

Cockroaches and
snowmen: liminal
spaces as liberating
mechanisms in hage
and atwo...



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Although optimism does not lie on the surface of Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the texts are existential discussions of the validity associated with the 'hope for humanity'. Hage's unnamed narrator, a suicidal immigrant, is a psychoanalytic experiment left to wander a convoluted capitalist world, while Atwood's *Snowman/Jimmy* is a man experiencing a severe identity crisis in a post-apocalyptic society that is working to engineer a new race of homo sapiens. Both protagonists adopt non-human attributes in attempts to endure the consumer driven commonalities; the unnamed immigrant undergoes an ambiguous transformation into a cockroach and Jimmy is stripped of civility as a sole survivor of a virus and assumes the role of 'Abominable Snowman'. The characters exist in marginal spaces that are outside of the capitalist system that operate their worlds as a means to attain individuality. They are classless, free-flowing signifiers that survive liminally in concealment from capitalism. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is a political lens through which the characters can be examined to segregate and distinguish their liminal statuses as a mechanism to escape corporate culture and human immorality. Foucault constructs and deconstructs simultaneously, a system of power through discipline that concentrates on physical bodies and individuality. Foucault's theory on disciplinary spaces resonates with the political systems and consumer models that pervade Atwood and Hage's texts. Liminality, however, for the protagonists functions as a space that exists outside societal boundaries and behavioral norms; it is through these spaces that the liminals inhabit, that liberation is a possibility. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is a 1975 interrogation of the social and theoretical mechanisms behind the massive changes that occurred in <https://assignbuster.com/cockroaches-and-snowmen-liminal-spaces-as-liberating-mechanisms-in-hage-and-atwood/>

western penal systems during the modern age. It's a profile of Foucault's definition of discipline—discipline concerned with the smallest and most precise aspects of a person's body—, which he suggests developed a new economy and politics for bodies. His theory is useful in that it is applicable to the capitalist systems that frame both texts and aids in liminal characterization in opposition to these consumer models. Foucault's section on discipline begins with the emergence of the 'new soldier': "...the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit..."(Foucault 139)The malleability of the soldier can be applied to that of the consumer, which in mass numbers, populate the settings of both novels. Nameless, mundane and 'docile', the bodies of the populations exist only to maintain plurality and retain profits. However, the liminal characterizations of Jimmy and Hage's narrator are discernible in their conscious opposition to the 'docile soldier'. The sometimes cockroach claims "...for me, everything was about defying the oppressive power in the world that I can neither participate in nor control."(Hage 5) His resistance comprises of his consciousness of the 'oppressive power' and in his cognition of exclusion from that oppression. The narrator's marginalized existence is to the extent that he lacks both authorities over himself and that which is supposed to govern him. His social presence is so minimal that his own name is never revealed throughout his entire psychological adventure.

In Jesse Hutchison's essay Immigration and Liminality in Rawi Hage's

Cockroach, liminality is discussed in relation to 'the immigrant' and the <https://assignbuster.com/cockroaches-and-snowmen-liminal-spaces-as-liberating-mechanisms-in-hage-and-atwood/>

difficulties associated in assimilating one's culture. Hutchison writes " In order to " become a good citizen" he must transform into one. As a result, the narrator is often wavering between retaining his cultural identity and transforming in order to survive."(Hutchison 8) There are layers of liminality that Hages narrator travels: his struggle between foreign body and Canadian citizen, and moral human being and filthy, thieving cockroach. In both states of in-between, he lives as an outlier to the outside world. Jimmy, or rather, Snowman, participates in a post-apocalyptic society that relies on bioengineering, genetic modification and corporations as substitutions for a system of government. His liminality is defined by the inability to release his life before the plague and his resistance to conform to the post-plague world. He is described as "...existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward-pointing footprints." (Atwood 7-8)

Snowman is himself a remnant of another time in history, so it is fitting that he has an anachronistic name that holds no meaning in the present. Also appropriate is the modifier " Abominable," since Snowman is presumably the only member of the human species who has survived catastrophe. Snowman also does not fit in accordance to the ' docile bodies' that Foucault explained, he does not encompass the compatibility with disciplinary spaces. Foucault's concept of power as a product of discipline relies on social systems that thrive on science and numeric thinking. Snowman, however, in contention to Foucault's theory and Crake's genius, excels in the arts and humanities. His liminal existence also borders on this binary, that of the struggle between numeric thinking and lingual (parole) cognition. Atwood characterizes

Snowman as " a castaway of sorts. He could make lists. It could give his life
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some structure. But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who'll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions: he'll have no future reader, because the Crakers can't read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past.(Atwood 41)Snowman's attachment to words and language is not necessary for the new society, which further exiles him from the norm. He lives on the threshold between the past and futuristic present, which is amplified by Atwood's similar narrative style, one in which the plot progresses through a composition of memories and present procession. Foucault, in addition the changing pliability of modern soldiers, or consumers, depicts the importance of the caste system to the function of disciplinary spaces. He explains, "...the rank: the place one occupies in a classification, the point at which a line and a column intersect...Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations."(Foucault 150-51)Foucault's definition of rank is consistent with capitalism, since the values are shared: consumers are classed under wealth and economic participation. The consumer's individual body is always changing in order to meet market standards, causing the society to become cyclical in advertising, catering, manufacturing and purchasing. Rank, however, is a signifier that does not apply to the protagonists. Instead, Hage's narrator participates in the rank of the underground: " The underground, my friend, is a world of its own. Other humans gaze at the sky, but I say unto you, the only way through the world is to pass through the underground."(Hage 24)

The narrator's liminality extends to his ' passing' in the underground, which
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is a world of its own and functions outside of the capitalist norm. Hutchison also comments on the classification of the narrator in regards to the 'rank' of immigrants in Canada: "In other words, then, the role of the immigrant is constructed as being something other than the role that is constructed for the dominant group. This in itself makes sense, for if the manufactured national unity of Canada is based on a "mosaic concept", then there should still be "particular others" insofar as the others absorb (and, consequently assimilate) the deeply held assumptions about the immigrant." (Hutchison 9) Hutchison distinguishes the role of immigrant as one outside of the dominant cultural group. This indicates a ranking through comparison, a comparison that the narrator himself is aware of when he complains of fellow immigrants: he mockingly calls them "aristocrats" but equates them to "colonial servants, gardeners, and sell-out soldiers for invading empires". (Hage 159) Foucault's ranks can also be applied to the "void" that the narrator describes in relation to basic existence: "I am at the bottom of the scale. But I still exist. I look society in the face and say: I am here, I exist. There is existence and there is the void; you are either a one or a zero. Once I was curious about the void. If I had died on that tree branch in the park, I would have experienced the other option... The void cannot be experienced. The void should mean perishing absolutely without any consciousness of it. It is either a perpetual existence or nothingness, my friend." (Hage 122) The narrator is conscious of his 'bottom of the scale' rank and the liminal conundrum of his existence. His liminality now extends to a man that exists on the threshold of life and death, a space similar to that of a purgatory; his life begins to take the shape of a paradox in which his disgust distances him from consumerism, even though his deepest, most human desire is to

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belong. Both novels adopt a certain political flavor in the structures of government, or lack of governing forces. Foucault theorizes on political ideologies in disciplinary systems, since his belief is that power should not be connoted negatively, but rather progressively. The function of discipline in political systems is to individualize populations for corporeal control.

Foucault describes, " politics, as a technique of internal peace and order, sought to implement the mechanism of the perfect army, or the disciplined mass, of the docile, useful troop..."(Foucault 173) Foucault neatly packages the definition and mission of a successful political system, however, Atwood provides a pessimistic juxtaposition to the ideology:" Anyway, maybe there weren't any solutions. Human society, corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain. It was like a giant slug eating its way relentlessly through all the other bio forms on the planet, grinding up life on earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be-obsolete plastic junk.(Atwood 243)This passage occurs when Snowman converses with then girlfriend, Amanda Payne and her progressively thinking friends, a significant amount of time before the catastrophe. Jimmy personifies the cyclical nature of human destruction to that of a slug, consuming and defecating consumer culture. Snowman's binary is present even when he was just Jimmy, for he is conscious of the immoral part of his society, one that in the future he will resent but also wish to connect with. Foucault returns again to ideology and inserts the individual to the system, when he theorizes, " the individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ' ideological' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ' discipline'."(Foucault <https://assignbuster.com/cockroaches-and-snowmen-liminal-spaces-as-liberating-mechanisms-in-hage-and-atwood/>

207) Hage's narrator can be considered a "fictitious atom" when he confronts the albino, life-size cockroach: "The world ended for you a long time ago. You never participated in it. Look at you, always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped in everything you do." (Hage 201) The albino cockroach, most likely a hallucination, reiterates the narrator's liminal demise to himself. Hage's narrator is a fabrication of discipline, but not an active participant; he cannot participate culturally, politically or economically in his society, however, his liminal position is preferable. Foucault's theory pans out finally to the function of The Panopticon, which he defines as follows: "The Panopticon, on the other hand, has a role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, not for the immediate salvation of a threatened society: its aim is to strengthen the social forces—to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply." (Foucault 221) The panopticon, although a method for enclosure and a source of prison architecture, is a contemporary, post-modern distinction of capitalist culture. Foucault developed a system in which visibility is a trap, by means of advertising, consumer markets and behavioral norms as forms of measurement in mass populations. The protagonists, however, due to their liminal positions, escape the 'visibility' of the panopticon, and perhaps escape the cyclical clutches of capitalism. Hage's narrator, though not comforted by it, labels himself a servant: "Nothing corporeal, nothing natural, should emanate from a servant. A servant should be visible but undetectable, efficient but unnoticeable, nourishing but malnourished. A servant is to be seen, always, in black and white." (Hage 85) The narrator makes reference to his visibility <https://assignbuster.com/cockroaches-and-snowmen-liminal-spaces-as-liberating-mechanisms-in-hage-and-atwood/>

in a way that is compatible with the panopticon's function of visibility, except, it is invisibility that the narrator adopts. Similarly, Atwood's Snowman/Jimmy deconstructs his social forces with disappointing results: "Some exotic splices: in a few years they will be overwhelmed. Or else they will spread, make inroads, choke out the native plants. Who can tell which? The whole world is now one vast uncontrolled experiment - the way it always was, Crake would have said - and the doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate. "(Atwood 228) Snowman/Jimmy's mental struggle with his society translates to his physical and emotional understanding as well. The efficiency and economy that the panopticon and capitalism narrate fail to organize a life for Snowman/Jimmy, a man who relies on his balance between his attachment to the past and his fear of accepting his new bio-engineered world. Liminality does not promise a concrete resulting position for one who experiences a cognitive or physical binary. Hage and Atwood leave their characters in a state of ambiguity, although their finality as complete and independent outliers in their societies is for certain. Liminality for these characters offered temporary escapism from the imbalances of the immoral tendencies of humanity, but not necessarily happiness. Foucault's theory on disciplinary spaces resonates with the political systems and consumer models that pervade Atwood and Hage's texts. Liminality, however, for the protagonists functions as a space that exists outside societal boundaries and behavioral norms; it is through these spaces that the liminals inhabit, that liberation is a possibility. Works Cited Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake: A Novel*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009. Print. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print. Hage, Rawi. *Cockroach*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2008. Print. Hutchison, Jesse. "<https://assignbuster.com/cockroaches-and-snowmen-liminal-spaces-as-liberating-mechanisms-in-hage-and-atwood/>

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