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The Reconstruction of Habitus under Conditions of Cultural Dislocation in Alyan's the Arsonist's City

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Abstract

In this article I discuss how the processes of rupturing and reconstructing the notion of habitus take place within cultural dislocation in Hala Alyan's work titled The Arsonist's City (2021). The study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological trinity of habitus, capital, and field, as well as Karim Dajani's psychoanalytical concept of cultural dislocation and epistemic rupture, to examine how the Nasr family's scattering from Beirut to the American diaspora disrupts inherited cultural dispositions and creates new, hybrid forms of belonging. The author proposes that the dislocation in the novel is not a one-off accident or catastrophe, but is a structural characteristic that alters the notions of identity over several generations. Idris's professional assimilation, Mazna's linguistic and artistic displacement, and the second generation's inherited rupture all point to an emergent hysteresis of the habitus when the social field that gave birth to it vanishes. The novel also shows how memory, storytelling, and the emotionality of ancestral space offer some kind of partial reconstruction. It makes a valuable contribution to postcolonial and diasporic literary studies by highlighting the relation between the sociological structure and the psychocultural fragmentation in Palestinian diasporic fiction.

Keywords: habitus, cultural dislocation, diaspora, Hala Alyan, Bourdieu, Dajani, Palestinian literature, reconstruction, postcolonial

1. Introduction

Palestinian diasporic literature can be said to occupy a unique space within the realm of postcolonial fiction, because it is not simply a document of an historical wound, but a kind of enacted reality at the level of form and character, of dispossession, exile and cultural disorientation. Palestinian writers have always used the displacement experience to create a space for cultural survival and aesthetic resistance, from Ghassan Kanafani's early works on statelessness to Mahmoud Darwish's elegies for the vanished homeland (Harlow, 1987, p. 2; Darwish, 2003, p. xi). Palestinian-American clinical psychologist, poet, novelist, Hala Alyan continues this tradition in the twenty-first century, by emphasizing the intergenerational and psychocultural aspects of exile. In *The Arsonist's City* (2021), she takes us with the Nasr family through Beirut, Damascus and the American exodus, exploring the fragments, mutations and partial reconstruction of cultural identity in three generations.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) theorises the concept of 'habitus' as the embodied system of 'dispositions' that are acquired through socialisation and that in turn, shape perceptions, judgements and practices in

ways that are largely without conscious awareness. In a state of stability, habitus and social field are mutually reinforcing, resulting in the sense of the game, a natural and easy-to-do practical competence, that comes easily to the player. Displacement completely upsets this relationship. By and when people are taken out of the social worlds where their habitus has been developed, their dispositions are potentially misaligned, if not malfunctioning, with respect to the requirements of the new cultural worlds.

Karim Dajani's psychoanalytical description is a valuable addition to Bourdieu's sociological perspective. Dajani conceptualises cultural dislocation as a profound rupture within systems of meaning and identity, one that is simultaneously temporal, epistemological and ontological (Dajani, 2011, p. 219; Dajani, 2015, p. 263; Dajani, 2017, p. 286). For Dajani, dislocation isn't just about losing a geographical home, it's also about losing the semiotic and affective networks through which the self makes sense of itself in relation to history, community and language. As is crucial, both Bourdieu and Dajani assert that rupture is not the end of identity, but the beginning of a hard, fraught and never complete process of reconstruction. The Arsonist's City is Alyan's psychologically and formally sophisticated double movement, from rupture to partial reconstruction.

The article continues as follows. In Section 2, the novel's plot and its connection to theories of diasporic identity are discussed. In Section 3, the theoretical framework is presented, which brings together the concept of Bourdieu's habitus and the model of cultural dislocation proposed by Dajani. The main place of the first-generation rupture analysis is done in section 4 in the characters of Mazna and Idris. Part 5 looks at the intergenerational transmission of dislocation for the second generation. In Section 6, the role of ancestral space, the Beirut family home, as a contested site of potential reconstruction is explored. The article concludes by placing the reconstruction of habitus in the context of Palestinian diasporic literature as a whole.

2. The Arsonist's City: Narrative Architecture and Diasporic Identity

In *The Arsonist's City*, the author's spatial and temporal tension is at the very heart of the story, as the death of the Nasr family patriarch's father and his decision to sell the family home call the family back to Beirut from their scattered outposts across the American diaspora. This is a return trip less a reconciliation with the past and more a struggle with the distance between recalled and real location, between past identity and current reality. The narrative is polyphonic (multiple viewpoints) and non-linear (changing over time and space), and formally engages the fragmentation that is central to Alyan's thematic focus.

The one to embody the act of willful assimilation is Idris Nasr, a Lebanese surgeon living in California who has been able to make a career out of systematically eradicating the cultural memories and political affiliations of his Beirut youth. His American wife, Mazna, is a Syrian-born actress who moved to Beirut before coming to the United States, a woman whose artistic identity and bilingualism was shattered by the rigors of immigrant life, and whose inner life is rooted in loss she can't express. Their three children, Ava, Naj and Mimi, embody the second generation's situation: they inhabit the American social field, but are psychologically and culturally haunted by a diasporic inheritance only in fragmentary incomplete and often unspoken forms...

Alyan's style of writing is like the condition it represents. Flashbacks to Mazna's childhood in Damascus and Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s alternate with present-day scenes in California, Brooklyn and Austin, and with her collective's journey back to Beirut. The temporality of this layering keeps the reader from having the whole picture of the family's history, and the characters are kept from having a sense of cultural belonging. Palestinian dispossession is not just physical, it's also "memoricide" systematic annihilation of historical memory and cultural continuity (Masalha, 2012, p. 89). The formal selections made by Alyan can be understood as an anti-archival practice, an attempt to bring back together, in narration, what violence and silence have dissociated. The novel's emotional and aesthetic qualities have been a constant source of critical praise. It has been commended for its lyrical prose, its portrait of Beirut

as a city of memory and ruin, and for its unflinching gaze of the gendered aspects of displacement. It has been said that Alyan provides an essential Arab American perspective that has the power to represent the social, political and gender injustices experienced by immigrants and diasporic communities. These answers suggest the importance of the novel as a cultural artifact, but without extended, theoretical discussions about the way identity is broken down and partially remade by the novel. This article aims to provide this analytical perspective.

3. Theoretical Framework: Habitus, Field and Dislocation as Epistemic Rupture

3.1 Bourdieu's Habitus and the Diasporic Condition

Bourdieu defines habitus as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions” that are deeply internalized patterns of perception, evaluation, action and reaction to the surrounding world (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Habitus is not just a set of conscious beliefs or learned behaviors, but rather a felt, thought and acted structure of the body, which emerges when someone has long-term interactions with a specific social environment. People learn some ways of speaking, moving, valuing and interpreting the world through family, education, language, class position, and through everyday interaction. These dispositions are natural since they are absorbed slowly and subconsciously. Bourdieu asserts that practices are produced by the habitus, but not in a mechanical way, through explicit rules (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57). In other words, people do not need to consciously consult a rulebook in order to know how to behave within their own social world; they develop a practical sense of what is appropriate, possible, desirable and legitimate.

This practical sense is dependent on a relationship between habitus and field. A field is a social space that is structured, like a family, a nation, an educational system, the artistic sphere or the professional sphere, where specific types of behaviour and capital are valued. If a person's habitus is developed in a field and stays in a similar field, then there is often an "affinity" between the person and the social world that is present. Bourdieu refers to this state as 'like a fish in water' because the individual navigates the field with ease, without constantly having to think about every action, word and decision. In this case, the social world validates the individual's dispositions and the individual's dispositions validate the logic of the social world. Despite being both historically and socially produced, habitus and field seem to be natural to one another.

Dislocation disturbs this fit relationship. War, exile, migration or forced displacement may lead to the disintegration of the social worlds that constitute the dispositions of individuals, so that their habitus no longer matches the requirements of the new field. Activities that were once of worth can be misinterpreted, devaluated or even counterproductive. A language which served as cultural capital can be a symbol of foreignness. Social intelligibility of forms of politeness, gender performance, artistic expression, political memory or family obligation might be lost. This discrepancy, Bourdieu says, is the hysteresis, or the time lag between the dispositions developed in one situation and the new situation in which they must now function. Hysteresis shows that habitus is persistent but not totally malleable. It still retains the marks of a previous field even if the field itself has been destroyed, abandoned or inaccessible.

In diasporic settings, hysteresis is not just a short-term issue of adaptation. Can develop into a permanent structural state. The "displaced subject" must inhabit a space where new skills are needed, but where the "embodied memory" of another world remains (Dajani, 2015, p. 265). This is especially important for Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian diasporic identities, as displacement is not just geographical, but historical, political and affective. The old field does not vanish, it lives on in memory, language, family stories, silences, food, gestures, grief and longing. However, it is still alive in scattered and unstable forms. The diasporic subject can thus find the subject to be split between dispositions received from an originary field and the actual requirements of the host society.

This process is further understood by the notion of capital, which Bourdieu has introduced. Language, accent, taste, education, bodily style, cultural knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) are all forms of cultural capital. These types of capital are not standard forms of capital; value is dependent on the field in which they are applied. The symbolic capital, on the other hand, is prestige, legitimacy and recognition that is only valid if it is recognized as valuable by others (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 72). Cultural and symbolic capital can be converted, lost or devalued in migration and exile. A person's status in Beirut, Damascus or Palestine does not necessarily mean the same in the United States. This is part of why the Nasr family is in The Arsonist's City - their inherited proclivities do not go away; they just get pushed to areas that don't acknowledge them. Therefore, the diasporic habitus is characterized by tension, partial translation and incomplete reconstruction.

3.2 Dajani's Cultural Dislocation and the Rupture of the Epistemic Framework

Dajani's approach is complementary and expands on Bourdieu's sociological description of cultural dislocation by addressing its psychoanalytical and phenomenological aspects. Cultural dislocation represents a deep disconnection from the systems of identity that hold together memory and belonging in the context of the "disconnect" that Dajani describes (2015, 263). The rupture can be trivalent, in the sense of past, future and temporal (tripartite) as it is temporal, it is epistemological (as it undermines the frameworks through which the subject sees and understands the world), and it is ontological (as it destabilises the basic sense of selfhood and existential security) (Dajani, 2017, p. 286).

Most importantly, Dajani argues that while dislocation can kill identity, it also can create it. This dislocated subject is somewhere between, a space of in-betweenness, where belonging is not entirely lost or entirely secured (Dajani, 2015, p. 266). This liminal space, which is experienced as fragmentation and loss, is also a critical space that provides the means to expose and challenge the constructed and contingent nature of dominant cultural narratives, as Dajani calls it the illusion of absolutism (2017, p. 288). The dislocated subject resists not by being stable, but by being able to occupy contradiction and challenge static meanings (Dajani 2011; p. 219) and resisting in a productive way.

Two frameworks combine to provide a fuller understanding of The Arsonist's City: one from Bourdieu and one from Dajani. The structural logic of the rupture, by which the rupture is socially produced and reproduced, is supplied by Bourdieu, and the phenomenological and psychological vocabulary, by which the rupture is experienced, negotiated and partly overcome at the level of the individual subject, is supplied by Dajani (Dajani, 2011, p. 219). These two make the novel's representation of identity less a loss and more a triumphant hybridity, or rather a process of reconstruction, one that is constantly in progress and is conditioned by the structure.

4. First-Generation Rupture: Mazna and Idris

4.1 Mazna and the Dismantling of Artistic Habitus

The events of Mazna's arc offer the longest and most nuanced example of sustained "rupture" in the novel. Mazna's habitus was shaped in the social field of the theatrical culture of the Levantine worlds in Damascus and Beirut in the 1970s. She was endowed with embodied dispositions, theatricality, expressive physics, proficiency in Arabic and a political awareness that was a kind of cultural capital that endowed her with status, identity and a sense of purposive selfhood in that field. Migration to the United States is not just a geographical shift, but a destruction of the social field in which Mazna's habitus was legible and was able to function.

In the American home environment Mazna's habitus becomes a hype. These dispositions that she has absorbed still trigger impulses, feelings and desires that the new field does not fit or recognize. This is her dramatic, body expressive body that transforms into the performance of domestic labour, her Arabic

language skills prove to be her burden in a space where English language skills are the key for social recognition. This change can be seen in the novel through Mazna's movement through the rooms of the California house: she is always hearing the siren or the voice of someone who lives in a past life that she had been separated from (Alyan, 2021, p. 212). This picture reflects exactly that which Dajani refers to as the "ego's habitus in crisis": the psychological structure that has been shaped in the context of a certain culture comes into contact with a different social reality in the new field, and is thus confronted with a condition of permanent "displacement" (Dajani, 2011, p. 221).

Mazna's linguistic exile is particularly significant. Linguistic capital is one of the most significant forms of cultural capital for Bourdieu because it helps people to engage in symbolic exchanges, through which the construction of identity, recognition and social value is forged (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170). The self-expression of Mazna is diminished when she speaks English, her intelligence and wit are diminished to the vocabulary she has, and to a stereotypical immigrant simplicity. Her kids don't meet the complex, intellectually rich woman she is, but rather a languid, flat, linguistic impoverished one. This linguistic displacement is in the most exact sense of the word symbolic violence, an imposition of a system of meaning on Mazna which denigrates her inherited dispositions, and which seems natural and inevitable.

However, Mazna's displacement goes beyond social and linguistic. It is also very temporal and emotional. As the frequency of her new life is different, her habitus continues to resonate at the frequency of her previous life, the Damascus stage and the Beirut streets. Her imagination is filled with the ghost of Zakaria, the revolutionary singer with whom she had fallen in love before marrying Idris, and whose death during the Lebanese Civil War is her earliest trauma as an adult. For Dajani, memory, in a certain sense, is a form of cultural continuity, a way of keeping the self-connected to the feelings of the originary field, even if one has not returned physically. (Dajani, 2015, p. 271) But for Mazna, memory is not a balm for her wounds, it is exile within exile: she is living in a moral exile, out of touch with the truth of her own history thanks to the secrets she holds back from her family.

4.2 Idris and the Habitus of Erasure

Mazna's rupture is felt as loss and suppression whereas Idris' rupture is felt as a project of self-transformation. Idris has the credentials as institutional cultural capital to transform his educational gains into professional and economic capital in the United States' field. However, the process of such a conversion demands systematic repression of the dispositions which had been developed during his youth in Beirut: his political sympathies, his emotional intimacies, his sense of collective Arab identity. The novel depicts this suppression in the form of a man who lives in the translation of things (Alyan, 2021, p. 88), one for whom the experience is always mediated, never direct, because the habitus by means of which it can be experienced has been deliberately broken.

A concept from Bourdieu, symbolic violence, is borne in mind. The values of the dominant cultural field of professional American medicine become dominant and obscure the value of Idris's Lebanese cultural capital, and at the same time, demand his individualist and emotionally closed model of achievement which is different from his originary habitus. His willingness to meet these requirements is not only a practical judgment, but an internalization that over time alters his character, creating the novel's "silence of the surgeon": a personality that demands great precision and a lack of emotion and is capable of conquering the world, but ultimately undermines his family.

The sale of Idris's ancestral house in Beirut is the culmination of this project of erasure. The family house then, from a Bourdieusian view point, is a place of objectified cultural capital, a representation and a repository of social history, relationship and symbolic investments of the Nasr family from generation to generation. To sell it is to do at the material level what Idris has been doing at the psychological level: to transform cultural memory and ancestral belonging into economic calculation. But the novel insists that

this erasure is never finished. The habitus, although systematically suppressed, is not abolished, reasserting itself as the grievance, guilt and estrangement from the self that Beirut imposes.

5. The Intergenerational Inheritance of Dislocation

5.1 The Second Generation and the Ghost-Habitus

Ava, Naj and Mimi represent a distinctive and theoretically rich form of diasporic condition: they have not themselves experienced displacement in the direct sense that their parents have, yet their subjectivities are profoundly shaped by the cultural rupture of the generation that preceded them. This intergenerational dimension of dislocation has been theorised by Marianne Hirsch through the concept of postmemory, the relationship that the second generation bears to the traumatic experiences of those who came before, experiences which are so powerful and overwhelming that they continue to be transmitted and mediated in ways that approach the intensity of firsthand memory (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). In Alyan's novel, the mechanism of transmission is primarily silence: the Nasr parents protect their children from the traumatic truth of their pasts by refusing to narrate them, but the affective reality of those pasts saturates the domestic atmosphere nonetheless.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the second generation inherits not a coherent habitus but what might be called a ghost-habitus: a set of dispositions that was formed in relation to a social field that no longer exists and which the inheriting generation has never directly experienced. This ghost-habitus generates impulses, feelings and orientations that cannot be satisfactorily explained or articulated within the American social field in which the children have grown up, producing a pervasive sense of alienation and incompleteness. Dajani's framework reinforces this analysis by insisting that cultural dislocation fractures continuity without offering a stable alternative (Dajani, 2015, p. 271), so that each subsequent generation inherits not cultural certainty but the experience of rupture itself, a fragmentation that continues to shape and unsettle identity.

5.2 Ava: Identity as Suspension

Ava's character most clearly embodies the condition of inherited rupture. As a scientist living in California, she appears to occupy the American social field with competence and even success, yet her interior life is characterised by a pervasive sense of suspension, of belonging wholly to none of the cultural worlds available to her. Hall's assertion that cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being (Hall, 1990, p. 225) is relevant here: Ava's identity is not a fixed inheritance but an ongoing and incomplete process of negotiation between the American present and the diasporic past. But unlike Hall's more optimistic formulation, Alyan suggests that this process of becoming may yield not hybrid wholeness but perpetual liminality.

The return to Beirut constitutes an acute crisis of cultural capital for Ava. She arrives in a city that is the source of her family's history but to which she has no direct access; she lacks the linguistic competence, the bodily memory and the local knowledge that would allow her to navigate it with any sense of belonging. She is, as she experiences it, the only one without an ear for the frequency (Alyan, 2021, p. 301). This image captures the embodied dimension of cultural capital as Bourdieu theorises it: the feel for the game that allows competent participants to move through a social field with ease is precisely what Ava does not possess, not through any personal failing but because the field in which her parents' habitus was formed was destroyed before she could inherit it.

5.3 Mimi and Naj: Music, Sexuality and the Search for Alternative Fields

Mimi and Naj pursue different strategies for managing the inheritance of rupture. Mimi's investment in music represents an attempt to construct, within the American cultural field, a space where the emotional

and aesthetic residues of the diasporic inheritance can find legitimate expression. Music functions, in Bourdieusian terms, as a field in which cultural capital of a different kind, not the linguistic and social competencies required by the dominant field but artistic creativity and emotional expressivity, can be accumulated and recognised. Yet even this strategy is marked by the instability of the ghost-habitus: Mimi moves through Brooklyn with the ease of a local, but his music carries the thrum of a city he only saw in his mother's nightmares (Alyan, 2021, p. 164), a translator who doesn't know the language, trying to find a rhythm in the wreckage.

Naj's trajectory is characterised by what the novel figures as emotional withdrawal and deliberate detachment. Her sexuality, hidden from her conservative family, represents a form of identity that has no legitimate place within the cultural field the first generation brought with them and no fully comfortable place within the American field either. Dajani's account of dislocated subjectivity as involving an epistemological fragility, a condition in which the subject's primary ways of knowing are dismissed by dominant structures, is relevant here (Dajani, 2011, p. 219). Naj's truths, as the novel puts it, have no place in the language her family spoke (Alyan, 2021, p. 241), and her response is to withdraw from the family field rather than to risk the confrontation that honesty would require.

The differing responses of the three siblings to the inherited rupture illustrate a point that both Bourdieu and Dajani emphasise in different registers: dislocation is not experienced uniformly but is shaped by the specific forms of capital, both inherited and acquired, that different individuals can mobilise. Ava, Mimi and Naj inhabit the same family field, face the same legacy of silence, and share the same diasporic inheritance, yet their strategies of negotiation diverge significantly. This differentiation reflects Bourdieu's insistence that positions within a field are always relational and that the distribution of capital, including inherited cultural capital, shapes but does not determine the individual's capacity for agency (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30).

6. Ancestral Space and the Mechanisms of Reconstruction

6.1 The Beirut House as Heterotopic Site

In Beirut, the Nasr family home in the novel is a heterotopia, a space that participates in the social geography but, in the time and in the feeling, has its own temporal and emotional rules, preserving and disrupting the social orders that surround it. For the Nasr family, the house evokes and evokes memories, is a source of grievance, a contested space of ownership, and a space of potential reconstruction. It's not just a building, it's a social and psychological archive - it holds, in the materiality of its walls, the dust and home objects and the history that the family's silence has not narrated.

Through her representation of the house, Alyan has integrated an extended tradition in Palestinian literature where the house is a metonymy for collective experience of displacement and loss. Palestinian dispossession not only takes place through the physical destruction of built landscapes, but also the affective relationship between people and their built environment, as Masalha contends (2012, p. 89). The house of The Arsonist's City is described in terms that highlight its role as a witness to interrupted history: All in the house was a reminder of a life interrupted, a dinner party that never ended, a war that never quite left the walls (Alyan, 2021, p. 82). This personification implies that the house, in its material form, carries over the social reality in which people lived within its walls, an objectified cultural capital that has been denied by family memories and silence.

The debate surrounding the house is a battle between erasure and reconstruction that is central to the novel. The house that Idris is anxious to sell is, symbolically, the culmination of his professional life in America, which has been based on the process of "habitual erasure": to sell the house is to transform ancestral and cultural capital into economic capital, therefore, finally breaking the material ties that bind the Nasr family to the social field that shaped their originary habitus. A contrary impulse is the children's

resistance to the sale, whether implicit or ambivalent, a desire to retain the material conditions in which reconstruction may be possible, but not how.

6.2 Memory, Narrative and Partial Reconstruction

The novel's study of memory makes it extremely difficult to read it as a straightforwardly redemptive reading of reconstruction. Memory is not a healing tool for Mazna, but a haunted archive in which past is preserved but inaccessible, too many doors (Alyan, 2021, p. 215), as the past is haunted and preserved at the same time. Dajani's framework proposes that in times of dislocation, memory can be a way of cultural continuity, whereby the self-attempts to connect to the emotional frameworks of the originary field (Dajani, 2015, p. 271). For memory to be therapeutic, however, it needs to be narrativised and shareable, it needs to be social. Mazna's secrets thwart this narrativisation and turn memory from a resource to reconstruct, into an extra source of rupture.

The uncovering of family secrets that the return to Beirut unleashes, therefore, forms the crux of the novel's theme of reconstruction. The truth about Zakaria's death and Mazna's love affair with him is only revealed in the end and this is not cathartic healing but a fresh and more intense face-off with the burden of inherited silence. The children now have to fit this knowledge in to their self-knowledge, which is a radically new re-contextualization of their family history. This integration is, in Hall's words, 'a product of identity in process' (1990, p. 222): the self is not returned to a previous state of wholeness but resynthesized as it relates to newly acquired knowledge, and must be able to incorporate fracture without negating it.

Alyan's story is an incomplete and difficult reconstruction. The novel does not bring any familial reconciliation or cultural homecoming to the story. But it offers a different perspective: that belonging is not simply a repatriation to the initial place, a place that has to be negotiated with the past and the present, and that reconstruction is always partial, always provisional, and always involves loss. This aligns with Dajani's claim that dislocation creates a situation in which identity has to constantly be rearticulated on different and changing spaces of memory and representation (Dajani, 2015, p. 268), a process that is not necessarily 'final'.

This approach to reconstruction is of critical significance in the realm of Palestinian literature. Said has claimed that the ability to tell a story, or to prevent other stories from forming and emerging, is integral to culture and imperialism (Said, 1993: xviii). By creating alternative Palestinian stories of displacement and partial reconstruction, Palestinian diasporic writers adopt a larger process of decolonising Palestinian literature and reclaiming agency over the story (Salaita, 2022, p. 47). The Arsonist's City is not engaged in this project as a triumphant narrative on cultural survival, but rather in insisting on the complexity, the cost and the continuously unfinished nature of the reconstructive work required by displacement.

7. The City as Field of Memory and Resistance

Beirut is more than just a setting in the novel; it is a social field, a field that has its own requirements, social structures and experiences of recognition and that shaped by them. The city in which Alyan lives is a city that is a double burden of trauma and happiness, a city in which the scars of the past violence and the vitality of the culture, trace upon each other, each pressing on the other (Alyan, 2021, p. 142). The image is a product of the postcolonial tradition of the city as the site of a contested memory where the materiality of the city is a site of dispossession and reconstruction of a culture. The city is like an external habitus, a materialised social field, which contains the dispositions and histories of those who lived in it; for those who return to Beirut after years of diaspora, the city is like an external habitus, a social field that is materialised, and contains the dispositions of those who lived in it, and their histories.

Mazna and Idris's embodied memories flood the streets, buildings, and homes of Beirut, they have been long suppressed in their American lives, to which the desire of immigrant assimilation has compelled them to surrender. This experience is a confirmation of Bourdieu's description of the embodied nature of this habitus, inscribed in the body's hexis, which is expressed in its postures, gestures and sensory responses (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). The city is not only a reminder of who they are, it is a reminder of their dispositions that the characters thought they had overcome, and which is brought back, temporarily and painfully. But the city to which the Nasr family is headed is different from the one they remember.

While Beirutscape has been rebuilt countless times since then, in their absence, it is a familiar yet strange landscape that mirrors not their own past but their absence from it; a beautiful, broken thing (Alyan, 2021, p. 156). This is how, even if one is the most ardent attempt to come back to an originary cultural field, what one gets is not reconstruction, but a more pronounced sense of rupture: the realization that the distance between remembered belonging and the present reality is not bridged by geographical return alone (Dajani, 2017, p. 285). The novel's account of the ancestral home is the most powerful figure for the city as a field of memory and resistance. During the family's stay in Beirut, the house becomes the place where the repressed stories of the first generation are first (and more or less) revealed to the second. The rupture is not repaired, but transformed: the children are no longer the feeling of alienation and not knowing what happened, but they are informed mourning, realizing the form and heft of what has been lost. Said's notion of exile as unhealable rupture (2000, p. 173) talks about the irreversible nature of the loss, a loss that can only be recognized, but not healed, since it is a refusal of erasure as silence has imposed it.

8. Conclusion

This article has suggested that, for *The Arsonist's City*, the reconstruction of habitus is a multi-generational, ongoing and non-resolvable process of cultural dislocation. Using examples of Mazna and Idris, Alyan illustrates conditions of hysteresis, which Bourdieu describes as a situation in which dispositions developed in one social field are not required in another and result in a perpetual cultural translation in which neither the original nor the adopted identity is fully realized. She shows, in the characters of Ava, Naj and Mimi, how the generational transmission of dislocation is not only not an intact cultural heritage but rather a ghost-habitus, an affective and psychic aftertaste of a social field never lived by the second generation and yet not passable by them. This article's construction of a sociological account of this novel's engagement with cultural dislocation and a psychoanalytic account of cultural dislocation, both informed by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Ofelina Dajani, has allowed it to go beyond a mere thematic reading of the novel's treatment of the themes of displacement and exile. The focus on structural mechanisms of 'disruption of the habitus' and psychological processes of 'diasporic in-betweenness' has shed light on the specific manner in which Alyan's characters inhabit the space of diasporic in-betweenness. It is not the permanent loss of a stable cultural identity, nor a triumphant hybridity, but the constant production of identity that occurs in and against the social, cultural and historical silences of social structures and historical trauma.

Finally, the novel's exploration of ancestral space (the Beirut family house and the city) shows the ways in which material environments can serve as sites of culture capital that is materialized and that the diasporic subject is attracted to and repelled from. The house is the materialization of the social history that family silence had rejected, and the return to Beirut is not a return to home but an encounter with the distance of memory from reality, of the cultural field from which the originary habitus has emerged, and the new conditions of the present. The encounter is not a simple or redemptive reconstruction, but it does generate the conditions of reconstruction, the conditions of awareness and mourning and partial articulation of what has been lost.

The novel is a valuable addition to Palestinian diasporic literature and to the larger genre of postcolonial fiction, not because it provides narratives of cultural success in the face of dispossession, but because it

insisted on the complexities, the expense, and the continual nature of the reconstructive effort that displacement demands. It does so by affirming Said's insight that exile can be a source of critical awareness and cultural production (Said, 2000, p. 186) as well as the irrevocability of rupture through which that awareness is produced. Reconstruction, as Alyan imagines it, is not about going back to origins or a new stable identity, but about living in and through the fracture, making from the rubble of dislocation new and always hybrid forms of cultural belonging.

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