The Unsettling Portrayal of Migrant Existence in Rawi Hage's Urban Fiction

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Abstract

This essay considers the function of the grotesque mode in Rawi Hage's novels *Cockroach* (2008) and *Carnival* (2012). The grotesque is a provocative tool with which Hage draws attention to the predicament of the class of poor and disadvantaged new immigrants in contemporary Montreal. He offers a male immigrant's unsettling perspective on the Canadian multicultural ideal that proclaims the acceptance of ethnic and racial difference.

Formal aspects that generate a grotesque effect include the first-person narrator's self-image, his disruptive discourse of resistance, his disorienting view of urban reality, and spatial metaphors in the context of the protagonist's social alienation and marginalisation. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection throws light on the sense of fear and repulsion felt towards the urban poor, and on the protagonist's deliberate identification with vermin in the context of his discourse of resistance.

Even though the underprivileged migrant is able to answer back, Hage's novels are devoid of true regenerative and liberating power. The literary texts give prominence to the migrant's isolation and socio-economic outsider position. Nonetheless, the grotesque mode also functions as a powerful tool with which the author depicts the recent immigrant as someone with a resilient and mobile identity.

Resumen

El presente ensayo considera la función de la visión de lo grotesco en las novelas de Rawi Hage *Cockroach* (2008) y *Carnival* (2012). El 'grotesque' es una herramienta de provocación con la que Hage pretende llamar la atención hacia la situación del grupo social de los nuevos inmigrantes de clase trabajadora en el Montreal contemporáneo. Hage ofrece la perspectiva perturbadora de un inmigrante varón frente el ideal de multiculturalidad canadiense que proclama la aceptación de las diferencias raciales y étnicas.

Los aspectos formales que generan un efecto grotesco incluyen la imagen introspectiva del narrador en primera persona, su discurso disruptivo de resistencia, su desorientadora visión de la realidad urbana y las metáforas espaciales en el contexto de la alienación y marginación social del protagonista. La teoría del abyecto de Julia Kristeva arroja luz sobre el sentido del miedo y la repulsión hacia las clases bajas urbanas, y hacia la deliberada identificación del protagonista con las plagas dentro del contexto de su discurso de resistencia.

Aún a pesar de que los inmigrantes desfavorecidos poseen capacidad de réplica, las novelas de Hage están desprovistas de un verdadero poder regenerativo y liberador. La narrativa enfatiza el sentimiento de aislamiento del migrante y la posición de marginado socio-económico. Con todo, el modo grotesco funciona igualmente como herramienta poderosa para el tetrato del inmigrante contemporáneo como un sujeto de identidad móvil y resiliente.

The grotesque is a powerful force in contemporary cultures of the West, both in the visual arts and in fiction. This aesthetic mode particularly appeals to artists today because its hybridity speaks directly to the concerns central to the debate about ethical values and the nature of the human in the context of multiculturalism (Connelly 22). In twenty-first-century art, the grotesque not only appears in relation to cultural hybridity but also gender hybridity, the disruption of the distinction between human and animal as well as human and artifice. The "nonhierarchical and nondichotomized" grotesque world (Perttula 38) thereby functions as a means to provoke the dominant culture's dualistic thinking and its fear of ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorder. The grotesque mode unsettles our preconceptions and makes the familiar world strange. Its serious literary purpose becomes especially prominent when it is used as an aggressive weapon to invert and undercut a society's arbitrary system of cultural classifications. The estranged world of the grotesque thereby radically destabilises cultural dichotomies of the symbolic order (Fuß 154) without, however, offering a clear ideological alternative.

This essay will specifically draw attention to the grotesque as an instrument of sociopolitical critique in contemporary migrant fiction. Its distancing effect shocks readers out of complacency and faces the latter with an undesirable social reality. Two novels by the Lebanese-Canadian writer Rawi Hage exemplify this alienation effect in the context of a male immigrant's fierce attack on forms of domination and subordination. In *Cockroach* (2008) and *Carnival* (2012), the male protagonist is a lower-class immigrant of Arab descent who lives in the multicultural and socially stratified city of Montreal. Hage experiments strikingly with the grotesque mode to offer the poor immigrant's alienating perspective on Montreal's present-day urban reality.[1] According to Chelva Kanaganayakam, "counter-realism" quite often typifies the work of exiled writers, for "the premises of realism, which have to do with consolidation or metonymy, are inadequate to express the voice of the periphery, of a vision shaped by two ontologies" (208). He adds that this vision is "not available to the insider" (213).

Smaro Kamboureli briefly refers to the grotesque mode in English-Canadian diasporic literature. She states that it "signals heterogeneity" as "a byproduct of the attitude that takes homogeneity to be the natural order" (190). Janice Kulyk Keefer in turn draws attention to "the present mode of transcultural writing in Canada" that is "a postmodernist form of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque," which combines "the celebratory aspects" of the late-medieval and Renaissance grotesque with "expressions of hostility and alienation" of the modernist grotesque. Wolfgang Kayser originally theorised the latter as "the demonic grotesque," a mode which the modernist artist typically relies on to explore a character's unconscious fears, alienation, marginalisation and bouts of 'madness'. In Keefer's view, the postmodernist grotesque in Canadian fiction rejects monologism, interrogates social and cultural hierarchies and transgresses "the code of 'good behaviour' demanded by the Department of Multiculturalism …" (67-8).

This essay argues that Rawi Hage's fiction combines the literary carnivalesque or folk grotesque with the demonic grotesque in the context of his unsettling portrayal of migrant existence. Hage relies on this subversive strategy to primarily draw attention to the predicament of the class of poor and disadvantaged immigrants in a multicultural city. As a socio-economic outsider, the protagonist experiences a tension between his individual sense of masculine subjectivity and identity and his cultural naming. His inability to experience real citizenship is caused, among other things, by the dominant culture's refusal to accept the new underclass of immigrants.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection will help to interpret Hage's grotesque animal imagery in relation to the social construction of minorities. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva introduces the notion of "the abject" as a subset of the grotesque. The abject is the radically excluded object, the repressed not-I-in-me that is experienced as a threat to the social system, the existing order, and one's human identity. It is human beings' animal, corporeal, and mortal side, the knowledge of which they try to repress in order to preserve their individual identity. Kristeva explains "abjection" as a psychological phenomenon whereby the subject projects the fear of the Other within the self onto foreigners. The terror of the abject bears a close similarity to Kayser's concept of the demonic grotesque (Hurley 141). In the ensuing analysis of Hage's urban fiction, the abject as an object of disgust will cast light on the hostility to the racial Other and on the male protagonist's deliberate identification with vermin as a form of resistance to power structures.

Keith Booker, who deals with abjection and the grotesque in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, aptly remarks that "abject images are centrally associated with the kind of filth, degradation, and animality with which dominant groups traditionally seek to identify marginal groups, … these images can take on a specifically political flavor" (245). To Booker, the grotesque literary strategies in these novels are "politically effective" only if they are satirically directed against specific social and political targets (246).

1 Rawi Hage, who was born in Beirut in 1964, left his mother country that was ravaged by civil war in 1984. After having lived in New York City for eight years, he moved to Montreal where he has resided since 1992. Besides being a creative writer, he is also a professional photographer and visual artist. *De Niro's Game* won the Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2006 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2008. *Cockroach* won the Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2008 and *Carnival* won the same prize in 2012.

In *Cockroach* and *Carnival*, the sociopolitical critique underlying the folk- and demonic grotesque indeed becomes most apparent when its subversive energies function as an aggressive device in the service of satire.[2] The first-person narrator, who presents an ex-centric defamiliarising view of urban reality, primarily targets the oppressive power of the dominant cultural order that defines the needy racial Other as inferior and undesirable.[3]

The subsequent analysis of *Cockroach* and *Carnival* will deal with several formal aspects that generate a grotesque effect. It will consider the latter as symptomatic of the male immigrant's vulnerability. Formal features of the grotesque in *Cockroach* and *Carnival* include: the protagonist's hybrid self-image and imaginary metamorphosis; his disorienting critical perspective on present-day urban reality; his spatial isolation and transgressive desire in the margin of society; his disruptive discourse of resistance or linguistic impurity; his fantasies of a world turned topsy-turvy.

The Grotesque in *Cockroach*

The Lebanese protagonist in *Cockroach* belongs to one of Canada's so-called visible minorities in the 1990s. He has lived in Montreal for seven years and has scratched a living by doing temporary menial jobs. The narrative starts after his failed suicide attempt that was motivated by his wish to escape from the oppressive sunlight (153), a metaphor for the "oppressive power in the world that [he] can neither participate in nor control" (5). Following his brief stay in a mental hospital, he picks up life again and is offered psychotherapy.

The predominant voice and perspective is that of the lower-class male immigrant who not only narrates his personal experiences but also displays great empathy with male and female Iranian refugees who, as political prisoners, were victims of torture and sexual abuse in Iran. He falls in love with Shohreh Sherazy, a heavily traumatised Iranian refugee who was raped in her home country, like his sister. The literary text revolves around the protagonist's solitude, his vulnerability, his basic human needs and desires, and his anger at the ruling class's refusal to accept the new immigrants' ethnic, racial, and class difference. The unnamed first-person narrator describes his relationship to Montreal's hierarchical social order in terms of alienation and subordination.

The protagonist's grotesque self-image as an ontological hybrid, "part cockroach, part human" (207) is, however, anything but imposed on him by the dominant class. This self-representation originates from a game he used to play with his sister at home in war-torn Beirut. During their childhood, they imagined being cockroaches while seeking safety under a blanket. They fantasised becoming imperceptible in a warm and fluid underground space that offered an escape from domestic violence. The protagonist's beloved sister ultimately did become a victim of domestic violence in Lebanon, for she was killed by her abusive husband. The protagonist leaves his home country soon after the tragic incident and immigrates to Canada, where he remains racked with guilt for not having prevented the murder. At no time does the adult narrator nostalgically yearn for the home country left behind but neither does he show an interest in adapting to the mainstream culture.[4]

The adult protagonist's experience of turning into a cockroach evokes a sense of extreme isolation and social alienation that is typical of grotesque figures in twentieth-century fiction, such as Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. However, one needs to distinguish the grotesque visual image in Hage's novel from Gregor's transformation into an unspecified beetle.[5] Gregor literally becomes both a human being and a giant insect, whereas the protagonist in *Cockroach* merely imagines turning into a cockroach while identifying with its contradictory traits. This insect is commonly perceived as an object of disgust yet it is also an admirably swift creature. It is hard for humans to detect when it hides in dark corners and it is above all a resilient survivor.

The poststructuralist philosopher Rosi Braidotti treats these traits of the cockroach in the context of her feminist theory about the position of women in Western society. Braidotti defines the insect as "a figuration of the abject, a borderline figure, capable of bearing different meanings and associations" (*Metamorphoses* 150). In *Transpositions*, Braidotti extends her study of abjection to the racial and ethnic Others, both male and female. She

2 Several contemporary British novelists, who deal with social marginality and misfit protagonists, rely on the satiric function of the grotesque. Nicola Allen refers to Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Irvine Welsh, Jim Crace, and Will Self to whom the grotesque "can often be both politically motivated and mordantly sardonic, designed to shock the reader via an exhibition of excess and exaggeration" (133).

3 Rawi Hage makes the sociopolitical critique of his novels explicit in an interview with Rita Sakr. He says about their main thrust that "it is crucial to have and to express a genuine concern for the world, society, individuals and the effect of ideologies on them" (347). The ameliorative intention of his fiction is obvious from the following remark: "My novels don't change the world but they create an awareness of possibilities and hence *might* [Hage's emphasis] contribute to change" (349).

4 The main character's unresolved trauma complex and diasporic condition has been treated by Syrine Hout, Rita Sakr, and Maud Lapierre. The novel's reliance on the grotesque mode has so far received little critical attention. Domenic A. Beneventi merely mentions the underground as a grotesque space (280). Whereas Mark Libin deals with Hage's aim "to *unsettle* the privileged Western reader/host, shifting the power to the diasporic guest" (76), he leaves the unsettling strategy of the grotesque out of consideration. Kit Dobson only refers to "the abjection of the immigrant or refugee body" (266).

5 Rawi Hage makes clear in interviews that his being influenced by Kafka is an erroneous assumption.

claims these “are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality, but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject-positions” (44).

Braidotti relies for her understanding of abjection on Julia Kristeva, who is in turn indebted to the study of defilement in the work of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas. As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva introduces the abject as an object of horror that violates “identity, system, order” and that “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers* 4). The abject “confronts us ... with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (12, Kristeva’s emphasis). The abject is the animal, corporeal, and mortal side of humanity that may be repressed but that can never be fully expelled. As human beings’ alterity hidden within the unconscious, it is a reminder of, and a threat to, the precarious status of the rational, unified self.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva specifically explores hostility to the foreigner in terms of a desire to keep one’s own unsettling otherness at bay. She claims that we deal with strangers just as we treat the stranger (the Other) within ourselves: “The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious” (191). She posits that an ethical relationship between oneself and the foreigner necessitates a confrontation with one’s own uncanny strangeness. In an interview about *Strangers to Ourselves*, she further clarifies her psychoanalytic paradigm for a new ethics: “… recognizing what is not doing well in myself – my death drives, my eroticism, my bizarrenesses, … all these uncoded marginalities that are not recognized by consensus – I would tend less to constitute enemies from these phenomena, which I now project to the exterior, making scapegoats of others” (“Cultural Strangeness” 41).

Kristeva’s theory of the unconscious and abjection throws light on the subordination and self-affirmation of the male racial Other in *Cockroach*. Dominant groups within society tend to ideologically define recent lower-class immigrants, “the herd of brownies and darkies,” (28) as an invasive species that infests the city. The danger of defilement is a device of discrimination and a way to keep the threatening, ‘impure’ strangers at a safe distance from the self. The “hungry, impoverished” (9) Lebanese protagonist indeed senses that “the rich hate the poor” (85) and that he is “the insect beneath them” (89). He internalises the animalisation of the migrant to such a degree that it constitutes his self-image. The “marginal impoverished welfare recipient” adopts the animalising discourse in saying, “Yes, I am poor, I am vermin, a bug, I am at the bottom of the scale” (122). He speaks about himself as a a victim of social abjection, “the scum of the earth in this capitalist endeavour” (123). He is refused a job as a waiter in a fancy restaurant on Sherbrooke street, *Le Cafard*, which is the French word for cockroach. As it would be an inappropriate name for a clean and proper restaurant, it cannot but refer to the expression *avoir le cafard*, which means being in a state of sadness. The latter indeed applies to the predominant mood of the narrator, for he is a heavily traumatised individual who suffers from “a terrible sadness” caused by the death of his sister (119). Maître Pierre insults the protagonist when he tells him why he cannot possibly be a waiter in *Le Cafard*: “*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).” This derogatory remark about his racial body triggers the protagonist’s impotent rage at the “filthy human with gold braids on his sleeves and pompous posture” who despises him (29). His rage is a symptom of his vulnerability to the normative gaze of the wealthy, who look at him with disgust. Being unwelcome in *Le Cafard*, the protagonist feels drawn “like an insect” to “Le Fly Bar” on St-Laurent street, for he has come to like “dirty places and sombre corners” (35).

Paradoxically, it is the protagonist’s refusal “to be a subordinate” (201) and his loathing for the normative values of Montreal’s rich inhabitants that makes him disidentify with the human species and increasingly identify with the repulsive yet resilient cockroach. He imagines transforming into a cockroach because, by straddling the boundary between human and insect, he manages to flee from being trapped in the fixed representations of the dominant culture’s advantaged (immigrant) class. The protagonist’s identification with a nocturnal and creeping insect “which inhabits realms apart from and inaccessible to man” (Kayser 182) is a typical motif of the demonic grotesque and conveys his refusal to be perceived as weak and easily defeated.

Cockroaches are known to scavenge for food above ground and flee back into a dark, unstructured underworld when exposed to the light. Whenever the protagonist comes across real cockroaches, he tries to hit them without desiring to kill them but to “keep those insects on their toes” (128) and observe their strong survival instinct. He personally gathers strength and a sense of power as soon as he imagines transmuting into an ineradicable human/cockroach.

For the portrayal of this other reality, Hage depends on *hypotyposis*, which is a trope common to grotesque narratives (Astruc 208). *Hypotyposis* is a description so vivid that the event seems to take place before the reader’s eyes, as when the human/cockroach describes himself as the repulsive Other that fears being crushed, yet manages to survive thanks to the insect’s remarkable speed: “I zigzagged, frantic, scanning the sky for any shadow of a giant’s shoes or rolled-up newspapers that would suddenly land on my head like a collapsed roof, like ten layers of sky falling to earth” (230).

The protagonist's social alienation is conveyed indirectly through space symbolism. He feels trapped by the light above ground, a trope for the city's settled discursive hierarchies and xenophobic stereotypes. He flees from Montreal's frozen surface, with its "words … shapes and forms that confine you and guide you" (270), and identifies with the cockroach that takes refuge in a dark underground space. On the other side, he becomes "the master of the underground" (23) where "all was good, all was natural, all was accepted" (156). When he dims his run-down apartment, he imagines entering a fluid subterranean space that functions as a location of radical openness and a space of resistance against the order of things. From this marginal space, the human/cockroach challenges the limits of classificatory systems and speaks back to representatives of the mainstream culture.

The underground is also a metaphor for the protagonist's unconscious. The voice of his low "other half" (245) becomes audible in a counter-discourse that expresses an embodied dimension of language. The protagonist's discourse of the unconscious, which is associated with fluidity and instability, gains the upper hand as soon as the language of uncontrollable drives erupts to the surface. The narrative transmits the corporeal language of primary processes by means of the grotesque mode. The latter involves excess on the level of discourse in the domain of psychic desire. [6]

The narrator conveys his erotic pleasure while making love to Shohreh as follows: "Then we rolled in dirt and made love in dirt until dirt became our emblem, our flag to pledge allegiance to, and we got drunk and composed new anthems with groans" (53). The folk grotesque both degrades nationalism (an elevated ideal) and celebrates the body of the repulsive Other in its gross animality. The reference to embracing dirt involves a shift towards the demonic grotesque or the abject. The migrant who embraces dirt rejects cleanliness for, as Smaro Kamboureli says: "cleanliness is synonymous with … cultural homogeneity … complete assimilation" (200).

Besides articulating erotic pleasure, the narrator's transgressive discourse gives expression to his vulnerability and aggression. His counterhegemonic discourse revolves around his anger and frustration at being "neglected" (32) as a human being with particular needs and desires, and around his refusal to be submissive. He vents his fury on the established order by whose ideological power structures he feels victimised. His linguistic excess causes in the reader a vertiginous sensation, as when he shows disrespect for bourgeois society. Take, for instance, the profusion of words in: "I forget and forgive humanity for its stupidity, its foulness, its pride, its avarice and greed, envy, lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, and anger. I forgive it for its contaminated spit, its valued feces, its river of piss, …" (226-7). These inner ravings contain a discordant diction and conceptual incongruity, as religious doctrine about the seven deadly sins is debased through the combination with images that refer to the flow of bodily orifices. This excessive verbal aggression, whereby the demonic grotesque shifts to the carnivalesque, is the narrator's means to subvert the bourgeois subject's ideal of the pure, clean self and to resist his own dehumanisation.

The protagonist repeatedly has a 'madman's' secular apocalyptic visions. The Apocalypse as a vision of rupture, conveyed through spectacular and terrifying images, is a motif of the demonic grotesque (Kayser 182). The apocalyptic visions in *Cockroach* announce a new era when all the hungry and oppressed immigrants will "inherit the earth" (53). The rioting "insects" or minorities will ultimately and collectively resort to physical violence with a view to radically overthrowing the existing social hierarchy above ground and triumphantly "claim what is rightly theirs" (27). The militant cockroaches will become "the future ruling race" (201).

Such grotesque visions deal with the threat of a popular uprising, whereby the conventional world is turned upside down. They primarily foreground the pent-up anger and frustration of minorities who are victims of racist assumptions and inequalities in contemporary urban society. The same target underlies Hage's satiric oppositionality and sociopolitical critique in *Carnival*, a title that does not cover the overtones of true carnival as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. [7] In the contemporary context, the concept of carnival signifies "resistance, disorder and methodological irresponsibility" (Jenks 161).

The Grotesque in *Carnival*

"True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole." This quote by Bakhtin, which Hage chose as an epigraph of *Carnival*, is a line from *Rabelais and His World*. It is followed by Bakhtin's general statement about the coexistence in world literature of seriousness and laughter, whereby carnivalesque laughter "purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified" (123). To Bakhtin, true carnival celebrates change, renewal, fertility and is devoid of fear. He stresses that the folk culture's ritual of reversal, and the opposition to the official culture of the ruling classes, is a joyful and comic as well as a regenerative and liberating experience.

An avid reader, the male protagonist of *Carnival* possesses a copy of *The History of the Comic Grotesque* (30). Carnival exuberance as a liberating and healing communal

6 Philip Thomson treats excess, exaggeration, and hyperbolism as devices with which the grotesque mode unsettles the reader's accustomed perception of reality.

7 At the time of writing this essay, no scholarly articles on *Carnival* had yet been published.

experience, however, largely remains unexplored in this novel. As in *Cockroach*, the protagonist's individual anti-authoritarian carnival takes centre stage and is marked by a vivid sense of isolation. To Bakhtin and Kayser, this is a typical feature of the demonic grotesque. In addition, Hage explores the terror of the demonic grotesque in the context of the violent resistance of poverty-stricken people of colour at the time of the city's festival.

Besides the city's carnival, the narrative contains other carnivalesque spaces such as the travelling circus, Montreal's social underworld, and the main character's taxi. The male protagonist was born and raised in a travelling circus, where his mother used to be a flying trapeze artist and his father a flying carpet performer of Arab descent. The latter converted to Muslim fundamentalism and abandoned the family as a result of which the mother hanged herself. After the demise of the circus, the bearded lady and the protagonist immigrate to a North American city known for its annual carnival.[8] The liminal human being, who was used to being loved and accepted in the circus, is doomed to be humiliated in a city that favours stable categories. The bearded lady knows that "people here want everything to be clear: men are men and women are women and those who are in between are left to the vultures and the crocodiles" (158).

The Arabic first-person narrator adopts the name Fly as soon as he arrives in the North American multicultural city. Fly earns a living as a taxi driver, like many recent immigrants whose lives revolve around survival or defeat. Fly tells a wealthy businessman: "In our profession, we are vulnerable" (196). He has great empathy with other taxi drivers, whom he calls underprivileged hungry "dogs" (61). He deliberately speaks about them as "human insects" (9) that either resemble spiders or flies. Like the protagonist in *Cockroach*, he adopts the animalising discourse to sharply criticise social abjection.

To the narrator, flies are "wanderers" who "navigate the city, ceaseless and aimless, looking for raising arms to halt their flights" (10). The term "wanderers," which recurs in the narrative, foregrounds the concept of migration, as the Latin *migrare* means to wander or move. Yet by calling himself Fly, the protagonist also conveys that foreign taxi drivers are associated by the rich with "a filthy low-life" (139) and a pest within the dual oppositions of the social formation. Thus the fly is an abject image for lower-class immigrants whom the bourgeoisie desires to keep at a safe distance.

When Fly retreats among the pile of books in his run-down apartment, his posture is that of an isolated individual who cannot find rest unless he has solitary sex, to which he is addicted. The protagonist's sexual frenzy is a manifestation of insubordination and a feature of the demonic grotesque. Linda Hutcheon sees a connection between non-productive grotesque sexuality and anti-authoritarianism in novels by Leonard Cohen, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer. Their fiction parodies Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque or folk grotesque because, as Hutcheon says, "there is little of the regenerative power of the erotic that Bakhtin elevated to a vital positive pole of ambivalence" (94).

Fly's transgressive fantasies are similarly anti-authoritarian and non-regenerative. Every morning, he lies down on his father's magic carpet and "happily" masturbates. In his spectacular fantasies, he imagines transforming into a victorious hero in a counterfactual history. He rectifies past world events and injustices and triumphantly 'comes' while liberating the oppressed "martyrs and insects" (184) from dictatorial regimes. One of his autoerotic fantasies contains a reference to cannibalism, or the abject, and the carnivalesque liberation of the inferior 'animals' from the doctrine of ideology: "I pound and pound until I hear the humming abyss of the rosy holes, the cannibalistic cunts of mammals and dinosaurs, the leaping legs of the lady frog, the latent hazy breasts of promiscuous albino sisters liberating their kind from the condemnation of the *sanctus doctrinalis*" (17). This grotesque collage of disjointed images generates an ambivalent emotional response in the reader, for it is both ludicrous and horrifying.

In the city, Fly's posture is often that of a sad clown who steps into the spotlight and openly shows his sensitivity to social injustice and power politics. He virulently attacks a priest as a representative of the Church's opposition to carnival, which was considered to be a profane site of disorder and sedition in bygone days. Fly, who is an atheist yet a believer "in others, and in humans" (175), openly directs his antagonistic discourse at the priest. He calls him "a hater of misfits, … a lover of power and buffoon dictators …" (176).

This is one out of several scenes in which Fly's uninhibited discourse, directed against the defenders of the privileged and powerful, is as marked by contempt as that of the protagonist in *Cockroach*. Fly's aggressive counter-discourse is a tool with which he consistently targets individuals who abuse their power against vulnerable ex-centric groups. These include working-class immigrants who "get stuck in awful jobs" (149) and underprivileged women of colour who are forced into prostitution.

The narrative contrasts Fly's disruptive discourse of resistance, that is, his verbal aggressiveness and autoerotic fantasies, with the stance of his black anarchist friend. The latter resorts to physical "violence and resistance" (208) against oppressors. Otto Blake is an impoverished black immigrant and a left-wing political activist who was born and raised in Angola, a former colony. In Montreal, he gives in to the uncontrollable urge to take revenge on people whom he accuses of race discrimination and the defence of imperial

8 *Carnival* contains several allusions to Montreal, such as "the mountain" (86), "the two shores of the American north" (124) and "St. Lucas Island" (265).

power structures. Otto's refusal to be beaten into submission and his radical postcolonial oppositionality escalate into a series of killings. The novel juxtaposes his monomaniacal violence with the city's carnival, which functions as a safety valve for human beings' 'animal' passions.

The people's festival ends up being severely disrupted by gothic horror, for two famished and drug-addicted adolescents kill the Angolan Fredao Mwalila and eat his limbs. One of the adolescents is Tammer, the child of Fly's drug-addicted Angolan female friend whom Fredao forces into street prostitution. Linda's plight is that of many immigrant women of colour whom the protagonist refers to as the city's "wandering animals" (75). Tammer commits the beastly deed because the pimp battered his mother. The uncanny act of cannibalism is only the beginning of a sequence of crimes committed by the dehumanised black social outsiders against rich people listed by Otto. *Carnival* thus sets the wintry festival period with its ritual of reversal against a backdrop of an unauthorised individual carnival with subversive energies that involve sheer savagery. The retaliatory act of aggression, committed by the children of prostitute mothers, causes mayhem. It denies the licensed festive anarchy of the true carnival that Bakhtin associates with the people's temporary liberation from official culture's dogmas and hierarchies. Cannibalism as the ultimate transgression of a social taboo shifts the focus from the folk grotesque to a horrifying and alienating world with shocking visual images that belong to the demonic grotesque or the abject.

At the end of *Carnival*, Fly empathises with Otto who "looked like a defeated bat" (282), the nocturnal bat being "the grotesque animal incarnate" (Kayser 182). Following Otto's suicide, Fly departs from Montreal and drives with his taxi to another destination. He simultaneously causes cognitive indeterminacy by describing how his taxi transmutes into a flying magic carpet that levitates above the city's surface. Thus, as in *Cockroach*, the narrative ending hesitates between realism and fantasy. *Cockroach* concludes with the protagonist killing the Iranian government official who raped Shohreh Sherazy during the Islamic revolution. Through his identification with the cockroach, the protagonist fearlessly murders the rapist and his bodyguard. Subsequently, the human/cockroach escapes, or imagines escaping, down the kitchen drain of the respectable "Star of Iran" restaurant where the retaliation took place. Both novels thus end with a grotesque visual image of the migrant entering a transitional space associated with spiritual freedom and surrealistic flights of imagination.

Conclusion

The analysis of Hage's *Cockroach* and *Carnival* has shown the grotesque to be clearly interrelated with the novels' underlying satiric oppositionality and sociopolitical critique. The grotesque mode engages the political when its alienation effect serves as an instrument to depict the migrant's marginalisation, vulnerability, struggle for selfhood, and contestation of established stratifications of power.

The male protagonists in both novels deliberately identify with the xenophobic stereotype, that is, the collective identity of 'impure' minorities in Montreal. The grotesque mode thereby functions as a tool to both criticise the demeaning images projected on second-class citizens and the ideal of cultural homogeneity. The migrant's alternative perspective on present-day multi-ethnic society may be linked to the outspoken critical view on the Canadian multicultural ideal of Neil Bissoondath, a Canadian author originally from Trinidad, who lives in Quebec City. To Bissoondath, the myth of multiculturalism "has preached tolerance rather than encouraging acceptance; and it is leading us into a divisiveness so entrenched that we face a future of multiple solitudes with no central notion to bind us" (192).

The modern metropolitan figure is the migrant and, according to Salman Rusdie, this "man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age" (356). Rushdie is the writer of migrant novels in which the satirical function of the grotesque is as prominent as in Hage's urban fiction. Thus in *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha undergoes an actual mutation into a goatish devil. According to John Ball,

> This metamorphosis makes a number of thematic and satiric points. As a magic-realist literalized metaphor, it inscribes on the body the fears and prejudices of those who see Third-World immigrants as sub-human species, inherently evil (hence the horns), and reproducing at an alarming rate. … Those who see darker-skinned immigrants as beasts … earn Rushdie's satiric critique for resisting the newness of demographic multiplicity. The satiric grotesque that they 'construct' Saladin as rebounds satirically back on them … Saladin's grotesque body transforms an image of scorn into a site of reclamation (149).

In her study of *The Satanic Verses*, Katherine Donn mentions the "transformatory force" of the grotesque, "which topples hierarchies and binary oppositions" (102). She remarks that the grotesque is particularly productive in postcolonial writing about immigrant experience, which is concerned with "questions of alterity and delimitation" as well as "metamorphosis and change." Donn adds that the grotesque is a mode "in which the

marginalised is able to answer back, in a way that exemplifies the element of liberation and sociopolitical resistance which has been an essential characteristic of the grotesque since Bakhtin" (108).[9]

Rawi Hage's migrant fiction needs to be distinguished from postcolonial writing. As Subha Xavier says, the migrant text departs from "the politics of oppression and resistance tied to old colonial regimes; its battles are now of a different order related to … democracy, rights of citizenship, and the struggle against various forms of discrimination based on race, class, gender or sexual orientation. Economic and political exploitation figures prominently as does the clash of languages and cultures" (19).

From the perspective of Hage's male protagonists, the underprivileged ethnic or racial Other is not accepted in the contemporary metropolis. Despite such a bleak picture of the recent immigrant's existence, the grotesque does function as a powerful satirical tool. It confronts us with an unsettling visual image of the migrant as someone with a strong survival instinct and an indomitable spirit. Hage convincingly depicts his displaced protagonists as stubborn survivors who fiercely refuse to be fully defined and delimited by the cultural binaries on which privileged human beings rely in the host country.

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9 Justin D. Edwards and Rune Grauland similarly deal with "politically empowering forms of grotesquery" in a chapter on "literary and cinematic works that write back to the former colonial centre" (124).

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