

## SHAPE-SHIFTING AS A QUEST FOR LIBERATION, EMPOWERMENT AND JUSTICE: METAMORPHOSIS AND THERIANTHROPY IN RAWI HAGE'S NOVELS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper is a critical analysis of Rawi Hage's novels, De Niro's Game, Cockroach and Carnival. It explores Hage's utilization of the mental and physical shapeshifting, metamorphosis and therianthropy as principal constituents of the literature of the fantastic. It posits that Hage employs these tropes symbolically to discuss oppression and repression, empowerment and control, human dilemma and trial of will, and the correction of an unsatisfying reality. The study highlights Hage's socio-political vision, existential propositions and ideated nostrums for the dehumanizing experiences of inequality, poverty and discrimination. Hage focuses on the individual search for justice and identity. His novels emphasize the realities that instigate the shape-shifting process as well as the individual voice of resistance. The article proposes that Hage's marginalized peripatetics, traumatized by civil wars, exile, or bigoted nationalism, resort to metamorphic characters, borderline ambiguity, and alternative identities as therapeutic defence mechanisms, to achieve liberation, empowerment and individualism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Canadian Literature, Shape-Shifting, Rawi Hage, War, Exile

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### INTRODUCTION

Shapeshifting is one of the primary cornerstones and defining principles of the literature of the fantastic. As a recurrent motif, it serves to kindle the uncanny, eerie effect characterizing the fanatastic, which arises by highlighting what Freud describes as "the contrast between what has been repressed and what has been surmounted" ("Uncanny" 249), as well as by dissolving the psychic boundaries between self and other, reality and unreality, and natural and supernatural<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Todorov attributes literary eeriness to the collapsing of the psychic boundaries of self and other, mind and matter, life and death, reality and unreality, as well as subject and object. When the boundary between psychic experience and physical world collapses, the deindividuation of other people produces numerous dreamlike effects. Shape-shifting, and its elusive forms of metamorphosis, therianthropy (animal transformation) and borderline identity (or the the co-existence and interchange of two identical modes of existence), serve several psychological purposes.<sup>2</sup> As a fantasy, shapeshifting gives vent to all the repressed desires and inhibited animal instincts that need to be compensated for as well as an outlet for forbidden fantasies. By creating a second self, or a tunnel of fulfilment and relief, it reciprocates to the wish to achieve superhuman quality. By empowering characters to become super/sub human, the shape-shifter archetype attains control, expresses the energy of the animus and anima and becomes a catalyst for change.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Rawi Hage's works exhibit numerous elements of fantasy literature; including the uncanny atmosphere, the supernatural phenomena, psychological abnormalities, and wish fulfillment and the carnivalesque subversive technique<sup>3</sup>. In a milieu of misery and suffering, such metamorphic carnivalesque episodes bestow the sole hope for change, rebirth, renewal and regeneration. In Hage's novels, *De Niro's Game* (2006), *Cockroach* (2008) and *Carnival* (2012), metamorphosis, therianthropy and shape-shifting recur as a focal literary motif. However, rather than deploying these fantastic tropes to elude ugly reality, or to fabricate a fallaciously jubilant one, they are utilized for liberation, empowerment, as well as fuels for social change. These tropes are employed by traumatized peripatetics, situated at transitional places at times of social, political and cultural change, at moments of clash between intellectual hegemonies, whether it be war-time Lebanon, or the Canadian impoverished émigré circle. Collective or personal experiences of catastrophic incidents, generate traumatic stress that impedes the "creative process through which experience, memory, and fantasy are woven into the texture of a life - or a culture" (Radstone qtd. in Hout 457). Hage utilizes the phantasmagoria to expose and pillory quotidian details of the racism, exclusion and xenophobia, which exert severe psychic and emotional tolls on his marginalized protagonists. Hage deconstructs the conventional and the teteological, highlighting instead the dark narratives of nonfulfillment, solitude and corruption. His novels mobilize shape-shifting, to dissect and revile extremely realistic, daily issues and to heighten consciousness and raise awareness about the local and global conditions of inequality and injustice, as the first step towards political and social change.

The moral centre of Hage's novels is the uprooted and abject underclasses. His novels delineate portraits of society's outsiders, who have been marginalized and exiled both within and without the boundaries of their homeland. Their victimization and alienation are due to exile or war, as well as the castrating conditions of poverty, displacement, and social injustice. These nomadic itinerants, whose lives have been reduced to mere survival, migrate from their native lands, only to be faced with varied nuances of maleficence and injustice. They become wandering prowlers, who aim through their actual and fictitious roamings to exorcise their sense of confinement in excluding and denigrating systems. These underprivileged and dispossessed protagonists utilize their fanciful trajectory as an emancipatory possibility. The only nostrum for these vulnerable characters, traumatized by bigoted nationalism, or driven underground by iniquity, discrimination, or identity annihilation, is to imagine and recreate a semblance of reality, through morphing into fluid characters, borderline ambiguity, and alternative identities, that bestow "illusions of escape from life's ugliness" (Hage *Cockroach* 185). Identity-altering offers one way of rebellion, and a therapeutic defence mechanism, to achieve liberation, empowerment and individualism. Hage's world of representation both coincides with and departs from familiar realities. He surmounts the unreal, oversteps the sober truth and undermines the limit between mind and world. Events are presented from the perspective of seemingly deranged heroes. However, the protagonists' nightmarish images are given embodiment and become the framework of their lives. Though his characters may strike us as delusional, escapist with a tenuous hold on reality, an in depth analysis shows that in fact, they have a full grasp of life's harsh realities, as well as the weapons to fight them.

## Objectives

The study aims to prove that Hage utilizes shape-shifting, metamorphosis and therianthropy in his novels, not just as tools of fantasy, but to achieve liberation, empowerment, social justice and change.

## METHODOLOGY

Primary and secondary data collection methods have been adopted for this text based, descriptive study. Various sources have supplied the material, such as collected scholarly literary manuscripts, multi-lingual reference books, journals and articles.

Electronic sources, such as online scholarly journal articles and interviews, were also used.

## Analysis

In Hage's three novels, there predominates a sense of nihilistic trauma, psychic disorientation, vulnerability, social and political alienation and ossification in a hostile world. As an existential writer with a socio-political vision, Hage manipulates this shared trauma, alienation, abjection and vulnerability to actuate social and political change. His focus is on the individual search for justice, as well as the geo-political realities that cause the displacement and dehumanization of the shape-shifters, such as the damaging impact of multiculturalism, globalization, cosmopolitanism and the unequal power relations. Shape-shifting in Hage's novels is related to the quest for identity, and defending subjectivity. Hage proposes that "we are all sharing in the same struggle for identity, especially self-identity.."("Long Day"). His peripheralized characters challenge the forces that strip away their individual civil identities, refuse to be victimized, to capitulate or compromise their principles. They retain their voices and assert their individuality.

**De Niro's Game:** De Niro's Game chronicles the vagaries of social relations within the background of war-torn Lebanon. Bassam and George struggle to survive and to acclimatize themselves to the by-products of civil war; namely, brutality, violence, fanaticisms, and fratricidal terrorism. Both war-wasted protagonists choose contrasting attitudes and routes of survival and escape, all involving some kind of shape-shifting. Their alternative personalities are their means to challenge the de-humanizing, corruptive and corrosive effect of war, sectarianism, organized religion as well as the oppressive narrow standards of morality. According to Hage, his novel is "an uncompromising look at a place in conflict, from the inside, presented in a true way" (qtd. in Nouri, 2007 167). There are echoes of Hage's own childhood, as he reminisces how: "the bombs will fall, .. There's a madness to it. As a kid you're an uncomprehending observer, filled with a haziness, a mixture of fear and adrenaline, a chemical reaction" ("Sudden Death").

Hage emphasizes how, during times of crisis, shape-shifting and morphing are the sole means of escapism. The nihilistic Bassam explicates how he is, "escaping time and space" (*De Niro's Game* 40) through his fantasy flights where he is transformed into a "bow with a silver arrow, a god's spear, a travelling merchant, a night thief... a king"(40). Morphing is a means to attain fulfilment in love: "even under the falling bombs" (208), as well as of survival: "All of a sudden the man burst into a big smile. In a quick magic act of metamorphosis he turned from a cockroach into an apologetic hunchback, apologizing, and

bowing his head, and calling me Ustadh (teacher)” (147).

The novel also poses the quandary arising when the ever-changing, metamorphic self faces: “as a challenge, the quest for a personal poeitic, identity” (Warner 28). *De Niro's Game* examines loss of identity as one of the symptoms and products of the hyperbolized fantasy of shape-shifting. The characters are ambiguous and complex. The question of identity becomes more prominent after Bassam leaves for Europe and faces cultural shock and displacement. The novel puts under the microscope, the “unsettling hybridity” (“the practiced art”) and the warring psychic and cultural struggles resulting from war and exile experiences as fuels for metamorphic experiences. In France, Bassam refuses to settle in the role of the helpless refugee, by morphing into alternate empowered identities. He shape-shifts into a heroic commander with “revolutionary tendencies” who plays a “crucial role in the revolution” and “the French resistance” (210). Bassam's liberating metamorphic episodes provide him with feelings of superiority: “I flew over Paris ... and the higher I flew, the smaller the people became, smaller and smaller, minuscule and insignificant” (246). The conclusion offers a diagnostic précis of Bassam's trauma, as a guilt-ridden character, yearning to flee: “I aspired to my own flight. I wanted to stray” (222), and obsessed with redemption and seeking to achieve his deliverance and self-actualization through multitudinous episodes of shape-shifting.

### Technique

Hage uses a fragmented, distracting technique, with repetition of the refrain “ten thousand bombs” (11, 17, 22, 36) and the juxtaposition of contradictory life images (33), to convey George and Bassam's psychological disintegration and hallucinatory undercurrent. The central and primary image of the novel, however, is the lethal game, inspired by Robert De Niro's 1978 movie *The Deer Hunter*. The game is the linchpin of the shape-shifting process. The game fuels the transformation of both protagonists. Bassam is obsessed with the game (230-1), and George adopts the nickname, as well as the alternative identity of De Niro, for the careless way he takes chances with his life. Russian roulette symbolizes war-decreed choices and resolutions: “We all agreed to participate. It was our choice, we each spun our own gun barrels, we each had four chances out of five. We all acted out of our convictions, and out of passion”(232-3).

**Cockroach:** Exile is the point of departure for Hage's second novel, *Cockroach*, which can be read as a sequel to *De Niro's Game*. The protagonist emerges as an unbalanced and pathological immigrant living in the “ugly side” (*Cockroach* 281) of Montreal, which is presented as “an alien topography of menial jobs, mysterious accents, insect infestations and class hostilities” (Redekop). *Cockroach* relates the tale of a life of potential trapped in a hostile environment, and analyzes the reasons that transform the traumatized immigrant into a mentally and psychologically disturbed and suicidal escapee into fantastic flights. It is a phantasmagorical character-study of a stranger in a strange land. Hage's protagonist is surrounded by an atmosphere of hostility, indifference, humiliation and disgust. Exile generates in him feelings of alienation, marginalization, and of being torn between two worlds: “I was split between two planes and aware of two existences, and they were both mine. I belong to two spaces” (118-119). He misses his homeland where he used to be “more courageous, more carefree, and even...more violent” (4). His aspiration for social elevation is oppressed by a matrix of racism and white supremacy, that assigns fixed subaltern roles according to color and race.

The narrator undergoes a psychological crisis that causes an abiding fantasy that he is a cockroach. The narrator is convinced of his veritable therianthrope condition; of "being part cockroach, part human" (207). The fountainhead for this crisis are the protagonist's impotent rage, "a lot of hidden anger"(4) at his marginalization, his ennui for being: "neglected by (life)" (32), as well as his intense hatred towards the world, his refuge country, the brutal weather, the French-speaking Québécois, whom he despises for being "corrupt, empty, selfish, self-absorbed, capable only of seeing themselves in the reflection from the tinted glass in their fancy cars" (185) and his fellow émigrés. Such negative emotions give him "an instant hit of metamorphosis"(13). He excels at disappearing and "at slipping under anything"(104). Paradoxically, it is this imaginary other self or alter ego that compensates the narrator for failures, and affords him respite from what he feels is the meaningless void of his life: "Yes, I am poor, I am vermin, a bug, I am at the bottom of the scale. But I still exist" (122). Becoming a cockroach, enables him to retrieve the power he has lost and to fulfil his dreams and wishes. As a vermin, he possesses the perseverance and ability to survive in a hostile climate, as well as invincibility: "a newly thick carcass made me oblivious to the splashing of water... No element of nature could stop me now" (79). Therianthrope is also associated with his frustrated sexuality (79).

The narrator has always resorted to therianthrope for liberation from his entrapment. As a kid, whenever he felt "oppressed by it all" (4), and abused, he "fanned (his) cockroach wings" (22-23), and escaped through drains, finding refuge in an alternative "nocturnal existence" (33) in the underground, where he becomes the almighty master. Similarly, as an adult, exiled and ashamed of his primitivity, therianthrope becomes his sole means to conceal and empower himself. Insecthood releases him from the human condition: "To be an insect is to be free, you are more invisible" (207). The protagonist's transmogrification into a bug enables him to inspect the altered concept of his self. For the protagonist, insecthood, is "a phantasmal extension of his own multifaceted idea of himself: as immigrant outcast, seething sensualist, Dostoevskian Underground Man, undetectable thief, future inheritor of the earth, agent of exposure among the hypocritical bourgeoisie and all-round connoisseur of the tang and sting of reality" (Dawson 154). Hence, he celebrates and propagates his cockroach-ness; as a sign of his nonconformity.

The focus of *Cockroach* is not, however, mainly on the protagonist's therianthrope as a private, mental and psychological malaise, but satirizing and condemning, in general, the concepts of ordered self, ordered society, organized religion, and immigration. Hage uses metamorphosis as an indictment of the depersonalizing influence of bourgeois values and institutions that obliterates humanity, denies compassion and impedes communication. *Cockroach* inspects how a cast of immigrant characters conduct themselves in a harsh environment. The marginalized immigrants are perceived as "the scum of the Earth in this capitalist endeavour" (*Cockroach* 123) and seek salvation and liberation from their "lost, empty lives" through "illusions of escape from life's ugliness" (185), and by donning "the ultimate mask" (182-3). Immigrants are "obsessive about masking their humanity,... They despise this world and therefore they are engaged in a constant act of covering themselves up – (make-believe)" (185). These exiled immigrants adopt changeable identities, shifting from the phase of: "the fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner" (199), to the "phase of the foreign savage", then comes "the time of the monkey with the music box" (282). The protagonist is mouthpiecing thousands of exiled immigrants when he wonders how he has



ended up "trapped in a constantly shivering carcass, walking in a frozen city with wet cotton falling on me all the time? And on top of it all, I am hungry, impoverished, and have no one, no one" (9). Hence, the protagonist's prophecy to the racist Maitre Pierre, that "one day he would be serving only giant cockroaches on his velvet chair" (29-30), becomes a socialist, collective and global victory for equality and justice.

Hage transforms the fantasy of the protagonist's therianthropy into a social and "political statement" (Hage Interview with Ghomeshi). The insect fantasy serves as Hage's metaphor for his existential exploration of the human conditions of impoverished immigrants and a tool to denounce the racist representation of migrants as alien, parasitical and pestilential intruders who should either abide by, be absorbed and consumed by norms, or be discarded and trodden on by the system. The image of the cockroach is both functional and metaphoric. Hage utilizes the cockroach metaphor as a catachresis, whereby the traditionally disgusting and vulnerable, becomes a positive symbol of liberation, empowerment and the revolutionary power of the dispossessed.

### **Hage's Cockroach versus Kafka's Metamorphosis**

It is noteworthy that Hage's *Cockroach* differs from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, though both relate similar stories of imagined therianthropic transformations that generate a state of dehumanization and self-effacement. Both protagonists suffer schizophrenic psychotic breakdown and mental regression.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Kafka's hero, Hage's transformation is a forceful tool or self-affirmation, rather than a "a path of escape" (Deleuze and Guattari 13), or withdrawal technique. His fantastic trajectory turns him into an active and resourceful agent aiming to emancipate himself and other immigrants from the existential, social, economic, and political incarceration. During the therianthropic episodes, the mutant protagonist scrutinizes the prevailing social flaws and imperfections from the liminal, and ex-centric vantage point of the cockroach.

Hage's hero is an active participant rather than a passive observer, inserting himself in the lives of other immigrants. He identifies "with the desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and the stranded in corridors of bureaucracy and immigration" (*Cockroach* 13). The albino cockroach who chastises the narrator for failing to resist the oppressive power of the privileged, represents the future ruling race of revolutionaries and rebels. The narrator's internal struggle is presented as a struggle between his independent, apolitical, and non-violent human side and his revolutionary cockroach side, which participates in the violent rebellion against oppression and injustice. In the conclusion of the novel, it is the cockroach side that wins, as the narrator uses his therianthropic powers to achieve moral and political empowerment, through executing refugee vengeance.

### **Carnavalesque Style**

Aiming to "cripple authority by refusing to submit to it" (Sommer 10), the protagonist resorts to carnivalesque subversive tactics such as: re-inventing and re-appropriating, and subverting the disciplinary, normalizing powers of multiculturalism and neoliberalism. Hage's carnivalesque style is especially manifest during the protagonist's sessions with his therapist, Genevieve, who represents the ambivalent forces of normalization, discipline and assimilation. Hage emphasizes that privilege and affluence form an impassable crevice preventing Genevieve from genuinely empathizing with her destitute interlocuter, since, in Ahmed's terms: "To see happily is not see violence, asymmetry, or force" (*Promise* 132).

She also plays an important role in the protagonist's fantasy. For him, she came to represent 'Canada', and becomes the object of his sexual fantasies and transference. Another strategy that the protagonist resorts to, is his refusal to confirm or conform to the prescribed or expected roles; such as that of the suffering migrant who basks in the perfection of his 'happy' new homeland. He uses dark humour intentionally to ridicule the dominant norms, values and practices, as seen for example in his play on the words, "taxpayers/Tax prayers" (59-60). The purposed catachresis evokes theological associations and depicts the protagonist as a heretic resisting the therapist's pressures and attempts to convert and redeem him, through an utter belief and surrender to the capitalist, neoliberal dogma, to happiness and salvation. There is a suggestion that religious faith and financial prosperity are employed as powerful pressures by the consumeristic society<sup>7</sup>.

*Cockroach* offers double metamorphoses. As a newcomer to Canada, the protagonist is expected to be assimilated and ultimately *metamorphose* into a good and 'happy' Canadian citizen. This can only be achieved by conforming to the nation-state's consumeristic logic, which appreciates difference only insofar as it can be incorporated and consumed. The protagonist satirically admits that he: "should be grateful for what this nation is giving me. I take more than I give, indeed it is true. But if I had access to some wealth, I would contribute my share. Maybe I could become a good citizen and contemplate ways to collect my debts and increase my wealth. That would be a good start" (65). Hage subverts the stereotypical representation of the migrant, (racial/ethnic Other), Hage's protagonist twists and warps the happily successful "teleological trajectory from Old World to New World" (Majaj 63), by resorting to a radically different trajectory; namely his powerful fantasy of metamorphosis. Through his therianthropic fantasies, the protagonist transforms his abjection<sup>5</sup> to self-affirmation, thereby contesting the hierarchical and racist incarcerating system. Abjection, through shape-shifting, strengthens the protagonist, through the affective attachments and political alliances he forms with his fellow vulnerable and excluded immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

The protagonist is a genuine carnivalesque character. His delusive imaginative and actual practices of nebulousness catalyze fantastic sentiments of wonder and amazement, to incite change and betterment. The protagonist uses tactics of mischief, satirical humour, celebration of the abnormal, the repressed, the filthy and gross (cockroaches), trivialization of the serious and degrading the revered. His shape-shifting is an advanced stage of the carnivalesque 'dress-up' and role play. He also resorts to sanctioned moments of abnormal, by stepping outside the socialization process and enjoying the possibility of a new role, inverted ideology; making strange socially received ideas/ideologies by replacing them with their opposite and the endemically subversive; or transgressing several received paradigms of authority, behavior, morality. These tactics enable the protagonist to invert power relationships, defy authority and bluff the liberal-capitalist state by feigning to capitulate, while retaining his difference and abnormality, achieving a sense of limitless possibility, and reaffirming his agency and potency<sup>8</sup>.

**Carnival:** Carnival chronicles the hallucinatory meanderings and the precarious life of Fly, the mentally restless immigrant cab driver. Fly criss-crosses a nightmarish, crime-ridden apocalyptic metropolis (Montreal), intercommunicating with the desperate and the delinquent, such as drug dealers, prostitutes, strippers, debauchees, drunks and murderers. Fly believes that the Taxi drivers in the carnival city have been transformed into "human insects" and are categorized into "spiders and ... flies"(9-10). Fly, is a wanderer, living a

"drifting existence" (95), of "perpetual transitions, of fluctuations between liberty and loss" (228). Fly is an observer, a dreamer and a "knower" (75), whose cosmopolitan spirit rejects boundaries. Unable to fully grasp the decadence and immorality surrounding him, the solitary Fly takes refuge in his hyperactive fantasy life, which he ignites through his obsessive readings, that spark elaborate historical sex fantasies, as well as by pursuing an existential freedom aboard his father's magical 'flying carpet', and stimulating himself, literally and figuratively, by transforming into a hero. "Fly is not completely tethered to the earth" (Eggertson), and undergoes a daily ritual of shape-shifting where he masturbates to historical visions, trouncing his insecurities and rootless existence and thereby coming close to fulfilling is utopian vision:

When I lie on one of my father's carpets and float over the world, I journey through these ancient lands of guns, trenches, and blood, and troubled lands of Slavs, Germans, Latins, Assyrians, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, and Greeks. In those nations where young men were drafted and women wept and populations were transferred and people starved and burned by the millions, I landed my carpet, I witnessed, I rectified, and I flew again. (29)

The cosmopolitan city of *Carnival* embodies "xeno-racism" (Sivanandan 2), which incorporates racialization, power imbalances, the complex imbrications of race and privilege and the inequity between the privileged and the oppressed. The central metaphor of the novel is the carnival. Fly finds "no better place for an exile to hide . . . than among a horde of humans in masks re-enacting the periodic cycles of life and death" (217). The carnival is a parable of our unjust world, embodying the truth about humanity and exposing its hidden immoral, bigoted and vulgar side. The focal philosophical allegation of the novel is that "(T)he world is a circus and it will always be" (29). By presenting *Carnival's* perspective of the world as populated by spiders, flies and myriad animals, Hage pinpoints the danger facing refugees of being removed from the ethical sphere of the human subject and their placement on an animalistic plane or the liminal space, where beings are deprived of their rights as humans. In the concluding lines of *Carnival*, there is an affirmation of the sustained fantasy that real life is a carnival, through the cinematic procession of "men in women's dresses," vampires, "Homeo sapiens with animal heads", a bearded man with a camel and "caravans of vagabonds and domesticated animals" (288).

The champions of Hage's novels are Fly and his fellow rebels who struggle against literal and psychological confinement. *Carnival* celebrates the liminal, the peripatetic, and the underclass, and those excluded from mainstream Western society because of their gender, race, or origins. For a potent symbol of resistance of hegemonic and exclusive structures of power, Hage selects the androgynous, borderline or intersexed type of shape-shifters with fluid identities. Their inter-gender shifting and their "explicitly hermaphroditic liminality and in-between-ness" (Forget 59) are their weapon of resisting the normative demands of mainstream Canadian society. Two examples are the transsexual Limo and the Bearded Lady who explains to Fly how that their "bodies are free, that we travel, resist, and fight and that we give refuge to convicts and revolutionaries, that we have saved gypsies and Jews. (154)<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION



In his three novels, Hage utilizes shape-shifting, metamorphosis and therianthropy, not just as tools of fantasy, but also for liberation, empowerment, compensation, and change. His shape-shifters are marginalized peripatetics, residing on the fringes of life, with severe identity crisis due to the conditions, and ramifications of war or exile. Hage is "a chronicler of the used, the unspoken, the untold" (Halberstam 104), choosing for the moral centre of his novels, the displaced, unrooted and abject underclasses. Traumatized and driven underground by rampant capitalism, bigoted nationalism and cosmopolitanism, shape-shifting becomes their means to retain their voices and assert their individuality. They reject the role of the passively grateful refugees, and dare to challenge the injustices. In *Carnival*, the protagonist affirms that: "We are all products and the victims of our upbringing, until we reflect, refuse, rebel" (68), and one way of refusal and rebellion is identity-altering. It is the active imagination of Hage's subjects, rather than their underdog realities, that empower them. His characters resist creolization and the annihilation of identities. In *De Niro's Game*, Bassam's unwillingness to be victimized leads him to migrate. In *Carnival*, Otto faces arrest and abuse due to his refusal to stand idle in the face of political oppression. The revolutionary transformations of his morphed heroes are only quasi-triumphs, because they terminate with their going underground.

Although superficially Hage's novels are suggestive of simple, mono-dimensional carnivalesque tales of adventures and fantastic transformations, the focus on the individual search for justice and the polemics of captivity and repression versus liberation and prepotency, endow the novels with a deeper political and philosophical dimension. In all Hage's novels, there is a fierce clash of wills, between forces of social and political despotism, (whether it is sectarian civil war, unjust consumerism, racism or social exclusion) on one hand, and dissenting, obstreperous insurgents, negotiating the best means of expressing their defiance, by resorting to uncharted roads, and fantastic contraptions, whereby they espy, re-signify and counteract the asymmetries, global economic and labour precariousness and malfeasance. His carnivalesque poetics proffer the possibility of recreation and renewal. Shape-shifting function as potent weapons to challenge the oppressive forces, and to effectuate the fantasy of a superlative future for more inclusive, equal and socially just communities.

Hage considers himself a "global citizen" with a cosmopolitan vision and aspiration. According to Hage: "The history of mankind is full of wars, divisions, the flow of blood, the flight of refugees, and misery... I long for the day when we humans realize that all we are are gatherers and wanders, ever bound to cross each other's paths, and that these paths belong to us all" ("Acceptance Speech"). He endeavours in his novels to reflect this vision, and to "open a space of interconnection as well as a platform for responsiveness and for resistance" (Hirsch 337), through coalescing with the downtrodden and the abjected. Hage dissects the factors that precipitate the "strangeness of the stranger" (Forget 30) or the otherness of the "foreign Other" (Said 13). Hage's project is one of social and political change, improvement and contentment both locally and globally. The albino cockroach voices this vision: "Yes, we are ugly, but we always know where we are going. We have a project... A change. A project to change this world" (*Cockroach* 202). Hage's carnivalesque style, and his persistent utilization of the recurrent motifs of mental and physical shapeshifting symbolically to discuss suppression, oppression and repression, empowerment and control, human dilemma and trial of will, and the correction of unsatisfying reality, secure his novels a prominent echelon in the genre of the literature of fantasy.

**NOTES AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

- [1] For detailed examination of the uncanny, and its relation to the "old animistic conception of the iniverse", see Freud's "Uncanny". According to Freud's description, the uncanny is "something familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated through the process of repression" (241). Hence, the uncanny derives its terror from something familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it. The uncanny effect is evoked by straddling, or blurring the distinction between reality and unreality, as well as through the use of the dream-like visions of doubling and death. For the connection between shape-shifting as a fantasy, psychosis and neurosis, see his "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis" p.183.
- [2] 2 For detailed analysis of the types and functions of shape-shifting, see Green-Wilson "Shape-shifting myths about transformations", Barkan, *Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism*, Forbes *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*. Oxford, 1990, Michael Jackson, "The Man Who Could Turn into an Elephant: Shape-Shifting Among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone", Frances Kennett "Sor Juana and the Guadalupe", W. L. Brad Smith, "Changing Bodies: The Mechanics of the Metamorphic Curse", *Acta Orientalia*, Brad Steiger, *Werewolf Book: The Encyclopedia of Shape-Shifting Beings* and Renato Traini, "La métamorphose des êtres humains en brutes d'après quelques textes arabes."
- [3] For detailed description of Carnavalesque, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. "Carnavalesque" refers to a style that embodies the qualities of the medieval Carnival, when all the rules are thrown off and mocked, and what is celebrated instead are the extreme opposite of the normalities and inverted power relationships. The main qualities of the Carnavalesque are the spirit of possibility, and the absence of any binding limits, which arises mainly from the quality of 'dressing up'. Role play/role reversal allowed the typical power relationships from the rest of the year to be thrown off, and inverted. The Carnival was also characterized by open public mockery of authority, towards the official and what was supposed to be revered. What was celebrated and praised, in turn, was what was typically repressed or held in suspicion. The Carnival was a celebration of dialogic, multiple voices, as well as of filthiness and grossiness as related to bodily functions. There was also an emphasis on the opened body versus the closed body, or on highlighting and exposing what is typically hidden and repressed. The Carnival was characterized by the spirit of possibilities, of renewal, of the tearing down of old forms and creations of new ones. The Carnival destroys all old, ready-made solutions of thought and world outlook, in order to reinvent newer ones. It is a positive degradation, that aims at regeneration through destruction. Rabelais' Carnavalesque imagery draws on the mischievous and playful spirit of the Carnival which mocks authority, subverts power relationships, and, by emphasizing the body, laughter, and role play, tries to create a new world. A Carnavalesque work is thus characterized by a spirit of possibilities which emphasizes the gross and disgusting, bodily functions and mockery of the serious. Carnavalesque imagery reverses power relationships by emphasizing the physique, laughter, dialogic voices, role playing, dressing up, role reversal, rebirth and renewal, celebrating the unfinished and degrading the official and revered.

- [4] According to Luke: "it is the schizophrenics who are often truly and irrevocably transformed into other people, historical personages, into animals or objects" (28).
- [5] For more on the abject and abjection see Nyers "Abject Cosmopolitanism" and Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, where she defines the abject as: "the improper/the unclean," that which is "radically excluded" and objectified to primary repression. It mobilizes contradictory, extremely destabilizing, and regenerative feelings of desire and disgust. See also Marchi, "From the Dark Territories of Pain and Exclusion to Bright Futures".
- [6] For how performativity destabilizes the normative discourse of abjection, see Butler. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*.
- [7] On the intersection of capitalism, ethnicity, and discipline, see Chow *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Chow argues that in capitalism, economic success and moral salvation are the rewards for disciplined (ethnic) subjects who have converted to the Protestant work ethic.
- [8] For more extensive criticism of *Cockroach*, see Urbaniak-Ryicka "Broken Dreams, Tangled Lives", Rigelhof "Howls from the Underdogs", Holman "Learning to love your inner insect", Toibin "The Anger of Exile", Battersby "On regret and despair", and Sakr, "Imaginative migration".
- [9] For more critical reviews on *Carnival*, see Docx, "Carnival by Rawi Hage- Review", Code, "Book Review: *Carnival*, by Rawi Hage" and Marszal "Carnival by Rawi Hage, review" and Robson, "Carnival by Rawi Hage and Ballistics by D W Wilson: Dashboard existentialists", Forget, André.
- [10] *Cockroaches: Refugee Justice in The Novels of Rawi Hage* and Whitlock, "Carnival: review".

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