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# Homemaking as sensemaking:

## Existence, place, and belonging among returning youth from the Levantine diasporas

### ABSTRACT

As youth from the Levantine diasporas resettle in what is nominally their homeland, they compose narratives of home at the intersection of finding their place and the constant movement of their existence. Their homemaking efforts delineate places of belonging where these youth position themselves in a double relative location: the intersubjective (in relation to others) and the subjective (in relation to their projected life trajectory). While dwelling in places and wider societal landscapes, these relative locations are continually moving as the youth negotiate the meaning of their presence in the here-and-now, both diachronically (*along* the perceived direction of their life trajectory) and synchronically (*toward* others). This conceptualization questions the centrality of identity in the debates on migration and diasporas, and it makes visible how belonging emerges from the existential process of making sense of one's location between the self and others. [*diaspora, home, emplacement, displacement, belonging, life trajectory, narrative, Lebanon, Canada*]

**I**n 1994, Fadi tried to return to Lebanon, his birthplace, six years after his family had fled the country's civil wars (1975–90).<sup>1</sup> He enrolled at the American University of Beirut, located in the Lebanese capital, where he was born and raised until leaving for Europe at the age of 12. Today he is in his early 40s and established in Montreal. This attempted return deeply altered his understanding of what “home” could mean:

I had a romantic vision [of Beirut] [. . .] the desire to come back to my roots, to reconnect with a country that epitomized my childhood memories. [. . .] But once there, after only two years, I was . . . maybe not disillusioned, but I wanted to leave . . . to go away. [. . .] I wasn't fitting in. [. . .] [It] made me think, “I am actually not at my place here.” That's how I started to dream about Montreal as a place where you can create, where you can live.

In this short return story, Fadi's vision of home simultaneously evokes a place (Beirut), a memory (childhood), a perception (not fitting in), and a movement (homeward). His vision stands out as deeply ambivalent, concrete yet imagined, a force that both attracts and repels. While his drive to reunite with Lebanon might reflect a diasporic “utopian impulse” (Quayson and Daswani 2013, 3), his unsuccessful return to the homeland reveals a rupture rather than the desired homecoming. Fadi's depiction of home is physically and emotionally located in his childhood city—the object of a nostalgic longing before becoming the source of a feeling of alienation in his story. This depiction thus materializes as the site where his past, present, and future collide. With the passage of time, life in Beirut no longer fostered a sense of continuity, but it had turned into something strange and unfamiliar. Unable to fit in, and, in his own words, “feeling like an alien,” Fadi started to aspire to move on to a new place where he could fulfill his dreams.

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The question that Fadi confronted—that of return—resonates throughout the scholarly literature on diasporas. The ways it is addressed, however, have dramatically evolved. The idea of return, idealized as an act of regrounding, has long been problematized (e.g., Ahmed et al. 2003; Gregorič Bon and Repič 2016; Stefansson 2004). It is now clear that the “homeland” does not form the essence of diasporas (Sökefeld 2006, 267; Wilcock 2018, 366) and that diasporic returns encompass a great variety of mobilities (including annual visits to the homeland, roots tourism, pilgrimages, and efforts to find employment), temporalities (first, second, or later generations), and motives (economic success or failure; desire to reconnect; taking refuge from racism and exclusion in the society of settlement). Rather than a simple reversed trope of migration, diasporic returns participate in complex transnational circulations, not only bounded by political and economic powers (e.g., Bougleux 2016, 13–14; Salazar and Smart 2011, iv–v), but also shaped by the agency of people on the move (Olwig 2016, 158).

More importantly, returns disrupt the intimate knowledge that diasporic populations construct by remotely engaging with their country of origins. As in Fadi’s story, returning home rarely turns out as anticipated, mainly because it exposes the illusion fostered among diasporas that two places exist simultaneously (Werbner 2013, 108). With time, “home” has grown into something different from what people have known or imagined, revealing their disconnection with the society they viewed as their homeland (e.g., Daswani 2013, 38; Tsuda 2003, 158). This realization engenders a fractured reality (Gilroy 1993, 126; see also Dayal 1996) and transforms diasporas’ double consciousness into what Sayad (1999) calls a “double absence,” the impossible ubiquity of migrant or diasporic lives. They are, Sayad (1999, 225–26) claims, absent where they are present and present where they are absent. Diasporic returns thus challenge the naturalized relationship between locality and belonging by exposing the reflective ambiguity of what home means when considered from an emic perspective (King and Christou 2010, 168). How does a location become “home”? When simultaneous connections and disconnections are exposed in instances of “homecoming,” how do people experience and navigate them?

To answer these questions, I examine situations of diasporic returns to understand how people making their everyday lives in new locales think about these places, and how doing so affects their sense of belonging and their vision of their own existence. These returns expose the “tension between place, memory, and change [that] lies at the heart of human existence” (Kirby 2011, 1). The ambiguity and complexity of relations between place and belonging in diasporic experiences have theoretically been addressed through “the identity question,” inspiring the development of concepts like “hybridity” and “cosmopolitanism from below” to grasp the existence of people “living ‘in translation’

everyday of their lives” (Hall 2008, 347). While these concepts have been critical in asserting fluid understandings of identity, they nonetheless risk isolating the diasporic condition as essentially distinctive. Against this danger induced by the reification of identity thinking (Jackson 2019, 20), I show that the ambivalence of place and belonging in diasporic biographies raises questions that enable people to reflect more broadly on the human experience of being-in-the-world.

The diasporic pursuit of home can be used as a site to conceptualize people’s need to find their place while moving forward in their lives. To unpack what is at play in such circumstances without reducing the variety of experiences to a conceptual diasporic identity, I turn to the process of homemaking, understood as a creative and agentic practice through which people try to turn the foreign into the familiar (Rapport and Williksen 2010, 5). Homemaking restores the focus on the multiplicity and open-endedness of lived situations. Through nostalgic imaginations, hopes for the future, and a sense of continuity, it includes not only the materiality and emplacement of home, but also its temporality (Rapport and Williksen 2010, 4). Homemaking is thus inseparable from the life course of its agents (Amit 2010, 234). Yet homemaking is not a form of subjective individual composition. On the contrary, it highlights the articulation between personal, intimate visions and contested collective affirmations of home, place, and belonging (Rapport and Williksen 2010, 14), calling attention to the intersubjective experience of being (Jackson 2012). Building on these insights, I propose homemaking as an analytical alternative to the identity question in the study of diaspora and beyond, defining it as a continual effort in which people perpetually revisit the close relationship between their emplacement and sense of self.

These reflections are grounded in ethnographic encounters and reflections around diasporic returns gathered in fieldwork trips I carried out among Levantine diasporic youth from 2016 to 2019 in Lebanon and Canada.<sup>2</sup> Migrations have drawn populations from the *mashreq* (Levant) across the globe in successive waves from the end of the 19th century. Particularly strong in the Americas, this presence has engendered manifold narratives of return to the Middle East. I first encountered these stories while conducting a collaborative study of lived space in Beirut (Lefort 2020), which marked the culmination of a decade-long ethnographic engagement with the questions of identification and coexistence among Lebanese students. As my exploration around the dynamics of belonging shifted toward the Levantine diasporas in Montreal, I started to document how young people with roots in Lebanon, Syria, or Palestine create a sense of home and rootedness in Quebec’s largest city. I conducted participant observation in activities organized by diasporic student associations, joined cultural festivals, and collected many life and family stories, using

different collaborative interview techniques.<sup>3</sup> This progressive immersion in Levantine diasporic lifeworlds urged me to revisit the narratives of return that I had previously collected in the Lebanese capital and to reexamine them in the light of people's agentic efforts to make sense of their presence in the places they inhabit.

From this dialogue between diasporic voices in Beirut and Montreal, there emerge diverse meanings of being at home. Using a form of person-centered interpretive ethnography, I show that these varied ways of making sense of home fit into people's existential efforts to negotiate the ambivalence between their experiences of location and displacement in everyday life. These ethnographic explorations are mostly rooted in encounters with young people. Understood as a relational category (Durham 2004), their youth positions them at specific junctures of their life trajectories. Compelled to navigate between attachment to and separation from their family, they aspire to direct their lives on the right track, thus offering valuable insights on the significance of biographical self-reflection in the experience of belonging. Although I intend to carefully resituate the material contexts in which these processes of sensemaking unfold, I am analytically more interested in the narrative construction of meaning that lies at the core of people's sense of self. While the stories voiced by my interlocutors are reenactments of past events, they nonetheless convey their experience of reality (e.g., Lems 2018, 45). In the same way that literature has no mode of representation but narrativity (Genette 1969, 55), there is "no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative" (Bruner 2004, 692). The story form of identity and experience is not an artifact but the very nature of human knowledge in and of the world (e.g., Ricoeur 1984). "In the everyday, people rely on stories to make sense of—indeed, to act in—their lives" (Somers 1994, 618), suggesting that, contrary to the classic distinction between the dramatic and narrative modes, the art of representation (*mimesis*) and the art of narration (*diegesis*) are inseparable, since narratives both compose and enact meaning.

After outlining this article's critical existential framework, I look at experiences of diasporic returns to conceptualize the vacillating nature of home as a lived reality. By zooming in on the struggles of three young people forced to navigate their ambivalent position as "returnees" in Beirut,<sup>4</sup> I unravel these complex and often contradictory perceptions of home and show that homemaking is also a process of making sense of one's emplacement amid an entanglement of local, social, and personal relationships. Finally, I introduce the contrasting story of an aborted return to Lebanon, showing how the indecisiveness of home essentially rests on the beholder's shifting interpretations of their relative position along their own unfolding life trajectory.

## Placing home existentially

In *Cartographies of Diasporas*, Brah (1996, 190) writes that "home is the subtext of diaspora." For her, the centrality of home among diasporic populations stems from the tension between their aspiration for a sense of home and their rejection of the discourse of fixed origins to which they are subjected (Brah 1996, 192–93). This situates diasporic experiences of home in between "people's need for attachment and boundedness, on the one side, and movement and openness, on the other" (Lems 2018, 9). This critical tension, often encapsulated by the interplay between "roots" and "routes" (Clifford 1994, 308), challenges sedentarist conceptions of home and culture (Malkki 1992) while stressing the significance of the lived experience of location among diasporas (e.g., Bayeh 2015, 2; Brah 1996, 192). Rather than deterritorialization and placelessness, displacement implies processes of reemplacement (e.g., Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018; Daswani 2013, 37). One key consequence is the redeployment of relationships, which involves incorporating new people into personal circles and a concomitant withdrawal from past networks (Werbner 2013, 117). As diasporic populations move toward new places, they have to "negotiate their ways within and across the boundaries of nation-states and groups" (Faist 2010, 24; see also Ehrkamp 2005). Their efforts to resettle in their new location and endow it with meaning shift how identities and attachments are lived as everyday realities, shedding new light on the interplay between the experience of location, mobility, and belonging.

From a phenomenological perspective, places are neither fixed nor confined, but "delineated by movement" (Ingold 2016, 77–78). They are formed and transformed by the unfolding trajectories of the people living "through, around, to and from them, from and to [them]" (Ingold 2011, 33). Building on this intimate connection between place and human existence, Lems (2016, 2018) analyses how the life of displaced people is ordained by their struggle for reemplacement. This relentless movement toward emplacement is nourished by the memories of the places and the people left behind. It incorporates multiple locations and temporalities that form the manifold imaginary layers composing people's sense of being-in-place (Lems 2018, 214–15). The diasporic home is therefore located in reference to different place-times, simultaneously anchored in changing memories and relationships. This dischronotopicality of the diasporic experience creates a confusion of places, times, and persons that requires people to negotiate the continually evolving meaning of their location (Peeren 2006, 71). Instead of delineating confined boundaries, the diasporic experience of emplacement disrupts essentialized definitions of home and reveals how people's sense of belonging is constantly reconstructed.

The moving nature of home also relates to the concept of “existential mobility,” as termed by Hage (2005, 470). Simply put, it refers to the feeling of going somewhere in one’s life. Existential mobility casts a forward movement toward the future, while incorporating memories from, and longing for, a lost past (Hage 2005, 471). It implies that people perceive their location *here* and *now* as a meaningful part of their past and future life trajectory as they continually reconstruct it. Among diasporas, creating places of existence relies on a sense of direction. It entails commitment to “projects of rootedness” (Obeid 2013, 369), purposeful activities that contribute to people’s long-term attachments to the places they live in (see also Hage 2013). For people on the move, building a sense of home is an agentive and locally grounded search for meaning, one that they undertake against the distress of an existence without prospects or stability. Never fully achieved, the pursued home changes as people’s lives unfold and the contexts of their existence transform (Taylor 2015, 206–7).

Drawing on these insights, I argue that *homemaking*, the processual creation of a sense of home and belonging in the everyday, is shaped by phenomenological and intimate self-articulation of one’s own location in a twofold relationality. On the one hand, homemaking happens in relation to others in emplaced encounters. Because the process of homemaking cannot be disentangled from being with others, I also suggest resituating it against the backdrop of the wider landscape of socially constructed hierarchies and conflicts. On the other hand, creating one’s sense of being at home unfolds in relation to the direction people attribute to their life trajectory. Hence, I theorize homemaking as, at the same time, *dwelling* with others in the world and *going* somewhere in our lives. As such, creating people’s sense of home is placed but not sedentary, simultaneously self-articulated and embedded in interpersonal relationships.

Undertaken from the dual perspective of existential mobility and the places people inhabit together, the analysis of diasporic homemaking ultimately addresses questions of belonging and identification. It does so by underlining the tension between egocentric and sociocentric ways of experiencing the world. As Jackson (2012, 3) puts it, “While human existence is profoundly social (*comprising relationships with others*), it always entails a sense of our own singularity and aloneness (*a relationship with oneself*).” Because of the ambivalence that they make so readily apparent, stories of diasporic returns provide favorable instances for delving into this existential paradox. By highlighting the critical role of lifelines and intersubjective encounters in these situations, we can instigate a creative dialogue between *roots* and *routes*, *placement* and *movement*, *belonging* and *alienation*, and *identity* and *alterity*. Ethnographic understandings of diasporic homemaking, rather than describing a particular condition, here play the role of conceptual tools that can restore the emphasis on

the complexities and ambivalence that lie at the heart of everyday life. They become a means of exposing the fallacy of identity categories that people habitually use to make sense of the world and unlock alternative reflections on existence, place, and belonging beyond the case of diasporas per se.

### **Claudia and Nadia: Insiderness and outsidership in divided places**

I met Claudia and Nadia in the spring of 2016. Both were students at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and were raised outside Lebanon. At the time, Claudia, a graduate student, had been living in Beirut for less than three years. She grew up in São Paulo, Brazil, where her father moved in the early years of 1980s, fleeing intermilitia fighting. After the end of her secondary education, her parents decided to send her back to the “old country” to pursue university studies, believing that an AUB degree would secure better opportunities for her future. She reluctantly accepted and landed in a city she had never visited before, carrying a single suitcase with her. As is often the case for returnees (e.g., Reynolds 2011, 536), her move back to Lebanon had more to do with the life plans that her parents had envisioned for her than with a strong sense of attachment to her country of origin. Claudia explained having no idea about what to expect in Beirut. With the help of distant relatives whom her parents had contacted, she first rented an apartment in the district of Mar Elias, a densely populated neighborhood in the center of the city. The first months were difficult, she recalled:

When I first arrived, I was totally shocked. [. . .] I found an apartment in Mar Elias. It was a very congested neighborhood. [. . .] Young men were guarding the entrance halls of the buildings, holding flags [of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, the two political factions that dominate this area of the city]. [. . .] All the people looking at you. [. . .] They know you are not from here.

Left without any acquaintances in the city, Claudia had to not only adapt to living alone but also navigate unfamiliar territories governed by local power dynamics. The Lebanese wars (1975–90), a series of conflicts that intertwined political, social, and economic factors (Picard 2002; Traboulsi 2007), had left the country’s capital devastated and deeply divided. Beirut retains the memory of its main front—known as the Green Line—that divided the city between “the West,” mostly populated by Muslims, and “the East,” which is predominantly Christian. The city also fosters a multitude of further internal divisions palpable in everyday geographies. The joint presence of politico-sectarian identities materializes in the built environment, as much in flags, political images, and posters marking the cycles of religious calendars as on bodies, from necklaces to

tattoos to diverse types of Islamic headscarves. When she arrived, Claudia encountered these demarcations and, like de Certeau's (1984, 18) pedestrian, was pressed to "get along in a network of already established forces and representations." Not only did she witness manifestations of power in the urban landscape, but, through these events, she also unwillingly became part of them. From her perspective, finding her place meant trying to make sense of Beirut's complex urban environment, characterized by deep political, communal, and economic delineations: "I had to adapt to people with different backgrounds. I had to learn the places I could go or not, what kind of clothes I could wear and what I could not. [. . .] I have been learning the hard way."

Gendered clothing norms, like flags in the previous excerpt, inscribe collective identities into urban visual textures. In both West and East Beirut, cosmopolitan areas with no perceptible dress code sit next to conservative neighborhoods where public demonstrations of piety are expected. For Claudia, these shifting standards marked her difficulties in feeling at home in the city. Far from being static, however, her experience of place involved not only "mapping" the norms and habits of different neighborhoods but also efforts to become acquainted with the sensory landscape of the city (images, smells, sounds, and tastes). Whenever it was possible, she asked other students who were more familiar with the city to join her explorations. Likewise, Claudia discovered the everyday manifestations of sectarianism, which she recalled encountering with astonishment and disbelief. For her parents, Lebanon was a homeland where their daughter could obtain a valuable education, but for Claudia it meant a place divided along political and sectarian identities, whose copresence in the city's everyday life remains tangible.

These fragmentations echo throughout the diasporic populations with great variations, based on the temporal contexts of migration (Humphrey 1998, 136). According to Claudia, expressions of sectarianism were rare in everyday encounters during her time in Brazil, perhaps because her Christian background allowed her to more easily assimilate to the majority population. Once in Beirut, she had to position herself not only within the duality of being Lebanese Brazilian, but also within the complex local politics of belonging. Her struggles to understand these tensions paralleled her difficulties in mastering the Lebanese Arabic dialect. Growing up speaking Brazilian Portuguese, she barely knew Arabic when she arrived in Beirut. Three years later, she confessed in our discussions that she preferred communicating in English, the language of her education at the AUB, whenever possible. Yet, despite the persistence of her experience of out-of-place-ness, she kept trying to make herself more at home. After one year, she moved to another part of the city, closer to the university, where she felt "less different." Like learning the codes

of the places she inhabited, moving away physically was an attempt to inspire a sense of relating to her surroundings that would transform her presence into something meaningful and enable her to overcome her feelings of alienation.

Contrary to Claudia, Nadia did not return to Lebanon alone but with her entire family. Like many Lebanese, her parents had immigrated in the later phase of the 1975–90 wars. Having both completed a university degree, they arrived in Canada to pursue a specialization. They settled in Montreal, where Nadia, who was born in Lebanon, received her primary and secondary education in a French school. After some years, Nadia's parents decided to move back to Beirut. She explained that their motivations were foremost professional. They believed that their careers were not developing as hoped in North America. For them, "going somewhere" in life required returning to a country where their Canadian experience would be highly valued. Nadia left her school and friends behind to discover the daily life in Beirut. The transition was not easy, although, unlike Claudia, she already spoke Arabic at home. She first studied in a French-speaking university based in East Beirut and completed a bachelor's degree in a health science before starting a master's program at the AUB, on the other side of the city. After only a few months, she decided to shift her major to sociology. This change, she said to me, was not coincidental. It took place amid a greater evolution in her existence.

Soon after arriving at the AUB, Nadia became acquainted with the leftist milieus that influence the intellectual and social life in the district of Hamra, where the university is situated. Living among these circles, she questioned her own background as a member of the Christian elite and developed a deep attachment to the city of Beirut as a symbol and historical hub of Arabism, a major political and cultural movement that professes secular and socialist ideals while campaigning for the prevalence of the Arabic language and Arab heritage in the society. Accordingly, she started to support the secularization of Lebanese political and societal institutions, as articulated by the government and administration, and in civil laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance, all of which depend on sectarian membership. It was for this reason that she decided to study sociology. Still, because of her religious family background and education in French-speaking institutions, gaining acceptance in these secular circles was difficult. It urged her to think about her own story in a different light, resituating the growing identification of Beirut as her home into her life and family history:

Meeting new people here at the AUB, I realized my prejudices in favor of the French, European culture, against Arabism, and all this. [. . .] My father's family comes from a central district in Beirut. [. . .] I only went there two or three times in my whole life. [. . .] But there are

not many people who actually are from the city itself. Sentimentally, I'm very attached to Beirut. So I like to brag a little bit about my origins. That way, I can justify my attachment to the city with roots. [...] It helped me compose my story and rationalize [...] my personal and political transformation.

After the creation of Lebanon under the French Mandate (1920–43), each family had to be registered in their city or village of origin to exercise their political and civic rights. This practice initially aimed at anchoring the political influence of local landlords throughout the country to serve as the backbone of the French domination. With time, it fostered a distinction between the “legal” and the “real” Beirut (Mermier 2013, 377), based on the differentiation between people lawfully registered in the capital and the far more many masses who inhabit the city while still being legally attached to their region of origin. Where Claudia expressed her struggles with the complexity of the urban landscape, Nadia understood the codes and resources she could access to find a way to assert a more accepted and meaningful presence. Using the significance of family origins in the Lebanese society, she could play with biographical details that she knew would matter. Doing so not only enabled her to believe that “this” was the authentic story of her own life, her natural trajectory, but it also made her story shareable and understandable to others. It offered a common ground with her interlocutors that could support her homemaking efforts.

For Nadia, these conscious and reflective attempts to inscribe her life into the local landscape also translated physically. She moved away from her parents' home in East Beirut and rented an apartment in Hamra. Doing this required her to gain financial independence by taking on a job in the AUB's administrative services. Thus, Nadia's quest for home strongly intersected with her life trajectory and her progressive separation from her parents, both physically and symbolically. As she told of her conversion from a French-educated young person who lived and studied in a conservative neighborhood into a politically active supporter of Arabism and secularism, her self-narrated story paradoxically delved backward into the past of her family to make sense of this new direction:

I wonder why my encounter with Hamra had such an impact on me, whereas it seemed to do nothing to many of my former university friends [from East Beirut]. So the narrative I have constructed is that [...] somewhere in my being [...] well, I'm from a Greek Orthodox family, so historically very urban and related to Beirut [...], with a working-class background and without political allegiance. It helped me understand my own behavior.

Nadia's family history became the main ingredient in her imagination of home and in her making sense of her existence in the Lebanese capital. Her movement toward home was realized through a process of interpretation, here taken in its double meaning of the allocation of significance and performance (Farrugia 2009, 270). She reconstructed the story of her roots in the city to transform the meaning to her present experience of place and provide a frame for locating her newly emerging sense of self *along* an ongoing lifeline. At the same time, performing this subjective location using the language of origins, which she knew would be acknowledged in the Lebanese context, enabled her to intersubjectively negotiate her emplacement in encounters—including how she positioned herself and how she was positioned in relation to others.

Understood existentially, this process of narrative interpretation participates in people's struggle to make sense of their presence in the world (Jackson 2019, 24) and, in doing so, to endow themselves with a means of acting in and on their lives. For Nadia, these efforts were productive, as she could inscribe her current emplacement into a meaningful emplotment capturing her ongoing life experience. She managed to convincingly build and share this understanding with others, making it possible for her to regain a sense of agency and belonging. For Claudia, it was less the case. Still, in both instances, their sense of home—or lack thereof—flows into interpretations of belonging in a double movement: diachronically *along* the perceived direction of their life trajectory and synchronically *toward* others. Belonging, like homemaking, is therefore constructed at the same time subjectively and intersubjectively, through the continual process of making sense of one's location between the self and others.

Contrasting the two stories highlights how Claudia and Nadia navigated Lebanon's fragmented social landscape their own way. Zooming in on their experiences underlines the elusive meaning of diasporic homes when these are understood from a unifying national or cultural standpoint. Their words are powerful reminders that places—and indeed home—are disputed entities where people find themselves located, as well as moving, differently. It also illuminates how Claudia's and Nadia's respective movements along their life trajectories and toward others yield oscillations between outsideness and insiderness in the places they inhabit. This tension refers to the degree of comfort or discomfort we experience in relation to places and the people who dwell in them (Seamon 2014, 15). But in-place-ness and out-of-place-ness are not solely imposed on Claudia and Nadia. Both transformed their relative subjective and intersubjective locations to construct the respective places where they could belong. This reveals that homemaking can also be seen as a conscious and reflective effort in which people seek to project their presence in the world in a way that is both acknowledged by others and existentially

meaningful. Such attempts at sensemaking remain necessarily imperfect, because the experience of dwelling follows the flow of events and the enduring confusion of life, as illuminated by Kamal's story, to which I turn next.

### Kamal: Drifting through interior landscapes

During the spring of 2016 in Beirut, I also met Kamal, a master's degree student at the AUB who was spending his second year in the Lebanese capital. Of Syrian descent, Kamal grew up in the United States, where his family had immigrated. Throughout his childhood, they had maintained bonds with Syria and regularly visited their relatives in the region of Aleppo. The outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011 constituted a turning point for Kamal. "My best memories were in Syria," he said, "so I wanted to help [. . .] and felt guilty that I couldn't." At that time Kamal was studying biology in the US, but he decided to travel to the Middle East to "return to [his] own people." Beirut was an obvious choice: Lebanon had become a refuge for many Syrians, and Kamal's grandparents had been living there for decades after spending part of their lives between several Middle Eastern countries and North America. After the AUB accepted his application to a program in social science, Kamal landed in the Lebanese capital in 2014. When I asked how he felt when he arrived in this new environment, he replied,

Within the first week here, I found out that there is a Syrian club. I am Syrian, so I joined. [. . .] I came here to be a part of—a sense of "being with my own people" sort of thing. A very tribal thing—very tribal or whatever you want to call it. But I found out quickly when I came here, and that bothered me, that everybody sees me as White or as an American. I didn't feel included. My Arabic was lacking then, [. . .] and they don't allow other languages [in the club]. It hurt me for a while. [. . .] They were all Syrians, but I was Syrian American. I have always felt like an outsider to their clique.

The story here exposes how Kamal understood that he simply could not recognize himself as part of the group he regarded as his own. Echoing Fanon's (1986) description of alienation within identity, Kamal described feeling like an outsider in the very place he believed he belonged. His "impossible ubiquity" (Sayad 1999, 225–26) became tangible in several episodes of his life in Beirut. For example, he described his anxiety after a visit to the office of the Lebanese General Security (*al-âmin al-âmi*) to obtain his student visa, where his passport was retained for weeks. This moment became "a symbol of [his] lack of control" (Kamal). In this situation, the feeling of not being a full actor in his own life nourished Kamal's impression of being out of place. This incident suggested the collision between his desire to consider himself at home among "his own" people

in Beirut and his experience of being somewhere he felt he did not belong. Kamal found himself without real presence or power to influence a situation in which tacit rules have been authored by others and which only underline his exteriority. Confronted with the impossibility of making sense of his arrival in Beirut as "returning" to somewhere he belongs, Kamal attempted to create meaning of his presence by inventing mundane rituals, or procedures that humans use "to restore a sense of understanding and control in the face of perturbing and overwhelming *everyday* events" (Jackson 2005, 94):

I usually enter [the university] by the main gate [in the upper part of the AUB]. But [. . .] when I enter by the back, it means that I am a bit hesitant. Because then it is an uphill battle [to reach the upper campus]. It means I'm trying to delay entrance, like punishing myself. This uphill battle helps me to focus. It's the only time I allow myself to worry about whatever worries me. [. . .] I'm coming either with a service [collective taxi], and it takes around 40 minutes to reach the main gate, or with bus no. 15, which takes me to the back entrance in one and half hour. Again, taking bus no. 15 is delaying, as it goes all the way around the [seaside]. [. . .] When I am on the bus, I never do my readings. I observe the landscape [. . .], delaying the inevitable. On the contrary, if I arrive by the main gate, it means that I already have a plan—I know exactly what I am going to do, and I won't allow myself to leave until it is done. If I didn't finish, then I would exit by the back again. [. . .] I don't know what it means, maybe admitting defeat. [. . .] On my way home, everything changes when I reach Cola [a major landmark situated midway toward his grandparents' house]. At this point, my anxiety becomes acceptance. It is the end of the day. I'm changing buses and will join my grandparents for dinner despite my defeat. [. . .] There will be better times to come.

Kamal's journey across the city depicts the practices he used to grasp his surroundings physically and mentally. For him, the hills, roads, roundabouts, and buildings making up the city's landscape became protagonists in his perambulation. To make sense of his environment, he routinized his daily movements and overloaded them with meaning. What I find significant in these storied rituals, beyond their multiple possible meanings, is their existential dimension. To me, Kamal's actions were rooted in his inability to reconcile his subjective and intersubjective experiences of his sense of self in Beirut. He struggled to be part of the city but felt excluded by others, and this made it impossible to resolve a certain tension: the tension between how others positioned him and how he intended to make sense of the experience of return in his life trajectory.

Unable to make sense of his presence in Beirut along the lines he had originally envisioned, Kamal shifted the focus toward an "inward" experience of place (Lems 2018,

208). Landscape plays a critical role here. By projecting his feelings onto the physical setting that surrounded him, Kamal reinvested it with the meaning it lost after his disillusionment with “returning home.” In a way, ritualization transformed Kamal’s environment into an analogy of his internal landscape. Doing so enabled him to escape the negative intersubjective relations that affected his interpretive efforts. This inward movement, refocusing his sense of self on the sole subjective experience, allowed the outside physical landscape to become meaningful again. In turn, the signification projected onto the world around him helped Kamal make sense of his presence despite his out-of-place-ness.

In ritualizing his everyday life, Kamal tried to bridge the contradiction between his original interpretation of the physical mobility that led him to Beirut and his experience of direction within his own biography, in which he had progressively renounced his dream of home in the Lebanese capital. This tension surfaces explicitly in another episode Kamal recounted to me:

The library is where I spend most of my time, and it is a place that is a reflection of the transition in my personal identity since I moved to Lebanon and now that I am about to leave. I came to study Syrian refugees, but [. . .] I couldn’t do [that] because I felt powerless. I discovered it in the library. [. . .] Now, I am leaving Lebanon and social sciences to return to my undergraduate studies in microbiology in the US. [. . .] I will try to change the world one person at a time through medicine, and [the library] was key in unlocking this transformation. [. . .] I have a lot of pressure from my family here to join the family business. [The library] was a safe place, a peace zone. [. . .] I don’t want to join the family company [because] I don’t believe in the concept of business.

Incapable of creating a sense of belonging, either through a meaningful life project or toward others, Kamal redeployed his homemaking efforts in his internal world and eventually decided to redirect his life trajectory. His words echo Hage’s (2005, 470) description of existential mobility as a need to “move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better.” It is when his experience became marked by the feeling of not going anywhere that he decided to change direction, both physically, by returning to the US, and existentially, away from the family business. Reflecting on his evolution while continuing to mobilize the analogy with Beirut’s landscape, Kamal added,

I have memories of breakfast with my grandparents in Raouché [a rock formation called the Pigeons’ Rock, situated next to Beirut’s seaside corniche]. Raouché has become an existential landmark of my doubts, of my existential crisis. People all the time are changing, but

Raouché stays. [. . .] It makes me think my time and space will eventually disappear. But Raouché would always be there.

The image of Raouché illustrates the lived tension between the placement of experience and the continuous movement of existence. Kamal constructed an introspective, ritualized connection with the city to negotiate his presence despite his out-of-place-ness. This inward drift in his experience of location resembles a coping mechanism in response to negative intersubjective encounters, one that he used until he could transform the significance of this episode into a mere parenthesis in his life trajectory. His narrative illustrates how homemaking efforts are emplaced and how they, at the same time, instigate a shifting experience of location (in this case inward). This movement is critical to understanding how constructing a sense of home recomposes people’s interpretations of their belonging, as the next story elucidates.

### **Being-in-place and going somewhere**

Homemaking is defined by oscillations between insiderness and outsiderness or inwardness and outwardness. But if, as Kamal’s story illustrates, being at home necessitates making sense of one’s presence, then homemaking also stands out as a continual and future-oriented process. Feeling at home provides a motive—that is, a meaning and a direction. When Kamal admitted that he could not make sense of his presence even for himself and did not want a future in Beirut, he decided to leave the city and reconnect his life trajectory where he had left it before moving to Lebanon. This implies that what is experienced as home can radically change as the perception of one’s future evolves. This continually changing nature of home was made explicit in an encounter I had with Elsa and Fouad, a Lebanese couple who had settled in Montreal.

When we met for the first time in the spring of 2017, Elsa and Fouad were working in their respective doctoral degrees in Montreal, where they had been living for around five years. Fouad arrived in Canada in 2011, and after spending one year in another city, he moved to Montreal, where Elsa had just been accepted into a doctoral program. Within a few months, Fouad also enrolled as a PhD student at the same university, and the couple gradually established their lives in Quebec’s largest city. The existence of a strong Lebanese community was helpful, they said. Despite the winters, they were not feeling too homesick thanks to the presence of, among others, former classmates from Lebanon, groceries where they could find all they needed to cook the food they were used to, and Levantine churches where they could celebrate Christmas and Easter and feel part of a community. Their sociability and practices enabled them to create a sense of attachment and belonging *here*



in Montreal. Yet at first, their lives were greatly turned toward *there*—Lebanon. In fact, Elsa was conducting her studies with a grant from a Lebanese institution. In exchange for this financial support, she was expected to return to Lebanon and work there for several years. They repeated at length that this was their plan: completing the PhD and returning to build a stable life while staying close to their parents. In their view, home and homeland were very much aligned at the time.

After three years in Montreal, Elsa and Fouad had a child. This life-changing event transformed how they envisioned both their presence in Montreal and their future. While they maintained their bonds with the Lebanese community and continued to underline the importance of their origins, their perception of their home's location fundamentally changed. With a child, their doubts grew about building a future in Lebanon. Together, they decided to make the necessary financial sacrifices to reimburse Elsa's funding and thereby free themselves from the prospect of having to return to Lebanon. Paying off their debt could be understood against the backdrop of the sense of guilt and treason that diasporic populations often experience when leaving their homeland (Hage 2002, 205). It helped make the painful rupture implied by their decision more acceptable, anchoring their choice in a moral founding moment.

Ultimately, Elsa and Fouad completed their doctorates, and in 2018, they were recruited to a college in a rather small university town in the US. They had understood for some time that their chances of finding work in the same city were slim in Canada. After several interviews in different American cities, they succeeded in being hired by the same institution. We met for the last time just a couple of months before they left Montreal. They were particularly worried that they could be discriminated against or even subjected to violent reactions in the US because of their Arab origins. They were also deeply engaged in finding a school for their child and connecting with the inhabitants of their new homeplace to be. They were gathering information about a local Catholic church that they, as Maronites, could attend. They were also looking for a Lebanese presence in the bigger cities of the region, especially so they could celebrate Christmas and Easter among other Lebanese Christians. Elsa was even spending some time browsing the Internet to find people with Arab names in the different institutions of their destination town, such as the hospitals. These could be people who would help them find their place.

Among all these questions, doubts, and even fears, one thing appeared to be clear: not returning "home" to Lebanon meant neither forgetting their families and past nor renouncing a place where they could settle for good. Elsa and Fouad wanted to establish a stable life in the US. When I asked what living in the US might change regarding their experience of their Lebanese-ness, both insisted that although they remained very attached to their roots, the fu-

ture of their child was what mattered the most. "I don't want our child to be imprisoned, believing they have to think always as a Lebanese," Fouad said. He then elaborated, "I want our child to be very fluent . . . not only about language but also in their way of thinking." As I was wondering what that would change for them, Elsa explained that, eventually, "we will be from where our child will be."

Fouad and Elsa's story encapsulates both the ambivalence in people's experience of home and the importance of direction in the process of homemaking. The birth of their child propelled them into a new phase in their life, in which they aspired to settle down more than anything else. Their focus started to shift first from Lebanon and later from Montreal toward the opportunity to plant roots wherever they could build both their academic career and their family. Their changing vision of home did not, however, dissolve their attachment to Lebanon or their desire to connect with fellow Lebanese or Arabs when they settled in the US. To understand this ambivalence, one must abandon monothetic conceptions of identity and belonging. As expressed in Elsa's striking final articulation of her transformed understanding of home, variations are critical to human existence. By privileging becoming over being, Elsa inverted the classic sequence between the homophones "roots" and "routes," signaling that the direction of her life (routes) would determine her origins (roots), and not the other way around. Her formula underlines the plasticity of identifications. It also translates her need to build a home *somewhere*. It is a powerful reminder that "as humans, we exist in the crossroads created by the inextricable possibilities of stasis and mobility, a space that sets limits to our existence but also opens up new horizons" (Silva 2017, 148). Home can be defined neither by fixed origins, whether expressed as ethnic, national, or any other category, nor by nomadic imaginations alone. Instead, it seems to emerge from the tension between being-in-place and going somewhere. Home is a place, but it is a shifting one, continually reconstructed intersubjectively and according to one's existential mobility. It dwells not only in places but also—more accurately—in locations relative to others and to life trajectories.

Life includes a sense of presence and purpose, Ricoeur (1992, 314–17) writes. It is this twofold inclination that I have tried to convey by sharing details of the life stories of Fadi, Claudia, Nadia, Kamal, Elsa, and Fouad. Their words evoke their struggles and the hopes involved in their homemaking efforts in their new surroundings. In many ways, their testimonies present samples of "gaps or aporias between expectations and outcomes, acting in the world and being acted upon by the world, being alone and being with others, finding and losing one's way, rising and falling" (Jackson and Piette 2017, 5) that make up human existence. For them, places, practices, imaginations, and encounters shaped an unstable conception of home and, ultimately, of

their selves. The stories they told about these mobile experiences differed from one another but shared comparable traits. They all evoked different ways of negotiating one's place, at once subjectively and intersubjectively. As such, they highlighted the creative dimension of homemaking (Rapport and Williksen 2010, 5).

Composing stories about their lived experience of dwelling places, these young people aimed to allocate and share the significance they were making of their biographical trajectories. As Bourdieu (1986) elucidates, biographical trajectories are always "an illusion," but contrary to his take, this reconstructed nature is precisely where their significance lies. Because biography is always an interpretation in situ, it can be defined as an ongoing process of meaning making that incorporates the possibility of change. While Kamal failed to make sense of his presence and decided to rearrange his life story according to another emplotment—going back to what his trajectory was before he resettled in the Lebanese capital—Elsa and Fouad recomposed their story in light of the birth of their child. Rewriting their story allowed them to maintain a feeling of being protagonists in their own lives as their focuses and preoccupations shifted. Homemaking can therefore be understood as a process through which people locate experiences of place within their ongoing existence so as to give it a sense of purpose. Considered from this viewpoint, "home" is what makes sense in the story of one's life.

Interpretations of home do not only relate to an individualized destiny. Making sense of experiences and locating them within biographical narratives become significant—that is, they acquire a shareable significance—when considered from the perspective of others. If being-in-the-world is being with others (Jackson 2005, xiv), then constructing our place somewhere means negotiating our presence here and now with these others. Home is mediated in intersubjective relationships and thus subjected to contestation. This contested nature looms in all the stories presented here: Claudia was looking for a place where she could relate to people instead of feeling alienated; Nadia used all the resources at her disposal to be accepted by the people in her social circle; Elsa and Fouad hoped to find a place in their future home where they would not be rejected because of their origins; and Kamal struggled to find a position that fit the story he composed for himself. Interestingly, the rare positive episodes that Kamal depicted of his life in Beirut relate to moments of communion with others, embodied in a specific place situated on the AUB campus that he called "the sociology tree," where he and some of his classmates would gather and find mutual support.

The need to belong and to be recognized by others enables an understanding of how "home" is always at the same time emplaced and on the move. It is emplaced because being at home is positioned in interactions embedded in the here-and-now. It is on the move be-

cause people's lives and the sense they are making of them are continually evolving along the succession of encounters with others. By interpreting their experiences of home, Claudia, Nadia, Kamal, Elsa, and Fouad constructed and shared a sense of self that is not stable but continually recomposed and renegotiated and that balances between personal and collective meanings, subjective and intersubjective experiences of emplacement and mobility, bonds and boundaries, as well as past, present, and future. Homemaking involves a continual process of interpretation of the self that discloses the intersubjective foundation of identity as theorized by Ricoeur (1992, 331) based on the concept of *ipseity*. *Ipse* is understood as an ever-changing reflective identity that is not antagonistic but defined by alterity, as opposition to *idem*, a stable and permanent projection of identity that constitutes the imagined underpinning of national or cultural definitions of identity. The other is not just the counterpart of the same but participates in the intimate composition of its sense (Ricoeur 1992, 329). The existential movement of the homemakers along their lifeline and toward others highlights this creative tension between the self and alterity. Relocating people's sense of belonging into a continual experience of the self embedded in dwelling places changes the emphasis from *idem* to *ipse*, bypassing the shortcomings of identity thinking to highlight the unstable relation between the self and others (Jackson 2013, 10), a relation at the heart of the fleeting and intersubjective nature of the human presence in the world.

### Conclusions: The shifting interpretation of the self

Narratives of resettlement offer an instance to reexamine the creative oscillation between "dwelling and travelling" that lies at the heart of diasporic experiences across all their diversity (Clifford 1997, 36). To a remarkable extent, these stories bring in full light the complex interplay between existence, place, and belonging. The dissonances they expose urge a turn away from abstract dichotomies, such as *home* and *host* countries, *identity* and *alterity*, *here* and *there*, or *now* and *then*. When considered from the emic perspective of people's lifeworlds, these categories lose their apparent stability. They become sites of negotiation, whose meanings are composed, contested, and transformed in people's interpretations of their sense of self.

In the stories that the young returnees told me about their resettlement in Beirut and their everyday lives there, the tension that exists between the subjective and intersubjective construction of belonging materializes. Their efforts to be at home in the city unfolded in two directions, *along* their own lifeline and *toward* others, both of which shaped a sense of presence and purpose: being recognized as part of the local community, on the one hand, and making sense

of this presence in terms of one's biographical trajectory on the other. Searching for a place in the city, mobilizing symbolic resources to negotiate belonging, or transforming daily routines into meaningful rituals, for example, all reflect homemaking practices that can be seen as attempts to build local attachment to the city where they were living. Such attachment was only possible where and when these young people could make sense of their presence and transform this personal understanding into something to be shared with others and situated in the ongoing story of their lives. In that respect, their narratives are to be understood as part of their ongoing life experiences. Although they include references to a great variety of places as well as reflections on their past and visions for their future, these narratives actually represent acts of positioning performed *here and now*. These acts of positioning, defined intersubjectively and connected to one's own biographical imagination, articulate people's sense of emplacement at once in the world—that is, with others—and within their life course.

By analyzing homemaking as an instance of people's efforts to gain existence amid the challenges of relocation, I aim to contribute to the debates on migration and diasporic populations in a way that does not restrict the conversation to the identity question. I show, rather, that the negotiation of identity was not my interlocutors' goal, but rather the means they used to make sense of their existential situation. Indeed, the "return" to a nominal homeland did not end, but rather fueled their interrogations about their belonging. Coming home does not resolve the expatriate's identity crisis because "it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination" (Boym 2001, 50). Nor does it close the ongoing process of imagining one's life as a continuing trajectory. Adopting a focus on the existential dimension of home rather than starting from categories, whether cultural, religious, or national, not only frees people from confined and naturalized origins, but it also offers an alternative way to think about diasporas, not in terms of a specific condition, but as a reminder of the passing nature of our relations with what we identify as being same and other. While it certainly does not exhaust the reflections on diasporic experiences, it enables one to use their complexity to conceptualize how the tension between the subjective and intersubjective sense of belonging is continually recomposed and renegotiated. It thus allows us to heed the anthropological call for "understanding the other as oneself in other circumstances" (Jackson 2012, 8).

## Notes

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1. To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms for them all.

2. In my work, I deliberately use the outdated notion of the "Levantine" diaspora. Although no neutral choice is possible, I do so for historical as well as methodological reasons. Historically, the diasporic communities were often constituted before the emergence of nation-states in what is called in Arabic the *mashreq* (Levant) and includes what are today the states of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, and, in some cases, Egypt. Methodologically, the notion enables me to avoid predefined national frameworks and prevent some of the effects of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

3. These collaborative interview techniques include map and mental-map interviews, lifeline interviews, as well as photo-elicited interviews.

4. These "returns" are not actual returns for all my interlocutors. While some, like Fadi, actually lived in Lebanon before emigrating and later attempting a return, others simply resettled in what they experienced as their country or region of origin. In all cases, these moves were life changing. Thrown into a new environment, these young people had to adapt to their surroundings and make their presence meaningful.

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