

From defeat to resilience: The human cockroach in world literature after Kafka

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The creatures once described by Aristotle as less than perfect (Cole 2016, 16) have been used to defame people over time. They have been instrumentalized for processes of dehumanization and genocide, strategies that are still in place and pervade populist rhetoric today. David Cameron famously invoked the images of biblical locust infestations by comparing migrants with “swarms of people coming across the Mediterranean” (2015). Not too long ago also, UK media pundit Katie Hopkins compared migrants with “feral humans”, “spreading like the norovirus”, and “cockroaches” (Jones 2015).

It is these “less than perfect” species that I am calling *bestia sacra*, the sacred beast. The *bestia sacra* is unthinkable outside its metaphorical relationship with the *homo sacer*, in fact the two form a symbiosis as will become clear in this article. Literary representations of the relationship between the *homo sacer* and the sacred beast can be read vis à vis the recent turn in trauma studies away from notions of un-representability towards the necessity of storytelling with its metaphorical language for working through trauma and arriving at some kind of healing. Such acting out and working through (LaCapra 2000, 21–22, 142–144) linked to cultural production can produce the kind of resilience required to cope with trauma, and it is closely tied to the creative ways in which some contemporary authors privilege a species such as the cockroach in their fiction.

I want to demonstrate how world literature politicizes the cockroach in the context of trauma and resilience in the wake of Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* (1915; Eng. trans. *Metamorphosis*, 1933). Authors have repeatedly engaged with this text by either reviving Gregor or writing Kafka against the grain in that the metamorphosis happens in reverse from roach to human (for example, in Ian McEwan’s novella *Cockroach*, 2019). In some texts the metamorphosis is spiritual rather than physical, the cockroach a catalyst for this kind of transformation, and Kafka’s aura of trauma, abandonment, and sacrifice are still tangible. Contemporary literary resuscitations of Kafka’s protagonist, however, also draw on the resilience of the cockroach for the characters who are being identified with this species, whether as Jews in Marc Estrin’s *Insect Dreams: The Half-Life of Gregor Samsa* (2002), migrants in Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* ([2008] 2010), the female protagonist in Clarice Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.*

(1964; Eng. trans. *The Passion According to G.H.*, [1988] 2012), or the survivors of Rwandan genocide in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Inyenzi ou les cafards* (2006; Eng. trans. *Cockroaches*, 2016). While Gregor Samsa's entanglement between a human being and a cockroach expresses vulnerability and ultimate defeat, the works of these authors are exemplary in demonstrating how Anthropocene fiction attempts to resist and destabilize the biopolitically charged and dehumanizing agency of the *bestia sacra* as metaphor. I will show how these authors liberate the species *blattodae* from its aura of dehumanization and draw on the resilience of this ancient species in the face of adversity and as a model for human agency.

BESTIA SACRA

Before I turn to these literary texts, some terminology needs clarifying. I understand the *bestia sacra* as a metaphorical companion species of the *homo sacer*. I would argue that as a human being considered to be in some way unclean – in the Middle Ages due to a heinous crime they committed and then biologically unclean due to racist perceptions in modernity – the *homo sacer* is discussed as a rather anthropocentric paradigm by Giorgio Agamben, who focuses exclusively on the sacred nature of the *homo sacer* without much attention to the non-human species the *homo sacer* is metaphorically entangled with. Especially as it implies the so-called conceptual, biopolitical metamorphosis of humans to animals, any discussion of the *homo sacer* also calls for non-human species to be examined in light of the definition of sacredness.

The sacred is closely tied to the notion of uncleanness. As an impure human the *homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed but can be killed by anyone with impunity. The same holds true for the *bestia sacra*, animals whose denigration as unclean makes them unfit for sacrifice. The *homo sacer* is stripped of human rights, reduced to what ancient Greece called *zoē* (animal life). By the same token cockroaches do not have the same animal rights as more cuddly species. Due to his impurity the *homo sacer* “pertains to the Gods” (Douglas 2002, 10), he is dead to the community while still clinically alive, a phenomenon Agamben identifies for the medieval outcast, from whom he draws a trajectory up to the *Muselmann*, the walking dead of the 20th-century concentration camps (1995, 185). The *homo sacer* has stayed with us since 1945, and we encounter them especially in current times amongst refugees and other displaced persons. Agamben, however, uses the word *sacer* in the sense of “cursed” rather than “holy”. The *bestia sacra* as I see it, the demonized or despised animal, partly shares this with the *homo sacer*. I would further contend, however, that the *bestia sacra* in cultural production is more complex, in the sense that the word *sacer/sacra* contains the double meaning of “defiled” and “holy”. Readily crushed by most people the cockroach is according to my definition as much *bestia sacra* as the “bee” with its history of eulogization, even holiness.

In spite of their health benefits (widely used in Chinese medicine) and their far more favorable evaluation by indigenous cultures, cockroaches are generally loathed as vermin in our western cultures. Unsurprisingly, as a species inspiring disgust rather than admiration, the cockroach is not only highly unpopular but has received little attention in conservation efforts. A prevalent association with this loathed

species type is the idea of their appearance in multitudes, closely linked to nosophobia, the fear of disease transmission. This fear of swarming creatures is partly rooted in the 17th and 18th centuries and their widespread obsessions with vermin, of “swarms of imperfect creatures threatening the human body” (Cole 2016, 5). It was widely believed that such creatures were not part of the creation of God but the result of processes of putrefaction (16). Leviticus had already described such species as “abominations” which “creep, crawl or swarm upon the earth. This form of movement is explicitly contrary to holiness” (Douglas 2002, 70). Species that can fly but then crawl on the ground (most cockroaches belong to this type) Leviticus abominates in particular, as they are creatures seen as monstrous due to their nature of being in-between classifications. Such species shall not be eaten, nor can they ever serve as sacrificial offerings.

What is particularly interesting about these abominations, both in human form as the *homo sacer* and their animal equivalent, the *bestia sacra*, is the resilience they can develop in the face of adversity. The abandonment of humans from the human community makes resilience necessary for the sake of survival, so the *homo sacer*'s resilience, if it happens, is a consequence of his being expelled into the state of nature. As for cockroaches, resilience is a chief characteristic that has allowed them to survive for over 350 million years. With water they can go for 90 days without food (Schweid 2015, 6), and once “we have eliminated our own species from the planet, cockroaches will be here to enjoy the leftovers” (159).

Resilience is a process of moving forward after encountering adversity and not returning back, and it is this feature in the cockroach that may both frighten us but also lends itself to metaphorical representations of human resilience, in opposition to the biopolitical reduction of humans to a pest that can be easily eradicated with impunity. We see this reduction in Kafka's story *Metamorphosis* to the level of an *Ungeziefer*, in its etymology an animal too unclean to be sacrificed, as a literary monument to the anti-Semitism of his time culminating a few years later in the extermination of undesirables as “lice” and “rats”.

SOVEREIGNTY AND RESILIENCE IN MARC ESTRIN'S *INSECT DREAMS*

Like Kafka, the American novelist Marc Estrin captures the anti-Semitism of the early 20th century in his novel *Insect Dreams: The Half-Life of Gregor Samsa* (2002). Having survived his family's neglect, Kafka's Gregor Samsa works in a circus in Prague before he escapes Nazi Germany by flying (using his own wings) to New York City where he quickly climbs the social ladder. He becomes a key member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's kitchen cabinet and advisor to the Manhattan project that develops the atomic bomb. In America too, however, Gregor encounters anti-Semitism, which shows itself especially in the government's passivity vis à vis Hitler. As he cannot convince Roosevelt to grant exile to the Jewish refugees escaping Nazi Germany, Gregor responds to the President by expressing his “Jewish cockroach view”:

Jews are cockroaches, in a way. They must become hard on the outside from so much kicking around. But they are soft on the inside [...]. Like cockroaches Jews represent

everything not to be digested, everything otherness, everything getting in the way [...]. We always reopen the wound of all-not-accomplished-by-society. So we are fit for only one thing: extermination. (263–264)

The identity between Jews and cockroaches in anti-Semitic stereotyping, alluded to by Kafka as part of the many facets that turn Gregor into a monstrous bug, is made far more explicit in Estrin's novel. Through his playfulness with this metaphor, however, Estrin is able not only to reveal anti-Semitism but also parodies such images in the context of resilience, survival, and Jewish contributions to nuclear warfare. The narrative strand of Albert Einstein's and Gregor's collaboration on the creation of an atomic bomb, for example, refers as much to the superiority and resilience of the Jewish intellect as to the cockroach's ability to survive nuclear war far more easily than humans.

Estrin's roach hybrid transcends the *homo sacer/bestia sacra* position by being aligned with those in power. While in Kafka's story Gregor is set apart from his family and society as a victim of abuse and persecution, Estrin's Gregor becomes *sacer* by being empowered by those in power and through his own heroic efforts in trying to save humanity. In his postmodern version about a human roach full of adaptability, resilience, and global dedication Estrin thus ironically heals the trauma inscribed into Kafka's story. It may come as a strange surprise to the reader that the hero is a man who is half cockroach, but in giving Kafka's Gregor an afterlife spent in fighting "to redeem the world" (461) Estrin takes Kafka's metaphor and the function of sacrifice "to quell violence within the community and prevent conflicts from erupting" (Girard 1988, 15) to another level. In Kafka, the killing of Gregor happens precisely for these reasons, to prevent violence and conflicts from erupting within the family as the nucleus of the community at large. In Estrin's novel, on the other hand, Gregor's resurrection implies a different kind of sacrifice. The author draws on the purported resilience of roaches in Gregor's self-sacrifice to humanity in quelling the various events of political violence of the first half of the 20th century and standing in as a scapegoat for all the victims of persecution and large-scale violence: "For was not Gregor's extreme otherness a spirit connection to [...] the abandoned Jews, the Japanese in camps and those soon to be incinerated [...] and all those others lynched and burned by hooded mobs?" (459)

RAWI HAGE'S ELUSIVE RESILIENCE OF THE MIGRANT AS COCKROACH

We encounter this sort of playfulness with resilience in a hostile environment also in Rawi Hage's migration novel *Cockroach* ([2008] 2010), the story of an unnamed Lebanese refugee trying to survive in Montreal. The central motif of the cockroaches with which the protagonist lives in his drab apartment and identifies to the point of becoming half man, half insect, has also been clearly inspired by Kafka. Parallels abound, such as the boots threatening to crush the human roach as which he imagines himself (101), the image of climbing walls (101), cleaning off the dust from his body (75), or his "ultrasonic insect sounds" (265) that are unintelligible to humans. However, the metamorphosis into a roach saves Hage's protagonist from humanity

rather than humanity killing him off, the way it happens in Kafka's story. Hage's novel is a postmodern parody of Kafka's modernist tale about the gradual loss of sanctuary and protection in what is supposed to be the most protective community, the family with its intimate space of the home. While Kafka describes a young man's gradual decline into animality, stripping him of his identity, marginalizing him from the human community, and leading to self-sacrifice, Hage's roaches show signs not only of resilience but of superiority. In their sovereign status they become a reflection of the illegal immigrant as traditional *homo sacer*, now strangely empowered thanks to a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest in Montreal's criminal underworld: "[...] the day would come when all my power would surface from below. I shall bring up from the abyss the echoes of rodent and insect screams to shatter the drums of your ears!" (26)

This criminal underground world of Montreal embodies both sanctuary and its loss to the immigrant. On the one hand, he morphs into an imaginary roach as outlaw inside the sanctuary of Canada, represented as state of nature/state of war. However, by withdrawing to what he describes as the underground world Hage's migrant also remains outside of the sanctuary. He stays *friedlos* (without peace) like Agamben's human outlaw of the Middle Ages (1995, 104), as both are expelled *ante portas* of the *polis*. In Hage's and other postmodern texts the state of nature as the *homo sacer's* place of exile is often presented as a mental, psychological one. Due to such unresolved trauma, integration seems impossible, so Hage tells us, making the immigrant and the cockroach one in being excluded, loathed, repressed and coerced to the margins of their habitats. Unlike what Anthony Grenville has described in his work on companion species as aids to social integration for refugees (2021, 177–186), Hage's roaches and the human-size albino roach of his imagination become what I would term an "identification species" in the protagonist's struggle with social integration. The options this unhappy immigrant has are either suicide – which he attempts – or metamorphosis. The latter either goes in the direction of adapting to his host country's expectations of him as an immigrant and becoming a resilient new Canadian or the kind of transformation he prefers, which entails becoming an undesirable species and thus withdrawing from all human affairs.

But Hage's protagonist feels ambivalent about insects. On the one hand, as he explains to his psychoanalyst Geneviève, with whom he is expected to meet after his suicide attempt, he admires the cockroach he becomes, as it makes him free and invisible (2010, 207). Hage's migrant craves the invisibility that comes with not belonging to any place as much as it also tortures him and it is this freedom of the *homo sacer* whom anyone can kill with impunity that is also a highly ambivalent concept. It implies freedom from the social contract but also being free from having any rights at all, from immunity against being killed.

However, insects also terrify him, and he sees them as invasive. They are "murderous in their sheer, vast numbers, their conformity, their repetitiveness, their steady army-like movements, their soundless invasions" (209). The passage is expressive of his sentiment of self-loathing as a migrant, the reference to vast numbers, their expected conformity, and their invasiveness being key terms in this regard. In a way,

in becoming roach and withdrawing into the underworld, Hage's suicidal and deeply cynical migrant refuses to accept his own status as a migrant, many of whom he considers to be filth. He refuses to accept the rights granted him by Canada as a sanctuary for migrants, and he refuses to conform to government expectations of him to be a resilient and happy migrant. As Casco-Solís argues, metaphorically the cockroach "represents the protagonist's rejection of the institutions and citizenship that do not provide the protection and security he needs as a human being. Instead, he will find this protection in the underground" (2021, 189). Hage's migrant as roach thus demonstrates what I would define as an "evasive resilience". In view of his persistent disgust of the invasiveness of both cockroaches and people – "I see people that way [...]. All nature gathers and invades" (Hage 2010, 210) – he is, however, rather resilient in this evasiveness of resilience.

CLARICE LISPECTOR'S ENGENDERED MORE-THAN-HUMAN RESILIENCE

When in Clarice Lispector's novel the *Passion According to G.H.* (2012), the female protagonist G.H. encounters a cockroach in her bedroom (a reference to the disclosure of animality in Gregor Samsa's room) she tries to kill it by slamming the closet door on the animal, but then becomes both mentally and, by eating its inner substance, physically entangled with it. This highly engendered inter-species entanglement leads her to a new self-understanding as a biological rather than socially constructed being, redefining also the way in which she sees herself as a woman. The violence she commits on the animal makes her contemplate whether the roach too is female, "since things crushed at the waist are female" (92). The roach as bare life and Lispector's protagonist may not become one in the end as they do in Kafka, but the novel attempts to describe a unique approximation between the impure beast and G.H., whose passion is this very impurity she feels empowered to imbibe. Although the notion of bare life in Lispector's novel differs from Agamben's theory that it is intrinsic to the nexus between the sovereign and the *homo sacer*, G.H. experiences *nuda vita* as primordial "pre-human/inhuman" life (65, 66). Becoming a cockroach is described as a positive, cosmic experience and sensation of its time-honored resilience built up over 350 million years:

I knew that roaches could endure for more than a month without food or water. And that they could even make a usable nutritive substance from wood. And that even after being crushed they slowly decompressed and kept on walking. Even when frozen, they kept on marching once thawed. For three hundred and fifty million years they had been replicating themselves without being transformed. When the world was nearly naked, they were already sluggishly covering it. (40)

Her desire to touch and even eat part of this "unclean" animal blurs the distinction between human sovereign and loathed species: "I had committed the forbidden act of touching the unclean" (67). Lispector re-evaluates the notion of sacredness and uncleanness in her novel by turning them into positive qualities: "the unclean is the root – for there are created things that never decorated themselves, and preserved themselves exactly as they were created" (69). While the roach does not

transform, G.H. does by the mere act of touching it, waxing “unclean with joy!” (70). The experience of becoming animal is thus an exhilarating one to her, offering a glimpse of the very resilience the roach has shown since the dawn of evolution. Her “self-abandonment” (96), however, is unlike that of the *homo sacer*, who is abandoned by the human community. Hers is by choice bringing her closer to divine knowledge, a cosmic union also contained in the reciprocal gaze between her and the roach. As the cockroach gives her “its fertilizing gaze” (93) G.H. equally gazes at the roach and realizes that they are made of the same primordial substance. As the roach is food to her, she is “equally edible matter” (132), a realization she shares with the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who was thinking the same after she had been attacked by the crocodile (2012, 18).

By becoming cockroach, G.H. sheds her human vulnerability. This is the opposite of what happens in Kafka’s story where the metamorphosis leads only to vulnerability and defeat. G.H., however, by imbibing the roach’s inner substance not only partakes of the ancient resilience of the species *blattodae*. The transformation from bios to *zoë*, from political human life to bare animal life, also comes with a sort of Dionysian disintegration of the protagonist’s *principium individuationis* that in its complete dissolution of delineations between the human and non-human leads to ecstasy and to heightened knowledge (Girard 1988, 145–150). In this violent act in which G.H. murders the cockroach to become one with all creaturely life she is able to glimpse into deep time, the very beginnings of life, as well as deep space, what Agamben calls “pure space” (2002, 57). It is the trauma of being human, literally the wound of being alive (as a woman) that is being temporarily healed through this mystic union, making her discover that “the inhuman part is the best part of us” (Lispector 2012, 65). Her engendered resilience results specifically from discovering this more-than-human side in herself.

DEHUMANIZATION AND SURVIVING GENOCIDE IN SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA

This experience of metamorphosis through contaminated diversity is very different in another literary text I want to highlight here, one in which identification with the cockroach from both a female and ethnic perspective is the result of genocidal dehumanization tactics: Scholastique Mukasonga’s memoir *Cockroaches* (2016). Trauma and resilience, the association of the persecuted *homo sacer* with cockroaches are central to Mukasonga’s work on the atrocities committed on the Tutsi population in Rwanda whom the Hutu majority regularly debased as *inyenzi*, cockroaches, culminating in the 1994 killings of approximately 800,000 people (Livingstone Smith 2011, 152–153).

Mukasonga’s cockroach metaphor is ambivalent, however, in that it embodies not only the dehumanization at work in genocide but also signals the resilience of survivors. Like that ancient species which has adapted to the harshest conditions, Mukasonga shows us how she, as alleged *inyenzi*, survives in the face of extreme adversity. This becomes especially clear in her descriptions of her time at secondary school, the Lycée Notre Dame de Cîteaux, where she is continuously exposed to extreme

humiliation by other students and even teachers, to the point that she has to morph into “a paragon of zeal” (2016, 81). In order to be able to study without being harassed, Mukasonga would get up in the middle of the night and lock herself into the toilet, ironically the place where cockroaches are most likely to be encountered. As Mrinmoyee Bhattacharya has pointed out, schools in Mukasonga’s work are sites in which Rwandan biopolitics are being replicated (2018, 86). The school toilet is her only place of refuge inside a place that does not offer any other. Her withdrawal into the toilet recalls Hage’s escape into the underground world. In becoming invisible to sovereign power, both Hage’s immigrant and Mukasonga get entangled with the positive qualities they perceive in cockroaches, their facile slippage into dark spaces and their resilience in surviving the harshest conditions. However, by withdrawing to cockroach terrain, the underworld as he calls it, Hage’s displaced protagonist refuses to show the kind of resilience expected of him as a newly arrived immigrant in Canada, while Mukasonga’s attempt to make herself invisible in the toilet reflects the tenacity of her will to survive and serves the purpose of personal advancement. Her ability to bounce back and move forward shows itself also in later life, in France where she founds an association for orphans, as well as in her continued attempts to work through her childhood trauma by returning to Rwanda.

Her resilience contrasts with the resignation of others, among them survivors like the man she meets as a guard at the Kigali Memorial. Wandering “aimlessly on death’s shores” (Mukasonga 2016, 139) he tells her that remembering what the Hutus kept “telling us: there is no place for the Tutsis on this earth” (139) he has made the company of the dead his home: “Here with the skeletons. This is where I belong” (139). Unlike Mukasonga’s resilience, this is the fate of the *homo sacer* who is rendered over to the gods, considered dead by the community, the subsequent choices being either active resistance, survival in silence, or, as is the case of Mukasonga’s parents, self-abandonment: “My parents were too old to seek shelter [...]. They were tired of being persecuted and pursued. Why bother struggling to survive [...] they waited in their house, waiting for death to come” (143).

Having no place on this earth is the shared destiny also between the *homo sacer* and the *bestia sacra* as the one that is cursed and condemned to extinction, animals of no value, of life not worth being lived. This is less than *nuda vita*, bare life, it is actually the complete negation of a creature’s life. The Rwandan genocide is no different in this regard from the Holocaust, the self-abandonment of Mukasonga’s parents resembling the *Muselmann* in their surrender to fate. Mukasonga’s memoir is a sinister reminder of these repetitive scenarios in genocide, but it also demonstrates the possibility of resistance and resilience in facing trauma.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the literary examples provided here all display the idea of resilience in connection with a positive re-evaluation of the species *blattodea*. They destabilize this metaphor from its political abuse for strategies of dehumanization by engaging with various semantic nuances. In Erskin’s novel this is manifested in the survival of Kafka’s protagonist and his ambition to save humanity from Hitler’s Germany. Er-

skin plays ironically with the idea of resilience in liberating the cockroach from its position of persecuted *bestia sacra* as a metaphor of the *homo sacer* aligning it with sovereignty. By dehumanizing a woman in her union with a cockroach, Lispector enables her to develop an enriched consciousness. Hers is an engendered more-than-human resilience, of a woman unwilling to subject herself to patriarchal structures. She achieves this through her spiritual and physical entanglement dissolving gender and species boundaries. In Mukasonga's memoir, the metaphor is perhaps most clearly stripped of its dehumanizing agency and used instead for a representation of surviving genocide and a resilience in the sense of bouncing back after severe trauma. Here the roach, beyond being an animal metaphor denoting eradication, provides an expression of solidarity in view of survival and finding sanctuary. This also holds for Hage's novel about an unhappy immigrant to whom the cockroach becomes a spiritual identification species in his evasiveness from neoliberal expectations of resilience and happiness. He demonstrates what I have called "elusive resilience" in his refusal to integrate.

"I am interested in these creatures and their history," says the narrator towards the end of Rawi Hage's novel, whereupon a First Nations cook tells him about the cockroach's role in indigenous creation myth (2010, 292). One may forget all too easily that the creatures commonly loathed in our western world are seen very differently in indigenous cultures where they are more readily granted spiritual and ecological sanctuaries. But the literature presented here also does its share in wrestling a blighted species metaphor away from its time-worn aura of loathing and use in the rhetoric of dehumanization. These narratives form part of a new type of text in contemporary world literature, in which various species become the protagonists and feature as catalysts in ecologically sensitive art about precarities of the Anthropocene such as exile and displacement, gender trouble, nationalist isolationism, and the threat to biocultural diversity.

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From defeat to resilience: The human cockroach in world literature after Kafka

Bestia sacra. Homo sacer. Cockroach. Migration. Trauma. Resilience.

Through a selection of literary texts featuring cockroaches in the wake of Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* (1915): Clarice Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964; *The Passion According to G.H.*, 1988), Marc Estrin's *Insect Dreams: The Half-Life of Gregor Samsa* (2002), Scholastique Mukasonga's *Inyenzi ou les Cafards* (2006; *Cockroaches*, 2016), and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008), this article shows how these authors politicize the cockroach as *bestia sacra* between trauma and resilience. These literary works are exemplary in demonstrating how Anthropocene fiction resists and destabilizes biopolitically charged species metaphors with their dehumanizing agency. How do these authors, in writing beyond Kafka's doomed human cockroach, liberate the species *blattodea* from its aura of dehumanization and draw on the resilience of this ancient species in the face of adversity and as a model for human agency?

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