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The Roach's Revenge: "An Insect's Play" of Suicide and Survival in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

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Submission to the 2018 Irving and Jeanne Glovin Award

Word Count: 4996

## Abstract

Through a literary analysis of Rawi Hage's 2008 novel, *Cockroach*, I explore the concept of good human conduct as it relates to current discourses of citizenship, exile, hospitality and belonging. I argue that the 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 the ways in which good human conduct relies on the fundamental recognition of the other as human. I ask: how does the discourse of the human respond to or fail the migrant, the refugee, the exile, the marginalized other? What are the rights of those without citizenship, without papers, without the protection of the state? When is being human not enough?

Examining the novel as a revenge narrative, my paper focuses on how *Cockroach*'s unnamed protagonist – an impoverished, Arab immigrant to Montreal – shifts between human and insect form to indicate the ways in which the discourse of the human fails to create the political, social and economic conditions necessary for his survival. The narrator's omnipresent feelings of exile and estrangement, his disenfranchisement and lack of economic and social mobility, his experiences of racialized and class-based discrimination, and his compulsion to become less human and more insect allows for a reading of this novel through a post-humanist and post-colonial lens, a reading that calls for a more ethical response to and understanding of the plight of the cockroach.

### Introduction

“I am only half human,” (p. 245) states the unnamed narrator of Rawi Hage’s 2008 novel, *Cockroach*. His other half, he asserts, is cockroach, an insect notoriously associated with filth, poverty, and pestilence. The cockroach is also, however, one of the most resilient creatures on earth, capable of adapting to various climates and not only surviving but thriving in harsh and inhospitable conditions. As metaphors of pestilence and plague have long been key to mobilizing xenophobic discourses used to demonize and dehumanize the im/migrant subject, the narrator’s “obsession with the vermin” (Abdul-Jabbar, 2017, p. 168) is directly tied to his outsider status as an impoverished, racialized immigrant to Montreal from an unidentified, war-torn Middle Eastern country. By perceiving himself as less than human and desiring to disassociate with the “filth” of humankind (Hage, 2008, pp. 53, 88, 159, 284), the narrator imagines a new world order in which the poor, the displaced, the abject, and the ‘undesirable’ are liberated from the physical and socio-economic structures that “seek to control their bodies and their movements, and ultimately efface their very presence from the public sphere” (Beneventi, 2012, p. 265). His embodiment of the ‘pestilential immigrant’ enables him to survive, however precariously, in a hostile world that excludes him on the basis of his class, race and immigrant status. Assuming the role of a cockroach, the narrator can transgress ‘forbidden’ and unsanctioned spaces, navigating the underground world of Montreal with more ease and invisibility than he can as a poor, Arab immigrant – as a human, that is.

As issues of migration, citizenship, security and ‘terror’ are at the heart of our age, examining the role of good human conduct in today’s border-obsessed world necessitates a critical rethinking of what it means to be human, and, more importantly, who is called by that name. Through a literary analysis of Hage’s darkly comedic and subversive novel, *Cockroach*, I

explore the concept of good human conduct as it relates to current discourses of citizenship, hospitality and belonging. In an interview with Rita Sakr in 2011, Hage characterizes his work as deeply “influenced by the crisis of identity and the conflictual nature of the question of belonging” (p. 346). The psychological and physical ambivalence of *Cockroach*'s narrator – he is half human, half roach – emblemizes the “diasporic split-consciousness” (Dobson, 2015, p. 257) that characterizes a lot of contemporary writing about immigration, exile and the condition of ‘refugeeness.’ However, while the narrator is “torn between staying human and assuming the role of the primitive to survive” (CBC, 2010, para. 4), his mutant identity calls into question the degree to which modern discourses of the human (and humanitarianism) can exist beyond state apparatuses of citizenship and belonging. If, as Giorgio Agamben (1995) argues, the “so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man” (p. 216) are inextricable from the rights of the citizen, then what are the rights of the human who lacks or is denied the privileges of citizenry and status? When, in other words, is being human not enough? What rights does a cockroach have?

### I. Becoming Cockroach

In Hannah Arendt's seminal essay, “We Refugees” (1943), she argues that “contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings” (p. 111) – the refugee and the exile, those without homes and political status. Being human, however, is not a guarantee of human rights. In his reading of Arendt's essay, Agamben (1995) highlights the ways in which the refugee – the “pure man,” in his words – poses a radical threat to the political and legal order 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. (p. 116)

In other words, human rights are not *a priori*. Without papers, without citizenship, 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, 1943, p. 118). To survive, Arendt (1943) writes, these “mere humans” 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: “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” (p. 115).

In *Cockroach*, the narrator's freedom is jeopardized by his impoverishment, his visibility as a racialized minority in Canada, and his reliance on the welfare of the state. His embodiment of the “pure man” derives not from the fact that he lacks citizenship – he has papers – but rather because he is denied access to the rights and privileges that Canadian citizenship supposedly confers: gainful employment, adequate health care, opportunities for educational and socio-economic advancement, etc. “I assured myself,” he naively states at one point, “that a good, hard-working man such as me could not possibly be left out to burn that last day or be subjected to the rule of cockroaches in the world to come” (Hage, 2008, p. 43). Yet “left out” is exactly what the narrator experiences. He is repeatedly a victim of racialized and class-based discrimination, repeatedly excluded from participation in the civic and economic order of the city. When he applies for a job as a waiter at an upscale French restaurant, for example, the Maître D turns him down, saying “*Le soleil t'a brûlé un peu trop* (the sun has burned your face a

bit too much)” (original emphasis) (Hage, 2008, p. 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!  
(Hage, 2008, p. 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” (Hage, 2008, p. 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.

As the mainstream discourse surrounding the global refugee crisis continues to cast refugees and migrants as potential invaders and virulent pests, the narrator’s Kafkaesque metamorphosis from man to cockroach offers a trenchant critique of the ways in which the language of pestilence is mobilized to dehumanize and demonize marginalized and vulnerable people. Indeed, national borders today are being threatened by hordes, hives, swarms, surges and swells of refugee and migrant bodies – anything but human beings. Jeanne Shinozuka (2013) identifies the degree to which this type of animalizing or naturalizing language is motivated by projects of colonialism and oppression: “the exclusion of others is inextricably linked with nature – the primitive and the demonized...Racism and colonialism, as well as sexism, have drawn their

strengths from casting various forms of difference as close to flora and fauna and reduced to the interiorized body lacking rationality or culture” (pp. 831, 836). The ways in which refugees and migrants are typically construed as either abject or dangerous, primitive or demonized, therefore operates to mobilize state policies and practices that criminalize and dehumanize them, effectively expelling them from “the realm of common humanity” (Razack, 2004, p. 8).

In Canada and other wealthy industrialized nations, these strategies of exclusion manifest in multiple forms, from the continued practice of indefinite migrant incarceration to the increased reliance on – and unerring faith in – biometric technologies to surveil and ‘capture’ the truth of a subject’s identity. Indeed, the whole apparatus of state security and surveillance is predicated now, as Foucault identified, on the question “Who are you?” rather than “What have you done?” (p. 32). Proof of identity – whether in the form of passports and identity documents, biometric data (fingerprints, retinal scans), or confessional testimonies – are essential now to designations of citizenship and status and, by extension, of humanness. It is therefore significant that the narrator describes himself simultaneously as a “master of escape” (Hage, 2008, p. 23). In his cockroach form, he can transgress the limits of his body, crossing borders undetected, crawling through “windows and holes” (Hage, 2008, p. 24) to take what the world owes him, to steal from the rich and give back to the roaches: “The underground, my friend, is a world of its own. Other humans gaze at the sky, but I say unto you, the only way through the world is to pass through the underground” (Hage, 2008, p. 24). As a cockroach, he can evade the technologies of security and surveillance that endanger his (human) ability to survive. As a poor, Arab immigrant living in the post-911, border-frenzied age, he feels “X-rayed...anticipated, watched, analyzed and bet upon” (Hage, 2008, p. 227), constantly under the watchful, punishing eye of the state. As a cockroach,

however, the narrator can watch others, invade their privacy and follow their movements: he is no longer the watched, but the watcher.

Reduced to the role of a survivor, the narrator is initially inspired by two apocalyptic-preaching Jehovah's Witnesses to take on the form of a cockroach, a creature, they claim, that will outlast the end of the world: "Only the cockroaches shall survive to rule the earth" (Hage, 2008, p. 7). As a cockroach, the narrator can imaginatively redefine his role as a mere survivor to one of dominance, a creature with agency and power. His fantasy of a post-apocalyptic, post-human world signifies the depths of his feelings of alienation and entrapment in this "cruel and insane world saturated with humans" (Hage, 2008, p. 23). As someone who has had to resort 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 rid himself of his humanity is both a way to escape the punitive gaze of the state and to silence his own conscience. While he has already been 'caught' by the state for publicly attempting to commit suicide (and subsequently held in a psychiatric institution), the narrator engages in a variety of legally and morally dubious activities, usually in his insect form, that he could very well be arrested and prosecuted for. As Kit Dobson (2015) notes, the narrator's "morphing into a cockroach occurs whenever he begins to contemplate any questionable act" (p. 263) of violence or violation. Certainly, this is the case when he stalks his therapist, Genevieve, and later breaks into her 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, 2008, p. 80)

As the scene progresses, the narrator makes himself increasingly 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"; "the intruder, feeling at home" (Hage, 2008, p. 81), linguistically juxtaposing the figure of suspicion and danger with the image of domesticity and home. When he confesses to Genevieve that he entered her home without her permission, she responds (naturally) with shock and horror. 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..." (Hage, p. 260). His statement is a clear indictment of the ways in which refugees, migrants – "today's 'global cast-offs'" (Nyers, 2003, p. 1074) – are tolerated, pitied even, 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.

Despite the narrator's vehement identification with the abject, the poor and the vermin, he yearns, nonetheless, to transcend his social and economic position, to be, as he once asks Genevieve, "invited in" (Hage, 2008, p. 286). Who wants, after all, to be poor and hungry? To live life as a bug, vulnerable and despised? To "exist and not to belong"? (Hage, 2008, p. 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 the ways in which the narrator's 'cockroach-ness' is born out of necessity, rather than choice. As his human body mutates into an insect's, with wings and whiskers and "many legs," the realities of his life interrupt his surrealist 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 (Hage, 2008, p. 19). The narrator inhabits the physical form of a cockroach to not only distract himself from the harsh realities of his life, but also to increasingly disassociate with the human “filth” that he perceives as the source of his suffering, those “who more comfortably inhabit the city” (Dobson, 2015, p. 260) because they are able to participate in the taxpaying economy of Montreal while the narrator is deemed a tax burden. As Dobson (2015) argues, the status of the human is not always a given or self-evident:

While...the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights assumes that what a human being 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. (p. 268)

The narrator, who embodies “the desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and stranded” (Hage, 2008, p. 151) is allocated less humanity than the suit-wearing, tax-paying, card-carrying *citizens* that surround him. Indeed, as Genevieve reminds him, he owes his life to the state. After his botched suicide attempt, the narrator is ‘rescued’ by state officials who arrest him, institutionalize him, and then take him for psychiatric assessment – all on the taxpayer’s dime: “I am here to assess your situation, she said, and to monitor your progress. 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, 2004, p. 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: he should be grateful. The narrator responds with contempt:

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, 2008, p. 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 (Hage, 2008, p. 243), leaving only the crumbs for the roaches to scavenge. "Bourgeois filth!" he cries, "I want my share! (Hage, 2008, p. 88).