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Volume 47, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095240ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095240ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Baron, K. (2022). “But How, How to Exist and Not to Belong?”: Hybridity and Trauma in Rawi Hage’s Cockroach. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 47(1), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095240ar>

“But How, How to Exist and Not to Belong?”: Hybridity and Trauma in Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach*

KELLY BARON

IN AN INTERVIEW IN 2011, RAWI HAGE commented on his unnamed narrator of *Cockroach*’s rejection of belonging. His narrator “sees attachments and gathering as formations of power, and power always ultimately generates violence,” he explained. “[T]he only choice for someone who realizes this appears to be to live outside, on the periphery of culture, and survive” (“Let’s” 11). Perhaps a rejection of belonging is the common thread uniting Hage’s novels. As Syrine Hout writes in *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora*, many reviewers see *Cockroach* as a continuation of Hage’s first novel, *De Niro’s Game*; published in 2006, the novel tracks two friends living in war-torn Beirut, both of whom reject their communal belongings in their own ways (162). In *Carnival*, published in 2012, Fly, a taxi driver born to circus-performer parents, defines himself as a wanderer, working alone and never travelling the same road twice. In *Beirut Hellfire Society*, published in 2018, Hage returns to war-torn Beirut, this time through the character of Pavlov, the son of an undertaker who provides burial rites to those who have been denied them by the state. Even in his shorter works, unbelonging appears as a central theme. In “A Letter to a Neighbour,” a short story published in 2014, Hage’s narrator explicitly decries belonging: “There is no word that I despise and loathe more than the word belonging, there is no act I fear more than the embrace of mankind” (9).

Hage takes, as his central inquiry for literary study, a focus on characters who can be considered to have no national belonging, rejected by mainstream society for their views, their careers, and in the case of *Cockroach*, their mental health and refugee status. Unbelonging is most pronounced in *Cockroach* through positioning the narrator as a human-cockroach hybrid, rejecting hybridity within the human realm and instead depicting a form of subjectivity that is deliberately alienat-

ing for the reader but becomes empowering for the narrator as a subject. Madeleine Thien analyzes this cockroach subjectivity beautifully in “No Condition Is Permanent: The Fictions of Rawi Hage and Ma Jian.” Rather than interpret the narrator as negative and unlikable, as many have done, Thien sees the entire world shift around him, becoming a “potential playground. Big things and small things are transposed, so that an insignificant human can take on the dimensions of a god” (24). Thien’s reading of the narrator is closely aligned with Hage’s own interpretation of his narrator’s rejection of belonging. Belonging and attachment, in Hage’s novels, become a formation of power under a settler-colonial society, one that by definition is violent. As a result, rejecting both humanity and belonging transforms the world around the narrator into something more positive, which can be defined by play rather than the hunger of his current circumstances. This binds the tropes of hybridity and trauma together to defamiliarize the contemporary world; the violence of the present becomes a playground for the hybrid human-cockroach associated with survival.

Hybridity operates on a number of levels in *Cockroach*. Beyond the human-cockroach hybrid is the homeland-hostland binary present in the breakdown between a Canadian present and a Lebanese past inherent in the unnamed narrator’s diasporic subjectivity. Hage himself articulated a level of tension in the hybrid state of the unnamed narrator in an interview about the novel: “I think my character is torn between staying human and assuming the role of the primitive in order to survive” (qtd. in Abdul-Jabbar 175). In a recent article on internalized vermin in the text, Wisam Abdul-Jabbar suggests that the recurring motifs of the hybridity of the narrator make him see “nothing beyond disruption; the split in terms of personality, culture, and memory seems to be interminable” (176). He concludes that hybridity is “schizophrenic and disfiguring rather than transcultural, well-integrated, and appealing” (176). The varied responses to the hybridity in the novel come to a similar conclusion: the unnamed narrator’s hybrid identity is inherently negative, reflecting his state of unbelonging. This conclusion counters typical depictions of hybridity in a diasporic context. As theorized by Homi Bhabha, hybridity opens up a third space in which “new selfhoods are formed and articulated as alternatives to unitary conceptualizations of national identity” (Hout, “Cultural Hybridity” 333). For Fred Wah, who builds upon Bhabha’s hybridity in theorizing the hyphen, hyphenation brings pressure against “the master narratives

of duality, multiculturalism, and apartheid, creat[ing] a volatile space that is inhabited by a wide range of voices” (74). When Hage chose to develop a hybrid cockroach-human narrator who rejects all forms of belonging, he was writing against these optimistic depictions of hybridity in diasporic studies.

Cockroach's depiction of hybridity as unbelonging is well supported at both the structural level and the passage level. By structuring the novel as therapy sessions with Genevieve, the narrator's state-mandated therapist, Hage calls attention to the Western gaze, determined to find an individual cause of the narrator's trauma through a focus on his childhood. The elision between therapist and sultan, recalling *One Thousand and One Nights*, also calls attention to what is expected of the diasporic refugee: to perform trauma for his Western audience and to tell a story of his sister's death that might or might not be true. The unreliability of the narration is forced into play by the narrator's will to survive, a trait that the narrator associates with being a cockroach. This means that his cockroach hybridity is partially a function of the Western gaze. He performs his trauma for Genevieve in order to survive, recasting the cockroach from its traditional role as vermin and turning the world around him into a playground to explore and his own history into something malleable that he can alter for his survival. This becomes evident at the passage level as well, as the narration binds together the formal tropes of hybridity and trauma.

But the trauma inherent in the text is collective, not individual. The narrator's rejection of the Western talking cure calls attention to the deterministic causes behind his individual experiences, specifically his refugee status and his time in a psychiatric facility after a suicide attempt. It is also indicative of recent interventions in trauma theory; Stef Craps, in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, writes against imposing Western “cures” for trauma onto other cultures, suggesting that it amounts to a “form of cultural imperialism” (22). Rewriting hybridity as inherently negative, resulting in a focus on unbelonging, aligns Hage's works with contemporary understandings of collective trauma, calling attention to the many structural causes of similar individual experiences of traumatic events. I use his focus on unbelonging to consider critically Bhabha's notion of hybridity, reimagined in a contemporary Canadian context through Wah's hyphenation, and to advance the goal in contemporary trauma theory of expanding the definition of trauma beyond the individual, event-focused model

that dominates the discipline. My goal in this article is therefore two-fold. First, my investigation of the role of hybridity in the novel aids an understanding of the hybridity inherent in the diasporic experience. Second, in developing hybridity to become a state of unbelonging, my analysis contributes to ongoing discussions in trauma theory that consider the collective in the definition of the traumatic. I work toward these goals through a reading that privileges both form and theory, in which I use formal elements of the passages binding together hybridity and trauma to advance my interpretation of both bodies of theory. I explore Hage's interest in unbelonging as the intersection between hybridity and trauma to suggest that, in *Cockroach*, the inextricability of the narrator's trauma from his hybrid identity writes against the positive depiction of hybridity while moving beyond event-focused understandings of trauma in the diasporic experience.

Hybridity and *Cockroach*

Hybridity was famously theorized by Bhabha in his seminal collection *The Location of Culture* (1994). Building upon his theorization of the "beyond," a term that he posits "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present," Bhabha considers the impact of what lies *beyond* the traditional boundaries of a range of "other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices — women, the colonized, minority groups, [and] the bearers of policed sexualities" (10, 8). It is through this movement that he develops his notion of the Third Space, the location of hybridity: "[B]eing in the 'beyond' . . . is to inhabit an intervening space," but it is also "to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to re-describe our cultural contemporaneity; to re-inscribe our human, historic commonality" (10). In re-describing cultural contemporaneity, Bhabha gestures toward "the location of culture" as that which does not fully fit within the homeland-hostland binary inherent in much of diasporic studies.

Bhabha begins to develop the Third Space in his first chapter of *The Location of Culture*, in which he argues for a commitment to theory. In so doing, he revises the history of critical theory to base it upon cultural difference or the "enunciation of culture as knowledgeable, authoritative, [and] adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification" rather than cultural diversity or "culture as an object of

empirical knowledge” (49-50). It is from this rhetorical move that he then begins to theorize the Third Space:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. *What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. . . . The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other.* (53; emphasis added)

In emphasizing the Third Space as a location of culture that introduces an ambivalence in the act of interpretation, Bhabha looks to language in order to address the hybridity of culture, providing insights that can be applied well to diasporic studies. In the diasporic context, the breakdown between the I and the You becomes the breakdown between the homeland and the hostland, a binary that, for the diasporic subject, is never oppositional but always dialectical. The pull from the homeland is one of nostalgia, of economic support, or of family still remaining there, whereas the pull from the hostland is one that demands assimilation while othering the diasporic subject. The Third Space, or hybridity, in Bhabha’s words, *is literally neither the one nor the other*: it is neither the homeland nor the hostland. It is a dialectic condition produced by the tension between them.

Wah builds upon this ambivalence of interpretation in order to develop what he refers to as the “scene of the hyphen” (73). Working from Bhabha’s Third Space, Wah contextualizes hybridity as a writer who “develop[s] instruments of disturbance and dislocation” (73). It is decidedly not a resolution of the binary of homeland and hostland but a celebration of the two cultures coming together, putting pressure on “the master narratives of duality, multiculturalism, and apartheid” (74). Although his stake in the hyphen is that of “mixed blood,” Wah recognizes that others can occupy the site of the hyphen as immigrants, visible minorities, or political allies (74). The site of the hyphen, or the site of hybridity in diasporic studies, is theorized in the contemporary Canadian context as distinctly positive. Bhabha’s theorization of hybrid-

ity, though nearly thirty years old, continues to influence Canadian diasporic studies, resulting in my interest in revisiting his work today.

Although both Wah and Bhabha view the Third Space or the hyphen as inherently positive — in both articulations, it is meant to be a diasporic space that allows hybrid subjects to thrive in their hybridity — I reimagine Bhabha's You/I oscillation as a rejection of belonging, as filtered through Hage's cockroach-human narrator in *Cockroach*. I refer to the narrator's half-man, half-cockroach hybridity as the unbecoming-cockroach; it is not that the narrator is a man becoming a cockroach or a cockroach becoming a man but that he is an "unbecoming" subject "formed and undone in relations to others and norms" (Thien, qtd. in Kamboureli 68). By referring to the cockroach-human hybrid as an unbecoming-subject, developed in rejection of others, my focus remains on a sense of unbelonging. The unbecoming-cockroach defines himself in rejection of all communal ties; he has no community in Montreal, even eschewing his own diasporic community there. The introduction of his hybridity as the unbecoming-cockroach occurs in the opening pages of *Cockroach*, during which the narrator tells Genevieve, his therapist, about the time his sister turned him into an insect during his youth:

Come, my sister said to me. Let's play. And she lifted her skirt, laid the back of my head between her legs, raised her heels in the air, and swayed her legs over me slowly. Look, open your eyes, she said, and she touched me. This is your face, those are your teeth, and my legs are your long, long, whiskers. We laughed, and crawled below the sheets, and nibbled on each other's faces. Let's block the light, she said. Let's seal that quilt to the bed, tight, so there won't be any light. Let's play underground. (5-6)

It is interesting to note that, though Hage writes against the positive tropes of hybridity in diasporic communities, his development of a human-creature hybrid maintains the ambivalence between the You and I breakdown inherent in Bhabha's Third Space. The narrator's sister emphasizes their oneness as a creature in the scene: *her* legs become *his* whiskers as the two of them become one cockroach. Yet the narrator insists on using possessive pronouns: rather than depict the two of them as one, he emphasizes their distinctiveness through the repetition of *her*, *your*, and *my*, choosing not to use the first-person plural *our*. In so doing, he rejects the sense of belonging inherent in the Third Space

while still using the tropes of hybridity through the You-I ambivalence. The attentive reader will also note formal elements of trauma theory that appear in the scene, in that the narrator's suicide attempt was to escape the sun, which no one could escape (30), and that the language of "sealing the quilt to the bed" reappears quickly in the text: "[I]t was my need to unfold an eternal blanket that would cover everything, seal the sky and my window, and turn the world into an insect's play" (11-12). This means that the repetition compulsion inherent in trauma theory appears both linguistically and symbolically in the derivation of the narrator's hybridity in the novel. However, where most of trauma theory argues for a repetition of the traumatic event that will inspire difference, usually a difference that is hopeful and directed toward healing, the narrator of *Cockroach* uses this original scene of the underground as a location that he prefers to the living: "[O]ther humans gaze at the sky, but I say unto you, the only way through the world is to pass through the underground" (24). In rejecting belonging and human subjectivity, the unbecoming-cockroach also rejects healing and the repetition that can inspire the difference in gazing at the sky and living in the light, showing the inextricability of hybridity and trauma in the text.

It is in this theoretical context that the depiction of hybridity in *Cockroach* is unique. The role of hybridity in the novel has been commented on widely in the academic literature, focusing primarily on its role in developing the unlikable persona of the unnamed narrator. The narrator defies the typical conventions of the diasporic subject; he is a man who openly preys on women, views himself as half man, half cockroach, breaks into the homes of his peers and therapist in Montreal, is trained as a thief during his time in Beirut, and contributes to a plot that, if we are to trust his narration, eventually results in the death of his sister. Instead of the virtuous immigrant narrative, Hage creates a subject widely read as unlikable, one with whom readers cannot easily identify or at the least are reluctant to associate.

A key element of the narrator's unlikability is his embodiment of hybridity; he is literally half vermin, calling up a literary tradition that includes antecedents such as Kafka, Dostoyevsky, and Ellison. Although Hage himself rejected any clear ties to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* — in an early interview on the novel, Hage expressed frustration about the continual comparisons between *Cockroach* and *The Metamorphosis*, protesting that his "intention was never to emulate Kafka. . . . Kafka does not have a monopoly on these fantastic [creatures]" (qtd. in Abdul-

Jabbar 169) — it is impossible to read his work without thinking of the previous famously alienated characters. The figure of the cockroach in *The Metamorphosis*, though it has received many interpretations, is typically associated with a deep level of alienation; a similar interpretation has followed the role of the underground in works by Dostoyevsky and Ellison. Ellison noted his debt to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* in the preface to the thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, recognizing that the “voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground,” so it seemed to be “crazy-logical that I should finally locate its owner living — and oh, so garrulously — in an abandoned cellar” (xvii). For Dostoyevsky, the underground represented an alienated class of Russian peasantry; for Ellison, the alienation stemmed from the racism experienced by Black American communities; for Kafka, the alienation resulted from the contrasting pulls of anti-Semitism and assimilation. And, of course, referring to visible minorities as insect-like typically recalls a deeply negative imagery; it is worth recalling here that Kafka introduces Gregor Samsa as an “ungeheueres Ungeziefer” or a “monstrous vermin” (qtd. in Ryan 2). Smaro Kamboureli addresses the historical antecedents of the cockroach form in her 2017 essay on diasporic memory in *Cockroach: cockroaches “stand for the lowest denominator of life,”* she notes, referencing the Rwandan genocide when noting that the Hutus referred to the Tutsis as cockroaches in their process of dehumanization (69). Yet, as she writes, the insect has a “remarkable tenacity: they are creatures on the fringe but they are also invaders” (69). Kamboureli's double movement in interpreting the unbecoming-cockroach is deeply helpful, for it calls attention to the alienation inherent in being referred to as a cockroach while also recognizing the individual strength of the insect to survive. Although Hage's narrator is deeply alienated from contemporary Canadian society, there is a difference worth noting between Kafka's Samsa, who turns into a cockroach against his will, and Hage's narrator, who claims his cockroach hybridity willingly, actively preferring the underground, since he believes it to be the “only way through the world” (24). In this movement, I view him to be rejecting assimilation actively, recognizing, through these literary and historical antecedents of both the cockroach hybrid and the underground, that there are deep, deterministic causes of the alienation that he experiences. Which brings us, in a way, to collective trauma.

Trauma Theory and the Event

Trauma theory gained prominence in the 1990s largely from the influence of Holocaust Studies.¹ Monographs such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* were hugely influential in developing key tropes of trauma theory: first, the impossibility of testimony, or the inability to represent a traumatic event in a method that would feel true to the survivor, and second, traumatic silences, referring to when survivors would struggle to represent the most traumatic elements of their experiences in words. A key publication of the period was Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which championed the event-focused understanding of trauma. Although developed from the collective trauma of the Holocaust and studies of PTSD following the Vietnam War, her monograph seemingly advances individual traumatic events, typically repeated by survivors until they can demonstrate mastery over their trauma. This focus on the repetition of the traumatic event, known in psychoanalytic circles as the Freudian repetition compulsion, became more pronounced as the academic literature progressed. Scholars have acknowledged the role of PTSD in developing trauma theory (see Toremans), the paradoxical nature of trauma (see Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge"; LaCapra, "Trauma"; and LaCapra, *Writing*), the narrative structure of trauma (see Kirmayer; and Robinett), and the benefits of testimony in the healing process (see Masterson et al.), all while using individual narratives of traumatic events as their case studies. Interestingly, though scholars such as Geoffrey Hartman ("Trauma") and Dominick LaCapra ("Trauma") have been suggesting since the late 1990s that trauma is a transhistorical, collective experience, thus de-emphasizing the importance of an individual event, calls to include the collective in the definition of the traumatic continue to occur.² Hartman addresses this paradox well when he writes that the study of trauma is "distorted . . . by a myth of temporal location" ("Trauma" 269), suggesting that only by developing a transhistorical definition of trauma will the true extent of human suffering be understood.

It was within this context that a Decolonizing Trauma Studies conference was held at the University of Northampton in 2015, during which scholars such as Craps argued for the need to look beyond the Euro-American context in order to address the intergenerational

traumas associated with colonialism (907). A year later, Caruth herself argued for a similar position in the twentieth-anniversary edition of her *Unclaimed Experience*. In the new afterword, Caruth addressed Craps's criticism of the Euro-American context in trauma studies, agreeing that the individual and the collective "cannot be extricated from each other, in the destruction of experience, which can never be grounded in the unity of a single position or voice" (121). Caruth and Craps are not alone in these calls; others, such as Irene Visser, are explicit in noting the failures of collective or cultural trauma theory to consider "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities," and she emphasizes that this type of suffering "has been routinely ignored or dismissed in trauma research" (276). Yet, as Visser goes on to note, some scholars have worked toward acknowledging deterministic causes of trauma; in support, she cites David Lloyd's comparison of the after-effects of colonialism being "identical with those for the traumatized individual" and E. Ann Kaplan's naming of colonialism, the Second World War, and 9/11 as specific examples of collective trauma (276). The unbecoming-cockroach's refugee status aligns well with these considerations of what might be indicative of collective trauma.

It is in this context that the role of hybridity in trauma becomes a concept particularly worthy of analysis. The intersection of cultural hybridity — theorized by Bhabha and Wah as a space of inclusion, yet noted as a distinctly negative occurrence in Hage's text — with typical conventions of trauma theory suggests an inextricability of the individual from the collective. Moreover, hybridity, in having a distinctly negative role in *Cockroach*, becomes the site of cultural, diasporic trauma; it is in the articulation of the unnamed narrator's hybrid status that elements of psychological trauma are found.³ Trauma is steeped within Hage's text, but it is a depiction of trauma that moves beyond an event-focused understanding, writing against the typical conventions of hybridity to argue for an intersection between hybridity and diasporic trauma through a rejection of communal ties and belonging.

Cockroach, Hybridity, and Trauma

Hybridity and trauma become bound up in the novel's depiction of unbelonging at both the structural level and the passage level. *Cockroach* is structured as therapy sessions between the narrator and his state-

appointed therapist, Genevieve; each of the novel's six sections begins with her asking him to tell her about his childhood. These therapy sessions, notably, are a failure; the narrator describes Genevieve as "annoy[ing]" him "with her laconic behaviour," explaining that she "brought on a feeling of violence within me that I hadn't experienced since I left my homeland" (4). The narrator explicitly outlines her failure to perceive the root cause of his trauma: "[F]or 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 nor control" (4). Genevieve's failure as a therapist, a continual refrain in the novel, emphasizes the breakdown between the narrator's diasporic hybridity and the expectations of Western society. By presenting the Western talking cure as a structural device that fails to understand the narrator's past and present trauma, Hage effectively de-emphasizes individualized trauma, focusing instead on the collective, politicized roots of the narrator's position in society.

Genevieve continually redirects the narrator away from any perceived collective root — whether Canadian or Lebanese — of his suicide attempt. The most repetitive concern for the narrator is his hunger, but when he and Genevieve begin to discuss food, and he tells her that he "worr[ies] about food shortages lately," she redirects him to his childhood, asking him if he had enough food in his youth (49). Food itself becomes linked to collective trauma later in the text, when the narrator shares details of his grandmother's days of famine in Lebanon, noting that "the famine took the lives of half the population" (209). But even when he begins to discuss the war, an obvious collective source of trauma in the life of a refugee, Genevieve redirects him to his family, telling him that she was "not interested in the war for now" since she is "interested in [his] family's genealogy" (168). By depoliticizing his problems, she attempts to render his collective trauma individual; ultimately, however, her attempts fail, giving rise to the narrator's violence and continual disdain. His unreliability and his decision to tell stories about his sister that might or might not be true are forced by Genevieve's refusal to see a more deterministic, collective cause of his suicide attempt. This means that the structure of the novel emphasizes a form of hybridity that results in exclusion and rejects individual causes of the narrator's trauma. The Western gaze, represented in the novel through the character of Genevieve and through the structural focus on the therapy sessions, rejects the narrator's focus on hunger and poverty in his Canadian

present along with the violence of the war in his Lebanese past. The You-I oscillation between the narrator's Canadian present and Lebanese past is not a dialectic but an uneven power dynamic. Genevieve expects the narrator to perform the requisite childhood trauma required for the Western talking cure, and when he deviates from it she threatens to recommend that he return to the psychiatric institution. It is unsurprising that the narrator rejects all belonging when this is the treatment that he receives.

Hybridity and trauma become further bound together in *Cockroach* in the scenes of the unbecoming-cockroach and the central scenes of trauma. For the purpose of my analysis, scenes depicting the conflation of hybridity and trauma are particularly compelling, specifically because of their depiction of hybridity as inherently negative and bound within the tropes of trauma theory. For this reason, I focus on two distinct scenes in the novel and their repetition: first, the repetition of the unbecoming-cockroach, analyzed earlier, repeated with a difference in the scene during which the narrator speaks to a giant cockroach; second, the scene during which the narrator addresses his sister's death, repeated with a difference during the murder of Shohreh's rapist.

Beginning with the repetition of the unbecoming-cockroach, the ambivalence in the You-I oscillation continues when the narrator is confronted by a giant albino cockroach in his kitchen. As a repetition that inspires difference, this scene stands out among the many other cockroach scenes in the novel, primarily because the narrator finally interacts with a wholly cockroach subject. This is the only interaction that the narrator has with a subject with which he could belong, so it is interesting to note that the hybridity of the narrator is what the cockroach finds least appealing in him: "You are one of us. You are part cockroach. *But the worst part of it is that you are also human.* . . . Now go and be human, but remember you are always welcome. You know how to find us. Just keep your eyes on what is going on down in the underground" (203; emphasis added). Here the giant cockroach emphasizes what is other to him in articulating his distaste at the hybridity of the narrator: the "worst part" of him, the cockroach asserts, is not that he is one of them, the cockroaches that thrive in the underground, but that he is also human. This recalls Thien's reading of the unnamed narrator; as Thien notes, he gives "voice to the idea that, in order to be fully human, we must cease to be entirely human, for only then will we begin to perceive both the powerlessness and the singularity

of our existence” (31). The worst part of the narrator is his humanity, which prevents him from understanding the nature of powerlessness in the wake of collective trauma. In this scene, the cockroach others the narrator’s humanness while articulating a gesture of welcome from the cockroach’s community, emphasizing, in a unique way, a distinctly negative aspect of hybridity. In this articulation, the You-I ambivalence is not a dialectic, allowing for the creation of a Third Space, but a binary. Human versus cockroach, when viewed through the eyes of the giant cockroach, is a binary of them versus us, one that clearly delineates which characteristics can be part of the underground community and which are to be abhorred.

In focusing on the derivation of the unbecoming-cockroach in *Cockroach*, it becomes apparent that the articulation of hybridity in the text is bound up with the tropes of trauma theory. To suggest that hybridity and trauma are inextricable from each other in the novel, the opposite also needs to be true; the scenes of trauma need to be bound up in the development of hybridity. For this reason, the death of the narrator’s sister becomes a scene rife with theoretical possibility. When the narrator decides to tell Genevieve stories of his upbringing to avoid reinstitutionalization, he begins to tell her about his sister, who, as a teenager, married a violent man with ties to the militia. After his brother-in-law is abusive, the narrator develops a scheme to get his sister and himself safely out of Lebanon and away from her husband, a scheme that culminates in her death:

I went up the stairs to my sister’s home. The door to the apartment was open. When I entered, the first thing I saw was the broken mirror, then the brute’s eyes, red, and then I heard him breathing heavily, his hand on the dining table, his eyes looking at the floor. I recognized the shoes, then the open palm, then the exposed thighs.

She is dead, he said. (242-43)

At this point in the novel, the narrator has been building up to his sister’s death through multiple therapy sessions, though the veracity of his story can be questioned, given an earlier scene in which he references speaking to his sister after their mother’s death. Recalling Jane Robinett’s articulation of the narrative structure of trauma, a number of elements here are typical in trauma theory, specifically “the densely sensory detail of the incidents, the timeless, wordless, photographic quality

of memories, the flat recounting of events” (306). The description of the setting, notably, is lengthier than the description of his sister and her death; the narrator sees an open door, a broken mirror, bloodshot eyes, a hand on the dining room table, eyes looking down at the floor — all of these details are about the scene of the violence, not the violent act itself. His sister’s death merits only two short lines in *Cockroach*: one line about the recognition of shoes, an open palm, and exposed thighs, followed by an abrupt line stated by his brother-in-law that she is dead. Other than the heavy breathing, this segment reads like a description of a photograph; devoid of affect, the narrator has retold what is arguably the most traumatic moment of his life in an entirely flat tone. The closest inference of emotion in this scene comes later in the text, when he likens his sister to Shohreh after Shohreh tells him her story of being tortured and raped: “You and my sister are the same kind” (248). Interestingly, however, in the few words about his sister after she has been killed by her husband, there is the recognition of her thighs, recalling her legs as his “long, long whiskers” in the origin scene of the unbecoming-cockroach. Recalling his origin scene with her death continues the intersection of hybridity and trauma. Her death ensures that the only closeness the narrator feels to his sister is through the unbecoming-cockroach, by turning into the cockroach that he used to pretend to be with her as a child. His hybridity, then, is exacerbated by her death, advancing the depiction of the inextricable nature of hybridity and trauma in the novel.

The death of the narrator’s sister, as a singular traumatic event, clearly recalls in *Cockroach* traditional trauma theory. Her death is repeated in the narrator’s decision to kill his girlfriend Shohreh’s rapist, made evident after the narrator says that the two women are the same. The repetition of the event creates difference; Shohreh misses when shooting at Shaheed, her rapist, and the gun is immediately taken by the bodyguard, likening Shohreh to the narrator in their inability to kill the rapist/brother-in-law. The narrator, however, is able to act this time, and when the gun falls from the bodyguard’s hand, he takes it and shoots Shaheed twice before disappearing into the drains to join his cockroach community (305). In the scene, the repetition compulsion creates the difference of an outcome that the narrator can manage, one in which he has the agency to kill the men hurting the women whom he loves. Shohreh and Shaheed are stand-ins for his sister and his brother-in-law; the hope that comes from the further violence allows him to assert

his agency and adopt the position of a protector. Interestingly, Hout associates the narrator's "contrapuntal consciousness," reflected in the distance that the narrator felt as he watched Shohreh fail to kill her rapist, with Bhabha's Third Space (*Postwar* 179). As Hout writes, the narrator's "intense emotion bearing" reflects "Bhabha's notion of a third space fashioned 'in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present,'" going on to suggest that "Shohreh's inability to avenge herself replicates in his mind his own failure to either protect or avenge Souad [his sister]" (179). This rupture in time in *Cockroach* correlates with the continuous present implied in a compulsively repeating traumatic event. The scene also aligns with a rejection of all forms of belonging. The narrator, though having finally protected a woman whom he loves from her abuser, does not stay with Shohreh to comfort her or celebrate the death of her rapist. Instead, his act of violence as the repetition of his sister's death becomes bound up with his hybrid subjectivity as an unbecoming-cockroach. By "steering . . . [his] glittering wings towards the underground," the narrator has rejected his human subjectivity, choosing instead to live as a cockroach in the underground, returning to his sister at last (305).

Conclusion

Bhabha's theoretical goal in understanding the location of culture as a Third Space, working from the ambivalence of meaning in speech acts to develop a You-I dialectic, has merit. Theorizing hybridity has great political implications; no longer asserting a binary between a homeland and a hostland for diasporic and postcolonial subjects helps to circumvent the typical othering that occurs when trying either to assimilate into a host country or to reject the new culture. It is therefore unsurprising that the work influenced by Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, such as Wah's hyphenation, paints the concept in a positive light, primarily noting the ability of the hybrid subject to reject or work against the hegemonic master narratives within society. In a work such as *Cockroach*, however, the concept of the hybrid subject is distinctly negative. A question remains: is it possible to reconcile Bhabha's theorization of hybridity with Hage's depiction of the diasporic unbecoming-cockroach, one that rejects any form of belonging as a matter of principle?

It is useful, at this point, to consider the limitations of Bhabha's theory. Benita Parry's insightful discussion of *The Location of Culture* can elucidate these limitations, primarily as they appear in response to ambivalence in the interpretation of language. Bhabha's theorizing of the Third Space explicitly engages in problems of language. It is through analyzing speech acts and utterances, enunciations and pronunciations, that Bhabha concludes that the Third Space is at the periphery of society, transgressing political boundaries in order to better understand the conditions of postcolonial displacements and contemporary diasporas. As Parry notes, Bhabha's use of language clarifies his theoretical agenda; Bhabha uses, at great length, paradoxical and open-ended words that signal an affiliation with the poststructural goal of revealing the instability of textual meaning in language, such as *ambivalent*, *borderline*, *boundary*, and *liminal*, among others (6). Parry's conclusion about his poststructural rewriting of the history of colonialism is significant: "[H]is elaborations dispense with the notion of conflict — a concept which certainly does [imply] antagonism, but contra Bhabha, does not posit a simplistically unitary and closed structure to the adversarial forces" (7). Beyond his rewriting of history, resulting in the erasure of conflict, is another notable criticism to consider. Bhabha's revision, as Parry outlines, "is overwhelmed by the nominalism of the language metaphor; and in the interests of establishing the autarchy of the signifier, the narrated event is existentially diminished" (8). This means that the language of a narrated event takes precedence over the narrated event itself, and the differences between a historical structure of oppression and a historical structure of language collapse. Hybridity, as theorized by Bhabha, is unable to account for a subject like Hage's narrator. Bhabha is concerned more with language's ability to deconstruct colonial experience as a set of unequal power relations than with language's ability to represent the experience of a subject under that structure.

As a result, Hage's unnamed narrator, rather than writing against the concept of hybridity, might simply be representing hybridity in its mundane terms. Showing the hybrid as the unbecoming-cockroach satirizes the alienation felt by diasporic subjects in the host-land — a satirization that draws from a literary legacy of alienation depicted by insects and the underground — while bringing aspects of hybrid identity to the forefront of analysis. Hage's narrator rejects all forms of belonging; as Hout notes, Canada's Multiculturalism Act states that

“immigrants can ‘fully participate in Canadian society’ while still being able ‘to identify with the cultural heritage of their choice,’” yet the narrator “resists both” (*Postwar* 161). Indeed, Canadian society is depicted in *Cockroach* as “cold” and “frozen,” and the narrator curses “the plane that had brought me here to this harsh terrain,” rather than a welcoming society into which he wishes to assimilate (8, 9, 8). But his disdain extends to his own culture, made apparent when he later describes the “Third World elite” as “the filth of the planet,” exclaiming that he feels no “affinity with the jingling-jewelry wives, their arrogance, their large TV screens” (159). The only affinity that he feels, if any, is with the underground, ensuring that his hybrid cockroach identity emphasizes his state of unbelonging. This state of unbelonging is reflected through his position as a refugee, exiled in a country that he disdains. His hybrid state, inextricable from a depiction of collective trauma, recognizes that collective trauma is defined by the insidious breaking apart of communal ties. In focusing on collective instead of individual trauma, the consideration is no longer of individual causes but rediverts to the structural or deterministic causes behind shared experiences of trauma in society.

Perhaps, then, the most accurate representation of the Third Space in Hage’s text is the underground. Both Dostoyevsky’s and Ellison’s undergrounds were noted locations of class- and race-based alienation; Hage combines them, developing a narrator who is an impoverished visible minority and refugee from Lebanon and actively prefers the underground to contemporary Canadian society. In Hage’s disdain for belonging, there is a recognition that belonging and attachment result in an uneven distribution of power in a settler-colonial society. In relation to Genevieve’s expectations of the trauma of the unbecoming-cockroach, his identity becomes malleable, a form of resistance to the status quo. And, by rejecting all forms of belonging, he also rejects the official stance of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, choosing not to believe in the myth of Canada’s polite cultural mosaic. Consequently, the narrator’s resistance to belonging — made explicit in a late internal monologue when he asks himself “But how, how to exist and not to belong?” (210) — indicates the collective trauma inherent in his hybridity and ultimately rejects the uneven power relations inherent in the contemporary Canadian landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to Smaro Kamboureli, whose insight on *Cockroach* and feedback was essential for developing the ideas in this article, and to the two anonymous reviewers who attended to this article with care.

NOTES

¹ This is not to discount the prevalence of trauma in psychoanalytic discourse; a more nuanced understanding of historical trauma theory acknowledges deep psychoanalytic roots, dating back at least a hundred years to Freud's seminal *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

² See Caruth; Craps; Craps et al.; Radstone; and Visser.

³ In Robinett's understanding, these elements include hyperarousal [sic], in which there is a persistent expectation of danger, including startle reactions and hyperalertness; intrusion, during which the traumatic events are relived "as if they were occurring in the present" in intense flashbacks, hallucinations and dreams; and constriction, manifested in numbing, withdrawal, indifference, emotional detachment, a sense of acute passivity or surrender (qtd. in Herman 35-43). Implicit in this set of symptoms is a contradictory structure that is at once chaotic and fathomable, which Herman identifies as the "dialectic of trauma" (47). Janoff-Bulman asserts that "intrusive thoughts and images typically alternate with periods of denial and emotional numbing" (108). This assertion, however, suggests a greater regularity in the dialectic of trauma than the actual fragmentation of daily life which these symptoms cause. More typically, hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction set up an irregular, recursive construct in the trauma survivor's life, sometimes existing below the surface of consciousness for years, only to emerge when triggered by a physical or emotional event. (296-97)

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