signals that their coffees are ready. Woman 1 leaves the table momentarily to get them.

WOMAN 2: We could begin with the way Hafeda comes up with four particular strategies for determining bordering practices in Beirut and somehow work with those?

WOMAN 1: Yes, they are lovely. The hiding, the crossing, the translating and the matching.

WOMAN 2: Does it matter that neither of us have ever been to Lebanon?

WOMAN 1: But I think that is actually one of the things that makes the book so interesting to me, that we have never been. Instead, I encounter Beirut and its many borders through his eyes, through his descriptions, his explanations and his art works. Through photographs of car dashboards, windows, of streets and buildings from balconies, from film stills, from maps, from posters, from extracts of conversations, both overheard and carefully planned. Through his words about sounds, about people, about buildings and street corners. Through what he calls his practices -

WOMAN 2: - bordering practices -

WOMAN 1: And also, what comes through all of these, is his love for the city and the people of Beirut, in spite of, or perhaps because of the political-sectarian conflict that pervades their lives.

WOMAN 2: Yes. And that conflict throws up borders everywhere.

WOMAN 1: Everywhere. In space and time.

WOMAN 2: And in response to them, the borders everywhere, he invents.

WOMAN 1: Yes! Exactly, he invents!

She picks up her copy of the book, and opens it on a page she has marked with a green post-it note. She chooses the odd phrase to read aloud.

He invents... practices that displace and transform... That work across time and shuffle temporal relationships... That construct associations between different pasts, presents and futures that are restricted in the current politics of Lebanon.

They both leaf through their copies of the book in silence. Small pools of rainwater have formed under the table.

WOMAN 2: To respond to the book, to his works, now, then we might also construct our own association with Hafeda himself, who we've never met, and the city he describes, which we have never been to.

WOMAN 1: And we might invent, also, in the spirit of his work

TOGETHER: Hafeda? Mohamad Hafeda? Are you there?

WOMAN 1: Does it matter that we have never been to Beirut but that we are still inspired by your work and want to respond to it from here, where the borders we encounter every day are so different?

Silence

WOMAN 2: We would like to celebrate your work.

WOMAN 1: How we read your work.

Long silence. The women sip their coffee. And then finish it. Pools continue forming. The rain shows no sign of abating outside.

WOMAN 2: Tell me about a border in your life right now.

ACT TWO

We made the following in direct response to spending time beside Hafeda's work The Chosen Two, or rather his research into and then description and documentation of his gallery installation, which makes up the first chapter of the book. We were inspired by the quiet, careful, poetic and witty way he approaches the administrative borders that divide the apparently unified Mazraa district. These borders, which include the electoral, the inherited, the demographic, the numeric, the urban and the cultural, are represented in official documents and procedures in one way, but negotiated in very different ways by the local residents and political parties. Although the gallery work is multimedia (involving video projection, audio, and vinyl text on walls) and multi-layered (playing with translation and the blurring of the fictional and the real, the moving and the still, the visible and the invisible), we chose to pay homage to one medium and one layer in particular to respond to a different border that is preoccupying us at the moment. We wondered what it might be like to sit down opposite the Vice-Chancellor of a University where the UCU is striking and ask him or her some simple questions in the calm manner that Hafeda asks questions of the two mukhtars, one real, one fictional, in his work. We have stolen several of his questions word-for-word. Like Hafeda, we are interested in the way that the answers, although not provided, are implicit in the questions and the way they are asked.

ACT THREE

- Q. Vice-Chancellor, who is the Vice-Chancellor?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, where do you think the borders of the university are?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, who are the people that work in the university? Have they changed?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, are those who work in the university the same as those who make the decisions?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, has the picket line divided us into two sides?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, how do we create meaningful and sustainable discussions together?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about equality in the work place?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, they say an innocent kiss is the sign of love; what is the secret of this kiss?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what does an unsustainable workload feel like to you?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about care in the work place?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what do you really care about?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about our Early Career Researchers?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what do you think about women and black and minority ethnic staff facing significant pay discrimination?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, where is the love?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what do you think about our students?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, do you remember the first teacher that ever inspired you?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, do you realise how much we care for the students?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what should we do about my mental health and yours?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, why do people say that you should only befriend those you have had a fight with before?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, do you see a winning side here? Is there such a thing as a winner anyway?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what do you think about student satisfaction underpinning our ranking?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about pay erosion?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about precarious contracts?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what about my pension?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, why is fate inevitable no matter how hard we try to avoid it?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, does it matter to you that I am a woman?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, does it matter to you what colour my skin is?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, does it matter to you how my body works?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what do you think about misogyny and racism, really?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, can we think of ways, together, to combat the Home Office hostile environment policy?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, how are you making a flourishing higher education sector?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what happened to learning being free?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what happened to fostering curiosity?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what happened to fostering a creative, imaginative and enriched society?
- Q. Vice-Chancellor, what might it mean to live in a world without borders and hierarchies?