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History, Memory, and Trauma: Reading Marwan Hassan’s "The Confusion of Stones" and Rawi Hage’s *De Niro's Game*

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Résumé

Dans ce mémoire, j'explore les conséquences traumatiques de la guerre civile au Liban, tant sur le plan individuel que collectif. En lisant « The Confusion of Stones » et le jeu de De Niro en tandem, j’essaie de discuter de l’importance de la fiction pour offrir une vision anthropocentrique de l’histoire. En lisant différents récits de la mémoire de guerre, je discute de la contingence et de la contiguïté de l’histoire et de la mémoire et de la façon dont les souvenirs traumatisants peuvent influer sur la perception de son histoire. J’examine ensuite les récits à travers le prisme de la notion de « mémoire multidirectionnelle » de Michael Rothberg pour mettre en évidence le potentiel collaboratif des expériences non hégémoniques. Je m’inspire de la compréhension de Cathy Caruth du traumatisme pour démontrer la nature insaisissable des « affirmations de vérité » que cette fiction pourrait fournir.

Mots-clés : Histoire, Mémoire, Traumatisme, Liban, Guerre civile.

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the traumatic aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War on an individual and collective levels. Through reading "The Confusion of Stones" and *De Niro's Game* in tandem, I attempt to discuss the importance of fiction in providing an anthropocentric view on history. By reading different accounts of war memory, I discuss the contingency and contiguity of history and memory and how traumatic memories can affect one's perception of one's history. I, then, examine the narratives through the lens of Michael Rothberg's notion of 'multidirectional memory' to showcase the collaborative potential of non-hegemonic experiences. I draw on Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma to demonstrate the elusive nature of the 'truth claims' this fiction might provide.

Keywords : History, Memory, Trauma, Lebanon, Civil war.

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To my parents

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Foreword

For fifteen years, Lebanon was ravaged by one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history[1]. Factional bigotry, private militias, and state-sponsored armies produced a carnage of victims, both civilians and soldiers. The dominant historical narrative surrounding the Lebanese civil war details that prior to 1975, Lebanon was indeed the scene of escalating violence for numerous years. In fact, since its independence from France in 1920, the country's division between Muslim and Christian political visions has intensified[2]. However, many historians maintain that the plight of the Lebanese people has always been constructed around the deep religious and factional divide. For instance, the historian David Gilmour maintains that while it is very difficult to pinpoint the exact incident or event that led to the start of the civil war, the massacre of Ain el-Roumaneh and the Sidon incident, both religious in nature, triggered the start of violent conflicts which culminated in a series of continuous acts of vengeance and religious retaliation (109-110). The Lebanese civil war ended in 1990 with the Ta'if accord[3], an agreement that divided political power among the different sects.

Despite varying uses of the terminology, civil war is generally defined as a violent and organized conflict between groups within one nation-state and is often the result of ideological, political, or religious divides[4]. The sectarian nature of civil wars acts as a powerful polarizing force

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[1] It is equally important to mention that while the Lebanese civil war certainly is one of the longest, the Sri Lanka civil war, for instance, erupted in 1983 and only ended in 2009. Fictional works centered around the Sri Lankan civil war include Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016). For more on the Sri Lankan civil war, see Sharika Thiranagama (2011).
[2] David McDowall stipulates in *Lebanon: A Conflict of Minorities* (1983), "it is the conflicting aspirations and fears of these different components of Lebanese society confined in small and rapidly urbanizing area which lie at the heart of the continuous crisis in Lebanon" (7).
[3] For more on the Ta'if accord, see Muadth Malley, 2018.
[4] For more on definitions of civil war, see Stathis N. Kalyvas (2017).

that separates people along identitarian lines. This is important for two reasons: First, the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomy which motivates the violence implies that the civil war is perceived as a threat to not only the survival of a group, but also the survival of its identity. Second, it suggests that those groups carry distinct sets of war memories[5]. Notwithstanding, the effects of civil war on the societal fabric are not limited to what its semantic definition suggests. War trauma, as I will later discuss, substantially influences the memory of those who witness its enduring effects. This memory can be regarded as an equal to traditional historiographies in discerning the truths of the past. War memories can impact one’s perception of history.

Civil war is not unlike inter-state war in the extent of destruction it can bring about. The Lebanese civil war required the invention of a new literary imaginary that acknowledges the manifold effects of the violence[6] and accounts for the centrality of war trauma in Lebanese everyday life. Felix Lang notes that Lebanese post-war literature creates “meta-narrative[s] of the war […] marked by a post-holocaust concept of memory characterized by a moral imperative to remember past violence” (5). These narratives are articulations of and are mediated by traumatic war memory. The latter serves as a recurrent trope around which the majority of Lebanese post-war literature was constructed. As I attempt to showcase, the unpredictability of violence, death, psychological trauma, and Beirut itself are central themes in the authors’ mythologized renditions of the war[7]. It is noteworthy that the war has led to the emergence of an important Lebanese

[5] While I am sensitive to the nuances of civil war, this thesis attempts to mainly read “The Confusion of Stones” and *De Niro’s Game* in light of its social impacts. For more on foreign intervention s in the Lebanese civil war, see David Gilmour, pp. 129-181.

[6] Alternatively, Felix Lang suggests, “the claim to the position of legitimate writer could be said to exclude the choice of politically partisan literature” (53). According to him, the writer’s “imperative to remember” could be “to gain recognition in the literary field” (5).

[7] Miriam Cooke compiles a comprehensive study of women writers during and after the Lebanese civil war in her book *War’s Other Voices* (1988).

Canadian diaspora[8]. Such writers, in addition to the centrality of wartime memory to their works, equally chronicle the various configurations of the experience of immigration. They are writing from the margins to explore the effects of displacement and alienation on the conscious experience of their characters.

The works of authors such as the Canadian Lebanese Marwan Hasan and Rawi Hage solidify these claims. Marwan Hassan's "The Confusion of Stones" can be categorized as what Ronald Granofsky refers to as a "trauma novel" (19). According to Felix Lang, such texts are "cast as attempts at building a collective memory of the war in order to fill in the gap left by the opportunism of the political elites who had little interest in addressing the crimes of the past, as well as means of coming to terms with the writers' personal traumatic war memories" (3). Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* takes a different approach; his novel, as Kyle Gamble suggests, "presents a critical and highly politicized perspective on the Lebanese Civil War […], focused on the society and the machine of war" (135). As I will argue, organized around the memory of its characters, the two texts provide insights into the violent history and aftermath of the Lebanese war. Hassan and Hage are not recording their personal experiences. Rather, the latter are mediated through the trauma itself and then on various levels of the narrative.

This thesis reads "The Confusion of Stones" and *De Niro's Game* symptomatically to uncover how such narratives are corollaries of war trauma. In addition, it examines the ways in which fiction creates a particular multi-layered historiography of violence and memory of the Lebanese civil war and thus mediates the trauma of war. My main objective, in the first chapter, is to investigate the particularities of history writing as it is told through memory and its various implications on the notion of historical truth. The second chapter is dedicated to a psychoanalytic

[8] For more on Francophone Canadian Lebanese literature, see F. Elizabeth Dahab (2009).

reading of Marwan Hassan's novella and Rawi Hage's novel. Through a character analysis of Falah, Bassam, and George I attempt to identify the effects of war trauma on the individual level. I, first, read the character of Falah through Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. Then, I examine Bassam and George's trauma through the coping mechanisms they each employ. I draw on Cathy Caruth's model of trauma in my attempt to read that of the characters. Finally, through Dominick LaCapra's theory, I contest the truth claims of trauma-based historiographies.

Chapter 1: Fiction, Memory, and the Writing of History

Marwan Hassan's novella "The Confusion of Stones[9]", collected in his book of the same name, is concerned with the narrativization of trauma. It follows the story of Falah, a Muslim Lebanese, who escapes his rural southern village and emigrates to Canada. Falah is the victim of an Israeli air raid that kills his entire family and leaves him with a serious injury that substantially disrupts his life. Falah's hand, permanently disfigured, morphs into a physical manifestation and a constant reminder of the loss he suffered. Similarly, in his debut novel *De Niro's Game*, Rawi Hage exposes the intricacies of war-torn Lebanese society through his nihilistic and dark prose. The novel chronicles the life of the two friends Bassam and George. While Bassam remains neutral, George fully embraces the martial violence and partakes in it as one of the soldiers in the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacres. Bassam eventually decides to leave Lebanon and start a new life in France. George, on the other hand, spirals deeper into the violence and eventually commits suicide.

This chapter examines the contiguity of historiography and memory as well as the role fiction plays in combining the two. I identify "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* as possible examples of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. Through this categorization, I attempt to investigate the status of historical truth as absolute. I, then, discuss Hayden White's understanding of historical writing as a literary construct. This definition of historical texts further consolidates Hutcheon's questioning of historical truth and allows fiction to act as a vehicle through which memory —and, therefore, history— are articulated. Furthermore, I adopt Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory to showcase the collaborative potential of different memory traditions, which can lead to the emergence of a synthesizing historiography that allows

[9] I will henceforth refer to "The Confusion of Stones" as "Confusion".

the coexistence of the particular. Finally, I address the fragility of memory through Sigmund Freud's notion of 'screen memory' as well as Dori Laub's discussion on faulty memory in order to highlight the contingency of history.

"Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* can be read as examples of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction genre. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and history" (2). Linda Hutcheon departs from this definition and expands on it to include texts that interweave history and fiction. Hage diverges from historical truth and shapes it in ways that fit his narrative. The assassination of the leader Al-Rayess (Hage 167) serves, in the novel, as the catalyst for the Sabra and Shatila massacres. Yet, in reality, it was the assassination of President Bachir Gemayel[10] that was behind the retaliatory attack on the Palestinian refugee camps. "Confusion" is a more subtle example of the genre. Hassan's novella places readers at the epicenter of an Israeli air raid on Southern Lebanon. Yet, the events that begin to unfold do not directly reference identifiable historical moments. The narratives foreground questions of accuracy in historical discourse through their self-conscious use of historiographic 'truths' in order to tell stories about fictional characters.

Historiographic metafictions are concerned with the simultaneous tasks of writing fiction and historiography. Linda Hutcheon argues that the overlapping present and past times in these novel "problematiz[e] the very possibility of historical knowledge" (*Poetics* 106). This brings into question the act of writing history as a whole. The practice and study of historical writing requires a distinction between empirical forms of historiography and the writing of history through memory

[10] For more on the assassination of President Gemayel and its repercussions on the Lebanese political scene, see Ghassan Hage, 1992.

and of memory. Raphael Lutz explains that the philosophical doctrine of empiricism[11] "starts from the argument that knowledge and especially scientific knowledge is dependent on experience, that it is only the more or less sophisticated result of observation and sense impressions" (2). For the historian who adopts the assumptions of empiricism, albeit in a "more or less distorted, more or less weakened form" (Raphael 3), and whose task is to "reconstruct the particulars of the past" (Raphael 9), empirical evidence constitutes the core tenet of the discipline of history. Explanation, necessary to the historian's work, must be divorced from both personal and theoretical biases[12]. Thus, as James E. Young observes, in the historian's "search for certainties about substantive realities" (57) and in order to uphold their objectivity, subjective experience, namely in the form of memory and testimony, is systematically disregarded[13].

The twentieth century, however, marks an important ontological and epistemological shift in the field of history in terms of how historiography is conceived and how the historical method is defined. The emergence of narratology[14], for instance, in the field of history gave rise to fundamental questions regarding the nature of historical writing[15] and knowledge. Hayden White identifies a new form of historiography which he calls "narrative history" ("Question" 8). Within

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[11] The philosophical school of empiricism has its origin in the works of Francis Bacon, John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Lutz 3)

[12] This approach the historiography was coined by the historian Leopold von Ranke who expressed the necessity of complete adherence to objective and methodical research methods in writing history. For further reading, see Fritz Stern, 1970. pp. 54-62.

[13] In his essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", the historian Pierre Nora argues, " Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear [...] to be in fundamental opposition" (8). According to Nora, memory "remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting [...] History [...] is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete" (8). For Nora, memory is variable and cannot, therefore, be informative of history.

[14] Narratology is mainly built on the principle of recurrent universal codes present in texts, regardless of genre. For more on the founding ideas of the study of narrative in discourse, see Vladimir Propp, 1928 and Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1958, in which they respectively lay out the principle narrative components of folktales and mythology. These works suggest that discourse is governed by certain tropes that make up genre.

[15] Roland Barthes, for example, tries to understand history from a structuralist point of view. In his book, *The Rustle of Language*, Barthes recognizes three unifying characteristics of science and literature: researched content, morality, and discourse. He equates literature and science and identifies language as the distinguishing element between the two. For more on language in discourse, see Roland Barthes, 1989. pp. 3-4.

this framework, historical work is identified as "a verbal structure in the form of narrative" (*Metahistory* 2). In addition, Hayden White identifies the inherent linguistic nature of historical discourse and argues that narrative is not a product of historical discourse. Rather, historical discourse is constructed through narrative, White's proposed solution for "the problem of how to translate knowing into telling" (*Content* 1). White offers an approach to understanding historiography whereby narrative is not a product of historical discourse, but its precursor. Historical discourse and historical consciousness itself are outlined by predetermined linguistic structures identified by White as recurrent tropes[16] that make up the style of a text.

Hayden White outlines his argument of the inevitability of the historian's input in historical work through what he calls the "explanatory affect" (*Metahistory* x). The explanatory affect scrutinizes the totalizing nature of the objectivity principle in historiography and relates it to fiction[17] and genre through the modes of articulation[18] employed by the historian in their narrative. Historical knowledge, within this paradigm takes on a more elusive definition. Truth, as White suggests, is not found in pure fact. Rather, the historian constructs a narrative around the fact which makes its interpretation give the illusion of possessing a universal truth. In this context, historical work is explained as an intertwined unit of an empirically based search for truth and the historian's "investigation of the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence" ("Question" 2). The historian's task, thus,

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[16] This idea is inspired by the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico and his "fourfold distinction among the tropes," recognized as "Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony" (White, *Metahistory* 32).

[17] In *Tropes for the Past Hayden White and the History / Literature Debate*, Kuisma Korhonen notes that while Hayden White firmly distinguishes between historical and fictional facts (*Tropics* 121), it remains "a difference that [he] rarely bothers to mention, taking it usually for granted" (12).

[18] Hayden White equally identifies three strategies historians can use in their explanation of historical data and four corresponding modes of articulation for each. First, explanation by emplotment uses of the tropes of Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire. Second, explanation by formal argument employs the modes of Formism, Organicism, Mechanism, and Contextualism. Finally, explanation by ideological implication applies the Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism. The 'style' of a text is determined by the combination of modes of articulation it utilizes (White, *Metahistory* 7-29).

departs from providing explanations of historical data to producing credible interpretation. Indeed, historical truth is no longer perceived as the only potential outcome of historical work. This shift in the ontological understanding of historiography foregrounds the notion of the multiplicity of truth[19] and recognizes its elusiveness.

Epistemologically, the understanding of the adequate means to attain knowledge experienced a similar move. Numerous scholars[20] reject the a priori assumptions dividing historical archive[21] as distinctively historical versus non-historical. White, for instance, rejects "any notion of "history" [which] presupposes a distinction within the common human past between a segment or order of events that is specifically "historical" and another order that is "non-historical" ("Question" 32). What ensues from such divisions, as he elaborates, is the alienation of the object of study whose lived experiences are twice removed from historical discourse. It can be inferred, then, that historiography is not confined to the limitations of traditional knowledge acquisition tools. It is, rather, the result of what is pieced together from the fragments of the past. Sarah Tyacke, for instance, insists, "archives and archiving are part of a continuing dialogue between the past and the present for the future" (18). It is precisely this dialogue which is, according to Tyacke, "beyond fiction or self-referential textual interpretation" (20) that gives historians an understanding of

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[19] While the attention only shifted toward these assumptions in the wake of the twentieth century, thinkers such as the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sought to destabilize current-time understandings of historiography. Nietzsche observes in his book *The Will of Power*, "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations" (267). This implies that Nietzsche rejects the a priori notion of universal truth. Instead, he regards 'truth' as unattainable and contingent on the various interpretations. In particular, he argues that 'truth' is the result of power dynamics and is determined as such. For more, see Friedrich Nietzsche, 1968. For a reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on historiography, see Hayden White, 1987. pp. 331-374.

[20] For example, in her essay "Of Mini Ships and Archives", 2012, Daphne Marlatt chronicles the archival research she conducted for her novel *Ana Historic*, 1988. Marlatt stumbles upon women's private journals from the 1870's and identifies them as a site of recognition for marginalized voices in history. Additionally, the essay foregrounds the potential of archives in constructing historical narratives that remain grounded in the social realities of the era. In this sense, the archive becomes inseparable from accurate representations of human past.

[21] In *Moving Archives, 2020,* Linda M. Morra discusses the affective nuances of archives and highlights the ethical aspect of conducting archival research. In addition, Morra perceives archives as perpetually in flux.

history in its micro form. Studying archives in their manifold representations can result in a form of historical knowledge that relates to the object of study on an individual level.

The varying forms in which historical archives may present themselves warrants equal attention. When situating memory[22] at the centre of acquiring historical knowledge, for example, an engagement with the new specificities of such historiographies becomes crucial. Memory is, as Richard Terdiman defines it, "the modality of our relation to the past" (7) and the "*present past*" (8). This implies that memory is essential in situating oneself in one's past and that while it relates to past events, it takes place in the present. This is important for two reasons: On the one hand, it can be argued that memory is at the core of history as it provides the only lived road to the past. On the other, memory entails a recurring act of remembrance, through which memories are recalled and reconstructed. Terdiman observes, "Memory […] complicates the relationist segmentation of chronology into "then" and "now". In memory, the timeline becomes tangled and folds back on itself" (8). This suggests that examining historiographies that utilize memory and build their narratives around it requires an alertness to the elusiveness of memory and the precarious nature of the act of remembrance.

The definition of memory and what it constitutes varies across disciplinary fields. One may, for instance, conceive of memory as a purely neurological phenomenon in which a collection of synapses between neurons is responsible for remembering a memory. James Fentress and Chris Wickham define it as "a process of active restructuring, in which elements may be retained, reordered, or suppressed" (40). Memory, to Fentress and Wickham, is "ordered not like a physical text, but, for all the difficulties that may ensue from acknowledging this, like thinking itself. It is

[22] Here, I speak of memory in the context in which it is articulated: through storytelling. For more on storytelling and how in turn it shapes memory, see Ian McGregor and John G. Holmes, 1999.

not a passive receptacle" (Fentress and Wickham 40). It is as Elizabeth Cowie notes, "central to perception, and our understanding of the world arises not so much from what we see, optically, but from what is recognized - as like or unlike what we have seen and known from the past" (196). Memory is the modality through which a person places his or herself in the world and which provides a direct link to one's past. It, however, remains anachronistic and achronological. Memories do not unfold on a linear timeline and can often appear fragmented and disoriented.

Marwan Hassan's "Confusion" epitomizes the complexity and unpredictability of memory. The narrative structure itself is representative of the workings of memory. Indeed, the story begins unfolding with an almost surreal depiction of Falah Azlam's memories. While climbing the steps at his janitorial job in Toronto, Canada,

> he ascends others... the double stairs in the hotel in Homs... the marble flight in the hotel off Marj Square in Damascus... the stone steps leading up to the communal foundation in his native village in the southern Latani valley... the series to the restaurants in Zahle where the waters flow down the rocky cliffs... and the steps winding up from the souk to the road where the sheep and goats graze on the domes in Aleppo (Hassan 8).

Hassan's introductory passage establishes his disregard for a linear timeline. Instead, the narrative moves back and forth freely through physical space and time. Falah "stretched out beneath a fig tree in the orchard […] eating a pomegranate. He drops the lush fruit and watches the scatter bombs tumbling down. The earth begins to tremble, the sky lights up as he is hurled onto his face" (Hassan 9). The abysmal memory imposes itself on the character's consciousness and envelops his reality. Falah's history, relived in his memories and recounted in the present tense, takes place in his present and de-emphasises traditional concepts of chronology. This can also be seen in "Intelligence", Hassan's second novella. The protagonist, Abourezk, oscillates between his present

and his memories as "image of Lynne could not be displaced from his memory"[23] (Hassan 100). Despite being narrated in the third person, the series of flashbacks reveals the protagonists' innermost thoughts and, thus, unveils a previously unattainable part of history.

The narrative timeline of "Confusion" evinces Walter Benjamin's notion of the "monad" (261). Benjamin presents an unconventional quasi-theological concept of time which transcends linearity. This "Messianic moment" which Slavoj Žižek defines as "dialectics at a standstill" (*Desert* 7) which leads to what Walter Benjamin calls "redemption" (255), "meant most prosaically" (162), as Werner Hamacher notes. Benjamin proposes, "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (255). To that extent, happiness depends on one's recognition of all the possibilities of the past and of all the possible links between past, present, and future. Perhaps, far from having forgotten, when Falah is able to see his past for all its possibilities, he gains a new perspective and way of looking at his past. Benjamin's "monad" is inhabited by Falah as he longs to be "reborn an olive tree that would live thousands of years" (Hassan 41), to occupy time differently. Toward the end of "Confusion", the "daffodils" (Hassan 60) in Falah's room, a reminder of the life he had lost, cease to anguish him. Instead, as he wonders "which [flower] lives forever?" (Hassan 60), he reinvokes plant imageries which come to symbolize his home. It is when Falah reaches this moment where the linear path between his past and present blurs that he is able to feel happy.

The importance of fiction lies in its ability to combine memory and history, while maintaining the necessary space for creative input. Fiction often straddles the line between what history is supposed to be and what memory is and, thus, mends the rupture between two seemingly irreconcilable facets of the human past. Notwithstanding both the limitations of historical

[23] See also Marwan Hassan's *The Memory Garden of Miguel Carranza*.

representation and of memory, works of fiction, as Richard Slotkin notes, "can be as accurate as a history in telling what happened, when and how […] The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to *non-essential* facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts" (225). Ghada Al-Samman's *Beirut Nightmares*, for instance, was written while its author was entrapped in her apartment for two weeks, while a sniper war raged outside her walls. The book is a series of vignettes that interlace waking and sleeping moments and subtly immerse readers in the emotional experience of its characters. Al-Samman writes, "I paced around the house like an animal that's fallen into a deadly trap. As I moaned and groaned, I could hear my voice mingling with the groans of the creatures in the pet-shop. All of us were together in the same trap. As for the pet shop. All of us were together in the same trap" (119). This vivid description of the narrator's state of mind puts the readers in direct contact with the realities of the socio-historical context.

De Niro's Game, similarly, offers a vivid simulacrum of everyday life in war-torn Beirut through the perspective of Bassam. The novel dives into the everyday life of the characters whose existence is marked by ceaseless violence. Bassam recounts an incident where he was trapped with his mother in their home during a bomb raid, "MORE THAN TEN thousand bombs had landed, and I was stranded between two walls facing my trembling mother […] She called upon one female saint after another but none of them, busy virgins, ever answered her back" (Hage 74-5). Hage places his readers in direct contact with the immensity of fear people may experience in such circumstances. The "busy virgins" that Bassam's mother prays to seem to only invoke his contempt toward and rejection of deities that have proven their uselessness to him. Bassam, who has grown accustomed to the "river[s] of blood" (Hage 23), waits patiently "for death to come and scoop its daily share from a bowl of limbs and blood" (Hage 36). The author does not shy away from

gruesome imagery of "darkness", "glass slic[ing] our dark flesh[24] wide open," and "vomit" (Hage 32,48,153) to evoke a strikingly vivid sense of discomfort in the reader. Narrated from Bassam's point of view, *De Niro's Game* immerses readers in the particularities oh his everyday life.

De Niro's Game is rife with instances where the characters and readers alike are confronted with horrific scenes of violence and war. Hage's epigraph, "And the breadth *shall be* ten thousand", taken from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, foreshadows the tremendous destruction and violence the novel depicts and its oblique tone. Throughout the narrative, the number 'ten thousand' is used by Bassam to quantify bombs, bullets, and kisses. Najat Rahman suggests that the repetitive references to the number allow it to "assume a certain materiality that speaks to the devastation" (808)[25], as Bassam often evokes it to depict an exaggerated version of reality. Julia Borossa notes that the entirety of Hage's narrative "speaks of a quality of excess to be found in any number of scenes at the fraying edges of war, where violence floods existence, overturning formerly trusted relationships, highlighting the loneliness and precariousness of life under those conditions" (119). *De Niro's Game* is more than a description of war. Rather, it

[24] From a postcolonial point of view, *De Niro's Game* can be read as a commentary on racialized bodies and memories. Dina Georgis maintains that the political context in civil-war Lebanon led to the creation of a "distorted race logic—in the Fanonian (1952) sense of *Black Skin, White Masks*— [which] convinced Christian Arabs that they weren't really Arabs but Phoenicians and that this status rendered them practically French" (141). George especially identifies with the French speaking Nicole and Laurent and perceives the French language as a sign of wealth and status. When recalling an ambush, he tells Bassam, "I could hear that one of them was almost breathing. I looked at his face and I saw a Somali or African of some kind, right? I struck him with my bayonet and finished him right away" (Hage 128). He himself, while referred to as a "horny Arab" (Hage 13) maintains a connection with a perceived superiority. George has never met his French father and does not carry his name. He professes that he "ha[s] no father" (Hage 39), and seemingly renounces his ties with an identity linked to his French roots. Yet, he remains grounded in beliefs instilled in him by a society that suffers the remnants of colonization.

[25] Najat Rahman equally notes that the repetition of the number ten thousand is evocative of *One Thousand and One Nights*. She writes, "If Scheherazade […] saved her life time and again with a story, the narrator Bassam seeks survival with a story, but stories in this novel tell of destruction, of the ending of lives, and of illusions" (807). Syrine Hout, on the other hand, interprets the number, "an oblique reference to Lebanon's geographical size" (40), as "a poetic refrain [that] helps structure Bassam's otherwise chaotic narrative" (39).

represents a complex and proliferating trauma which, as I will later discuss, touches the lives of the characters in myriads of ways.

In addition to Hage's vivid descriptions of war-time destruction, the novel presents an often ironic rendering of violence and death. Indeed, in its fictional representation of the war, *De Niro's Game* unearths the absurdity of violence along with its random nature. For instance, Bassam hears the story of a young soldier whose mother dreams of his death and decides to warn him. The woman ventures into the Green Line where her son is stationed and is scolded by him. Seeing this, the soldier's commanding officer sends both of them home. Once they are home, however, the son is killed by a bomb in his bathroom (Hage 114). Rita Sakr notes that Hage's narrative "highlights the paradoxical trivialization and spectacularization of the war" (26). *De Niro's Game* normalizes violence, in particular martial violence, and renders it an ordinary part of the characters' daily lives. Bassam's mother, for example, is not fazed by the fact that "in her kitchen, a bomb had landed and made a wide-open hole in the wall" (Hage 17). Instead, she covers her "blue sofa […] with white sheets to protect it from dust" (Hage 11). While this can be read, at first glance, as a testimony to the resilience and strength she portrays, it equally indicates the extent to which war destruction has become a part of their lives.

It is noteworthy that the novel's title signals back to the prevailing absurdist and nihilistic phraseology adopted by both Hage and Bassam. *De Niro's Game* is a direct reference to Michael Cimino's film, *The Deer Hunter*, which dramatizes the death of one of the characters in a game of Russian roulette. This is echoed, in the novel, by the "many [Lebanese men who] had died playing De Niro's Game" (Hage 231)[26] Bassam recalls a particular incident when "Roger, the son

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[26] The famous Russian Roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* takes place in Vietnam after Mike, played by Robert De Niro, attempts to save his friend Nick, played by Christopher Walken, from a heroin addiction and a dangerous life.

of Miriam the widow, had pulled the trigger one night, and the blood from his brain had stained the cocaine on the table, and George's shirt, and Issam's face, and [his] chest" (Hage 231). While Bassam does not provide an explanation for the young men's fascination with Russian roulette, it can be read as a means for them to gain back control of their life or, more accurately, their death. Dalia Said Mostafa remarks that the game of Russian roulette in the novel is "a zero-sum game" in which "the individual struggles against oppressive circumstances by subjugating others" (39). At the risk of their demise, the players seem to be seeking an illusion of control and agency in a world that deprives them of both.

Marwan Hassan's "Confusion" works in similar fashion. Falah Azlam represents the ordinary person's plight during times of war. The arbitrariness of violence experienced on a first-hand level by Falah suddenly and permanently reshapes his life. The narrative in its entirety symbolizes the disorientation and confusion Falah endured. Hassan frequently interjects the characters' conversations with horrific images of war and sudden death. Uncle Yusuf comments, "My Zainie, the finest woman in the world who never even hurt a spider […], blown away like so much dust" (Hassan 43). while another farmer mourns "[t]he olive trees planted by [his] ancestors blown away" (Hassan 27). For the characters, the war not only caused them material loss, but also a loss of faith in a god that "cursed [their] land" (Hassan 23). When Falah arrives in Beirut and is confronted by the same violence and "the squalor of refugee slums" (Hassan 33), he seeks comfort— and, perhaps, safety— in a "paradisiac womb" (Hassan 33), a dirty and claustrophobic hotel room. Falah's nightmarish memories plague his waking and sleeping moments rendering him both physically and mentally incapacitated.

The latter, however, dies of his own game. Interestingly, George's story does not parallel that of his namesake. Rather, his fate is eerily similar to Nick's as he too becomes addicted to cocaine and dies of the same game.

Like many other commemorations of war, "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* unveil the particular and the personal and enable readers to catch a glimpse of the past as it lived. As I later argue, the collective repression of war memories and *de facto* erasure of the immense suffering led to the emergence of a constructive body of works that range in form and seek to counter the effacement of the lived experience of the Lebanese people. A new kind of imaginary[27] emerged from the myriad of artistic expressions[28] of war memories. Miriam Cooke, for instance, writes, "War, the organization of violence against another person, demands to be written" (25). The Lebanese civil war, according to her, provides the ideal site for violence to be articulated: "The magic formula of *la ghalib la maghlub* (no victor, no vanquished)" ("Public" 193), as Sune Haugbolle notes, allows writers to rid themselves of the question of blame. "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* seem to be, on the surface, two opposing accounts of a conflict, each told from a participating party's point of view. The narratives, however, are devoid of accusatory rhetoric. Instead, they present two sets of subjective experience through which readers are able to see the various attitudes people carry in times of war.

Read in tandem, "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* epitomize the polyphonic historical representations, in terms of both form and content, that can emerge when given proper space. I argue that these two literary works offer readers a unique and complementary perspective on the intricacies of a complex and multi-layered historiography. Both set in Lebanon, at the apogee of the civil war in 1982, the stories seemingly inhabit different worlds. In their representation of the 1982 siege, "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* allow readers insights into the different outcomes,

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[27] For more on the common tropes of women's post-war literature in Lebanon, see Miriam Cooke, 1988.

[28] Zena el Khalil's art exhibition, "Sacred Catastrophe: Healing Lebanon", held in Beit Beirut, a building located at the heart of the green line in Beirut and taken over by snipers during the war. El Khalil's exhibition presents a collection of paintings, images, and videos that aim to create a link to the past which allows the reconciliation of Lebanese traumatic history. The exhibition is available at: https://www.fondazionemerz.org/en/zena-el-khalil-sacred-catastrophe-healing-lebanon/. For more on the exhibition, see India Stoughton, 2021.

reactions, and, most importantly, perspectives regarding the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Falah, the Muslim peasant who enjoys a simple life in his Southern village and spends his afternoons "stretched out beneath a fig tree in the orchard […] eating a pomegranate" (Hassan 9), appears foreign when juxtaposed with Bassam and George, self-proclaimed "aimless, beggars and thieves" (Hage 13) who grew up surrounded with constant reminder that "[they] might all die any minute from falling bombs and bullets" (Hage 59). Falah's farmer friend proclaims his contempt for "the bastard landlords and stinking bankers in Beirut" (Hassan 26), while a phalangist soldier protests the "Fucking Muslims in [his] district" (Hage 118). This multitude of attitudes raises the question, how can these distinct configurations of Lebanese historiography coexist and culminate in a collaborative, more comprehensive understanding of history?

In his canonical work, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*[29], Michael Rothberg offers an alternative approach to memory studies. Memory studies operated within the assumption that distinct memories of a singular event eventually clash and the erasure of all, but one becomes inevitable. This can especially be seen in the works of Walter Benn Michaels, as outlined in *Multidirectional Memory* (Rothberg 1). Rothberg, however, asks and attempts to answer the question: "how is it possible to remember the specificities of one history without silencing those of another?" (*Multidirectional* 37). Indeed, the study he conducts can be read as a response to discourses of uniqueness and a model of competitive memory. Rothberg argues that memories do not have to necessarily struggle for recognition. Instead, they can be seen as two facets of the same coin. Rothberg suggests that "we consider memory as

[29] Rothberg tries to "construct a theory of multidirectional memory that focuses on exemplary sites of tension involving remembrance of the Nazi genocide of European Jews in order to offer an alternative framework for thinking about and confronting the recent and ongoing "memory wars"" ("Gaza" 523). While I am aware that Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* is specific to the study of Holocaust remembrance, I attempt to apply its principles in my reading of "The Confusion" and *De Niro's Game*.

multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (*Multidirectional* 3). For narratives such as "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game*, this implies that their coexistence is not only possible but essential in the context of forging a non-hegemonic and polyphonic national memory[30] that encompasses a multitude of different historical facets and narrative.

Similar to how Rothberg conceptualizes memory as productive, the corpus of Lebanese post-war literature seems to produce different versions of the Lebanese national memory. This discussion entails, first, an exploration of the concept of a nation. Ernest Renan thinks of a nation as "consent" (261), that is, a desire for a shared life[31], while Walker Connor, sees it as "a body of people who feel that they are a nation" (398). Renan and Connor's articulations have in common a keen interest in the people's desire and sense of belonging. Homi Bhabha departs from Renan's definition and re-evaluates the nation as "a system of cultural significance" (2) and a "form of social and textual affiliation" (292). Additionally, Bhabha equates the nation to a "narrative strategy" (292) and acknowledges its inherent multiplicity. The nation is, thus, located at the intersection of a multiplicity of national narratives. It is noteworthy that Bhabha also emphasizes the potential of recognition within this paradigm. He notes, "The nation is no longer [a site where] cultural differences are homogenized". Rather, it "opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their differences" (300). Bhabha, thus, argues that nations have a pluralistic and multidirectional potential.

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[30] Jay Winter distinguishes between national and collective memories and argues that "[s]tates do not remember; individuals do" (4).

[31] Ernest Renan writes, "a vast solidarity, constituted by the sentiment of the sacrifices one has made and of those one is yet prepared to make. It presupposes a past; it is, however, summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (231).

"Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* can be read as manifestations of the elusive nature of historical truth. Hage's Bassam represents the possibility of carrying a homogenous yet multifarious Lebanese national. First, Bassam Al-Abyadh[32] is a name that, as Syrine Hout notes, "bears no religious marker" and "does not unambiguously identify his family's allegiance to a religious sect" (44). Hage's choice of the name is not arbitrary. Bassam, the son of Maronite parents, holds a distinctly Arab name that does not allude to his religious affiliation. Hence, Bassam's name blurs the arbitrary line of demarcation that separates the Christians and Muslims and allows him, at times, to seep through the different factions[33]. Additionally, Bassam astutely muses,

> We drove down the main street where bombs fell, where Saudi diplomats had once picked up French prostitutes, where ancient Greeks had danced, Romans had invaded, Persians had sharpened their swords, Mamluks had stolen the villagers' food, crusaders had eaten human flesh, and Turks had enslaved my grandmother (Hage 12).

The previous passage showcases Bassam's awareness of the successive civilizations that inhabited his home and demonstrates his equal recognition of the dancing Greeks and flesh-eating crusaders. Bassam is aware that history is an ever-evolving flux and that the present is inextricably tied to the past.

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[32] Al-Abyad directly translates to "the White"

[33] Bassam shows an ability to differentiate himself and assert his individuality in the face of the community's shared beliefs. He asserts, "There are many Christians on the West Side of Beirut, still living there, and no Muslim ever bothered them" (Hage 131). Bassam is aware that "everyone claims to be a hero in this war" (ibid) and is, hence, able to see it as more than the threat of the perceived enemy. The 'other' for him is not stripped of humanity. Instead, he shows compassion and is aware that "[b]ombs that leave are louder than the ones that land" (Hage 37).

This is also true of “Confusion”. Marwan Hassan begins his story in the unnamed rural village of B***** where Falah and his family live. While B***** is likely the village of Baloul, the hometown of his parents, Hassan deliberately conceals its name and withholds identifying characteristics. The lack of a specific spatial setting perplexes readers and suggests the triviality of such detail. Indeed, this works to transform the tragic Israeli air raid from an accidental catastrophe, confined within small geographical boarders, to one that can affect anyone during the war. Hassan suggests that, in this case, the name is inconsequential. B***** symbolizes the tens of other villages where the same could have happened. Furthermore, the narrative travels back to thirty years prior to the civil war and follows the conversation of two farmers,

> “Thirty years ago we should have fought. We should have thrown all those bankers into the sea before they sold out Lebanon.”
>
> “You wouldn’t remember, boy […] We did fight. We fought with rakes and hoes against tanks and planes” (Hassan 27).

Hassan showcases the disconnection between the men’s memories. This is important because it demonstrates, on a first level, that history can easily be altered, forgotten, or changed. On a second level, it highlights the presence of a dual national memory. The first man was too young to remember the Lebanese political crisis of 1958. His memory and, consequently, conceptualization of Lebanese history diverges from that of the older man. Yet, they are equally ‘real’ to the person they belong to.

Engaging with this myriad of experiences requires Rothberg's counter-tradition of memory[34]. The incident between the two farmers demonstrates the inherent multiplicity of memory which requires a different approach. *Multidirectional Memory* centralizes the question of "how to conceptualize and represent multidirectionality" (Rothberg 36). Rothberg makes a move toward building a new way of remembering. As I previously discussed, he argues "against a logic of competitive memory based on the zero-sum game" ("Gaza" 523). Rothberg is, indeed, critical of the uniqueness discourse, grounded in the belief that collective memory is singular and does not allow the existence of more than one version. The model of competitive memory stems from a uniqueness discourse that came as the product of a struggle for the recognition of Holocaust memory. Indeed, the articulation of a multidirectional memory hinges on the understanding that "the result of memory conflict is not less memory" ("Gaza" 523). The collision of different memories results in the emergence of a new synthesis that allows the recognition[35] of their simultaneous validity.

When different memory traditions emerge in the public sphere in a collaborative form of articulation, nations can begin to pave the way toward reconciling a traumatic history and achieving justice. Rothberg writes, "multidirectional memory is often the very grounds on which people construct and act upon visions of justice" (19). Representations of multidirectional memories such as "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game* provide the unique opportunity to identify, understand, and reconcile the various configurations of the Lebanese civil war memory. "[T]he main street" (12) in Hage's narrative represents one of many points of historical convergence which enables Bassam

[34] The underlying assumptions of multidirectionality can also be seen in Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* where the protagonist, Khalil, protests the lack of engagement of the 1948 Nakba narrative with Holocaust memories and yearns for a way to reconcile both memories simultaneously (295-6).
[35] Kelly Oliver views recognition as not an end goal, but a pitfall into the "Hegelian master-slave relationship" (79). According to her, demands for recognition are embedded in an underlying power struggle. Calls for recognition signify the existence of a powerful recognizer vs. a non-powerful recognizee.

to grasp the injustice of Roman invaders, Persian conquerors, and slaver Turks (Hage 12). Bassam's hyperawareness of the constructedness of collective memory ultimately enables him to see the 'other' not as a threat, but as an equal. Falah encounters violence similar to what he had seen in B*****, in Beirut, the city "he had visited […] several times in the past but now it was so divided and damaged as hardly to be recognizable" (Hassan 19). This puts him in direct contact with the totality of war and suggests his acknowledgment of the multiplicity of experiences and, hence, memories relating to the war.

Soon after the end of the war, the Lebanese state enforced a general amnesty law effectively pardoning the atrocious crimes against humanity. Like the young farmer, many are placed in, as Sune Haugbolle suggests, "an amnesic society, which [does] not let them know about the events that they were obliged to accept as formative of contemporary Lebanon" (*War* 72). Consequently, multidirectional memories must also be questioned and approached cautiously. Memory, as previously established, is elusive and susceptible to distortions. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud proposes the notion of 'screen memory', "owing that distinction only to its connection with an earlier experience which resists direct reproduction" (*Psychopathology* 37). Freud makes the observation that childhood memories are often distorted versions of the real memory. He provides an example from Victor and Catherine Henri's "Enquête sur les premiers souvenirs de l'enfance", where an adult's earliest childhood memory is that of a bowl of ice whereas he has no other recollections from his grandmother's funeral, a traumatizing event for him.

Screen memory functions, according to Freud, as a shield between a person's traumatic recollections and their consciousness. Authentic memory is often unattainable and is replaced by a screen memory, "the distortion and displacement of an experience" (*Psychopathology* 57). Screen memory is, nonetheless, not entirely invented by the adult. Rather, it remains somewhat grounded

in reality. The act of summoning, reconstructing, and remembering— albeit not always voluntary— highlights the equally important force at play in determining memory: the lack of it. Freud's 'screen memory' highlights the ever-present duality of remembrance and forgetting[36] that is ultimately the decisive factor in determining the content of memory. Dori Laub puts forward the example of an Auschwitz survivor providing her eye-witness account of an uprising that led to prisoners setting fire to the camp. The woman testified to seeing "four chimneys going up in flames" (59). The falsity of her memory, however, is later revealed as "[h]istorically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four" (Felman and Laub 59). Laub equally speculates that the woman's memory could have easily been influenced either by her knowledge of the "betrayal of the Polish underground" (Felman and Laub 63) or by his own knowledge of the events[37].

Multidirectional memories are certainly essential for a reconciliation with the multiple facets of the past. However, like any other form of memory, they must constantly be questioned. Memory is not fact. It is a person's reconstruction of a past event, in the present time, which may often be tainted by internal and external influences. "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game*, whether read from the venture point of historiographic metafiction, as a form of historiography, or as representations of multidirectional memory, can only offer unverifiable truths. These 'truth claims' nonetheless are of equal importance to those of traditional historiography. The fiction of Marwan Hassan and Rawi Hage does not record history. Rather, written through memory, they enter in

[36]In *Moses and Monotheism,* Freud argues that "What is forgotten is not extinguished but only 'repressed'; its memory-traces are present in all their freshness, but isolated by 'anticathexes'.... they are unconscious—inaccessible to consciousness" (94). Slavoj Žižek similarly suggests, "the opposite of *existence* is not nonexistence, but *insistence*: that which does not exist, continues to *insist*, striving towards existence" (*Desert* 22). If applied to Freud's screen memory, this means that those original and authentic traumatic memories are not non-existent. Rather, they *insist* until they come into existence.

[37] Dori Laub maintains that the historical accuracy of a testimony does not precede the testifier's *lived* experience. By "breaking the frame of the concentration camp" (62), Laub writes, the survivor is able to convey much more than a historical fact. Rather, her distorted memory testifies to "resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death" (62). For a further reading on the survivor's testimony, see Kelly Oliver, 2004. pp.83-85.

conversation and challenge the dominant historical discourse surrounding the Lebanese civil war. Neither fiction nor historiography can assert ownership of historical truth. Rather than being in conflict, fiction allows the articulation of traumatic memories through which history is told differently. This form of historiography highlights both the collaborative potential of memory and history and the fragility and contingency of historical truth.

Chapter 2: Trauma in Marwan Hassan's "The Confusion of Stones" and Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*

Memory and history are, as previously established, intricately intertwined. The result of their collaboration is a comprehensive and anthropological understanding of the human past as it unfolded. Memory, far from being concrete, remains elusive and easily influenced. To that end, scholars of trauma studies, like Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, further foreground the question of the contingency of history on memory as it is influenced by trauma. Traumatic memory takes on a different representational dimension in its complex nature. Indeed, trauma cannot be accessed directly and must, thus, be read symptomatically. Through tracing the symptoms of trauma in "Confusion" and *De Niro's Game*, this chapter aims, on a first level, to understand the ways in which traumatic memory manifests its presence in the narratives and in the lives of their characters. On a second, this chapter investigates the reverberations of violence, and hence trauma, on a collective level, namely, through the experience of exile. I read Falah's immigration and the effects of the Sabra and Shatila massacres on the Lebanese nation as a whole as indications to the depth of the Lebanese national trauma. This allows me to discuss the unrepresentability of trauma and the necessity of such narratives in not only complementing historiographical accounts of collective disaster, but also in reconciling and healing individual and collective encounters with violence.

Inspired by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's theories in psychoanalysis, the field of trauma studies explores the intricate relationships between trauma, memory, and history.

Scholars[38] of trauma studies, like Cathy Caruth, engage with the concept of trauma[39] on an epistemological level and the various implications it has on literature and history. "In its general definition", Caruth writes, "trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur" (91). Caruth locates trauma at the curious binary of the knowable and unknowable and suggests that it is "not locatable in the simple violent and original event in the individual's past, but rather in the way [...]it was precisely *not known* in the first instance" (4). The violent encounter leads to the psyche's fragmentation, with the traumatic memory dormant in the unconscious mind until its return to haunt the subject. Additionally, trauma harms the traumatized individual's psyche and renders the traumatic event inaccessible to the conscious mind. "The reference", as Caruth suggests, "is indirect" (11).

Trauma within this framework, is beyond articulation and comprehension. The traumatic experience which, as Caruth maintains, "defies and demands our witness" (5) resides in a realm beyond conscious understanding. It evades and resists articulation while simultaneously imposing its presence. Caruth writes, "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (92). This understanding of trauma entails a rethinking of the limitations of the referentiality of linguistic and historical representations of traumatic events. Trauma for Caruth impairs the individual's capability of remembering their past and of understanding their present. Caruth remarks that "knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it" (4). The traumatic event halts time

[38] The scholarship of Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Geoffrey Hartman are equally influential in shaping the field of trauma studies.
[39] Dominick LaCapra, for instance, defines trauma as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (*Writing History* 41).

and renders any access to it impossible[40]. The traumatized individual, not fully aware of their traumatic history, experiences, as Caruth argues, "uncanny repetition[s]" (9) of the trauma in the form of dreams or hallucinations[41].

For narratives such as *The Confusion of Stones* and *De Niro's* Game, the "reference", in Caruth's terms, "is indirect" (10). The trauma which mediates Hassan and Hage's stories cannot be directly articulated. Rather, it must be read symptomatically to uncover the extent of its effect on the characters' lives. Marwan Hassan's novella weaves its story around Falah's traumatic experiences and the subsequent effects they had on his life and of those around him. "Confusion" is written in dream-like prose that mimics Falah's state of mind. The narrative oscillates between the protagonist's present-day in his janitorial job, his memories from his life in Lebanon, and his protruding dreams. The introductory passage of "Confusion" establishes the dominant atmosphere of the novella. Falah, "oppressed by the prevailing sterility" (Hassan 7) of the Plaza, prefers an escape through memories of his homeland. The image of "the communal fountain in his native village in the Southern Latani valley" (Hassan 7) is Falah's haven in a reality he cannot accept. Falah attempts to submerge his conscious mind in the nostalgic elements of his home. His memories, however, are soon revealed to be a site of suffering and anguish for him. Falah's escapist fantasies are interrupted as "the Israeli Phantoms appear in the turquoise heaven over the stone village" (Hassan 9).

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[40] Geoffrey Hartman, for instance, emphasizes the alien nature of traumatic experience. For Hartman, trauma is the result of "an experience that lodges in a person without having been experienced, that is, without having fully passed into consciousness or stayed there. It is a 'foreign body' (*Fremdkörper*) in the psyche" (257). This definition equally highlights the difficulty one faces when attempting to understand trauma. Trauma blurs the line between the conscious and unconscious mind without offering the subject the opportunity to fully grasp it.

[41] Caruth draws from Freud's notion of the return of the repressed. Freud argues that 'forgotten' memories are never erased from the unconscious. Rather, it "appears as a symptom, without the acquiescence and also without the comprehension of the ego" (*Moses* 127).

Falah's trauma can be traced back to two major incidents where his life was irrevocably altered. First, Falah was witness to the annihilation of his entire village and to the carnage produced by the Israeli bombs. Second, his hand is disfigured and he is forced to undergo a gruesome medical procedure. He remembers,

> Donkeys' heads and sheep's limbs [...] scattered about the earth like broken chess pieces. A woman in a black dress squats against a wall, her nose long, her thick pink tongue hanging out between bucked teeth as she smiles. [Falah] nudges her softly on the shoulder with his elbow and the head rolls off and splatters blood on his shoes. He recoils from the staring eyes. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry…" (Hassan 10).

Falah's detailed memory shows the extent and the depth of the trauma created in him. The horrific images of dismembered animal corpses, a decapitated woman, and endless blood haunt his recollections and plunge him deeper into a melancholic state. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is characterized by the doubleness of the "*crisis of death*" and the "the correlative *crisis of life*" (7). Indeed, it is unclear if Falah is apologizing for the literal act of dropping the woman's head, or for having survived the same bombs that killed her. The question Caruth poses, "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7) resonates with Falah's plight. The trauma of having witnessed the death of so many people, his family included, is perhaps equally detrimental to his psyche as the trauma ensuing from his survival.

This tension between life and death, according to Caruth, is at the heart of trauma. Caruth argues that traumatic memories, such as Falah's, tend to stay latent for a period of time before they come back in the form of an involuntary cycle of repetition. This repetition can manifest symptomatically as dreams. Most notably in "Confusion", Falah dreams,

> He was in the Latani valley near the village carrying a body which was his father's […] His two dead brothers emerged from a small stone hut on a distant ridge [and] motioned for him to follow the steep goat path towards them. He arrived at the hut and rested the emaciated, weary body on the military cot (Hassan 53).

On the one hand, this can be partially explained with Freud's notion of wish fulfilment whereby Falah's dream offers him what he longs for the most: the resurrection of his family. On the other hand, the dream can be approached as a manifestation of Falah's conundrum of simultaneously facing and escaping death. Caruth notes, "Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again" (62). The sole survivor, Falah's confrontation with death remains distant, separated by a barrier which prevents its complete understanding. His dream, thus, epitomizes his cognitive incapability to grasp the full meaning of his trauma.

Falah's lucid recollection is limited to the details of the horrific images he saw. His memory of his family's death remains fragmented and is only revealed to him by his nurse. She explains, "They were all trapped in the house. And the house was bombed as you said. Your mother died at a hospital in Jezin. The others died in the house or were shot by Haddad's forces" (Hassan 15). Unable to accept what he deems as "not possible", Falah "did not weep, but recalled the vision of the smashed, mud roof as he had stood before the rubble" (Hassan 15). He is unable to process the sudden loss of his family. This may be read as Falah's conscious mind's inability to fully integrate the unthinkable encounter with violence. This further highlights the difficulty of directly extracting the traces of trauma. While unaware of it, traumatic experience becomes the driving force behind people's actions and perception of the world. Falah constantly relives the traumatic moment and remains trapped in it, rendering him incapable of living his present independently from it.

Following the air raid, Falah's hand is "severed clean across the palm along the heartline [...] by a hunk of metal implanted in the soil like a clever delivered from the heavens" (Hassan 9). He, then, loses consciousness and slips into a dream-like state where he is confronted by an "afrit"[42] who "stabs Falah in the Carotid vein" (Hassan 11). When he wakes up, he finds himself in a hospital bed with "the hand grafted to his abdomen" (Hassan 13). Falah finds this repulsive and rejects the protruding limb which feels foreign to his body[43]. The severed hand will henceforth have a constant effect on the peasant's daily life. Following a lengthy healing process, Falah's hand "gestured a rarefield brittleness of an alabaster shell that even a cautious caress might cause to crumble" (Hassan 21). If the physical trauma is seen as a metaphor for psychological trauma, the story will reveal the depth of Falah's suffering. Hassan writes, "The doctor had said with time he might even forget the numbness was there. Suddenly, the physiological amnesia shrank back into its cocoon and he could feel a leadenness in the limb" (41). This suggests that Falah's trauma, identical to the physical injury, is itself relived in that moment. The severed hand and the traumatic memories have in common a "transcendence of time and matter" (Hassan 21).

The mutilated hand, as representative of his psychological suffering, forces Falah to repetitively relive his trauma. Hassan writes, "Under the pressure of the circumstances, his mind had grown lucid in the extreme" (Hassan 21). Taking Caruth's principle of the inaccessibility of trauma, this suggests a severance between Falah's conscious and unconscious mind. Falah's thoughts remain lucid as he navigates life in the aftermath of his family's death and his subsequent displacement. Yet, the sight of his "ugly hand" (Hassan 55) repulses him precisely because of its

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[42] "Afrit" translates to demon.

[43] In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty opposes the Cartesian separation of mind, or subject, and body, or object, and argues that consciousness is the result of intersubjectivity. The body, for Merleau-Ponty, is a prerequisite of one's ability to perceive the world. For further reading on the relationship between bodies and subjectivity, see Merleau-Ponty, 2018.

sameness with his trauma. Falah's psychological and physical scars thwart, as I later discuss, his assimilation in Canada. When the Medieros family, his Portuguese landlords, try to introduce themselves, Falah seems cold and distant, unwilling to open up. The traumatic memories force him to act and perceive the world through them. Falah is incapable of contemplating the idea of happiness. He wonders, "How can they be happy?" (Hasan 41) when he sees the Medieros family enjoying dinner. Additionally, when Tima and Lucy Medieros inquire about his hand, Falah hides it in his pocket and refuses to speak about it.

Given his ongoing refusal of not only the surgery, but also the hand itself, Falah can also be perceived as becoming, in Julia Kristeva's terms, an abject to himself. Kristeva defines the abject as "one of those violent and obscure revolts of being against that which threatens it and which seems to it to come from an outside or an exorbitant inside; something that is thrown next to the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It is there, very close, but unassimilable" (126). The abject is that which resides in a site of ambiguity. It disrupts boundaries and challenges the social order. Kristeva suggests, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing in familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (5). Accordingly, Falah's sense of himself is invaded by this perceived intruder, a "mutilation" (Hassan 13). The injury causes the boundary between Falah's body as a subject and as an object to blur, which causes further fragmentation of his psyche and alters his subjectivity. Falah is, thus, forced to be confronted with his deepest traumas on a daily basis.

Whereas Falah experiences a singular, albeit unthinkable, encounter with extreme violence, the traumas of Hage's Bassam and George initially stem from a continual exposure to it. Raised in Achrafieh, a predominantly Maronite neighborhood in Beirut where fighting often

took place, Bassam and George are introduced to the horrors of war from a young age[44]. Soon, it becomes the only reality the teenagers know. *De Niro's Game* is narrated by Bassam who offers readers a voyeuristic view of the events from his perspective. While this inevitably challenges his credibility, the first-person narrator nonetheless manages to depict the various configurations of trauma in the characters. Najat Rahman suggests that the novel is ultimately "the story of a separation of two friends shaped by the experience of a long war" (807). It is through the various stages of this friendship[45] that Hage reveals the outcomes of the characters' traumas on the course of their lives. Bassam and George's paths begin to diverge when the latter joins the militia. He eventually betrays his "brother" (Hage 172), plots against him, and gets engaged to Bassam's lover, Rana. Bassam's only goal is to escape Lebanon and the war. In doing so, Bassam believes that everything, including murder, is permissible for the sake of money.

Trauma permeates *De Niro's Game* and can even be detected in Hage's language, on a stylistic level. The surrealist aspect of *De Niro's Game*, most notable in Bassam's inner-monologue, conveyed through fragments of stream of consciousness, can be understood as a manifestation of the trauma Hage attempts to capture. Rita Sakr notes that Bassam "escapes […] imaginatively into fantasy as he becomes the audience of a surreal drama where consciously observed reality loses its contours as it dissolves into the panorama of unconscious personal fears and longings" (30). Accordingly, the surrealist, and ironic, undertones of *De Niro's Game* grapple with the impossibility of representing the trauma it attempts to capture. Surrealist

[44] The events of the novel take place circa 1982, coinciding with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Bassam and George must have been ten years old when the war was instigated.

[45] Julia Borossa notes that "what is at stake is showing how the traumatic effects of violence inevitably enforce a kind of compromise formation on subjectivity, understood here as fundamentally relational, albeit in a nontransparent way" (120). It is, thus, possible to trace the trauma that reverberates throughout the novel. This trauma, fundamentally inaccessible, becomes detectable if read symptomatically. Bassam neither recounts his trauma nor George's. Yet, through reading their characters in the different stages of their friendship, readers can begin to understand Bassam and George's psychological suffering.

narratives, like trauma, often leave readers confused and disoriented, unsure of their true meaning[46]. Bassam evokes illogical images that are often emblematic of his psychological suffering. Rita Sakr suggests, "Hage's surrealist image[s] responds to Picasso's *Guernica*, a displacement of the unrepresentable war reality onto an aesthetic space that accommodates complex historical and psychological realities" (27). Coupled with Bassam's ironic rhetoric, the surrealist imagery in *De Niro's Game* functions as a way to represent the "unknowable" (80) in Caruth's terms[47].

In ironizing the war, *De Niro's Game* undertakes the task of articulating Bassam's traumatic memories. Bassam's prevalent irony can be read as a coping mechanism the teenager employs in the face of his repetitive traumatic encounters, his stunted emotional development, and his inability to narrate his trauma directly. Dalia Said Mostafa notes that the "characteristically ironic tone in Bassam's narrative voice [hints] that a violent incident might explode at any moment" (27). For instance, Bassam recounts, "There is a young girl who saw the Virgin Mary hovering in the sky. She opened her robe and shielded all of us from the Muslims' falling bombs" (Hage 67). This is not only indicative of the teenager's contempt for and disregard of religion, but also of his underlying conviction of its uselessness in protecting them from the possible threats in the war. The sky, "a murky swamp, hanging upside down […] seemed about

[46] Rita Sakr elaborates, "Hage employ[s] several elements of the surrealist aesthetic, namely, the surrealist oneiric object comprising the dream-object and the image-metaphor that is a product of the unconscious, while [he] explore[s] the intersections of internal and external reality, reality and fantasy, the past and the future, the communicable and the inexpressible" (27). Bassam, for instance, "thought of the many ways to leave. The ghost could twist your arm and squeeze the trigger in your face, and if you're lucky, my friend, he will push you over the roof and wait for the partridge bird to carry you back up" (Hage 139). This can be read as the teenager's inability to vocalize his distress and desire to escape the war even if the answer was his own death.

[47] Another interesting facet of Bassam's narrative is his conscious effort, at times, to misrepresent the reality. For instance, when he meets George's sister, Rhea, Bassam recalls, "when I saw how happy she was, I changed names, I planted trees, I painted the concrete houses in our old neighborhood in tropical colours, I made people dance and laugh, even under the falling bombs" (Hage 208). Bassam willfully fabulates and misconstrues the past to serve his own desires.

to fall, to spread darkness and drown" (Hage 32). Bassam's life in Beirut seems to be a series of anticipated catastrophes that he will be forced to survive. As Mostafa suggests, the ironic narrative tone "reflects a discourse of danger, violence and betrayal which both results from and exacerbates the war situation" (27). Accordingly, Bassam exists in a perpetual state of repressed panic: He is keenly aware of the danger surrounding him, yet remains incapable of consciously expressing and reconciling his fears.

This is, perhaps, best exemplified in the way Bassam is perceived by readers. Mostafa argues that in Bassam, Hage creates a character which "displays some characteristics of the narrative voice of Camus' protagonist Meursault in *The Stranger*" (39), a novel that he later reads in France. The first sentence of Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*, "*MOTHER DIED TODAY. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure*" (qt in Hage 226), parallels Bassam's apathy toward his mother's death[48]. He professes, "I had no sadness to spare or parade. If anything, the death of my mother had liberated me" (Hage 86). Like Meursault, Mostafa notes, Bassam is "aloof, detached, and indifferent" (39). This disassociation from reality is prevalent in the protagonist's attitude and reaction in the face of extreme violence. Bassam recounts, "[George and I] drove under falling bombs, oblivious" (Hage 13). The teenagers' gaze is instead directed toward "short skirts of female warriors" and "schoolgirls' thighs" (Hage 13). This is not only emblematic of Bassam's disregard and lack of fear in the face of a war, but also indicative of the rules by which the teenagers live. For Bassam and George, the war they had grown accustomed to is no longer

[48] In her book *Gender and Nation*, Nira Yuval-Davis argues that "it is women […] who reproduce nations biologically, culturally, and symbolically" (2). Accordingly, Lisa Grekul suggests that Bassam's mother-son relationship is emblematic of what postcolonial theorists call "the feminization of nation states" (48). She reads Bassam's mother as a trope used by Hage to symbolize "Bassam's tendencies to conflate nation and woman" (49). From this lens, the overwhelming sense of relief Bassam feels when his mother dies represents his eagerness to extricate himself from the nation and escape the war.

central to their lives. Instead, they both seek different forms of distraction that varies from the hyper-sexualization of women[49] to committing murder in search of a semblance of control.

Bassam and George occupy similar positions within their community. While Bassam's dad, a "good-for-nothing gambler" (Hage 256), is killed by a bomb in their kitchen, George never met his[50]. His mother "had become pregnant by a French man who had left the country [and] decided to keep the baby in spite of all the social taboos, the hardship she had to face, the church's excommunication threats, and the isolation she faced from her family and society" (Hage 217). Bassam and George are "the socially marginalized who turn into rebels during the war" (Mostafa 26). The awareness the teenagers display of their social marginalization can be seen as a precursor to their affiliation with violence. Bassam, while remaining politically unaligned, attempts to flee the country and leave behind the atrocities of a life governed by a crippling and constant presence of death. This, however, leads him to first partake in a theft organized by George at his place of work in order to amass the necessary funds for his trip. Bassam eventually commits murder as his criminal activities expand. George, on the other hand, becomes a secret Mossad agent and a participating soldier in the massacres of the Palestinian refugee camps Sabra and Shatila.

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[49] Lisa Grekul offers a gendered reading of the novel and emphasizes the marginal position that women occupy. She argues that it "ultimately illustrates that, however ''in flux'' Lebanon society may be, patriarchal power structures persist, rendering real women the passive objects and symbolic projections of a nation whose destiny is determined by her ''sons'' and ''lovers''" (50). Women in *De Niro's Game*, like Rana, Nabila, and Nicole, are perceived as mere objects of desire. Hage's narrative reveals, thus, the "gendered power structures that privilege masculinities over femininities" (67).

[50] Hany Ali Abdelfattah identifies the roots of George's trauma in the absence of his father. He argues that "George's biography is central […]: given the circumstances that he is an illegitimate son, George joins the Kataeb Party and thus chivalry and bravery represent a mechanism of self-defence shielding him from the guilt of his mother" who "dishonors him" (4). George's performance of masculinity, similar to Bassam's, is employed in response to feelings of marginalization and alienation.

It can be argued that Bassam and George's participation in violence, albeit on different scales, are expressions of the identities they adopt in response to the war. Dina Georgis notes that "[m]asculinity is deployed in the service of the nation" (140). Hence, Bassam and George's identities can be read as manifestations of an unconscious identification with masculinity as an appropriate response to the war[51]. Gendered acts, according to Judith Butler, precede gender itself. Gender identity for Butler is a "performative accomplishment" (200) whereby gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (199). Bassam and George's masculinity, for instance, stands in stark contrast with that of their dead fathers and emulates the mafia leader, Abou-Nahra who, in Haugbolle's terms, "continue[s] to embody a hegemonic masculinity" ("(Little)" 132). This can especially be seen in Bassam's interactions with women in the novel and in George's adoption of the patriotic soldier model. The two protagonists are, according to Mostafa, "both victims and victimizers" of "'structured' violence" (28).

Bassam's overt identification with the masculine gender epitomizes the underpinning traumas that govern his life. The great majority of the young protagonist's interactions with women reveal his reliance on masculinity as a coping mechanism. Rana, Bassam's lover, suffers the consequences of his violent reactions. After his mother's death, Bassam learns that Rana and George are having an affair when he sees them leaving his building together. The following day, when he meets her at his house, Bassam attacks Rana. He recalls

[51] For an exploration of masculinity and gender anxieties in Arab literature, see Samira Aghacy, 2009.

> seizing Rana by the hair, pulling her head back, and kissing her neck violently, fumbling at her breasts […] She attacked me with her nails. I slapped her face. She cried, escaped me, and ran out of the room with a naked breast […] I went to my parents' room and looked in the mirror. Tears slipped out of my eyes (Hage 133-4).

Bassam, heartbroken over Rana's betrayal, acts out violently in order to mask his underlying vulnerability. This oscillation between violence and guilt persists throughout the protagonist's story[52]. Indeed, Bassam employs masculinity as a coping mechanism and a shield which protect him from directly confronting his traumas. After both his parents' death, the betrayal of his childhood friend and of his lover, Bassam is deeply wounded by abandonment that he, nonetheless, continues to 'perform' a version of masculinity is at once revealing of his inner turmoil and inability to speak of it. While Bassam refuses to join the militia and overtly partake in the violence, he remains governed by the masculine gender norms[53] which have been imposed on him by a patriarchal society.

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[52] In a similar incident, Bassam attacks the cleaning lady at his hotel in Paris and shouts, "Linda from Portugal, I will wait for you to come to my room every day! Let me caress your breast" (Hage 257). He later, however, regrets his actions and apologizes to Linda's uncle (Hage 262-3). Dina Georgis reads his apology as Bassam's "masculine constructions begin[ing] to break down" (144). Lisa Grekul, however, contends that regardless of Bassam's guilt, his apology is expressed to "Linda's male proxy" (66), excluding and marginalizing women, once again, from Bassam's narrative. Sune Haugbolle notes that, in war, "masculinity is re-negotiated through performances of celebration and regret after engaging in violence" ("(Little)" 120). This can be applied to the violence Bassam exerts on women. While he does not show remorse for attacking Rana, he is later able to recognize his wrong-doing.

[53] Tarja Väyrynen comments, "Male bodies that are defending the nation, freedom, and honour are encoded to embody the ultimate manly virtues of courage, discipline, competitiveness, virility, dignity, and strength" (139). From this lens, Bassam's experience emerges as entirely dominated and dictated by external forces. Bassam recounts, "To look at the sky over our land was to see death diving at you — you, a pool of water on a curved street, a salty sea with red fish, a string bed for boys to jump on; you, embroidered underwear for painted toes to step into, a diamond cover for an arched dagger; you…" (Hage 20). While addressing an ambiguous 'you', Bassam's musings can be interpreted as his disassociation and alienation from his body. It is noteworthy that Bassam's reflections often take place in private, where he is not bound by expectations of performing a rigid masculinity which is fundamentally othering and stigmatizing.

The Lebanese civil war created a sort of vortex wherein masculinity was redefined and refashioned into a necessity for saving the nation[54]. Haugbolle contends, “While militarized masculinity associated with militias is unacceptable in a national context, it is openly celebrated in less national contexts such as families, schools, neighborhoods, clubs, and other institutions of socialization for young Lebanese men” (“(Little)” 118). Violence, thus, was celebrated and perceived as a necessary to Lebanese young men who were suddenly becoming soldiers. Bassam’s fascination by and participation in violence can be understood as an unconscious adherence to the expectations of society. The protagonist does not commit violence in the name of saving the nation. Rather, he employs it for his own benefit. In addition to his patronizing attitude toward women, Bassam’s violent outbursts are often unpredictable. Bassam is deeply traumatized by the violence he constantly witnesses, the loss of his parents, and, ultimately, the performance of the military-man masculinity which forces him to disconnect from his feelings and maintain the façade of unwavering strength.

The prevalent theme of revenge in *De Niro’s Game* further foregrounds Bassam’s conformity to, as Haugbolle calls it, “military-masculine virtues of strength and courage” (“(Little)” 117). His admiration of vengeful acts is apparent from the onset. When Nabila complained to George about her neighbor, Chafiq Al-Azrak, who does not allow her to park her car, he “shot the wheels of [his] car […] He aimed higher and shot the car’s lights, the door, the tinted glass, the seat inside” (Hage 14). Bassam, who accompanied him, remembers, “It was a lethal, entertaining act of vengeance, and I liked it” (Hage 15)[55]. Bassam’s desire for revenge

[54] For further reading on the trope of the militiaman as the embodiment of war-time masculinity in Lebanese film, see Najib Hourani, 2008.

[55] Dalia Said Mostafa argues that for Bassam and George, violence “develops into a strategy to resist marginalization and objectification” (31). Additionally, she interprets their constant use of a gun as a Foucauldian “strategy” wherein the gun becomes a token of the “process of struggle against subjugation and oppression” (37).

resurfaces when Najib, George's friend, betrays him, steals from him, and terrorizes him with his friends. He "wanted to avenge a wrong done to him" (Hage 137). Once alone with Najib, Bassam recounts, "I grabbed him from behind and twisted his shoulder, and once his face was exposed to me I hit him with my head (I was still wearing the helmet that, I hoped, would make me appear to him like a spaceman from a B movie)"[56] (Hage 138). The protagonist showcases a gradual normalization and incorporation of violence that ultimately culminates in murder. Bassam, a teenager, adopts the persona of a strong military man, capable of overpowering those around him through violence.

While Bassam is not free of guilt, he is nonetheless the victim of extreme violence. Unbeknownst to him, George sets him up for the murder of Laurent and the theft of his diamonds (Hage 151). As a result, he is detained and interrogated under torture by the militia. Rambo, "the monster" (Hage 154), deprives Bassam of sleep, hits him, and drowns him in order to force him to admit guilt for a crime he had no knowledge of. He recounts, "the monster would watch me, and slap me as I turned navy, the colour of the deep sea, the colour of my left eye" (Hage 154). While Bassam maintains the illusion of defiance and strength, he is haunted by the memory of the aggression. He later reflects, "I was thirsty, but the thought of water brought back the memory of Rambo's hand on my neck, drowning me, and the thought cut the air from my chest" (Hage 222). Bassam's dreams equally serve as reminders of his traumatic encounter. He sees himself "drowning in a large sea that had shrunk to the shape of a tub" (Hage 256). The physical violence

[56] Bassam seems to be fascinated by popular American culture: He wears "American jeans" and smokes "American cigarettes" (Hage 13,14). Dalia Said Mostafa notes that the novel "is characterized by speed and action as in an American Hollywood thriller" (27). The narrative's entanglement with Hollywood and American culture, most prevalent in the novel's title and overt reference to the film *The Deer Hunter*, reflects, according to Mostafa, a "discourse of danger, violence and betrayal" (27) that permeates the narrative.

Bassam is subjected to continues to affect him long after his escape. This epitomizes the extent to which his view of the world is skewed and governed by his trauma.

Caruth defines post-traumatic stress disorder as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations", or "flashbacks" and "nightmares" (57,91). While this certainly applies to Bassam's experience, that of George is more palpable. After joining the Christian militia, George transforms into a cold-blooded killer[57]. When another militiaman threatens to uncover Bassam and George's theft of the militia's casino, the latter shoots him dead (Hage 64). Similar to Bassam, his use of violence and the severity of his crimes increases. George is often described as, "drunk […] delirious and violent" (Hage 39). George, unable to cope with his psychological wounds, resorts to heavy alcohol and, later, drug abuse. In his apartment, "[h]ighways of cocaine were stretched on mirrors. Noses operated on glass like vacuum-cleaner hoses, driving white powder into the molecules of numb, wide eyes" (Hage 107). The teenage soldier who is trained to kill in efficient ways (Hage 94) and who, undeniably, witnessed atrocities finds himself incapable of processing his emotions or comprehending the myriad of effects it has on him. George disappears in his trauma and resorts to substance abuse as one of many coping mechanisms he employs to numb his pain.

[57] It is noteworthy that George did not have the freedom of choosing whether to join the militia or not. He tells Bassam, "[Abou-Nahra] asked me to join. He looked me straight in the eyes and said it's better for everyone. You know what he meant don't you?" (Hage 70). Furthermore, when Abou-Nahra asks him to convince Bassam to join, he is "evasive" (Hage 91). While this does not absolve him from his crimes, George is also a victim of the war. His involvement in the violence and killing harkens back to Hannah Arendt's discussion of Adolf Eichmann's trial for his role in the Holocaust. As a high-ranking official in the Nazi regime, Eichmann knowingly took part of the organization and murder of millions of Jews. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* chronicles his career and argues that he was not, in fact, an evil 'other'. Rather, he is the compliant subordinate who was only following orders. His actions were driven not by hate, but rather by a sense of commitment and duty to a totalitarian regime that renders such crimes permissible. Similarly, George's readiness to comply with the militia's orders leads him to willingly participate in the murder of thousands of innocent Palestinians.

George is further implicated in crimes of the right-wing militia as one of the perpetrators of the Sabra and Shatila massacres. He tells Bassam, “So we killed! We killed! People were shot at random, entire families killed at dinner tables. Cadavers in their nightclothes, throats slit, axes used, hands separated from bodies, women cut in half” (Hage 175). In his story, George uses the passive voice to describe the horrific scenes he both enacted and witnessed. As he progresses, however, his mode of address changes and becomes more erratic. When he speaks of the murder of children, George recounts, “It was their cries that made me shoot them. I hate kids’ cries. I never cry; have you ever seen me cry?” (Hage 177). Despite his attempt to keep himself removed from the massacre, George eventually loses control and the ability to give a dissociated and dehumanized version of events. He is aware of his implication and is seemingly beginning to grapple with the horrific nature of his deeds when a bird-chase[58] leads him to find “two small children […] huddled in fear under there. Their dead mother’s body was in the room, staring at them with open eyes. [He] just wanted to hunt the bird [...] All [he] wanted was to hunt” (Hage 178). George appears to be in search of a justification of the killing of “hundreds, maybe thousands” (Hage 174).

Following the massacre, George returns to Beirut and haphazardly ‘kidnaps’ Bassam. Rather than taking him back to the “torture chambers” (Hage 179) to be prosecuted for his implication in Al-Rayess’ assassination, George takes them to a desolate location under a bridge

[58] Hany Ali Abdelfattah suggests that the comparison between George’s father and a “migrating bird” (Hage 34) allows readers to trace his trauma through the recurrent image of the bird. Most notably, George seems to be obsessed with and haunted by the killing of birds (Hage 178, 268). Abdelfattah notes that George’s encounters with birds disrupts the characterizing “belatedness” (*Unclaimed* 92) of the trauma, as Cathy Caruth argues. According to Abdelfattah, the Freudian “uncanny of the bird” (2) allows readers to trace and understand George’s trauma. He writes, “the inability to release his feelings is what troubles George. Eventually, this turns into violence and killing of the birds wherever he sees them and the bird becomes the “uncanny” of the novel” (4). George’s visceral reaction to the sight or sound of birds lends itself Abdelfattah’s interpretation. George is deeply traumatized with no ability to understand or reconcile his past. This leads him to, in Dominick LaCapra’s words, “acting out” (90) his trauma in pathological ways. Hence, it is “the cooing of a partridge” (Hage 178) that suddenly brings George to face the crime he has committed. Indeed, he experiences a sort of halt where he is faced directly with the uncanny.

and admits to his friend, “I killed today […] I killed many. Many” (Hage 173). From the onset, Bassam remarks that George’s “eyes were red. He was either drunk or high. Or maybe he couldn’t sleep from the noise of gunshots” (Hage 172). This hints simultaneously at George’s inability to face the traumatic encounter of which he speaks and at his guilty conscious, haunted by the sound of bullets. While Bassam repeatedly attempts to leave and stop George from talking, the latter demands to be heard. He proclaims, “Do you want to hear more? […] Yes, you want to hear, and I want to finish my story” (Hage 176). As Caruth suggests, George’s trauma— rather unattainable— “demands our witness” (5). Borossa argues that “the space of violence is the very space of trauma, which unmakes subjectivity” (129). Accordingly, as George’s subjectivity begins to crumble, so does his grasp on reality.

The story that George insists on telling begins by the detached rendering of a horrific crime. Bassam however, is puzzled by his erratic and disorganized speech that is, at times, nonsensical. George, for example, proclaims,

> I killed my mother, I killed her, he said and burst into tears.
>
> Your mother died in the hospital from cancer, I said to him.
>
> For Al-Rayess! he shouted, lifting the bottle and drinking some more (Hage 177).

This conversation reveals George’s state of mind as he later describes the sight of a Palestinian woman who tells him, “You might as well finish what you started, my son” (Hage 177). In this moment, he ceases to differentiate between reality and imagination. An obedient soldier and proud nationalist, George is convinced of his superiority and of the ‘un-humanness’ of the enemy. However, when he is directly confronted with the tangible consequences of his crime and with the woman’s suffering, he appears to be shocked and confused. This eventually culminates

in his decision to play “De Niro’s game” (Hage 231). It is unclear whether George is seeking redemption for his actions, escaping “the torture chambers […] inside [him]” (Hage 179), or merely playing a game[59]. Nonetheless, his gruesome death foregrounds the dire consequences trauma might cause.

Falah, Bassam, and George all experience wartime violence differently. Their traumas and subsequent reactions to it are also distinct. Nevertheless, when examining the fiction of Hassan and Hage in tandem, readers can detect common themes that unify both narratives. For instance, all three protagonists experience a loss of faith or do not believe in religion. Falah, once a believer, is longer able to pray as “[h]e lay slumped over, hands flat against the rug […] The claw of a falcon was pressed against the back of his neck, he was not able to lift his head” (Hassan 34). His uncle even instructs him to “forget about [God]” for he is “a torturer if he exists” (Hassan 42). Similarly, God for Bassam and George is one “whose thirst could never be quenched, a petty tribal God, a jealous God celebrating his tribe’s carnage and gore […] a lonely, lunatic, imaginary God, poisoned by lead and silver bowls, distracted by divine orgies and arranged marriages, mixing wine and water” (Hage 36-7). The characters share the belief that a deity which stands by and, consequently, sanctions the horrors they witnessed cannot be real. In fact, Bassam’s proclamation that “God is dead” (Hage 96) resonates with the characters of both fictions. The experience of trauma, here, is no longer individual, but, rather, collective.

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[59] Julia Borossa suggests that George’s suicide is the result of a psychosis-like state. George describes his first moments in the refugee camps, “The whole area was lit up; it was like being in a Hollywood movie. And I am De Niro in a movie” (Hage 175). Borossa argues that George is indeed so disconnected from reality, the enactment of the famous De Niro game seems to be his only way out, “for he had reached an impasse without the possibility of communicating further” (129). This is in congruence with Caruth’s definition of trauma and of its inherent challenging of linguistic representation. George tries to force Bassam to sit through a horrific story that the latter does not want to hear. He, however, is adamant in his attempt to narrate the events and, perhaps, exonerate himself from the guilt as “All [he] wanted was to hunt” (Hage 178).

Falah and Bassam, both forced to flee Lebanon, find themselves in the face of a new trauma. “Confusion”[60], in particular, is undeniably concerned with the immigrant experience. Falah, who did not want to leave Lebanon and his native village, is thrust into an unfamiliar and unwelcoming setting. Upon his arrival, his uncle begins to guide him through their neighborhood, predominantly Italian and Portuguese immigrants. He warns him not to “talk politics” because “[e]veryone here loves the *Kataib*” (Hassan 36). This confrontation with islamophobia and xenophobia exasperates Falah’s alienation. On his first day working, the protagonist is handed a uniform with the name “Nick” on it:

> “Nick is shorter and easier to say than Fa…Fa… What’d you say his name was again?”
>
> “Falah”
>
> “Oh yeah. Well, he won’t mind if I call him Nick. I can’t say the other name anyway. Nobody’ll know how to say it” (Hassan 38).

Falah feels threatened by the effacement of his identity, symbolized by the loss of his name. Kenneth L. Dion argues that “a close connection exists between an individual's name and her/his personal identity and sense of self” (245). “Nick”, for Falah, is not a mere name on a uniform. Rather, it is a direct attack on his subjectivity and a loss of his very essence. This proves to be a central concern that reverberates throughout the novella. Falah’s exilic condition is characterized by continuous suffering, loss of identity, and traumatic implications.

[60] While I focus in my discussion, for the most part, on “Confusion”, “Intelligence” is of equal importance to Hassan’s exploration of the experience of immigration and its effects on the individual. By juxtaposing Falah, a newly-arrived immigrant, with Abourezk, a first generation Lebanese-Canadian, Hassan’s *The Confusion of Stones* is able to represent the nuances of the immigrant experience. Abourezk is a Canadian citizen whose parents are Lebanese immigrants. “Intelligence” follows the trip he takes to Lebanon, to his parents’ village, and the questions his belonging raises. While Falah knows he is Lebanese and remains hopeful to return to his homeland, Abourezk is unsure of his identity. When asked where he is from, the protagonist of “Intelligence” seems confused and unsure. Immigration, in this context is trans-generational.

Although he protests the wrong name, Falah is dismissed by his uncle, who seems to have become unrecognizable to his nephew, "a transformed person" (Hassan 40). Falah and Yusuf are set as foils to each other. Falah is content, to some extent, with the simple life he leads with his uncle. Yusuf, however, urges him to consider looking for another job. The uncle exists within the margins. He works "two sweating jobs, six days a week, fourteen hours a day" and believes that "[n]othing else matters but work [...] There's nothing else to do in this country but to work and shovel snow" (Hassan 40). His entire existence, his *raison d'être*, is reduced to monetary achievements. Sylvia Terzian suggests that Yusuf is "the model of the adaptive immigrant whose achievement in Canadian society is undermined and ironized by [his] preoccupation with money" (81). Falah, on the other hand, "refuses assimilation [and] rejects acculturation" (Terzian 76). Through the juxtaposition of Falah and Yusuf's belief systems, Hassan offers his readers insight into the nuances of the immigrant experience[61]. Whereas Falah copes with exile by holding on to his roots and the nostalgic memories of his homeland, Yusuf seems to have entirely departed from his past.

Hage's Bassam experiences exile in a way that resembles Yusuf. After killing Rambo and witnessing the death of his childhood friend, the protagonist boards a ship that smuggles him to Marseille. Bassam recalls, "I sat and thought of my home. I tried to locate its direction but found I was lost in the roam of the drifting-away earth, as if my neighbourhood drifted on the tide, and my chunk of land, with its war and my dead parents, floated on the seas" (Hage 187). During his journey, the protagonist reflects on his life in Beirut and is convinced that he will never return. He "made [his] mind blank. [He] wanted it to be blank for a long time" (Hage 183). The journey, despite the tragic events leading up to it, gives Bassam the rare opportunity to feel peace. Bassam

[61] For further reading on displacement and the characterizing aspects of immigration, see Abdelmalek Sayad, 2004.

does not feel nostalgic and considers exile as a source of "a sense of purpose" and a desire to "justify [his] existence, and legitimize [his] foreign feet" (Hage 193)[62]. Once they arrive, Moustafa, the mechanic who facilitated the journey, suddenly announces, "You are on your own now" (Hage 190). Lisa Marchi argues that Moustafa's proclamation "sounds like an irrevocable condemnation and an anticipation of Bassam's bleak and lonely condition in France" (608). Indeed, his experience in France proves to be ''so different from the old photographs in the history books'' (Hage 204).

Moments after Bassam arrives in Marseille, he is attacked and tormented by a group of French men who verbally and physically terrorize him. The assailants call Bassam "[u]*ne merde de beur*" and tell him that they "do not want filth like [him] here" (Hage 191). While seemingly unfazed by the racially-charged insults, Europe is, nonetheless, different from what Bassam expected. The protagonist soon realizes that Paris, too, looks "divided" (Hage 196). Marchi notes that Bassam's "painful and alienating experience as an illegal migrant in France is constructed in opposition to the comfortable life that French citizens […] enjoy in the French capital" (607). When the Algerian hotel receptionist notices Bassam's choice of *L'Étranger*, he tells him "*Ah oui. On est tous ça ici, mon frère*" (Hage 224). This utterance reveals the inherently 'othering' experience of the immigrant who is often dehumanized and stripped of their identity. As Georgis remarks, "in France, where he is racially marked, Bassam is unequivocally an Arab, not a Meursault" (143). The novel ends with Bassam, yet again, escaping one place to seek a home in another.

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[62] Sylvia Terzian argues that the representation of exile in *De Niro's Game* "problematizes diasporic imagination as centered on nostalgia for a lost originary place, in this case, for a pre-war Lebanon" (65). Through Bassam, Hage challenges the expectation of an ever-present longing for the homeland in what is, arguably, a break from the tradition of the post-war Lebanese novel.

For Falah, Bassam, and George, the multitude of traumatic experiences they face acts as a prism through which their perception of reality is often skewed. Trauma is, ultimately, the governing force behind their actions. While these traumas are experienced individually, their effects reverberate communally and are shared among the Lebanese people. If their stories are looked at through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma model, they become inherently incomprehensible and defiant to representation. This is why trauma-based historiographies require a different set of paradigms that account for their elusive and ambiguous nature. Caruth suggests that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other's traumas" (24). From this lens, Lebanese history *is* the implication of a traumatized subject in another's trauma. This is, perhaps, best exemplified in Hage's rendering of the Sabra and Shatila massacres which, according to Abdelfattah, traumatized "the Lebanese nation, just like the Lebanese individual" as they "are haunted by their guilt and they suffer from being the perpetrators of the trauma" (2). History, for the Lebanese, is indeed a history of trauma(s)[63].

If history is looked at from the point of view of Caruth, there are fundamental questions regarding the founding principles of historical truth. Indeed, history is no longer "straightforwardly referential" (11). Instead, it "arise[s] where *immediate understanding* may not" (11). In this sense, traumatic memory can be questioned on two levels. First, as I previously discussed, these memories may be entirely faulty or distorted. Second, they are not directly accessed. As a consequence, engaging with traumatic history requires a shift in paradigm toward

[63] Cathy Caruth explains that "the theory of individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history" (77). In this sense, individual and collective traumas are not looked at separately from each other. Rather, "historical or generational trauma is in some sense presupposed in the theory of individual trauma" (136). Caruth's argument can be read as a path to understanding collective trauma through engaging with individual trauma.

acknowledging. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, approaches historiography from a mediating space. LaCapra offers a new understanding of the historical method that he situates at the intersection of two methodological approaches to writing history: The "documentary or self-sufficient research paradigm" (6), where the focus is on facts, and "radical constructivism" (8), with Hayden White as one of its most prominent proponents. LaCapra writes, "Without diminishing the importance of research, contextualization, and objective reconstruction of the past, experience as it bears on understanding involves affect both in the observed and in the observer" (41). He, instead, proposes a method which allows for empathy for the victims of historical trauma, while maintaining a necessary alertness to the elusiveness of trauma.

Falah, Bassam, and George are all, to some extent, victims of extreme physical and psychological violence. In light of Cathy Caruth's trauma model, the torment of the characters defies comprehension and representation. Once read symptomatically, however, one might begin to uncover the manifestation of each character's traumas in the narrative. Falah experiences the double loss of his family and his homeland. His mutilated hand, a literal representation of his psychological wounds, is what forces Falah further into isolation. Bassam performs a prescribed military-man masculinity and resorts to violence as a coping mechanism. George, now a war criminal, goes into a path of drug addiction and alcoholism as an escape from his pain. He eventually kills himself in a game of Russian roulette while Bassam watches. Trauma acts, in both stories, as the driving force behind the characters' lives. It takes hold of them and dictates their perception of the world. The nature of trauma, and by extension trauma-based historiographies, necessitates an alertness to the precariousness of its truth claims. Trauma simultaneously evades and invades the victims' consciousness. For these reasons, methodological

approaches, such as Dominick LaCapra's, are useful in negotiating an understanding of the past as it was experienced by victims of traumatic events.

Conclusion

“Three days into the 1982 Siege of Beirut”, Rita Sakr writes, “the poet Khalil Hawi committed suicide. His act has been read as one of the most eloquent statements on the farcical absurdity and disturbing brutality of that moment in Lebanese, Middle Eastern, and world history” (34). This sentiment reverberates throughout Marwan Hassan’s “Confusion” and Rawi Hage’s *De Niro’s Game*. The narratives, which succeed in capturing an almost unrepresentable event, offer readers a unique perspective on the daily lives of people from both ends of the conflict. Falah is a Shiite Muslim from Southern Lebanon, who, until one tragic day, lived a peaceful life. Bassam and George are Maronite Christians who grew up in one of Beirut’s most notorious neighborhoods. Falah, Bassam, and George, because of their bibliographies, carry certain preconceived ideas on the enemy from the other side. As a result, their perceptions on Lebanese history are often distinct and contradictory. While this might be understood as a site of conflict, Michael Rothberg suggests an alternative conceptualization of collective memory. He argues that the interaction of different memories does nor result in the effacement of one of them. Rather, if given the space, they can collaborate and lead to the emergence of a multidirectional memory that encompasses the nuanced specificities of multiple memories.

Historiography, in its traditional sense, is based on the historian’s search for objective and accurate truth. Theorists like Hayden White, for instance, argue that history itself can be understood as a text, a literary and narrative construct. Under these assumptions, the ‘truth claims’ of historiography can and should be contested with those of memory. The multiplicity of experiences that Falah, Bassam, and George epitomize the potential of memory-based

historiographies in capturing an anthropocentric view of a bloody and ruthless war that took the lives of thousands. This is, however, a site of extreme trauma that proves to be the driving force behind the narratives. Trauma cannot construct a story. It remains obscured from one's consciousness while simultaneously consuming their lives and contaminating their thoughts. Traumatic memory, like memory itself, is erratic and unpredictable. Reading trauma as it figures in the fiction requires an engagement with its non-linear figurative narrative possibilities.

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