

Research Paper:

A Proposal for the Research Paper is due March 16 (2:30pm): (10%)

The proposal for the research paper is to be approximately two pages. It is to include a preliminary thesis, outline of the main arguments, and Works Cited.

A Research Paper is to be submitted by April 11 (2:30pm): (35%)

The research paper is to be approximately 3200 words. The research paper is to draw on the themes of the course, engaging with the assigned texts and class discussions. Students are also encouraged to draw on their interests and major areas of study, relating these to the course themes.

A research paper means that students must use the York University Library to research scholarly or refereed articles or books for the project; internet sources will not be accepted. Time will be allocated in class for workshops on how to use the York University Library for research.

All assignments are to follow MLA format (8th edition) for intext citations and Works Cited:

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html).

All assignments are to be submitted through the course eClass site as a Word document, double-spaced, and with file name: LastnameFirstnameDate.

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HUMA 4228

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“The Others of animals”: Representations and Uses of Insects in Human Culture

In analyzing the roles that insects hold and play in human culture, especially their symbolic functions within narratives, it becomes clear that insects simultaneously evoke both disgust (Kosonen 90) and fascination (Collignon 2), for a variety of sociopsychological reasons. Jake Kosek writes that “If animals are human Others, insects are the Others of animals, intimately involved in our lives but much maligned” (653). Insects are the Others of Others, viewed as different and alien, and thus, also used to represent difference and alienation. Insects and humans share a complex relationship, with each group intimately and inextricably impacting the other. Thus, moving forward, it would be beneficial to all if the conscious decision is made to, in spite of societal norms or psychological misgivings, recognize how significant insects are to the processes of ecology, biology, sociology, philosophy, and poetics, and thus prioritize respecting, protecting, and conserving them. Using the framework of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s idea of embracing “contaminated diversities” (33) and creating “livable collaborations” (28), this paper explores how insects are Othered by human beings due to perceived differences, contributing to dismissal of one of the most important parts of our ecology, and argues that there is a need for more understanding and recognition of our shared interests, especially in the era of climate change and environmental degradation.

To begin with, a survey of entomological literature shows that insects mainly appear in stories and poetry through the medium of metaphor. Insects, like most other so-called “nonhuman” and “natural” elements, are rarely depicted simply and straightforwardly, but rather are utilized to represent particular themes pertaining to human lives. For example, in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, arguably the most popular and obvious example of the insect-as-metaphor, the main character, a salesman named Gregor, one day wakes up as a beetle and is stuck that way forever, much to the confusion and chagrin of those around him. Naama Harel notes that this story has been received as an allegory on “petit bourgeois mores,” capitalism, alienation, “the Oedipus complex,” “Jewish assimilation into European society,” “empathy and solidarity,” “homosexuality,” illness, and familial conflict (22). Insects can clearly elicit a wide range of reactions, and be read in a variety of ways. In Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, flies and cockroaches, at different points, join Pi and Richard Parker on the lifeboat after their ship goes down. The insects act as comic symbols of weakness, precarity, and death, and are notably differentiated from all the other animals Pi encounters, and certainly from Pi himself. The flies, which Pi guesses could be “native” to the lifeboat or could have come from another animal on the ship, “didn’t last long; they all disappeared within two days.” They are eaten by the hyena, “swept out to sea,” or “die[] of old age” (147). Meanwhile the cockroaches, in a moment of absurdity, kill themselves by jumping out into sea: “The last of the foreign life forms was abandoning ship” (206). Both insect groups appear out of nowhere, and are unexpected to Pi, who is usually so deeply attuned to the needs and behaviours of animals. He immediately casts them as Other in his story, and the flies and cockroaches, as if dutifully playing the part, leave the narrative as soon as they are finished suggesting what hopeless, frightening conditions Pi faces. In both of these narratives, therefore, insects come to represent the worries and concerns of

humanity, while simultaneously maintaining material distance and distinction from human beings. The following paragraphs explain why this split occurs.

Insects are numerous and they are everywhere; they “are the first nonhuman, nondomestic animals most humans encounter” (Brown, XVI). Yet, their representations primarily take place in the marginal spaces of life. What is it about the insect that provokes such reactions in human beings? And what is it about human beings that moves us to view insects in this way? It ultimately seems to be due to the twin influences of disgust and fascination, which overlap and intertwine in many ways. Tuija Saesma and Urho Tulonen define disgust as such: “Disgust is not only a primal gut feeling; it is also a complex and even paradoxical affect that also incorporates desire or fascination towards disgusting objects. The objects of our disgust simultaneously inflict rejection and capture our attention” (75). Fabienne Collignon meanwhile refers to the unique and particular fascination evoked by insects as “the Insectile”, and she defines this concept as such: “that which prompts a rethinking of the so-called human subject’s enunciation, figured and unfigured through the phenomenon of fascination” (2). Though an external object—insects, for the purposes of this paper—initially triggers disgust and fascination in the viewer, both of these reactions suggest so much more about the individual actually experiencing these emotions. Insects provoke disgust and fascination within human beings for a variety of reasons, and this subsequently influences how insects are both conceptualized and represented in mediums such as literature and common discourses.

To begin with, one possible reason for disgust and fascination could be that insects are simply just very different to human beings in both appearance and behaviour. Whereas in many animals, we can see (perhaps sometimes in harmfully anthropomorphizing ways) similarities we recognize in ourselves like appendages (such as four limbs separate from the body, an obvious

face) and behaviours (such as the ways in which bodies contort to move, walk, run, swim), “the Others of animals” both look and behave notably differently. Mary Berenbaum explains how since even the exoskeleton of insects are on the outside, they present “a basic body plan that’s inside out and upside down from a human perspective, and lifestyles and abilities that often defy the imagination” (4). Insects simply appear alien and strange to human beings, which shocks and intrigues us. They have too many arms, or too many eyes, or new appendages altogether, like antennae and wings (which, unlike bat or bird wings, are separate from arms and legs), that they utilize to experience the world, to sense and fly around and scuttle in movements unique to them. We cannot imagine what such sensations might feel like, and so find ourselves distanced, but we can look upon them with awe. Furthermore, Berenbaum posits that, “As things that go bump in the night, insects... evoke frightening dark, weird, and creepy sensations. Their associations with decay and putrefaction (since biblical times) contributes to the power of insect images in eliciting dark feelings of mortality” (6). Insects are often found in darkness, closed spaces, and the undergrowth; the inverse of the well-lit, open places humans beings occupy. They are closely involved with processes of death, subsequently also gaining a reputation as vectors for various diseases. The unknown, disease, and death, due to the biological threats they suggest, provoke disgust as a “human defense mechanism” (Kosonen 92), encouraging us to stay away from these situations. And so we do, turning to represent the strangeness of it all in literature and the arts instead. Human beings extract all the aforementioned tendencies of insects, from the odd, alien bodies, to the unique abilities, to the insular habitats, to the roles they play in death, and apply them symbolically to our stories in order to depict ideas such as strangeness, alienation, isolation, and decay.

All that being said, at the same time, there are also insect behaviours that are recognizable and familiar to human beings, yet still encased in a feeling of strangeness and the uncanny. Insects are living beings, after all, who work, eat, sleep, procreate, create waste, and live according to rules like human beings. They just do it differently, with different mechanisms. Eric Brown, Berenbaum, and Charlotte Sleigh all note how insects have spread across the globe in a manner that is reminiscent of human colonization. Brown describes how “Bees and ant colonies have over the centuries been imagined as ideal commonwealths—models, indeed, for human colonization, especially in the New World” (XIV). Berenbaum meanwhile asserts that “Insects are the only organisms that have colonized the planet to the extent that we humans have; they live wherever we live, even hitching a ride on our bodies on occasion to do so” (4). Finally, Sleigh suggests that insects “practice[] agriculture...nurse[] their young and perform[] marvellous feats of architecture...they also [go] to war and [take] slaves” (284). These are all complex activities that human beings consider themselves unique and even intelligent for doing. Sleigh asserts that the key difference between us and insects is that insects operate out of “instinct” rather than intellect (284). To imagine that there are creatures out there that behave in ways familiar to us, but in ways, and for reasons that are unfamiliar to us, heightens that sense of disgust and fascination, and thus shows how perfectly insects can be considered our Others. Together, human beings and insects engage in what Tsing refers to as “world-making”: “World-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process these projects alter our planet” (21-22). We each go about our own ways, yet find ourselves influenced by the other all the same by virtue of the fact that we share the same space.

With all this in mind, it becomes clear how Kafka and Martel use beetles and flies and cockroaches in their respective stories; we see what these insects come to represent. Kafka’s

usage of a beetle in particular in his narrative, over other animals, and even other insects (like one that could fly away, for instance) perfectly encapsulates the concepts of feeling confined and isolated from the demands of society at large. Readers look at Gregor's plight with the same disgust and fascination they look at insects with in real life, and subsequently intimately recognize the themes Kafka wishes to highlight. Collignon's work touches on this; partially quoting Lacan, she writes, "the subject-to-be, passing through the mirror stage, 'hangs completely on the unity of another ego,' whose perfect mechanism fascinates. Yet fascination concurrently has the potential to rend the I apart and is bound up with a dreamy terror, being rooted to the spot" (128). The reader becomes entangled in the disgust and fascination invoked by Gregor's situation, and understands the shocking and horrifying ways in which reality reflects art. Martel's featuring of flies and cockroaches in his narrative, meanwhile functions in a similar way. Although less central to the story, the flies and cockroaches Pi encounters cement the horrors of the situation he finds himself in. Asserted to be non-"native" and "foreign" from the start, they die off in ways that are wholly unique to their size and shape—being eaten by hyenas and fish, drowning within seconds of hitting the water, dying after two days of exposure and no food. But all of these threats are still also possibilities for Pi—he can be attacked by Richard Parker, which he must be diligent about, and he can drown or waste away at sea. *Life of Pi*, like *The Metamorphosis*, therefore also uses the familiar yet unfamiliar ways of insects to represent human issues and concerns. Ultimately, it appears that insects occupy the position they do in our collective consciousness because they are so utterly unlike us in looks, behaviours, and motivations, yet also hauntingly familiar and recognizable. Insects are our Other.

There are a variety of ways in which insects deeply embody what it means to be Other. Some of their distinctions from human beings has been explored, but insects are also used

symbolically to Otherize human beings, for instance. Crucially, going back to the usage of insects as metaphors, some human beings ostracize other human beings by comparing them to insects, thus aligning them with the perceived negative perceptions of insects. Christopher Hollingsworth provides a survey of various historical propaganda that labels certain groups of people as particular insects, for cruel and insidious political purposes up to and including genocide. For example, a U.S. Colonel in 1864, and a Nazi governor in 1941 have both been documented as referring to those they subjugated, a Cheyenne community and the Jewish people, respectively, as lice (264). Lice are widely considered to be pests, deeply personal nuisances that are indicators of “[un]cleanliness” (264), and as such, creatures that must be eradicated. Thus, both the forces of U.S. colonialism and German Naziism not only dehumanized their victims by identifying them as insects (266), but used the particular qualities of lice to encourage specific ideas about Cheyenne people or Jewish people in the heads of their audiences. During the Rwandan genocide, “the majority Hutus regularly referred to Tutsis as cockroaches” (Miller qtd. in Hollingsworth 268). Similarly, “Mexican immigrants are [also] frequently described as cockroaches” (Hollingsworth 272). Cockroaches are also seen as pests by many people. They are viewed as unwelcome guests in an individual’s home, which need to be exterminated or sent away. Those who liken the Tutsi people or Mexican immigrants to cockroaches want to create the insidious connection between the insects and the people, thus promoting cruel treatment of the people. All of this follows Heidi Kosenen’s point that “disgust [is] use[d] in the construction and preservation of the ways societies, nation-state, and cultures are ordered and hierarchized” (92). The ideas of disgust and fascination typically felt towards insects are appropriated and directed towards other human beings. And the power of the insect-as-metaphor means these attempts are usually horrifyingly effective. Colonialism, Naziism, the Rwandan genocide, and

anti-immigrant sentiment have been or are quite successful in deeming Indigenous people, Jewish people (and gay people, Romani people, and communists), Tutsis, and Mexican immigrants as lesser than, deserving of systemic oppression and even annihilation. The propaganda likening these groups to insects, which generally possess a lowly position in the minds of most people, certainly contributed in some way towards these atrocities. Thus, the Otherness that insects represent, used to demonstrate marginal existences in literature, can also be exploited and utilized for politically nefarious purposes in real life.

Despite all of the various ways in which human beings have attempted to distance themselves from insects in literature and in society, for all the various reasons, it is undeniable that our lives also cannot be the way that they are without insects. Not only do insects carry out vital functions that support and preserve our environments, but their doing so is deeply linked to our own behaviours and actions. For example, Kosek goes over the many ways in which honeybees have been utilized by human beings, such that the needs, wants, and activities of both groups have become intimately entangled with the other, developing concurrently. Bees not only have been induced to produce excessive honey and beeswax that benefit human creations, but they have also been used for centuries in military endeavours (654), encouraging specific ideas about what it means to swarm, to fight, to be violent, to be victorious. Brown, meanwhile, details how insects are utilized by human beings as to produce ink, dye, honey, and silk, all of which often become commodities and thus enter our systems of commerce (XVI). Furthermore, external of the direct influence of humanity, if that is even possible, insects of course contribute to the maintenance of the eco-system, aiding in processes of both life (e.g., pollination), death (e.g., decomposition), and everything in between (e.g., as sustenance). In spite of how insects are perceived of and depicted within literature and popular culture, their roles within our lives are

clearly major and significant. And so, going back to Tsing's idea of world-making, it becomes clear just how, even as we each pursue our own specific interests, each species is deeply dependent upon others: "In the process, each organism changes everyone's world. Bacteria made our oxygen atmosphere, and plants help maintain it. Plants live on land because fungi made soil by digesting rocks. As these examples suggest, world-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species" (22). Human beings are the one species that have the ability to be truly cognizant of this. Perhaps the disgust and fascination discussed earlier can be grasped and capitalized upon. The inherent intrigue that draws us towards insects can, if approached thoughtfully so that it does not degrade into the typical dismissal and avoidance, be used to promote better, protective insect-human relationships. Tsing asserts "that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly and humbling" (33). The initial reactions we have towards insects does not have to negate the fact that we should accept responsibility for and take care of insects.

In the era of rapid and intense climate change and environment degradation, the manner in which insects are currently perceived and treated must be put aside. This is a time of precarity, and precarity necessitates urgent action. Tsing writes, "The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others...In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent" (29). Insects need our intentional help. Writing in 2017, Camila Leandro, Pierre Jay-Robert, and Alan Vergnes reveal that only 123 insect species are specifically protected, of the 105,016 species found throughout Europe; this is only 0.12 % (1). More recent scholarship on the matter, from 2023, indicates that approximately 76% of insect species are not adequately covered by or represented in protected areas worldwide. (Chowdhury et al., 2). Both papers note that our dismissive treatment of insects contribute to these realities. Whereas mammals like rhinos and

polar bears receive lots of attention from the public for being endangered, insects are typically left by the wayside when it comes to conservation efforts. The more attractive and alluring insects, such as butterflies, do receive some attention. (This is one last way in which insects exemplify the state of being Other; this time the Othering occurring within insect species themselves, by human beings.) Leandro, Jay-Robert, and Vergnes note that “In invertebrates, aesthetic value has been shown to give leverage for research and conservation.” Insects with familiar names also fare better in receiving more protection (1). Humanity’s particularities when it comes to understanding insects therefore adversely affects how we approach protection and conservation. Though we see insects as different from us, and classify them as Other, it is necessary to try a more patient, thoughtful, and critical approach to understanding the roles that insects play, and the resources that they require, as this would mutually benefit all.

The perception and treatment of insects in literature and in society has historically been complex and rich, reflecting, as our Others, numerous different human concerns, fears, and anxieties; ranging from the literary and speculative, to the political and harmful. Insects, routinely pushed to the peripheries of human interests, despite the major role they play in every aspect of our ecologies and our societies, deserve our attention and care as all of our lives move more and more towards precarity. We desperately need to embrace “diverse contaminations” (Tsing 33), move beyond harmful stereotypes, and recognize the beauty and power of living collaboratively (28); of accepting differences and working together so that we, and future generations after us, may all live to see the next day—whether that be in wide, open fields and rooms, or in the dark, rotting undergrowth.

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Thank you for an outstanding paper. You have taken the line from Kosek's paper, that "insects are the other of animals," and run with it to explore in rich and imaginative ways the complex places of insects in human lives. Your research of your subject matter is exceptional, enabling you to relate this topic to texts and concepts explored within the course, from Tsing's notions of world making, contamination and precarity to Kafka's effective use of insect poetics. I especially appreciated how you analyze the place of insects in the *Life of Pi*. You also go beyond course materials in fascinating ways. It is an excellent paper.

I will submit the paper for an essay prize in Humanities.

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