

From the Dark Territories of Pain and Exclusion to Bright Futures? Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

Introduction

Intrigued by Heather Love's call for a reconsideration of negative affects and backward trajectories as a basis for a radical politics, I turn to *Cockroach* (2008) by Arab-Québécois writer Rawi Hage, a novel that focuses on a difficult past and mobilizes negative affects, such as unhappiness, resentment, anger, and pain, to fuel social and political change. I consider this novel exemplary of recent Arab diasporic literature¹ that counters the negative image of the melancholic migrant, as a subject fatally trapped within a deeply hurting past and paralyzed by nostalgic grief, as well as the all-too transparent and shiny representation of the successful immigrant who finds comfort and fulfillment in his/her new homeland. Rather, the novel's orientation toward the past, I argue, gives rise to a powerful and politically innovative representation of the migrant, and of the racial/ethnic Other in general, as a subject who neither mythicizes the place of origin nor glorifies the place of arrival. Instead, the protagonist in *Cockroach* poignantly insists on the persistence of racism and violence in both places and refuses to concur with the majority that multiculturalism is inherently good and cheerful.

Particularly after 9/11, with the rise of Islamophobia and the implementation of a series of racist policies following the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia, Arab writers in North America have used literature to expose, criticize, and oppose the negative construction of Arabs (especially Muslims) as potential terrorists, dangerous outlaws, and undesirable intruders threatening through their very presence the nation as a whole.² Far from limiting themselves to the exposure of this

negative construction, Arab-Canadian writers have developed distinctive ways to destabilize and dismantle this stereotypical representation. They have shifted the focus to the quotidian, thus drawing readers close to the (often dim) reality of migration, making them touch with hand the concrete material, psychic, and emotional costs of everyday racism and xenophobia.³ Hage provides an exemplary case, which is particularly significant since he is a key figure in the literary panorama of Quebec, one of the privileged destinations of the century-long Arab migration to North America.⁴ Far from reproducing the classical linear trajectory from Old to New World and the image of the good and happy-go-lucky immigrant that has widely characterized early autobiographical immigrant writing, Hage openly deviates from his predecessors to outline instead a complex character who does not necessarily thrive, inspire sympathy, nor conduct an exemplary life.⁵ On the contrary, *Cockroach's* anonymous protagonist fully displays his own contradictions and ambiguities, must learn to live with his weaknesses and failures, and feels no obligation to perform the "happiness duty" (Ahmed, *Promise* 158) that the new homeland has imposed on him.

In her provocative essay "Happy Objects," Sara Ahmed criticizes and dismantles the construction of the multicultural nation as a "happy object" and re-examines the representation of the migrant as the source of unhappiness, a melancholic being turned both inwards and backwards, who acts as "an obstacle to his or her own happiness, but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and to national happiness" (48). Writing back to a whole tradition that has blamed migrants for their stubborn insistence on "difference" and "injury" and their melancholic returns to a past they refuse to let go, Ahmed performs an interesting twist, reversing this negative interpretation and powerfully rereading the migrant's backward trajectory as an emancipatory possibility. Drawing on Ahmed's reflection on the affirmative power of such returns, I interpret the refusal to let go of suffering by Hage's protagonist and his stubborn insistence on his own and others' unhappy histories as a progressive step rather than a backward orientation. Indeed, it is an affirmative action that allows him to draw attention to conditions of inequality and injustice shared and produced both locally and globally and to promote awareness, which is the first step to propel political change.

In *Cockroach*, Hage narrates the tribulations and hardships of a dark-skinned and morally shady migrant as he struggles to claim his space in a late-capitalist society that excludes him. I claim that this mutant figure, half-man and half-cockroach, uses his condition of "abjection"⁶ to forge spectacular acts

of self-affirmation, to contest the hierarchical and racist system that imprisons him, and to build imaginative interracial, intercultural, and even interspecies alliances as a basis for collective forms of political mobilization. Drawing on subterranean links between past and present, East and West, the fantastic and the mundane, Hage surprises readers with creative and emotionally intense representations of the migrant, and of the racial/ethnic Other in general. No longer just the blinded victim of bad luck, but rather an active and resourceful agent constantly looking for new ways to liberate himself and others from the existential, social, economic, and political confinement in which he finds himself trapped, the anonymous protagonist in Hage's novel willfully uncovers a dark and too-quickly liquidated archive of unhappy stories and vulnerable bodies, thus unmasking the ineradicable traces of violence and racism that still persist in our presumably happy democracies. More specifically, by revealing to attentive readers the imperfections that hide under the glittering surface of the Canadian multicultural nation, Hage urges them to imagine alternative, more equal and inclusive ways, to recreate a different community.⁷ Happiness, for the protagonist, is not then a mere motto imposed by the multicultural state on its citizens, but consists rather in enjoying fugitive moments of mutual recognition and affective connection with other human beings who share with him similar conditions of vulnerability, are fully aware of the flawed, imperfect nature of the world in which they live, and wholeheartedly engage to change it for the better.

**A Restless and Dissident Performer:
Disturbing the Myth of the Arrival as Good**

Cockroach's dark and unsettling plot unfolds through the restless wanderings across the city of Montreal by the anonymous immigrant protagonist. His nomadic habits as a night prowler, who roams the streets to exorcize his sense of entrapment in a system that devalues and excludes him, are coupled with an itinerant narration that advances rather chaotically through “flashbacks, therapeutic sessions, philosophical divagations, and surreal adventures” (Urbaniak-Rybicka 453). Besides being an impoverished and estranged migrant, Hage's protagonist is also the representative of a whole category of underprivileged and dispossessed people who try to make a new life in Canada under very difficult circumstances. In the following passage, the brutality of the weather—in a move that cunningly twists Albert Camus' representation of a cruelly asphyxiating summer in *L'Étranger*—epitomizes the estrangement of the protagonist and the absurdity of a world where life has been reduced to mere survival:

Goddamn it! Not even a nod in this cold place, not even a timid wave, not a smile from below red, sniffing, blowing noses. All these buried heads above necks strangled in synthetic scarves. It made me nervous, and I asked myself, 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)

Through a hybrid style that blends dark humor and a pitiless critique, Hage expresses here the psychic disorientation, affective and material vulnerability, social and political alienation that the protagonist experiences in his “new” country. Expressions such as “buried,” “strangled,” “trapped,” “carcass” aptly communicate his sense of suffocation and discomfort; the whole passage is traversed by feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and mental confusion, as he finds himself immersed in a cold, indifferent, and unsympathetic world.

Looking for some sort of connection and refusing to remain confined on the margins, the unruly protagonist in Hage’s novel imaginatively allies himself with the cockroaches that infest his house and that mirror his condition of abjection. Like the brown and repulsive little insects to which he feels naturally attached, he too is greedy, voracious, and insatiable; he is in constant need of food, used to breaking into people’s houses and assailing their fridges. Mimicking the cockroaches’ traditional resilience, he is capable of surviving in an inhospitable environment and is constantly moved by a strong desire for “warmth and comfort” (75).

A newcomer who is expected to impersonate and ultimately metamorphose into a *true* Canadian, Hage’s protagonist deviates from the norm to take a radically different path: he prefers instead to mimic and indeed transmutes at times into a brown and pestilential cockroach. I suggest that the cockroach in this novel functions as a *catachresis* (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense): through it, Hage extends the negative implications attached to the concept in unexpected ways, turning for instance what is normally an imposed and abusive category of representation (i.e., migrants as “pests”) into a powerful tool of self-affirmation and liberation. Through the cockroach, moreover, Hage denounces the construction of migrants as intruders, parasites, and alien creatures who are absorbed, consumed or simply discarded by the system. By turning the cockroach into “a political statement” (Hage, Interview), Hage further develops a piercing critique against the myth of Canada—and more in general of Western multicultural democracies—as hospitable, benevolent, and humanitarian countries. Indeed, his novel is crowded with migrants living in basements and forced to take jobs below their skill level,

who contradict and negate through their very presence the construction of the multicultural Canadian nation as a “happy object,” a harmonious whole constituted by different parts which perfectly fit into the One. The following passage lays bare the matrix of racism and white supremacy that are at the origin of the protagonist’s oppression:

Once I approached Maître Pierre and told him that I would like to be a waiter. He looked at me with fixed, glittering eyes, and said: *Tu es un peu trop cuit pour ça* (you are a little too well done for that)! *Le soleil t’a brûlé ta face un peu trop* (the sun has burned your face a bit too much). . . . I threw my apron in his face and stormed out the door. . . . I promised him that one day he would be serving only giant cockroaches on his velvet chairs. He had better remove the large crystal chandelier from the middle of the ceiling, I said, so the customers’ long whiskers wouldn’t touch it and accidentally swing it above his snotty head. (29-30)

The protagonist’s modest dream of social uplift is here blocked by the racist remarks of the French maître, who embodies the residues of colonial power. In order to oppose a racist system that confines him to fixed subaltern roles, the protagonist in this passage identifies with and prophesies the victory of the cockroaches—and therefore, by extension, the revenge of the poor, “colored,” and dispossessed. Thus, through the alliance with the cockroaches, his individual struggle for equality takes a collective, global dimension.

Rather than coming to terms with a system that, despite its ostensible innocence, he views as complicit with and culpable of his own and others’ abjection, Hage’s protagonist takes a step back and obliquely observes his condition of oppression from the mobile, liminal, and ex-centric vantage point of the cockroach. From there the happiness of the multicultural Canadian state cannot but appear flawed and imperfect, as it is mined from the inside by the presence of vulnerable, subaltern, and underprivileged bodies and by the persistence of their unhappy histories. It follows that the metamorphosis from man to cockroach performed by the protagonist cannot be reduced to a mere escapist strategy, for the protagonist does not simply withdraw from the reality in which he lives by becoming a cockroach; on the contrary, he actively intervenes in it through his spectacular performance, by exposing and ultimately manipulating the categories of representation that were originally meant to transfix and annihilate him.⁸ Through the voluntary adoption and re-signification of the despicable category “cockroach,” I claim, the protagonist turns it into a powerful tool of self-affirmation and contestation.

In the chapter “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler argues that performativity in queer experience takes the form of “a reiteration of the norm” that

constructs (queer) subjects as “abjects” in an attempt to re-signify the original denigratory meaning attached to that category (12). According to Butler, moreover, besides destabilizing the normative discourse that constructs certain bodies as “unthinkable, abject, unlivable” (xi), performativity further functions as a powerful resource to re-assemble a new kind of community based on mutual recognition, reciprocity, and inclusion (21-22). Shifting our attention from queer to ethnic experience, I here read the protagonist’s metamorphosis into a cockroach as a subversive strategy through which he *cites* and therefore reiterates a classical category of abjection in an attempt to re-signify it. His condition of abjection thus becomes a platform to negotiate affective attachments and political alliances with other people sharing with him conditions of vulnerability and exclusion.⁹

In *The Signifying Monkey* (1989), Henry Louis Gates Jr. demonstrates that, through a complex process of signification, African American authors have turned “blackness” from an essentially negative property forced upon African American subjectivities by the white majority to a positive self-refashioning. In Hage’s novel, I claim, the protagonist departs from the conventional negative use of the term “cockroach” and rearticulates it in more positive terms, thus extending its possible meanings. Through his odd alliance with the cockroaches, in fact, he not only destabilizes the negative cultural perceptions attached to this concept, but also produces categorical confusion and provokes a disturbance in the system of representation and signification. His scandalous performance, more specifically, transforms his body into a terrain of contestation and turns his alienation into a powerful weapon to assert his agency and express his dissent. At the turn of the nineteenth century, as Daphne A. Brooks powerfully argues, African American performers used their bodies to expose, criticize, and ultimately rearticulate their condition of alienation into an occasion for self-affirmation and political liberation. They further engaged in spectacularly odd and resistant performances in an attempt to destabilize fixed identity categories, disturb audiences with unconventional representations of the racial and gendered Other, and put in place alternative, more liberating, categories of identification and representation (2-8). I suggest that a comparable insurgent performance, both discursive and embodied, takes place in Hage’s text which, through an original re-iteration and imaginative re-elaboration of a historical engagement by Arab-American writers with “blackness,” renovates a long-established affiliation with the African-American group.¹⁰

A Carnavalesque and Undisciplined Performer: Refusing to be Happy

The oppression and alienation that the protagonist suffers in his adoptive country emerges particularly in the weekly therapy sessions he is forced to attend to recover from his failed suicide attempt. As Smaro Kamboureli explains: "As occasions authorized by the state, on which he is expected both to explain his suicide attempt and be rid of the desire to kill himself, these sessions are not, then, just an instance of simple life-telling, of the narrator remembering at will" ("Forgetting" 147). His accountability to the state, as she contends, is rather symptomatic of his lack of agency and his subjugation. And yet, it is precisely during these imposed weekly appointments with a white, Canadian, female doctor called Genevieve, I suggest, that the protagonist slowly liberates himself from the abjection that keeps him hostage. Through his carnivalesque performances, I argue, he indeed succeeds in neutralizing the forces that want to discipline, correct, and convert his supposedly deviant body into a good migrant and ultimately a happy Canadian citizen.¹¹ The following passage, outlining the bizarre exchange between a bright and untroubled therapist and her "dark," (both troubled and troublesome), immigrant patient, conveys the sense of unresolved and potentially explosive tension that marks the relation between the two characters:

The therapist annoyed me with her laconic behaviour. She 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 relations with women, but for me, everything was about defying the oppressive power in the world that I can neither participate in or control. And the question that I hated most—and it came up when she was frustrated with me for not talking enough—was when she leaned over the table and said, without expression: What do you expect from our meeting?

I burst out: I am forced to be here by the court! (4-5)

An insurmountable rift separates here the therapist from her patient; the two characters have a different perception and consciousness of the world because their life stories differ. While the doctor looks happy and unperturbed, her interlocutor feels consumed by an existential malaise that is the result of both his traumatic past and his current alienation.¹² Happiness, in this case, not only reveals a position of privilege within society but is also equated with indifference, blindness, and lack of consciousness. In Ahmed's own terms: "to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force" (*Promise* 132). Having grown up in a war-torn country and experienced first-hand the tribulations and misery of a newcomer, the

protagonist in *Cockroach* cannot but feel a kind of resentment toward his doctor, whom he presumes having had a “childhood of snow and yellow schoolbuses, quiet green grass and Christmas lights” (50).

Far from reproducing the classical representation of the melancholic migrant as a subject stuck in his nostalgic grief, in need of rescue, and pursuing the dream of a happy life in the new country, Hage outlines here a subject who is fully aware of his subaltern position and engages without hesitation to change the existing power relations. He is, moreover, an ambiguous character who is simultaneously emotionally fragile but also a wicked charmer who as such holds the reins of discourse as well of his life. The following passage is particularly telling of his ambiguity:

A FEW DAYS PASSED, and then it was time again to climb the stairs of the public health clinic and sit in my interrogation chair.

This time, the therapist was interested in my mother.

My mother, I said, has kinky hair.

What else? she asked.

A long face and pointy teeth.

What does she do?

Well, I said, when she was not dangling clothing by the arms or the ankles off the balcony she would stir her wooden spoon around a tin pot, in a counter-clockwise motion, and if she was not busy doing that, she was chasing after us with curses and promises that she would dig our graves. . . .

So do you love your mother? the therapist asked, pasting on her usual compassionate face.

Yes, I do, I said, thinking that if I told her anything more, I wouldn't leave this place for two hours. The shrinks are all big on mothers in this land. (47-48)

Like a resourceful and audacious Scheherazade, Hage's protagonist here performs artful manoeuvres to hold his therapist's curiosity, gain her indulgence, and constantly delay his adverse fate.¹³ Reality and fiction, truth and lies, past historical events and fabricated new tales overlap and blur in this bizarre exchange between a composed and authoritarian doctor who hides herself behind a compassionate face and her unrestrained and insubordinate patient. The story of the mother who theatrically hangs out the laundry, mixes various ingredients in her pot, and chases after her undisciplined children, reproduces stereotypical patterns of thought about the Middle East, as a “barbaric” place traversed by chaos, backwardness, and fixed gender roles. Genevieve's interlocutor is clearly an unreliable narrator—reticent, elusive, sly—who withholds information and cleverly circumvents his therapist's questions, offering her grotesque tales about a distant, exotic, and backward Middle East to appease her curiosity and give her what she

wants to hear. As he himself explains: "The exotic has to be modified here—not too authentic, not too spicy or too smelly, just enough of it to remind others of a fantasy elsewhere" (20).

Far from confirming mainstream representations of the "white man" (in this case a white woman) as the subject who "enables the [suffering migrant] to let go of his injury . . . [and] brings [him] back into the national fold" (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 49), Hage reverses here the traditional picture and portrays a rather carnivalesque migrant, who nonchalantly juggles past and present, Middle East and Canada, subverting existing hierarchies and the power relations that oppress him. It is precisely through this constant play of fort/da, I claim, that the protagonist cunningly gets rid of his impotency and finally reasserts his agency.

In *Proceed with Caution*, Doris Sommer puts us on guard against the danger of what she calls "the ravages of facile intimacies" (xiii); she particularly invites us to look closely at the uncooperativeness of certain characters and at the resistant strategies of certain minority writers who "cripple authority by refusing to submit to it" (10). In other words, Hage here voluntarily frustrates Genevieve's (and the readers') curiosity about the (presumed bad) life of the migrant in his original country and cheerfully blocks her/(their) desire for a glorifying tale about his arrival in the new country as *good*. Not only does the protagonist cunningly keep his previous life secret, but he also willingly manipulates it through creative ruses and minuscule, clandestine tactics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau claims that a tactic is "an art of the weak" (37), who can only cleverly play on and confront his/her adversary on the ground carefully established and organized to discipline his/her existence. Hage's protagonist, I claim, exploits the therapist's sessions to subvert the power that was meant to discipline and convert him to the norms of the multicultural, neoliberal state. His precise intention is clearly that of undermining and subverting the power of his host, as the following passage tellingly shows:

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. I have a responsibility towards the taxpayers.

Tax prayers? I asked.

No *taxpayers*, people who actually pay taxes. Some of us do. (59-60)

Genevieve's (failed) attempts to convert her patient to the norms, values, and practices promoted by the multicultural, neoliberal state reveal the

inquisitorial quality of the therapeutic sessions and the pressures of integration and assimilation they enact. Genevieve, in particular, interprets here the protagonist's silence and his unhappiness as a refusal to cooperate, improve, be redeemed and redeem his debt, and consequently sanctions it. She further reads his failure to be happy not only as a personal failure, but also as a terrible sin capable of sabotaging not only his own individual happiness but most importantly also the nation's happiness as a whole. An unbending "heretic," Hage's protagonist refuses to conform to and believe in the dogmas of the state—that is, the gift of happiness offered by multiculturalism and the myth of the good life promised by capitalism (Berlant 196). As a consequence, he is blamed for causing unnecessary expenditure with his (presumed) unhappiness.¹⁴

Anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles are here linked in thought-provoking ways. The nation-state's consumeristic logic, which values difference only insofar as it can be incorporated and consumed, is cleverly manipulated by Hage's protagonist who indeed refuses to comply with and support the fantasy of the happy multicultural state. Likewise, he refuses to feed the mirage of "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (Berlant 3), which liberal-capitalist societies rely on and powerfully promote. Thus, by only apparently conforming to the state's logic and dutifully responding to his therapist's desires, the anonymous protagonist succeeds in bluffing both state and the therapist and he does so in the exact moment when he seems to capitulate:

TAXPAYERS, THE SHRINK SAYS. Ha! I thought as I finished my chocolate in the alley. Well yes, yes indeed, I should be grateful for what this nation 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. (65, emphasis added)

The protagonist in this scene is sipping his chocolate in the alley with no hurry, while contemplating ways to become a *good* citizen. I claim that his inertia and reluctance to adhere to the doctor's (read the nation's) norms suggest that he refuses conversion, rejects the role that his host has prescribed for him, and prefers instead to hold on to his own difference. Through his meditative and recreational attitude, he subtly stalls the business of the dominant neoliberal society; by imposing on such a system a slower rhythm, whose difference interferes with the productive imperative of capitalist economy, he voices his dissent.¹⁵ The pleasure he takes in slowly

sipping his chocolate definitely disturbs the very idea that happiness can be found in the fast accumulation of wealth. No longer a blinded victim stuck in his melancholic grief, Hage's immigrant protagonist is both a dissenter and a troublemaker who stubbornly reminds readers of the conditions of social exclusion, and economic and labour precarity that mark our late capitalist societies. I further reread him as a resourceful and pragmatic agent who is constantly looking for ways out of the impasse that affects many of us, and urges venturesome readers to take unexplored paths in search of a community that recognizes and re-signifies precarity and shared vulnerability as the starting point to imagine and make concrete brighter, more equal, and socially just futures.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show how Hage places at the centre of his novel a shady, marginal, ambiguous (both vulnerable and willful) character who wanders randomly in the streets of an inhospitable multicultural metropolis, uncovering asymmetries, injustices, and violences of all sorts. By replacing traditional teleological migrant narratives of improvement and success with less tidy and more obscure stories about experiences of failure and loneliness, violence and oppression, destitution and delinquency, Hage intriguingly turns into "a chronicler of the unseen, the unspoken, the untold" (Halberstam 104). He voluntarily "turn[s his] back to the future" (Love 7) and orients his attention to a dark archive of unhappy histories, negative feelings, and vulnerable bodies that belong to the past as well as to the present. His writing advances through halts and deviations to present a progression that is also a regression, thus weaving an obscure narrative that illuminates, in his own words, "the desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and stranded" (13). Not only does he make us plunge into the troubled waters of pain and exclusion, but he also imagines through his carnivalesque poetics the possibility of brighter futures. His writing indeed pays tribute to a sharp and inventive character that is capable of metamorphoses and challenges through his flamboyant performances the dark powers that oppress him.

By shockingly revealing to (self)absorbed readers a familiar world now oddly turned alien, I claim, Hage helps estrange them from the familiar and awakens them to the distortions, asymmetries, and injustices that still persist in today's multicultural societies, so that a new consciousness may emerge. Suffering, in particular, functions in his text as "a heightening of consciousness,

a world-consciousness in which the suffering of those who do not belong is allowed to disturb an atmosphere” (Ahmed, *Promise* 75). Indeed, in his visionary novel, the domestic and sectarian violence suffered by the child protagonist in an unnamed country of the Middle East finds its counterpart in the hardships, abuses, and vilifications that the adult protagonist endures in Quebec. As the past protrudes into the present, so violence extends from one continent to the other, taking on new forms and nuances.

Traditionally conceived as an impasse or “the engulfment of the ego in memory” (Ticineto Clough 6), trauma, in Hage’s work, is put back into the ordinary. It is reframed as the starting point to negotiate a different political space, based on “sideways” horizontal relations (Stockton qtd. in Halberstam 73) and on “stigma-, shame-based alliances” (Love 37), which grow in parallel lines and transgress rigid ethnic, racial, and national forms of belonging. In “Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times,” Marianne Hirsch contends that “the retrospective glance of trauma might be expanded and redirected to open alternative temporalities that are more porous and future-oriented and that galvanize a sense of urgency about the need for change, now” (337). I understand such urgency for change as one of the distinctive and more original aspects of Hage’s work.

It follows that alienation in *Cockroach* emerges not only as the marginal cultural position occupied by the ethnic/racial Other in the multicultural nation but also as a more universal category, which describes a subjectivity condemned to economic and labour precarity in a rampant capitalist economy; it is further reinvented as a subversive tactic that the marginalized protagonist re-appropriates to inaugurate new forms of solidarity and resistant collective practices that transgress strict racial, ethnic, and national borders because they are based on a shared vulnerability. Through his figurative and embodied alliance with the cockroaches, more specifically, Hage’s protagonist recognizes his own vulnerability and that of others as a common ground from which to invent and perform new affiliations and innovative modes of dissent and resistance in the attempt to improve conditions of equality and justice both locally and globally. As the white cockroach explains to the protagonist during a vehement confrontation: “Yes, we are ugly, but we always know where we are going. We have a project. . . . A change. A project to change this world” (202). Undoubtedly then, the recognition of a shared vulnerability intersects in this novel with tangible contestation and functions as a powerful weapon to propel political change. As Hirsch poignantly suggests: “An acknowledgment of vulnerability, both

shared and produced, can open a space of interconnection as well as a platform for responsiveness and for resistance" (337). It follows that the dark-skinned and impoverished migrant in *Cockroach* emerges with an utterly new face: he is not only a wicked killjoy, a politically inconvenient figure who refuses to be good and obliging, to forget about the pain of past and present injustices, and to simply be happy with what the hosting country is giving him—in his own words, merely "a wealth of crumbs" (Hage 43). Rather, he is also a carnivalesque, spirited, and willful man who performs spectacular acts of discursive and embodied insurgency, mobilizes feelings such as wonder and surprise, and insists in declaring his unhappiness with the persistence of violence, injustice, and racism, while at the same time engaging wholeheartedly in both imaginary and concrete practices to change the world for the better.

The tension between confinement and mobility, backwardness and progress(ion), oppression and liberation, individuality and collectivity adds a political dimension to a novel that might otherwise simply appear as a classical narration of the vicissitudes of a dark-skinned migrant in a contemporary urban landscape. On the whole, Hage refuses the blinding clarity of early accounts on migration and privileges dark, fragmentary, and partial accounts over more pleasant, marketable, and totalizing narratives, thereby providing readers with a new, partly defamiliarizing yet extremely necessary, perspective on the migrant, who is no longer simply good or totally bad but full of contradictions and ambiguities of all sorts, and on today's Western democracies, which are far from being perfect and accomplished.

When faced with a crisis, the intrepid protagonist of Hage's novel never loses hope and constantly asks, "which way?" Following his restless wanderings and embarking with him on an unpredictable journey in the heart of today's darkness, we may ourselves become aware of the limits, cracks, and flaws that risk sabotaging the construction of our presumably happy, multicultural, late-capitalist societies and be moved by the desire to imagine and realize other, more inclusive and just communities.

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NOTES

- 1 See, among others, works by Rabih Alameddine, Diana Abu-Jaber, Abla Farhoud, Nina Bouraoui, Amara Lakhous.
- 2 On the harmful consequences of 9/11 for Arabs and especially Muslims in terms of social exposure, vulnerability, and stigmatization, see Shu-Mei Shih; Gana, 2008; Hornung and Kohl.
- 3 On the everyday as a resource for Arab-Canadian writers and filmmakers to contest the negative construction of Arabness, see Gana, 2009.
- 4 For a more detailed and exhaustive history of Arab migration to Canada and the US, see Abu-Laban; Dahab; Gualtieri; Naff; Orfalea; Suleiman.
- 5 As Lisa Suhair Majaj notes, early (US) immigrant autobiography is characterized by “a teleological trajectory from Old World to New World,” the anxiety to be accepted in the new country, and the desire to distance oneself from one’s original culture (63).
- 6 In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva explains “the abject” as “the improper/the unclean,” that which is “radically excluded” and banished. The object of a primary repression, “the abject” mobilizes contradictory and therefore extremely destabilizing but also regenerative feelings of desire and disgust.
- 7 Among others, scholars such as Nouri Gana and Smaro Kamboureli have offered a critique of Canada’s multicultural policies, which they consider as being aimed at responding to and at the same time containing/disciplining the various ethnic communities present on Canadian soil. See Gana, 2009; Kamboureli, 2000.
- 8 In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari interpret the act of becoming animal as “a path of escape” and the “cross[ing] of a threshold” (13). In Hage’s novel, I contend, the cockroach functions not only as a form of escapism but also as a tactic to expose, attack, and at least figuratively subvert an oppressive system that blocks the subject in fixed roles and marginal positions.
- 9 The protagonist, in particular, builds meaningful affective attachments and political alliances with members belonging to the Iranian community in Montreal, who have experienced, like him, the damages of war, violence, and racism.
- 10 On the interracial affiliation between Arab-Americans writers and African-American groups, see among others, Hartman (2006); Feldman.
- 11 The forces of normalization, medicalization, and assimilation are intricately woven together in Hage’s novel to compose an ambivalent and multi-layered narrative.
- 12 The protagonist’s relationship with his therapist is far from being transparent and is also marked by feelings of desire, gender and sexual difference, and most importantly by acts of transference. Simultaneously a “pervert” and a victim, a predator and prey, the protagonist projects both negative and positive feelings on his therapist; this ontological and affective instability complicates matters to the point that it is difficult for the reader to decide who is “the good” or “the evil” character in this scene.
- 13 Among others, Syrine Hout has underlined the subversive use of Scheherazade’s tale in Hage’s novel. See Hout, particularly p. 172.
- 14 On the intersection between capitalism, ethnicity, and discipline, see Rey Chow’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Drawing on Max Weber, Chow argues that in capitalism, economic success and moral salvation are the rewards for disciplined (ethnic) subjects who have converted to the Protestant work ethic.
- 15 In this reading, I am influenced by Saidiya V. Hartman’s work on the inventive ways slaves stalled the business of the master.

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