

States of Precarity: Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* as a Postcolonial Picaresque Novel

Jopi Nyman

University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland

Introduction

This article discusses Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006) as a postcolonial picaresque novel. Set amidst the Lebanese Civil War, *De Niro's Game* focuses on its protagonist Bassam's struggle to survive in the city of Beirut, amid war, bombings, and pitched battles between official and unofficial militia groups. Following the paths of Bassam and his friend George, who grow apart and choose different sides, the novel shows how Bassam eventually leaves his home and travels as an irregular migrant to France. As Bassam is traumatized by the atrocities of the past, the novel emphasizes his precarity and shows how he remains unable to become a member of the community of the new "homeland" of Europe.

Bassam's first-person narrative relies on many elements of the picaresque novel as defined by Thomas Pughe, including the protagonist's involvement in petty crime, episodic journeying, and the novel's open ending. This structure is, however, combined with attention to globalization, mobility, and precarity, which makes the novel a postcolonial picaresque in the sense proposed by Jens Elze. For Elze, the postcolonial picaresque is a means to address the increasing precarity of life under global capitalism by rewriting an established genre (11). Often telling of marginalized characters with limited socio-economic opportunities, works in the genre revisit the legacies of colonialism and neoliberalism to voice the experiences of those with limited access to economic benefits (Elze 17). I argue that the setting and use of mobility in Hage's novel foreground the role of precarity embedded in the experience of migration and diaspora. When attempting to escape the precarity of life in their home countries, the "unstable" and "unprotected" subjects of postcolonial picaresques (Elze 23) enter further spaces of precarity during their journeys, as shown in *De Niro's Game*.

What distinguishes my own reading of the novel from previous analyses is my claim that Hage's novel uses the picaresque to locate its protagonist's episodic journeying in the world of petty criminals and precarious migrants. In so doing, it places the genre in the contexts of global mobility and precariousness generated by military conflict, warfare, and neo-colonialism. In earlier criticism, this precariousness has been associated with violence. For example, Mostafa argues that

the characters are embedded in a discourse of violence that structures the formation of their identity (21). In a similar vein, Abdelfattah reads *De Niro's Game* in the context of Lebanon's Civil War and its traumatizing effects, seeing it as a version of national trauma (2). Georgis, however, emphasizes that the novel's main characters maintain their humanity and do not become "war thugs" (135). For Libin, this trauma is universal and "transcends historical and geographical limits" (78).

What I will argue is that precariousness is addressed further in the protagonist's displacement and wanderings that take him to new situations. In addition to representing Lebanon as a hybrid and postcolonial space displaying the effects of diverse cultural encounters and mobilities, the novel creates further locations of cultural mixing by intertwining such cosmopolitan cities as Paris and Rome with its Mediterranean spaces involving Egypt, Algeria, and Lebanon. In so doing, the novel extends the idea of the postcolonial to European spaces and reveals that the continuous interaction between Europe and its Others through mobility contributes to both identities. However, rather than constructing a conventional narrative of hybrid identity, the novel presents a more melancholic understanding of diaspora as part of the protagonist's past and his personal and cultural losses and attaches it to precarity. In this article, the term postcolonial is not understood as a mere act of writing back or as a temporal marker of historical development, as conventional understandings of postcolonialism have maintained. Recent analyses have argued for the applicability of the concept to research concerning Europe and its neighbouring regions, with an emphasis on ongoing changes and new phenomena. As Anna Ball puts it, the term allows the critic "to reveal the simultaneous disjunctions between" various "colonial (or indeed postcolonial) contexts" (7). In this sense, Europe and the Middle East are both embedded in discourses of postcoloniality (Schulze-Engler, 2013; Ball and Mattar, 2019), as Hage's novel testifies through its intertwining of Europe and its neighboring regions as well as its attention to cultural encounters and mobility around the Mediterranean.

What my reading of Hage's novel aims to demonstrate is that it uses picaresque mobility to address links between Europe and its adjacent spaces. Following Iain Chambers, the latter can be seen as "scarred landscapes" that carry memories and counter-histories pertinent to migration (*Postcolonial* 83-100) and are thus both colonial and postcolonial. In the same way, the postcolonial picaresque protagonist of Hage's novel carries memories of loss and violence as part of his identity, showing how global developments are present in local precarity. The article begins with a discussion of the postcolonial picaresque and the concept of precarity from the generic and cultural perspectives as outlined by the postcolonial critic Jens Elze and the

cultural theorist Judith Butler. In the first part of the analysis, I focus on the novel's use of the genre conventions of the postcolonial picaresque in a precarious space. Following this, I will discuss the precarity and trauma associated with mobility. In the third part, I address the role played by the traumatizing past, which the novel approaches by the means of its photographic images of loss and death. In addition to placing the novel's Lebanese identities in the transnational mobility of labour and cultural encounters, I will also address its thematization of diaspora identity as precarious, generated by loss and trauma as suggested by Vijay Mishra. In so doing, my reading links Mishra's understanding of diaspora trauma with Butler's idea of melancholia as an element in precarity. I suggest that Hage's novel can be seen as "an instrument of exposure and critique" (Balkan 23) that functions as a counternarrative challenging the conditions producing a postcolonial picaresque protagonist (Cobo-Piñero 474).

The Postcolonial Picaresque Novel and Precarity

The postcolonial picaresque uses generic features of the established genre but with a different purpose, linking global capitalism with the precarity of the local setting (Cobo-Piñero 474). Conventionally, the picaresque novel is recognized through its protagonist's marginality, the work's open-ended structure, and its critique of established social conventions and mores. Thomas Pughe has defined the key generic feature of the conventional picaresque as follows:

1) a pseudo-autobiographical first person narrative; 2) the protagonist's roguishness and social outsiderdom; the absence of his or her father; the frequency of his or her role changes; 3) an open ending due to an episodic structure and almost non-existent development of the protagonist's personality; 4) a satirical presentation of society. (60)

The postcolonial picaresque has been understood to provide a means for challenging the dominant and promoting alternative ideas. By rewriting canonical picaresque novels such as those by Daniel Defoe (Thieme 53-71), postcolonial texts have problematized the universalisms of the Western canon. For Helen Tiffin, forms such as magic realism and the postcolonial picaresque are examples of counter-discursive forms that in the contexts of post-coloniality "are carried to a higher subversive power" (22). More recently, critics have emphasized that the picaresque is useful for addressing postcolonial issues ranging from new kinds of rogue characters to diverse mobilities and displacements. For instance, Stacey Balkan suggests that Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) brings the picaresque to the Nigerian slums and oil fields, showing how such characters resist the master narrative of globalization (23). Furthermore, in her analysis of postcolonial picaresque novels, Ligia Tomoiagă suggests that for writers such as

Salman Rushdie the genre is more than a “revived” one but provides an opportunity to address the “special situation of the former colonized as a displaced self” (138). In similar vein, Maria Rocío Cobo-Piñero examines picaresque elements in NoViolet Bulawayo’s Zimbabwean novel *We Need New Names* (2013) and suggests that postcolonial African picaresque novels challenge “western narratives of affluence, metropolitan consumption and accumulation” (474). Cobo-Piñero’s way of linking the picaresque with Afropolitanism pinpoints the role of mobility as allowing for transnational perspectives rather than those of European mobility (475), and her way of reading of picaresque mobility in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* can be seen as a parallel to my reading of Hage’s protagonist’s travel to Europe.

In his analysis of the narrative strategies of the postcolonial picaresque novel, Jens Elze suggests that the contemporary picaresque novel responds to the conditions of precarity characterizing the uncertainty of life under global capitalism (10-11). The notion of precarity, Elze suggests, is a means to explain “how ... certain subjects are produced as unstable, as unprotected, unable to rely on progressively building a ‘good life’ upon those programmatically safe ... premises of modernity” (23). The term is clearly applicable to the discussion of postcolonial narratives where the uneven development between the West and its others, or the North and the South, is often highlighted, as shown in Elze’s reading of the Indian writer Arvind Adiga’s contemporary novel *The White Tiger*. For Elze, the postcolonial picaresque emerges from the margins of contemporary globalization and explores the lives of those who have difficulty in locating themselves in such a transforming world. In his view, at the core of the picaresque is the idea of precarity, which “concerns the social and symbolic precariousness of individuals and their lives in early and postcolonial modernity – not as alternative or multiple modernities that would embrace difference or seek to escape modernity’s alleged homogeneity, but as marginal aspects of and precarious positions within a singular modernity” (Elze 27). Following Elze’s general view, I will address the role of precarity in Hage’s novel with particular reference to the experiences of mobility that add to the protagonist’s precarious life, rather than serve as solutions providing a better life.

The specific notions of precariousness and precarity central to postcolonial picaresques have been addressed by cultural critics such as Judith Butler. Citing war as an example, Butler suggests that all “lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (25). She defines the idea of precarity contextually: it “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially

exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). As Ruti suggests, this view is based on the assumption that such inequalities are global and that they have created precarity in some parts of the world, while other parts of the world are relatively stable and privileged (95). This reveals the extent to which precarity characterizes the ruptures that are part of global mobility and the related experiences of displacement in postcolonial literatures. An example of this is seen in Madhu Krishnan’s analysis of Teju Cole’s novel *Open City*. Krishnan writes that when crossing into other spaces Cole’s postcolonial migrants do not face them as hospitable spaces in the manner of conventional cosmopolitan travellers (676). Rather, instead of “open movement” they meet with an “illusory appearance of freedom” (Krishnan 693), which indicates precarity.

Such sense of precarity is relevant to postcolonial fictions of mobility in general and Hage’s novel in particular: its protagonist’s life is constantly threatened because of warfare, geopolitics, and economic problems rooted in what Elze sees as “precarious positions” (27). I suggest that *De Niro’s Game* uses the postcolonial picaresque genre to address these aspects in more detail. In other words, by using the picaresque form, the novel associates its protagonist’s episodic life, including his restlessness and movement, with the precarity generated by experiences of mobility and diaspora. In so doing, Hage’s work constructs a postcolonial Lebanese identity that is on the one hand based on historical and cultural experiences of trade, migration, and diaspora, and on the other hand characterized by the precarity generated by loss and trauma. What this means is that the novel sees mobility as a form of precarity. My reading is based on an extension of Elze’s suggestion that the postcolonial picaresque is characterized by a sense of placelessness or atopia, terms that in this context refer to the protagonist’s “social placelessness” as they “are not securely rooted in class, family, or other structures that would imply a social place from which to articulate oneself and towards or against which to project one’s aspirations of critique” (44). Since Elze’s placelessness can also be generated by mobility and globalization that uproot individuals and generate “new forms of precarity, marginalization and subalternity” (Malreddy 2), my analysis pays particular attention to Hage’s representation of mobility and diaspora as part of the experience of precarity.

De Niro’s Game: Rewriting the Genre

The first part of my analysis explores the use of genre conventions. I will show how Hage places the picaresque in the precarious space of war and violence. The novel’s setting is appropriate for a picaresque,

and it fulfils many of the thematic requirements of the genre mentioned by Pughe. First, it is told in the first person by Bassam, starting from his observations concerning war-torn Beirut and ending in Paris where he is trying to buy a railway ticket to Rome (referred to as “Roma” in the text). Second, Bassam, whose father is dead when the novel starts and whose mother dies in a bombing, is a rogue who resorts to petty crime such as cheating on poker machines and drugs. In the episodic novel he performs different roles in varying social circles: a winch driver at a port, a small-time crook working the poker machines and driving around on his motorbike, a lover of Rana, and an illegal migrant in Europe. The novel portrays life in a city under siege where drugs and alcohol are the only ways out, and where death and violence remain constantly present. It also presents outsider characters such as the ex-colonialist M. Laurent and his junkie girlfriend *Bébé*, and Bassam’s socialist uncle, who has left his community, and refugees trying to enter the city. Third, the novel is open-ended. The reader is left wondering whether Bassam will make it to “Roma” before the police catch him. However, Pughe’s final feature, the presence of a satirical attitude (60), is less relevant in this case, and, indeed, almost missing – the story-telling of deserted dogs as the real inhabitants of the city is a way of critiquing the constant warfare between the factions by means of satire. Usually, however, the novel’s critical perspective is based on the grotesque and the abject, which construct shocking images of death and violence through exaggeration.

In addition to following the basic conventions of the genre, the novel relies on strategies that have been identified as typical of postcolonial picaresque fiction (Elze, 2017) and link global development with the local sense of precarity (Cobo-Piñero, 2019). Precarity is a constant presence in *De Niro’s Game*. The Lebanese Civil War can be seen as a neo-colonial war between Western and other interests in the Middle East, and the novel’s precarious society does not provide stable conditions for life. In this sense, the chosen wartime setting confirms Elze’s view that the precarity of postcolonial picaresque novels results from their protagonists “witness[ing] their constant states of exception” (27). It also exemplifies Butler’s idea of precariousness as exposure to violence in the contingent conditions of war. Similarly, the marginalization and dehumanization experienced amidst the civil war show how life is reduced to “bare life,” as suggested by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. As Hage’s Beirut is an irrational space of impending death that a bomb may turn into “a river of blood” (23) at any moment, the everyday and the ordinary cease to exist, and agency is reduced to a mere act of waiting for the next attack.

As the following quotation shows, this space is an example of what Agamben refers to as “state of exception”: a wartime “space

without law', a 'zone of anomie'" (51), where the exception is the norm:

On the pavement there were kids' bicycles, and clay marks of kids' drawings. Inside our houses, there were women stranded in kitchens cooking. From below a radio was playing, a mother was calling her kid, a few passing cars rolled slowly through our narrow street. There was that silence, that quietness before bombs fall and teeth shatter and kids piss in their older brothers' shorts, and young girls menstruate before their time, and windows shatter, and glass slices our dark flesh wide open. (Hage 48)

This description of contingent violence portrays the precarity of life through abject corporeal imagery, reducing humans to blood and excrement. For Elze, this strategy is rooted in the Spanish picaresque, which is capable of unveiling "realms of the improper, the unclean, the bodily – criminality, faeces, violence – and as such it has clear affinities with the precarious landscapes of the picaresque" (180).

Examples of this abound in *De Niro's Game*, and they are associated with death, sexuality, violence, and torture (see Hage 157). First, there is Hage's representation of the dead body of a young girl bleeding to death at the hands of the protagonist: "The girl's blood dripped on my finger, down my thighs. I was bathing in blood. Blood is darker than red, smoother than silk; on your hand it is warm like warm water and soup" (23). Second, the novel includes George's story of the militia's attack on the women and children, a credible narrative representation of the Shabra and Shatila Massacre in 1982, when hundreds if not thousands of Palestinian refugees were killed in their camp, which is seen by Abdelfatah as a key factor in the national trauma (3). In this episode, the intoxicated George, prepared to kill his friend in a game of Russian roulette (which is the game that Robert De Niro plays in the 1978 film *The Deer Hunter*), tells Bassam about atrocities and "houses ... filled with bodies of slain women in aprons, men stretched next to their wives and their raped daughters" (Hage 178). In George's discourse, others are not part of his world and he does not share their precariousness, which in Butler's view is central for recognizing the other as "grievable," as one who is understood to be one of "us" (28).

Those who are ungrievable are also abject and othered. While George appears unable to grieve for those he has killed, Bassam is more ambiguous and shows signs of trauma and dehumanization. An example of this is the scene where he becomes involved in sudden violence and attacks his girlfriend Rana, "ripping her clothes, snapping the buttons on her blouse" (133). For Bassam, the choice is whether he should remain in Beirut and become fully dehumanized or emigrate and start a new life in the land of his dreams. Beirut, Hage's novel suggests, is an abject place that is suitable only for dogs who, deserted there by their owners, roam freely and eat "from mountains of garbage in the corners of our streets" (31). These examples, as well as the

episodes telling of Bassam's violent encounters with small-time crooks and militiamen, show how he lives his life among the lower social strata and absorbs its values rather than following more general moral conventions. In the novel's Beirut, precariousness is the general condition that decreases the value of life, especially of "them."

Precarious Mobilities

Hage's novel also addresses precarity at the level of mobility and migration, providing an understanding of the picaresque protagonist as a postcolonial subject in motion, one whose "straying" is in contrast with attempts to control the movement of bodies (Elze 53). As Finney suggests, today's picaresque protagonist is "the illegal immigrant who transgresses national, religious, and ethnic boundaries" (74), as is the case with Bassam. The novel motivates Bassam's journey to other spaces by introducing narratives of diaspora and mobility as well as others telling of cultural encounters. Syrine Hout's multifaceted reading of the novel is helpful here. In addition to paying attention to the psychological and political contexts, her study provides a larger focus as she mentions that the novel "paints a large canvas of migrations, displacements and returns of characters of diverse ages and backgrounds" (Hout 142). This is what has guided my reading of *De Niro's Game*. It is a novel that, in addressing the protagonist's mobility, translates the picaresque into a story of postcolonial precariousness and combines that with a narrative of loss and trauma. Rather than being a mere story of Bassam's growing up traumatized and fatherless in a time of war and being a picaro in Beirut, *De Niro's Game* is a diasporic text that locates Bassam within the context of Mediterranean mobility to show that his precarious identity is generated by history, diaspora, and migration. In addressing them he is involved in what Cobo-Piñero finds typical of the postcolonial picaresque, "uncover[ing] relations of inequality" (476).

The importance given to mobility in the novel is significant. Its different forms include representations of war-induced migration and Muslim refugees entering the city from Syria, stories addressing the historical making of Lebanon and Beirut, and episodes that locate the protagonist in contemporary border-crossing mobility and diaspora. The novel's Lebanon is a historically and culturally hybrid space linked with the Roman Empire whose values and legal tradition are often considered to be cornerstones of Europeanness: "Beirut is an ancient Roman city, I thought" (Hage 45). In addition to the Romans, the novel refers to the diverse histories and nations that have generated the identity of Lebanon as a culturally hybrid nation. The importance of cultural encounters is made evident at the beginning of the novel: "we drove down the main streets where bombs fell, where Saudi

diplomats had once picked up French prostitutes, where ancient Greeks had danced, Romans had invaded, Persians had sharpened their swords, Mamluks had stolen the villagers' food, crusaders had eaten human flesh, and Turks had enslaved my grandmother" (Hage 12). This passage links the narrator's nation with the diverse histories and encounters characterizing the cultures of Eastern Mediterranean spaces, both in the past and in the present, and underlines their violent pasts. The list of historical invasions and conflicts is complemented by present-day references to Saudi diplomats and French prostitutes. On one level this continues the image of foreign invaders exploiting the country and its women, but it also serves to underline the historical connection between the nation and its histories of interaction with Europe.

Furthermore, the nation's links with other Mediterranean spaces are revealed in the novel's representation of the sea as bringing together the peoples and cultures residing on the different shores of the Mediterranean. The boats that Bassam unloads in the port carry fruit and "seasick sheep ... from Turkey," as well as "weapons ... stamped with Hebrew, English, and Arabic serial numbers" (Hage 19). These references tell of the continuing presence of several cultures and languages (as well as of neo-colonialism) in this contact zone, to use Mary-Louise Pratt's term characterizing sites of cultural encounters (33). They also indicate the picaresque hero's desire to travel and gain new experiences. Further, the Mediterranean is referred to as "the sea that is filled with pharaoh tears, pirate ship wreckage, slave bones, flowing rivers of sewage, and French tampons" (Hage 20). While using abject and grotesque images in the context of colonization and the symbolic pollution it has created, this passage underlines the importance of the various historical layers that have generated new histories and cultural phenomena on the shores of the shared sea. These new phenomena are examples of what Iain Chambers sees as emerging from his "multiple Mediterranean" where "the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia" (*Mediterranean* 3). Lebanese identities are part of this history of cultural mixing that the novel associates with the precarious experiences of migration, diaspora, and exile.

The novel carries this historical entanglement into the present through the various migrations its characters undertake. These locate Lebanese identities in a world of mobility but also demonstrate the precarity associated with living in Lebanon. These include, first, M. Laurent's story of his life in late colonial Africa, where he made a fortune in the diamond trade but which he left to return to his childhood village with his drug-addicted girlfriend. Second, the novel evokes the story of George's father, a French Jew who visits Lebanon while working for the Mossad and has a brief affair with George's

mother but never returns. Third, the novel refers to Bassam's friends who move to Sweden to escape the war. Finally, we are presented with the stories told by the Egyptian sailor Moustapha, who works on the boat taking Bassam to France as an illegal migrant and tells him anecdotes full of sex and bordellos, drugs and bars, and distant countries from Japan to Africa (Hage 188).

Yet the novel provides representations of Europe that construct the continent as a safer and more prosperous alternative to the narrator's home and its precariousness. In addition to showing how Bassam is linked with the opportunities represented by the Mediterranean through his part-time position as a winch driver in the port of Beirut, the attraction of Europe is evident in his desire to escape Lebanon to the utopian city of "Roma." This place offers solace from constant bombings and fear: "Roma must be a good place to walk freely. The pigeons in the squares look happy and well fed" (Hage 19). His desire for Europe, based on popular cultural images, is shown in the description of his bedroom: "I was sitting in my room, looking at a wall filled with foreign images, fading posters of teenage singers, blondes with white teeth, Italian football players" (Hage 19). Significantly, what is absent from Bassam's life is present in the form of representations that reveal his desire for other spaces. These representations show the extent to which his identity is constructed in conditions of constant liminality where, as Fongang puts it, he becomes one of many "postcolonial subjects [who] constantly reshape their identities through movements and relocations" (5). Bassam's identity, rather than being rooted and bound to remain home, is mobile and diasporic, formed through the transnational mediascape analysed by Appadurai (36-37) and trying to make sense of the world of everyday precariousness through popular cultural images.

The role of migration and mobility is particularly emphasized in the third and final part of the novel using the picaresque motif of travel. As Cobo-Piñero writes, the journey of the picaresque does not show a secure place or development but is characterized by "wandering, sneaking out and strolling around" (475), which is also the case in Hage's novel. Following George's accidental death in an unsuccessful game of Russian roulette and betrayal of Bassam, Bassam travels to Paris with the intention of meeting Claude Mani, George's father. While George's act of killing himself is a traumatizing experience for Bassam, rather than grieving the loss of his former best friend, he leaves for Europe. When meeting with George's French family, Bassam learns that Claude has died, but his widow Geneviève and daughter Rhea welcome the friend of his son. This episode can be read in relation to genre conventions, as it shows Bassam's immaturity in the world of softer emotions, features that are typical of the picaresque (cf. Pughe). His unsuccessful affair with Rhea is a

particularly apt representation of this, as he does not realize that the family friend Roland is her lover and also a violent Mossad employee.

What is particularly important from the perspective of precarity is that the representation of mobility in the final part of the novel uses several narrative devices that strengthen Bassam's in-betweenness and his traumatized identity. F. Elizabeth Dahab suggests that in his fiction Hage "elevates the exilic paradigm to a new, higher, transcendental level of estrangement" (274). The novel shows how Bassam enters a state of trauma-induced melancholia in which he walks the streets aimlessly, spends time alone, sleeping extensively, and speaks to people whom only he can see. His state is not that of a classic Saidian exile, for whom the experience is mainly creative, consisting of "solitude and spirituality" (*Reflections* 181), but rather one that resembles his former identity without being the same. To use Homi K. Bhabha's term, his entrance into Europe is at the same time an entrance into the Third Space, a liminal space between cultures that challenges his former identity. Following Bhabha's suggestion that this space where identity is reconstructed as a result of cross-cultural encounter is one where the subject can experience an "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (9), the novel appears to represent France as a site of ambivalence "that is almost the same but not quite" (86; emphasis original). As the novel shows through images that are dreamlike, *unheimlich*, which Bhabha associates with the Third Space, Bassam encounters the process of hybridity and the way it challenges the subject's coherence and generates further precarity.

While Abdelfattah has suggested that the novel addresses the Freudian uncanny and George's trauma through its image of a wounded bird (4), the concept is developed into a different direction in the description of Bassam and his response to the forming of hybrid identity. Bassam drifts aimlessly in Paris, imagining himself to be a member of the French revolution, and has discussions with his imaginary officers (Hage 253), and he even flies over Paris (246). Similarly, he has nightmares (255), exhibits bodily symptoms of stress in the course of which he sweats extensively (255) and feels nauseated (244-45). This alienation is both psychological and cultural, a part of his precarity, and it is addressed through intertextual references to Albert Camus's novel *L'Etranger* (1942) in particular. Bassam borrows the novel from the Algerian receptionist of his hotel and devotes considerable time to studying it (see Hage 224-26). Its references to the protagonist's mother's funeral remind Bassam of that of his own mother, which forces him to address his traumatized past. The use of the Third Space in this novel is based on Bassam's recognition of himself as a racialized subject. The use of imaginary worlds is, then, a way to address Bassam's disappointment and inability to cope with migration and racialized encounters: Europe, rather than a site fulfilling his fantasies, is a site of precarity like that of his home city

and it forces him to deal with his traumatized past rather than attempt to escape it.

Read through Bhabha's view of hybridity as enunciation, meaning-making (36-38), the identity reconstruction that hybridity requires may be harmful to some subjects as it challenges their expectations. In Hage's novel the promise of migration transforms into racism and loneliness, showing how postcolonial mobilities are often "uneasy and less privileged" (Toivanen 1). In addition to contributing to his precarious and traumatized identity, Bassam's experiences of the new space described above link his narrative with the classic existentialist texts by Camus and Sartre where the subject's earlier beliefs are shattered and may lead to self-questioning and nausea. Further, since Edward Said's well-known reading of Camus suggests that the French writer reserves for Arabs the position of the objectified and silenced Other (*Culture* 216-17), Bassam's realization of his outsider status shows how his existentialist crisis is racialized. Through these incidents, the novel reveals that Bassam has not confronted his own traumatic past generated by years of precarity and loss of family. As the sense of rejection is boosted in Paris and supported by French colonialist thinking present through racism and the Camus text, Bassam is unable to embrace Europe but remains its excluded Other, dwelling in continuous precarity.

The Postcolonial Picaresque and Trauma

In this section I show that the role of trauma in *De Niro's Game* is to add to the sense of precarity and insecurity. Rather than a psychological novel of maturation, Hage's picaresque has a cultural focus and emphasizes the making of Lebanese and diasporic identities in the context of trauma, linking global developments with local insecurities and precarity. Najat Rahman's reading of the novel as a trauma narrative suggests that it deals with a trauma of war and a historical trauma (801; cf. 807); for Abdelfattah, the national trauma and the guilt related to the atrocities of the Civil War are central to the novel. While the war and the constant fear of violence play a role in Bassam's trauma and support the thematics of precarity, in this section I aim to expand the interpretation. While Libin understands the novel's trauma as a "generalized representation [...] that transcends historical and geographical limits" (78), in my reading the trauma is firmly located in the specific context of precarious mobility. I argue that the novel's representation of Bassam's traumatized subjectivity corroborates with Vijay Mishra's understanding of diaspora as trauma, and that it can be read within the context of Butler's theorization of precarity. What Mishra suggests is that diasporas constantly encounter "their own ghosts, their own traumas, their own memories" (16). For

Mishra, “the diasporic imaginary is a condition ... of an impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia” (9). In other words, only by accepting the loss of homeland can the traumatizing effects of diaspora be healed. In a similar vein, Butler associates melancholia with precarity and suggests that the melancholic may enter a state of self-destruction in situations where the other has been lost (173-74). As Butler writes: “The criticisms and recriminations addressed to the absent other are deflected and transformed into an internal voice directed against the self” (174).

The past and its traumatizing losses as they are depicted in the novel are approached by using references to photographs that indicate both the precarity of life and the trauma it has generated. In an essay addressing photography depicting death and war, Roger Luckhurst points out that violent images of dead corpses and wounded soldiers have been used in diverse ways (109-10). The earlier prevalent melancholic trend, where the documentary photograph functions as an index of the dead, aiming to shock, has shifted towards a “disclosive” form that “reanimates the dead, brings them back into play” (110). Previous readings of the role of the trauma in novel, such as those presented by Libin and Abdelfattah, do not pay attention to the strong presence of photographic images in the novel. While the use of photographs in Hage’s novel occurs in the context of death, the images do not primarily focus on dead and maimed bodies. Rather, its narrated images of photographs frame their subject in other contexts dominated by death and loss in a precarious location. The first two images described in the novel come from Beirut: “I walked past photos of dead young men posted on wooden electric poles, on entrances of buildings, framed in little shrines” (Hage 36) and “on the way I saw Khalil’s photo pasted on a shoemaker’s door and on cement walls. *The hero Khalil Al-Deeq, martyred on the front line defending his beloved country*, the poster said” (65; emphasis original). In addition to the photographs that are displayed in public and generate images of martyrdom underlining the propagandistic division into “us” and “them,” the novel also addresses family photographs as markers of death (see 102). Furthermore, it presents one of the theories of photography as a medium that is based on the idea of death. This is evident in Bassam’s report on an art exhibition he visits with Rhea: “One day we went to a photography exhibit, and she walked calmly in front of each frame, posing in front of each photo. Photography is about death, she said to me. It preserves the illusion of a past moment that can never be re-enacted” (213). In the novel, the work of photography is akin to Banerjee’s reading of diaspora photographs as marking “absence, loss and even death” (445). In so doing, the novel also opens up a potential way of reading photographs as sites of haunting that emphasize the protagonist’s loss. These losses are not only personal but also extend to the loss of home and land, seen in a

passage that addresses the issue through reported and fragmented memories. Particularly significant are those associated with refugees who are deprived of their possessions as well as of their land: “I feared for the olive groves, the refugees in tents holding keys to houses they would never see again, holding photographs of the land that one day would be stolen” (216). Here the cultural trauma of diaspora emerges through a visual memory of the loss associated with forced migrancy.

The novel’s description of Rhea’s family photo album is a further marker of precarity, as it contributes to instability rather than stability, displays insecurity rather than security, and tells of loss rather than gain. Rhea’s childhood idyll depicted in the photographs is challenged by her father’s absence – he is dead to Rhea, and he was never known to George. When Rhea explains her story to Bassam, she does so through images: “Let’s look at photos, she said. Slowly, she turned the pages. I looked at photos of a young infant crawling the floors, Genevieve in 1970s dresses and pointy shoes and dark sunglasses, and Rhea in her father’s arms, with Africa in the background. This is my nanny, said Rhea, and that is me in Singapore. And this is at the kibbutz in Israel” (Hage 214). The photographs referred to introduce ghosts from the past to the present, revealing the Janus-faced identity of Rhea’s father, a diplomat and a spy. Rather than merely supporting memory, the images indicate her father’s simultaneous yet different roles in Rhea’s and George’s narratives. Following Chambers and his reading of Walter Benjamin, this is an example of haunting, a moment when history – the “ghostly company” as Chambers puts it – “haunts and disturbs the present, interrogates it” (*Mediterranean* 8). This links the novel’s Lebanon with Paris and emphasize the precarity of both places. Whereas the violent past of Lebanon is enacted through the photographs of dead military heroes, the urban space of Paris is marked with memories of war: “I watched Rhea strolling next to me, telling me about the architecture, the Germans who had invaded, the little brass engraved with the names of French resistance fighters who had died while fighting to liberate their country” (Hage 209).

As these signs of haunting suggest, the present is built on a narrative that does not provide a secure sense of identity because the past has not been dealt with properly, an idea that is part of the novel’s discussion of diaspora trauma and precarity. For Rhea, the loss of her father as well as of an unknown brother is not fully mourned, as can be seen in her conception of photographs as markers of death. In the case of Bassam, his trauma, marked in the increasing sense of in-betweenness and his related inability to reconstruct the past, leads to melancholia and self-destruction. In Paris, his traumas surface: in addition to the deaths of his mother and best friend, Bassam remembers stories of death and war told to him by his grandmother. Significantly, these memories also link together France and Lebanon,

and in so doing bring into the open the transgenerational trauma that Bassam and Lebanon have not dealt with: “Then I remember the story of my grandmother ... and the story of her brother, who during the Second World War joined six thousand Lebanese who formed the Kanasa troop, under the command of the Force Française de la Libération. I remembered my grandmother telling me of their heroic fight in the Bir Hakim battle. I remembered her telling me of her brother who perished in the desert, thirsty for his home up in the high mountains, for the chain of trees, the tolling bells, and the munching goats” (Hage 215-16).

Mishra’s suggestion that diasporic melancholia is a result of traumatic moments is applicable to Bassam. While some of the traumas are historical in nature, and as such add to the depth of his experience, the fact that the trauma actualizes in France indicates that it is particularly strongly related to his act of migration and diaspora identity. The novel shows that upon entering his new homeland, Bassam is unable to identify with it. In France, he is a racial Other and as such attacked by a group of men in Marseilles who call him, using a racialized insult, “*une merde de beur*” (Hage 191). This interpellation as “filth” (191) shows how France – and Europe writ large – reject him, and the harassment encountered is comparable to Fanon’s famous recognition of himself as “A Negro” in *Black Skin/White Masks* (see 89). In the view of Mishra, the loss of the migrant’s original homeland “is not compensated for by happiness in the new nation-state and is therefore internalized as the emptiness of the ego itself” (10). Since the migrant has no access to citizenship and its promise of equality, Bassam, too, remains in a state of melancholia. Following Butler’s view concerning the emergence of violence in the condition of precarity (173), Bassam’s rage and violence in Paris reveal his state as evidenced in his physical assault of Rhea’s lover Roland and his generally self-destructive behaviour. As my above discussion of the events depicted in the last section of the novel shows, his melancholic identity and grief reveal what Ruti in her interpretation of Butler refers to as “the utter dissolution of the self” (99).

For Bassam, this trauma is strengthened as he is not accepted by France. It is further emphasized in Rhea’s rejection of him, which shows how the migrant is rejected by Europe; this adds further to his traumatized identity. This “dissolution of the self” (Ruti 99) is addressed in the novel through Bassam’s imaginary discussions as well as his increased identification with the Arab Other as portrayed in the Camus novel and discussed by Said (*Culture*). In this context the use of the picaresque can be read in the larger context of nation. Fachinger claims that the emergence of the genre has at various points in history been linked with the protagonist’s alienation from society and that picaresques often attempt to come to terms with historical dislocation and the loss of cultural tradition (23-24). From this perspective, Hage’s

novel emerges as an attempt to reconstruct Lebanese identity following years of precarity, warfare, and forced migration by using a literary form capable of capturing alienation and cultural trauma associated with the protagonist's marginal position. While the novel, typical of its genre, does not provide a narrative closure but closes with a potential start of a new episode, the solution leaves some space for a more positive future. The final chapter shows Bassam holding a railway ticket to "Roma," the utopian space with happy pigeons, where his diasporic melancholia may come to an end when – or if – the minority emerges as a "full participant [...] in a nation-state's collective history" (Mishra 10). Although the Mediterranean offers solace as a space linking different groups and nations with each other, the traumas generated by the Lebanese conflict, neo-colonialism and migration also reveal a sense of diasporic melancholia where the new homeland is unable to generate positive identifications and the picaresque hero finds few opportunities to reconstruct his identity. In this sense, the new identity hinted at is as precarious as his former life.

Conclusion

This article reads Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* as a postcolonial picaresque. Following discussions of the postcolonial picaresque as a narrative of precarity (Elze, Cobo-Piñero), I have argued that Hage's novel brings a new aspect to the mobility characterizing the genre. Through stories of mobility and cultural encounters, the novel places its protagonist Bassam in histories of the Lebanese diaspora and Mediterranean mobility and in the related precariousness and trauma generated by the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, showing how the global affects the periphery and generates precarity. In this novel, the picaresque hero's mobility is an attempt to address the personal and cultural traumas of the past. Bassam's increasing in-betweenness, however, shows their depth and relevance to the Lebanese diaspora more generally. The novel's use of photographs as markers of death and loss reveals how the past affects the present, and the significance of history and memory in the formation of the postcolonial subject. Furthermore, the contested relationship between Europe and its racialized Others prevents migrants from fully identifying with the object of their dreams and adds to their exclusion, linking race to the traumas of precarious life and colonialism. In this sense, the novel is a counternarrative to the conditions that generate postcolonial picaresque protagonists inhabiting worlds of precarity.

Works Cited

Abdelfattah, Hany Ali. "National Trauma and the Uncanny in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and*

Culture, vol. 14, no. 1, 2012, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/12/>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2021.

Agamben, Giorgio. 2003. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell, U of Chicago P, 2005.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Balkan, Stacey. "Rogues in the Postcolony: Chris Abani's *GraceLand* and the Petro-Picaresque." *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2015, pp. 18-37.

Ball, Anna. 2012. *Palestinian Literature and Film in Postcolonial Feminist Perspective*. Routledge, 2017.

Ball, Anna, and Karim Mattar, editors. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East*. Edinburgh UP, 2019.

Banerjee, Bidisha. "Diaspora's 'dark room': Photography and the Vision of Loss in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Hema and Kaushik.'" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, pp. 443-56.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Paperback ed., Verso, 2016.

Chambers, Iain. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Duke UP, 2008.

---. *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

Cobo-Piñero, Maria Rocío. "NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013): Mobilities and the Afropolitan Picaresque." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2019, pp. 472-85.

Dahab, F. Elizabeth. "The Arab Canadian Novel and the Rise of Rawi Hage." *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, edited by Nouri Gana, Edinburgh UP, 2013, pp. 269-97.

Elze, Jens. *Postcolonial Modernism and the Picaresque Novel: Literatures of Precarity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

- Fachinger, Petra. *Rewriting Germany from the Margins: 'Other' German Literature of the 1980s and 1990s*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2001.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin/White Masks*. Translated by Charles L. Markmann, Grove P, 1967.
- Finney, Brian. "Migrancy and the Picaresque in Timothy Mo's *Renegade or Halo*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 49, no.1, 2007, pp. 61-76.
- Fongang, Delphine. "Introduction: Transitional Identity and Cultural Ambiguity in Diasporic African Literature." *The Postcolonial Subject in Transit: Migrations, Borders, and Subjectivity in Contemporary African Diaspora Literature*, edited by Delphine Fongang, Lexington Books, 2018, pp. 1-10.
- Georgis, Dina. "Masculinities and the Aesthetics of Love: Reading Terrorism in *De Niro's Game* and *Paradise Now*." *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2011, pp. 134-48.
- Hage, Rawi. 2006. *De Niro's Game*. Penguin, 2013.
- Hout, Syrine. *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*. Edinburgh UP, 2012.
- Krishnan, Madhu. "Postcoloniality, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2014, pp. 675-96.
- Libin, Mark. "Marking Territory: Rawi Hage's Novels and the Challenge to Postcolonial Ethics." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2013, pp. 71-90.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "Why Have the Dead Come Back? The Instance of Photography." *New Formations*, vol. 89/90, 2016, pp. 101-15.
- Malreddy, Pavan Kumar. "Introduction." *Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalization, Labour and Rights*, edited by Pavan Kumar Malreddy, Birte Heidemann, Ole Birk Laursen, and Janet Wilson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 1-15.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.

- Mostafa, Dalia Said. "Journeying through a Discourse of Violence: Elias Khoury's *Yalo* and Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2011, pp. 21-5.
- Pratt, Mary-Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.
- Pughe, Thomas. "Reading the Picaresque: Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, and More Recent Adventures." *English Studies*, vol. 77, 1996, pp. 59-70.
- Rahman, Najat. "Apocalyptic Narrative Recalls and the Human: Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2009, pp. 800-14.
- Ruti, Mari. "The Ethics of Precarity: Judith Butler's Reluctant Universalism." *Remains of The Social: Desiring the Post-Apartheid*, edited by Maurits van Bever Donker, Russ Truscott, Gary Minley, and Premesh Lalu, Wits UP, 2017, pp. 92-116.
- Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.
- . *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard UP, 2003.
- Schulze-Engler, Frank. "Irritating Europe." *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 669-91.
- Thieme, John. *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing back to the Canon*. Continuum, 2001.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse." *Kunapipi*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1987, pp. 17-34.
- Toivanen, Anna-Leena. "Not at Home in the World: Abject Mobilities in Marie NDiaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-18, <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1916/1801>. Accessed 28 Jun. 2022.
- Tomoiağă, Ligia. *Elements of the Picaresque in Contemporary British Fiction*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.