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STUDIA I SZKICE

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(State) Authority and Immigrant Life in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*

Rawi Hage's debut novel *De Niro's Game* is set in Beirut and Paris and it tells the story of two young men, Bassam and George whose friendly relationship comes to be painfully tested by the violence of the Civil War (1975–1990). We meet them both at the moment when the war is well under way (early 1980s) and are led to witness how their friendship gradually turns into betrayal culminating in a deadly showdown. It is when George joins the Phalange militia, directly responsible, as we later learn, for the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps, that their relationship becomes uneasy and, finally, deteriorates. George, devastated physically by heroin and psychically by his involvement in the mass killings at the camps, dies a self-inflicted death as they both play the Russian roulette. The eponymous de Niro's game which they play at George's behest is what George sees as his fraternal life-saving gift for Bassam who comes to be unwittingly implicated in the assassination of the Christian forces leader. Bassam, who has earlier refused to join the militia forces and has been tortured by them, wins his life to George and escapes from Beirut to France. With no documents to legalize his stay, Bassam travels from Marseille to Paris to meet George's French family.

Though George's father is dead, there is still George's half-sister (Rhea) and her mother (Genevieve), the former desperately anxious to learn about the brother she never knew. Invited to Genevieve's elegant flat

upon his arrival in Paris, Bassam is grilled with questions, offered food and finally taken care of by Rhea who helps him rent a room. She becomes his guide and his lover and this nearly idyllic atmosphere comes to be spoilt when one night Bassam stalks Rhea and a man, Roland, whom he later accosts and mugs. Infuriated, Rhea ends the affair yet, at the end of the day, they both decide to help Bassam who is to leave for Canada on a fake visa an underground humanitarian organization will provide. While Bassam waits for the visa, intriguing facts emerge. It turns out that Roland, Rhea's father's friend, works for the Mossad as did both Rhea's father and her Lebanese brother George. In a confrontation with Roland, just before he is to leave for Canada, Bassam is given an ultimatum: he either tells them George's whereabouts, or they'll prevent him from leaving and have him arrested. Yet Bassam won't be intimidated. He goes to Rhea's, manages to tell her what happened to George, something he didn't do up to this point and then hurriedly leaves for Roma by train.

Drawing on the work of Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Etienne Balibar, I begin with a rather sketchy account of the intimate links between territorialisation and political power and order as they have been conceived by philosophers and political scientists in the European tradition. These links allow us to view displacement as a prerequisite rather than an aftermath of the territorialisation of space. Displacement would then be both what enables political sovereignty and keeps reproducing its power. Trying to unpack the connections between authority and displacement as they are represented in the novel, especially the Paris part on which this paper focuses, I have drawn on Judith Butler's reading of Althusser's model of ideology, a reading invited by Bassam's interpellation into the national space of France.

Displacement, understood as an act that entails removing and expelling or being made to flee from what one considers a home or homeland, is what already places us in the midst of other spatial institutions and phenomena such as state, territory and national authorities. Displacement acquires its significance as an effect of the work of these political entities and seems difficult to think without their organizing and authorizing logic. It draws our attention to how every act of displacement is, at the same time, an act of placement within other territorial regimes. Understood as such, it presupposes defined, circumscribed places the movement across which is both away and into. Displacement is, therefore, an order of subordination that relies on a belief and an investment in territoriality as the structuring mode of our physical and psychic geographies. This is by no means sur-

prising. While Rousseau, as Wendy Brown tells us, posits "the territorial *mine*"[1] which involves fencing, walling and enclosing as the foundation of "political sovereignty",[2] it is John Locke who has offered the most pronounced articulation of the relationship between land possession, "bounded proprietorship"[3] and political power. This "production of (political) order through spatial orientation"[4] is what one can find, Brown argues, in political theorists from Machiavelli to Rousseau, and it derives its life from "walling off"[5] that demarcates polities into being. Or, as Brown argues, the wall establishes what it encloses.[6] In a different context, Etienne Balibar looks at the question of political spaces and how "the constitution of (political) power"[7] both involves "*the control of the space(s)*"[8] and makes power spatially represented. This spatiality of power is linked, Balibar tells us, to territorialisation, or the commonly accepted view that the emergence of the modern nation-state involved and was premised on the transformation of "space into territories".[9] The emergence of territories is concurrent with the "'invention' of borders"[10] which also invent the difference between the national and the foreigner and, more importantly, define "sovereignty as a power to attach populations to territories, to 'administrate' the territory through the control of the population".[11] To control the population may mean, Judith Butler argues in turn, to extend or suspend "modes of legal protection and obligation",[12] to produce belonging as well as non-belonging. In other words, the state can "bind" and unbind[13] that is, "release, expel, banish".[14] It does so, Butler continues, through "an exercise of power" that requires forms of containment, "barriers and prisons"[15] the function of which is to produce and maintain states of dispossession and displacement.

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[1] W. Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York, 2010, p. 45.

[2] Ibid., p. 43.

[3] Ibid., p. 44.

[4] Ibid., p. 45.

[5] Ibid., p. 45.

[6] Ibid., p. 45.

[7] E. Balibar, *Europe as Borderland*. "Environment and Planning D: Society and Space" 2009, vol. 27: 190–215, p. 190.

[8] Ibid., p. 190.

[9] Ibid., p. 192.

[10] Ibid., p. 190

[11] Ibid., p. 192.

[12] J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford 1997, p. 3.

[13] Ibid., p. 4.

[14] Ibid., p. 5.

[15] Ibid., p. 5.

What these very general remarks on the state, territory and borders suggest is that displacement is not merely an offshoot of the operation of territorial power inscribed in the logic of the sovereignty of the nation state but its most obvious, expected and requisite condition. What Brown, Balibar and Butler imply is that for political territories and sovereignties to emerge and endure, there must be populations excluded from ownership and thus belonging. For a piece of land to become a political territory, it can only belong to *some* and not all people (also, only some, and not all people can belong to it). To draw a borderline is in itself a displacing gesture (those who experienced border-shifts would no doubt know the feeling of being displaced). If the walls, or borderlines, establish what they enclose as well as what falls outside, they also give rise to power structures that both determine what things and people are allowed to populate a given territory and what things and people need to be kept or placed outside. They [these power structures] thus emulate and reiterate the founding gesture of displacement. The feeling of being scandalized we are taught to cultivate, scandalized at the manifold instances of displacement people were and are made to experience, is merely a cover-up for this founding and re-founding act of displacement without which no political sovereignty as it is understood today would be possible. This cultivation, which hides the indispensability of displacement, turns displacement into something exceptional rather than regular, deviant rather than conventional, preventable rather than inevitable.

Bassam's arrival in France begins with his being noticed as someone out of place whose unwelcome presence motivates racist taunts. The scene opens with Bassam peregrinating, freely, around Marseille in search of a place to rest: "I walked. I walked through the vacant streets, past doors that opened directly onto the curb of the street".[16] Yet this relatively unhampered movement comes to an abrupt stop when a car that passed him by returns "slowing down behind"[17] him:

> Three kids were in it, and they all stared at me. [...] The two passengers shifted their heads to get a better look at me. I heard one of them saying, *Une merde de beur ici chez nous*. Hey, the driver called in French, we do not want filth like you here. I looked him in the eye, said nothing, and kept on walking. The kids cursed at me and drove fast away. At the top of the street the car made a U-turn. [...] The kids opened their doors, got out of the vehicle, and slowly walked towards me. [...] they swung sticks and pipes in

[16] R. Hage, *De Niro's Game*. Toronto 2006. p. 190.
[17] Ibid., p. 190.

> their arms. I turned and ran in the opposite direction [...] I heard rushing steps on the ground behind me, and promises to bash my head and stomp my body with heels.[18]

This violent encounter mobilizes a set of familiar tropes and hierarchies: the nationalist "we" and the foreign "you"; the expelling subject and the expelled object; the raceless "we" and the racialized "you"; the national inside and the alien outside; territorial appropriation and territorial dispossession; the pure self and the impure other; the typically scatological representation of the racially marked and the assumed cleanness, both moral and epidermal, of the racially unmarked. These recognizable figures also unfold within the well-known script Althusser proposed for the working of ideology. In Judith Butler's reading of the Althusserian "Hey you...", the turning around to those who hail is enabled by a prior submission to the law. For this power of hailing to be effective, there has to be a readiness to respond to the interpellating, naming voice. Butler says that one must have submitted to the interpellating authority before one has responded by turning around. Interpellation, in other words, involves a "founding submission".[19] This submission, Butler contends, entails a "psychic disposition"[20] without which it would not be possible: "one has," she tells us, "already yielded before one turns around, and that turning is merely a sign of an inevitable submission by which one is established as a subject positioned in language as a possible addressee".[21]

Butler's reading stresses the subject's incorporation into the fold of ideology whereby one becomes a subject through submission to the subjecting authority that speaks one into its jurisdiction even if that submission is already in place before one is ever hailed. What this reading points up is belonging and membership within a group likewise subjected. That one gets interpellated *somewhere* becomes apparent when we look at the language Butler uses to narrate Althusser's ideological production of subjecthood: "The theory of interpellation appears to stage a social scene in which a subject is hailed, the subject turns around, and the subject then accepts the terms by which he or she is hailed".[22] A scene, a stage, a place in which the hailing occurs – these topographic renditions of interpellation suggest not only that it calls for a site in which to unfold but also that to become a subject is to be emplaced, to be seen and summoned into a particular place

[18] Ibid., p. 191.
[19] Butler, *Psychic* Life, p. 111.
[20] Ibid., p. 112.
[21] Ibid., p. 111.
[22] Ibid., p. 106.

that one can then occupy as a subject. As Butler puts it, when one is hailed, "one is established as a subject positioned in language" by the very fact of being addressed and of having to respond.[23] Likewise, those doing the hailing always also call from specific locations that authorise the act and its actors. It is clear there are places in which the "Hey you…" will not be pronounced. The distinctly spatial character of Althusser's model – one that Butler's interpretation also acknowledges – reveals itself most clearly in the "Hey you there." If "there" designates a place of departure from which one needs to move through speech into the subject position, it also implies a "here," the destination from which the voice of authority commands the moving subject-in-the making. This movement between the "there" and the "here" is one that marks admission, entrance into the realm of subjecthood (which is both a place in discourse and a place in space), a community of other subjects whose togetherness is formed as a result of having been hailed or of being potential addressees of the commanding voice.

And yet, this movement from here to there is a movement within the same territory. If, as Butler contends, to respond to the hailing authority one must have submitted to this authority beforehand, we could conclude that one must, in a sense, be already *in*, rather than *out*, already within the community/context in which the hailing voice reconfirms one's belonging, or at least one's temporary belonging. In other words, one must already be within the jurisdiction of the commanding voice for this voice to have and exert any authority. Indeed, the voice of the nationalist and racist "we" that hails Bassam as he walks down the streets already acknowledges, explicitly, that he is within their national home (otherwise, why would they care to want to remove him?). Following Butler, we could say that one needs to be placed *first* before one can get displaced by authority from the place one occupies discursively or physically. There seems to be a paradox in the scene of interpellation Bassam experiences: aiming to eject him, the hailing voice acknowledges his belonging. Authority displaces *not* those who do not belong or who are not considered to be part of a given community, but, on the contrary, those who are seen as belonging and whose belonging has been recognised by the ejecting interpellation. The threat Bassam poses to the racist nationalism is not the potential claim on being part of the national "we" he might stake out in the future, but his presence *within* testifying to the fact that the claim has already been made.

We can surely hear the disquieting reverberations of the racist voice of the street in Genevieve's and Rhea's benevolence. It is instructive to see,

[23] Ibid., p. 111.

and crucial not to overlook, the ways they both attempt to attenuate the implications of Bassam's presence in Paris, to loosen what they perceive as his potential hold onto their lives and homes and therefore also, implicitly, land and to render his stay in France temporary and reversible. A careful look at the conventional politeness Genevieve demonstrates when she first meets Bassam reveals the quiet efforts she makes not to articulate and thus address Bassam's current condition:

> When I arrived in Paris, I got off the bus and looked for the woman I had talked to on the phone.
>
> She wore a long navy dress, as she had promised. I approached her, and she smiled.
>
> Do you have any luggage? she asked.
>
> No.
>
> [...]
>
> When did you arrive in France?
>
> A few days ago.
>
> You came straight from Beirut?
>
> Yes.
>
> [...]
>
> Where are you staying here? Do you know someone in town?
>
> No.
>
> Did you come by plane?
>
> No, by boat.
>
> *Oh, mon Dieu, c'est long* ça, *non?* she said in her pleasant, gentle voice.[24]

Note how Genevieve's questions deftly refrain from naming what Bassam's answers so unmistakably indicate. These answers seldom provoke any reaction on Genevieve's part apart from noncommittal pleasantries. Motivated by what she assumes to be normal about travelling (plane, luggage), Genevieve sees Bassam as a tourist rather than a refugee, something she most tellingly reveals in the luggage question. While the question about luggage may surely be impelled by practical reasons, it also speaks of certain unspoken expectations she holds about Bassam. As Mireille Rosello argues, "the size, quality, quantity, and the shape of the piece(s) of luggage serve as visual or textual shortcuts to give us information about the type of the journey and the identity of the traveller".[25] To travel and arrive with luggage such as a suitcase, Rosello tells us, usually mobilizes a number of relatively unambiguous meanings. For instance, a piece of luggage can signal "a discreet request for hospitality;" its contents, in turn, stand for the home one

[24] R. Hage, *De Niro's Game*, pp. 195-197.

[25] M. Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. Stanford 2001, p. 112.

has temporarily left behind.[26] Because this "home away from home"[27] holds the promise of return (it implies, in the first place, that there *is* a home from which things have been temporarily collected), to extend hospitality thus requested always portends a mere sojourn. If, in other words, luggage is a "mark of the traveller",[28] then Bassam's luggage-less arrival no doubt acquires disturbing significance. Suggesting there may be no home to return to and turning what is expected to be temporary into something ominously indefinite, the absent luggage spells unwelcome burden, unwanted obligations and bothersome permanence.

Rhea replicates Genevieve's attempts to turn Bassam into a tourist, someone with fewer, if any, claims on the land visited. Thus she takes him on sightseeing tours eager to satisfy what she apparently presumes to be a traveller's taste for landmarks and monuments of an unknown place. "Let's go. I want to show you Paris",[29] she tells him, conveniently forgetting that a day before she had to rent a room for him under her name. Bassam's "illegality" does not seem to bother Rhea nor her newly assumed role of a travel guide. While most of the time Rhea is a generous and welcoming host, she nevertheless can be seen as symbolically supplying Bassam's missing luggage. Treating him as a keen traveller rather than a distressed refugee, Rhea effectively dispels the permanence of his presence in France. To act as a host to a visitor also allows her to establish and maintain control over Bassam's movement. Because *she* is the one deciding where they go and what they see, one often gets an impression that Bassam *is moved* rather than moving himself. Moreover, acting as a host, she puts herself in charge of the national space and, consequently, of all the cultural and historical treasures it contains: "I stayed with Rhea for the next couple of days. We took long walks every day. We hopped from one café to another. We entered museums and galleries, and she showed me her favourite paintings. We skipped through wings filled with massive gold portraits of governors, aristocratic ladies, and white Roman statues. We went straight to her favourite pieces…".[30] To lay claims to territories and their treasures is, the narrative suggests, a historically conditioned prerogative that Bassam and those like him never enjoyed. Having dinner in the "rich surroundings" of Genevieve's apartment, Bassam notes the "framed old maps with compasses indicating north; a trace of a trip to an exotic land; African masks; a small statue of an

[26] Ibid., s. 112.
[27] Ibid., s. 112.
[28] Ibid., s. 112.
[29] Hage, *De Niro's Game,* p. 209.
[30] Ibid., pp. 212–13.

Egyptian god".[31] What these paraphernalia of colonially orchestrated mobility speak of is, no doubt, an idea of movement as privilege. Yet the privilege they express has its origin in other privileged forms of movement that has called for *no* return. Indeed, "Europe's expansionist initiatives",[32] as Mary Louise Pratt calls them, rested not only on seeing-equals-possessing kind of logic, a visual mastery of land that equalled appropriation, but also, precisely, on a self-assumed right to stay. To see Bassam as a traveller on a short visit rather than a resident overstaying his welcome brings a definite benefit: Bassam as a tourist always holds a promise of departure.

Bassam does depart though not as a tourist. It is at the moment when Bassam's claims to Paris and Rhea become unpleasantly redolent of permanence that he is told to leave:

> Rhea asked me to help you. I was reluctant at first, but Rhea insisted. You have to leave France. You have no papers, and you will not get any for years to come, and the police will catch up with you sooner or later. ... Here is what I suggest. Canada. ... You call this man who knows someone, who knows someone else, who can get you a fake visa to Canada. ... You get on the plane, and when you arrive at the Montreal airport in Canada, you claim refugee status.[33]

That their decision to "help" coincides with their realization that he might not be the tourist they have wanted to see in him is telling. Differently put, they resolve to arrange Bassam's illegal passage from France to Canada after they (Rhea in particular) come to recognize that he has come to *stay*. The injunction to leave cannot make any sense if it is not preceded by this recognition. That Bassam obeys Roland's commanding words only demonstrates that they draw their authority, like the peremptory voice in the scene of interpellation (which they emulate, anyway), from a prior submission and its spatial contours. Bassam can only heed Roland's imperative because, at the moment it is articulated, he has already found himself under the national and territorial jurisdiction of a voice like Roland's.

The help they offer, however welcome and vital for someone like Bassam, is entirely in line with the national authority that renders Bassam illegal and thus unwelcome in the first place. It is also both obedient to the nation-statist logic that undergirds such authority and conservative of its power. This help's unwitting complicity with what it aims to alleviate becomes most plainly visible when Bassam contacts the people who will get

[31] Ibid., p. 200.

[32] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York 1992, p. 10.

[33] Hage, *De Niro's Game*, pp. 236-37.

him the fake visa. Before they agree to render any help, Bassam is made to substantiate his request with stories of suffering. "Do you need the story?"[34] Bassam asks the woman he meets in a park to arrange for the fake documents. "The woman asked me many questions. She wanted details…",[35] he tells us, somewhat bewildered by the grilling to which she subjects him. "The reason I asked to meet, she said, is first because I need your passport, and second just so that you know we do not do this for profit. We do it only for people who are refugees. We are an underground humanitarian organization. Do you understand that?".[36] While the sentiments behind this self-exposition share in what Didier Fassin has recently called "humanitarian reason" and its heavy reliance on narratives of suffering they also (these sentiments) betray the ways an organization such as this sanctions rather than contests the workings of state authority. This underground organization not only implicitly differentiates between genuine and bogus refugees – a common practice among contemporary European states – but also acts in accordance with and adopts the language of political control in which designations like "refugees" reinforce the laws which regulate the lives and movement of those thus designated. If, following Butler, we agree that refugees "are not just stripped of status but accorded a status and prepared for their dispossession and displacement … becom[ing] [refugees] precisely through complying with certain normative categories"[37], we will see how the organization subscribes to and reinforces the kind of logic that produces such categories. In other words, before they proffer any help, they have to accept the rules of the state. Supplying forged documents illustrates perfectly this precondition. Doing so not only brings someone like Bassam under the control of state authorities but also preserves these authorities' right to control some people's movement.

While neither Roland and Rhea nor the humanitarian organization is state authorities, they nevertheless speak the language of these authorities and adopt their optics. To recognise and call someone illegal is to mimic the recognition by state authorities. To be deemed "illegal" by the state is to be made to assume an identity that pre-exists the person thus identified. Roland's proposal, with its "you have to leave," "you have no papers," both anticipates and conveys the authoritative "Hey you…" to which Bassam

[34] Ibid., p. 241.
[35] Ibid., p. 241.
[36] Ibid., p. 241.
[37] Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, politics, belonging*. London 2007, p. 15.

acquiesces thus demonstrating the "inevitable submission"[38] to the state authority and the categories it dispenses. For the state to identify someone as illegal it must first have recognised that this someone has arrived with a claim upon its territory and that this arrival is a form of encroachment upon it. Clearly, not all arrivals are read as such. By replicating this kind of reading in relation to Bassam, and thus speaking and acting on behalf of the state authority, Rhea, Roland and the humanitarian organization in fact displace Bassam consolidating and reproducing the power that authorizes designations such as "illegal." This designation already contains an implicit injunction to leave invalidating one's claim to a given place. It thereby re-establishes the borders that demarcate it, and re-institutes authority over it. The displacement intimated in an appellation such as "illegal" materializes the space in which, as Balibar has told us, political authority can be constituted by maintaining control over it. Therefore, "You have to leave," Roland's apparently friendly advice that remains in the service of the statist logic, situates him and Rhea and the organisation *not* in opposition to the state but amidst its most vehement defenders such as the racist thugs. The ambivalence of the "You have to leave" lies in its uneasy replication of the racist taunts with which Bassam gets to be greeted on arrival. This is not to say that what a gang of racist thugs does on the street and what an underground organization helping refugees does is the same. But it is to say that *both* act according to the same kind of logic even if this logic is used to different effects. These different effects, though, still keep the logic intact.

[38] Butler, *Psychic Life*, p. 111.

Ewa Macura-Nnamdi

(State) Authority and Immigrant Life in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*

This paper offers a reading of Rawi Hage's novel *De Niro's Game* (2008) as engaging with the questions of immigration, displacement and the role of authority in the production and maintenance of the national space. Drawing on the theoretical work by Etienne Balibar, Wendy Brown and Judith Butler, I argue that territorial thinking underlies not only nationalist interpellations (it is in fact necessary for interpellation to take place) but also humanitarian actions and sentiments which turn out to be propelled – against all odds – by a similar kind of logic that underlies national authority.

Keywords: Rawi Hage, *De Niro's Game*, immigrant, authority, displacement
Słowa klucze: Rawi Hage, *W co grał De Niro*, immigrant, autorytet, przemieszczenie