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PRIVATE NARRATIVES AS ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF MEMORY WORK AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN RAWI HAGE'S *DE NIRO'S GAME* AND HILAL CHOUMAN'S *LIMBO BEIRUT*

by
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ABSTRACT
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Title: Private Narratives as Alternative Spaces of Memory Work and Identity Reconstruction in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* and Hilal Chouman's *Limbo Beirut*

Since the military phase of the Lebanese civil war ended, no collective memory has been established, only sectarian narratives. This lack of a proper representation of the atrocities of the war left the victims with no space to work through their traumas. In this thesis, I read the two post-war novels, *De Niro's Game* (2006) by Rawi Hage and *Limbo Beirut* (2016) by Hilal Chouman – whose events are 26 years apart yet in terms of publication, a decade apart – as an attempt at reconstructing a memory of the war that turns away from political agendas to focus on the psychological experiences of individuals, marking a socio-political shift that Aleida Assmann terms "the *ethical* turn''. To demonstrate this, I reframe my comparative analysis within Zeina Tarraf's concept of turning inward that describes the recent shift, in Arab countries, from commitment literature or *adab al iltizam* to more relatable and subjective narratives of wars. Using this framework, I uncovered the personal narratives that the characters developed in lieu of the contested collective ones, and analyzed the ways in which they serve as alternative spaces of memory and identity work. My study of private alternative war narratives across post-war Lebanese literature contributes to the very reconstruction of this alternative cultural memory of the war.

Keywords: Lebanese Civil War, *De Niro's Game*, *Limbo Beirut,* Cultural Memory, Personal Narrative

PROLOGUE

Born seven years after the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), I define myself as a member of a post-civil war generation. Having lived through and past the assassination of the Prime Lebanese minister Rafik al Hariri in February 2005, the 2006 July war, the 2008 Shia-Sunni street clashes, the 'crushed' October 2019 Lebanese 'revolution', the 4 August 2020 Port Blast, the 2021 massacre of Tayouneh, the increasing inflation due to the economic collapse, I define myself as a survivor of an "on-going Nakba''. I find that this latter term, although original to the Palestinian catastrophic displacement, can capture the unrest that (most of) the Arab people have been put through. The expression 'ongoing Nakba' conveys what cannot be conveyed in a foreign language, as this perpetual emotional and physical displacement is an experience specific to the Arab World that is inflicted upon us, in one way or another, by the West.

This dehumanizing sense of unrest seized me specifically in the streets of Beirut when I was witnessing my dream of a transformative revolution fade out. It isn't only a state of constant emotional and physical displacement but also a historical one. The more I fought for a different future, the farther I was taken back into the deadly past that preceded my birth yet dictated my entire life and those of my generation. I felt not only displaced but suspended in a civil war that I did not choose, that I could not resolve and that my parents, like my school, had refused to teach me about.

The closest I had gotten to my history and identity were post-war novels suggested in two courses, ''ENGL 292: Capstone Seminar for Literature Major'' and ''ENGL 311: Revolution Acts in Lebanese Culture'' that my supervisor Dr. Syrine Hout offered. Two of those novels, *De Niro's Game* (2006) by Rawi Hage and *Limbo Beirut* (2016) by Hilal Chouman spoke to me and for me in many ways. Other than offering me an alternative

memory of the civil war, these works also provided me with representation. Although Hage's novel is situated in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and Chouman's in the 2008 clashes, I was able to identify with the characters' painful experiences, ranging from grief for their city and for those they've lost to alienation, confusion, and helplessness. These two novels also offered me a sense of continuity in the sense that I was able to trace back the origins of the protracted state of war that we are still enduring as a people, and to contextualize the failure of our revolution. Moreover, to my surprise, when I used to walk on Beirut's streets and lead the revolutionary chants, I'd feel that I was bringing to close the stories of *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut*'s characters who struggled and dreamed about closure and change. These books became so personal to me to the extent that very often I felt physically accompanied by Bassam, Walid, Hassan, and the Surgeon.

What started as a revolution for the future regressed into a fight over narratives and 'truth', a fight over which leader must be exempted from our collective promise to overthrow all politicians. In these moments, I found myself reliving the historical repetitions described in *Limbo Beirut* and experiencing the strong sense of alienation and neglect that the characters of these novels experienced each in wars that they were forced into. In the same way that they were obliged to dissociate from their surroundings to resolve their internal wars, in the face of helplessness and hopelessness, I retracted into my own bubble to work through my traumas as an individual rather than a member of a collective, for myself rather than for the nation. That is because, just like these characters, I was forced to accept the impossibility of a future for a nation in the face of an unresolved past.

Months later, as the streets were completely cleared, I observed something that moved me. Most of the people I used to see in the streets and who, like me, had

disappeared for a while, were now around me discussing 'the new phase' of the revolution, one that is more private, sensitive, personal. These discussions were carried at house parties where friends in their 40s (civil war generation) and others my age (post-war generation) were meeting, or often overheard in cultural and communal cafes like Tota. In this phase, I was struck by the cultural and creative projects that were being put out on the table. The film scene boomed with stories about the civil war, expatriation, the explosion, and the crises, all produced by my generation in collaboration with the older one. At the same time, Haven for Artists, a cultural hub in Beirut, had started producing a monthly zine that offered space for anyone to submit their works – most of the works were produced by the youth, addressing identity and history issues. This zine containing the subjective experiences of each person had created a sort of collective archive of the hard times lived in Lebanon. All of this made me think that the revolution might have not really ended but rather might have been privatized, shut down in the streets and reignited in alternative ways, in alternative spaces. Although my generation was not handed archives of its history, I was witnessing the emergence of an alternative cultural memory – rooted in a personal and collective need and in a consciously acknowledged necessity. Acquainting myself with the experiences of others has given a context to my own traumas and, hence, offered me a sense of integrity and a certain continuity and coherence to my personal narrative.

The concept of private alternative spaces and forced alienation is something that, on the one hand, I had identified in my two novels since characters were resorting to private alternative outlets – whether arts or drugs – to resolve their wars, and another, that I was experiencing and witnessing 'post' the Lebanese revolution. In the middle of the political and psychological turmoil, struggling to complete my master's degree, I could

only work on something that felt personal and proactive to me. In this light, I was pulled to dive into the personal narratives of the characters who helped me cope with my feelings of alienation and whose stories played a major role in teaching me about my own history. By exploring this concept of alternative spaces that I discovered after the revolution, through stories of a civil war that happened 33 years ago, I felt that I was actively bridging a lacuna between past and present that disrupted my sense of self, that stood in my way of producing a complete identity narrative.

The way the novels *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* represent Rawi Hage and Hilal Chouman's own private alternative spaces of working through war trauma, this thesis is my alternative space of working-through. This thesis represents my effort to take part in this collective project of building an alternative collective memory based on personal narratives of alienation and subjective experiences of the Lebanese ongoing Nakba. In my thesis, I reread these two novels that have served as historical references through my own experience of history. I redirect my own revolutionary efforts from the streets of Beirut to my more private and subjective world, literature.

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CHAPTER I

FROM CONTESTED HISTORY TO PERSONAL STORIES OF SUFFERING AND ALIENATION

A. Overview of the Lebanese Civil War: A War of Narratives

In light of the latest occurrences of Tayouneh's massacre (2021), Khaldeh's clashes (2020), and the 2008 factional street rivalries between Sunni and Shias, one may speak of a repetitive pattern of civil conflicts in Lebanese history. Civilians live in constant fear of re-experiencing the civil war of 1975-1990. Zeina Tarraf refers to this re-occurrence of history as a "protracted past'' (7); Lebanese people live a *post*-civil war era whereby *post* is not understood as what comes *after* the war ends, but rather as a strange continuation of a war that supposedly ended. Post-war Lebanese literature indeed seems to always revolve, in one way or another, around the civil war, along questions of identity and narrative construction. An observation of contemporary Lebanese cultural production reveals a trauma that has not been dealt with, a trauma that the post-war generations have inherited and are trying to resolve through the arts.

One may ask then, based on the observation of events, what makes it seem impossible for history to take a different turn in Lebanon? What is at the origin of these historical repetitions? Where, in time, is the present in Lebanon suspended? How is this glitch in what Aleida Assmann calls "Time regime'' dealt with by the people of Lebanon?

Forty-seven years ago, *Black Sunday,* what started as a bus shooting of 27 Palestinians by the Phalange (13 April 1975), dragged the country into 15 years of a black history. Lebanon experienced its bloodiest and most shameful episode of history, unfolding into a series of massacres and ethnic cleansing executed by the Phalange

(Maronite Christian far-right) on one side, and the Lebanese National Movement (Pro-Palestinian leftists and Muslims) on the other. Some of these include the Damour Massacre (1976) in which the LMN killed around 500 Christian inhabitants, Tal Al-Zaatar massacre (1976) carried out by the Phalange with the support of Syrian Forces, where up to 4,280 Palestinian and Lebanese were shelled, and what Sune Haugbolle deems "the single most violent incident of the war'' (Haugbolle, "Historiography and Memory'' 6), namely the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in which an estimate of 3,000 were massacred at the hands of the Phalange supported by the Israeli Forces, over three days (16-18 September). In total, the civil war left up to 90,000 dead and more than 100, 000 injured, displacing two-third of the Lebanese population (2).

While there is no disagreement on the atrocities that have been committed, neither historians nor local communities seem to agree on a single reading of the political circumstances that have led to a civil war of 15 years and, even more, on the necessity of the crimes. As Haugbolle states, "disentangling [the events] from ideological discourse is a difficult task, and not one that Lebanese historians are always able to fulfil'' (6). While the Phalange justify their actions as a defensive and precautionary reaction against previous assaults on Christians, the Lebanese National Movement deems this narrative as propaganda to excuse ethnic cleansing. Other narratives of the war are based on a rhetoric of a colonial past, a rhetoric of governmental corruption, and what Ghassan Tueni calls "une guerre pour les autres'' or "a war of others'' (4) in references to discourses that displace the blame onto foreign forces/groups.

Although the war 'ended' by 1990, the Syrian troops only withdrew in 2005 after the former Prime minister Rafik Al-Hariri was assassinated, igniting the Cedar Revolution as a resistance against invasion, corruption, and sectarianism. Despite the

sense of independence and the nationalist sentiment that overtook all regions of Lebanon, hopes for a different future slowly crumbled as another sectarian conflict broke (2008) between Shiaas and Sunnis due to different political agendas, of which the narrative, until this day, is not agreed on either.

B. Aftermath: Oblivion and Moving Towards The Future Further Into the Past

In 1990, the attempts at closing the chapter of the civil war were in vain, as the question over who were to blame and held accountable couldn't be answered. On one hand, that is because the brutal nature of the war seemed to defy any possible logic, and on another, because fear between sects had reinforced communal divisions and further attachments to sectarian leaders or protectors (*Zaims*). In the absence of an consensual collective narrative, the only discourse thought to keep all sects at bay was the discourse of "*la ghalib la maghloub''* (no victor, no vanquished). The open-endedness of the civil war was dealt with, with the establishment of the *Tai'f* accords in 1990 which distributed governmental power between the sects, and with the passing of an Amnesty Law to *forgive and forget all* (Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory'' 14) – including all criminals and crimes against humanity of any degree.

The reconstruction of the country was, therefore, a task given to the same criminals who had led the war. Progressively, laws were established to suppress any talks about politics (1994) and justified as an attempt to prevent further civil conflicts and to maintain peace (4) – when in reality, these laws only protected the leaders from being judged. This censorship was only exerted on the media but also on the most important foundation of society, the educational system. Any talk about politics has been banned in school, and history is only taught until the independence of Lebanon from the French in

1943. No official history book has been released since no official narrative has been agreed on, fearing that communal differences among teachers and pupils may cause tension. Haugbolle explains that this strategy of oblivion dates back to a “small’’ civil war in 1958 and had been reinforced as a technique to let the social system in place prevail (4). These censorship laws have, after decades, surpassed their “legal aspect’’ to become engrained in the people themselves, creating a culture of self-censorship and hence, silence.

In the aftermath of the civil war, all efforts were directed towards a socio-economic recovery. The Lebanese society was forced to immediately turn towards “*al mustaqbal’’*, the future, with no space for the victims to express their suffering, no commemoration of lives lost, and no collective memorial of the civil war, all of which being necessary for the healing of any nation. Instead of developing a resonant narrative to help the Lebanese population make sense of the horrific massacres and loss, the government worked towards resetting the city and effacing any trace of its shameful history. This was done through the project of Solidere, the reconstruction of the central souks of Beirut into something that looked like the pre-war celebrated and glorified Beirut. The effects of this project are alarming. Solidere erased, first, any trace of the effect of war on the city, and second, any trace of the lives that the war had destroyed.

While the buildings of central Beirut feature a pre-war façade, they are, in fact, furnished with technology, and form global commercial chains (Makdisi 10). Solidere aimed to produce only “an image, a memory’’ of pre-war Beirut that the victims may not have even lived through but only heard of. Hence, the bereavement narratives of the people were forcefully replaced by “a false image’’ of Beirut (12), a “*sense* of belonging’’ rather than belonging as such (11). This lack of memorialization resulted in an inability

to establish the *pastness* of the war. Indeed, Haugbolle makes an important point in saying that although there is a general consensus that the Lebanese civil war started on April 13, 1975, "when exactly the war ended is littler harder to establish'' (Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory'' 3).

C. Importance of Collective Memory, Types of Memories, and the Emergence of Private Political Memor*ies* in the Absence of a Public Cultural Memory

The state-induced silence, the lack of necessary collective memory of the war, and the project of reconstructing Beirut as "an ancient city for the future'' (Makdisi 2) was thought to be a way of moving further and faster into the future. However, this has in a sense, messed up the temporality of Lebanon whereby the past haunts the present and renders any progress impossible, since the attempt of rebuilding a future is in itself based on an illusion of an era that predates way before the civil war or just looks beyond it. Makdisi elaborates on this temporal complications by explaining that the reconstruction of Beirut's *souks* was designed "to short-circuit the history of the war by seamlessly uniting the prewar past with the postwar future'' (12). The consequence of this project are, in fact, dehumanizing as it leaves no space for a clean present to emerge and no past to identify with. The victims are, thus, left with torturous experiences and generational grief with no standardized narrative that would help make sense of them, which in itself, is a crime against humanity. Therefore, when talking about the history of Lebanon, it is important to highlight that it is not a matter of on absence of memory but rather a discourse of forgetfulness imposed by the warlords to escape judgment and preserve their thrones.

In light of this 'void' in the historical narrative of Lebanon, Assmann explains that without memory or even just *a sense* of reliability on it – although memory is not

fixed or reliable – "we (cannot) construct a self nor (can) we communicate with others'' ("Memory, Individual, Collective'' 225). Memories, according to Assmann, are indispensable as they are what constitute our personal experiences, interpersonal connections, our sense of responsibility, and the image of our identity. Assmann's view on the indispensability of memory further puts into perspective the previously discussed consequences of a contested collective memory of a traumatic nature, on both the national and the individualistic levels.

The term "collective memory'', to start with, has been widely criticized by scholars, with some denying the social aspect of memory, and others, deeming it totalitarian as homogeneity would entail suppressing the voices of minorities (Kapelchuk 2). Assmann does not refute this (later) point; on the contrary, she underlines the malleable nature of memory and the power it holds. Instead of rebutting the whole concept of "collective memory'', which is essential to the discussion of past, present, and future, Assmann substitutes this vague term for more specific ones, such as social, political, and cultural memory – and of course, fundamentally, the individual memory. Individual and social memory are embodied memories that are rooted in lived experiences, while cultural and political memory are mediated memories founded on external symbols such as archives, for example, which characterizes them with a longer lifespan.

Assmann emphasizes the complementary aspect of the relation between individual memory and social memory by explaining that memory shapes the identity of an individual, and that individual memory is formed in social proximities (226). Social memory is shaped by the collaborative process of selective remembering and forgetting by a group of people who have experienced an event together; this memory constitutes a

narrative that brings these individuals together and provides them with a sense of belonging and social identity. It is in this context that Assmann argues the crucial role of a collective memory in the process of overcoming trauma, on either a personal or a social level. Although individual memories are perspectival and idiosyncratic, they are very much bound up with to social context. Assmann describes individual memories as "fragmentary'' in the sense that they flash up as isolated scenes with random associations but no sequence, cohesion, or coherence.

Qualities of sequence, cohesion, and coherence can only be achieved when "memories are tied into a larger narrative that retrospectively provides them with a form and a structure'' (227). This latter process called "emplotment'' is a term coined by Hayden White, an American historian, to describe the way in which fragmented historical events are organized and assimilated – through narrative techniques – into a ''plot'' with sequence and cohesion and which can be delivered as complete meaningful historical narratives (White 5). In this context, a larger social narrative is what brings clues and context to the fragmented individual memories, proving the necessity of collective memory to personal narrative identity. Furthemore, Assmann stresses that if individual memory is characterized by a traumatic nature, for it "to rise to the surface, a positive social climate of empathy and recognition is necessary'' (Kapelchuk 226).

In other words, the social memory must legitimize and bridge individualized experiences, and not put them into question, as to create a discourse of suppression, alienation, and power. It is in this context that social memory can be discussed as a political memory, when the social group (or any larger collective) has political goals of establishing a discourse of self-versus-other, mobilizing the members towards a certain vision, and alienating those whose experiences defy their narrative. The establishment of

this kind of memory is done through *lieux de mémoire*[1] (sites of memory) that delineate communities or “private’’ spaces in Lebanon. For example, Achrafieh is known to be affiliated with the Kataeb (Christian right-wing), hence its central square, Sassine Square, displays a memorial and building-scale poster of Bashir Gemayel. One may know they have just entered another private area at the sight of a green flag which indicates Haraket Amal, for example. These spaces are configured by a communal political memory or narrative, making them, in a sense, collective yet ‘private spaces’. In Craig Larkin’s study of the post-war experience, which he conducted 20 years later, one of the students interviewed says, “if you are a Muslim going into a Christian area, you should be careful and the same vice versa…’’ (15). The fact that people from a certain community avoid visiting areas to which they don’t “belong’’ attests also to the mental and psychological division of Lebanese territories into private sectarian spaces.

D. Dynamics of Trauma, Memory, and History: Traumatic Repetitions and Not ‘History’

One may ask why, in Lebanon, do social groups emplot their experiences of the civil war that they have witnessed nationally and create private narratives instead? This is because no public memory or official cultural memory of the civil war was established in the aftermath, rendering the Lebanese people “victims of a lacuna between personal memory and collective amnesia’’ (Haugbolle, “Public and Private Memory’’ 5). Haugbolle explains that according to Assmann, it is in this very lacuna that trauma arises. In other words, the absence of a contextual background that is necessary for the assimilation of the fragments of individual memory is what engenders trauma or

[1] A term coined by Pierre Nora in reference to the commemoration of past events in different forms (sites, monuments, rites, narratives, etc.). As he explains, “there are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory’’ (7).

intensifies earlier ones. In the case of Lebanon, the necessary contextual background is an official cultural memory, a collective narrative that validates the suffering of all and archives the social and cultural memories upbringing of all generations. When no context is established for the isolated event or fragment to be made sense of, individuals come up with alternative narratives. On a collective level, the Lebanese people tend to fill this narrative void with a sense of nostalgia for a "Golden Age'' of a prewar Lebanon, "when the young state was thriving and prosperous'', which helps them overcome feelings of discontinuity and meaninglessness (5).

To speak of trauma, memory, and history, it would be necessary to understand how these three are related in Assmann's view. Assmann explains that history is no more than a sequence of events, that memory is the product of the interaction between the witness of the event and the event, and that trauma is defined as the belated recognition of the event (Kapelchuk 6). Assmann advances that trauma is the result of an issue with "time regimes'' which refers to the system in which time operates. In Lebanon, as I have explained, the memory of the past was erased and replaced with a vision of the future, ironically based on an era that precedes the civil war. This ensures that the victims of the war – including the post-war generations – can no longer identify (with) their past. In Assmann's words, "the future-oriented modern time regime silently (passes) over the victims of history'' (11), causing an inability to identify this trauma. It is this very belatedness, this void, that constitute the traumatic experience, and it is also what explains the belated cultural production on the civil war.

Cathy Caruth adds another dimension to trauma theory by advancing that trauma is not the belated recognition of trauma but rather "a failure of representation'' (Kapelchuk 10), and that in this sense, trauma operates at the unspoken level. In this light,

historical trauma arises among the Lebanese due to the erasure of the traces of the past, the erasure of memory, leaving instead a void that signals “an unlocalizable event’’. It is this erasure of the trace of trauma that puts the victim in doubt of their own reality, forcing them to return to the event over and over in an unconscious attempt to understand what truly happened. These repetitions take the form of vivid flashbacks on a more personal level, but on a more collective level, of a ‘hypermnesia’ or ‘hypermemory’ of the event in question. Caruth explains that for the victim to understand that a trauma is from the past, the trauma needs to be inscribed as a “description’’ (i.e., cultural memory), and it is through the act of reading this description as something “retroactively narrated’’ that the “victim’’ becomes a “witness’’ instead (11). Through this process, the victims can start distinguishing past from present and, therefore, halt the repetition of trauma at the nationalistic level. This memorialization of trauma would enable history to take its course instead of a traumatic repetition happening and being mistaken for history. Therefore, what is at the heart of the historical repetition in Lebanon is the lack of a proper representation of the civil war and subsequent wars and clashes, that should have given the people a closure.

E. Approach to Traumatic Repetitions: Emergence of Cultural Memory, the Ethical Shift, and the Turning Inward

All of that being said, the following question remains: Can Lebanon move past this traumatic repetition? The absence of an official collective narrative simply makes it impossible for either a present or a future to take place. Consequently, post-war generations who have experienced the war too young or not at all are left hanging in overlayered/superimposed time-regimes, with the baggage of a war that is not theirs.

They are, in a sense, unable to establish a new reality or identity for themselves, and unable to envisage a different future.

Although there is no official collective memory, cultural production related to the Lebanese Civil War and its protractedness into post-conflicts (i.e., clashes of 2008) has emerged and is, now more than ever, on the rise – as to even constitute an era of hypermemory or hypermnesia replacing the previously discussed systemic silence or collective amnesia. In a sense, artists and scholars have taken the project of memory re-construction into their own hands. This cultural memory that is being established is essential to examine as it offers alternative ways to tackle the contested national memory. Some novels such as the *Little Mountain* (1977) by Elias Khoury, *Dear Mr. Kawabata* (1995) by Rashid Al-Daif, and *Beirut Fragments* (1990) by Jean Said Makdisi, use repetition as a stylistic device to create and destroy, over and over, the attempted narratives that the novels themselves offer. This, according to Saree Makdisi, reads not as an attempt to find the truth of what happened during the civil war but rather to dismantle the very concept of 'truth' that left Lebanon hanging in the ruins of the past since 1990 (208). The interpretation by Makdisi shows that those who are partaking in the production of a Lebanese cultural memory are aware that since no national homogenous narrative can be established, other ways of dealing with the past must be sought and showcased.

Further into this vision, it is important to inspect how a cultural memory can provide the people with a better representation of the war that is necessary for closure. Assmann highlights that while political memory (communal in Lebanon) aims at producing emotionally charged, clear-cut, hegemonic discourses, cultural memory is formed by "works of art that retain more ambivalent material that allow diverse

interpretations'' ("Memory, Individual, and Collective'' 234). Furthermore, while socio-political memory "addresses individuals first and foremost as members of a group'', the cultural memory "relates to members of a group first and foremost as *individuals*''. In this light, Lebanese artists are working towards decentralizing the production of war narratives – across genres and through any means – and this entails rebuilding a collective memory that is based on individual experiences of the war rather than contested and contradictory communal discourses. The cultural memory, unlike the political ones, would therefore invite an open discussion about the war rather than offer/present a debate. This, in itself, represents an alternative approach to the construction of a collective memory.

In accordance with this project, the post-war literary production has displayed a major change in the writing of the Lebanese novel, shifting from what used to constitute pan-Arab and nationalistic narratives – known as *adab al iltizam* or "commitment literature'' – to more individualistic and peculiar ones characterized by what Tarraf coins as a "turning inward'' (46). The perfect and patriotic protagonist that was once created to certain push political agendas is now replaced by imperfect and vulnerable characters who are unsure about their relationship with their corrupted country. The focus, in recent literary works, is about both the world perceived from within individuals, about their reception and processing of ceaseless political turmoil. Writers are now emphasizing the human subjectivity and agency that the civil war has destroyed due to its establishment of the 'political communal' as the fundamental structural unit of Lebanese society. This brings us to Tarraf's discussion of alienation as experienced in Arab countries, specifically Lebanon. Tarraf explains that, unlike in the West, alienation in Lebanon, does not correspond to "the individual's feelings of anonymity within society, the urge to

escape, and to justify this escape'' (51). As reflected in Lebanese post-war literature, alienation is imposed on individuals against their will, due to the triumph of political communal narratives that efface the individual struggle of navigating a never-ending war. As Tarraf writes, "the instinct is to combat it (the alienation)… rather than to escape by… turning inward'' (5). In this sense, "alienation in the Arab context is socially imposed as opposed to inwardly experienced''.

The cultural project of going back in time and re-narrating history as experienced on an individual level – here through historical fiction – alludes to what Assmann refers to as "an ethical turn'' (Kapelchuk 11). Assmann states that there has been a change of time regime – a return to the past, a necessary slowing down in time – due to "politics of recognition and the ethics of human rights''. In the countries of the Global North, this change has been established through an official memorial culture after the wars had ended. In Arab countries, like Lebanon, that experience a sort of an ongoing *nakba* – due to corruption and post-colonialism – the art scene is what produces this memorial culture which now, more than ever, emphasizes the fundamental right of individuals, "the right to their own vision of the world, experience and identity'' (12). As Assmann says, this ethical turn puts in the forefront the "vulnerability of human flesh'' as opposed to a memorial culture that revolves around political ideologies.

Tarraf's "turning-inward'' and Assmann's "ethical turn'' together create a vital framework through which Lebanese post-war literature can be explored as an alternative construction of a collective memory. Looking at cultural material through a framework that focuses on subjectivity and psychological accounts of the war, invites a continuation of Haugbolle's discussion on the memory of the Lebanese Civil War. In addition to Haugbolle's public and private (communal) memory, there seems to be a third category

of memory which consists of alternative individualistic narratives that deserve as much attention as – if not more than – social narratives.

The necessity of such a study lies in the fact that the very engagement with cultural material entails a participation in the reconstruction of a collective memory of the civil war. This engagement is open and for all as it ranges, according to Assmann, from "reading, writing, learning, scrutinizing, criticizing'' to the very simple act of "appreciating'' (Assmann 235). In addition, just like political memory, "the structure of cultural memory is not fixed but permanently challenged and contested'', and it is its very contesting that presents it "as lived and shared knowledge and experience''. Meaning that, our mere interaction with this cultural material that recounts the civil war – whether in fictional genre or not – and its becoming a unit of interaction with others, makes it a generational or transgenerational experience in itself. In this sense, studying the subjective alternative narratives of working-through in literature entails returning to the unlocalizable event to ensure a certain extent of closure.

In this light, I have chosen to engage in this cultural project by studying two texts, the first being the English-language novel by Rawi Hage titled *De Niro's Game* (2007) and the second, an illustrated collection of interrelated stories titled *Limbo Beirut* (2016) by Hilal Chouman and translated from Arabic into English by Anna Ziajka Stanton. I argue that *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* represent a *spillage* of private spaces and narratives of working-through, in lieu of the non-resonant public and the communal ones. That is to say, these personal memories will, in a way, insert themselves like water on a surface and will always make sure that they have their due place. I situate my thesis in the fields of memory studies and Lebanese post-war literature.

Limbo Beirut recounts the 2008 violent events between Hezbollah militants and Sunni fighters as experienced by five characters of different occupations and backgrounds – a gay artist, a struggling writer, a pregnant woman, a militiaman, and a surgeon. Most of these characters have lived through the last years of the civil war, except for Hassan, the militiaman who is fighting for the second time. All the characters seem to struggle with a sense of disconnection from their present due to the lack of closure on the civil war and its lack of narrative that extends to their present, manifesting itself as a historical repetition. What brings these stories together is the characters' common fixation on an unlocalizable event, a repressed memory triggered by the repetition of civil violence. In this intrusive, absurd, and seemingly everlasting war, the characters build private alternative narratives to cope with their fragmented and unresolved traumas that date from the civil war, and to restore their sense of self. The multi-vocal narration and the dozen of pen-ink illustrations allow a better look into the psyche of these characters.

De Niro's Game tells the story of two childhood best friends, Bassam and George, who journey through the violence of a civil war that puts their agency, subjectivity, and futures at stake. The novel is narrated by Bassam himself who feels that he has been forced into a war that he does not understand and does not want to be part of. Bassam, like the characters of *Limbo Beirut*, appears disconnected from his present; the fast-paced war leaves him no space to process the torture and loss that he undergoes. Bassam finds himself unable to rely on any social narrative to make sense of the apocalyptic war that he is experiencing. The novel, then, unfolds as Bassam's quest for meaning which he establishes by emplotting his experiences into private meaningful alternative narratives.

Although scholarly articles written on *Limbo Beirut* are scarce, a few blog and book reviews address interesting and peculiar points about the Chouman's novel. In

‘’The nightmare returns for young Lebanese”, Leah Caldwell discusses the way Chouman captures the emotional unrest or state of limbo that young Lebanese experience and that I refer to as an “ongoing Nakba” in my prologue. In another review on Qantara, Marcia Lynx Qualey points out that *Limbo Beirut* cannot be reduced to a warfare novel as the novel also represents a demand that the reader finds a ‘’balance in the uneasy space between being a voyeur and a participant’’ (par. 2). In the context of my thesis argument, Qualey’s view emphasizes the role of cultural memory in engaging the Lebanese reader in their history in the absence of a collective memory. In *Arablit Quarterly*, the novel’s review features Anna Ziajka Stanton discussing the challenges of translating *Limbo Beirut* as it requires a work of topography, “a writing of place’’, and in this case, a translation of place, that would cater to the Anglophone audience. Although language is not part of my thesis argument, I acknowledge the importance of it in the context of alternative spaces. Both *De Niro’s Game* and the English translation of *Limbo Beirut* feature anglicized words left untranslated from Arabic. For a multilingual people, this code-switching symbolizes a switch from space to space, each serving a certain function. Evidently, no extensive academic work has been done on *Limbo Beirut*. In my thesis, I aspire to explore the characters’ response to the ‘limbo’ that both Caldwell and Qualey discuss and its manifestation into private alternative spaces of working-through.

As for *De Niro’s Game*, a larger body of work has been produced addressing a comprehensive scope of themes and topics. Both Dina Georgis and Hany Ali Abdelfattah use Freudian psychoanalysis to discuss the ways repressed trauma manifests into symbolisms in the characters’ lives and narrations. Abdelfattah specifically brings up the difference in the construction of historical narrative and personal narrative, one being an attempt at ‘neutrality’ and the other delivering a lived experience – that is, memories. In

other works, using Foucault, Dalia Said Mostafa, Khelif Fatima Zohra, and Julia Borossa redirect the discussion to how *De Niro's Game*'s militiamen characters are victims of a cycle of violence that deprives them of subjectivity and agency, as well as of any means to survive other than the recourse to violence itself. Furthermore, in their articles, Najat Rahman and Rita Sakr study the complications that writers face in representing the "unrepresentable" reality of war. Kyle Gamble and Syrine Hout examine the representations and linguistic manifestations of sectarian and socio-cultural divisions in Lebanon, as described in the novel. Lastly, in ''Looking for Home in All the Wrong Places: The Various Lebanons of De Niro's Game'', Hout explores the many ways in which the characters experience Lebanon as a place and space, and the ways in which, lacking a solid concept of home because of war, the characters create their own. In this body of works, I find snippets of my argument that I want to extend in this thesis. While some of these scholars address the issue of subjectivity being erased in a state of war, the others address the manifestation of trauma, being symbolism in narration and spaces in imagination. I aim to contribute to this academic body by exploring how, in *De Niro's Game,* the characters reclaim their agency and subjectivity amidst war by creating alternative spaces of working-through.

Whether engaged in the war or not, the characters of these two novels show a common political ambivalence that reflects Zeina Tarraf's observation. Unlike the old commitment literature that presents the perfect protagonist supporting political agendas, in those two novels, the emphasis is on the confusion and alienation that the characters feel in the civil war and the 2008 clashes. The two novels are characterized by a strong sense of not one-versus-other but rather self-versus-the-world. Not only do the characters not understand the logic of the war as it lacks a consensual narrative but their chances at

forming a social narrative is even more bleak since their families – the most fundamental unit of transfer of narrative according to Marianna Hirsch (8) – are either dead or absent.

Since "individuals cannot remember outside the context of their social groups'' (Righi 33), the characters resort to their imagination to contextualize their experiences. In Tarraf's and Assmann's terms, this turning-inward enables the characters to *emplot* their "memory fragments'' as to create a meaningful narrative or "a bigger picture''. Their alternative personal narratives are developed through and take the form of narrative techniques, art production, and cultural works.

To these alienated characters, imagination, in Cornelius Castoriadis words, makes it possible for them "to go beyond closure'' (Righi 50) – the closure alluding to the Lebanese contested history as a 'dead-end'. That is, the act of "turning inward'' becomes in itself an opening. Working towards weaving a personal narrative helps the characters rebuild a sense of integrity, autonomy, and agency that the war destroys. Not only does turning inward enable them to navigate the past to make sense of the present, but also to imagine a different future.

These two novels represent a good corpus to explore the private alternative narratives of working through for many other reasons. First, the two texts illustrate the rationale of my study, as their combination reflects Assmann's concept of incomplete modernization of time regime that results in a repetition of history. *Limbo Beirut* begins with characters on their balcony observing the reaction of older generations who are witnessing their second civil war outbreak, these people being Bassam and George from *De Niro's Game*. The contestedness of a collective narrative about the civil war in *De Niro's Game* carries over, spills into, *Limbo Beirut*, making the characters of the latter fixate on resolving the past through personal alternative narratives. Lastly, the variety of

languages and formats that my corpus consists of demonstrates the ethical turn as a collective project that is expanding across a wide scope of works. It is important to add that the shift from a uniform pan-Arab commitment literature to more particular, peculiar, and authentic literatures, has brought changes to our perception of what constitutes 'Arab' or, in the case of my thesis, Lebanese literature, in terms of language. As Wail Hassan states, "Arab literary production has outgrown the pedagogical and institutional structures organizing literary studies (single-language departments such as Arabic, English, French, and so on)'' (10), yet very little work has been made to combine or compare Lebanese literatures produced in different languages. In this thesis, I bring forth a work in English translation, *Limbo Beirut*, and an Anglophone novel, *De Niro's Game,* into conversation for the first time.

CHAPTER II

PRIVATE ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES IN *DE NIRO'S GAME*

In this novel by Rawi Hage, the civil war is recounted by Bassam, an ambivalent character with ambivalent political views, living in East Beirut which is inhabited and ruled by the far-right Christians – the *Kataeb* lead by Bashir Gemayel, which Bassam refers to as "Al Majalis'' led by Al-Rayess. Bassam's entourage is constituted of Phalangists, and the closest person to him, his best friend, George, becomes an active member. However, unlike other young men in his community, Bassam befriends a Ali from West Beirut – the mostly Leftist and Muslim part of the divided city – where Bassam also has a leftist uncle. Bassam's narration of his experience living through this bloody war is governed by a strong tone and sense of alienation from his surroundings. Belonging to neither West or East Beirut, this character who is not enough of a militiaman nor of a civilian completely cleared of crimes, finds himself deprived of a narrative necessary to help him make sense of his pain and role in the war. Unlike the other young men who have replaced their deceased father figures with Al-Rayess, Bassam is unable to make of the Phalangist ideology a narrative for himself.

Despite the many other social narratives that Bassam has access to, none of them make sense to him. To start off, Bassam cannot identify with his mother's Fairuzi version of Lebanon, "the Lebanon of yesterday'', since he has known nothing but war in his lifetime. The novel opens with Bassam repulsively criticizing his mother's fixation on Fairuz's songs since the beginning of the war; he says her "melancholic'' (Hage 11) music made his life "a morbid hell'' (12). Moreover, Bassam finds no representation, in Caruth's terms, no "description'' of the war that he is experiencing in the medias. In many

passages, he juxtaposes extracts of the journalistic *simplified* version of war with his own contemplation of Beirut being bombarded to emphasize the difference. The news, to him, are “with no story’’ which he finds disconcerting (238). And last but not least, Bassam fails at figuring out the logic or narrative behind the war; he claims that he perceives it as the “battle of the thousand dogs’’ (43) in reference to the foolishness of civil massacres.

In the absence of resonant family, communal, journalistic, and/or national narratives, Bassam finds himself facing a question that is posed in the epigraph of the novel, “How, from a fire that never sinks or sets, would you escape?’’. Besides the face that the ever-burning fire symbolizes the protractedness of the past into the reality of the reader, on a textual level, it alludes to the civil war that Bassam was born into, has grown through, and that has not stopped – due to the ideological divisions. Throughout his narration of this absurd war, Bassam forges an answer to the latter question by creating his own private alternative narratives of working-through. In this context, the concept of escape is understood as ‘saving himself’, or as Tarraf states, in her discussion of alienation, as “fighting back’’. These alternative narratives allow Bassam to protect himself not only mentally but also physically. On one hand, they serve as an assimilatory space for his daily unresolved war trauma to create meaning, and on another, since narrative affects the course of action, they make it possible, in the impossibilities of war, to trace a route for himself that leads to a different future.

Bassam creates many private alternative narratives to cope with various traumas. These spaces of working-through appear sometimes as the product of reframing or emplotting of events, stream of consciousness, and interestingly, the intimate worlds that Bassam’s own interaction with books and films can engender.

A. Epic Emplotment: Narrative Identity and a Possibility of Future

The first private space of working through memory and trauma that Bassam creates is one that operates as an epic narrative. While chaos governs his social surroundings, Bassam seems to have privately woven the fragmented events of the war into a storyline, into what looks like an epic journey that borrows from Roman mythology. In his narration of his experience of the war, Bassam is sailing under "Hellenic skies'' (189), running in "Titanic forests (99), "shooting at… sexless byzantine angels'' (139), "slaying underwater nymphs'' (141), and battling "jealous'' and "lunatic'' gods (37) like Hades (76). In this narrative, the Bekaa Valley is situated "on the steps of Heliopolis'' where Fairuz sings, and Beirut is mainly perceived as "a Roman city'' (45). Since Bassam is unable to form an identity in a country that has only known war, by going further into the past of his city, he may be searching for an alternative identity narrative and a space of belonging that is not completely detached from his own roots. He, indeed, implicitly refers to himself as "the fisherman's fish… [that] forgot its home under the sea'' (113).

In this context, betrayal, hurt, murder, and vengeance are all narrated in imageries that allude to the genre of epic and that associates characters with historical figures. This, in the absurdity of war, helps Bassam to put things into perspective for himself. For example, when he discovers that his bestfriend George has betrayed him and participated in his torture, Bassam says, "the soundless Aramaic tears were shed, on that tempest day, for the nailed son of Yahweh and the dangled corpse of his companion, the forgiven thief'' (102). In this passage, Bassam is implicitly referring to himself as the Christ and to George as the anti-Christ. Narrating betrayal through such a religious text allows him to validate the painfulness of this situation on the one hand, and on another, helps him accept it as "part of the journey'', as something that is already *inscribed,* meant to happen.

In other words, this narrative gives him something to identify with and a way to accept the absurdity of being betrayed by his childhood friend whom he considers to be his only family left.

It is specifically as soon as George officially joins the Kataeb that he starts turning his back on Bassam who, unlike other young men, shows a certain political ambivalence and disdain for Al-Rayess. In this light, George reports him to the Phalange and sends men to batter him. To talk about this painful experience, Bassam relies on the narrative of Brutus who betrayed his life-long friend Caesar for the sake of the nation; he refers to George as “my brother who stabbed me and kissed me’’ (139). This story offers him not only the possibility of identification, once again, but also in Caruth’s terms, a *description* of his experience, an *inscription* of the event.

To add to that, Julius Caesar was the leader of the Roman Empire. In a sense, by identifying with him, Bassam is representing himself as the leader of Roma, his alternative Beirut and, hence, the owner of his narrative. This reads as an attempt to re-establish his sense of control and agency that the war destroys. On page 40, Bassam says, “[I] drove toward the city. The wind kept me awake. I drove like the wind. I drove faster than the wind that kept me awake. I was escaping time and space, like flying bullets. Death does not come to you when you face it… I was a king’’. This passage presents an interesting metaphor that emphasizes the empowering characteristic of these personal narratives. Bassam doesn’t escape Beirut, instead, he drives further into it and faster than the wind, which allows him to bypass the realm of bullets and to enter another one, that is, the realm of Roma, his alternative space of belonging in which he is king. As Tarraf has explained, Bassam doesn’t “escape’’ alienation but rather faces it, literally, and

"combats'' (51) it; and that entails challenging the hegemonic war ideologies with subjective and authentic ones that empower him.

By narrating his experience of betrayal through the stories of the Christ and Julius Caesar, Bassam establishes an alternative narrative identity, an alternative life-story. These stories present to him spaces of working-through in which he succeeds to escape the psychological shattering that betrayal can bring about. That is, instead of looking at himself with shame and as merely a victim of ostracism, Bassam builds empowering narratives of the outcast hero and 'the chosen one' (i.e., The Christ and Caesar).

These narratives are established in other passages. After defeating the men that George had sent to hurt him, Bassam declares, "I, a lightning bolt of wrath, a Trojan horse's belly on fire'' (99). Since the bolt symbolizes the weapon of Zeus who started the Trojan war, here, Bassam is representing himself as the earthly expression of a violent God; he is the deadly "trojan horse''. Through this notion, Bassam creates power in being the intruder in his community, the one perceived as a "traitor'' (131) who "believe[s] in nothing'' (53). In a sense, Bassam is reasserting his right to his own vision – in Assmann's terms – even if it threatens others.

Furthermore, Bassam says, "I was a bow with a silver arrow, a god's spear'' (40). Both of these elements symbolize Apollo's defeat of the python in the Delphi valley (Chappell 2). At the same time, upon his victory over his enemies, Bassam refers to himself as "the erect cobra in [the]… valley'' (99). By portraying himself as both the god and his own enemy, Bassam is claiming that nothing and no one other than himself has power over him. That is, through such a narrative, Bassam reclaims his agency and protects himself.

Besides losing his best friend to treason, Bassam also undergoes the very painful death of his mother in the bombing of their building. To work through such paralyzing circumstances, once again, Bassam resorts to an epic reasoning that saves him. Although he does not eat or sleep for days and loses his ability to speak after her death, Bassam proceeds to reason, "The death of my mother had liberated me… Her death made me closer to birds and farther away from humans. Birds fly, I aspire to my own flight'' (87). From this moment, Bassam becomes accompanied by a partridge that guides him throughout his journey, from Lebanon to Roma. According to Dean A. Miller, the epic hero is characterized as "a man, even if superman, [who is] caught between god and animal'' (379), and who often is guaranteed "animal guardianship'' (168). In addition to that, the epic hero is gifted an instinct that is defined as "a borderland concept between the human and the animal'', and this space is undoubtedly "where the hero often is born, lives, tours, discovers, [and] acts'' (381). That is to say, by portraying himself as this epic hero and by concretizing his instinct as a spiritual support that is sent to him, Bassam isn't only shifting from the mentality of losing to that of surviving, but he is also creating an alternative reaction to his mother's death. Bassam uses this event as a potential transition of the self, from human to what is *beyond* human, a being, unlike those around him, that *ought* to fly, and so he takes the necessary step to realize this plan that is written or meant to be. By incorporating his loss in such a narrative, Bassam is, thus, able to free himself from the static grief and can look for a better future outside Lebanon.

It is this emplotment of events, which means the act of "[placing] them into a meaningful constellation of a plot'' (Dohnalová 33), that allows Bassam to re-organize the chaos of the war. By portraying his experiences as part of an epic journey, Bassam is able to defy the terminating power of war and alternatively to enable his own life and

progress – since the epic implies a *journey*, a continuity, and a continuation. In the absence of a social narrative essential for a sense of *identity* and *direction*, then, it is through this alternative emplotment that both a "description'' of past events and a possible "prescription'' of future actions can take place (33).

Bassam describes the world in which he lives in as "Manichean'' (Hage 123) which means that he disregards the pluralistic nature of the civil war and resituates his own reality in a world based on a binary struggle between Good and Evil. On one hand, by re-configuring his reality with a simplified logic, Bassam makes it easier for himself to survive the war; in a "Manichean'' world, evil is whatever stands in his way, rather than its being a concept lost in the ever-changing alliances of the civil war. On another hand, this Manichean characterization helps him persist through traumatic experiences because it adds both an epic and a spiritual dimension to all his experiences. For example, when Bassam decides to kill his terrifying torturer Rambo before leaving for Paris, he carries out the murder like a spiritual rite of passage that grants him transition. Bassam runs up to a hill, spreads red mud over his face, and as "rushing butterflies [flap] their gigantic wings, raising the mountain's fog from the valleys'', Bassam shoots Rambo, then falls on his knees with his "[his] head… pulled down to the earth'' (171). The mere location of the act establishes a spiritual atmosphere to it. Moreover, by emphasizing the involvement of nature (the butterfly and the fog), Bassam shows that the divine is on his side which helps him alleviate his fear, make it possible for him to accept his torture, and ascertain that he is indeed fighting against Evil. The rite closing with an image of himself on his knees on the top of a hill offers the perfect portrayal of the surviving hero.

In another passage, Bassam presents his voyage to France – from where he will be leaving to the Promised land, Roma – as an Odyssey with luring "sirens'' (184) and

seagulls with “mythological wings’’ ogling him with “xenophobic eyes’’ (185). To add to that, it is only in this voyage that Bassam refers to Lebanon as “my home’’ and “my chunk of land, with its war and my dead parents’’, which dramatizes his relationship with Lebanon. He gazes at his “landscape of burning rocks’’ and thinks about “the dead humans singing warrior’s songs’’ (184). By dramatizing his relation with Lebanon towards which he had originally expressed disdain, Bassam dramatizes his departure and presents himself as the “exiled/wounded hero’’ who was forced to give up on his comrades. Indeed, in her book, *Post-Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* (2012), Syrine Hout argues that Bassam’s ‘’escape by ship from the flames engulfing Beirut’’ is a parody/imitation of ‘’Aenea’s flight from burning Troy in a vessel’’ (135). Bassam’s self-portrayal as a Homeric hero who “suffered at sea while seeking to save his own life and to achieve the safe homecoming’’ and who “do what he might he could not save his men’’ (Homer 2) relieves him from feelings of cowardice and the guilt of a willingly departure. In this voyage, Bassam says that the partridge appears to him with a message of reassurance, “No condition is permanent. I shall bring you a branch when the floating mountains are closer your feet’’ (186). By reinforcing his image of the chosen one, Bassam makes it easier for himself to cope with the unknown that the war has thrown him into.

The narrative *inscription* of Bassam’s experience into an epic journey allows him to gain a sense of agency, order, and coherence that a social narrative of the war should’ve initially offered him. Before the unfolding of events, like in epic narrations, Bassam sets a direction for his narrative through foreshadowing visions (79) and a riddle for the listener. First, he says that his story will have “waves, a distant land, a woman, and three signs’’ (30) according to George’s aunt who reads his coffee cup. He then claims having

had visions of “a friend immersed in a pool of light and blood’’ and of himself dropping his father’s garment, pouring water in his own eyes, and crossing a river (79). All of these predict George’s suicide and Bassam’s decision of choosing a path that is different from the majority of men in his community, which entails traveling by water. By introducing his narrative through riddles, Bassam is establishing agency and a sense of control over it; this is *his* story, and not a *history* that he does not know how to narrate.

Bassam divides his journey into three phases or chapters. He situates his story first in Beirut. In this chapter, Bassam still has family and friends; he interreacts with others and does not feel as alienated or disempowered. The second chapter, although still physically in Beirut, is titled “Roma’’ and it is from there that Bassam’s narration becomes strikingly epic. In a sense, Bassam mother’s death marks a break from his strings to Beirut, from his narrative lineage and social identity – as he states himself that her death made him farther from humans and closer to other creatures. In borrowing from Roman mythology to describe his own suffering, Bassam starts identifying as a wounded hero, which automatically influences the course of his actions. As a Homeric hero, Bassam readies himself to for the third phase of his journey, which is the voyage away from Beirut on his quest for Roma – he lands first in Paris and, from there, leaves for his destination.

As observed, then, by emplotting his painful experiences, Bassam creates for himself a coherent and meaningful “identity narrative’’ that serves to “bridge between description and prescription’’ (Dohnalová 33), that is, between past-present and present-future. In perceiving himself as a chosen one, Bassam automatically acts accordingly to guarantee not only his survival, but also his life.

B. Re-enacting History to Change It

Once Bassam arrives in Paris, he faces feelings of shame for having escaped the war, added to his sense of alienation and inferiority as a refugee. Overwhelmed with his protracted past, Bassam wishes that "all death (could) be a death and an end – [with] no memory,… no stories…'' (Hage 256). He describes Lebanon as "the phoenix… that never ceased to burn and never ceased to die'', leaving him with "residues of history'' (244). As I have previously mentioned, the epigraph of the novel even quotes, "How, from a fire that never sinks or sets, would you escape?'' which alludes to Bassam's struggle to escape the war even after having left the land. This frustration is rooted in his inability to make sense of the war *because* no accurate narrative or representation of the events were offered to him to allow identification, working-through, and closure.

Alternatively, Bassam emplots these emotional residues or "fragments'' in an already existent historical narrative, the French Revolution from the "books [he] has read'' (204), and which he adopts, reenacts, and changes. When he arrives to France, Bassam says that with his gun, he can "now.. defend this city'', he can "kill Nelson the British admiral'' and change the fate of these battles, that this way, he could finally become a "soldier in the emperor's army''. Evidently, the city that Bassam is defending is not Paris but Beirut. In a passage, while leaning into the Seine river and thinking about French revolutionary soldiers, Bassam's eyes suddenly "[beam] battle scenes from Beirut'' (243); this only proves that this "surface'' narrative, at the core, serves Bassam as an alternative space of working through the trauma of Beirut's war.

Bassam's re-enactment allows him to work through his feelings of shame and alienation; he desires to be part of a group, to belong to a community, to have a collective narrative and a cause. It is the fact that this history is distant and closed that allows Bassam

to use it as a space to assimilate his own residual war; he can bend this narrative as he pleases to attain the victory that he wishes he had brought to Beirut, and he can also feel like "a victorious soldier'' (205). This alternative narrative is Bassam's way of offering himself another chance. In this narrative, he does not escape, he does "not wave a white cloth out of the window''; here, he already has closure, he can anticipate the sounds "that would fill any revolutionary's eyes with tears of triumph'' (204).

Having a narrative gives Bassam a sense of purpose and control over his life. He uses it to make sense of things around him, ranging from the smallest details, such as having no more cigarettes because he offered them to aristocrats he executed the night before (206), to more pivotal moments in his journey. To understand the extent to which a personal narrative re-organizes Bassam's life, it would be necessary to examine how it affects his decisions. In Paris, where he is visiting Rhea, George' half-sister, Bassam is reprimanded by her lover, Roland, for keeping a gun. As the events escalate, Roland threatens him and says, "Go throw it in the river and all is forgiven'' (229). Bassam's gun is not only a weapon, it is an extension of himself, it is "an arm in [his] hand'' (260), and more than that, since it symbolizes his chance to liberate Beirut, it is an integral part of his identity and his past. Hence, Bassam not only feels immensely threatened by Roland but also, his inability to understand the authority and power that Roland holds disturbs him. Consequently, Bassam emplots this confusion into his revolutionary narrative by thinking to himself, "it must be conspiracy… Roland is a rich aristocrat, and if I lose my gun it will only serve the purpose of… heredity and oppression'' (230). He asks himself, "what would the emperor think if I laid down my arms in the river?" It is by reasserting his role inside a historical narrative that Bassam gains a sense of direction as it enables him to sketch out, more clearly, who is a threat to him, and hence, to *prescribe* his next

actions. In this light, Bassam chooses to keep his gun to protect himself from Roland who turns out, indeed, to be a Mossad agent sent to investigate him about George.

In another passage, Bassam sees a man beating Rhea and tries to find his address to threaten him. Bassam proceeds with his plans as if he truly is part of an army, he "[consults] [his] fellow fighters'' with whom he stays up all night "preparing for the attack''. Bassam proceeds to call his lieutenant and bring the horses, and together, they "[ride] to [their] enemy's territory'' (254). In this narrative, Bassam compensates for having been alienated in Beirut. He has his own soldiers whom he gives orders to and with whom he shares common values and goals – the fight against the aristocrats. In a sense, through this narrative, Bassam builds the social narrative and identity he did not have back in Beirut.

Bassam's re-enactment of history happens only privately and internally; Bassam goes *inward* into a *private space* that he creates for himself to assimilate his residual traumas. When he does not want to enter his alternative space, he "[orders] [his] soldiers to clean up the war scene'' (210), meaning that he has control over his story. In fact, he can realize that this narrative is imaginary as he refers to it as "the phantasm of my youth'' (204). This proves that Bassam is not *reliving* his traumas that manifest as alternative spaces but rather, that he creates them to allow both a narrative and its process of narration – since trauma shatters language.

Last but not least, there is a reason why Bassam relies on what has *already* been written in history to produce *an inscription* of *his* story. Pierre Nora explains that, "with the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history'', and that "memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past (3). Bassam's main

struggle is that he does not own a social narrative that allows him, in Caruth's terms, to *allocate* his trauma, and it is this very lack of contextualization that is experienced *as* trauma (Kapelchuk 10). Therefore, by emplotting his experiences in an alternative historical narrative, Bassam is *attempting* to move from the realm of trauma to the realm of memory which would allow him, in turn, to recognize its *pastness* and hence, to move to a realm of history or at least, to the illusion of it.

C. Intertext: *L'Étranger* as a Space of Identification

As Caruth says, trauma operates at the unspoken level. The victim of traumatic repetition can only become a witness when there is a description of history that can be read and recognized as *the past*. To illustrate the complex relation between history itself and traumatic repetition which is a death drive, Caruth states "the witness creates the addressee, the trauma erases it" (Kapelchuk 9). In this novel, Bassam *finds* an address, a representation of his own pain in the book by Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* or *The Outsider*, and so he turns it into another private space of working-through.

Camus' novel tells the story of a man from Algeria called Meursault whom society perceives as *l'étranger* or *the outsider* because he's emotionally detached from the world around him; unlike others, he believes that everything is inherently absurd and insignificant. The first major event in the novel is Meursault receiving the news of his mother's death; Meursault attends the funeral where people notice his indifference. The second is Meursault shooting a man for no reason and being taken to court. What starts as a tribunal for his crime becomes a shaming for his lack of grief following his mother's passing and his general indifference towards life, both leading to his death sentence.

Since Meursault struggles with estrangement, shame, loss, and feelings of bitterness towards the world, and added to that, the inability of finding meaning in it, his narrative allows Bassam a degree of identification. Through this identification, the novel offers him a space of introspection that takes the form of an interaction between him and the characters of the story. In this way, Camus' novel enables an *articulation* of Bassam's negative feelings that war has inflicted on him and that he was unable to express. This introspection is specifically made easier because Bassam can address his traumas from a distance, through someone else's narrative – instead of having to localize his trauma himself, to create a trace for it, he can simply rely on Meursault's story.

The first time Bassam opens the novel and reads the first sentence, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure'', he immediately adopts the character of Meursault. In *L'Étranger*'s first few pages which Bassam flips through, Meursault meets his neighbor accompanied by his dog. After reading this opening line, Bassam walks to his window and says, "I glanced down at the street, I saw a man and his dog walking'' (224). Bassam proceeds to say that he found himself on the North African shores "joined to waves of water from the Mediterranean Sea'' which symbolizes a link being formed between Bassam's world and Meursault's, an identification that is slowly taking place. Then Bassam continues, "between the covers of my book, I saw the protagonist walking on the seashore with a gun in his hand . . . *This man who is morally guilty of his mother's death*, the prosecutor said and pointed at the accused. I quickly left the courtroom and dropped the book on the bed''. Bassam resonates so much with Meursault's character that he imagines himself at the tribunal – as we know, his own mother died chasing him to get him to go down to the shelter with her. The usage of "the accused'' marks a blurring line between Meursault and Bassam; the latter for the very first time in the entire novel then,

is thinking about the role he played in his mother's death. Through someone else's story, Bassam has the option of working through his unconscious and the guilt that he cannot speak of. However, Bassam chooses not to, as he exits the tribunal by closing the book right away.

A day later, Bassam states "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure'', and states that he had not been able to stop repeating it and laughing at its absurdity. This marks his very first time talking about his mother's death in the novel. Surprisingly, Bassam proceeds to further describe the entire funeral and so he adds, "when I realized that someone was holding my arm for fear that I might faint, slip, or crawl behind the coffin, I had looked that person in the eye and asked for a cigarette'' (226). This detail specifically demonstrates that it is his identification with Meursault's indifferent character that enables him to talk about his experience of his mother's death; it sort of lays the ground for his own narration of these painful events. It is important to note that, unlike Meursault, Bassam is not inherently detached but rather, it is after his mother's death that he falls silent and isolates himself (85, 87). The usage of the text as an alternative space of working-through proves to be successful when Bassam closes the narration of his mother's funeral with his own reformulation of *L'Étranger's* opening sentence, "I had not been certain about when my mother had died — whether it was today or yesterday or even the day before'' (226), indicating a shift from the unspoken realm that defines trauma to a realm of healing.

The novel presents itself as a space that transforms the difficult task of introspection into a discussion between Bassam and the characters. In one of the scenes, Bassam talks about the death of Roger, one of the militia members, while they were all playing Russian roulette. Moments later, he opens his novel and reads (231), "… *and*

has he uttered a word of regret for his most odious crime?'' (233). Bassam interacts with the judge in Camus' novel and responds "No… Why should he? We all agreed to participate. It was our choice…''. The novel seems to facilitate a conversation that Bassam feels the need to have with himself. Although Bassam denies feeling any regret, the fact that he's internalizing what the prosecutor is saying insinuates that it has triggered something in him whether at the conscious or unconscious level. This is further demonstrated as Bassam comes up with a question that he attributes to the prosecutor, "Reason?'' and proceeds to answer it, "Reason is a useful fiction''. Bassam's own extension of the novel's passage, this imagined interaction with the prosecutor, represents a conversation with himself. By borrowing from these passages and adding to them, Bassam's necessary introspection and retrospection become possible.

The 'alternativity' of this space is further demonstrated in another passage. Not only does *L'Étranger* set an alternative space of working-through but it also serves as an alternative space of *being*, a separation between what has been ascribed to Bassam and what future he can prescribe for himself. In a passage in *De Niro's Game*, Bassam sees a newspaper that shows a car bomb in Achrafieh where he lived but fails to recognize anyone and says, "the story in the paper was disconcertingly factual, without story or investigation'' (238). Bassam gets home and lays the page on his desk, then, he looks at the walls and opens his book, "*I informed him that I'd been staring at the walls for months, there was nobody, nothing in the world . . . A life which I can remember, this life on earth. That is all I want from it.*'' Bassam ends his novel with a "melancholy consolation''. This passage is crucial, as it indicates that Bassam is finding in Camus' novel what he has not found in representations of his own war; the report is "without story'', the novel, however, brings him consolation and representation. In this extract of

L'Étranger, Meursault is articulating his last wishes before his death sentence, and Bassam seems to relate to him as he, too, desires a story, a life that he can remember.

In a previous passage, Bassam had said that when he'd look at the desk of his room, he would directly imagine "a traveler's desk'' with a man's "hand holding a single feather and dipping the feather in a small jar of ink to carry a few drops and transform them into a flow'' (202). Bassam's act of laying the newspaper page open on this same desk and then proceeding to read from Camus' book immediately, can be interpreted as a metaphor of his desire to rewrite the representation of history through his personal experience. Bassam's act of discreetly ripping this page from a newspaper that isn't his and laying it open on his desk, despite the fact the journalistic narrative does not resonate with him, indicates his willingness and need to keep this conversation open and going. Bassam doesn't re-read the newspaper or observe it, he proceeds to open Camus' book and read it out loud right away. This goes to show that it is through this intertextuality that he allows a conversation about how the war truly affects him; the fact that all he desires is a life on earth that he can remember shows the extent to which war deprives him his humanity and his most basic right, to live rather than to survive (238).

Last but not least, it is important to note that Bassam brings up the concept of melancholia only twice in the novel which makes it a concept worth elaborating on. The first time is when he criticizes his mother whose radio "has been on since the start of the war'' playing "melancholic Fairuz songs'' (11) and proceeds to say, "I was not escaping the war; I was running away from Fairuz, the notorious singer''. The second time he speaks of melancholia is when he finishes Camus' book who brings him a "melancholy consolation'' (238). According to Freud, unlike the normal mourning process in which the mourner can let go of the lost love object, melancholia is a pathological state in which

the individual cannot recognize or respond to the *call of reality* (Ferber 66), hence cannot let go. Melancholia issues from an initially confusing relationship with the love object. Upon loss, unable to work-through the confusion, the melancholic person internalizes these feelings which leads to self-hatred and a destructive loyalty to the lost love object. In this context, Bassam finds Fairuz's music "melancholic'' because it only feeds into a collective fantasy that conceals the reality of the Lebanese society. Indeed, Tarraf explains that Rahbani's music is "able to cater to contradictory politics'' *because* it delivers a fuzzy nostalgic narrative of Lebanon (155). While Bassam's mother relies on this collective fantasy of "the golden age'' to cope with her grief, Bassam who has not known "the Lebanon of yesterday'' finds that Fairuz worsens his grief and confuses his relationship with himself and Beirut even more. Alternatively, what brings consolation to his melancholy is the individualistic story of Meursault, a book that he feels addresses him personally, as an individual rather than as a member of a community. Unlike Fairuz's songs, *L'Étranger* doesn't feed him a paralyzing narrative that keeps him in a fictive past but rather offers a space of working through his relationship with himself and his relationship with Lebanon.

D. Stream of Consciousness: The Possibility of Retrospection

In one of the previous sections that I have discussed, Bassam imagines a hand holding a feather and which, with a few "drops'', can create "a flow''. This passage evidently illustrates his own desire to weave his experiences together into something coherent and meaningful. More specifically, this expression alludes to Maria Teresea Tiexeira's discussion of stream of consciousness where she defines the latter as "drops of experience" that, put together, "become indivisible wholes'' (5). Stream of

consciousness is a technique that Bassam resorts to throughout his narration to defy the disruptive effect of the war on identity formation, meaning-making, and the very attempt at expressing oneself through language – as he says, "war spreads silence, cuts tongues, and flattens stones'' (Hage 38). In the novel, stream of consciousness appears as long single blocks that seem to delineate spaces of working through.

In a sense, these "streams'' interweave fragments of thoughts and joins broken temporalities to allow Bassam to localize the "unrepresented'' event which Caruth defines as trauma. In a passage where he is being tortured in an underground prison by Rambo the Phalangist, Bassam disconnects from his surroundings and enters an alternative space which unfolds as successive streams of consciousness, one of which says:

> I fell on that cool floor again, and his boots came and retreated like waves that splash on misty shores, like black veils that eclipse the sun from your eyes, like the sound of blasting drums in your ears, like lollypop drips on your chin, like the smell of plastic erasers in your classroom. The dust from the floor rose again, like the powder chuck that was swept from the blackboard by that brownnose Habib, oh, and like the slaps from the French Jesuit priest that landed on your palm as if they were the ruler's blessing, and like your bent knees on those narrow logs under the chapel benches, and like the smell of incense that came back and gave you a celestial high, and forgive me, Father, for I have sinned, I jerked that tree until it ejaculated fruits, I broke that glass with St. Peter's rock, I stole candies, and I fumbled that little girl under the falling bombs in the shelter, while her mother was snoring in sync with the news on the radio. You see, Father, I confess, I am the one who waited until the candle was dead, and then I slipped my hand under her nightgown, to her newly acquired pubic hair, and she never said a word, and she followed me when I played, when I went up to the roof, she followed me like a puppy dog, like a female bird. Ever since then, Father, she dressed louder, played with her hair, chewed gum with an open mouth, danced flamboyantly to every jingle. She became jealous of my mother […] So you see, Father, ever since I have refused to go down into the shelter, even if Rambo here hammers me into a meat pie. No, I won't go down to that dark place because I have always hated the underground and the little devils who dwell there, who made me lust for her skinny thighs and her newly acquired pubic hair. (151)

In this passage, Bassam lets his subconscious loose. He juxtaposes ideas that are not explicitly linked; one thought after another, further into his repressed memories,

Bassam is able to regress in time. Under torture, Bassam relates the sensations he's experiencing as those of "the sound blasting drums in [his] ears'' which refers to the bombing in war. He then proceeds with elements related to childhood like lollypop and classrooms. From here, Bassam begins to perceive Rambo as the Jesuit father who is slapping him for having "stolen candies'' and proceeds to admit that he also "ejaculated fruits''. This confession carries on as a metaphor of the time he molested a girl in a shelter and ends with a reassertion of his refusal, as if being asked, to ever go to the shelters again. This passage is evidently not a repentance for molestation since Bassam assaults many women throughout his journey with no remorse. What seems to be operating here is Bassam trying to talk about the guilt he feels for his mother's death – as previously mentioned, she was killed trying to convince him to come down to the shelter with her.

From the beginning of the novel, Bassam mentions repeatedly that shelters make him uncomfortable but never elaborates on his statement. Being tortured in an underground cell only obliges him to reminisce about the cause of his mother's death. His inability to speak of this event stems not only from his self-loathing but also from the very fact that loss has shattered both his language and his thoughts. A stream of consciousness facilitates an introspection about this event, as it becomes a space of working-through (2). By letting out the "drops'' of thoughts that cross his mind, Bassam engenders a "flow'' that allows meaning to arise. In her elaboration on the stream of consciousness, Tiexeira defines isolated thoughts as "things that are fluid" and that once expressed with no interruption, form together "relations that are fluctuating" (3). This proves to be true since it is due to this uninterrupted stream that Bassam goes from his external entourage inward, linking one thought to another, until he gets close to the "unlocalizable event'', his mother's death. Even if Bassam doesn't bring up the latter

explicitly, he accuses the girl he molested in the shelter of being jealous of his mother, as if to say that she was the reason his mother died. To add to that, the stream of consciousness that follows is all about his mother feeding him as a child. This signifies that although Bassam is unable to firmly tie together the pieces of the event (his mother's death), through a stream of consciousness, he can still have a retrospect on it – which entails a certain degree of representation of the event, hence a step towards healing.

Furthermore, having explained how the lack of social narrative of the war complicates remembering, it is be necessary to highlight how the stream of consciousness, as a space, facilitates such processes. In this passage, we see how Bassam regresses to different temporalities to collect fragments from each and how, together, these fragments create meaning and bring him closer to localizing the unspeakable event. The ability to recall memories from the past is due to the fact that consciousness is naturally continuous and is defined as "that which is without breach, crack, or division." (Tiexeira 2). Thus, streams of consciousness "draw on the indestructible past for their coming into being; and the ontological past necessitates the emergence of the novel for it reinvents itself as the flow of consciousness is enriched by the novel states of consciousness'' (4). In other words, a stream of consciousness is based on a flow of thoughts that derives from the past, and by acknowledging the past in the present moment, one transforms it again to create the novel; this process is what allows a retrospection. It is in this manner that despite the lack of social narrative and despite the fragmentation of thoughts, that Bassam is able to draw memories from his past and *readdress* them in order – and in an order – to bring to himself something close to closure.

In another passage, in Paris, before leaving for Roma, Bassam decides to liberate himself from what he hasn't yet managed to speak of, the suicide of George that he

witnessed. To do that, he resorts, once again, to the stream of consciousness technique. Bassam goes to George's half-sister, Rhea, and says, "I took a deep breath, then spoke without stopping'' (Hage 268). Indeed, his narration extends over six pages through which he dismisses all of Rhea's interruptions. The sequencing of his thoughts doesn't follow a logical order. Bassam starts talking about the time he and George killed a bird, then jumps to the time they killed their comrade for business, to their money scams, to their quarrels, to his torture, and proceeds to talk about the suicide of George. Rhea even tells him, "This is all confusing… Your stories are not making sense'' (269). Bassam doesn't respond to any of Rhea's questions and refuses to let her go until he is done telling his story – he says, "I did not answer her… I continued talking'', "I ignored her shouting'', "I held her back (269), "I pushed her back and said, I buried him there'' (270). Bassam's recourse to the stream of consciousness technique stems from his awareness of his urgent need to talk about this traumatic event to overcome it – since trauma operates at the unspoken level.

Through this six-page stream of consciousness – which already attests to an alternate state of mind – Bassam disconnects from the moment and seems to go inwards into a private space; he says, "De Niro's hair spilled on my lap. I caressed it. I caressed it. Without thinking, I touched Rhea's hair'' (271). By making space for any thought and limiting any filtering, the stream of consciousness technique enables Bassam to work through memories that come in a chain to bring him closest to the unlocalizable event, George's suicide. This alternative space liberates him from his "residues of history'' and grants him the possibility of a new beginning; once Bassam tells everything to Rhea, he is able to set for Roma.

E. A Pastiche of *The Deer Hunter*: Alternative Representation of the Civil War

Last but not least, throughout the novel, both Bassam and his bestfriend George refer to the movie *The Deer Hunter* (1978) that depicts the psychological effects of the Vietnam war, to talk about their own war. The movie becomes in itself an alternative space of working-through for two reasons. First, it offers a representation of their experiences, something to identify with, and second, it allows them to defamiliarize themselves with their war while narrating it.

In *The Deer Hunter*, Robert De Niro betrays his friend by flying to the U.S. and leaving him alone in Vietnam. In this context, Bassam *only* starts referring to George as "De Niro'' after he's enrolled in the Phalange party and betrayed him. Bassam looks at George and says "he was like an American soldier with his arms above his head, advancing slowly and half-immersed through the swamps of Vietnam (124). In a sense, Bassam copes with his hurt and grief by defamiliarizing himself with George and replacing his attempts at making sense of George's behavior with an already established and completed persona, that of De Niro's. Indeed, fast-forward to their confrontation, George tells Bassam, "De Niro's a fucking good actor; you remember that scene in that movie, Bassam, when De Niro played his best friend?'' (174). This shows that the movie served as a shared space of working-through to "many young men'' as Bassam says himself (231), since it offered a representation of the psychological violence of war.

In another passage, George holds Bassam captive and forces him to listen to him talk about his participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, he yells at him "I want to finish my story'' (176) – just like Bassam does in the stream of consciousness passage. To capture the massacre's atrocities that are unrepresentable through language, George repeats, "It was all like a movie. All like a movie.'' "The whole area was lit up; it was

like being in a Hollywood movie. And I am De Niro in a movie'' (175) – the repetition here demonstrates his falling short on words to describe the bloodshed. By resorting to a movie to talk about the massacre, George is able to convey the surrealness of his experience. In this sense, the movie offers him a representation of his trauma.

Lastly, just like reading Meursault's narrative about grief previously facilitated Bassam's narration of his mother's funeral, the story of *The Deer Hunters* facilitates Bassam's narration of George's suicide, after a very long silence. The parallelism between the movie and Bassam's own war experience having been introduced throughout the novel sets the ground for Bassam's stream of consciousness in Paris. As I have mentioned, when pouring his heart out to Rhea, Bassam first starts with a story about him and George going hunting together and it is from this original point that the narrator carries on to speak of the traumatizing event. This sequence alludes to *The Deer Hunter*, since it begins with friends going hunting together, and ends with the suicide of one of them via Russian roulette, like George. In this sense, therefore, through a simultaneous representation and defamiliarization, the movie offers a space of working-through for the characters to speak of their own traumas that shattered their mental and linguistic processes.

In this novel, Bassam creates his own alternative spaces of working through using many techniques and tools. First, Bassam resorts to epic emplotment to recontextualize events overshadowed by negative feelings such as betrayal, loss, and exile. Through this emplotment, Bassam succeeds in creating empowering narratives such as that of the chosen hero and the victorious soldier, that allow him to persist through the war, to work through feelings of alienation, and to create a more hopeful future. Second, Bassam

resorts to literature (*L'Étranger*) to find representation of his own struggle. Through identification, he is able to think back on traumatizing events like his mother's death and unwanted feelings like estrangement. Third, Bassam uses the technique of stream of consciousness to create meaningful mental associations that facilitate a retrospection of repressed memories. Lastly, Bassam and George borrow from a war movie (*The Deer Hunter*) to enable their narration of their own war. The acts of resorting to cultural works that carry personal meaning and figuring out ways to psychologically assimilate trauma read as a turning-inward. By turning-inward, the characters create a more coherent identity narrative in a war that has neither rhyme nor reason.

CHAPTER III

PRIVATE ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES IN *LIMBO BEIRUT*

Limbo Beirut presents wars as experienced by a group of five individuals from different backgrounds who have all witnessed at least the last few years of the civil war: Walid, the queer artist, a writer known as Takara's husband, Salwa, the pregnant woman, Hassan, the militiaman, and the surgeon. These characters, like Bassam, feel no communal belonging. Walid's parents are killed; the writer who's lived abroad with a foreign spouse feels detached from his roots; Salwa doesn't relate to any of her family members; Hassan is tired of sacrificing his life for others; and the surgeon realizes he has never truly known Beirut. The characters are all forced into alienation either due to a separation from their loved ones by death or exile, due to their grief over their city, or to the heavy realization of the insignificance of their lives in the face of war. None of the characters find resonance in any political party; on the contrary, they all denounce the repetition of the same civil conflict and shut themselves off in frustration.

The absurdity of this historical repetition weights on the characters and leaves them with a sense of confusion about their identities and roots. The two common questions that are raised across the stories are "when did it all start?" and "what is the missing link?" and they refer to traumatic events that the characters cannot put their fingers on due to the gap in their common historical narrative, specifically that of the civil war.

To retrieve and to resolve their repressed memories or more generally to create a coherent identity narrative, in the absence of a reliable social one, the characters develop their own private alternative spaces of working-through through drawing, writing, solving

cross-word puzzles, cinematic reframing, correspondences, journalistic writing, and, surprisingly, corpses.

A. Walid: Drawing the Unrepresented Trauma

The first chapter of *Limbo Beirut*, narrated in the third person, tells the story of Walid who lived through the two last years of the civil war, and lost both parents in the events of 2008. His father had gone grocery shopping one day and never came back; his mother, after battling with depression, died of grief. In the uncertain political circumstances, Walid is left alone to make sense of all his loss – starting within his parents' death to the deterioration of his city and his sense of self.

In a war where "the government [seems to be] fighting itself" (24), and in which "people [are] avoiding talk of what [is happening]" (20), Walid finds himself not only deprived of narrative but also of space where narrative can possibly arise. With the passage of time, Walid's "power of speech [starts] diminishing" (18) as he grows frustrated and promises that "he would become a creature of utter silence". The usage of the word "creature" alludes to a certain type of self-*othering*, of alienation, which we also see in *De Niro's Game*, as Bassam grows resentful towards others and clams up. This common silence indicates trauma, since trauma translates into a fragmentation of language; as Bassam says "war spreads silence [and] cuts tongues" (Hage 28).

To make sense of all this, Walid turns away from language to fine arts. Drawing becomes a portal to an alternative space; it allows Walid to shift from an external war that is not manageable to an internal war that he can work through. – In Tarraf's terms, Walid *turns inward* "to create order" "inside the chaos" (Chouman 19). In reference to drawing, the narrator describes Walid as "inside that thing" which concretizes this space

and highlights its private aspect. To add to that, inside this "bubble'', Walid is able to select what he wants to let in from the external world until he becomes "isolated from everything except certain exterior details''. The 'alternativity' of this space is further highlighted by the fact that, on the inside, Walid experiences time differently; the narrator interrupts a passage and says, "When did this happen? Three days ago? Four? Five? The days ran together for Walid when he drew''.

Walid drew mainly half-faces "without chins or mouths''; the narrator says that "without mouths, the faces spoke to Walid'' (15). At the same time, the narrator also says that when Walid saw his mother dead, it appeared to him that "her jaw had fallen off'' (24), "that she had become half-face'' (25). This, automatically, shows that Walid's fixation on half-faces is a fixation on his mother's death; it is re-drawing this scene, then, that allows him to return to the site of trauma in an attempt to understand it. Drawing itself can also be understood as an act of concretizing the trauma, that is, drawing a trace and/or a representation of it.

Furthermore, the very form of his outlet or his alternative space represents civil war trauma that he needs to assimilate. At the end of the war, Walid's father took him to see the ruins and took many photos of him and of their family there. The narrator explains that these pictures became "his access point'', "his visual memory'' (27), and ever since that day, Walid knew he would be drawing. The narrator says that on that day, while posing on top of the rubble, Walid "looked out over downtown Beirut… with its debris and its desolation, to find that it resembled hair'' (27). Then, the narrator shifts from talking about Walid's past and this vital detail, to a present where as Walid finishes his drawing, he notices that "there [is] hair on the upper halves of the faces as well''. This detail draws a connection between Walid's witnessing of the destruction of his city in the

civil war and his witnessing of his mother's death. By drawing the hair that he perceived in the ruins, around these half-faces, in a way, Walid is recontextualizing the death of his mother. It is the open-endedness of this war that has dragged the country into similar events decades later which killed his father first, and his mother second. As the war itself is out of his control, Walid turns inward to resolve his inner war. With no reliable narrative for neither the civil war nor the 2008 clashes, drawing becomes Walid's alternative space of working through trauma.

Drawing is further demonstrated as an alternative space of working through as the chapter juxtaposes a passage in which Walid, as an adult, is drawing, and an illustration of him, as a child, is standing above the rubble of Beirut. In the later passage, the narrator says that "Walid rose, leaving what he had produced on the floor'' which refers to his drawing and returns the "scissors and knives'' (27). This juxtaposition contrasts the destruction that Walid witnessed as a child against the creation in which he is engaging himself as an adult. This parallelism presents drawing, then, as an alternative space of working through the memory of this protracted war. As Walid finished his drawing, "everything inside of him… turn over at the same instant, becoming without flavor or taste'' (25). In a sense, Walid succeeds in fulfilling the wish that he's had since his mother's death, which is to "restore the emptiness that was in his head'' (4), as he suffered from an unwanted repetition of experience – "the memory took over'' (4,10).

After finishing his drawings, Walid decides to put them up in the street. The narrator says that, in that moment, Walid felt that "every detail…finally [cohered]''; "the chaos of his mind [were] wiped clean'' (29) as "everything extraneous'' was "trimmed'' (30). Interestingly, at the end of the chapter, for once, the illustration of his drawing does not appear as half-faces but rather, as completes one (32, 33). This ultimately translates

into a completion of "the bigger picture'' or "the larger narrative'' that Walid initially needed to assimilate his loss and confusion. Last but not least, this act of publicizing his drawings or of bringing the private into the public can be read as an attempt to invite people like him into a collective discussion of their personal suffering.

B. Takara's Husband: Writing to Build Missing Links

This chapter, narrated in the first person, tells the story of a Lebanese writer who originally lived in the UK with his Japanese spouse, Takara. Unable to write his novel that is situated in Lebanon, Takara's husband ("TH'' as an abbreviation) decides to move back home in case it is his exile that is causing his writer's block.

In Lebanon, TH becomes depressed, falls silent, and begins to detach himself from his surroundings until Takara leaves him just like Rana left Bassam in *De Niro's Game.* TH's writer's block takes a toll on him; it is specifically his inability to understand the origin of it that depresses him. He ask himself "what was it I kept missing'' (50), and more importantly, "do I have a story?", "has a single thing worthy of being narrated ever happened to me?'' (51). TH's writer's block cannot but be related to his relationship with Beirut and his need, like Bassam, for a meaningful *narrative identity*. The writer who has been away from Lebanon makes no mention of family or Lebanese friends; the only family he mentions is his Japanese wife. Amidst this chaos that he needs to make sense of, the narrator finds himself with no reference, no resonant social narrative of the war to rely on for meaning.

Indeed, at the beginning of his narration, he tells us that "we hardly notice'' that "Beirut is a deep valley'' that feels "wholly remote'' (37); then he proceeds to say that he's been "searching for the stone steps so [he] can descend'' into it (46). This implies

that what is disabling him from writing his novel is this gap or "barrier'' (50) between him and Beirut which reflects his relationship with himself. The illustration that introduces his story (34), indeed, shows him standing before a mirror with a distorted image of himself; his traits do not show on his face, but rather, only in his reflection. This illustration portrays the gap between him and himself that is parallel to the distance between him and Beirut, and hence represents his identity struggle. This gap or what he calls "limbo'' (48) relates to his question, "what was it I kept missing'' and alludes to Caruth's concept of trauma defined as an "unlocalizable event''.

In a passage where the narrator sits before his screen and tries to type his novel, he says "a feeling beset me that I lacked free will, that I was advancing toward an unknown goal… yet some part of what was in front of me was not wholly unfamiliar'' (58) This reflection on writing sounds like a reflection on war instead, and the familiarity TH speaks of alludes to his re-experiencing the civil war through the 2008 clashes. This parallelism between the war outside and the act of novel-writing represents the latter as an alternative space where war can be navigated subjectively and managed on a smaller scale.

Furthermore, the illustrations of the novel create an equally important parallelism. On one hand, we have TV screens showing armed men fighting as the narrator unresponsively walks in his house; this makes it seem as if history is rolling in the background of the narrator's life, and as if the militiamen are invading his personal space. On another hand, a contrastive illustration on page 49 shows the narrator typing alone in his room, isolated from everything, even sound. This parallelism translates as a metaphor of TH's "re-writing'' history in private or writing *his* story into and onto history which further represents writing as an alternative space of working through an identity crisis.

More specifically, TH talks about the novel as a “simplification’’; he asks “perhaps simplicity in relationships (between characters or things) is what we desire in an alternate reality?’’ (46). This demonstrates that the narrator perceives writing as an alternate space that allows him to weave missing relations between things – such as him and Beirut – in order to create meaning and a narrative. Indeed, TH says that in his writer’s block, “all that came out [of him] was scattered words’’ and “*fragments* suitable for nothing’’ (50) and that alternatively, writing is what should allow him to "put this chaos down in words’’, to “rearrange things’’ into a bigger “picture’’. TH uses this latter expression when talking about Takara’s failure at linking the events of the war, which further proves that he perceives writing as something that would enable him to make sense of the war specifically.

Like Walid in his drawing process, when writing, TH “would submerse [himself] in [his] head’’ (47); he would not eat or shower for days which indicates a dissociation from the external world that attests to Tarraf’s concept of turning inward.

The narrator is only able to write once Takara explodes in rage and shows how truly troubled she is by the war. This signals that what TH needed all along was something to relate to, a *trace* of trauma in Caruth’s terms. The moment Takara breaks down and leaves him, the narrator says, “I was thinking about many things, except about Takara. I wrote. I wrote. I wrote’’ (56). This shows that the relationship he aims to simplify is not his with Takara but rather the relations between the events of the war, his relation with Beirut and, hence, his relationship with himself. In fact, two illustrations demonstrate this notion. Prior to writing, the narrator goes to Raouche where he sits and observes the rocks. The illustration presents his silhouette as similar to the rocks themselves (52). This suggests that the narrator may have become *absorbed* in Beirut as he desperately tried to find the

missing link between himself and his city. Indeed, the narrator says that the rocks looked "closer than usual'' and that he felt like "a stranger'' to himself (52). After writing, the narrator goes to Raouche again and says that "the rocks were very distant'' and that, at that moment, he "felt only a sense of alienation'' (68). This indicates that through the process of writing, the narrator was able to rearrange his 'fragments' and to reconfigure a relatively better relationship with himself and with his city. He shifts from feeling estranged from himself to feeling alienated from others which implies that, through writing, he regained a sense of self and hence, can see Beirut more clearly.

Last but not least, after having relieved himself through writing, the narrator goes cruising in Hamra where he sees a militiaman pointing his gun at someone (Walid). Upon this sight, TH drives into the militiaman without thinking. The narrator says that, in that moment, his mind became clearer, that "[his] questions about [himself] and about Takara vanished'' (64). It is after driving into this man that he heads to Raouche. The fact that on that day the rocks looked farther and clearer to him also signifies that his active participation in the war and the sight of death offered him a concrete trace of a war that previously had no representation. In Caruth's terms, this sight turned him from a victim of the war absorbed by trauma into a *witness* capable of causing and later reading a *description* of the event.

For the first time since the beginning of the chapter, TH narrates his story in a flow rather than in fragmented thoughts and questions; he slips into a stream of consciousness that goes over three pages. Just like Bassam, in this space, without a conscious effort, TH is able to link past and future. He begins this stream of consciousness from way before he met Takara, proceeds with the moment she left him, imagines a future where he's impregnating her, then returns to the murder scene, and finally comes back to the present

moment. For the first time, TH expresses something with certainty; he thinks about the man he just killed and says, “I will give him a definition: he is the first story that has happened to me’’ (70). That is to say, other than novel-writing, corpses also present an alternative space for TH to work through his experience of the war. Just like Bassam’s mother’s death offered Bassam a certain liberation and reconfigured his relationship to himself and to Beirut, TH’s murder allows him to process the state of war in Lebanon. This death provides him with a substance of the war, a narrative of the war.

C. Salwa’s Puzzle: Piecing Memories, Bridging Past and Present

While the last chapter ended with Takara’s husband imagining his wife pregnant, with him wondering “what child did we just create while I could not stop thinking about the man I killed?’’ (70), this chapter starts with a character called Salwa who is pregnant but cannot stop thinking about her deceased father. In three illustrations on pages 104 and 105, Salwa is standing pregnant and naked, with hair-like lines surrounding her belly. Since the novel is a collection of interrelated stories, this cannot but be linked to the hair that Walid speaks of (Chap.1), and that symbolizes the debris and dust of the civil-war-ravaged Beirut. Together, this signifies that Salwa’s story revolves around her inability to move from the past and to live in the present. More specifically, she finds herself in a state of ‘limbo’ between an unlocalizable event –her father’s death in the civil war– and her impending labor in the 2008 clashes. This limbo originates from the fact that her wound was left untended as no narrative was available for her to assimilate her father’s death as a child. As history repeats itself with events that “[defy] the rule of logic’’ (108), Salwa’s trauma is triggered. She feels that her thoughts are “all in fragments’’ (78) and is unable to understand what is bothering her.

The story unfolds as Salwa sees a kiosk with cross-words that trigger something in her. Salwa runs hastily to buy them and gets hit by a car. At the hospital, upon her awakening, Salwa's unable to make sense of time; she "[cannot] find the right place to begin'' thinking (78). In the absence of a narrative that would help her piece her thoughts together to create a coherent memory, Salwa starts integrating her fragmented past experiences into a mental cross-word puzzle. The latter becomes her alternative space of working-through that leads her to uncovering the unlocalizable event that is puzzling her. While people talk to her, Salwa "[removes] herself completely'' and "passes the time inside her game'' (83); this marks the private aspect of this alternative space.

The first puzzle that Salwa generates has for instruction, "To solve the following challenges… work in a counterclockwise direction'' (78). This signifies that to resolve the origin of her unease, Salwa unconsciously knows that she needs to move backward, to return to the past and review past events. Salwa proceeds with a second puzzle with two clues, "the four-letter name of an ancient… god of the sea'' and "an Um Kalthum song'' (83). The narrator says that by solving this, Salwa may be transported "to the very location where the events took place'' (84). Salwa, indeed, finds herself transported not yet to the original location of the event but to one associated with them: the kiosk with the cross-word magazines where she was hit by a car. The narrator says Salwa realizes that, at the sight of those, it was to her teenage years that she was brought back, to her father who used to buy her these same magazines during the civil war; "it [was] the same moment in time'' that "[replayed] in her memory'' (86). Salwa solves the previous puzzle with two answers, the first being "Yamm'' and the second "Memories'' (91). However, at this stage, the narrator addresses several questions about the car accident, "did she see the beach at Ramlet el Bayda?'', "did she walk ahead of her father, as he held her arms,

into the sea? did they turn around so that she could see smoke rising behind them from the streets of Beirut?'', "what did Salwa see?' (90, 91). The narrator's endless questioning illustrates Salwa's struggle to piece together her fragmented thoughts – "yamm'' (sea) and "memories'' – into a single coherent narrative; she cannot remember what happened by the sea. Salwa, therefore, gives herself a clue, "re-arrange the scrambled letters to form a meaningful word'' (91), but in vain. The narrator says that if Salwa were to summarize how she felt, "she would have said simply that she was failing to solve the puzzle''; indeed, she answers her last puzzle with "I'm drowning'' (106).

Although Salwa was not able to solve the puzzle right away, days later, during her labor, the words "yam'' and "memories'' come together to form parts of the image that the narrator was describing; Salwa sees "her father [standing] on the sand facing Yamm and holding a bundle of magazines for her… [whose] puzzles she had not yet solved'' (112). In this sense, in the absence of a coherent narrative of the civil war that should have allowed Salwa to think back on her past, this mental cross-word puzzle becomes her alternative space in which she integrates and works through her fragmented memories to form a bigger picture. It isn't mentioned exactly why this memory at the sea with her father is significant to Salwa, but since the narrator mentions smoke rising as they looked behind them, it may be something traumatizing that Salwa cannot explore further, such as an explosion.

Just like Walid's outlet alludes to his trauma, Salwa's technique of working-through (mental cross-words) takes her to the repressed memory of her father who brought her these magazines, and hence to the civil war. Indeed, the narrator says that this cross-word magazines "were the (civil) war for her'', they were "archives of that period'' (87). The fact that these magazines were no longer produced after "the military phase of

[the civil war] was over'' (87), and that only old issues were being released, symbolizes the protractedness of the civil war into the present. When Salwa tries to understand how the production of the magazine stopped as peace was near, she theorizes that the lifespan of this magazine was equal to the lifespan of the war, and that "since this magazine had been unsuccessful in claiming a new identity for itself to go along with the next phase, it was only natural that it should stop''. Salwa's assertion that the magazine should claim a new identity to match the next phase could be translated as her own need to move on from the civil war and re-emerge into the present. The fact that through her mental puzzle, Salwa built an image of her father in the civil war holding magazines with puzzles that weren't solved yet, means that although stuck in the past, Salwa acknowledges the need to move on – since she is used to obsessively solve the same puzzles over and over again. Indeed, as Salwa simultaneously gives birth and remembers her father, she sings "Sitting here in limbo/ I wait for the stream to flow away/ Sitting here in limbo/ I know that I must leave'' (112), the limbo being the gap between the past (father's death) and the present (child's birth, 2008), and letting the flow stream means allowing a continuation after the civil war ("I must leave''), hence a linking the civil war with the 2008 clashes.

In this sense, in Salwa's story, cross-word puzzles offer what a social narrative should have, which is a space that allows reconstructing a repressed memory, first, and linking it to the present, second.

D. Hassan: Cinematic Reframing, Zooming Into the Personal

In this chapter, the narrator is a militiaman who has fought in the civil war. Coming from a low-class background and having to take care of his mother and differently-abled brother, Hassan finds himself joining the militia again. However, this

time, he doesn't quite understand the nature of the war or what he'd rather call "the events''. The lack of narrative and the absurdity of the clash confuses Hassan as to what and whom he is fighting. Just like Bassam in *De Niro's Game*, Hassan is forced by circumstances to join the streets, and just like him, he feels that he lacks of a sense of subjectivity and agency. Indeed, Hassan says that just like he does not understand the war, "[he] does not understand [himself]'' (122). To add to that, having dedicated his entire life to others, Hassan feels that he lack a personal narrative identity. To address this, Hassan resorts to a cinematic reframing technique, meaning that he turns away from the reality of the war and turns inward to reimagine his life as a movie. This alternative space of working through allows him to "[organize] things inside things that are not organized'', that is, to create a personal narrative that can be "assimilated'' and which can "evolve'' and "survive'' in the chaos of the war (122).

Hassan first starts by explaining his relationship to film. He emphasizes two particular things that have an effect on him. He starts by saying that "something inside of [him] was touched'' whenever he found himself in front of the opening sequence of a film where "music is overlaid with the voice of a man: talking to [them] about the regular day ahead of him'' or "perhaps about the day on which the event occurred'', "or about the last day of his life'' (132). There is an emphasis on *voice*, on banalities made important, on beginnings, and on the act or the *ability* to reminisce. It seems that Hassan wishes to have a personal story and to know how to narrate it, as he complains that his life has consisted of "repeated attempts to avoid things'' only (134). Indeed, as he watches films, Hassan finds himself "inside the image on the screen'' which indicates a desire to have representation, to restore the voice that Assmann says the incompletely modernized time regimes have passed over.

In this sense, films become an inspiration for him to create his own identity narrative. Hassan begins to reframe his moments into cinematic scenes, an act which allows him to select what he wants to see and *how* he wants to see it; that is, to create an alternative reality for himself. In the streets, Hassan loses himself "in another world'' (155). He dissociates himself from the events, observes the militiamen talking, and says "I enjoyed a voiceover moment, like the films.. I began to ask: Where did they come from?... Are they like me, living in apartments, taking care of their sicks mothers…?'' (135). By choosing what to focus on, Hassan reinterprets this snippet of reality into his own film, that is, he *recreates* an alternative reality of his choice. Evidently, Hassan chooses to focus on the humanness and subjectivity of these fighters, as he craves his own to be seen and valued despite the war.

In another passage, Hassan creates an even more private alternative space where, in the face of the dehumanizing war, he is able to talk of the flavorful banalities of his life. He says, *"I love coffee. I make it every day. I bring it to boil four times on the stove, at seven in the morning. But today I did not sleep at home. I did not drink coffee. I woke up two hours before seven. Today everything was different. And tomorrow will be more different still. How? I do not yet know the details. I am still discovering myself''* (153). This passage is significant as it shows how cinematic reframing functions as an alternative space of working-through. Firstly, by perceiving his routine as a cinematic scene with his narration as a voiceover grants him control over what is worth being narrated and what is not. Hassan shuts off the war outside and creates a moment for himself, a narrative where the significance of such life details is restored – since in the face of a war so big, all value of human life is erased. Moreover, by narrating his thoughts in what looks like a stream of consciousness here, on the one hand, Hassan allocates importance to every thought,

even those that express confusion. On another, this stream of consciousness or free-talking helps him make sense of his actions as they happen; he puts fragments together to create a more coherent and meaningful scene. In fact, he mentions that "sometimes [he] [recalls] a memory, [thinks] about it, and [places] it in its correct slot, but then [he] [gets] anxious'' because it "is not where it belongs'' (123). Narrating his thoughts as they come without filtering them makes it possible for him to make space for meaning to arise. In this example, he says that he knew that this day was different because his routine was interrupted and, indeed, it was on this day that he gets killed.

To add to that, by looking at himself as a character, through this cinematic reframing, Hassan can "see [himself] from outside… [hence] study aspects of [himself] that [he] had not noticed before'' (153). In other words, the cinematic reframing technique allows defamiliarization which enables Hassan to examine himself better and, hence, to narrate his story more easily – just as *The Deer Hunter* facilitates for Bassam and George their story-telling, and just as writing allows Takara's husband to see himself from a distance.

In one passage, Hassan talks about film-making as an outlet that enables organization and that aids the formation of a bigger picture of things. He says, "the camera starts from above and everything we see looks far away, spread out, miniature, and then it plunges with us… and we rush closer first to see the city from overhead, then the roofs…. Then the streets…. Thought a window into a room…'' (132). This means that through cinematic reframing, Hassan can zoom in and out as he pleases, and that he can organize things to create patterns, and hence, meaning. This passage can be juxtaposed with one from *De Niro's Game* where Bassam, like Hassan, uses his imagination to fly over the city so he can rearrange it in his mind; he says, "the higher I

flew, the smaller the people became, … the more the streets and houses were arranged in circles, cut and shaped…'' (Hage 246). This shows how, by turning inward, both militiamen are able to control the distance from which they observe the world; thus, they can organize the external chaos through their imagination.

Back to *Limbo Beirut* and the previous extract, although Hassan is talking about a city, he's also alluding to his mind. This is made clear at the beginning of the chapter where Hassan creates a parallel between city and self; he says, "Sometimes I don't understand this country…. It's a labyrinth. Sometimes, I don't understand myself'' (122). That is, by reconfiguring his perspective on the world, Hassan also reorganizes the chaos in his mind. Through cinematic reframing and reimagining, Hassan can gain control over the lens and angle from which he wants to look at things, which automatically guarantees modifying his subjective experience of the space that he inhabits as he pleases.

In relation to that, an illustration on 142 and 143 represents the passage in which he mentions the camera going "through a window into a room'', as it shows a person's head with a window on its top, from where lines and patterns are bursting. This probably emphasizes that Hassan's imagination, this cinematic reframing, allows him to transport himself outside this window, to look at the world from above, to have a bigger picture of both the war and of his life in it.

Although Hassan tries his best not to involve himself in any crime, he is forced by his party to show loyalty to them by kidnapping one person, any citizen. Hassan goes to the street and points his gun at Walid. In that instant, Takara's husband comes driving in his direction and kills him. Hassan closes his story by claiming, "I knew that I had died only when I discovered that I possessed language. I became certain of my death when I found my own voice. This voice'' (157). What Hassan is saying is that he was

only able to narrate his story after he had been certain of his death, certain of the end of a cycle of life under war. As Caruth would suggest, his death acts like a trace or a description of the *pastness* of his story, which allows him to finally become both a reader and a *witness* of history rather than one part of/in its repetitive cycle.

E. The Surgeon: Journal Entries, Revealing the Repressed

This chapter is narrated by a surgeon who has just gone through a breakup with his lover who's leaving Lebanon. To process his breakup, the surgeon starts writing to Sanaa letters that he does not send. What starts as a correspondence to understand his relationship with his lover turns out to be an attempt at addressing his relationship with his city, Beirut. From the beginning, we can sense that there is an undertone to his letters; the questions that he raises about his breakup apply to the outbreak of the war – which is a pattern we see in the stories of Katara's husband and Salwa. To demonstrate how letter-writing becomes an alternative space of working-through, first, I will show how these love letters allow him to navigate a relationship with Beirut that he could not have addressed before. Secondly, I will show how discovering the root of his breakup through these love letters enables him to begin looking at once for a narrative for the war in Beirut and for a narrative identity. The surgeon, indeed, states it himself, "the letters that had started out addressed to you (Sanaa) turned along the way into scribbled diary entries'' (213), which marks a shift of focus from his relationship with Sanaa to a more individualistic relationship, with himself, with his identity, that is, with Beirut.

From the beginning of the chapter, the surgeon asks questions that reflect the same confusion that other characters feel towards "the events'' in Beirut, specifically in relation to the lack of narrative about this war. The surgeon wonders, "shouldn't there be

a clear reason for what happened?... Should there be, or is this only what I wish? Does a clear reason make everything else clearer and easier?'' (161). These questions, although said to be addressing the surgeon's breakup with Sanaa, cannot but allude to an attempt at understanding the outbreak of the war. The surgeon, in fact, shows a more explicit link between Sanaa and Beirut by asking, "Had I needed to witness death in front of me before I could bring our story to an end?'' (210), which marks a parallelism between these two love objects. Just like Takara's husband, it is the sight of a corpse that concretizes the war for the surgeon; this event automatically triggers a relationship with his city which replaces the outdated alternative one that he had with Sanaa – he says it explicitly, "I realized I had been searching in the wrong places'' (213). The surgeon also says, "I do not know if I was compensating for my lost love for you with a renewed love for this city'' (182); here, "renewed'' implies the restoration, upon his breakup, of a relationship he once had with Beirut. As he separates from Sanaa, he asks himself, "with you, Sanaa, did I lose parts of myself?'' (186).

Furthermore, in his writing, the surgeon says to have realized that "the country exploded a week after [Sanaa]'s departure'' (193), "as if [he] entered a parallel world'' (194), marking his passage from a relationship with Sanaa to a relationship with Beirut. The transition, in fact, becomes more explicit as he names one of his diary entries, "Me and Beirut in the mirror'' (180). This implies that, through working out his relationship with Sanaa in these letters, he was able to work out his relationship with Beirut too.

The function of these correspondences as a space of working-through and as a space in which meaning can arise shows more explicitly in two passages. In the first one, the surgeon says that it was while he was "looking at the sky [that] [he] decided to start a correspondence with… Sanaa'', to "review everything again'', "to inscribe it all in

[his] memory'' (166). In the second passage, a long time into this letter-writing, he says, "As I looked at the sky, I felt like everything was breaking apart. I saw the crack move across the world. Across objects. Split them into two halves. Expose their interiors. Bring forth from them new things that had been hidden'' (194). This implies that what the letters have brought out, through the breaking down of his relationship into pieces in pieces of writings, was an unaddressed relationship with Beirut. Through his writings, he discovers that this relationship was left unaddressed because to him, Beirut was a city that left him with questions, "conflicting possible outcomes, each with its own unknown probability of occurring'', "a complex web of possibilities'', "endless speculations'', that all "kept [him] from being certain'' (169). Alternatively, Sanaa was "one of the people with answers'' (175) which made him feel more "comfortable'' (213). It is, therefore, through extensive elaboration and reviewing, that the surgeon is able to discover the "things that had been hidden'' (194); that is, an abandoned attempt at connecting with Beirut.

By writing these correspondences to Sanaa, the surgeon comes to understand that what was standing in the way between him and her was, in fact, their different relationships to Beirut; the surgeon was never able to properly communicate with Sanaa who spent her life in the Gulf and did not understand the anxieties of living in Lebanon. In the diary entry called "Things Happened'' that follows "The Crack in the World'', the surgeon realizes that, indeed, he had "lost parts of [himself]'' with Sanaa (195). It is upon this discovery that the surgeon embarks on a quest for these lost parts of himself through the bits and pieces of the stories that belong to the corpses of the war victims that he sees at the hospital daily, hence through the stories of the war in Beirut.

At this point, the letters shift to a more diary-like format in which the surgeon talks about "Undead Corpses'' (196) that belong to people who died in acts of violence

as opposed to natural deaths, and who, therefore, “come with a story’’. The surgeon proceeds to say that his theory may not be true because “perceiving things and understanding them is an entirely personal matter’’ (197), but he asks anyway, “must our personal stories be convincing?’’ (198). We see here a shift in the nature of the questions being asked. While at the beginning of the correspondences the surgeon addressed the origin of the war, near the end to what has turned into diary-entries, he focuses on subjective narratives, personal stories. The diary-entries become an account of individualized stories such as those of the two brothers who died trying to save each other, and other ones that he witnessed while helping a stranger (Walid) put up his drawings in the street, Hassan’s who was run over by Katara’s husband.

In a first diary entry, “The Dead Corpses… the Undead Corpses’’ (196), the surgeon is recounting stories he has not been part of. In a second one, “A Witness to Other Lives’’ (207), he becomes part of the scene. In a third, “The Corpses that Might Not Die’’ (208), he becomes aware of his ability to *inscribe* these stories/memories, to transmit these individualized voices that have become marginal in the face of war. The surgeon stops asking himself “how did I become a part of stories I do not understand? Would I be able, if my intrusion was meant for a purpose, to play my role?’’ (208) and begins to acknowledge his role in this war, “I was before an undead corpse, bearing a story… I was before a corpse that might not die. With me it will not die’’ (210).

At the beginning of his letters, he speaks of the omissions between him and Sanaa and mentions “riddles left unsolved and unfinished become normal’’; near the end, when facing the corpse of Hassan and seeing a phone number tattooed on his arm, he says, “it was always there, a riddle clearing the way for the story to end’’ (210). Since in addressing Sanaa, he was also addressing Beirut – as I have demonstrated – this means

that through his diary entries that allowed retrospection, the surgeon was able to discover that there is a way to somehow solve the riddle, which is to fill these "omissions'' or this narrative void with the stories of the victims. He says that witnessing these stories has "shown [him] a new path'' (215), which translates into the possibility of an alternative personal (yet collectively built) narrative and a possible relationship with Beirut.

Whether or not the surgeon decides to transmit the story of Hassan who made him realize that even militiamen are victims with "sick mothers'' (209) remains unclear and leaves the book, just like the war, with an open end. To continue Hassan's story or to simply move on would play a role in whether "life [will return] to normal'' (214) after the war by simply passing over the voices of victims, as it has always been the case in Lebanon.

Facing an absurd historical repetition of the civil war and having grown tired of sectarian narratives, the characters of *Limbo Beirut* all explore alternative ways of dealing with their traumas in the absence of any resonant representations of their struggles. First, Walid resorts to drawing to bridge between the unresolved civil war and the 2008 clashes; this allows him to make sense of his parents' death by giving it context – his ability to give himself closure restores his sense of agency and control. Moreover, Takara's husband resorts to novel-writing to simplify his complex relationship with Beirut which, then, allows him to restore his own relationship with himself. Third, Salwa reorganizes her fragmented thoughts into a mental cross-word puzzle to make sense of them and to facilitate the retrieval of repressed memories – this retrospection allows her to link her past and present. Furthermore, taking his inspiration from film, Hassan adopts a cinematic point of view to his life which allows him to zoom in and out on what he finds most significant – this restores his sense of agency and subjectivity. Lastly, the surgeon resorts

to letter and diary writing which help him renew his relationship with Beirut and create a resonant narrative of the war. In privately exploring alternative ways of navigating the protracted war, the characters are said to *turn inward*. Through this turning-inward, they create spaces that enable them to assimilate their fragmented experiences into a coherent and meaningful identity narrative, in a war that has none.

CHAPTER IV

A COMPARISON BETWEEN *DE NIRO'S GAME* AND *LIMBO BEIRUT:* TURNING INWARD, ETHICAL TURNING, AND THE DYNAMIC OF WORKING-THROUGH

While *De Niro's Game* sheds light on the lack of narrative at the origin of the civil war and the absurdity of the massacres, *Limbo Beirut,* although situated in the clashes of the 2008, illustrates the consequences of the unresolved memory of the civil war. The production of these two literary works – whose events are separated by a quarter of a century – illustrates, on the one hand, the very concept of incomplete modernization of time regimes that passed over the voices of the victims, and on the other, the ethical turn set as a project to reclaim these voices.

As observed, *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* do not advance political agendas but rather shed light on "the vulnerability of human flesh'' that Assmann speaks of. Meaning that, these two novels bring forth the effect of war on the characters' relationships to themselves and to others, their ways of navigating trauma, and their urgent need for meaning and self-preservation as opposed to community preservation.

In commitment literature, Bassam and Hassan, for example, may have been self-sacrificing soldiers with nuclear families and a blind loyalty to their nation or community. On the contrary, these two novels portray the concept of "fighting for the nation'' differently. In *De Niro's Game*, for example, the emotionally charged depiction of men coming together to protect and fight for their community is shred into pieces. The same young men who are honored and celebrated as 'shuhada' or martyrs (Hage 131, 231) – one of the most important cultural concepts in Lebanese society – turn out to have been killed by their comrades over business quarrels, like Khalil was killed by George, or to

have died in Russian roulette games, like Roger and George. Instead, we are presented with narratives of militiamen like Bassam's who, betrayed and tortured by his closest ones, only wants a life on earth that he can remember, and like Hassan's in which, tired of serving his community, he only wishes his morning coffee routine was as significant as the breaking news. The shift of focus from political ideologies to subjective experience, in literature, is further demonstrated by the characters' description of the war. While George tells Bassam, "the torture chambers are not the other way, the torture chambers are inside of us'' (Hage 179), Hassan says, "I was deep inside the war. No. It was inside me'' (Chouman 148). All of the characters in *Limbo Beirut* experience the war from within and try to manage it privately. The narrator says that "this war [resembles] Walid's brain'' (25); Takara's husband is desperate to arrange the "chaos'' that he's feeling, a word that Walid uses to refer to the war itself; Salwa calls her trauma "the events'', a word that Hassan the militiaman uses to talk about the clashes, and the Surgeon says that his own reflection in the mirror is the image of Beirut at war ("Me and Beirut in the mirror'').

The characters of both novels all seek the same thing, to preserve their sense of self in this intrusive war, or as both Bassam and Walid say, to restore the "emptiness that was in [their] [heads]'' (Chouman 4), to keep their minds "blank for a long time" (Hage 183). In the face of the absurd, preserving one's self necessitates assimilating "the residues of history'' that Bassam speaks of and the memory "fragments'' that overwhelm *Limbo Beirut*'s characters, into a coherent and meaningful identity narrative. Indeed, all of the characters are aware, to a certain extent, of the importance of personal narratives in war in the absence of a collective one. Bassam cannot leave for his destination before telling Rhea what truly happened to her brother, while George finds it absolutely

mandatory to finish telling Bassam his story. In his narration of Sabra and Shatila, George internalizes Bassam's traumas and cries to him, "I killed my mother, I killed her'' (177); and when Bassam corrects him, George proceeds to talk about a woman that he killed in the camp. This moment in the novel alludes to the role that people's stories play in facilitating our narration of our own story; that is, to how the perception of the other allows a perception of one's self. This concept extends to all the characters of *Limbo Beirut.* Takara'*s* husband only breaks free from his writer's block after witnessing Takara finally break down; Salwa wishes she could tell her story to someone who knows how she feels; Hassan wishes his story could be screened in the cinema; Walid puts his story out in the streets for others to see; as for the Surgeon, his pondering about whether he has a personal story is followed by a determination to bring Hassan's story to a closure which entails informing his loved ones about his death. This emphasis on personal stories demonstrates that this corpus of texts truly marks an ethical turn in Lebanese memorial culture.

Certain moments in *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* even illustrate the need for this ethical turn. Bassam unfolds a newspaper page that reports a bombing in Achrafieh, remarks that it is discerningly devoid of story, and proceeds to read aloud from Camus' book. Takara's husband keeps the TV news on a low volume, remarks that something important may have happened but feels completely unmoved, and proceeds with his novel writing. The act of keeping the newspaper open and the TV news on and directly shifting to personal outlets symbolizes the need to keep the conversation about the war going but from the perspectives of the victims themselves. In Assmann's terms, the characters want to be addressed first and foremost as individuals and not as members of a group; they seek personal and resonant narratives as social ones do not speak to them

or to them. Those two intersecting moments in my corpus even allude to my own attempt at continuing Haugbolle's discussion of the social memory of the civil war by shifting the focus to personal narratives.

These novels thoroughly illustrate Assmann's ethical turn and Tarraf's turning inward as they not only present us with personal narratives of the protracted war but also shed light on the individual dynamics of working through that each character develops to produce these narratives. The characters of both *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* have a range of similarities in their goals and their ways of dealing with trauma. At times, they resort to the same tools for different reasons, and at others, they reach common goals with different tools.

For example, many of the characters struggle with repressed memories – the "unlocalizable event'' or the 'void in narrative' – due to the lack of accurate social narratives that would facilitates memory retrieval. In this case, many of them rely on techniques that naturally operate on a linking between past, present, and the present-future. Bassam uses the stream of consciousness technique to let his subconscious lead him near the unlocalizable event, his mother's death that he cannot speak of. In a similar way, the surgeon resorts to journal writing which, since informal, also entails sort of a subconscious flow that engenders meaningful associations. By writing diaries and giving into the stream of his thoughts, the surgeon is able to uncover the origin of his breakup with Sanaa, which in turn, reveals to him the reason behind his strained relationship with Beirut. Like Bassam and the surgeon, Takara's husband resorts to novel writing as a way of simplifying relations between things in order to allow meaning to be forged and found. Although novel writing is a more reflective activity, Takara's husband could have also been free-writing as he states that he "abandoned [himself] to writing'' (Chouman 59)

and that "scenes would come charging from my head'' (50); "I wrote. I wrote. I wrote'' (56). By abandoning himself to writing, Takara's husband is able to bridge the distance (the narrative void) between him and Beirut that he mentions at the beginning of his story, and which gives him some mental clarity. To allow oneself to slip into a stream of consciousness or to indulge in a free-writing entails allowing the subconscious flow to unravel as it carries the indestructible past that is reinvented in the present. Through this reinvention or simply saying something, through this flow, Bassam, the surgeon, and Takara's husband are able to create associations between their thoughts and, hence, to allow, if not the localization of the traumatic event, then a necessary discussion around it. To retrieve a repressed memory, Salwa also resorts to similar private spaces of working-through. Perhaps aware of her inability to uncover her unlocalizable event, Salwa creates mental cross-word puzzles to help herself, step by step, puzzle by puzzle, regress towards the repressed memory. Although not as spontaneous as Bassam's stream of consciousness, Salwa's puzzle also operates on a linking between the hardened past and the novel's fluid present. In this way, struggling with memory retrieval, all these characters rely on alternative and intimate spaces of working-through that fulfil the original function of the social narrative.

In the absence of a resonant social narrative, the characters of *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut* struggle to organize the chaos of the world into a meaningful narrative or a coherent worldview. Thus, world-remaking becomes a common goal for Bassam and Walid; however, each used different tools to work through common feelings. Bassam transforms his world through epic emplotment by not only introducing mythological creatures but also by reconfiguring its entire setting – Beirut becomes Roma with Hellenic skies and Titanic forests and Al Bekaa is transported to the steps of Heliopolis. As for

Walid, to fulfill his goal of world-remaking, he resorts to the act of drawing. Based on my previous analysis, Walid's act of drawing as an adult, juxtaposed with images of him being *photographed* in the ruins of the civil-war ravaged Beirut, entails a world-reconstruction that, just like Bassam's, is both subjective and private. Although these two characters use different tools for world-remaking or world-reconstruction, they achieve shared goals, the recontextualization of events. Through epic emplotment, Bassam is able to recontextualize confusing events like his betrayal by George, his alienation, and the death of his mother. Similarly, by overlaying half-faces and the hair-like debris of Beirut, Walid recontextualizes the death of his mother into a narrative – it is *because of* the protractedness of the civil war that she died. Since recontextualization helps both characters create meaningful narratives, they both automatically restore a sense of agency and control in their lives. In the same way that world-remaking empowers Bassam to pave for himself different routes toward a hopeful future, it empowers Walid to go out and put up his drawing as an attempt to open a discussion about the protractedness of the war – and this, in itself, entails paving a different route for the people towards a more hopeful future.

As militiamen, Bassam and Hassan share an urgent need to preserve their sense of subjectivity and selfhood in the war, as they're expected to sacrifice themselves for their community. In this light, Bassam and Hassan both resort to alternative spaces that facilitate working through their relationships with themselves.

In a war that forces men into certain roles with social consequences of not fulfilling them, both Bassam and Hassan turn inward to reframe their realities and to play their desired roles. Having been ostracized by his community for his ambivalent political views, when in Paris, Bassam reframes his daily life using the story and atmosphere of

the French revolution. In this narrative, Bassam adopts the role of a soldier who brings victory to his country. As for Hassan who has sacrificed his entire life to his people, through imagination, he reframes his reality to produce cinematic scenes in which he plays the role of a man with a simpler life, who wakes up early every day to drink his coffee. Although Bassam uses this technique to regain a sense of community, what he is truly seeking at the core, like Hassan, is a stronger sense of self that has been shattered by his community shaming him for wanting a simpler life. In this sense, by going inward and reframing their realities, both Bassam and Hassan adopt alternative roles that allow them to work through their relationships to themselves that the war has affected.

Hassan's act of reframing his reality as a film reveals a strong desire for a personal narrative that focuses on very intimate feelings and matters. Hassan, as Bassam quotes from Camus' book, wishes for "nobody, nothing in the world'' other than "a life which [he] can remember, this life on earth.'' (Hage 238). Hassan's cinematic point of view lets him focus or zoom in on the things that *he* finds important which allows for the production of a highly personal narrative. – For example, other than shedding light on his morning coffee routine, at the checkpoint, he zooms in on militiamen eating sandwiches and wonders if they, too, have sick mothers, a detail that is significant to him. While Hassan's personal narrative arises from a more direct interaction with the world, Bassam is able to mediate a personal narrative by interacting with Camus novel, *L'Étranger*. As Bassam reads his book, he selects the passages that are most significant to him and immerses himself in them, just as Hassan zooms into the details that he finds most significant. Bassam and Hassan's spaces of working-through highly mark a need for subjectivity. Bassam doesn't resort to a collective narrative but rather to a book that speaks to him only, and like him, Hassan turns away from the communal and chooses to look at the

world through no lens other than his own. In Assmann's words, by turning inward, both characters reclaim their most basic right, the right for one's own experience and vision. Chouman's and Hage's representations of the militiaman figure at his most vulnerable state further demonstrates the ethical turn taking place in post-war Lebanese literature.

Hassan is not the only one who relies on film; Bassam and George, too, both resort to the movie *The Deer Hunter* as an alternative private space of working-through. All three characters make use of film for the same end-goal which is to facilitate their narration of their own stories. Film enables this narration through two dynamics, identification and defamiliarization. Hassan only starts perceiving the world from a more intimate point of view after having watched a film in the cinema that he could relate to – "something inside of me was touched whenever I found myself faced with one of those opening sequences'' (Chouman 131). In the same way, it is Bassam and George's identification with the characters' experiences in *The Deer Hunter* that sets the ground for them to talk about their experiences of the civil war. Furthermore, it the distancing that allows these three characters to narrate their own experiences. Hassan says that a cinematic point of view facilitates his narration as it allows him to "see [himself] from outside… to study aspects of [himself] that [he] had not noticed before'' (153). As for Bassam and George, to talk about the unspeakable or to represent the unpresentable, they incorporate references from the movie into their own narratives; this defamiliarization or this distance that they take from their own war enables them to speak of it. In a war that offers no representation and that fragments language, by turning-in through film, Hassan, Bassam, and George are able to narrate their personal experiences.

Furthermore, in both novels, corpses operate as an interesting space of working-through for characters like Bassam, Takara's husband, Hassan, and the surgeon. It is upon Bassam's mother's death that Bassam establishes a relation with Roma (his alternative Beirut); in the same way, after killing someone, Takara's husband has a neater relation to Beirut; Hassan only finds his own voice after his own death; as for the surgeon, upon witnessing a corpse, his relationship with Sanaa ends to give space to a relationship with Beirut. Corpses in these stories offer what the characters originally lack which is a solid *trace* of the war, a representation of it, the location of the trauma. When the characters are faced with death and specifically witness the corpse itself, a relationship with Beirut that was dormant due to the lack of proper representation or narrative is triggered. In other words, this encounter with death acts like a reality check for the characters who, with no exception, do not understand what is happening in the street; as Takara's husband and Hassan say, it gives them a "story'', a "voice''.

The ethical turn in Lebanese post-war literature isn't only proves by *De Niro's Game* and *Limbo Beirut*'s common adoption of the turning-in technique, or their emphasis on private alternative space and narratives of working-through. My corpus furthers this argument as it shows an *intertextuality* between the two texts that illustrates this ethical turn as not just a movement but rather as a *collective* and collaborative project. *De Niro's Game* begins with Bassam saying, "Here, in her kitchen, a bomb had landed and made a wide-open hole in the wall, giving us a splendid view of the sky. We wouldn't fix it until winter, until the rain fell and washed away the soil above all the corpses we'd buried. Here in that kitchen my father had died; hers had died farther north'' (Hage 17). *Limbo Beirut* ends with the surgeon saying, "Perhaps I must let the man's corpse die so I can move on with my life. Perhaps I must bury the death that I witnessed; perhaps I

must help, as much as possible, to bring the story of which I was a part to a close. Perhaps'' (216). Bassam's passage translates into a metaphor of unresolved memory; the wall symbolizes the historical narrative of Lebanon, the hole in the wall left open represents the memory of the civil war left unresolved (un-cleared), and the rain represents time. It is through this narrative hole that the violent past of *De Niro's Game* slips into the present of *Limbo Beirut*'s characters who are forced to witness a historical repetition. The surgeon is faced with the choice to either close this wall and help bury the deads that Bassam speaks of, or to let the rain wash away the sand over the deads, over and over – which would entail witnessing the past repeat itself indefinitely. The intertextuality between these two novels, hence, establishes the ethical turn as a developing collaborative project in which members engage in and build on each other's works.

Lastly, the open-endedness of the narrative of the civil war extends to the characters of both books. *De Niro's Game* ends with Bassam saying "To Roma'' which leaves the reader with two interpretations; Bassam may be heading to Italy to begin a new life or back to Beirut, his Roma. The first interpretation would entail the successful breaking of a traumatic repetition while the second would entail a going back to the site of the traumatizing event. In *Limbo Beirut*, Walid doesn't know how his story will end, Takara's husband and Salwa are stuck in limbo between past (death) and future (birth), the Surgeon isn't sure whether he should bring the stories of the corpses to a close or simply move on with his life, as he says, "perhaps''. Although the characters succeed in developing alternative personal narratives in the absence of resonant social ones, their stories remain with no closure, seeming almost like 'fragments' themselves with no given context. However, once studied as a collective, these personal stories seem like a

continuation. The narratives of *Limbo Beirut*'s characters make sense when read together – and even more in juxtaposition with the illustrations – and whether Bassam's story comes to a close becomes the responsibility of the surgeon and the reader themselves. By making space for the voices that the incompletely modernized time-regimes have passed over and engaging with their personal narratives, we contribute to creating a collective *description* of the civil war experience which would turn us into *witnesses* ourselves. It is only upon our realization of the *pastness* of these events, as Caruth says, that we shift from a compulsive return to the site of destruction (Bassam) and allow a history to emerge.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Rawi Hage and Hilal Chouman's works, together, succeed in displaying an alternative approach to the construction of a collective history of Lebanon. By turning away from politically motivated story-telling and adopting a turning-inward story-telling technique, the two authors offer us more resonant, true, and humane representations of the wars.

I'd like to close my thesis on Valérie Haas' note, "a group cannot forget what it has not received'' quoted in "Lebanese youth: Memory and identity'' (Righi 47). As we stand torn between our right to forget and our right to remember, Lebanese artists bravely and beautifully set the ground for us for a necessary intergenerational discussion of the civil war. Our duty to remember is rooted in our right to forget. It is this very right that Aleida Assmann speaks of as a right to our own vision and experience, the right to have a life beyond war, beyond a violent past that we did not choose ourselves. Like Bassam, George, Walid, Takara's husband, Salwa, Hassan, and the surgeon, we all have been turning inward to cope with an on-going nakba that alienates us and forces us to come up with private alternative spaces – such as the arts, intimate spaces, organized poetry nights, or a personal project like my MA thesis.

In protracted wars like ours, imagination becomes as important as reality because it is through it that we withdraw from our painful experiences, that we represent our past, and through it that we project into a hopeful future that incites us to take action. As Paul Ricoeur states, "the self identifies with the place from which the other tells [their] story'' (Righi 40). Through our engagement with others' imaginary personal narratives, we start

constructing our own histories while recognizing the histories of others, whence a true(r) collective history can be found or forged.

Since our cultural memory has been produced in multiple languages, one cannot ignore the importance of languages as alternative spaces. For future research or an extension of mine, I'd suggest a comparison of the original Arabic version of *Limbo Beirut* and an Arabic-language translation of *De Niro's Game*.

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