

The Roach's Revenge:
Suicide and Survival in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*
Brittany Kraus

Abstract: What does it mean to “exist and not to belong?” asks the narrator of Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* (210). This article analyses the themes of exile and alienation in *Cockroach* in relation to current discourses of global migration and state surveillance. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s idea of the refugee as “pure man” (116), I argue that Hage’s novel calls into question the degree to which the discourse of the human (and human rights) can exist beyond state apparatuses of citizenship and belonging and how refugees, migrants, and *sans papiers* are excluded from the “realm of common humanity” (Razack, *Dark Threats* 8) via state apparatuses of security and surveillance. Examining the novel as a revenge narrative, I focus on how *Cockroach*’s unnamed protagonist—an impoverished Arab migrant living in Montreal—shifts between human and insect form to indicate how the discourse of the human fails to create the political and socio-economic conditions necessary for his survival.

Keywords: refugee, exile, hospitality, surveillance, citizenship, Rawi Hage, *Cockroach*

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.

Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 1

He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.

Samuel Johnson, “Anecdotes by the Rev. Percival Stockdale” 333

In a 2011 interview with Rita Sakr, Rawi Hage characterizes his work as deeply “influenced by the crisis of identity and the conflictual nature of the question of belonging” (“Imaginative Migrations” 346). This statement certainly holds true for his 2008 novel, *Cockroach*. Set in Montreal—where Hage, originally from Lebanon, currently lives—the novel traces the movements and metamorphoses of its unnamed male protagonist as he attempts to survive poverty, racism, and the splintering of his sense of self. “I am only half human,” the narrator states (Hage, *Cockroach* 245). His other half, he asserts, is cockroach, an insect emblematic of squalid quarters, impoverished conditions, and dark, dank spaces. As an Arab immigrant¹ to Canada from an unidentified, war-torn Middle Eastern country,² the narrator’s identification with the cockroach gestures toward the long use of metaphors of pestilence and plague to mobilize xenophobic and racialized discourses that demonize and dehumanize the migrant other. But in the context of today’s global refugee and migrant crisis, the narrator’s desire to become less human and more cockroach raises salient questions about the use of security and surveillance state apparatuses to not only police the movements of people across local, national, and transnational borders but also govern the very discourse of the human. How, in other words, do today’s technologies and discourses of surveillance establish normative criteria determining who is human and who falls outside of that category? Who can enter spaces of belonging and recognition, into the “realm of common humanity” (Razack, *Dark Threats* 8), and who is driven underground? What rights does a cockroach have?

To date, Hage has published four novels: *De Niro’s Game* (2006), *Cockroach*, *Carnival* (2012), and *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018). All of them focus, to different extents, on a “series of variously unstable, unreliable, and often unlikeable characters who face the difficult and amoral (rather than immoral) choices that they make in order to survive in contexts of war, subordination, abjection, and subalternisation” (Dobson 257). In *Cockroach*, the “unstable, unreliable, and often unlikeable” protagonist assumes the role of a cockroach as a way to survive the harsh realities of his everyday existence and seek revenge against the forms of domination and subordination he deems responsible for his abjection

and alienation. The cockroach—a creature of great resilience—knows no borders, no human hierarches of being and order. As Hage states, “I used a despicable insect as a metaphor for the ever-resilient mover for whom the architecture of human boundaries is nothing more than a stroll through the pipes and the underground, whose closeness to the ground mocks the idea of an afterlife, a being who defies upward mobility and its cloud of rewards” (“On the Weight of Separation” 230). In his cockroach form, the narrator imagines himself free to move as he pleases, strolling—or, rather, crawling³—past property lines, codes of civility, and the bounds between truth and fiction or fantasy and reality. He increasingly believes in an “unhealthy, imagined underground world” (Abdul-Jabbar 181) in which he can find refuge from the hunger and cold that ravage his (human) body and escape the panoptical, socio-political gaze that seeks to regulate his identity and categorize his worth. The underground is “at once hiding place and refuge, . . . the ambivalent ground the protagonist occupies” (Kamboureli 145).

Since its publication, *Cockroach* has generated criticism that interprets the novel through diasporic, postcolonial, nationalist, psychoanalytic, and trauma frameworks. Little has yet been written on the novel in relation to current discourses of global migration and state sovereignty, despite *Cockroach's* trenchant engagement with themes of security, citizenship, and nationhood, as well as the presence of multiple refugee narratives in the novel.⁴ Although the narrator is never identified as a refugee, his experiences of dehumanization, disenfranchisement, and displacement; his tactics of escape and evasion; his ontological (and psychological) insecurity; and his desire for refuge and recognition typify the politics and aesthetics that accompany the refugee condition. Moreover, the narrator's deep ambivalence, which characterizes every aspect of his being—from his citizenship status⁵ to his species, his victimhood to his venality—challenges the codes of legibility and recognition that are used to sort people into categories that, as David Lyon suggests, may threaten their very survival (1). Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's concept of the refugee as “pure man” (116)—a figure who poses a radical threat to the foundations of state and sovereignty—I argue that Hage's *Cockroach* interrogates the degree to which the discourse of the human (and human

rights) can exist beyond state apparatuses of citizenship and belonging. Despite the many ways in which the narrator exercises his agency in his spectacular performance of a “despicable insect,” his metamorphosis from man to cockroach (which, I claim, is complete by the novel’s conclusion) ultimately highlights how the discourse of the human fails to create the political and socioeconomic conditions necessary for his survival.

Who Are You?

From the outset of the novel, the narrator’s humanity is called into question. His introduction is not as a man but as a mutant creature, driven by excessive sexual desire and primitive, predatory urges:

When I see a woman, I feel my teeth getting thinner, longer, pointed. My back hunches and my forehead sprouts two antennae that sway in the air, flagging a need for attention. I want to crawl under the feet of the women I meet and admire their upright posture, their delicate ankles. I also feel repulsed . . . by slimy feelings of cunning and need. It is a bizarre mix of emotions and instinct that come over me. (Hage, *Cockroach* 3)

The narrator describes himself as being held captive by his compulsion to “seduce and possess every female of the species” (3), to dominate them as he, paradoxically, crawls under their feet. He admits to feeling repulsed by his animal (or insect) urges yet clearly revels in unsettling his audience by incorporating lurid and spectacular details into his confession. As he fixes his gaze on a woman, he describes his bodily transformation into the grotesque form of an insect. The narrator’s metamorphosis from man to roach is, according to Gillian Bright, “a physical manifestation of his shame; his transformation denotes the affective symptoms of shame—the excruciatingly self-aware blush that leads its victim to feel grotesque—and transcribes them into the mutant figure” (69–70). Yet while the narrator’s shame manifests in a fantastical form, transforming him into a slimy, sadomasochistic roach, his shame is borne of real experiences of trauma: “In addition to its corporeal afflictions, shame emerges from specific events—the exchanges produced by histories with

particularly uneven power dynamics: abuse, for instance, or segregation” (Bright 70). Indeed, the narrator first locates the cockroach’s origin in an extraordinary tale of his youth:

Tell me about your childhood, the shrink asked me.

In my youth I was an insect.

What kind of insect? she asked.

A cockroach, I said.

Why?

Because my sister made me one. (Hage, *Cockroach* 5)

We later learn in a flashback that the narrator’s sister is dead, murdered by her husband, a militiaman, after he heard rumours of her alleged infidelity. Not only were the rumours false, the narrator was in fact responsible for spreading them in a backfired (and not altogether altruistic) attempt to save his sister from her husband’s vicious abuse. Too cowardly to confront the husband and his thug friends in reality, the narrator begins fantasizing about seeking revenge in the form of an insect capable of “crawl[ing] under their doors at night and slay[ing] them all in their filthy bedsheets” (100).

The death of the narrator’s sister, and the responsibility he feels for it, is the original trauma, the terrible event that “casts a shadow over the narrator’s whole life” (Urbaniak-Rybicka 457). However, the narrator’s experiences of trauma are not restricted to his past or his homeland: his trauma is ongoing in Canada, aggravated by conditions of poverty, racism, and abjection, as well as the mechanisms of normalization and assimilation he is regularly subjected to. The narrator’s shame, then, is a product not only of his traumatic past but also of his present. As Daniel Trottier argues, “[s]haming typically manifests in response to behavior or utterances that breach either legal or moral boundaries. Through mediated coordination, the perceived transgressor becomes the ‘transgressor victim’ of scrutiny and denunciation” (171). In his relationship with his therapist, Genevieve—a white, Canadian doctor—the narrator frequently plays the part of the “transgressor victim,” alternating between modes of sympathy and subversion. His belated realization that Genevieve is not only a doctor but a woman and thus subject to his

lustful gaze, “that same urge” (Hage, *Cockroach* 3) of sexual voyeurism, allows him to exercise the limited power he has in their doctor/patient relationship while embodying the stereotype of the hypersexual, chauvinistic Middle Eastern man. By identifying Genevieve as a woman rather than a doctor or representative of the state, the narrator attempts to divest her of her authority, subjecting her to the same objectifying and dehumanizing strategies he feels vulnerable to in their weekly therapy sessions. He tries to reverse the clinical—and colonial—gaze by placing her body on display as an exotic specimen to be observed, assessed, fetishized, and shamed. In so doing, he embodies the male gaze and its histories of patriarchal and colonial violence.

Seeing, or, in Donna Haraway’s famous words, “the power to see” (192), is a prominent theme in the novel and questions the ways human beings are ranked and (de)valued by visual regimes of power. Since Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the male gaze in cinema, multiple theorists have identified how seeing is fundamentally inscribed by relations of power and violence. “Vision,” as Donna Haraway writes, “is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?” (192). In his constant surveillance of women, *Cockroach*’s narrator embodies the “determining male gaze” (Mulvey 13) that objectifies and fetishizes its object. But as the narrator watches women, assessing their body parts and behaviour—“their upright posture, their delicate ankles”—so too is he watched and assessed. He feels “X-rayed . . . anticipated, watched, analyzed and bet upon” (Hage, *Cockroach* 227), a figure of constant suspicion and observation. He becomes obsessed with escaping the “permanence of the sun” (4), the light of which, as a symbol of (white) power and privilege in the novel, both excludes him and threatens to expose him. As Haraway identifies, “[o]nly those occupying the position of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied, unmediated’ (193). Only by ceasing to exist can the narrator imagine freedom from subjugation and the watchful, determining gaze of the state and its most privileged subjects: “I felt oppressed by it all. The question of existence consumed me” (Hage, *Cockroach* 4). Thus, the narrator attempts suicide—in public and in broad daylight—as a des-

perate and defiant act of escape. He fails, theatrically, and is “handcuffed and taken for, as they put it, assessment” (5).

Ironically, the narrator's drastic attempt to escape scrutiny places him under increased surveillance. His suicidal (and criminal) behaviour marks him as a viable threat to not only himself but also public safety and sanctity; his suicidal body becomes a social problem. In his mandatory visits to the therapist, the narrator is regularly scrutinized for signs of danger and disturbance. Outside of the therapist's office, his suicidal body is less of a concern than his visible foreignness and social abjection, which attracts, on more than one occasion, the attention of the police. The narrator is a highly conspicuous figure, especially when he is standing still: “But I couldn't just stand there on the street for too long, not working, not moving. I would raise the neighbours' suspicions. Everything on this street had to have a purpose. Stillness and piercing foreign eyes would soon be questioned by uniforms under whirling police-car lights” (270). He must keep moving to avoid attracting attention. He is too visibly poor, too visibly foreign: his body gives him away.

With the rise of biometric technologies, the body emerges as a primary site of testimony, capable of affirming or denying one's public identity. The body is both an object of inquiry and an evidentiary text, analysed and assessed for signs of danger, risk, truth, and falsehood. While biometrics are sometimes praised for their neutrality, they are, as many critics argue, inextricable from biopolitical systems of power and domination. According to Joseph Pugliese, biometrics are “inscribed with infrastructural relations of disciplinary power underpinned by normative categories of race, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, class and age” (2). The answer to the question “[w]ho are you?”⁶ he argues, “pivots on the specificity of a subject's embodiment and her or his geopolitical status. What you are—a person of colour and/or an asylum seeker—determines the answering of who you are” (Pugliese 2). Lyon asserts that modern surveillance is equivalent to “social sorting,” a method of maintaining hierarchies of human value: “surveillance today sorts people into categories, assigning worth or risk, in ways that have real effects on their life-chances” (1). Security, then, rests on the delineation of firm boundaries between the self and the other, between those who must be

protected and those who, in Sherene Razack's words, "must be killed so that we can live" ("Afterword" 819). The increased use of biometrics to determine the "real" refugees from queue jumpers, terrorists, criminals, and other imposters demands that the refugee's body is both identifiable and verifiable. Because biometric technologies transmute "a subject's corporeal or behavioural attributes into evidentiary data inscribed within regimes of truth" (Pugliese 3) that are in turn inscribed with complex relations of power and knowledge, those data must correspond with the coded expectations and demands of that truth regime. If the body is shown to be false—the gait suspicious, the accent wrong—the refugee's life could be at stake.

Though he embodies the "desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and stranded" (Hage, *Cockroach* 151), the narrator in *Cockroach* is never explicitly identified as a refugee or refugee claimant. In fact, the narrator is frequently contemptuous of refugees, especially Professor Youssef, "[t]hat lazy, pretentious, Algerian pseudo-French intellectual" (10). The narrator's disdain for Youssef and other Algerian refugees—"those welfare dogs" (144)—arises from his own shame at being "stuck at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy" (Beneventi 563), exiled from the promises of Canadian multiculturalism. As the narrator is unable to experience the full benefits of "real" citizenship, which are exemplified, in his view, by the lives of the wealthy and the white, he turns his anger against the Algerians, aligning himself with the dominant culture and its "refusal to accept the new underclass of refugees" (Staels 17). The Arista Café on St. Laurent Street is a symbolic borderland in which a motley crew of immigrants, exiles, refugees, and undocumented migrants gather to, in the narrator's words, "howl about the past" and "sprinkle traces of their lives here" (Hage, *Cockroach* 144). He mocks the newcomers, perceiving them as "lost mutts" unable to assimilate into the dominant society: "I find it charming, the refugees' confusions and complaints. . . . Lost mutts! They don't know what colour they are. They can't decide what breed they belong to" (144). In this passage, the narrator adopts the surveilling eye of the state that demands its subject identify herself in clear, classifiable terms: What race? What place? What breed of immigrant? Are you human or "miserable dogs?" (144).

II. A New Kind of Human

In her seminal essay “We Refugees” (1943), Hannah Arendt argues that “contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings” (111): the refugee, the exile, those without countries or political status. As Arendt identifies, being human does not guarantee human rights. Without legal or political status, the refugee or stateless person is subject to the “fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings” (Arendt 118). In his reading of Arendt’s essay, Agamben highlights how the refugee—the “pure man” (116), in his words—poses a radical threat to the concept of the nation-state: “That there is no autonomous space within the political order of the nation-state for something like the pure man in himself is evident at least in the fact that . . . the status of the refugee is always considered a temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation. A permanent status of man in himself is inconceivable for the law of the nation-state” (116). In other words, human rights are not a priori. Arendt argues that humans who are “nothing but human beings” (118) must continuously change their identities, adopt false accents and fake names, forget the past, and play the role of the happy and well-assimilated citizen, or they risk discovery: “The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles” (115). Survival, then, is dependent on disguise.

Cockroach’s narrator embodies the “pure man” not because he lacks political status—he has papers, although their exact nature is unclear—but rather because he is denied access to the rights and privileges that Canadian citizenship supposedly confers: gainful employment, opportunities for social and economic advancement, and freedom of mobility. His suicide attempt is thus a confession that, as he cannot live as he wants, free from the burdens of poverty and racism, he would rather not live at all: “It was my need to unfold an eternal blanket that would cover everything, seal the sky and my window, and turn the world into an insect’s play” (Hage, *Cockroach* 11–12). Like Meursault in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (*L’Étranger*),⁷ the narrator desires to rid himself of the oppressive, intruding light. This time, however, the Arab man is

not wielding a knife; he is dangling from a rope. As Camus writes, “[i]n a sense, and as in melodrama, killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it. . . . It is merely confessing that [life] ‘is not worth the trouble’” (*Sisyphus* 2). But the narrator’s suicide attempt is not only a confession; it is also an accusation. In his efforts to escape the “shameful, shaming structure of the Western gaze” (Bright 71) once and for all, the narrator enacts a public scene of violent, vengeful spectacle: “Within a specular system of identifying otherness, shame infects all—both sides of the shaming gaze: the object of the Western gaze and the Western subject, who must contend with shame’s violent return” (71). The narrator’s pathetic failure to achieve death does little to mask the gruesome reality of the scene—a man “hanging from a rope around a tree branch” (Hage, *Cockroach* 5) for all passersby to see, a ghastly spectacle of suffering and despair that confronts the dominant image Canada promotes of itself as a place where immigrants will find hope, hospitality, and opportunity. The narrator has found nothing in Canada but “harsh terrain” (8), hunger, isolation, and impoverishment. Walking the streets of a wintery Montreal, he loses all sense of purpose, place, and identity: “Where am I? And what am I doing here? How did I end up trapped in a constantly shivering carcass, walking in a frozen city with wet cotton falling on me all the time? And on top of it all, I am hungry, impoverished, and have no one, no one” (9). He laments the hostility of the city’s inhabitants, the lack of human contact and social recognition he experiences: “Not even a nod in this cold place, not even a timid wave, not a smile from below red, sniffing, blowing, noses” (9). The narrator’s disillusionment with the “promised land” (9) of Canada leaves him with a profound sense of alienation. He is a stranger to others and to himself.

After his suicide attempt, the narrator’s desire to end his life mutates into a longing to rid himself of his humanity. Being human traps him in a “constantly shivering carcass” (9), a body surveilled for signs of danger and difference. As an impoverished Arab immigrant living in the West in the early post-9/11 years, the narrator is a conspicuous figure: his clothes are too shabby, his skin too dark. When he applies for a job as

a server at an upscale French restaurant, the maître d' turns him down, saying “[*Le soleil t’a brûlé ta face un peu trop* (the sun has burned your face a bit too much)” (29). The narrator immediately launches into one of his many spectacular tirades:

Impotent, infertile filth! I shouted at Pierre. Your days are over and your kind is numbered. No one can escape the sun on their faces and no one can barricade against the powerful, fleeting semen of the hungry and oppressed. I promised him that one day he would be serving only giant cockroaches on his velvet chairs. . . . Doomed you will be, doomed as you are infested with newcomers! (30)

As the narrator threatens the maître d' of the unstoppable invasion of “newcomers,” his body shifts between human and insect form, his “index fingers flutter[ing] like a pair of gigantic antennae” (30). His sputtering rage at the injustices of his own life manifests as a promise of revenge and the inevitable destruction of the systematic structures of racism, colonialism, and capitalism that denigrate people to the status of bugs. He assumes the role of a mad prophet, a soothsayer of doom; no one can stop the “hungry and oppressed,” he warns.

The narrator's apocalyptic vision of a world in which the roaches rule signifies the depths of his feelings of injustice and entrapment in this “cruel and insane world saturated with humans” (23). His imagining of a roach-ruled, post-human world is initially inspired by two proselytizing Jehovah's Witnesses who warn of environmental catastrophe and human extinction: “Only the cockroaches shall survive to rule the earth” (7), they proclaim. As a cockroach, the narrator can imagine himself as sovereign rather than a mere survivor—a creature of dominance and power. As someone who has resorted to crime, namely theft and home invasion, in both his country of origin and in Canada as a means of basic survival, his desire to erase all trace of his humanity is a way to escape the punitive gaze of the state and to move, undetected and undeterred, across physical and ethical boundaries. Kit Dobson notes that the narrator's “morphing into a cockroach occurs whenever he begins to contemplate any questionable act” of violence or violation

(263). Certainly, this is the case when he stalks his therapist and later breaks into her home:

I saw where Genevieve lived, and then I crawled home.

THE NEXT DAY, FRIDAY, I woke up early. I returned to Genevieve's place and watched her leave her house for work. Then I slipped past the building's garage door, went down to the basement and crawled along the pipes. I sprang from her kitchen's drain, fixed my hair, my clothes, and walked straight to her bedroom. (Hage, *Cockroach* 80)

As the scene progresses, the narrator makes himself at home in Genevieve's private, domestic space. He crawls into her bed, sniffs her clothes, looks at her photographs, and fixes himself a sandwich. He begins referring to himself in the third-person—"the stranger in the house" (84); "the intruder, feeling at home" (83)—linguistically juxtaposing the figure of suspicion and danger with the image of domesticity. He fantasizes that he is a welcome guest in Genevieve's home, a "considerate stranger" (81) rather than a dangerous intruder. When he confesses to Genevieve that he entered her home without her permission, she responds (naturally) with shock and horror. But Genevieve is aware the narrator is a thief. In one of their therapy sessions, the narrator confesses that he steals:

You stole things.

Well yes, I did, I guess. But what kid does not steal?

Do you steal now?

I looked around, left my chair, opened the door, peered outside the room . . . and then I returned to my seat and said: Yes, sometimes. I said this in a low voice.

That's okay, Genevieve said. She cracked yet another big smile. That's okay. This is all confidential. (49–50)

Genevieve assures the narrator that "[y]ou can, and should, tell me anything, and everything" (50), refusing to acknowledge the seriousness (and ongoing nature) of his crimes until she is personally affected. The narrator calls her out for her moral hypocrisy and ethical lassitude: "You

tolerated me breaking into other people's places, I said, but now that it is your own place..." (260). His statement is a clear indictment of offering help and pity to refugees and migrants—"today's 'global cast-offs'" (Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism" 1074)—only until they come into "our" house, arrive at "our" borders, and threaten "our" way of life. The narrator's rebuke of Genevieve indicates how the language of hospitality is often used to uphold nationalist narratives of compassion and humanitarianism but is devoid of any real care for human suffering.

"I just wanted to be invited in," Hage's narrator says (Hage, *Cockroach* 286). Despite his vehement identification with the abject, the narrator yearns to transcend his social and economic position and rise above the baseness of his existence. Who wants, after all, to be poor and hungry? To live life as a bug, vulnerable and despised? To "exist and not to belong"? (210). The fact that his initial transformation into a cockroach occurs at a moment in which he is worried about how he will survive without money, food, or prospective employment indicates that the narrator's cockroach-ness is born out of necessity. As his human body mutates into an insect's, growing "wings and many legs" (19), the realities of his life interrupt his Kafkaesque fantasy: "My welfare cheque was ten days away. I was out of dope. My kitchen had only rice and leftovers and crawling insects that would outlive me on Doomsday" (19). The narrator inhabits the physical form of a cockroach to distract himself from the harsh realities of his life and to disassociate from the human "filth" that he perceives as the source of his suffering, those "who more comfortably inhabit the city" (Dobson 260) because they can participate in the taxpaying economy of Montreal while he is deemed a tax burden, an economic parasite. As Dobson argues, the status of the human is not always a given but allocated on the basis of economic potential: "While, for instance, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights assumes that what a human being is is self-evident and then sets out to discuss the rights accorded to such humans, one important function of the neoliberal is to police the borders of the human, allocating differential amounts of humanity to bodies based on their (economic) suitability" (268). The narrator is seen to have less humanity than the suit-wearing, tax-paying, identity card-carrying citizens that surround him. Indeed,

as Genevieve reminds him, he owes his life to the state and is therefore in its debt: “Yes, I am here to help you, but you know what? In the end I am an employee of the government. People are paying taxes for you to be here” (Hage, *Cockroach* 208). Genevieve’s care for the narrator extends only insofar as she continues to get paid and he continues to cooperate. He is a ward of the state, she reminds him, and he should be grateful.

Gratitude is, after all, the migrant’s duty. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness*, the migrant who refuses to assimilate jeopardizes the so-called happiness of her host country, and risks being identified as ungrateful or, worse, dangerous:

It is important to note that the melancholic migrant’s fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness. This figure may even quickly convert in the national imaginary to the “could-be terrorist.” . . . [T]he duty of the migrant is to attach to a different happier object, one that can bring good fortune. (144)

The good migrant is a happy migrant, both contributing to and participating in the cultural and tax-paying economy of the host nation. The narrator’s refusal to express his gratitude therefore identifies him as unsuccessful, undesirable, and untrustworthy. He is not only a bad migrant; he is a bad citizen: “TAXPAYERS, THE SHRINK SAYS. Ha! . . . Well yes, yes indeed, I should be grateful for what this country is giving me. I take more than I give, indeed it is true. But if I had access to some wealth, I would contribute my share. Maybe I should become a good citizen and contemplate ways to collect my debts and increase my wealth. That would be a good start” (Hage, *Cockroach* 65). The narrator is highly suspicious of the idea that good citizenry is synonymous with paying taxes and increasing wealth. Indeed, he grows more and more disgusted with the human capacity for greed, telling his therapist that they are the only creatures who take more than they need (243), leaving only the crumbs for the roaches to scavenge. “Bourgeois filth!” he cries, “I want my share!” (88).

III. The Insubordinate Insect

The narrator, of course, never gets his share. But while he is unable to secure any economic power by the novel's end, he exercises agency in his capacity as a storyteller. An unreliable narrator whose diatribes, rants, and lurid confessions of lust and deviant behaviour are frequently distasteful, and whose grasp on reality is often questionable, he blurs the lines between fact and fiction, truth and lies, fantasy and reality, human and insect. Considering *Cockroach's* preoccupation with how human identities are verified and authorized (or unauthorized) by state practices of surveillance and security, the narrator's refusal to fully cooperate in his therapy sessions, or function as a reliable narrator in general, questions the degree to which narratives of refugee or migrant trauma have become a form of currency in the economy of state hospitality.

In Canada and other Western nations, the refugee determination process requires claimants to prove a well-founded fear of persecution via data—stories, scars, identity documents—that attests to the trauma of their past and, hence, their right to protection. However, as Peter Showler, a former member of Canada's Immigration and Review Board (IRB), suggests, the refugee hearing is itself a kind of performance space, in which “fact and fiction, communication and miscommunication . . . [and] insight and ignorance intermingle and combine to form a story that may or may not capture the truth of a refugee's experience” (210). Indeed, the weekly therapy sessions the narrator is mandated to attend with his state-appointed counselor play out as miniature hearings, in which the narrator is repeatedly reminded that he will be remanded to a psychiatric institution if he does not cooperate, if he refuses to supply truthful answers to Genevieve's egregiously naive questions: “Do you want to tell me more about your childhood today? If we do not move forward, if we do not improve, I might have to recommend that you go back to the institution. Frankly, you do not give me much choice with your silence” (Hage, *Cockroach* 59–60). A representative of both the ideal citizen and the authority of the state, Genevieve equates the narrator's silence with insubordination. He must talk and lay bare the trauma of his past by telling the “tale of growing up somewhere else” (4) or return to the asylum.

Multiple critics have identified how refugees and refugee claimants must represent themselves in static and stereotypical ways to uphold Western narratives of hospitality and humanitarianism. Peter Nyers argues that refugees and refugee claimants are expected to define themselves in relation to their “refugeeness” by emphasizing their helplessness and “general condition of homelessness” (*Rethinking Refugees* xv). According to Nyers, most Western countries view the figure of the “refugee warrior” (103) as an oxymoron. How can the helpless have agency? How can those deemed “speechless and invisible victims of oppression” (Lapierre 561) have any dignity or self-determination? The expectation for refugees to tell a static and verifiable story “again and again in repetitive trauma” (Hua 110) not only affirms Western benevolence but also confirms the refugee claimant’s legitimacy and right to protection. As credibility is the key criteria used in the refugee determination process, stories of trauma have a great deal of weight: a claimant’s life may depend on her ability to produce (or reproduce) a believable story. Beyond the claim process, those who are granted refugee status are repeatedly called upon to speak of their pasts only in terms of violence and trauma while praising the benevolence and goodwill of the host nation: “Whatever the forum—courtroom, screen, stage, page—the refugee is expected to tell the same kind of story, one which testifies to trauma while supporting the familiar . . . script about ‘deserving victims and benevolent helpers’” (Dawson 52). In *Cockroach*, the narrator’s refusal to go along with the script (he frequently lies to Genevieve or skews the details of his past) shows how trauma stories are frequently rendered “easily consumable spectacle” (Granados 31). In one of his therapy sessions with Genevieve, the narrator criticizes how his so-called treatment is contingent on his ability to nakedly confess his trauma: “Here—is this what you want? Here—these are my tears. Does that make me sane, normal, cured?” (Hage, *Cockroach* 142).

Genevieve’s cyclopic focus on the narrator’s past denies him the care and treatment he requires in the present—care that may have prevented the murders he later commits and his complete descent underground by the novel’s end. Early on in *Cockroach*, the narrator describes his rage toward his therapist’s fundamental lack of understanding and insight:

"The therapist . . . brought on a feeling of violence within me that I hadn't experienced since I left my homeland. She did not understand. For her, everything was about my relationships with women, but for me, everything was about defying the oppressive power in the world that I can neither participate in nor control" (4–5). Although Genevieve expresses her desire for the narrator's rehabilitation, for him to "reintegrate into society" (76), she fails to acknowledge that his most basic needs are not being met. When the narrator tells her of his "food envy syndrome" (87) because he is starving and desperately poor, she ignores his plea for help:

Was your mother nourishing? Genevieve asked.

With food, you mean?

Well, okay, food. Let's talk about food.

I like food, I said. Though I worry about food shortages lately.

Did you have enough food in your youth? For now I am interested in your past. (49)

What the narrator needs is food, not therapy or pseudo-Freudian talking cures. The directive to talk only about the past is an ineffective treatment strategy. But more importantly, it also depoliticizes and decontextualizes his problems: "According to Genevieve, neither poverty nor the hostility he experiences from mainstream Canadian society are to blame for his attempted suicide" (Forget 76). The narrator's suicidal inclinations, his tendencies toward theft and violence, his excessive sexuality, and his obsession with the abject are all issues, in Genevieve's view, that are strictly rooted in the narrator's past and homeland.

The therapist's refusal to concede that the narrator's problems may be a product of the perils he faces living in Canada indicates her failure to regard him as anything other than a foreigner, a stranger whose ability to "reintegrate into [Canadian] society" (Hage, *Cockroach* 76) rests on his capacity to assimilate. As Julia Kristeva writes, "[t]he foreigner is at once identified as beneficial or harmful to that social group and its power and, on that account, he is to be assimilated or rejected" (96). Paradoxically, the stories that excite Genevieve and capture her

attention emphasize the violence and barbarism of the narrator's desert homeland and confirm his exoticism and otherness in her eyes. In a reversal of gender roles, the narrator adopts the persona of Scheherazade, the female storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, to entertain the doctor, who, he perceives, "like sultans, is fond of stories" (Hage, *Cockroach* 102). He attributes Genevieve's gullibility to the privilege of her status as a white middle-class Canadian: "I knew she was hooked, intrigued. Simple woman, I thought. Gentle, educated, but naïve, she is sheltered by glaciers and prairies, thick forests, oceans and dancing seals" (104). Yet while the narrator plays the role of the "fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner" (199), he does so from a subordinate position: "The barrier between the narrator—a dark-skinned, traumatized, impoverished and psychotic immigrant—and a white, native-born, successful, and wealthy Canadian not personally involved in the sessions but relegated to the task by the government and hired by tax-payers, never disappears" (Urbaniak-Rybicka 454). Even as an audience, Genevieve is privileged. If the narrator's story goes off-script, if the story he tells does not accord with what she wants to hear, Genevieve has the authority to diagnose him as mentally unfit and send him back to the asylum. As Smaro Kamboureli argues, "[t]hat he is accountable to the state's health system is symptomatic of his pathologized condition as an immigrant, and as an Arab at that. Indeed, the outcome of the therapy sessions will determine the narrator's life course" (147). The storyteller must appease the sultan: his future depends on it.

Although storytelling is typically perceived as a uniquely human activity, stories can also have dehumanizing effects. According to Wisam Abdul-Jabbar, "[d]ehumanization is . . . prominent in the novel via the disparaging romantic notion that arriving in Canada marks the end of the immigrant's woes, the final haven for asylum seekers, and therefore the story of immigration becomes a narrative about becoming human again" (175). The immigrant success story often relies on a rhetoric of salvation, wherein the First World extends a helping hand to a deserving victim, typically from the Third. Everything about the narrator, however, runs counter to the narrative of the successful, re-humanized immigrant. His story of "becoming human again" is interrupted by the fact

that he lacks everything that supposedly defines a successful immigrant (and a successful citizen), such as economic and social mobility, law abidance, community support, and mental and physical health. It is no wonder, then, that the narrator attempts suicide: "All those who leave immigrate to better their lives, but I wanted to better my death" (Hage, *Cockroach* 160). Death offers him freedom from "the world that [he] can neither participate in nor control" (5). As Arendt speculates, suicide may be the final hope for human freedom from oppression: "Perhaps the philosophers are right who teach that suicide is the last and supreme guarantee of human freedom: not being free to create our lives or the world in which we live, we nevertheless are free to throw life away and to leave the world" (113–14). The narrator's decision to end his life is, however, a dramatic failure, a "reminder that this whole comedy of my life was still at play" (Hage, *Cockroach* 33). The branch he hangs himself on cannot support the weight of his body and breaks, plunging him to the ground. Unable to find freedom in death or transcend the baseness of his living existence, the narrator splits in two, imagining himself as both human and insect. His feelings of alienation and estrangement are so powerful that the narrator hallucinates he is seeing—and talking—to a giant albino cockroach. The white cockroach corroborates the narrator's suspicion that he is only half human and becoming even less human as time goes on: "But *mon cher*. The slimy creature at my door leaned its head sideways. The world ended for you a long time ago. You never participated in it. Look at you, always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped in everything you do. . . . You are one of us. You are part cockroach" (201, 203). According to the giant cockroach, the narrator's inability to meaningfully participate in society is responsible for his dehumanization. Had he been able to secure economic and social privilege in the world instead of "always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped," the world would, in the cockroach's view, still exist for him. Social participation, or citizenship itself, becomes an index of humanity. Indeed, in *Deaths of Man*, the American clinical psychologist Edwin S. Schneidman draws a correlation between social alienation and what he terms "partial death" or "death of an aspect of the self" (164). Not being "totally socially alive" (162), Schneidman argues, may bring about a

kind of spiritual or psychic death: “Its manifestations are an inner barrenness and aridity, accompanied by withdrawal from his society, grave social refusal. . . . It has to do with the repudiation of one’s society, of ostracizing people, cutting them dead; it also relates to society’s repudiation and ostracism of the person. Thus there are deaths of aspects of the inner self, and deaths of aspects of the outer or social self” (162). The narrator’s “partial death” is literalized by his part human, part cockroach form. The more he feels ostracized from human society and its hierarchies of privilege and belonging, the less human he becomes: “I bent my long whiskers and thought how self-absorbed these humans are. All they ever build is for their own kind and their own height” (Hage, *Cockroach* 285). As he cannot join the dominant class or aspire to “their own height” of wealth and social privilege, the narrator turns to the underground.

Characterizing humans as “jealous, vain gods,” the giant albino cockroach invites the narrator to join the cockroaches in their underground revolution, in their “project to change the world” (202). The narrator refuses at first, stating that he will not participate in their mission to “subordinate and kill” all those who resist the mission. But the cockroach reminds him that violence is inescapable, that there will always be those who subordinate and kill and those who are subordinated and killed. As violence shapes his past, so too will it be central to his future: “I have known you since your childhood. . . . That was me. When you hid in your mother’s closet I was also there, and when you stole candy from the store I was there, and when you collected bullets, and when you followed Abou-Roro down to the place of the massacre and watched him pull golden teeth from cadavers, I was there” (202). As an enormous white cockroach, the insect is a manifestation of the narrator’s psychological trauma and his desire for dominance and “revenge for past hunger, cold, and those days when the sun chased me from one room to another, making me sweat and making me blind” (225). Ironically, the white cockroach is a symbol of the “dark powers that oppress him” (Marchi 51)—an internalized figure of white dominance, global capitalism, Western rule, and a reflection of the narrator’s own abjection. Majeed, a refugee taxi driver, tells the narrator: “You know,

we come to these countries for refuge and to find better lives, but it is these countries that made us leave our homes in the first place. . . . You know, these countries we live in talk about democracy, but they do not want democracy. They want only dictators. It is easier for them to deal with dictators than to have democracy in the countries we come from” (Hage, *Cockroach* 223–224). The white cockroach thus symbolizes the lie of Western democracy and the violence and political corruption that has followed the narrator throughout his childhood and adulthood, displacing him from his homeland, ensuring his poverty and oppression, and inciting him to violence.

At the end of *Cockroach*, the narrator not only joins the underground, he embodies it. After killing a rapist and arms dealer in a misguided act of revenge, the narrator casts off his human form entirely and descends underground with his “glittering wings” (305). While the romanticized language of the final passage suggests the narrator’s triumphant escape from the “oppressive power” of the human world—he climbs aboard a leaf “carried along by the stream of soap and water as if it were a gondola in Venice” (305)—it cements the narrator’s permanent exile from human discourse. Having killed a man with deep ties to the Canadian and Iranian governments (as well as the man’s bodyguard), the narrator can never return to his human form without facing the punishment of incarceration, possible deportation, and even death. As a fully awakened cockroach, he is a fully estranged man. Indeed, the narrator’s final metamorphosis into a cockroach signifies a second (but this time successful) suicide attempt, in which his cockroach form extinguishes his human body; the underground, which finally allows him to escape the light, disappears him in darkness. In an earlier scene in the novel, the narrator imagines his dead body as “a large red fruit swinging from high up in the tree[,] . . . a red dot against the white horizon, suspended above the earth” (175). He envisions his death as offering hope and solace to others: “Maybe that is all that is supposed to be left of our lives: a glimpse of beauty, an offering for those who are still trapped, a last offering to console them in their mundane existence” (175). But while the final passage of the novel offers that “glimpse of beauty” with its romantic, surrealist imagery, the reality is bleak. There is nothing left

of the narrator's life but that glimpse. As Dobson argues, there is little triumph in the narrator's final act:

It seems very difficult . . . to view his final turn to the underground and to his cockroach self as a return to equilibrium, ontological certainty, or a sense of home. Instead, in its final enactment of what is set up as justified revenge against a rapist and arms dealer, the protagonist appears to reject the human form, casting aside its limits and pretensions, and diving, instead, for the sewers that humankind already metaphorically inhabits in this novel. (269)

Though pessimistic, Dobson's reading of the novel's ambiguous conclusion cogently acknowledges how profound the narrator's sense of alienation is by the novel's end. Reading the narrator's final descent into the underground as regenerative and liberating runs the risk of minimizing the narrator's experiences of poverty, racism, and abjection and romanticizing the conditions that lead him to despise his own existence. As Edward Said writes, "[m]arginality and homelessness are not, in my opinion, to be gloried; they are to be brought to an end, so that more, and not fewer, people can enjoy the benefits of what has for centuries been denied the victims of race, class, or gender" (385). Unable to access the benefits denied to him because of race, class, and citizenship status, the narrator quite literally disappears down the drain by the novel's end. His alienation is complete and his foreignness absolute. He who makes a bug of himself gets rid of the pain of being human.

Notes

1 The narrator's citizenship status remains ambiguous throughout the novel. Most critics identify him as an Arab immigrant to Canada, though some critics, such as Libin and Abdul-Jabbar, refer to him as a refugee. The ambiguity of the narrator's citizenship status further emphasizes his alienation and estrangement; he identifies neither with the "taxpayers" (Hage, *Cockroach* 65) of Montreal's dominant class nor the "welfare dogs" (144) of the city's diasporic and refugee communities.

2 Multiple critics have read the protagonist's country of origin as Lebanon. Kam-bourelly asserts that "we can infer [he] is an Arab of Christian background from

- Beirut only by the names of his family members and such references as those to the war in Beirut and the city's port" (144). The fact that the protagonist and his country of origin are unnamed emphasizes his exilic condition as well as his commonality: he is a man with no name and no country—one among the millions of the world's displaced and dispossessed. His anonymity also represents his ability to bypass detection.
- 3 Kamboureli notes that the verb "crawl" appears with "disturbing frequency" (145) throughout the novel, signalling the narrator's willful and forced dehumanization.
 - 4 Lapierre's essay "Refugees and Global Violence" is a rare example of writing on the novel that analyses the function of its refugee narratives.
 - 5 *Cockroach* never explicitly identifies the narrator's citizenship status. He has identity papers—in one scene of the novel he is asked to produce them for the police—which suggests he is not undocumented. He never claims to be a citizen, however, but repeatedly emphasizes his outsider position.
 - 6 Pugliese is building on Foucault's famous assertion that in the modern biopolitical state, the "question of truth" is no longer "[w]hat have you done?" but "[w]ho are you?" (Foucault 34).
 - 7 As Bright argues, "on contextual, aesthetic, and philosophical levels, the writer with whom Hage engages most purposefully in *Cockroach* is Albert Camus" (2). Indeed, Hage makes multiple, interwoven allusions to Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Guest* (L'Hôte) throughout the novel. The suicide scene in *Cockroach*, for example, is a cunning play on the famous murder scene in *The Stranger*.

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