

**INTRO:** This is part two of my interview with Zein El-Amine. If you have not yet listened to [part one](#), I highly suggest you go back and do that first. It was [episode #201](#), and it provides some really important context for this episode. If you have already listened to part one, then please enjoy part two of my interview with Zein El-Amine.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I definitely want to dive into some of these amazing studies abroad trips that you've done. And I'm wondering if you can just talk about that and maybe just start with the very first trip that you took.

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure. I had the pleasure, I told you, of working with John Schmidt, who was the director of the Writer's House, and she wanted to design study abroad trips for the students. She came from a progressive Quaker background and very politically astute and open minded and believed highly in travel as part of education of college students. So, I had read the Yacoubian Building, which is an Egyptian novel that was a bestseller in like 2004, I believe, and it was about a building that exists in Cairo. You should actually watch the Yacoubian Building, a movie which is available on YouTube, and it'll give you the history in the first five minutes of that building. But basically, what's cool about that is, it's not the best novel. It's not like the classic Naguib Mahfouz writing, but it was a springboard to jump into all aspects of politics and Egyptian society.

So, people lived there are old money, there were middle class dentists, there were the poorest of the poor living on the rooftop and still are. And so, there were all aspects. I said, how about if we build a study abroad from that? And that expanded, of course, to reading Nagib Mahfouz for listeners who don't know, he's the Most prominent Arab writer and won the Nobel Prize for literature. And we also had them read Season of Migration to the North. And we also had them read Women at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi. And we traveled throughout Egypt. So, we would go to Cairo and then we would take the train down to Luxor. And then from Luxor we go to Sohag, the poorest region of Egypt.

And there we had a project for the students where we were building a library for an orphanage there in the poorest province. And then from there we went to Aswan, down in the southmost point, and then from there to Sharm El-Sheikh and also to St. Catherine's Monastery, where we stayed in the monastery itself, which was a magical experience. And we would hike up Mount Sinai, you know, at 3 in the morning to watch the sunrise where Moses saw the burning bush. Magical experiences. And also, another magical thing that happened is Nawal El Saadawi agreed to host us at her house.

**Matt Bowles:** Wow.

**Zein El-Amine:** For talks about everything; politics and her books and everything. And the way it happened is that I contacted people that are in touch with the literature and art scene in Cairo. And somebody gave me a number so that I could contact her through. Now, when you contact an author of that caliber, even with Egyptian authors, of course you're going to have gatekeepers, right? Somebody's going to answer the phone. And that was my experience with other writers who had gatekeepers. And the day before I'm supposed to call her, I was watching a debate that she was having with some right-wing cleric that was debating with her because she used the name God in the title of her play. And the whole time the guy would say, madam, madam. And he would interrupt her and finally she snapped at him. He says, I'm not a madam. I'm not the head of a brothel. I am a doctor. I'm a doctor in two ways. I'm a medical doctor and I'm also a doctor because I have a

doctorate in such and such. So, call me Dr. Saadawi, not Madam. Stop calling me, madam. I'm like, whoa, I'm glad I watched this. Not that I use madam, but it's common for in the Arab world to use madam sometimes or madam.

So, I'm sitting there before calling the number I was given, I was practicing Dr. Saadawi, Dr. Saadawi, Dr. Saadawi, making sure not to say Nawal or whatever. Then I call the number, and a woman answer, and I say, can I speak to Dr. Saadawi, please? And she goes, this is her. And I'm like caught off guard. And I said, oh, I didn't expect you to answer the phone. And she said, well, who do you expect? This is my home. I said, I'm sorry, but every time I call an author there, there's a secretary and all that. No, this is my home. I answer my own phone. I said, okay, okay. So, I said, we're reading your book, and we're reading Women at Point Zero, and we would love to meet with you at one of the universities or any place that you like. She goes, why don't you come here, bring your students. I can serve you tea and we can have a chat here. I said, really? And she said, yeah.

And so, this started a tradition that we repeated where we would visit Nawal Saadawi and talk with her. And it was a great experience because most of the people on that trip that signed up for the Egypt trip were women. So, there'd be like 11 women and one guy. So, it was great because also we would visit Nawal Saadawi in the first days in Cairo so that they still have all these ideas about what Arab women are, these ossified ideas that she kind of blew away. So, she would be talking about marriage as prostitution and all of this stuff. And there you could see my students. There'd be smoke coming out of their ears. And one day on the second trip, one smart student said she had read about her ahead of time and thought she had caught her on some hypocrisy or something. And she said, you keep saying that marriage is prostitution, but you've been married several times. She says, yeah, I've been married three times. And she goes, well, are you married presently? And she said, yeah. And she says, well, where's your husband? And she goes. She points, because where we are in a complex of buildings, and she's on the fifth floor, she goes, you see that fifth building down there on the seventh floor? My husband lives there. What? Why? And she goes, well, I like to have my own space to write and think and read and be on my own. And when I want love and sex and companionship, I give him a call.

That was our experience with Nawal Saadawi, the other great experience that we had, besides the fact that we read Naguib Mahfouz in El-Fishawy Café in the seat where he used to sit and write. And we would go to the market there while they're opening before the crowds. So, we would read and visit the places he talked about there. We would actually try to locate them. But besides, that we also ended up winning the presidential award for volunteerism because we built that library in Sohag in that poor province in Egypt, and we equipped it with books and computers and all that. And we got a letter from President Obama's office. That Coptic Orphanage had nominated us for this award, and we won it. So, we also did some good there when we were there.

So, it was a great experience. But we did it about three, three or four times, the study abroad. And then the last time was right before the Arab Spring. And I remember when we were there, it was January, right before the revolution in Egypt. And as you know, the Tunisian revolution was already in full force. And I remember when reading the news and we were in Luxor in Egypt, I told my students, we're not going to discuss any of the books we're reading today because this is a historic moment and this is unprecedented. There's a Tunisian revolution in, spreading across the region and all that. And one of the students says to me, well, do you think it's going to reach Egypt? I said, no, the

security system in Egypt is too complicated, it's too tough. And I think Egypt will be one of the last countries for this to happen. And we leave. And a few days later, it's like the action hero leaving and then explosions behind. That's what it felt like. As we were leaving, the whole country was exploding in revolution. And my students were calling me, what was that about? And you know, I was close to them, and we all laughed about it. I was telling them it'd be the last country too. But that was the end of the, the Egypt trip, basically. And after that I took a class as part of my MFA. One of my favorite classes was reading *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I always tell people, don't try this at home because it's hard to take apart the book on your own.

**Matt Bowles:** I had the same experience. I took a graduate seminar on *Ulysses*, and it was an entire semester long graduate level class just on the book *Ulysses*, which was one of the most incredible classes, maybe the number one most incredible class that I took in all of college, certainly right up at the top. And it was just absolutely transformative and mind blowing, completely amazing. And that was one of the many things that you and I have connected with over the years is *Ulysses*. And I'll always kind of text you or message you when I'm traveling around the world somewhere and there's a *Ulysses* reference somewhere or I go to a Bloomsday event somewhere. Speaking of Egypt, I just recently remembered that in 2014 I was in Egypt because I was there about two months in 2012, which was after the overthrow of Mubarak, but before the election of Morsi. So, I was in that interim SCAF period.

And then I went back for about nine months in 2014, which was after the coup. I was there for the rise of Sisi. And during that nine-month period that was over the month of June that I was there. And of course, for folks that don't know, the entire book of *Ulysses* takes place on one day exactly, which is June 16th in 1904 in Dublin, the entire book takes place on one day. And so, every year on June 16, that is what's called Bloom's Day, named after the lead character in the book, Leopold Bloom. And it is this massive international celebration of the book. And people gather and they do readings from the book, and sometimes they dress up like the characters and they do all of these events. And this goes on all over the world. And pretty much wherever I am, I can always find a Bloomsday event. And so, for example, when I lived in LA, that is incredible Blooms Day event at the Hammer Museum out by UCLA, and they would pack it and they would sell out over 500 seats and they would have serious actors from LA doing the readings, and they had Irish actors that had performed at the Abbey Theater that were there doing readings. And it was just an incredible event. And then other times there's just a bunch of drunk people packed into a pub and they're just passing the book around and doing readings or whatever it may be.

And I remember in 2014 in Cairo, I was there for Blooms Day, and I was looking around for events and I couldn't find an actual event like on the Internet or anything that was going to happen. But you can always find James Joyce fans wherever you go in the world. There will always be Joyce fans around. And so, I found a number of people that were just super Joyce fans. And we said, well, why don't we just create our own Bloomsday event? And so, first thing, we need a copy of the book. So we went to the bookstore, we got a copy of the book, and I was like, second thing, we need a bottle of Jameson. So, we got a bottle of Jameson and then we just planned this whole incredible evening where we just went around the city to these different places and did readings from the book. And then we rented a Felucca boat. You know, we're out sailing around in the water, drinking Jameson, just reading *Ulysses*.

And it was such a special night. I remember posting that and then tagging you on it because of both the Egypt connection and the Ulysses Ireland connection. I was like, Zein, would appreciate this more than anybody I know. So super, super, super fun thing. An amazing way to connect with people because people that love Joyce, love James Joyce, and they love Ulysses, and it's a really, really special thing that I have found. Just opens all of these doors all over the world. But I would love to hear, though, your experience with Ulysses and particularly why you connected so much with that book and what it means to you.

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure. So, I, like many people, had attempted to read it on my own and gave up after the third chapter, as most of Ireland had done to this day. But when I took it in class, it was really important because it was the second semester of my first year, and here I am entering a culture that is kind of a liberal arts kind of school in the university in Maryland. It's so different from, as you might imagine, an engineering school in Saudi Arabia. And I was trying to find how I fit in there. And I always felt a stranger, and I felt intimidated because, for example, my Ulysses class was mostly PhDs and I was doing my master's, and they always had these obscure things that they were this analysis that they would provide that I didn't understand, and so I didn't know how to fit what was pivotal about me taking that class. Not only the richness of the book that we managed to uncover together and explore, but also there was a moment where the professor said, everybody, this is at the beginning of the first week. They say, everybody, pick one of the 18 episodes of Ulysses. And none of us had read it yet. But the PhD students knew that to avoid certain chapters that are complex, they read online that, oh, this is the most difficult chapter.

So, everybody was snapping. Everybody was picking. We were sitting around the table, and there was almost the same number, like 18 students or less. And then there was one chapter left. It's the Ithaca chapter of Ulysses. And so, Richard, the professor, looks up and says, oh, Zein, you get the Ithaca chapter? And everybody's like, shaking their head, and I'm like, what is the Ithaca chapter? And so, I didn't know what was going on. But then Richard says something that I only understood later. He says, oh, that's a good fit, actually. And he knows my engineering background. So, we get to chapter 10 or something, or 12. We get to the Ithaca Chan I'm supposed to present on it. And so, I read it.

And for those of you who are not familiar with Ulysses, every episode after the first three episodes is written in a completely different style, as if a completely different person wrote it. And that chapter was written in engineering language. Bloom, the main character, instead of saying he filled up the tea kettle with water and heated it and made a cup of tea, Joyce would explain everything scientifically. Bloom turned the faucet handle counterclockwise and he felt filled up the pot with this much water, and he would actually give the measurement. And then he put the kettle on the stove, and the stove expended this many bridge thermal units to bring it from such and such degrees Celsius to boiling point at such and such degrees Celsius, et cetera. And he explained everything. But even when he turns the faucet, he starts to talk about how the water came from the storage system in Dublin at that time down this pipe at a certain angle and came into the faucet.

And I go, oh, my God, no wonder nobody wanted to touch this thing. So, you know what I did, Matt? I actually calculated everything in that chapter. I had the formulas to calculate this thing. So, what I discovered is that I had to look up things like what was the coefficient of friction on the pipes in Dublin that brought the water down, so I could figure out at what speed. So, I realized that Joyce had

actually done enough research to know all the factors that go in into calculating the speed of water, the flow rate of water, the boiling points. He's calculated everything. But you know what I discovered, Matt, is that he gave the wrong answers. So, he knew all the factors, and he deliberately gave the wrong answers. So, then I looked back, I said, what form is this written in? And it was written in the form of catechism. You're Catholic, right, Matt?

**Matt Bowles:** Yes, sir.

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah. So, catechism, for those of you who don't know, in Catholic Church, you learn your religion by questions and answer, and the answers are usually given to you beforehand, and you're supposed to just parrot them. And that's how you learn your religion. So, the fact that the whole chapter was formed, and at what flow rate did the Bloom's faucet release the water? And then he would give the answer. So, considering that it came from this elevation to this elevation at this angle and this pipe, et cetera. So, he would have all the factors as an engineer would. Only a knowledgeable engineer would do. But he would give the wrong answer. Why would he do that? Right? And we know. And you know, Matt, he was very critical of the Catholic Church as an establishment, so he was giving the wrong answers. It's such a fucking brilliant thing to do.

So, I went up in the class and it was my day to take over the class. And I take some chalk, and I walk up to the board, and I start writing formulas after formula. Actually, if you have a kettle that has this much water, this is how much British thermal units you need. It's nowhere near what Joyce said. Or if the water is coming from this elevation to this element elevation, this is the actual flow rate. And I've been intimidated by these PhD students the whole time. And here they are in awe. They are in awe. From then on, I became the most popular student in that class. I already was being drawn into this book, but now I have that personal attachment to this book.

**Matt Bowles:** It's incredible. And when you read Joyce, some of his earlier stuff is easier to read with short stories and different things. But when you read Ulysses and then if you try to read Finnegans Wake, I can remember I did the graduate seminar in Ulysses. And then my parents were in Buffalo, New York at the time I went to high school, and I came back and there was. And I got invited too. After, the folks knew that I had done the graduate seminary Ulysses. There was this Finnegans Wake reading group and I got invited to it. And it was like this unbelievably eclectic group of brilliant people. So, it was this radical left wing Catholic priest, this PhD astronomer who was like a Joyce fanatic. It was the PhD students at the University of Buffalo that were doing their PhD on Finnegans Wake. And they said, we've been doing the Finnegans Wake reading group for 10 years running.

**Zein El-Amine:** Wow.

**Matt Bowles:** And we're on page 100. Exactly after 10 years of doing it every week. And so, I go to the Finnegans Wake Reading group and it's all these incredibly brilliant, eclectic people. They come there, they've got a stack of books that are references that Joyce is making to this category of thing or this category of thing or this category of thing in the book. So, they bring this stack of reference books and then there's Guinness and Jameson. So, everybody pours a drink and then we're sitting around in a circle, and you would go around, and you would read. And then it was my turn to read. So, I would read a sentence or two, which in that book can be a page or so, and then you read it and then everybody discusses it. And when they would discuss it, they would dissect each sentence and they would be like, oh, this clause is a reference to this particular Irish song. And that Irish song

is about this Thing. And it means this. And then they would sing the Irish song, because there was a ton of Irish people there, right. That knew this stuff, and they'd sing, like, the entire song. So, we'd be there for two hours, and we've done a page and a half of Finnegans Wake. Right. And then this was, like, the spin speed at which they were like, okay, see you next week, and then you come back next week. So, it's been going on for 10 years that they're like, on page 100. But this is how the depth and the richness and the layers that are in Joyce's work and the people that really appreciate that stuff. I really appreciate that stuff.

**Zein El-Amine:** Right. Finnegans way. I picked it up, and the first thing I said is, nope.

**Matt Bowles:** Just to give people context, the book starts in the middle of a sentence. So that should give you that. That should give you some context to the extent to which it is a radical experimentation in postmodernist form, and definitely something that you want to read as part of a group or a class, for sure. But back to Ulysses. One of the other things that's interesting about Ulysses that a lot of people don't know is that it was Originally published in 1922.

**Zein El-Amine:** Right

**Matt Bowles:** But it was not available in the United States until 1933 because the US government had declared it as obscene and pornographic, and they had a ban on the importation or the printing of this book in the United States. And so, it wasn't until 1933, I believe it was Random House that had the rights to the book, where the ACLU said, if you print one copy of this book and get arrested for it, right. And all that, we will defend you, and we will take this as far as it needs to go legally so that we can get this law overturned. And sure enough, one of the most incredible legal cases, one of my favorites in American history. You can look this up. It's called the United States versus one book called Ulysses. Yeah, that's the name of the legal case because they printed one copy of the book, got arrested for it, and then the ACLU tried the case, eventually winning the case. And now all of a sudden, this literary masterpiece, which has been circulating around the world for 11 years, can finally be printed in the United States, and Americans can read it.

**Zein El-Amine:** Matt, you have to read a book called the Most Dangerous Book, which is about the history of the censorship of the book. You had anarchist women that were involved in bringing this in and defying the laws, and you had Hemingway snuck Ulysses in his pants, through the Canadian border. Fitzgerald said, do you want me to jump out of a window and hurt myself? And Joyce said, no, it's okay. Why would you want to do that? He says, maybe it'll get attention about the censorship. It was written by a guy who worked as a bartender in Dublin and was fired. And writing about censorship, it reads like a thriller. It's the most amazing story, and you have to read it.

**Matt Bowles:** Wow. I would love to hear about how when you designed your study abroad program and you took your students and you taught Ulysses and you went to Ireland, how did you structure that program?

**Zein El-Amine:** The way I designed that study abroad trip? And it worked so well because Dublin is the only city that not only celebrates an author, but it also celebrates a book. And so, the way I did it is I mentioned that Ulysses has 18 episodes in it. And, Matt, you mentioned that the whole book takes place in one day where Bloom, this Jewish man, walks through different parts of Dublin in each chapter. But the whole thing takes one day from the time he gets up to the time he goes to bed

at the end of the chapter. And so, every day we would go, we would tackle one chapter so that the study abroad was 18 days, and we would tackle one chapter. And then wherever we walk in the footsteps of Bloom, the way he walked in that chapter and that Dublin makes it easy, because, as you know, Matt, they have these medallions in the ground saying, bloom stopped here at 12:05 to get glass of burgundy or whatever.

Then we would walk through Dublin, and then we would settle at a pub. By the way, wherever you ended up in Dublin, at the end of your walk, there's going to be a pub within a stone's throw of you. So, the joke that Joyce always had is, like, how do you cross Dublin without passing a pub? And the answer was, you stop at every one of them. Basically, we would stop, and there was, like, these cozies in the back of pubs that used to be reserved for women, so they're perfect, like, study group places. And we would grab our pints, and we would unpack that chapter, and we did that, and it was time so that we finished the 18th chapter on the 18th day. And the next day would be Bloom's Day, where the whole city of Dublin celebrates the book. And my students would join Dubliners by wearing outfits of their favorite character. And we would walk around. We would go to Central Park there, where everybody would gather, and there's a giant gazebo in the center of this park. This is just one of the many activities that's going on in Dublin.

But the first time I went to that gazebo, there'd be like a guy with a harmonica and say, this is my interpretation of this episode of Ulysses. And he would go up and do this, play this harmonica. And the next guy was the ambassador from Finland. And he goes up there and he has Ulysses. You could see it's a well-worn copy of Ulysses. And he says, when I was 16, I saw this in a bookstore in Finland. It was the Finnish translation of Ulysses. And here's my favorite chapter that I'm going to read to you in my broken English. And so, he reads that chapter, and then the next guy was the minister of finance in Ireland. Here's my favorite chapter. And he reads like it was just unbelievable. And by that time, the students had read Ulysses, which even the people in the English department said, you're not going to get college students to read the whole of Ulysses, not undergraduates and et cetera. And trust me, most of the students did read because it makes it easy when you're there in Dublin. It makes it so easy to be engaged and not to drop it. So that's the way the whole trip was designed. And we would celebrate Blooms Day with everybody, and the next day we would go back home. And really, by that time, nobody really wanted to go back home. It was a tremendous experience.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, that's amazing. And you mentioned to me that your first trip to Ireland that you took had a significant impact on you. When you ran that initial trip with the students, what for you was the impact of doing that for the first time?

**Zein El-Amine:** Well, it's just arriving in a city, and even when you get to the airport here, we have racists on horseback. We have presidents, rulers, genocidal maniacs that we have statues of, and we have memorials to wars there. You have writers and revolutionaries, you know, on pedestals. That's what you have. You have poetry etched in the glass at the airport. You arrive and you feel at home. The other thing that impacted me is the Dubliners themselves, because you get a sense of these are urbanites, but with a rural mentality. The way they engage with you, the way they talk with you. And it's not like sunshine and roses. It's just that they're friendly, helpful people and you feel at home. I always say, I have two homes. One is Beirut and one is Dublin. And I felt so at home there. And obviously, you see me as the longtime advocate for Palestinian liberation. You see Palestine all

over the place. You know, graffiti supporting Palestine and events and all of that. And the people there, the attitude about that issue and you're coming from the United States, it's such a great change. So, it was a tremendous experience for me.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, I think that solidarity element is really significant and it's really significant in the historical context, of course, of the Irish struggle against British colonialism. And the Irish being the very first British colony that there was and the Northeastern 6 counties of Ireland today still being the final British colony that there is. And I can remember I've been to Belfast a number of times. I lived in Dublin, of course, I studied abroad, went to Trinity College and lived there for a year. And then I've been back a lot doing activist solidarity work in the north. And one year I was in Belfast with our mutual friend Rania Masri and Diana Buttu, who is a very high-profile Palestinian activist. And we were up there, and they have basically declared an annual Palestine Day, and they do this entire festival in West Belfast, and I was up there with them. And Diana Buttu of course traveled the world and speaks on Palestine all over the world. And she was the keynote speaker there for the Palestine Day event. And I can remember just hanging out with her and towards the end of that trip and her saying to me, I have traveled all over the world, and I have never including anywhere in the Arab world, never have I seen this much love and support and solidarity with Palestine. It's unbelievable.

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah, the first time I went to Belfast I had a similar experience, Matt. So, I was on the train, and I was communicating with Kueve who by the way lived in Dahieh in the suburbs of Beirut, in Dahesh as an Irish woman, she was the star. Tall, blonde, light haired, blue eyed Irish woman that lived in Dahieh for years on her own. For people who think it's dangerous to live there. I was communicating with her. I said, I'm on my way to Belfast for the first time. And she said, oh, it so happens that there's a Palestinian delegation that's being received at City Hall right now by the mayor. And you know how they share power in Belfast. And it so happened to be the mayor that's friendly to Palestinians.

And so, I arrived there miraculously of one door as the Palestinian delegation is entering from the other door into this great expanse, a city hall. And then I start talking with some of the people in the delegation and the Irish handler that was there, he says, just go in and because we'll consider you a Palestinian today. And that way you're going to be fed, they're catering food for you, and you get to see the wall, the dividing wall, the best way possible. Because I'm going to tour you, I'm going to show you all the pro-Palestinian graffiti and all the anti-Palestinian graffiti on the other side. So, I spent the whole day with the delegation and that's how I saw Belfast the first time with a Palestinian delegation and an Irish handler. And then we visited also, of course, the graves of the IRA martyrs, the revolutionaries, basically.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I also want to ask you about your study abroad trips that you ran to Morocco.

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure.

**Matt Bowles:** I remember when I was in Morocco a few years back, the first thing that I did was I messaged you because I had been following all of your trips that you were taking students there and doing all this epic stuff. And I said, Zein, what should my priorities be? And you immediately responded, and you gave me all these unbelievable tips. You said, first of all, get out of Marrakesh, go over to Essaouira and do this and this and this and this and this and the other thing. And I did it immediately and it was unbelievable. And ever since then, I've been giving those same travel tips to

all of my friends that go to Morocco. And I literally have a friend of mine right now, as we're recording this, shout out to Jamesa, who is on her way from Marrakech to Essaouira to do the Zein El-Amine itinerary. So, I want you to know that that has been passed on, on and appreciated by a lot of people. But can you share a little bit about how your trips to Morocco were structured and your experiences there?

**Zein El-Amine:** First of all, there's a book called Morocco Bound that might have also recommended for you. But it talks about, of course, Morocco in the context of Orientalism and how to disorient Morocco. There's stuff that's attributed to Morocco that doesn't belong there. And obviously Morocco has always served historically as a stand in for the rest of the Arab world. And now you could see that idea manifest itself in Hollywood, where Morocco is used as the stand in for any other country, there's a huge film industry there. So even the John Wick movies, they film there. But even when you're filming, when Elliot Kola's that Central was about to be filmed, it's supposed to take place in Baghdad. You know, they actually filmed it in Morocco. So, from the days of Casablanca, the classic movie with Humphrey Bogart, till today, there's a bunch of movies that kind of paint Morocco. And of course, in an exoticized way and attribute things that really didn't belong to its culture. And some of the stuff actually came from the hippie pilgrimage that happened, the maraucuit express that happened in the 70s during the Vietnam War, from American hippies that went to Morocco and went everywhere, including Tangier and Essaouira.

**Matt Bowles:** Well Zein, you know, one of the things that I noticed when I went there, by the way, just to further your point, first of all, I looked this up to make sure this was accurate historically. And of course, there wasn't a single moment or scene in the film Casablanca that was actually shot in Morocco. None of those actors stepped foot in the country of Morocco, first of all. And then what they did retroactively as a tourist trap is they created Rick's bar.

**Zein El-Amine:** Right, exactly. And that's like supposed to be a duplicate of that restaurant bar in that movie. And if you went down to the basement mat, you would see that Casablanca is playing on a 24-hour loop. It is just all again and again and without reading about it as you did. Sometimes people think that that's where the movie is based on that. But actually, it was retroactive, and it was actually an idea that a westerner came up to make money off of that. So, this is one great example of the spirit of the trip was to de exaltify Morocco. I don't like to go to Casablanca, it's not my favorite city in Morocco. But we go there for a day so I can show them that example that you just mentioned Matt and I take them inside the bar, and we have a drink there and everything to show them how these things come about.

And so, the idea was to take the writings of Paul Bowles, for example, who lived in Morocco. Paul Bowles and Jane Bowles, who is a great author in her own himself, both traveled to Morocco for a trip. Paul Bowles was already an established music conductor, but he had decided to write. And when they traveled to Morocco, Paul Bowles, who's a closeted gay man and Jane Bowles was a closeted lesbian and they're married, right. And in Morocco, of course, they live in Tangier. And it's like the free zone. It's free for all. Freeze. So, Paul Bowles can openly have his men and young men at that and his hashish. Jane Bowles was living with Sharifi, who's actually her Moroccan lover, who was fully veiled and was a character used to wear Ray Ban glasses. And they lived on different floors. So, Paul Bowles lived on one floor in a midrise and Jane lived above him with her partner, and he lived with his lovers.

But they were close friends, Paul and Jane, and basically, they beat poets and writers, that's where it was born. It was really born in Morocco. And everybody had gone to Morocco to visit with Paul Bowles. Tennessee Williams went there and stayed. Capote went there, Jack Kerouac went there, Ginsburg went there. All these poets and writers who formed the foundation basically of the hippie movement, who some of them also didn't want anything to do with later, but formed the foundation for the hippie movement, actually cut their teeth in Morocco. And so, there was this all-alternative scene, you know, Francis Bacon, the famous British painter, who, if you go to Dublin and you go to Hugh Lane Gallery, they moved his whole studio in there.

And Francis Bacon, for those of you who don't know, he's one of the most important painters among all Western painters. And Francis Bacon, to give you just one example, also went and would stay in Tangier for lengthy periods of time. And he was into some really kinky stuff. And the police in Tangier, which weren't like the police were used to, because this was called the free zone, they would find him at 3 o'clock in the morning, bloodied and sleeping in the street, and they would just take him home and put him there. And then they would say, Francis, do you want to complain that somebody hit you? And he said, no, I don't know what you're talking about. This is the kind of place that it was. So later the hippies would make their exodus. If you want to see a movie with Kate Winslet, it's hideous, kinky. It's a movie that's neither hideous nor kinky, but it's about a British woman who takes her kids as part of this Marrakesh express. With that hippie exodus to Morocco and that experience and all that, it's actually one of the better representations of Morocco and Moroccans.

So that's the basis, is the beat poets and writers, but also in reading the classic Moroccan book *For Bread Alone*. And we would read *For Bread Alone* and visit where the authors lived and where he drank. So that was really an important one. But it was also a book that was censored everywhere in the Arab world because it was so explicit, sexually and otherwise, that it was hard to get at first. And so, Paul Bowles, when he was there, he translated it from the Moroccan, what we call the colloquial there, *Darja*, by merely listening to the author tell it in the colloquial. And then he didn't know how to write Arabic, but he understood *Darija*, and he would listen to him tell the story, and then he would write down in English. Later, the book was translated into dozens of languages and so on.

So, the Morocco journey starts in the capital of Rabat, and it went all over, including two of my favorite places which I had mentioned to you when you asked me for tips. One is Shifchaouen, which is the blue city that was painted that way by Moroccan Jews and is kept up by Moroccan Muslims. Now, also, the other city that you mentioned is my favorite place on earth, as I probably said to you, which is Essaouira. And Essaouira in *Darija* means the little picture. And it's a port city that was designed by a Moroccan sultan with the help of a French architect that he had imprisoned and gave him his freedom in exchange for him to design what he called a port city, a truly open port city. And what he meant by that. It's the kind of place that you enter the harbor and you feel right at home, no matter what background you come from. That's why the archways in Essaouira have a seashell, which represents Christianity. It has the star of David representing Judaism.

It has the crescent representing Islam. It's also famous for Gnawan music. And the Gnawan music festival that lasts many days, attracts tens of thousands of people. And it's one big grave. And it's a place also where Orson Welles filmed one of his films, because he thought that it's better to film it there. When he visited Essaouira and found the walls and the ramparts there to be ideal to film

Othello, Shakespeare's Othello, in fact, for a long time, there's a bust of Orson Welles that sits up outside of the walls of Essaouira. And somebody comes at night every time that there's rain or whatever, and paints Orson Welles beard blue. It's a mystery who does that. But unfortunately, with the new development, they had removed that bust. But, yeah, Essaouira is one of my favorite places in Morocco.

**Matt Bowles:** It's amazing, man. I remember going out there. Just the energy of that city is entirely different. You just walk into it. It's just like this enchanting place. The architecture is incredible. And then I took notes on all this stuff you told me. And so, I was there with a friend of mine. I'm like it, so my friend Zein says we're to walk the entire length of the beach, and if we do that, we will come across this Jimi Hendrix shrine. And she's like, okay, so sure enough, we walk the length of the beach, there's camels on the beaches walking around, all this kind of stuff. And we get there and there's this tiny little cafe, tea house type of place which has all of this Jimi Hendrix stuff inside. Outside it's just wild like the stuff that's there is absolutely incredible.

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah, yeah. The funniest part about the Jimi Hendrix. Because Jimi Hendrix visited there and used to sit at the beach there. The Moroccans say he wrote the most beautiful song when he was there. That's what inspired Castles in the Sand. Actually, we never say anything. I always tell my students not to say anything. But actually, Jimi Hendrix wrote Castles in the sand three years before he visited Morocco. And the funny part about the cafe which. Which we always sit in the cafe and have a book discussion there with an expert on the hippies that came and settled in Essaouira. And when you walk in, there's a do not smoke sign and on the other wall there's Hendrix with a big spliff in his mouth. That's an amazing place to visit.

**Matt Bowles:** Zein, can you expand a little bit on this concept of Orientalism that you mentioned for people that are not familiar?

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure.

**Matt Bowles:** Maybe just share a little bit about Edward Said's masterpiece that came out in the late 1970s, what his thesis was on Orientalism and why that framework is such an important foundation for studying or engaging with any literature from or about the Arab world.

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah. So, well I always start and most people that are teaching about the Arab world start with talking about Edward Said's Orientalism because it's changed the way that academics look at the Arab world and the Middle east and also the Far East. So, it's about de exotifying. That's why we do it, to de exotify. The best example I can give you that Edward Said provides us with is when Napoleon Bonaparte, for example, arrived in Egypt, he didn't invade just with armies. He invaded with writers, historians, painters. And the idea was to basically present an image of this place that's exotified, that shows inhabitants are almost alien. And why would he do that? It's because here you have a country which declared its liberation with equality, liberty and justice and all of that. So, with those kinds of standards that were set for the country, how could they mistreat and exploit these countries and justify it to their own people?

And the only way they can do it is by showing that these people are different than us, almost subhuman. And they assigned things like tendency for violence or hypersexual characteristics and also wanted to paint these countries as feminine objects in a patriarchal society where the

feminine object is there for possession. So, a lot of these paintings that came out of the period have nothing to do with the reality on the ground. That's what we always start off whether I'm teaching about Arab world, about Morocco. I teach a course in Morocco at the American University called Morocco Bound. When I teach Arabic literature, I always start with Orientalism so that the students can have the tools to basically detect this kind of exoticization that marginalizes or denigrates people in the Arab world. And also, it homogenizes the Arab world along with what's called the far east, as one entity and as an alien entity, and much different than us, as if we don't have the same loves and desires as everybody does.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, one of the other things that Said would write about, I mean, he has work on Reflections on Exile. I'm wondering, in your own life, Zein, when you think about your experiences of relocation and immersion into the unfamiliar and dislocation and migration and all of that, what impact do you think those experiences have had on your writing?

**Zein El-Amine:** Being exiled wasn't a strange feeling for me. And the reason for that is because from the very beginning, even when I was in Lebanon, in my childhood, it was a time when us southern Lebanese were looked at as the ignorant peasants. There's a derogatory term that is used for us called the Mitwalis. Mitwali means the one who takes over the land. My grandfather's generation almost lived under a feudal system. And so, when I was in boarding schools in Beirut, for example, and other places, city dwellers would look at us as almost like refugees and all that, going to Saudi Arabia, obviously, I was still in exile, and I was caught between two cultures that looked at me in an antagonistic way and in a racist way.

One was the American culture where, you know, I would be riding the bus and the kids in the bus, probably hearing it from their parents, would point at Saudis and we'd say, look at this raghead. Look at that raghead. So that was on one side. The Saudis had this hierarchy in terms of who they respected, and they respected the Americans and the British and the Europeans most. And then there was hierarchy of disrespect that started from there downwards. And the Lebanese and the Syrians and Palestinians were always treated as there to serve them and as inferior to them. And so, we were mistreated and discriminated against by the Saudis, at least. I could say clearly that, for example, the domestic workers were treated the worst. The Filipinos, the Thai, especially the Sri Lankans, were treated horribly.

So, I lived in an atmosphere of racism that I saw every day in stereo, and I heard every day in stereo. Then going to Bahrain, going to an international school, I was part of an international community, a school that had both British and American curriculum, but had students from all over the world. And that's where I felt the first time, not so much in exile and wasn't experiencing this kind of discrimination. Then going back to Saudi Arabia and being at that university, it was horrible. It was a horrible experience. And as I mentioned, it was like doing time. And then in 87, coming to the United States. And of course, within the first few months, I realized that it's not the country that I thought it would be. And I was learning so much about racism. They had not accepted, first of all, my college degree in the beginning, So I had to work construction in the field. And it was my first interaction with black workers in the field who would refer to me as brother. And I was wondering, why are they doing that? And I realized there's a certain affinity between people of color in this country because of the extreme racism. The more I learned about the extent of racism and the segregation.

So, I was asked by the Howard Zinn Book Festival that happens every year in San Francisco to come and be part of a panel about exile poets in exile. And I said, everybody's doing that. I want to do something else. I want to add another exile to it. And the coordinator, who was a friend of mine, an amazing guy, amazing activist, his name is James Tracy, he told me, well, what do you want to do about it? And I said, I want to do it about exile from exile. And he said, what is that? And I said, that's where you move into a city, you know, establish yourself in that city, and then gentrification comes. And I call gentrification the exile from exile. I've seen my neighborhood in the last 10 years change from 80% black to 90% white. I live in one of the fastest gentrifying corridors. It's the 14th street corridor in the country.

For a long time, when I started to write heavily and I was enrolled in the MFA, the first thing I did was write a series about this exile from exile. It was called Swamp City, which is what I call D.C. it was all about gentrification and how the neighborhood has changed and all these great places, including neighborhood bars and restaurants, that have been swept away with the gentrification, how everything's been sanitized. So, it's absolutely spiritless. So that's where I live now. And if it wasn't for the little oasis that I have here in the housing cooperative, I wouldn't stay another minute. I would move to a place like Baltimore, where I feel more at home.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, you have a collection of poetry called A Travel Guide for the Exiled that was recently shortlisted for the Bergman Prize. Would you be willing to read one of the pieces from that collection?

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure. And I know you told me a lot of the listeners to your podcast are travelers. I picked one called On Embassy Row. Just some background, in D.C. we have Embassy Row, where all the embassies from around the world are all in one set neighborhood. And I was tasked one day when I was the assistant director to the writer's house, I was asked by the director to take an Iranian poet in exile, this woman who couldn't return to Iran and came here to the United States and was the poet. And she had hired her as the poet in residence for the Writer's House. And she told me to take her on a tour of the city. And one of the first places I took her was in my neighborhood. The Embassy Row is not far from my neighborhood. And what happened is that one of the first days where she was, like, feeling really free, and she basically, at some point, while we were walking Embassy Row, she saw a tree that has shed all these flowers on the ground. And she was feeling so liberated that day that she dove on the ground into this bed of flowers while there was construction across the street that stopped, basically, because everybody's staring at this, this beautiful Iranian poet that was laying back in this bed of flowers.

And this is what inspired this poem. "On Embassy Row, it's like the day was done up by Almodovar, spilled wisteria over a wrought iron veranda. Trumpet vines draped over a doorway announcing Nowruz, a weeping cherry tree parachuting blossom. And here is Sheyda, unbound for the first time, free to don spaghetti straps, low cut jeans, a bare midriff and Onassis sunglasses. We approach a magnolia in its early spring glory, fallen petals like stranded seashells, some cupped up, some cupped down. She resides, Farokhzad, in breath Fuls of Farsi until she chokes on the march air, surrenders to the rapture, lays her body back like a marionette. From here, the leaves scramble on her side. One moment she sees herself as a beached mermaid, hair arranged by retreating water. And in the Next. She is a fallen angel, Mauve feathers asunder, pinned in God's blinding glare.

**Matt Bowles:** That's so amazing, man. I am such a fan of your work, brother. That's so incredible. Well, I want to trace a little bit of your activist trajectory here now. Zein, you had mentioned about the experience in Bahrain in prison, how that really sparked the beginning of your consciousness raising. And then I want to hear a little bit now about when you got to the United States, what was sort of the path from there. You talked about your connection with these black workers and that initial piece of solidarity there. And I'm curious about how that developed, because you've done a lot of solidarity activist work with the black community of the U.S. and of course, there's an incredibly rich history of black Arab solidarity, whether we're talking about the Palestinian liberation movement supporting the African American struggle and vice versa for many decades, or whether we're talking about actual labor history in the United States in places like Detroit, all this kind of stuff in these shared struggles. But I'm curious for you, about the trajectory of your political development. How did that happen? From the time you arrived in the United States up until, let's just say the time that we met in sort of the late 90s, early 2000s.

**Zein El-Amine:** My engagement in the black community was not deep as it was later when I started to work on police brutality and prison industrial complex. And I established, for example, the D.C. chapter of Critical Resistance, which was founded by folks like Angela Davis. But I was already shocked that a lot of aspects of American society, you know, I watched *Friends* who are sitting there in the evening and watching *Cops*, you know, the reality show where the whole show was about cops busting people of color and brutalizing them and all that. And also like in working construction, while I'm doing inspections at construction sites, they would have Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing commentator, on *Full Blast*.

And there was another racist guy, his name was the Grease man, but he used to feature what's called a mandatory kick ass on his show once a week. And mandatory kick ass is where somebody gives the cops a chase and the cops, when they catch up to him, they're obliged, as part of the police secret conduct code, is that they must beat the shit out of him. And so, people would call in and say, I know about a mandatory kick ass that happened the other day. And they would tell him, and they would all have a chuckle about it. I'm being witness to all of this stuff. And finally, the Gulf War comes. What I'm witnessing is a subset of this war culture, of this violent American culture. And the way that they were reporting about the first Gulf War for not just CNN, but like NPR and all those, that kind of. In this romantic way about the war and the scenes that they were showing about these smart bombs and all that.

Smart bombs that were, quote, unquote, smart enough to have cameras on them, but not smart enough to survey the scene afterwards to show how many civilians were collateral damage. At the same time, my brother Bilal was in Egypt. And in Egypt, he got in touch with these leftists. Some of them identified, I guess, as Marxists, some of them as socialists, some of them as communists that were doing underground study groups because they would be put in jail for that kind of thought. And they got him in touch with socialists here. And when he came here, my brother Bilal went to Davidson College, along with my brother Rami, also went to Davidson College in North Carolina, and they both studied political science. And they didn't have this kind of pause for a long period in their life like I did, where I wasn't intellectually stimulated because I was in Saudi Arabia.

And Bilal was always a step ahead of all the brothers in terms of forward thinking. And we always followed his lead in terms of what he was doing and what he was thinking. And when he was living

in New York, and I guess for a While doing his PhD in New York, after doing his master's at Georgetown, he met an Egyptian socialist that was a leader in the International Socialist Organization here in the United States, which was like a very small organization. What attracted us to the organization is that it was one of the few organizations that were organizing against the war and more importantly, had the right analysis about what's going on and all this. So Bilal joined the organization and was climbing into a leadership position. And my brother Rami and I attended a meeting, and it was specifically about the Gulf War. We attended a meeting in New York, and there we joined the organization and came back and built the DC chapter for that organization. And we were doing a lot of activities, and we were also highlighting the Palestinian liberation as part of that work but also doing a lot of worker solidarity. And we had some great successes.

Rami and I worked closely with the UPS general Strike, which was historic. And the hub that we worked with became the model hub for the president of the Teamsters to come and stand before it and say, this is the model hub, and we're following their lead. And it's because the leadership, frankly, of the Teamsters weren't really passing on information to the workers. And what Rami and I, we played a role in basically bringing the resources from the headquarters and the Teamsters, which was called the Ivory palace here, into the hubs up in Laurel, Maryland, which was a 24 hour hub, into the night shift and eventually helped build solidarity and engaged more workers than any other hub in the country, I think. And the strike was won, and it was historic. And we helped with the campaign to end the death penalty. And so, there were moments like that. And [Joshua Stevens](#), when you interviewed him, talked about this moment when the battle in Seattle happens. And the anti-globalization movement was born in Seattle, and it was a brush fire that went across the world into Europe for the first time.

The American youth were setting the example for European youth sort of example. And the anti-globalization movement was growing. We felt that we have to relate to this movement, and we have to learn from it. And the leadership in the International Socialist Organization, they said, no, the International Socialist Organization is the vanguard, and they need to relate to us and that they have all these backward ideas. And our argument was, look at the rate of radicalization that's happening in this movement. They don't need to relate to us a few hundred, we need to relate to these hundreds of thousands, if not millions of youths that are rising. We need to relate to them, we need to learn from them, we need to be part of them, we need to assist them and so on. So anyway, there was a huge debate, and we finally were collectively kicked out of the group. Thankfully, it was a hard time for us because we had a lot of friendships there that we lost and a lot of work that we lost. But we can build on. But the beautiful thing is that there's this gorgeous movement that rose. It was beautiful and it was where we met people like you, Matt and others.

And so, we were engaged in that. And we noticed that the movement needed support in terms of increasing its knowledge and bettering its theoretical knowledge because its activism was getting ahead of its knowledge and we need to develop something. So, it started as a small gathering of activists in the anti-globalization movement in D.C. and in New York and in San Francisco, where we would collect articles that were written by the thinkers in the movement, including people like Naomi Klein, Walden Bellow and others that were expanding on the theory of this movement. And we would staple these articles together, we'd print them out and put them like a cover, might have scenes of people protesting. And we would sit in local cafes in these cities. Usually there was an attendance, about 20 people, 25 people. It started with two or three. And then it increased. And it

was suggested that we create a magazine that is in the spirit of this little newsletter that we're creating and that centers the discussion groups.

So, I was tasked with creating a template. None of us had any experience with creating magazines or anything of the sort. None of us had a degree in journalism, but we knew the movement well, and we knew that aesthetically the magazine had to be attractive, the aesthetics of it, because we knew that this movement, if they look at the COVID of this thing and it looks like the old left or anything like that, it's not going to be this kind of adhesive that brings together the whole range from the green movement to the anarchists. So, we needed good esthetics. So, I went to this guy who created the templates for magazines, who. His most recent project was an alternative rock magazine called Harp. And I told him; can you create a template for our magazine? And he says, what is your magazine? I said, it's a magazine for activists, by activists. We had decided to call it [Left Turn](#). And he said, I have to tell you, I'm apolitical. I don't know anything about politics.

So, I'm not sure I'm the person for you. I said, you are the person because we need a political magazine with rock and roll aesthetics basically to attract people so that the youth would take a second look at it. And he said, okay. And that's. He created the template, and we started the magazine. And as you know, it grew and it lasted 10 years, but it covered all topics, whether it's the prison industrial complex, the privatization of schools, and the nonprofit industrial complex, which was one of our most popular issues. We wrote articles about Islamophobia. We dissected how the Iraq war was portrayed.

And one of the most important things I think it brought is bringing in the Palestinian question into the anti-globalization movement. It was a very exciting time. Those magazines were delivered. They would be collated electronically in New York by two copy editors that worked for credit card companies and then sent to a printer and the printer in New York. And then parcels would be sent out to five major urban areas. And from there they would be distributed to single subscribers or organizations that subscribe to it. The New York Times Review of Magazine called it the trade magazine for activists. And it's really a historical document. I have an issue from every magazine we create, and it's astounding. It's as relevant today as it was then.

**Matt Bowles:** It was an incredibly special time. And that was when I met you and I met Rami. In D.C. and then eventually met Bilal in New York and Rayan in San Francisco. And you, you had, as you mentioned, the uprising in Seattle, followed by the organization in D.C. to shut down the IMF and the world bank, and the whole emergence of that movement that was challenging corporate globalization. And then at the same time, in the year 2000, you had the second Palestinian intifada, which erupted there. And so, you had the founding of [Left Turn](#), which was this incredible nonsectarian, nonparty based, very broad, anti-authoritarian, leftist umbrella platform that just somehow attracted all of these unbelievable activists from all over the world that were in the trenches of all of these different struggles, writing firsthand accounts from those activist struggles.

And so, you really prioritize the voices of the activists that were in struggle from all of these different movements. And it was pretty much adjacent to the organization Sustain, which your brother Rami and I were among the co-founders of. There were a number of other co-founders. We came to do that. And Sustain was an acronym. It stood for Stop U.S. Tax Funded Aid to Israel Now. And that was very focused on popular education and as well as nonviolent direct action to try to raise awareness about the extent to which U.S. Tax dollars and every single citizen of the United States that pays

taxes is involved in funding and politically supporting the human rights abuses that are being carried out by the Israeli government. And therefore, that we have a responsibility to act and to do something about that if we want those human rights abuses to cease. And we have some power to do something about that. And so, we really need to organize.

And so, I feel like sustaining the [Left Turn](#) with these two adjacent organizations and a number of the activists, including I was incredibly honored and privileged to publish a couple articles in Left Turn during that amazing run that you had. But I was really amazed just to meet the people that came together around that and the other writers that were coming to publish articles and the volunteer editors that came forward and just all of this stuff.

What do you think, Zein, about that particular historical moment and about that particular magazine and platform that you created that was able to attract that caliber of people? Because it wasn't just that they were brilliant and politically sophisticated, they were also extraordinary humans. I was just like, wow. Like, just to be in the presence of these people was so heartwarming and amazing. I feel like Sustain was the same thing you mentioned, the [Joshua Stevens](#) episode, which if Maverick show listeners haven't listened to that, we'll link it up in [the show notes](#). And you absolutely should, because he was very much part of that milieu in D.C. as well and was very much involved with sustainability Sustain. And we were reflecting on, wow. Sustain just somehow attracted these extraordinary human beings that just came out of I don't even know where. And they just found us, and we just came together, and it was this amazing kind of moment. And I feel like [Left Turn](#) was very similar. But do you have any reflections on what would account for that?

**Zein El-Amine:** Sure, yeah. You learn about the world by acting on it. And these were activists. So, the way we solicited articles, for example, at first when it was just the core group, we would be at demonstrations and somebody would deliver a speech or somebody would talk about something with us, or some person led and organized something, or somebody was providing a critique of the non-profit organizations that they've worked with, etc. And then we would say, would you write an article? We were in the trenches with them and so there's more trust. And it was easier to get talented people to do that work because we were sitting their shoulder to shoulder with them in the trenches.

And just like you, Matt, I was just blown away when people used to come to D.C. protest and the [Left Turn](#) group would gather in my apartment. I would look at these people and say, God damn, what a privilege to be with these people. They were just the smartest, most dedicated, bravest people I've ever met. And I just felt so lucky. The richness of it was incredible. So, the joke was that the El Amin's distributed themselves deliberately to three different cities. Bilal moved to New York, me and Rami remained in D.C. and Rayan moved actually to California. So, we recruited writers and activists from those three cities. But it wasn't just the United States. So, for example, we had at one point this guy who kept on writing letters to the editor complaining about how we were writing about some parts of Asia, like Singapore and all this, and parts with can be referred to as the Far east, that there was some information missing. So, what do you do in that case?

Maybe another magazine would have said they answered it or whatever. But what Bilhal did with that guy says, can you be the one in charge of writing about that region? So, he became the person, the main editor for Asia. And that's how it was built. And I was so privileged to this day. I remember going to a party in New York in SoHo. It was a left-hand party and everybody, you know, who's who in

New York in terms of activists was there and I was in awe. I was just standing there silently and watching these people. And every time I was introduced to somebody, I was told this person is right or has contributed to left turn and all, all that. And it was just an incredibly exciting time. And the team was some of the most talented people I've ever met in my life.

**Matt Bowles:** Can you talk a little bit about, for you, the significance of the Palestinian struggle and the centrality of the Palestinian struggle to your politics over the years? And when you reflect back on this last quarter century, from this time we're talking about in the late 90s until now, can you talk about the impact that all these activist struggles that you've been involved with and the writing that you've been involved with, the impact that that has had on where things are now versus where they were 25 years ago?

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah. So, when you grow up in South Lebanon at a time when the PLO was seen as heroic because of the Fedayeen, the guerrilla fighters that were fighting for liberation, this was before the PLO became detached from the Palestinian people. We used to look at these people as heroes. We used to dress like the Fedayeen with the keffiyeh. And so, you grow up with this kind of idea of an affinity with the Palestinians. But since the southern Lebanese were being punished, every time the Palestinians did an operation across the border, there would be usually more Lebanese killed in the raids than Palestinians. And as you know, Israel doesn't give a damn about how they retaliate.

By the time the Israelis invaded Lebanon in 1982 and went all the way to Beirut, Israel, even when they withdrew, they still stayed in a strip of Lebanon for 22 years and treated the Lebanese just like they treat the Palestinians. And out of that grew, as you know, guerrilla resistance like never before eventually defeats them and kicks them out. So that's the arc of my people. But for me personally, growing up in Lebanon was one thing and to be also exposed. And I was always living near refugee camps. You couldn't avoid them. And in certain places, like at my uncle's house in Tyre, in the coastal city of Tyre, which we call Sur, we were near a refugee camp. And at night, we would wake up with these light bombs that are being lit above the refugee camps. And I would wake up and walk to the balcony, and it was like daylight. And I felt such anger even as a kid, such anger that the fact that they kicked out these people out of their homes, they chased them into Lebanon, they bombed them in Lebanon and also lay like they're observing them under a microscope, basically, as they are in exile in these refugee camps with open sewers and spaghetti wires of illegal electricity that spread throughout there. But there was no opportunity to advocate for that.

And when I came to the United States, when we started doing antiwar work and we started meeting a lot of progressive, except for Palestinians, we started doing these talks about Palestine and things have changed a lot. I remember one day Rami and I did a talk at UDC about Palestinian liberation, the University of District of Columbia here in Washington D.C. and only two people attended after we tried to build for it for three weeks or so. And those two were friends of ours and one of them was a Palestinian married to the other. But anyway, things have changed a lot, of course. And now, you know, when you have those kinds of talks, you have so many people and all this. It was different times then.

**Matt Bowles:** I think that's an important concept. And just for people that don't have any context on this, one of the very pervasive dynamics, particularly in the United States, has been this concept, as you just mentioned, as progressive except for Palestine. In general, I'm opposed to apartheid,

except for Palestine. In general, I'm opposed to colonialism, except for Palestine. In general, I'm opposed to racism and unfair treatment and oppression of people, except for Palestine. And in part, growing up in the United States, we are very heavily socialized in the United States because of course, the United States is the patron or the colonial metropolis ostensibly that patronizes Israel and supports it politically and supports it financially and all of that and has historically for my entire lifetime.

And so, as a result, we are heavily socializing in the media and elsewhere that to be progressive or a good person or this or that with regard to that issue is something entirely different and in fact inverted. And so, this was, I think, very pervasive. And even in that period that we're talking about the late 90s, early 2000s, even among the very far left in the United States, the radical left, this was a very pervasive thing where they could have this entire political analysis of all of these different global dynamics and have this entire progressive political critique of it, except for Palestine. And I think that one of the things that Sustain did and that left turn did very much was to educate on Palestine as much as we could. And starting with the far left and then going into the center left and then really kind of trying to bring that education about what's actually going on there and particularly the responsibility that Americans have in what's going on there to the center of the organizing work that was being done in the United States. And I think there has been a lot of Progress to that extent over the last couple decades.

**Zein El-Amine:** Right, absolutely. The other thing we worked on is connecting the globe with local issues like the prison industrial complex, affordable housing, and all of that stuff. And so we made sure all our teachings and all this included somebody that's talking about at the global level, and somebody might be talking about, for example, how to save the only public hospital in Washington, D.C. and also we tied the local with the Palestinian question because we're saying, look, how much has been put into the system, Colonial Project. And it's being taken from this pot and put into that pot. It's been taken from health care put in that pot, and education put in that pot, and so on, so forth.

**Matt Bowles:** Well, I want to ask you a little bit about your local activism now, because you had mentioned that as your politics evolved and your activism expanded, you got very involved in local organizing in D.C. particularly with the African American community in D.C. can you talk a little bit about the campaign that you were involved with to save the local community center in your neighborhood?

**Zein El-Amine:** Right, yeah. So, I had started to be involved first with Critical Resistance, starting at chapter of Critical Resistance, where I was active with a group of 15 activists here, mostly women of color, that had joined the chapter. And we were organizing against the Oak Hill Youth Detention center in Maryland. That's where the juvenile detention center for DC is actually located in Maryland. And we're so effective in that campaign that it forced the mayor to send somebody to sit in all our meetings. And at some point, when we're organizing an action, we would tell him to leave the room so we can organize the action. And in fact, we were invited by the OCAL Youth Detention center to take a tour in which we discovered that the recidivism rate, meaning the rate of return of these prisoners, was actually 63%. So, it wasn't doing its job as we had guessed. And we're providing alternatives to that.

The Youth Detention Center. Anyway, the Youth Detention center was eventually changed into a school. I think it's largely because of the work we did. But we also organized things like a very popular film festival that went on for three days, and even the Washington Post recommended it as the thing to do that weekend. After that, I was also organizing with a group of teachers to save D.C. public schools, because D.C. government was using charter school movement to basically whittle away at the public education and replace it with privately owned schools. I mean, they called charter schools public schools, but they really privately funded public schools. They were Trojan horses for privatization. We did a lot of impactful work at a time when the government was going all out to try to expand charter schools, etc.

From that work, because I worked first with juvenile justice, then with high schools, I was asked if I could help women in the next to our cooperative that were organizing to save the Boys and Girls Club. So, the Boys and Girls Club in our neighborhood, one of the fastest gentrifying areas, takes a good chunk of land and it serves 240 kids of color. And a multinational company came, and they say to the board of the Boys and Girls Club, we see that you're in the red in general. What about selling us one of the Boys and Girls Clubs and we'll build luxury condos and in return we'll pay you millions of dollars so that you can get out of the red. And so, as you might imagine, Matt, that would have put 240 kids of color at risk in a working-class neighborhood at the time on the street. And you know what that means.

And so, I started to organize with them, and they had all the energy that you wish for, but didn't have like the knowledge how to organize, how to deal with and all this. So, I helped with that. And this went on for six months and it got the attention of the Washington Post, which freaked out the mayor and freaked out our city councilor. And finally at a gathering at the Boys and Girls Club, we raised so much hell that our city councilor said, I will not give the permits that a multinational developer asked for, which means that they can't build the project. And this is a guy, by the way, Matt, that has been in bed with the developer the whole time and then pretends that he's on the side of the people because things have got too hot for him. So, we saved this and then we went marched on to the mayor's office in the next week and asked him to earn \$500,000 a year to keep that club afloat.

And it's still to this day, it's been what, 15 years now? It's still there and it's still serving 250 kids. It's really my proudest moment. As much work I've done and as much great work I've been privileged to be involved in. This is one of my proudest moments. And I couldn't believe it when I was there at the moment. For us activists, there's never a decisive moment where you either win or lose. It usually stretches out over a long period. But I could tell you the minute and the hour and the date when we won because that city Councilor stepped up to the podium and said, I'm not going to give those permits. My community's convulsing, he said, And I couldn't believe it. I had to ask the person next to me what had just happened. And they told me, you just won. That's what just happened.

**Matt Bowles:** That's amazing, man. Well, one of the things that you are doing now and have been doing for a while is you are hosting the [Shay Wah Nana show](#), which is broadcast on local D.C. public radio. It's also syndicated worldwide as a podcast. Can you first just explain the name, what that means and what the show is about and how that's gone for you?

**Zein El-Amine:** Yeah. So about six or seven years ago, I was approached by Katea Stitt, who was like the manager at the station. I think at the time, she was the interim manager. But she's a wonderful person and a great activist and a great advocate in the black community for Palestinian rights.

Tremendous person. She said that we have an open slot in our programming, and would you be open to do something on the Arab world? Because that's the gap we have in our programming. And this is a truly public radio station, not like NPR that takes money from the military industrial complex like Lockheed Martin, but this is a genuine public radio station that also carries great shows like Democracy Now, which is my go-to news show. But she said, imagine one hour program that includes politics and culture of the Arab world. I said, yeah, okay, I'll do it. And I've been doing it ever since. And it airs every Wednesday from 2 to 3.

And it addresses everything from what's happening. If there's urgent matters like the bombing of Gaza, we would talk about that. But also, at the same time I would talk with filmmakers from North Africa, the Middle East, talk with authors and writers. And recently we had a story about how the Maasai are being displaced in Tanzania into Kenya because the Tanzanian government wants to open up spaces for game hunting by rich Saudis for a company owned by the Saudi government. It's been a unique program and people tell me that there's nothing like it on air. And so, I keep doing it.

**Matt Bowles:** Yeah, it's incredible. You have absolutely powerhouse guests there. I just listened to one of your recent episodes with Vijay Prashad who just, just recently co-authored a book with Noam Chomsky forward by Angela Davis. This is the caliber of people you're getting on your show to have these discussions with. And I was super impressed with the episode on the Maasai. I'm actually going back to East Africa in about six weeks. I spent about a month in Kenya in 2018, and I did have the incredible privilege to go out to the Maasai lands and spend time with the Maasai people and learn all about their culture and their history and everything else. And as you mentioned, right now is an incredibly disturbing series of events going on in Tanzania, with violent attacks and evictions by the Tanzanian government and all of that. And you had a Maasai activist from Tanzania reporting from the ground on your show talking about this. And so, the scope of issues that you cover and then relate them back to the Arab world is really, really super impressive. So, we're definitely going to link up to the show, you can get it on Apple Podcasts from anywhere in the world. So we're definitely going to link that up in [the show notes](#) so that folks can check that out.

All right, we are going to pause here and call this the end of Part two. Please be sure to tune in to [the next episode](#) to hear Part three of my interview with Zein El-Amine. Good night, everybody.