


War Remains: Ruination and Resistance in Lebanon

Yasmine Khayyat (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023).

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Yasmine Khayyat's new monograph, *War Remains: Ruination and Resistance in Lebanon*, is premised on two provocative claims: first, that the fate of southern Lebanon foretold the fate of the nation itself—and second, that the region's "southernness" renders it a synecdoche for the broader Global South, making its fate of concern to the world. Indeed, if Beirut was once considered a "cipher for Arab tragedy" as Khayyat writes, southern Lebanon requires us to expand our comparative lens (p. 35).

Khayyat joins a new generation of scholars (including members of her family—anthropologist Munira Khayyat) working to center a region whose history, residents, and significance are seldom explored so deeply. The monograph approaches the region's past, present, and future through engagement with its ruins (and its corollary: traces) of individual, collective, and national memory, as well as infrastructure, analyzed through the lens of literature and the land. As the title suggests, the project hopes to re-signify ruins—or perhaps more accurately, to chart how southern Lebanon's ruins have been and continue to be re-signified—and interpolate them into practices of survival and resistance.

The monograph opens with a review of the region's "metaphorical and material knots of debris resulting from anthropogenic-related violence and upheaval" from the past century (p. 5). Khayyat's historiographical timeline begins with the 1948 creation of the State of Israel—an act which not only sent waves of Palestinian refugees into a newly independent state of Lebanon, but also created borders which separated families in southern Lebanon with the single stroke of a pen. The timeline continues through decades of guerilla warfare (1960–present); multiple Israeli occupations (1978–2000) and military campaigns (1978, 1982, 1993, 1996, 2006); the 1975–90 civil war; as well as the nationwide fallout of economic and manmade disaster from the global pandemic, the collapse of the Lebanese economy, and the Beirut port explosion.

Amid a kaleidoscopic narrative of violence rooted in settler-colonialism, violent postcolonial tensions, and a failed state, Khayyat's grappling with forms of life is deeply inflected by postcolonial scholarship. Referencing Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997) and Laura Stoler's edited collection *Imperial Debris* (2013), Khayyat carries forward a site-specific study of afterlife, historical haunting, absent-presence, and colonial aftermath. The work also implicitly nods to infamous questions posed by scholars of subaltern studies, asking whether a southern Lebanese voice can speak, or even be heard, in a discursive national and international landscape where political, economic, and cultural interests have—at least until now—overdetermined what can be said about the country and its regions.

Khayyat excavates voice from both the anthropomorphic and the built (and destroyed) environments, combining literary analysis with memory studies. In the first two chapters comprising "Part One: Domestic Detritus," Khayyat seeks to correct the reality that southern Lebanese literary output has been largely overlooked in favor of that which originates in Beirut. Through consideration of Shi'a narratives of dispossession and revolution, indexed in the prodigious poetry and publications of the *Shu'ara' al-Janub* (The Poets of the South), Khayyat establishes the southern poets as inheritors of ruins poetry, or *qaṣīdat al-aṭlāl*. She offers readings of the relationship between geography and politics, content and form, in the works of Abbas Baydun, Jawdat Fakhr al-Din, Shawqi Bizi^ṣ, Muhammad 'Ali Shams al-Din, and Hasan 'Abdallah with all the attention to detail that her training as a scholar



of comparative literature would suggest. She dissects the presence and absence of an implied speaker and audience; the tone of lament; and the creatively theorized relationship between land and literature which the poets themselves propose, as in Fakhr al-Din's "The Qasidah Itself," in which the south is said to both emerge from and return to the *qasida*. The work of Ken Seigneurie, who wrote a major study of the nostalgic trope of weeping at the site of ruination as a poetic mode in the context of Lebanon's contemporary history, gains new life in this region-specific consideration of the region's history of ruination where her ruins become a form of ecological witness voiced not only through but also in addition to the individual and collective narrative voices.

Her second chapter on literary fiction positions ruins and ruination as the metaphorical and immaterial residue of national memory in the era of postwar Lebanon. Through readings of novels such as *Kawabis Bayrut*, *Binayat Mathilde*, and *Yalu*, Khayyat suggests a literary case study of the claim made by Paul Ricoeur that national belonging seems to require forgetting—that there is a parallel between national burials and self-renewals. Here, the characters in the novel resist the burying of memory by reanimating the dead, the forgotten, and the misremembered, whether the unnamed narrator of *Kawabis Bayrut*'s dead lover who visits her in dream-states or the very much alive humans such as the titular character, Daniel Yalu, who persists in attempting to tell his story despite the state's demand that he be hidden away in a jail cell. Implicit in this literary reading of ruination is the notion that these novels center the ruins of narratives themselves.

The remaining chapters in the next two parts, "Part Two: Resistant Ruins" and "Part Three: The People's Right to the Ruins," focus on human relationships with the detritus of war in southern Lebanon and Beirut, respectively. The motives and consequences of the political and social actors reanimating postwar ruins are more varied. Khayyat refers in part to political-military actors such as Hizbullah who build living archives of war and survival as part of their historiography of the region. Khayyat's personal recollections from her life growing up in Lebanon, as well as interviews and readings of memoirs, allow her to describe the processes by which organizations and individuals rehabilitate and create sites of cultural memory such as the former prison-turned-museum in Khiam, Bayt al-ʿAnkabut in Beirut's al-Dahiya, and the museum of resistance in Mleeta.

The study highlights the simultaneity of the attempts to both redeem and control, to resurrect and to govern, with mixed results. While these resurrected ruins, built from the very detritus of war in many cases, are a form of resistance, they also remain a form of exclusion, leaving out the roles played by southern Lebanese women in the historiography they construct, or of their own violence. Khayyat's turn to sites of memory in Beirut such as Bayt Bayrut, the UMAM Documentation and Research organization's traveling memory bus, and various temporary exhibits further underscores the irresolute nature of memory infrastructures built from or speaking to ruination.

Khayyat's monograph is refreshing in its unorthodox and cross-disciplinary choice of objects and methodological approach. Indeed, such an approach is necessary for thinking with and about a geopolitical region as palimpsestic and dynamic as southern Lebanon. The ethical imperative underscoring the project is urgently present throughout the monograph. Perhaps by dint of how much ground Khayyat attempts to cover, however, certain claims in her monograph would benefit from deeper engagement: the positioning of southern Lebanon as a synecdoche for the Global South is provocative but remains under-theorized, and the work begs to be in conversation with scholars of postwar environmentalism and the nonhuman. That said, it may very well be a task more suitable for those who will build on this provocative study—and, certainly, in the era of Gaza's decimation this work *must* be continued.

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