

# Hunger, Consumption, and “Contaminated” Aesthetics in Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach*

Justyna Poray-Wybranowska

Volume 39, numéro 2, 2014

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl39\\_2art10](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl39_2art10)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Poray-Wybranowska, J. (2014). Hunger, Consumption, and “Contaminated” Aesthetics in Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 39(2), 190–209.

# Hunger, Consumption, and “Contaminated” Aesthetics in Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach*

JUSTYNA PORAY-WYBRANOWSKA

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION, Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* has received much critical attention, but most responses to the text tend to fall into one of two camps. Scholars belonging to the first camp focus on the novel’s Canadian context and its involvement with the politics of multiculturalism. Maude Lapierre and Dominic Beneventi, for example, see the protagonist as an “empowered” character who “effectively resists Old World oppressors” (Lapierre 11) by “revealing the repressed, the obscene, and the disavowed machinery of city and nation” (Beneventi 281). Syrine Hout and Rita Sakr, on the other hand, are part of the second camp. They read the novel with attention to diaspora and the connections between Montreal and the protagonist’s unnamed country of origin, and they cast the narrator as “an immigrant with an unresolved trauma complex” (Hout 339) who is “alienated from almost everyone” (Sakr 344). As Lapierre points out, however, both camps’ approaches to the novel “face specific conceptual challenges” since they fail to reconcile the text’s local context with its broader concerns (1). This essay accepts Lapierre’s premise and endeavours to make connections between the novel’s specific local context and its larger global concerns by spotlighting aspects of Hage’s work that have received very little critical attention: namely, the way in which the text configures hunger in the urban setting.

One surprising oversight common to many responses to *Cockroach* is a failure to address the materiality of hunger in the novel and the role that it plays in shaping the protagonist’s relationship to his environment. Indeed, when critics do refer to a scene in which food is being consumed, they focus not on the actual act of consumption but on its metaphorical significance in the text. Beneventi, for example, speaks of the way in which the “narrator’s very body becomes nourishment for the machinery of class privilege as . . . utensils symbolically cut into his flesh” (275).

Even Lapierre treats consumption symbolically, critiquing the way in which the narrator “adopts the same tendency to consume . . . refugees” as white Montrealers (2). But surely critics recognize that *Cockroach* is not only concerned with the narrator’s traumatic past and psychological “wounds”: in addition to symbolic hunger — for wealth, revenge, and so on — the novel devotes a lot of space to addressing literal hunger and the “material . . . trials” (Sakr 344) that its protagonist faces as an impoverished immigrant on welfare. Eating habits without a doubt “inform the production of racial difference and other forms of political inequality” (Tompkins 1), but food is also central to the text’s configuration of the protagonist’s relation to the urban centre and the non-human beings that inhabit it. Hage certainly forces human hunger to share the spotlight with non-human hunger, so reading the novel with specific attention to metaphorical consumption and the way that it informs human social hierarchies is rather limiting. To advance a more critical approach to consumption and to human-non-human relationships in contemporary environments, it is therefore useful to analyze the materiality of hunger in *Cockroach*. Hage’s protagonist sees the edible potential of even the most “contaminated” spaces (Tsing 95). His relationship to food and eating differs from that of the novel’s other characters: he is the quintessential “other” figure, marginalized through his poverty and his status as an ethnic minority, a foreigner, and a half-human, half-insect being. In choosing him as the narrator, Hage blurs the line that divides food and waste and calls into question what constitutes an appropriate use of food and water for the modern, urban inhabitant.

By no means is the narrator an ethical environmentalist or a human rights activist: as many critics point out, he is very much “complicit” in the problematic power relations that he vehemently criticizes since he too takes advantage of those physically weaker or more naive than he is (Lapierre 10). Even the “gigantic striped albino cockroach” (Hage 200-01) that the narrator hallucinates accuses him of being “[m]anipulative” (200), and he cannot but recognize that “the big roach knows me well” (209). Yet, despite the narrator’s questionable morality, Hage’s text, framed by the cynicism and sarcasm of its speaker, exposes the ideological flaws inherent in common conceptions of human relationships with non-human environments and disrupts the “conceptual stasis emanating from organicist conceptions” of the city (Gandy 64). Drawing on the discursive conventions of pastoral aesthetics but apply-

ing them to an urban setting, Hage subverts the binary conceptualization of the relationship between “natural” and human-made spaces. His imagery thus moves “away from the idea of the city as the antithesis of an imagined bucolic ideal” by advancing “an alternative set of readings of urban space which place greater emphasis on the malleable, indeterminate . . . dimensions of the urban experience” (Gandy 72, 64). His speaker lives among and even communes with cockroaches, and he recognizes his shared animality with them, extending his own concern with food and water scarcity to the non-human beings that share his home. In filtering the novel through his perspective, Hage renders porous the border between humanity and animality and “remind[s] city dwellers of our placement within ecosystems and the importance of this fact for understanding urban life and culture” (Bennett and Teague 4).

The term “nature,” Michael Bennett and David Teague suggest, “usually calls to mind open spaces, perhaps with a few trees, wild animals, or bodies of water” (5). Hage, however, chooses an urban setting for his animalistic protagonist’s daily hunting and gathering — an artistic choice that allows him to break down the classical nature/culture divide. Since the rise of industrialism, writing concerned with the environment has relied on the discourse of romanticized visions of untamed nature to promote environmental awareness, revealing an insistence on a conceptual separation between the wild space and the urban space (Bennett and Teague 5-6; Gandy 65-66). “Widely perceived to reside outside nature or the ‘natural order,’” the city has been theorized as an “aberrant spatial form,” as the “antithesis” of everything beautiful and pastoral that the natural landscape embodies (Gandy 65, 66, 72). But nature evokes no positive images for the protagonist of *Cockroach*: “nature horrifies me and open spaces make me feel vulnerable” (Hage 296). Instead of glorifying picturesque landscapes, the narrator forces the reader to look on the ecosystem of dirt and refuse that constitutes the city, all the while applying the “dystopian” discourse traditionally associated with it to the natural landscape (Gandy 72). His visions of the forest, for example, make his inversion of conventional “romanticist” tropes for depicting natural spaces obvious: “the deer howled, and the wolves twittered,” and “in the morning birds came and laid their giant claws on me, . . . dug their beaks into my chest and tore my flesh, . . . devoured me alive, with my feet dancing in the air under their big, monstrous eyes” (Hage 296; see Gandy 72).

It is this fear of becoming food for another species that makes this space threatening; in the city, the protagonist has no natural predators, and he sees all others around him as “[e]asy prey” (Hage 149). His preoccupation with consumption pervades the text and without a doubt influences his relationship with the city.

The speaker is and has always been a city dweller, so rhetorical appeals to a return to the pastoral idyll, to spaces “untouched” by human presence (Tsing 96), have no nostalgic resonance for him. His constant awareness of the way that the non-human world makes incursions into the human world, however, unearths “the intricate combination of nature and human artifice which has produced the urban space” (Gandy 63). The protagonist sees non-human agents operating everywhere and ascribes an important amount of agency and sentience to them: “An insect or a shaft of light could carry me; the water could equally sweep me down” (Hage 119). His own human dwelling is infested with cockroaches, which he views as a powerful invading force (“only those insects shall survive. They shall inherit the earth” [53]), and inanimate elements of nature, like snowflakes, become “little creatures,” “murderous in their vast numbers, . . . their soundless invasions” (209). In the novel, no human-made space functions as a closed system that the non-human cannot penetrate: “All nature gathers and invades” (210). Even those spaces that humans desire to keep for themselves, such as high-end restaurants, are breached: “I promised him that one day he would be serving only giant cockroaches on his velvet chairs” (30); “I can see the sign coming, my friend, and it shall say: Under new management! Special underground menu served by an undertaker with shovels and fangs!” (31). The establishment’s name, Le Cafard (“the cockroach”), equally collapses images of dirt and animality with the sense of sophistication and culture elicited by the use of French (69). Hage selects a restaurant as the point of convergence between the human and the non-human because it is a “place where humans and insects are equally fed” (211).

Hage is not the first novelist to show interest in the hunger of the non-human protagonist; almost a century before him, Franz Kafka explored the way in which the food-related anxieties of a “gigantic insect” run parallel to those of its human cohabitants in *The Metamorphosis*. It is certainly no coincidence that both Kafka’s and Hage’s protagonists struggle financially and share an anxiety surround-

ing their ability to satiate their hunger — their relationship to consumption differs from that of the novel's other characters, exposing the connection between socio-economic status and limited food options. One important difference between these texts, however, lies in how their protagonists' "otherness" is signified. Gregor Samsa is marginalized by his family's financial situation, and his otherness is expressed via his non-human status. In Hage's novel, the speaker is also an immigrant and an ethnic minority in Montreal. In the context of *Cockroach*, therefore, race, class, and socio-economic status come together with animality to articulate his position as the other.

Focusing specifically on representations of consumption and subaltern bodies, both bell hooks's "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" and Kyla Wazana Tompkins's *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* argue that the act of consumption exposes the asymmetries inherent in social relationships and that "eating become[s] a way of asserting racial, not to mention class, identity" (Tompkins 184; see also hooks 366). Indeed, common to the majority of contemporary scholarship concerned with food practices is the premise that otherness can be negotiated through relationships to food; Hage's novel is certainly no exception. Hage deglamorizes contemporary "foodie culture" through his narrator's marginalized perspective. In adopting the point of view of an impoverished foreigner working at the backs of restaurants, he reveals that eating is "often founded on problematic racial politics in which white, bourgeois, urban subject positions are articulated . . . through the consumption and informational mastery of foreign, that is, non-Anglo-American food cultures" (Tompkins 2). While waiting for his "welfare cheque[s]," the "hungry" narrator orchestrates elaborate schemes to gain access to the homes and refrigerators of his white Montrealer acquaintances (Hage 76, 20). He knows exactly what it takes to evoke the interest and pity of Mary and her "pale-faced vegan" friends (21), so he makes conscious efforts to play the role of the "fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner" (199) to strike the right chord with that particular crowd: "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). Although his hosts strive to appear cultured and worldly via their enjoyment of exotic foods, the narrator makes it clear that they end up only reinforcing their privileged subject positions via their "mastery of . . . foreign food cultures" and their

“*internalization*” qua ingestion of foreign foods (Tompkins 2). He takes advantage of their desire to “consume” otherness by using his acquaintance with Reza, the Iranian musician, as a ploy to enter Sylvie’s house and raid her fridge: “I knew Sylvie wouldn’t be able to resist anything foreign” (Hage 196). The prospect of listening to songs performed on a traditional Iranian instrument is simply too tempting: “*La bourgeoisie* thinks that she is wild and crazy! She is convinced that she and *la gang*, as she calls her friends, are *dingue*” (196). While she eats up Reza’s tales of “suffering and exile,” “bewitch[ed]” by his “exotic tunes and stories” (25), the narrator’s stomach starts to churn: “her dramatic facial expressions made me sick. I remembered why I had felt I had to leave her and her lucrative *la gang*” (197-98). Here “ethnicity becomes spice” (hooks 366), as Hage explicitly connects his characters’ status as racial others and socio-economically marginalized subjects to their status as consumable commodities in the eyes of the novel’s privileged characters.

The protagonist’s constant preoccupation with having “no money, and therefore . . . no food” (Hage 55), contrasts with these francophone Montrealers’ blasé attitude toward people stealing their wallets and raiding their refrigerators: “I see you found your way to the food as usual, [Sylvie] said. Eat what you want, but do not steal anything today, please” (198). Without a doubt, his fixation on food is tied to his marginalized status, and the discrepancy between his relationship to consumption and Mary’s or Sylvie’s is directly linked to the food options available to the protagonist. The narrator might not articulate it in so many words, but his use of language signals his recognition of the way that consumption practices are linked to class and cultural background. His language highlights how one’s position in the social hierarchy dictates one’s access to basic subsistence needs, such as clean water. Describing the “deep purple gums gathering in a large pool for slum kids to swim, splash and play in,” the speaker generates consonance through the repetition of the *p* and *g* sounds and adds rhythm and melody to his imagery (22). The dissonance between the poetic language and the image of children playing in sewage, however, makes the tableau rather disturbing. *Slum* is the operative word here — the narrator casually throws it in to make the reader aware that these children are from a specific part of the city and therefore belong to the socio-economically marginalized class (22). This passage is rhetorically powerful, for its ironically romantic language and its spatialization of subaltern bodies connect socio-economic

marginalization and position within the cityscape to severely limited consumption options.

The narrator lives very scrupulously and has little concern for his material possessions and the state of his surroundings: “I can live in filth and hunger” (52), and “I can tolerate filth, cockroaches, and mountains of dishes” (52). His willingness to eat food “not even the roaches, with their massive egalitarian appetites, would approach” (142) shows that he values every bit of available nourishment and that he is capable of appreciating things that the average person takes for granted. The avid way in which he pursues Reza bespeaks his anxiety about being able to meet his basic needs: “forty dollars he owed me. Just imagine the soap I could buy, the rice, the yards of toilet paper” (24). Having no money, he has no compunction about using flattery to extract food from his Pakistani neighbours: “I love the smell of your food. I was wondering if you could give me some of your recipes or maybe a little of your food to taste?” (141). Although the meal that he receives “burn[s] [his] nostrils” and makes him “cry,” he cannot bring himself to let it go to waste: “The food was too hot for me, but it was food — I couldn’t throw it away” (142). This sentence clearly illustrates that the taste or quality of a meal matters very little to the narrator; it is simply the fact that he can satiate his hunger with it that gives it value in his eyes. Unable to stomach food so spicy, he must “dilute it with water and make soup out of it” (142). He transforms a traditional Pakistani meal into something that can no longer be considered ethnic cuisine; he takes the dish out of its original cultural context and makes it into something generic, bland, and watery, thus separating the food from its symbolic significance as a marker of cultural identity. In doing so, the protagonist, in effect, “dilutes” culture, and this scene can be read as a comment on the way in which contemporary food culture alters ethnic cuisine to make it palatable to Western consumers, but it also underlines his indifference to what his food tastes like (142). He states that “it was better, so long as I didn’t drink the liquid” (143), and this indicates that he is more concerned with satiating hunger than with enjoying the experience of consumption.

The connection that Tompkins and hooks make between consumption, race, and socio-economic marginalization definitely holds in the context of Hage’s novel, but here I attempt to move beyond conventional psychoanalytic interpretations of food and eating. In fact, despite the



tremendous amount of critical attention that the field of food studies has received over the past few decades, scholars all too often insist on reading eating metaphorically. Their approaches to eating stress the symbolic and cultural significance of human appetite and consumption but do not leave room to analyze the physical materiality of hunger, or the anxieties related to it, in their own right. Without a doubt, reading food metaphorically in relation to social inequalities can be very useful for analyzing how interpersonal relationships function, but Hage's reliance on the discourse of animality, and his attention to non-human appetite and non-human hunger, call for an examination of eating practices from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Certainly, the fact that the novel's main character is "split between two planes and aware of two existences," straddling the border between "two spaces" (119), must be taken into consideration when analyzing his unique connection to food. Hage calls attention to his narrator's "tormented" selfhood, and he highlights the way in which his cockroach-like existence fuels his anxieties about the availability of food (Sakr 344). The entire novel, in fact, can be read as a prolonged quest for food in a compromised space with limited resources as its narrator must find new and creative ways of acquiring sustenance day after day. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why he can relate so easily to the cockroaches that have taken over his apartment, since he shares with them the feeling of non-belonging among other Montrealers as well as the constant struggle to find nourishment.

After his transformation into the "gigantic insect," Gregor Samsa discovers that he no longer enjoys human food and has an appetite only for "old, half-decaying vegetables, bones from last night's supper covered with a white sauce that had thickened," and pieces of "cheese that [he] would have called uneatable two days ago" (Kafka 91). He is "unusually hungry" and starts "worrying about . . . meals" within the first few paragraphs of the novel (70, 68). The narrator of *Cockroach* shares Gregor's fixation on food: he uses words such as *wealth* and *loot* to refer to the food that he acquires, casting the ability to fulfill such a basic need as a luxury (Hage 43, 17). He sees potential nourishment in everything — things such as "mildew" that would not be considered edible by most people entice him — and he even describes the way in which he wants to "lick . . . the hardened yogurt drops on the side of the garbage bin" (67). Waste makes the protagonist anxious: "every drop of

water that ran through the drain inspired me to follow it, gather it, and use it again” (22; see also 43). When he “worked as a dishwasher in the French restaurant,” he would “pick . . . up a spoon or fork,” “take off [his] gloves,” and “pass [his] thumb” over the “food residue,” studying it attentively to determine “if the customer had tightened her lips on the last piece of cake” (28). He shows no disgust at the prospect of coming into close contact with leftover bits of someone else’s food; a detritus eater, he sees every morsel of edible substance as valuable. He describes his own behaviour as a manifestation of “food-envy syndrome” (87), exposing the rigid binary between food and waste that socio-economic privilege upholds and that his insect status allows him to move beyond.

His indiscriminating insect-like appetite is very much at odds with the “slimy feelings of cunning and need” (3) and the distinctly human desire for luxury that he occasionally articulates (“what I really, really wanted was to sit in the middle of the bar . . . , maybe a big fat golden ring on my finger, my chest gleaming under a black shiny shirt, . . . a golden chain around my neck and a well-dressed woman with kohl under her eyes”) (66-67; see also 203). By moving between these diametrically opposed approaches to consumption, the narrative puts the human and insect elements of his thinking into perspective. But the scene ends with the narrator wishing to sink his “pointy teeth” (67) into the bits of discarded food strewn across the kitchen floor — for him, “good living” (197) is synonymous with access to food: “no one should suffer in hunger” (58). He sees humans undergoing the same basic struggle as insects to survive, and awareness of and consideration for their hunger set him apart from the other humans around him.

Although the speaker does engage in mass killings of cockroaches with his lover, Shoreh, he generally conceives of his relationship with the insects as one of mutual understanding and respect (53). His word choice implies that he is very conscious of how his actions have impacts on non-human life and that he recognizes the unfairness of causing his fellow creatures to starve: “I even did the dishes — against the roaches’ will, depriving them of a wealth of crumbs” (43). The fact that he endows them with “will” is telling, for it points toward the belief that these invertebrates possess some form of consciousness (43). He even tries to imagine how the insects conceive of his presence and insists that, when he comes home with food, they can always smell “the loot” and start to “salivate like little dogs” (17). By comparing the cockroaches to

“little dogs,” the narrator in effect elevates them beyond the status that they are usually accorded; cockroaches are normally viewed as pests and signs of filth, but likening them to “man’s best friend” casts them in a significantly more merciful light. In fact, the speaker goes so far as to personify the insects, stating that he feels the “envious eyes” of “the cockroaches that lived with [him]” on his back (6). The use of “lived with” in this sentence equalizes human and non-human life by placing humans and cockroaches side by side rather than in a hierarchical relationship, giving each party equal claim to ownership of the space and therefore to the food within it (17). In this scene, Hage emphasizes the connection between his protagonist’s unconventional relationship with the non-human world and his recognition of the fact that, in the “contested habitat” of the city (Bennett and Teague 17), the protagonist must share his human dwelling with other beings.

The narrator’s fascination with “drains” and the flow of water equally reinforces his concern with waste and stresses the permeability between nature and city, reinforcing the idea that the two are part of the same ecosystem. The novel is peppered with dramatic descriptions of water rushing with the sound of “galloping horses, flying beneath sabres” (119), making the cockroaches in his sink run “for their lives” (6). Beneventi even points out that the image of the narrator “driving” water toward the drain “like a herd of buffalo off a cliff” (Hage 156) directly links “the wastefulness of the first world to the hunger of the developing world” (Beneventi 278). His interpretation of the quotation certainly holds up — the speaker himself articulates similar criticisms of the consumption habits of the “elite” and the way that contemporary social hierarchies have been established from a long-standing history of exploitation (“they consider themselves royalty when all they are is the residue of colonial power”) (Hage 159). But the language that he uses to describe the drain seems to align it with egalitarianism rather than hierarchy: the drain “swallowed everything, . . . all was good, all was natural, all was accepted by the underworld” (156). Recycling and ethically appropriate environmental action might not concern him per se, but his own experiences of water shortages make him particularly aware of privileged consumption habits and their effects on thinking about the use of natural resources (22). His job at the restaurant, for instance, is to segregate food from waste and to discard the latter down the drain (156). Although it “sadden[s]” him to “erase happiness with water,” he

knows that “the underworld” lets nothing go to waste: “nothing was . . . tossed away” (156). The drain is the nexus of exchange between natural and human-made spaces; it functions as the flimsy, porous border between the urban space, which “sucks in natural resources,” and the natural one, toward which “wastes are pushed out” (Roberts, Ravetz, and George 9).

Several times throughout *Cockroach*, the narration pauses, and the speaker describes cityscapes that he imagines, depicting the underground sewer system in rather unexpected ways. Instead of treating the underground as a place where refuse gathers to be hidden away and ignored, he makes an effort to picture it in detail. He even “glue[s]” his “ear” to the door when Shoreh goes to the bathroom and spends the next eleven lines of text visualizing the trail of her “precious flows”: “I imagined the beauty of the line making its way through the shades of the underground, golden and distinct, straight and flexible, discharged and embraced, revealing all that a body had once invited, kept, transformed, and released, like a child’s kite with a string, like a baby’s umbilical cord. Ah! That day I saw salvation, rebirth, and golden threads of celebration everywhere” (14). Here the narrator invokes images connoting purity, such as children’s toys and newborn babies’ “umbilical cord[s],” to undercut the reaction of disgust that one would expect after a tour of the sewer system (14). This passage collapses the paradoxical notions of contamination and purity, ugliness and beauty, and harnesses the tensions between the aesthetic appeal of Hage’s language and the grotesqueness of what Hage describes to challenge conventional modes of representing urban landscapes. “In the dominant environmental literature,” Bennett and Teague assert, “the city is sick, monstrous, blighted, ecocidal, life-denying, parasitical, you name it” (16). Hage’s narrator, however, is willing to endow it with some aesthetic appeal. The space that he visualizes is more than simply a “monstrous” landscape (Gandy 72) “characterized as an aberrant spatial form” (66); his appreciation of the city carves out a space in which a new “contaminated” aestheticism that subverts traditional ideas of natural beauty to encourage a re-evaluation of conventional thinking about the spaces most affected by human presence can be articulated (Tsing 96). Casting the underground as a space of possibility in which water can be reused and discarded food can still serve as nourishment for other life forms, the narrator repeatedly expresses “the necessity” (Hage 11) of inhabiting

the underground, of adopting its ability to “embrace” (14), to “transform” (14), and to make full use of the resources within it.

His imagery bespeaks appreciation of the unused potential of the urban space and highlights the interchanges between human and non-human actors in the urban centre, generating a vision of the city that falls in line with Gandy’s “urban ecology” (63). The interspecies relationships operating here have undeniably been affected by “human disturbance” (Tsing 95), but the ecosystem generated through these exchanges is “no more or less ‘natural’ than any other kind of modern landscape whether it be a managed fragment of wild nature in a national park or those accidental pockets of nature” (Gandy 63). The city is configured “as an evolving, contested habitat” (Bennett and Teague 17); the narrator’s fear of “be[ing] subjected to the rule of the cockroaches in the world to come” (Hage 43) clearly demonstrates his belief that they are “the dominant species,” that they “can withstand all invasions” (Bennett and Teague 17). In casting the insects as rulers of this ecosystem, the narrator *de facto* positions humans below them in the food chain, as “subdominants” who must “fit into available niches as best they can” (17). His own “part cockroach” status hence becomes useful here, for it allows him to move fluidly between his human and animal states and to adapt to changes in his environment rather quickly (Hage 207). When faced with a difficult situation, the narrator immediately metamorphoses into his cockroach form, growing “wings and many legs”: “in the mirror, I saw my face, my long jaw, my whiskers slicing through the smoke around me” (19). Indeed, he must use both his insect skills and his human abilities if he is to acquire food and continue to survive in this environment. As Nik Heynen explains in his study of urban hunger, “the metabolic processes that sustain a body entail exchanges with its environment”; “if the processes change, then the body either transforms and adapts or ceases to exist” (132-33). Here he makes explicit the connection between subjects’ relationships with the environment and their relationships with consumption — a connection that Hage also makes.

When the narrator breaks into people’s houses by “crawl[ing] along the pipes” and springing from their “kitchen drain[s]” (Hage 80), or when he flees the scene of a crime by “rush[ing] towards the drain” and climbing onto “a leaf” (305), he draws from his arsenal of cockroach abilities. His duplicity and the self-conscious fashion choices that he makes to manipulate how others perceive him, however, function as dis-

tinctly human skills that play an equally important part in his perpetual quest for food (“One look at the guests and I knew what kind of party it would be. . . . What to wear, was the question”) (20). The narrator employs what he considers to be the most useful characteristics of the human and the non-human to manoeuvre through the city. Hage even allows the narrator to romanticize his escapades in cockroach form: with irony, he describes himself as an insect “carried along by the stream” and then as a man “on a gondola” on the canals of “Venice” (305). Through his extravagant descriptions of the ways in which his insect abilities allow him to move through space differently than other people, he directly links his “not . . . fully human” status to his unique relationship with the city (207). Indeed, through the use of stream-of-consciousness narration, which gives the reader access to the narrator’s metamorphoses, Hage collapses human and non-human subjectivity into one subject position and thereby renders impossible any hierarchical conceptualization of the relationship between humans and non-human animals as well as between the spaces traditionally associated with them. “Like a suicidal moth to artificial lights,” the protagonist is “drawn to dark places” (226), and the text connects the ease with which he navigates through pipes and sewer drains to his ability to see the edible potential of discarded food. “In my youth I was . . . [a] cockroach,” he insists (5), and his ability to adapt to the changing conditions in his environment certainly reinforces his position as the adaptable detritus eater or scavenger. The ecological role that he fills in the city, then, is crucial, since it allows other life forms to subsist and “thrive” despite the space’s environmentally compromised status (Tsing 96): “if dirt is repellent to most city dwellers, for Hage’s narrator, it becomes a central symbol of his ability to survive in the harshest of circumstances” (Beneventi 277).

As Anna Tsing explains, the contemporary biological landscape is always already marked by human presence and environmental destruction, and the only way to encourage the development of sustainable ecosystems is to facilitate their integration into ecosystems of “human disturbance” (96). In her research on the ways in which “cultural and biological” life forms have developed in relation to one another over the “last few hundred years” (95), she argues that the ideological investment in the appeal of “‘untouched’ rainforests” is counterproductive (96). The modern era should strive instead to promote “contaminated diversity” (96) since “the diversity that thrives is that which adapts to

. . . disturbance practices” (96). To illustrate her point, Tsing describes how matsutake mushrooms, a Japanese delicacy usually found in Eastern “big timber” forests (97), can now be found all across the world because of their resilience in harsh climates and their adaptability to seriously compromised soils. This fungus can even survive in regions with “small, crowded, diseased pines,” its presence also benefiting other animal and vegetable life forms in the surrounding area; it is capable of “accepting the . . . limitations” that the space presents while at the same time fertilizing the soil and “allowing forest life to continue” (97). Fulfilling a similar function in his environment, Hage’s protagonist adapts to “filth[y]” living spaces and coexists with other life forms without trying to wipe them out (Hage 52). He makes his awareness of his influence on his environment evident, stating that he has no desire to become an invasive species himself: “how can I tell her that I do not want to be part of anything because I am afraid I will become an invader who would make little boys hunger, who would watch them die with an empty stomach. I am part roach now, and what if my instincts make the best of me and lead me to those armies of antennae . . . that are preparing from the underground to surface and invade?” (210). He does admit to his greed (“I wish I were rich”), but he is also conscious of the problems inherent in the hierarchical conceptualization of human-non-human relationships (“you believe that you belong to something better and higher”) (263, 201).

The narrator’s “tormented” selfhood (Sakr 344), his questionable mental health, and his suicide attempt make it clear that the novel is not advancing his insect-like thinking as fundamentally positive, something to be aspired to, but it does grant the narrator access to a different framework for conceiving of his own consumption practices and their effects on his environment. In this way, his perspective functions as a useful foil for modern consumption habits. The scene in which the speaker plays at being a food connoisseur, and his ironic invention of the “chocolate bar masala” (Hage 58), illustrate the way in which social privilege is linked to problematic, superficial thinking about consumption. Since his narrator is “a marginal impoverished welfare recipient” (22) who navigates the city differently than the average (human) Montrealer, Hage harnesses his particular mode of appreciating the city to satirize “foodie” culture. Although his poverty forces him to “endure freezing toes, and the squelch of wet socks” (9), the narrator always finds a way

to harness the potential of spaces most closely aligned with “filth and hunger” (52), such as grimy back alleys into which ethnic restaurants vent their exhaust fans (57). Instead of avoiding the smelly air expelled by the restaurants, he intentionally places his stolen chocolate bar before it: “now the experience would drastically change, not without some risk” (58). Alternatively exposing his meal to the “city wind” and the “exhaust . . . that was coming out of the back of [an] Indian restaurant,” he designates his culinary creation “an exquisite delight direct from the Orient” (58). The city itself has produced this dish; born of downtown Montreal, where car exhaust becomes one with the exotic scents of ethnic cuisine, the “chocolate bar masala” (58) acts as a stand-in for the way in which ethnic foods, signifiers of foreignness, are adapted to fit into Western, Orientalist ideas of Indian cuisine via contact with the urban centre. The speaker also reflects on how “chocolate does taste better when it’s cold” (57): “A chocolate connoisseur knows that chocolate at a certain temperature, exposed to the air to breathe, makes for a refined experience” (58). Here his ironic reference to a “refined” dining experience brings the connection between his own marginalized status and his lack of expertise in fine cuisine to the foreground.

The “bourgeois” status of Mary and company gives them the luxury of making food choices based on whimsy, on whatever symbolic meaning that they attribute to a particular food (Tompkins 2). For them, consuming a meal is not about satiating hunger or meeting a basic human need but about participating in an aesthetic experience. The “impoverished” narrator (Hage 122) is always thinking about his next meal, but he cannot afford to make such thoroughly thought-out food choices; his fridge is “empty” (276), while theirs is “filled with food — French cheeses, ham,” “eggs,” “tomato,” “lettuce,” and so on (81). Once inside Mary’s apartment, he quickly makes his way to the kitchen and “help[s] [him]self to food,” which he devours still standing up, while the other guests sit together on the floor and enjoy their meal communally (21). This scene of consumption is significant since it clearly illustrates the difference between the speaker’s relationship with food and the other characters’ relationship with food (21). While for them eating is about the symbolic significance of food, the narrator is mainly concerned with the materiality of sustenance as a basic need. As Heynen explains, the “urban political ecology of hunger, like all other socionatural processes, is produced through an amalgamation of . . .



material and cultural practices, social relations, language, discursive construction and ideological practices" (129-30). These processes "co-evolve somewhere within the tension between consumption based on physiological requirements and consumption based on cultural conditions; between need and desire" (130). Perhaps for this reason, Hage uses only a few words to communicate that the narrator's hunger has been satisfied ("I had helped myself to food at her party") but devotes five lines to describe the "bleached Brahmins" enjoying their meal (Hage 21) — his narrative form reflects the tension between the narrator's material "need" and his hosts' aesthetic "desire" (Heynen 130). For the protagonist, the degree of enjoyment involved in consuming a meal is almost irrelevant; eating is about acquiring whatever food is available to fuel his body, so his act of consumption is conveyed succinctly and without extraneous details. The dining experience of Mary and her friends, on the other hand, is prolonged by Hage's decision to embellish it. Hage goes out of his way to emphasize their enjoyment of food by likening "their chewing" to "an incantation," elevating mastication to divine heights through the use of vocabulary with strong spiritual connotations (21). The alluring imagery used here equates the act with a transcendent experience: "they floated on Indian pillows, the humming inside their throats synced to the sound of Mary's old fridge and the cycles of the world" (21). His grandiose register is completely at odds with the unappealing, unaesthetic action that he describes — the scene is aestheticized to the point of making it ridiculous, signalling that it is the symbolism of the experience that matters to these privileged Montrealers.

Although the protagonist exhibits an overall lack of concern for all things unessential to his survival, he does recognize his own "decadent methods of survival" (26). His fixation on food and his anxiety about waste are not framed in ethical terms, nor does he exclude himself from his criticisms of human arrogance and wastefulness. Indeed, throughout the novel, the protagonist works at two exclusive restaurants, and therefore he too contributes to the waste of food and water, to the superficial and uncritical approach to consumption that he satirizes (69). He recounts how "the Frenchies" would "laugh" and "mak[e] fun" of customers who enjoyed the food and "gave compliment[s] to the chef with every bite"; the waiters are very aware of the questionable quality of food in the restaurant (28). The average consumer, he implies, is being fooled

into “humm[ing] approvingly at antibiotic-laced hormone-injected cows ruminating ground chicken bones” (28). The sentence evokes powerful, disturbing images; it sheds light on “where our food comes from” and “how it gets to our table” (Stull and Broadway xviii), but it would be a stretch to attribute this statement to any real ethical or ecological concern of the speaker. Hage merely employs his protagonist’s bitterness toward the economically privileged masses to expose the hypocrisy of a system that takes advantage of the economically marginalized population’s lack of “inherited knowledge of wine and culture” to charge that population extravagant prices for mediocre food (27).

In the same way that he critiques powerful corporate entities for telling people “what to wear, what to buy, whom to watch, and whom to . . . hate,” the narrator criticizes the global food industry for encouraging patterns of thinking that generate a culture of conspicuous consumption in which individual identities are entirely based on food choices and on purchasing power (87). The “cowboys” (28) who come to eat at the restaurant are so absorbed in emulating the behaviour of cultured and knowledgeable “foodies” that they pretend to enjoy their meals, “all the while quietly starving from the small portions” (28). The narrator makes it clear that they are not familiar with quality food; they have simply been programmed by years of exposure to a food culture driven by venture capital and the “commodification of Otherness” (hooks 366), so they simply assume that eating at an expensive restaurant with “Frenchie” employees (Hage 28) who “exaggerated [their] French accent” (29) means that they will be getting fine cuisine. The food culture perpetuated by this type of flawed thinking is nothing more than a simulacrum, an artificial illusion of culture created to convince consumers that they are being sold food that bespeaks a certain degree of sophistication. These customers’ misguided preoccupation with trying to emulate a “mastery of foreign foods” (Tompkins 2) manifests not only their ignorance of quality food, and of non-Westernized foreign cuisine, but also their lack of self-reflexivity and their unwillingness to consider the complex sociopolitical power relations that shape conventional thinking about food culture. The fact that they believe appreciating expensive food will cast them as “cultured” in itself reveals the vacuity of their idea of culture. The narrator aligns their concern with projecting a vapid, artificial identity by appreciating the restaurant’s

food with Sylvie's desire to "live a permanent life of beauty," focusing only on "stylish dresses" and "good manners" (Hage 182).

Like Genevieve, whom the narrator accuses of living "in la-la-land" (79), Sylvie leads a "make-believe life" in which "any hint of misery . . . , problems or violence" is "automatically dismissed and replaced with something happy, light, or pretty" (182). It is not optimism that the speaker satirizes but the fact that Sylvie lives "in a state of permanent denial" (182). His obsession with the underground, then, can be seen as a rebellion against such privileged, unrealistic conceptualizations of the city. It also bespeaks his resistance to the conventional version of aesthetics embraced by people like Sylvie who choose not to see spaces compromised by poverty or pollution. Indeed, to maintain her identity as a genteel, sophisticated woman who describes "everything . . . as charmant, intéressant, d'une certain sensibilité," Sylvie must pretend that she cannot detect "bad smells from sewers, infested slums, unheated apartments, single mothers on welfare, worn-out clothing" (182). She is so committed to performing the role of the cultured woman that she must ignore the filth, poverty, and suffering around her to preserve her sense of self. Of course, Hage ties the artificiality of the identity that she projects back to her relationship with food: "everything had to be perfect, . . . every morsel of food had to be well served — presentation, always presentation, the ultimate task" (182-83).

The narrator's uncompromising critique of food culture certainly makes the reader aware of the fact that consumption choices are political acts, that eating has "social, political, environmental and moral implications and consequences" (Stull and Broadway 87), but the narrator makes no conscious effort to limit his own complicity in the problematic system that he condemns, nor does he articulate any more ethical mode of thinking about consumption. In fact, he too enjoys "a large, fat hamburger" produced by the food industry that he critiques — with "ambivalent feelings" (Hage 225). His actions are always complicated by the fact that he tends to replicate the attitudes that he criticizes. Even when it comes to the instances of metaphorical consumption that critics such as Lapierre address, the speaker is not blameless: he "request[s] to hear Farhoud's story" but "does not share his" (4). Thus, even though he mocks his therapist for absorbing his own "stories" so hungrily, he too acts as a consumer of refugee narratives, and his hypocritical behaviour manifests the tensions inherent in his sense of self (Hage 102).

His “association with cockroaches” and “his ability to transform himself into one” both empower the protagonist, because they allow him to penetrate otherwise inaccessible spaces and betray “his disgust toward his own condition, as a man who lives in poverty and is desperate for affection and acceptance” (Lapierre 8). Even the human elements of his character are products of contradictions: he is both an immigrant and a Montrealer, an “other” figure in the Western world and a typical Canadian in a global era, an employee at an expensive dining establishment and a poor man on welfare who can barely afford to feed himself. His unique position in the food chain hence collapses into the marginal position that he occupies in the social hierarchy, and his part-human, part-non-human condition allows him to reimagine human relationships with the non-human environment in more productive ways. The novel’s strength lies in the fact that Hage makes no didactic move toward advocating positive change or ethical environmental action — he relies on the rhetorical power of his marginalized protagonist’s tone and language to expose the self-perpetuating power structures that shape people’s consumption habits. In choosing a morally questionable protagonist who clearly lacks integrity to be the vehicle for these criticisms, Hage puts the various approaches to consumption that the novel presents into perspective, and he thus advances a more critical approach to modern food culture and prompts a re-evaluation of the relationships between humans and the spaces that sustain them.

## WORKS CITED

- Beneventi, Dominic A. “Montreal Underground.” *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études canadiennes* 46.3 (2012): 263-86. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.
- Bennett, Michael, and David W. Teague. *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999. Print.
- Gandy, Matthew. “Urban Nature and the Ecological Imaginary.” Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 63-74.
- Hage, Rawi. *Cockroach*. Toronto: Anansi, 2009. Print.
- Heynen, Nik. “Justice of Eating in the City: The Political Ecology of Urban Hunger.” Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 129-42.
- Heynen, Nik, Maria Kaika, and E. Swyngedouw, eds. *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- hooks, bell. “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001. 366-80. Print.

- Hout, Syrine. "Cultural Hybridity, Trauma, and Memory in Diasporic Anglophone Lebanese Fiction." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.3 (2011): 330-42. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.
- Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken, 1995. 67-134. Print.
- Lapierre, Maude. "Refugees and Global Violence: Complicity in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50.5 (2014): 1-13. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.
- Roberts, Peter, Joe Ravetz, and Clive George. "Introduction." *Environment and the City*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009. 1-25. Print.
- Sakr, Rita. "Imaginative Migrations: An Interview with the Lebanese-Canadian Writer Rawi Hage." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.3 (2011): 343-51. Web. 18 Apr. 2014.
- Stull, Donald D., and Michael J. Broadway. *Slaughterhouse Blues: The Meat and Poultry Industry in North America*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013. Print.
- Tompkins, Kyla Wazana. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: New York UP, 2012. Print.
- Tsing, Anna. "Contaminated Diversity in 'Slow Disturbance': Potential Collaborators for a Liveable Earth." *Why Do We Value Diversity?* Ed. Gary Martin, Diana McIntyre, and Ursula Münster. Spec. issue of *Biocultural Diversity in a Global Context* 9 (2012): 96-98. Web. 1 Apr. 2014.