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The 'Cockroach': Waste and Wasted Life in World Literatures in English

Abstract I: In questo saggio intendo proporre una lettura in chiave comparatistica di tre romanzi postcoloniali – in relazione intertestuale e contro-canonica rispetto a *La metamorfosi* (1915) di Franz Kafka – che affrontano l'etica, ma anche l'estetica, dell'interconnessione umano-animale. In questo modo, e con il supporto di un apparato critico su Kafka, in particolare il contributo di Deleuze e Guattari (1986), su cui s'impernia il presente studio, intendo esplorare il nesso fra letteratura e ambiente, con particolare enfasi sui rifiuti, nell'accezione anche della necro-politica (Mbembe 2003) e dell'*écart* (Jullien 2012). *La maledizione di Kafka* del sudafricano Achmat Dangor (2006), *Il ladro del silenzio* (2011) del canadese-libanese Rawi Hage e *Culo nero* (2016) del nigeriano Igoni Barrett saranno qui oggetto di disamina.

Abstract II: In this essay I intend to pursue a comparative reading of three postcolonial texts – in their intertextual and counter-canonical relationship with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) – that deal with the ethics, but also the aesthetics, of the relationship between humans and animals. By doing so, and with the help of the Kafkian critical apparatuses, particularly Deleuze and Guattari's critical contribution (1986), which will be the core of this study, I will also examine the nexus between literature and the environment, with particular emphasis on waste, also taking into consideration the paradigms of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) and of *écart* (Jullien 2012). *Kafka's Curse* (1997), by South African writer Achmat Dangor, *Cockroach* (2008) by Canadian-Lebanese Rawi Hage, and *Blackass* (2015) by Nigerian Igoni Barrett will be here analysed and scrutinised.

Keywords: World Literatures in English, animals, waste, necropolitics, *écart*.

In this essay, I would like to concentrate on three narratives in which an individual – through a Kafka-esque metamorphic process – is eventually equated to waste. Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is certainly a starting point, in order to discuss this specific narrative representation of biopolitics and necropolitics (Mbembe 2003). Moreover, the purpose of this essay is to analyse and demonstrate how Kafka's texts undergo a process of regeneration and re-naturalisation; of intertextual re-birth in other cultures, languages, literatures, and nationalities, particularly within the field of Anglophone postcolonial literature[1]. Achmat

[1] A different version of the article here expanded was published in German (Concilio 2020). I am particularly

Dangor's South African *Kafka's Curse* (1997), Rawi Hage's Canadian-Lebanese *Cockroach* (2009), and Igoni Barrett's Nigerian *Blackass* (2015), all show strong analogies with Kafka's text by placing the metamorphosis at the centre of an identity crisis based on the dichotomy black/white, ethnic minority/domineering majority, inclusion/exclusion, typical of postcolonial narratives.

In this context, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) will be the pivotal reference. It introduces a new mythologem in what can be considered Kafka's idiosyncratic inauguration of modern mythology[2]: the insect (Germ. *das Ungeziefer*, *der Mistkäfer*; Engl. "bug", "beetle", "cockroach")[3]. It is "the insect" that becomes the "index to the significance straddling two texts" (Riffaterre 1980: 638).

Moreover, Paul Gilroy claims that some of the most interesting answers to debates on racism, slavery, and migration are to be found in discussions of Kafka's works, who "more than any other writer, placed the human, the infrahuman, and the animal in disturbing relation in order to establish a variety of modernism 'far away from the continent of Man'"(Arendt 1967: 157). Furthermore, in his introduction to the essay *The Infrahuman. Animality in Modern Jewish Literature* (2018), Noam Pines writes:

> Instead of depicting a struggle to emancipation, the literature of the infrahuman […] instead of the prospect of integration, acculturation, or assimilation, […] offers an experience of abandonment and degradation (Pines 2018: xxix).

If the insect can be elevated to the status of absolute 'otherness', of discrimination, segregation, abandonment and degradation, another critical paradigm has definitely opened the doors to Kafka's texts and characters unto postcolonial discourses: Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of Kafka as representative of minor literature, which "does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. The first characteristic of a minor literature is that in it the language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 16).

Deleuze and Guattari also suggest that Kafka's use of the German language by a Czech Jew is similar to the African American writers' use of the English language in the States (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 17), thus reinforcing the parallel among minorities, or communities which suffered forms of racial and cultural discrimination and political persecution[4].

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thankful to Dr. David C. Assmann, who organised the Environmental Studies Conference on "Narrative der Deponie" in 2019, or narratives of waste, with both Germanists and Anglicists, and to the lively discussion that emerged during the debate, for the inspiring sparks that enriched that former version of the article.

[2] "Kafka is to modernity what classical myth was to traditional society" (Bensmaïa 1986: xi).

[3] "He wakes up to find that he's become a near-human-sized beetle (probably of the scarab family, if his household's charwoman is to be believed)" (Cronenberg 2014: 9).

[4] "This book represents a watershed and is invaluable for the modern reader of Kafka" […] "By proposing the concept of 'minor literature' – a concept that opens so many new avenues of research in Europe and the United States – Deleuze and Guattari give the modern reader a means by which to enter into Kafka's work without being weighed down by the old categories of genres, types, modes, and style […]" (Bensmaïa 1986: xiii, xv).

These interpretive and critical assessments determined Kafka's fortune in postcolonial studies and literary discourses (Dahab 2018: 215), likewise encouraging new writers to a whole range of more or less conscious or unconscious intertextual quotations, allusions, borrowings, echoes, and even parodic cross-references to Kafka's *Ur*-text. This rich machinery of citations is undoubtedly better classified through the well-established narratological tools of intertextuality, as theorised by Julia Kristeva, Michael Riffaterre, Gerard Genette, and Linda Hutcheon, among others. And yet, here, Kafka's *Ur*-text, "Die Verwandlung/ The Metamorphosis", will be treated as "storied matter", that is literary material that is "holder of stories" (Cohen 2014: ix), that had once been thrown into the collective European literary conscience, and is now re-born overseas, naturalised in other countries, acquiring and describing new kinds of citizenships.

Kafka's *Ur*-text: "Die Verwandlung/The Metamorphosis"

Kafka's character Gregor Samsa is a man who finds himself transformed into a disgusting insect. All through the process of what Deleuze and Guattari call "becoming-animal", Gregor Samsa does not lose his human reasoning and concerns. His voice changes into that of an animal, while his body metamorphosises, too – "a becoming-animal, a becoming-inhuman, since it is actually through voice and through sound, and through a style that one becomes an animal" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 7) – and his taste for food also changes, rather to the point of reaching total refusal. When his family give up any hope for normality, they remove all the pieces of furniture from his room. Finally, after everyone seems to have accepted his animal-like, or infrahuman qualities, Gregor transforms himself from animal into rubbish, particularly when his room, too, has become a dumping ground for discarded and unwanted objects. Paradoxically, it is the cleaning lady who dumps dirty things into Gregor's room, and when she finally comes to sweep him away, she acts more like an undertaker than like a cleaner:

> Man hatte sich angewöhnt, Dinge, die man anderswo nicht unterbringen konnte, in dieses Zimmer hineinzustellen, und solcher Dinge gab es nun viele, […].
> Aus diesem Grunde waren viele Dinge überflüssig geworden, die zwar nicht verkäuflich waren, die man aber auch nicht wegwerfen wollte. Alle diese wanderten in Gregors Zimmer. Ebenso auch die Aschenkiste und die Abfallkiste aus der Küche. Was nur im Augenblick unbrauchbar war, schleuderte die Bedienerin, […] einfach in Gregors Zimmer (Kafka 1994: 180-181).

> Everyone had gotten the habit of using his room to store things there was no space for in other parts of the apartment, and now there were many such things, […].
> Many things had become superfluous, things that could not be sold but were still too valuable to throw out. All of this found its way into Gregor's room. As did the ash box and the garbage pail from the kitchen. The charwoman, always in a great hurry, would simply fling any unserviceable item into Gregor's room (Kafka 2014: 96).

In order to provide an immediate example of how this particular detail of the kitchen garbage bin resurfaces almost literally in one of the texts under scrutiny here, it is worth anticipating a quotation from Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2009), which might call to the mind of the reader reminiscences of Kafka:

> The smell of food from the kitchen brought me back to the land of forests and snow. And all I wished was to crawl under the swinging door and hide under the stove, licking the mildew, the dripping juice from the roast lamb, even the hardened yogurt drops on the side of the garbage bin. With my pointy teeth, I thought, I could scrape the white drips all the way under the floor (Hage 2009: 67).

While "kitchen" and "garbage bin" are precise lexical and semantic markers in both quoted passages, a third element, "teeth", too, is present in Kafka's *Ur*-text, towards the end of the same paragraph, when Gregor regrets not having proper teeth[5]:

> Als ob damit Gregor gezeigt werden sollte, daß man Zähne brauche, um zu essen, und daß man auch mit den schönsten zahnlosen Kiefern nichts ausrichten könne (Kafka 1994: 183).

> As if to demonstrate to Gregor that a person needs teeth to eat and even the most splendid jaws, if toothless, can accomplish nothing at all (Kafka 2014: 98).

This particular and limited example anticipates how Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* places itself in an oblique, agonic relation of "recurrence" and "sameness" to the *Ur*-text, with which it establishes an ambiguous, if possible, filiation, which will be analysed in depth in the central part of this essay, where the three novels will be introduced[6]. The novel also creates an intertext, for it "complements" various texts by Kafka, and almost "comments" on them, providing new meanings to the metamorphosis and not limiting itself to imitation, allusion, or literal quotation (Riffaterre 1980: 627).

It is worth noting that among the reviewers of Rawi Hage's novel, there are those who believe that to compare him to Kafka means to belittle and diminish his work:

> I don't mean to suggest that everyone who has responded to Hage's work has done so insincerely. But when I see it being compared to Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Genet, Rimbaud and Burroughs – I can't imagine that anyone with a mind believes that. In making such overblown comparisons, these "admiring" critics have respected Rawi Hage far less than I have (Gaitskill 2009).

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[5] "To speak, and above all to write, is to fast. Kafka manifests a permanent obsession with food, and with that form of food *par excellence*, in other words, the animal or meat – an obsession with the mouth and with teeth and with large, unhealthy, or gold-capped teeth" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 20).

[6] The author refuses with irritation the comparison to Kafka: "It's not about Kafka", he insisted grumbling about the journalists who've already brought up the most obvious literary reference (Donnelly 2008).

> Kafka obviously comes to mind here, but the handling of the idea, often dazzling in its own way, is notably un-Kafkaesque. Where Kafka writes Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis as a passion play of Christ-like suffering and forbearance, Hage works the subject for something much more caustic and defiant (Lasdun 2009).

I think this is not the case. It just means to highlight one – among many – layer of meanings and this is a practice only great works of art allow for. Moreover, in the case of postcolonial re-writings, "'writing back', 'counter discourse', 'oppositional literature', 'contexts', is a strategy for contesting the authority of the canon of English literature" (Thieme 2001: 1). Yet, Tiffin "claims that such texts do not simply 'write back' to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continue to operate in postcolonial worlds" (Tiffin 1987: 23). In Kafka's text, Gregor progressively becomes as untidy and dirty as his own room:

> war auch er ganz staubbedeckt; Fäden, Haare, Speiseüberreste schleppte er auf seinem Rücken und an den Seiten mit sich herum (Kafka 1994: 184).

> he too was covered in dust; he dragged around threads, hair and food scraps clinging to his back and sides (Kafka 2014: 100).

The final and inevitable step of this metamorphosis is obviously death, as Deleuze and Guattari claim: "Gregor's metamorphosis was the story of a re-Oedipalization that leads him into death, that turns his becoming-animal into a becoming-dead. […] all the animals oscillate between a schizo Eros and an Oedipal Thanatos" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 36). Thus, what also characterises Gregor's destiny, as well as the destiny of Kafka's "Hunger artist" (1922) – and of Kafka's himself – is exactly the equation between a human "wasted life" – or, the body – and waste. This reading is offered – for instance – by Hanif Kureishi, who writes:

> In 'Metamorphosis', […] Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning to find he has become transformed […] into an insect, a bug, or a large dung beetle, depending on the translation. And in 'A Hunger Artist' the protagonist, a determined self-famisher, exhibits himself publicly in a cage, where, eventually, he starves himself to death as a form of public entertainment. Like Gregor Samsa in 'Metamorphosis', at the conclusion of the story he is swept away, having also become 'nothing', a pile of rubbish or human excrement that everyone has become tired of (Kureishi 2015: 6).

Whereas David Cronenberg reminds us:

> Is Gregor's transformation a death sentence or, in some way, a fatal diagnosis? Why does the beetle Gregor not survive? Is it his human brain, depressed and sad and melancholy, that betrays the insect's basic sturdiness? Is it the brain that defeats the bug's urge to survive, even to eat? What's wrong with the beetle? […] Well, we learn that Gregor has bad lungs – they are "none too reliable" – and so the Gregor beetle has bad lungs as well, or at least the insect equivalent, and perhaps that really is his

> fatal diagnosis; or perhaps it's his growing inability to eat that kills him, as it did Kafka, who ultimately coughed up blood and died of starvation caused by laryngeal tuberculosis at the age of forty (Cronenberg 2014: 11-12).

Therefore, as a way to close these introductory reflections, I would claim that it is very difficult to distinguish between Gregor Samsa the character and Franz Kafka the writer, if we have to follow Baioni, when he argues that thanks to a Kabbalistic shift the number of letters composing the two surnames is the same, while the vowel "a" of the surname occurs in the same position and the consonant "s" perfectly substitutes the "k" in the same position (Baioni 1962: 85).

One last example of how Kafka's text is literally translated into an evocative intertext and at the same time it is reused and transformed is provided once again by Rawi Hage's novel, in the portrait of a group of nervous, frustrated male migrants, smoking and thus transforming themselves into animal-like creatures, almost like dragons puffing smoke clouds into the air, who are very similar to Kafka's three tenants:

> Fresh immigrants [with] tobacco-stained fingers summoning the waiters, their matches, like Indian signals, ablaze under hairy noses, and their stupefied faces exhaling cigarette fumes with the intensity of Spanish bulls on a last charge towards a dancing red cloth (Hage 2008: 7).

> Besonders die Art, wie sie alle aus Nase und Mund den Rauch ihrer Zigarren in die Höhe bliesen, ließ auf große Nervosität schließen (Kafka 1994: 185).

> Particularly the way in which all of them were blowing the smoke of their cigars high into the air from their noses and mouths suggested extreme agitation (Kafka 2014: 100-101).

Kafka/Samsa abroad

> *Benjamin showed that Kafka could well have adopted Montaigne's phrase: "Mon livre et moi ne faisons qu'un"*
> (Bensmaïa 1986: xii).

Bodies thrown away like waste, expelled, rejected, unloved: this is how Kafka has marked his characters with "superfluity" and "expendability" (Mbembe 2008: 38). It is easy, therefore, to understand why Kafka appeals to postcolonial writers. To begin with, the South African novelist of Indian, Muslim descent, Achmat Dangor, imagined a character affected by Kafka's curse – and this syndrome becomes the novel's title and leitmotif: *Kafka's Curse* (1997)[7]. Besides, the Lebanese-Canadian writer Rawi Hage produced a novel entitled *Cockroach* (2008), which allusively re-naturalises Kafka, bringing to life a Middle Eastern migrant and outsider in Montreal. Last but not least, the Nigerian writer Igoni Barrett

[7] On its publication, the novel won the *Charles Bosman Award* in South Africa.

created a metamorphic character who 'plays white', in his novel *Blackass* (2015), whose epigraph is borrowed from Kafka's *The Metamorphosis:* "'And now?' Gregor asked himself, looking around in the darkness"(Kafka 2014)[8]. The three texts might be considered classics of postcolonial discourse on the 'other', almost in the Fanonian terms of black skin behind white masks, as far as genre is concerned. Only *Cockroach* is narrated in the first person, while the remaining two novels use the omniscient third person narrative.

Before analysing the three texts, I would like to mention another critical category that also has to do with rubbish and waste: *l'écart*. The Italian word *scarto* that translates the English term "waste", or "rubbish", and the German term *Müll* or *Abfall*, has a second meaning if used as a verb. *Scartare* in Italian indicates a sudden lateral movement and subsequent forward projection, typical of an animal (Zaccuri 2016: 6). In English it can be translated into the verb "to swerve", while in German it might be translated as "plötzlich abweichen". But the term is also normally used in rhetoric with the 'figurative meaning' of what diverges, swerves, and takes over the 'normative' or 'proper meaning'. This is to say that what Kafka disseminated in his narrative production in terms of new mythologems has now been bent and swerves in order to serve ever new purposes. Finally, the French philosopher Francois Jullien proposed the concept of *l'écart* to substitute the concept of *difference*, particularly if referred to cultural difference. In his opinion, l'*écart* is the open space between cultures, that can be filled by a reflexivity between self and other, and can be bridged by relational rather than essentialist discourses:

> l'écart ne porte pas à s'arroger une position de surplomb à partir de laquelle il y aurait à ranger des différences. Mais, par la distance ouverte, il permet un dévisagement réciproque de l'un par l'autre: où l'un se découvre lui-même en regard de l'autre, à partir de l'autre (Jullien 2012: 7).

Bearing this definition of *l'écart* in mind, I would like now to approach the three literary texts here under scrutiny, for they engage with Kafka's alterity in a transformative dialogue, where Kafka-the-writer, his texts and his fictional characters have been naturalised in other continents, have been both deterritorialised and reterritorialised in other literatures, languages, and literary *personae*; more specifically, gaining South African, Canadian and Nigerian citizenships:

> Stories of magical transformation […] prompt us to wonder if transformation into another living creature would be a proof of the possibility of reincarnation and some sort of afterlife and is thus, however hideous or disastrous the narrative, a religious and hopeful concept (Cronenberg 2014: 15).

Where Cronenberg speaks of reincarnation, I would say that Kafka/Samsa's new citizenship is also a metempsychosis, a rebirth like that of the mythical phoenix, out of its own ashes, whereas Dahab speaks of "transmutative" devolution (2018: 216). Indeed, the

[8] Cf. "'Und jetzt?' fragte sich Gregor und sah sich im Dunkeln um" (Kafka 1994: 187).

three main protagonists might be said to interpret that open space of *l'écart* as the space between blackness and whiteness, that transforms them not really into someone else, but rather into something else.

To begin with the comparative analysis, one of the paradigms singled out by Deleuze and Guattari in Kafka's narratives is the *geopolitical triangle*: Germans, Czechs, Jews. Such triangle corresponds to the triangle of Kafka's linguistic choices: German, Czech, Yiddish and Hebrew[9].

This has to do with Kafka being a representative of the German speaking minority of Czech Jews in Prague and to his father being an Eastern/rural Jew who has now renounced his roots in order to assimilate to Western/urban culture.

In the postcolonial texts here analysed we find similar triangles:

KAFKA	Gregor Samsa	German, Czech, Yiddish
Czechoslovakia, Prague	Identity	White Jew > Black insect
DANGOR	Omar/Oscar	Afrikaans, Yiddish, English
South Africa, Johannesburg	Identity	Oriental Black Muslim > White (European) Jew
HAGE	Unnamed	Lebanese, English/French
Canada, Quebec, Montreal	Identity	Black Arab migrant > in white Montreal
BARRETT	Furo Wariboko/Franc Whyte	Yoruba, English
Nigeria, Lagos	Identity	Black Nigerian > White Nigerian

All the Kafka-esque characters speak more than one language: sometimes they do not speak one of the languages of the country, and the language they speak makes them more or less authentic in their metamorphosis, and determines their loyalty towards one specific 'sovereignty'.

Another paradigm selected by Deleuze and Guattari is the *becoming-infra-human or becoming-animal*, as a line of flight, a line of escape, as an alternative to remaining obedient, with a lowered head, remaining a bureaucrat, an inspector, a judge, a culprit. *Becoming-animal* is an absolute deterritorialization (see Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 12).

In the three Anglophone novels, the characters metamorphose into a different ethnic/racial, religious and/or linguistic subject. This *becoming-other*, although allusively referred to as a *becoming-cockroach* – at least in two of the three novels –, implies a real deterritorialization, for the three protagonists are literally expelled and exiled from the family circle, the house, the city, the country.

[9] "Kafka's situation is analogous to that of Indian writers who must choose between their regional, Indian tongues, and a pan-Indian, bureaucratic English, or African writers who must decide whether to communicate widely through the coloniser's tongue or reach a more limited audience to a specific tribal language. And Kafka's deterritoralization of German represents a particular strategy for dealing with this widespread postcolonial linguistic dilemma" (Bogue 1997: 105).

KAFKA	Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt. Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen (Kafka 1994: 115). When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into some sort of monstrous insect. He was lying on his back – which was hard, like a carapace – and when he raised his head a little he saw his curved brown belly segmented by rigid arches atop which the blanket, already slipping, was just barely managing to cling. His many legs, pitifully thin compared to the rest of him, waved helplessly before his eyes (Kafka 2014: 21).
HAGE	I lay in bed and let the smoke enter me undiluted. I let it grow me wings and many legs. Soon I stood barefoot, looking for my six pairs of slippers. I looked in the mirror, and I searched again for my slippers. In the mirror I saw my face, my long jaw, my whiskers slicing through the smoke around me. I saw many naked feet moving (2008: 19).
BARRETT	Furo Wariboko awoke this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn up on the wrong side of sleep. He was lying nude in bed, and when he raised his head a fraction he could see his alabaster belly, and his pale legs beyond, […] He stared at his hands, the pink life lines in his palms, the shell-fish coloured cuticles, the network of blue veins […] His hands were not black but white … same as his legs, his belly, all of him (2015: 3).

All three texts include a crucial metamorphosis, although what becomes important here is the skin colour. Two characters, the South African Omar and the Nigerian Furo, 'play white', that is to say, they want to pass for whites, and therefore to escape from the racial discrimination that black people suffer for. Differently, Hage's character is a Middle Eastern man in Canada where he identifies with the other migrants, exiles, refugees, who live a separate life from the white majority of Canadians. Dangor chooses irony to define Oscar's choice of becoming a Jew, in order to be assimilated to white people in South Africa, where Blacks and Coloureds/Asiatics were discriminated under apartheid. Actually, both Oscar and Furo undergo a double metamorphosis[10]. After changing his name and becoming a Jew, Oscar dies and transforms himself into a tree, thus opting for *becoming-vegetal*. Furo, instead, after obtaining a first passport with a new picture as a white man, would like to obtain a second one, with also a new name and surname: he wants to be known as a successful businessman, as Franc Whyte.

[10] "What happens when you update a classic story by a century, shifting continents along the way? Furo Wariboko, the Nigerian everyman at the centre of Igoni Barrett's first novel, *Blackass*, is plunged into such a situation when he awakes, Gregor Samsa-style, to find he has changed dramatically overnight. In Furo's case, he has not transformed into an insect but into a white man" (Carroll 2016).

Oscar repudiates his Muslim family, his religion, his proper name and moves from the township to the gentrified suburbs. The unnamed protagonist of Hage's novel migrates from an unnamed country, easily identifiable as Lebanon, to Montreal, abandoning his family and his previous life and language[11]. Barrett's protagonist leaves his family, changes identity and moves to another area of Lagos. Geographically, they are displaced or diasporic people, socially they are all outsiders; physically and psychically they are all hybrids. After all, the *becoming-animal* of Kafka's characters is not a way out of humanity but a way of remaining co-substantial to both human being and animal (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 14).

If the *becoming-animal* is seen as a line of flight by the two French philosophers, a way for Gregor to subtract himself from patriarchal, juridical, economic and social laws of submission as a middle-class man, son, employee, the metamorphosis grants a better job and upper social mobility to both Oscar and Furo in Africa. For all three characters the metamorphosis allows for the breaking of family bonds, of affective obligations, and allows them a temporary flight. Hage's character, on the contrary, from outsider becomes outlaw, thus excluding himself from society altogether.

Another paradigm that seems to be respected in these Kafka-esque stories is the one regarding the Oedipus complex that includes the sister, what Deleuze and Guattari call the schizo-Oedipus. Moreover, the two philosophers see *the sisters* as a machine or a machination that is opposed to the one of *the prostitutes*, as a series of constant presences in Kafka's texts[12].

KAFKA	**Gregor's Sister**: er wollte ihr dann anvertrauen, daß er die feste Absicht gehabt habe, sie auf das Konservatorium zu schicken, und daß er dies, wenn nicht das Unglück dazwischen gekommen wäre, vergangene Weihnachten – Weihnachten war doch wohl schon vorüber? – allen gesagt hätte, ohne sich um irgendwelche Widerreden zu kümmern. Nach dieser Erklärung würde die Schwester in Tränen der Rührung ausbrechen, und Gregor würde sich bis zu ihrer Achsel erheben und ihren Hals küssen, den sie, seitdem sie ins Geschäft ging, frei ohne Band oder Kragen trug (Kafka 1994: 186). He would confess to her that he'd had the firm intention of sending her to the Conservatory and that if the disaster had not disrupted his plans, he would have made a general announcement last Christmas – Christmas had passed now, hadn't it? – without letting himself be swayed by objections of any sort. After this declaration, his sister would be moved to the point of tears, and Gregor would raise himself to the height of her armpit and kiss her throat, which, now that she went to the office every day, she wore free of ribbon or collar (Kafka 2014: 101-102).

[11] Rawi Hage claims: "*Cockroach* is about displacement. It's also a reflection on people like me. We are not quite immigrants. We are not quite rooted in this culture. That's why this helplessness comes across in the book" (Donnelly 2008).

[12] "*The Trial* and *The Castle* multiply these women who in various ways reunite the qualities of sister, maid, and whore" (Deleuse & Guattari 1986: 65).

DANGOR	**The sister (Anna and Martin)**: Anna saw the quick emergence of the ancient photograph behind her eyes […] Martin much younger, Martin monstrous, Martin pained, Martin doubled up with agony, Martin naked, Martin remorseful, Martin bloated and huge, exploding in the air (2000: 21). **The psychiatrist:** Perhaps it was a mistake to accept you as my therapist. Funny profession, psychotherapy. A kind of prostitution, getting paid to listen (2000: 59). **The prostitutes**: The occasional prostitute, the cleanest on offer, I made certain of this, […] I had to reassure many a nervous young woman (2000: 47).
HAGE	**The sister**: 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. […] Let's play underground (2008: 6). **The psychiatrist:** Perhaps it is time to see my therapist again. […] I put my hand on her knee while she was sitting across from me (2008: 3). **The lover/prostitute**: I am in love with Shohreh. But I don't trust my emotions anymore (2008: 3).
BARRETT	**The sister**: 09.10 | Pls help RT. This is my missing bro Furo Wariboko in the pic. He left home Monday morn & no news of him since. pic.twitter.com/0J9xt5WaW. (2015: 79). **The Lover/prostitute**: Furo knew the reason Syreeta had picked him up on that second day of his awakening. […] She was tough enough to endure the moral itches and emotional blows of her fancy prostitution, her Tuesdays-only concubinage (2015: 253).

Gregor's wish to kiss his sister's unveiled neck has been read by Deleuze and Guattari as a schizo-Oedipus. Meanwhile, the father's intervention, throwing apples at Gregor and finally causing his death, is read as a re-oedipisation of family relations. In all three texts the male protagonists are representative of a certain masculine, if not machist drive, as opposed to their moral weakness, for they are liars and imposters, and as opposed to their being always hungry and very skinny, for they are broke, they live alone and hardly ever eat. They are sexually active and show a certain degree of misogyny. In all the texts, the sister, or a sister, is a most relevant presence. In both Hage's and Barrett's novels, the protagonists are very fond of their sisters. In Hage, there are very explicit undertones, alluding to a half innocent, half incestuous playfulness between brother and sister. However, the plot becomes more dramatic when the protagonist confesses to his therapist that he was not able to save his sister's life from a violent husband: when he confronted him with a gun in his hands, he was not able to shoot him.

In Montreal he has a lover, Shohreh, a Persian young woman, who shares with him the condition of being a migrant, gravitating around a small community of Middle Eastern men. In the end, when Shohreh is certain to have seen her former persecutor and rapist in Montreal, the protagonist shoots him, thus taking revenge for her and his own sister.

In Dangor's novel, Anna is the protagonist's white wife. Her mysterious sorrow depends on her having been molested by her own brother, Martin, who is affected by a psychosis that victimises even his own daughters. Here the incestuous relationship between brother and sister is explicit, but does not involve the protagonist himself.

In Barrett, the sister is a beloved presence. She immediately activates herself when her brother disappears, by posting a picture of him on Twitter and asking for help. In this case the introduction of Twitter's posts in the novel serves to update a Kafka-esque situation to our contemporary digital age and digital literature, thus providing the sister with agency and a prominent role in the narrative.

As far as prostitutes are concerned, sometimes they are explicit presences, sometimes the psychotherapist assumes a borderline, if not incestuous role, particularly in Hage and Dangor. In Hage and Barrett the beloved women, Shohreh and Syreeta, are ambiguously portrayed as potential prostitutes but they are also brotherly loved by the protagonists, who find shelter and protection (also food) from them. The Oedipal triangle is reproduced in all these novels, too, for some male characters intervene in order to stop or hinder the relationship between the protagonists and their lovers/prostitutes.

As far as the ending of the novels is concerned, apparently only one inherits Kafka's scatological ending, where the dead body of the insect is swept away like rubbish. In this respect, Dangor's novel is the closest to Kafka's text[13].

Of Oscar Kahn's corpse we know that "there wasn't much left of the body to bury. It was as if it had crumbled to dust" (Dangor 2000: 27). His brother "Malik gathered the claylike remains of his brother Omar into the stained and yellowed sheet in which Omar had died" (Dangor 2000: 63), he only found "This body, this blerry body, of which there remained only some matter, a powdery matter that crumbled at the lightest touch" (Dangor 2000: 65). And yet, instead of the body now a tree has appeared, a metamorphosis has been accomplished: "In what had once been the main bedroom, a tree had thrust up through the floor. Flowers sprouted in a profusion of colours from the dark, disinterred earth, green moss covered the walls" (Dangor 2000: 28).

Thus, half Kafka-esque, half Ovidian, Dangor's narrative "swerves" from its original model. Oscar's transformation into a tree, which inevitably provides a touch of magic realism or shamanism to the plot, is also a reference to an eastern fairy tale Omar used to tell, about a gardener, Majnoen, and a Princess, Leila, who fall in love, but their love is forbidden. They decide to flee together, but Leila is caught and Majnoen waits for her so long that he becomes a tree of the forest that was their meeting point. Similarly, Oscar is bed-ridden and waits for Anna who will not come back. Majnoen is also the name of a madness, a syndrome: "An insanity that strikes those who dare to stray from their 'life's station'" (Dangor 2000: 31).

Majnoen is another name for Kafka's curse. After Oscar's death, his psychiatrist says that he suffered from

[13] "In Oscar's shocking metamorphosis there is a nod to Kafka – and also an echo of an old Arabian fairy tale about a poor gardener who fell in love with a princess, and paid for his temerity much as Oscar does. But his symptoms are normal. In South Africa, what was laughably called 'reality' was always effortlessly stranger than fairy tales. And every bit as odd as Kafka" (Hope 1999).

> anxiety and severe paranoia. Got worse when his wife left him. Thought he was degenerating. Returning to vegetable matter. No, it was not a case of a man thinking he was a carrot. He was wasting away. Refused to eat, or could not eat, though doctors could find nothing physically wrong with him, except for some peculiar problem with his breathing (Dangor 2000: 209).

Both Omar/Oscar's father and grandfather had suicidal drives and both died under strange circumstances. Yet, the police are questioning Amina Mandelstam, the psychiatrist, because strangely enough all the male figures who come across her die mysteriously.

Thus, in terms of genre, Dangor's novel can be considered a rewriting of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; a magical realist tale; a medical case of Alzheimer's disease and lungs disease (an echo of Kafka/Samsa's lungs weakness), dementia or severe psychosis; a crime fiction with a seductive psychiatrist, probably a serial killer under cover.

In Rawi Hage's case, the protagonist is a potential suicide and therefore he is treated in a psychiatric clinic. He is an impoverished migrant with no roots, a petty criminal, both a drugs addict and a thief, who finds a job as a waiter in a Persian restaurant, but in the end kills a man who comes from the turbulent past history of the Middle East, a history of violence, civil wars, dictatorships that ends up chasing these migrants even in their host land. Thus, in the final pages of the novel he turns into a killer, an outlaw. His exit from the scene is described as a surreal withdrawal of a cockroach in the sewage:

> Then I crawled and swam above the water, and when I saw a leaf carried along by the stream of soap and water as if it were a gondola in Venice, I climbed onto it and shook like a dancing gypsy, and I steered it with my glittering wings towards the underground (Hage 2008: 305).

Here, Hage's character too seems to become rubbish among rubbish, for ever excluded from the humanity that has never allowed him real access, hospitality, acknowledgment of his presence and needs. No matter if we believe that the killing is real or only hallucinatory or imagined, as a projection of his wish for action and revenge, with no real capacity to do so, the plot acquires a twist towards a crime fiction with Gothic elements.

Igoni Barrett opts for an ending that foresees a reconciliation between his protagonist and his family, facilitated by the fictional writer, who substitutes the psychiatrist here ("as his confessor, I made no judgements, I only listened to absolve", 2015: 260). Named Igoni, too, he is portrayed as a person undergoing a gender transition from man into a woman. The writer, like a detective, has studied the Twitter-posts in order to see if he could discover anything about the man he had met in a café in a big Mall of Lagos. Clearly, he connects the picture of the black man with Furo's new identity and organises the encounter between him and his family. Yet, the novel ends in the same way as it begins, and in the same way as Kafka's short story begins, with the mother knocking on the son's door. And we are not sure whether he will open the door onto his changed status[14].

[14] "Barrett says the family elements were crucial: he rereads *The Metamorphosis* every year, and is fascinated

The ending of the novel, however, also involves his by now ex-fiancé. Syreeta has become pregnant. In the end she is about to obtain what she wanted, a white child who could give her access to "mixed-race baby club" (Barrett 2015: 253), for she is actually befriended to a circle of Lagos women who have married white Europeans and have mulatto children. Furo knows, however, that he is a black man and their child would be a black Nigerian. He imposes an abortion to Syreeta, and thus here, too, the theme of biopolitics and necropolitics meet, for the foetus is disposed of, like rubbish, because of its blackness.

In Hage's novel, too, Shohreh confesses that she had an abortion. In this foreign land, when she arrived in Quebec, she was alone and her only friend was another migrant like her, an acquaintance of her uncle, a victim of the regime's persecutions. Both these traumatised characters hang on each other, yet none of them is really able to sustain and support the other. Now, she only remembers her loneliness at the clinic (Hage 2009: 191-192). Her own abortion is an attempt at disposing of history, not too differently from Syreeta, whose obsession with whiteness is but a legacy of colonial history.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that these are examples of how Kafka's mythologems are precisely the "storied matter" that has been picked up, in bits and pieces, and morsels, that has been collected, treasured and transformed by contemporary Anglophone writers. Particularly, Kafka's insect has become the emblem of a condition of absolute otherness[15], and the metamorphosis has become a line of flight and a stratagem to survive racism. More than one critic has claimed how "In his use of animals as protagonists, Kafka finds the opportunity to explore the tension between human and non-human, the same tension that exists between self and other" (Powell 2008: 130). Powell insists: "By playing off this tension between human and non-human, between what is 'the self' and what is 'not the self', Kafka is able to explore the ontology of otherness that clarifies the space between self and other" (2008: 131). Powell sees the "ontology of otherness" in Kafka's adherence to the grotesque genre.

Another critic, Richard Barney, contemplates "What, then, is the link between colonialism and animals?" and suggests

> I come close to the view of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that in this story, as in much of Kafka's work, Red Peter embodies a radical critique of Western subjectivity, in the form of what they call an "absolute deterritorialization of the cogito". Kafka's many stories involving human characters' transformation into or intimate affiliation with animals, they argue, constitute his aim to dismantle completely – to deterritorialize, to level the psychic field, as it were – what seemed to him the prison-house of rationalist Western identity at least since the philosophy of Descartes (2004: 19).

Thus, not only the cockroach, but also Red Peter, the monkey, is yet another humanised animal, with his own rational logic and anti-colonial or even de-colonial attitude. But

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by the way Gregor 'allowed his family to break him'. Barrett sought to invert this dynamic, creating instead a family in which love and forgiveness were paramount" (Carroll 2016).

[15] David Cronenberg sees Gregor Samsa's condition as emblem of a sudden disability comparable, for instance, to sudden ageing (Cronenberg 2014: 9).

in Kafka's shorter proses there is also a dog ("Investigations of a Dog" 1922), a sort of philosopher, who is content to eat crumbs falling from the table (Ulrich 2018: 211-226). Similarly, Hage's character launches himself on an invective against white Canadians, who only leave crumbs to the migrants:

> Talking about crumbs, a nice sandwich would do me fine, I thought. Perhaps I could go to a restaurant nearby, enter it, and sweep up the little pieces of bread and other leftovers on the tablecloth, and then follow the trail of crumbs to the counter next to the kitchen and help myself to some of the warmth released from the toaster. But I know how hard it is to steal food in restaurants (Hage 2009: 56).

The reference to crumbs, that occurs around ten times all through the novel, might be a biblical quotation of the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16: 20-23) but this sharing of bread as in Eucharist is actually negated to migrants, and what characterises the protagonist's mood is an on-going *j'accuse* from the margins and on behalf of the marginalised. "Like many of Kafka's characters, Hage's protagonist gives us a minority or marginal perspective on society" (Dahab 2018: 215).

All the three texts here analysed practice a policy that has to do with *l'écart*. They eliminate and discard what is not needed, they keep something of Kafka's textuality. They swerve; they diverge, keep a distance from the original, thus creating a space for the dialogic reflexivity François Jullien speaks about (Jullien 2012: 7). An open space between cultures, languages and even cultural traditions. Here, in this space, the mythologem of modernist and surrealist narrative, Kafka's metamorphic insect, germinates in a variety of new ways, but always as an answer to racism, migration, and asymmetrical power relations. It is of course extremely relevant that all these texts are from both African and Middle Eastern writers, all the Kafka-esque characters have a dark complexion or "play white"[16]. They find themselves stigmatised, excluded, marginalised in big urban environments of our contemporary world: Johannesburg, Montreal, Lagos. "Dirty Arabs like you" (Hage 2008: 15) is one definition attached onto Hage's character, while he defines himself as follows "But it is I! I, and the likes of me, who will be eating nature's refuse under dying trees" (2008: 21). Similarly, Omar describes himself as follows: "he was a mixture, Javanese and Dutch and Indian and God knows what else […] he was a lovely hybrid […] all brown, bread and honey!" (Dangor 2000: 15); "he is not one of us", claim the white relatives of his white wife" (2000: 15). To Furo, a food street seller asks: "Abeg, no vex, but you be albino?", "I'm not an albino", Furo answers (Barrett 2015: 31). He is also described as a white man "oyibo", speaking Nigerian, or with a true Nigerian accent. Significantly, Hanif Kureishi claims that Kafka is a "philosopher of the abject, of humiliation, degradation and death-in-life" (2015: 11) and in all three texts, the protagonist turns into a racialised subject.

[16] "Coloured people under apartheid who were light enough to 'pass for white' and did so, for obvious reasons of social and material advantage" (Jacobs 2016: 90).

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