'Black holes in the fabric of the nation': Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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'Black holes in the fabric of the nation': Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

This article explores the representation of refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), a novel which has been widely celebrated for its response to the refugee crisis of its contemporary moment. In a distinct echo of Salman Rushdie's claim, thirty-five years earlier, that it 'may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated', Hamid's novel similarly claims that 'we are all migrants through time.' Moreover, like Rushdie's fiction, Hamid's novel incorporates elements of magical realism: its protagonists escape their unnamed war-torn city through a 'door' that instantaneously transports them to Mykonos, and they subsequently travel through other such 'doors' to London and California. Their story is interspersed with a series of vignettes in which other migrants also find themselves magically transported across national borders. As well as considering the ways in which Hamid's novel seeks to humanise refugees, this article considers the novel's evocation of a world in which human beings – like capital, images, and (mis)information – have gained access to largely ungovernable networks of instantaneous travel across vast distances. It argues that Hamid's novel is not just 'about' refugees but also constitutes a reflection on how they and their journeys are represented and mediated by actually-existing technologies.

Keywords: *Exit West*; Hamid, Mohsin; refugees; refugee crisis; migration

Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel marks an early and particularly prominent literary response to sharp increases in the numbers of displaced people during the second decade of the twenty-first century, and to the sense of political and humanitarian crisis that has accompanied these increases. Clearly, works of literary fiction are unable to respond to geopolitical events with the kind of immediacy possible in fields such as journalism, particularly in the age of digital communications technology (which, as we shall see, is a major theme of Hamid's novel). However, it is notable that *Exit West* was published in February 2017, little more than two years after the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to its highest levels since the Second World War in late 2014 (UNHCR, 2014). By this point, Hamid was already an international literary celebrity. His status, in combination with the scarcity of other works of literary fiction about the 'European migrant crisis' written and published quickly enough to emerge while that crisis was still ongoing, helped to ensure that *Exit West* garnered an enormous amount of critical and wider attention.

Hamid's first three novels – *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) – were all well received by critics, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in particular proved an enormous commercial success. As well as being an international bestseller, it was shortlisted for the 2007 Man Booker Prize, was adapted for the screen as a big-budget blockbuster in 2012, and has become a staple of academic syllabi. Each of Hamid's first three novels focuses on the experiences of characters from Pakistan (or, in the case of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, an unnamed country that closely resembles Pakistan), where Hamid himself was born. All three were noted for their formal experimentation, and for their incisive explorations of the inequities of contemporary global capitalism. The protagonist of *Moth Smoke* is a self-destructive junior banker whose life begins to change for the worse after he loses his job. The novel is narrated from numerous perspectives, and sometimes addresses 'you'; in Hamid's words, 'the reader [is] cast as [the protagonist's] judge' (Hamid 2013b). In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, narrator and protagonist Changez graduates from Princeton and then works for an elite valuation firm in New York, before becoming disillusioned with the United States and returning to Pakistan. He delivers a dramatic monologue to an unnamed American auditor (referred to as 'you') who may, it transpires, be an assassin sent to kill him. As Sarah Ilott notes, this 'constructs readers of the narrative as sympathetic to the American's perspective' (Ilott, 2014, 574). *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* uses a second-person mode of address throughout, again implicating the reader, and draws on the conventions of self-help books and get-rich-quick schemes. The novel's unnamed protagonist ('you') is an entrepreneur, and the title belies its concern with contemporary capitalism and, in particular, the different kinds of 'filth' involved in being extremely poor and extremely wealthy. Hamid is also a prolific writer of non-fiction, and 2014 saw the publication of *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York and London*, which collects some of his

many essays and, rather than ordering them chronologically, divides them into sections entitled 'Life', 'Art', and 'Politics'. While the main title of this volume is an obvious (and somewhat flippant) pun on Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), its subtitle is more revealing. As it suggests, here Hamid conceives of himself as a kind of correspondent working in three different cities on three different continents, each of which he has 'called and considered … home' (Hamid, 2014, p. xiii). The mostly very short pieces are, he suggests, 'the dispatches of a correspondent who cannot help but be foreign, at least in part' (ibid), and the 'entire collection might be read as the experience of a man caught in the middle' of '"the war or terror"' (p. xv). In 2013, *Foreign Policy* magazine named Hamid one of the world's '100 Leading Global Thinkers', describing him as 'a master critic of the modern global condition' (The Artists, 2013, p. 122). Indeed, Hamid has become something of an 'intellectual' in what Stefan Collini describes as 'the cultural sense' of the term (Collini, 2006, p. 52).

Exit West was greeted with extremely positive reviews, with many praising its timeliness as well as the quality of the writing. Among other awards, the novel was selected as the *New York Times* Best Book of the Year, awarded the *LA Times* Book Prize for fiction, and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. As if it needed any further high-profile endorsements, *Exit West* was named by Barack Obama as one of the twelve books that he had 'enjoyed the most' in 2017 (quoted in Wood, 2018). In a sense Obama's endorsement of Hamid's novel was ironic; while in 2009 Hamid referred to Obama as 'an exceptional man' whom 'the world is fortunate to have … as president of the United States' (Hamid, 2014, p. 113), he has also been vocally critical of Obama's foreign policy. In an article for *The Guardian* he criticised Obama for being 'intent on escalating American military involvement in Afghanistan' (Hamid, 2009), and *Discontent and its Civilizations* includes a piece entitled 'Why Drones Don't Help' (Hamid, 2014, pp. 165-77).

In 2011 Hamid published 'Terminator: Attack of the Drone', a short story that evokes a post-apocalyptic future in which, the narrator tells us, there 'ain't many' humans left (Hamid, 2011), and in which survivors are terrorised by drones (unmanned combat aerial vehicles). Infamously, during Obama's two terms in office his administration made extensive use of drones in countries that include Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Hamid's native Pakistan. While no geographical setting other than 'the valley' is explicitly referred to in the story, through its child narrator's exaggeratedly American idiom the story makes it pointedly clear that the future being imagined is one in which children in the U.S. are being terrorised and murdered by drones. With its title being an obvious allusion to a popular American franchise of post-apocalyptic science fiction movies in which humans are at war with murderous robots, the story seemed to imply that contemporary America's cultural imaginary is only able to conceive of its own pain and possible future devastation; that it is somehow incapable of conceiving of the very real devastation actually being wrought by its own present-day foreign policies (or, perhaps, that the latter can only be achieved through the conduit of the former).

Like 'Terminator: Attack of the Drone', *Exit West* explores contemporary geopolitical events through the lens of a near-future narrative.[1] However, while that story is a typical piece of dystopian fiction in that it 'conjur[es] up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now' (Gordin, Tilley, & Prakash, 2010, p. 2), *Exit West* is ultimately rather hopeful in tone. Indeed, in stark contrast to 'Terminator: Attack of the Drone', *Exit West* arguably constitutes a literary affirmation of human beings' ability to identify with each other.

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[1] It also makes reference to 'flying robots high above in the darkening sky, unseen but never far from people's minds' (Hamid, 2017, p. 83).

Exit West is set in an unspecified year and follows protagonists Saaed and Nadia, who are the only named characters in the novel. As Claire Chambers notes, with this choice of names Hamid 'engages in onomastic play, because the initials of "N" and "S" in his characters' names supplement the missing compass points implied in the novel's title, *Exit* [East] *West*. To some extent Nadia aligns with generalizations about the global north and Saeed the global south' (Chambers, 2019, p. 216).[2] Approximately the first half of the novel takes place in their home city, which remains unnamed throughout. While some reviewers, such as Lionel Shriver in *The Times*, suggested that this city quite straightforwardly 'seems to be Aleppo' (Shriver, 2017), others noted its resemblance to more than one city. In *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* respectively, for instance, Viet Thanh Nguyen and William Giraldi noted parallels with both Aleppo and Mosul. In an interview, Hamid states that he 'modell[ed]' the city on his own birthplace:

> I wrote it thinking of Lahore, modelling it after the city of Lahore, where I live. And I just couldn't bring myself to fictionally … cause to befall to Lahore the terrible events that happen to Saeed and Nadia's city. […] But partly, I also wanted to open it up – to have people from other places imagine this as their city, so [as] to widen the entry point into the novel, for different types of … readers from different places. (Frostrup & Hamid, 2017)

Notably, then, Hamid hoped to transcend his own authorial identification with his protagonists and facilitate *readerly* identification with them. As Chambers observes, in a sense this is characteristic of Hamid's work, which frequently underscores and seeks to enhance the active role that readers play in the production of literary meaning; like the use of

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[2] This kind of synecdoche is, again, characteristic of Hamid's work. For instance, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez's American love interest and his American employer – Erica and Underwood Samson respectively – seem to stand for two different manifestations of the nation (while the former sounds similar to 'America', the latter can be abbreviated to 'U.S.'). See Hartnell, 2010; Morey, 2011; Ilott, 2014; Perfect, 2016.

second-person modes of address elsewhere in his oeuvre, the namelessness of Saeed and Nadia's city 'enables readers to involve themselves in the co-production Hamid espouses in his art' (Chambers, 2019, p. 244). The names of the protagonists' city and their country are left blank, then, in part to encourage readers to insert those of their own. At the same time, as Amanda Lagji notes, this nameless is also a 'generalizing gesture [that] encourages readers to see similarities between places that *could* serve as the novel's setting' (Lagji, 2018, p. 223, emphasis original). Lagji's modal verb is telling here. As much as present-day Aleppo and Mosul (for example) *already* bear striking resemblances to Saeed and Nadia's city, the novel seems to suggest that a whole host of other cities in the Global South – including, by his own admission, Hamid's birthplace – *could* come to resemble it in the near future. Indeed, when the novel begins Saeed and Nadia's city is not officially at war, as its carefully crafted opening lines make clear:

> In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days. His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble, and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe. (Hamid, 2017, p.1)

Notably, the first clause of the novel is extremely pejorative about refugees: the city being 'swollen' by their arrival seems to liken them to the cause of some debilitating ailment, and in this construction the conjunctive 'but still' implies that refugees inevitably bring conflict with them. They are referred to only as a collective, with no adjectives or other description assigned to them, and they are marginalised by the very syntax of the prose. The collective term 'refugees' may be the sixth word of the novel, appearing before references to any individual characters, yet their mention occurs in a subordinate clause of which they are not even the subject (the unnamed city is). When the subject and object of the first sentence as a

whole emerge they are, in stark contrast to the undifferentiated mass of 'refugees', an *individuated* man and woman whose meeting is the main focus of the sentence, and upon whom the third sentence confers names as well as physical descriptions. These descriptions even give early indications as to their characters: like his beard, Saeed is studious, and as suggested by the 'flowing black robe' that covers her body, Nadia is guarded but also elegant and laid-back. In due course Saeed and Nadia are themselves to become refugees, but the novel's opening works hard to *distinguish* them from refugees.

When Saeed and Nadia do speak to each other, a few paragraphs into the novel, more details emerge about the violence taking place in their city. However, this too is rendered incidental to the development of their relationship, which takes centre stage:

> Not long after noticing [a beauty mark on her neck], Saeed spoke to Nadia for the first time. Their city had yet to experience any major fighting, just some shootings and the odd car bombing, felt in one's chest cavity as a subsonic vibration like those emitted by large loudspeakers at music concerts, and Saeed and Nadia had packed up their books and were leaving class. (Ibid, p. 2)

In this short paragraph the offhandedness of the phrases 'just some' and 'the odd' diminishes the sense of threat posed by the violence taking place, and the likening of the sound produced by car bombings to that produced by loudspeakers at concerts suggests that Saeed and Nadia are far more familiar with enjoying themselves on nights out than they are with urban violence. Much like the refugees in the novel's opening line, that violence is framed as subordinate to the development of Saeed and Nadia's relationship, sandwiched as it is here in the middle of a two-sentence paragraph that begins and ends with interactions between the two protagonists.

As Nadia and Saeed's relationship develops, the number of refugees arriving in their city continues to increase and the effects of this do not go unnoticed by the pair. In the second chapter we encounter the first of a number of descriptions of refugee camps in the novel:

Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to recreate the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg. (p. 23)

The language of speculation is significant in this passage. With the exception of some brief vignettes that stand apart from Saeed and Nadia's narrative (and which are discussed below), the novel's two protagonists focalise the third-person narrative throughout, this passage included. Here, 'seemed', 'what looked like', 'maybe', and 'possibly dying' all convey Saeed and Nadia's conjecture about the refugees, whose actions can be concretely reported but whose thoughts and emotions – and, particularly chillingly, whose possible deaths – can only be speculated about. Again, this serves to emphasise the *distinction* between the novel's two protagonists and the refugees arriving in their city. There is also a notable emphasis here on the marginality of the refugees: they are *between* roads and *next to* boundaries, and they sleep in the *margins* of streets. The phrase 'as though it were completely natural' emphasises how *unnatural* their presence is. Their positions are not only marginal but also extremely precarious – even those who mean them no harm 'ha[ve] to be careful not to run over an outstretched arm or leg', with the refugees tellingly described here as a collection of body

parts rather than as human beings. While Saeed and Nadia do not seem to resent the presence of the refugees as such (they are, after all, 'careful' not to injure them), neither are they able to identify with them (and of course, their carefulness towards them is phrased as an obligation). This is, I contend, part of a key paradox of Hamid's novel: rightly taking lack of empathy with refugees as one of the most significant problems of its contemporary moment, *Exit West* seeks to achieve readerly empathy with two characters who become refugees and, as part of that project, begins with those two characters being themselves unable to empathise with refugees. This is a calculated and astute textual strategy: as Hamid well knows, his reader is likely to be familiar with the experience of getting on with one's own living, working, and loving whilst being uncomfortably conscious of the forced displacement of an increasing mass of people from elsewhere – people for whom one may 'feel bad', but the reality of whose humanity one does not, in truth, fully appreciate. This is very much Saeed and Nadia's situation at the beginning of *Exit West*, when their becoming refugees themselves is only hinted at; ominously, in just its second paragraph, the novel notes that it 'might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class', but that 'this is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying' (pp. 1-2). We identify with Saeed and Nadia being too busy living their lives 'as usual' to identify with refugees, after which the novel turns Saeed and Nadia into refugees and thus, paradoxically, secures our identification with refugees.

While we may not know the name of Saeed and Nadia's nation, that they are citizens of it is crucial. Edward Said described refugees as 'a creation of the twentieth-century state' (Said, 1984); Giorgio Agamben went further, and argued that 'in the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state'

(Agamben, 1995, p. 116). In turn, for Agamben, the concept of the refugee is one that 'radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state' (p. 117). Hamid's novel aligns with Agamben's point, suggesting that mass refugee movements represent a crisis not just for particular nations at particular moments, but for the very concept of nationhood itself. In Saeed and Nadia's city, the refugees' lack of rights, protection, and individuation goes hand in hand with their statelessness. In due course, Saeed and Nadia also come to be bereft of their supposedly 'inalienable rights' when they leave their nation and thus become 'aliens'.

The violence taking place in Saeed and Nadia's city escalates to all-out urban warfare between government forces and militant groups, and Saeed's mother is one of the many people killed. Like most people who have any opportunity to do so, Saeed and Nadia decide that they must attempt to leave the city, and pay a shadowy 'agent' to arrange their escape. Their journey takes them from the Greek island of Mykonos, where they live in a refugee camp, to London, where they live with other migrants as squatters in a palatial, unoccupied house, and then in the new 'London Halo' (p. 167), and, finally, to California, where they help to build a 'new city' (p. 191) that is 'overwhelmingly poor' but nevertheless has a 'spirit of at least intermittent optimism' (p. 192).[3] This optimism is strikingly different from what Hannah Arendt, writing in 1943, referred to as the 'insane optimism which is next door to despair' (Arendt, 1943, p. 268), and which she described as a precursor to many refugees' suicides. Hamid encourages us to believe that the refugees in his novel will build not just a new city but also new, fulfilling lives for themselves. It is in this new, largely optimistic city that the two protagonists part ways. Having begun in an old city that was being destroyed,

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[3] It is significant that, unlike their home city and country, all of the places to which Saeed and Nadia travel are explicitly named. Chambers argues, convincingly, that this is because Hamid 'wants to call out Western nations by name for their inhospitable treatment of refugees, while lending all migrants a common humanity and a sympathetic ear' (Chambers, 2019, p. 244).

their relationship ends in a new city that is being built. In a sense, Saeed and Nadia migrate away from each other.

Upon their arrival in Mykonos, Saeed and Nadia are confronted with a sight that echoes, but is on a very different scale to, the impromptu refugee settlements that they observed in their own city:

> they saw what looked like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colours and hues […] gathered around fires that burned inside upright oil drums and speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world, what one might hear if one were a communications satellite, or a spymaster tapping into fibre-optic cable under the sea.
>
> In this group, everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was. Nadia and Saeed quickly located a cluster of fellow countrywomen and -men and learned that they were on the Greek island of Mykonos (p. 100).

The protagonists' relationship with this community of refugees is very different to the relationship they had with the refugees occupying various spaces in their city. While Nadia and Saeed were previously careful not to ride their motorcycle and scooter (respectively) too close to the refugee settlements in their city for fear of harming someone, they must now be careful about *leaving* their own refugee camp lest they be harmed themselves: 'The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places. Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall' (p. 101). In the passage focusing on settlements in their city, emphasis was placed on Saeed and Nadia having to speculate about the refugees' thoughts, emotions, and possible deaths. Here, however, it is possible threats to their own safety that must be pondered, and about which they cannot be certain: they are informed (and

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cannot know how reliably) that Mykonos is *pretty* safe, with some exceptions, including at night, when it is *probably* best not to venture out.

With its hundreds of tents, its fires in oil drums, its sea of non-white faces, and so on, the novel's account of the refugee camp that Saeed and Nadia become part of on this particular Mediterranean island is, clearly, evocative of images with which many contemporary readers are likely to be very familiar (images which are discussed in some depth elsewhere in this Special Issue). However, something that *Exit West* conspicuously refuses to evoke is images of the extremely perilous – and, tragically, all-too-often deadly – journeys over land and sea that have been undertaken by millions of displaced people during the second decade of the twenty-first century. In Hamid's novel, there are no barbed-wire fences being scaled by refugees as they hide from border guards; no lorries crammed with human cargoes; no precariously overcrowded dinghies making their way across the Mediterranean. This is because Nadia and Saeed – and other migrants in the novel – travel, instead, through magical 'doors' that have opened up all over the world. Nadia and Saeed first hear of these doors in the fourth chapter of the novel, when the fighting in their city is beginning to escalate significantly:

> Rumours had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. (pp. 69-70)

Soon, 'most people' in the city come to 'believe' in the doors (p. 82), even if (in another paradox) they must rely on unofficial confirmations of official confirmations of their reality: '*those with shortwave radios claimed* that *even the most reputable international broadcasters*

had acknowledged the doors existed, and indeed were being discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis' (pp. 82-83, my emphasis). By this point in the novel, however, Hamid's readers have already been provided with verification of the existence of the doors. With the notable exception of the twelfth and final chapter, which is set 'half a century' after the rest of the novel (p. 227), every chapter of *Exit West* features a vignette of roughly three pages that is distinct from Nadia and Saeed's narrative. The vast majority of these vignettes make explicit reference to people travelling great distances instantaneously through the doors. In the first chapter, for instance, in a house in Sydney a man from an unspecified but 'perilous' place (p. 7) who has 'dark skin and dark, woolly hair' materialises from a closet doorway that is described (in a not-so-subtle allusion to Joseph Conrad) as 'dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness – the heart of darkness' (p. 6). In the second chapter, in an alleyway in Tokyo, 'two Filipina girls, in their late teens' emerge from 'a portal of complete blackness, as though no light were on inside, almost as though no light could penetrate inside' (p. 27). Throughout the novel, emphasis is repeatedly placed on the extreme darkness of the doors. Before Nadia steps though the door that transports her and Saeed out of their home city, she is 'struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end' (p. 98). Like many others in the novel, Nadia and Saeed do not actually know where the doors will take them – as above, when they arrive at the refugee camp they have to be informed by some compatriots that they are in Mykonos. That the doors are apparently 'discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis' (p. 83) makes it clear that they serve as a comment on the refugee crisis of the novel's contemporary moment. However, the repeated underscoring of their darkness emphasises the utter desperation of the vast majority of people travelling through them. As such, *Exit West* seeks to shift focus away from the notion of a single, identifiable geopolitical crisis and insists, instead, on

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acknowledging the countless individual human crises experienced by displaced people in the contemporary moment. At the same time, the doors also evoke the growing sense of crisis in the wealthy nations in which these refugees are arriving. The refugees do not know where they will appear when they step through a door, and the authorities do not know where or when the next door will appear.

Notably, *Exit West*'s evocation of instantaneous travel across vast distances does not represent the first appearance of such a concept in Hamid's fiction. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as part of the selection process for the elite valuations firm where he secures a job, Changez is asked to value a hypothetical company that 'has only one service line: instantaneous travel. You step into its terminal in New York, and you immediately reappear in its terminal in London. Like a transporter on *Star Trek*' (Hamid, 2007, pp. 13-14, original emphasis). When Changez values this hypothetical company at more than two billion dollars, his interviewer dismisses this figure as 'wildly overoptimistic' and pointedly asks him, 'Would you be willing to step into a machine, be dematerialized, and then recomposed thousands of miles away?' (ibid, p. 15). The rhetorical question posed by Changez's interviewer here is pertinent to *Exit West*, as is his terminology. When the doors first start to appear, people step through them out of desperation, without knowing whether they risk death by doing so; moreover, they are arguably 'dematerialized' as citizens and 'recomposed' as stateless, losing their 'so-called sacred and inalienable rights' in the process (Agamben, 1995, p. 115).

Far from being owned and controlled by a single company like the hypothetical teleportation machine in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the doors in *Exit West* prove more or less impossible to secure or regulate in their entirety, although significant attempts are made to do so. In this sense, at least, they resemble the boats (and migratory routes more generally) on which so many refugees have attempted passage to Europe in the novel's contemporary

moment. In their home city, Nadia and Saeed investigate 'the possibility of securing passage through the doors' in the full knowledge that 'any attempt to use one or keep one secret' has been proclaimed 'punishable […] by death' (Hamid, 2017, p. 82). In Mykonos, doors are conceived of as being either 'out' or 'in', and only the former are attended by the authorities:

> the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from – although almost no one ever did – or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all. (p. 101)

In London, despite the concerted attempts of the authorities to secure them, the proliferation of doors means that migrants arrive in numbers that fundamentally change the city:

> All over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled […], some said by a million migrants, some said by twice that. […I]t was now said that between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were in a minority, and native-born ones vanishingly few, with local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation. (p. 126)

There are, of course, echoes here of the descriptions earlier in the novel of refugees occupying any available spaces in Saeed and Nadia's home city, before it collapsed into open warfare. The implication, of course, is that London – or, for that matter, any city – could follow a similar trajectory; that no city is entirely immune to the threat of devastating urban conflict. Indeed, during Saeed and Nadia's time there, it is widely feared that a 'battle of London' that is going to be 'hopelessly one-sided' will see 'paramilitary formations' carry out a 'great massacre' of the migrants (p. 159). Moreover, it is in the passage above that we encounter the only reference in the entirety of *Exit West* – a novel that asks readers to

entertain the idea of 'portal[s] of complete blackness' (p. 27) that seem to violate the laws of physics – to the actually-existing phenomena of black holes. Remarkably, however, the term 'black holes' is *not* used in reference to the doors themselves. Rather, it is geographical areas of London in which 'legal' residents find themselves outnumbered by those who have arrived through the doors, and in which native-born people are an increasingly small minority, that are described by the media as 'black holes in the fabric of the nation'. What, in this formulation, is 'the fabric' of the contemporary British nation, and, by extension, of nations more broadly? Of what is it composed? The implication seems to be that this 'fabric' is woven out of nativism and restrictions on the movements of human beings across borders, with tears in this 'fabric' being as unthinkable to some as tears in spacetime. As much as the doors in *Exit West* function as a comment on the refugee crisis of the novel's contemporary moment (something that perhaps seemed unthinkable until it happened), they also serve as a means of imagining a post-national future (something that may currently seem unthinkable, but which Hamid's novel suggests is possible, even likely). Crucially, however, Hamid's novel does *not* conceive of such a future as a particularly bleak one. Unlike the local London newspapers that it imagines complaining of 'black holes' formed by high concentrations of migrants – and there are, of course, racist connotations to the phrase here[4] – *Exit West* is decidedly optimistic about a future in which there is less and less correlation between where people are born and where they live. Agamben argues that the concept of the refugee not only 'calls into question the principles of the nation-state' but also 'helps clear the field for a […] renewal of categories' (Agamben, 1995, p. 117), and again Hamid's novel is in alignment

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[4] *Exit West* was published eight months after the U.K. European Union membership referendum of 2016, and readers in Britain are likely to find Hamid's portrayal of alarmist anti-immigration rhetoric redolent of the political and media discourse surrounding that referendum. In addition, it was published three months after Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and just five weeks after he took office. The novel's portrayal of reactionist nativism is clearly evocative of the rhetoric employed by Trump and his team during his campaign and presidency. Indeed, while the novel obviously constitutes a response to the 'European migrant crisis', it may also be considered a comment on the Trump administration's infamous determination to 'secure' the Mexico–United States border (two of its vignettes (pp. 45-48; pp. 157-159) make reference to people crossing this very border).

with this. *Exit West* does not seem to advocate any one 'category' of belonging in particular, but it does offer a celebratory vision of a world in which 'the spaces of states […] have been perforated' (ibid, p. 119) to such a degree that nationhood is rendered increasingly insignificant.

Unsurprisingly, the doors in *Exit West* have, thus far, been one of the most frequently commented-on aspects of the novel. For Spencer Dew, they are the 'one magical realist touch' in the novel (Dew, 2017, p. 274). Indeed, they constitute what Wendy B. Faris refers to as an 'irreducible element' of magic (quoted in Warnes, p.6), and by refusing to rationalise them the novel 'naturalizes the supernatural, presenting real and fantastic coherently and in a state of equivalence with one another' (Warnes, p.6). More problematically, Suzi Feay describes the doors as an 'ingenious conceit' (Feay, 2018, p. 31) that 'mimics the real-world journey of many a migrant, merely eliminating the time-consuming travel part' (p. 32). Feay's 'merely' obfuscates a thorny issue here: nobody in Hamid's novel is physically harmed, let alone killed, by their journey through the doors, whereas tens of thousands have died trying to make their way to Europe (see Needham, 2018). For all the novel's emphasis on their darkness, Hamid's 'ingenious conceit' of the doors arguably risks negating the extraordinarily hazardous, frequently traumatic, and often deadly nature of the journeys undertaken by displaced people. It could well be argued that in a novel that reflects on the 'European migrant crisis', to replace overcrowded dinghies with magical doors is to side-step all too conveniently the suffering of the very people at the centre of that crisis. At the same time, the repeated emphasis on the darkness of the doors might be read as an admission on Hamid's behalf that such suffering is ultimately unrepresentable in narrative fiction and, perhaps, unimaginable. Moreover, *Exit West* repeatedly invites readers to make comparisons between the doors that it imagines and actually-existing digital technologies. For instance, the very first description in the novel of a migrant travelling through one of the doors is

juxtaposed with Saeed sending a work email to a client. In the aforementioned vignette of the opening chapter, a 'dark' man from an unnamed, 'perilous' place materialises in a closet in Sydney (pp. 6-7); significantly, he does so just as an email sent by Saeed is 'being downloaded from a server and read by his client' (p. 5). Here, the virtually instantaneous transmission of text (email) is juxtaposed with the instantaneous transportation of a human being. Later, when mobile phone networks and internet connectivity suddenly disappear in their city, Nadia and Saeed are suddenly 'deprived of the *portals* to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones' (p. 55, my emphasis). In this novel about imaginary portals, it is no accident that actually-existing communications devices are referred to here as 'portals' (indeed, this term is used only twice in the novel: once in reference to the doors (p. 27) and here, in reference to mobile phones). When Saeed and Nadia are in London, the latter is left absolutely dumbfounded not by the concept of magical doors but, again, by actually-existing technology:

> once as Nadia sat on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone across the
> street from a detachment of troops and a tank she thought she saw online a
> photograph of herself sitting on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone
> across the street from a detachment of troops and a tank, and she was startled, and
> wondered how this could be, how she could both read this news and be this news, and
> how the newspaper could have published this image of her instantaneously, and she
> looked about for a photographer, and she had the bizarre feeling of time bending all
> around her, […] and she almost felt that if she got up and walked home at this
> moment there would be two Nadias, that she would split into two Nadias, and one
> would stay on the steps reading and one would walk home, and two different lives
> would unfold for these two different selves, and she thought she was losing her
> balance, or possibly her mind, and then she zoomed in on the image and saw that the

woman in the black robe reading the news on her phone was actually not her at all.

(pp. 154-5)

Although it transpires that Nadia is not in fact the woman in the online photograph that she is looking at, nevertheless she experiences a kind of autoscopy here. The sudden repetition of a whole twenty-three words of this passage (from 'on the steps' to 'and a tank') makes the reader momentarily feel as if they are somehow reading Hamid's prose wrongly, cleverly echoing Nadia's sense of confusion, and this long, winding sentence refuses to end until she finally realises that she is not actually looking at an image of herself, which evokes her initial inability to ascribe meaning to what she is seeing. Nadia is made to feel alienated from herself here – as if there are now, and forever will be, two of her – and, with time itself apparently 'bending all around her', as if the very fabric of the universe is being distorted. Despite Nadia having already travelled through magical portals on two occasions by this point in the novel, it is, again, technology that actually exists – the capacity for images to be taken and then published online 'instantaneously' – that brings about her experience of utter bewilderment and alienation from herself. Further evidence of the association between *Exit West*'s imaginary doors and actually-existing digital technologies include, in a quote given above, the experience of being in the refugee camp in Mykonos being likened to listening in to an undersea fibre-optic cable, or being oneself a 'communications satellite' (p. 100). In addition, as part of the construction of a new settlement outside London, Nadia and others who have arrived through the doors work on laying pipes through which 'would run the lifeblood *and thoughts* of the new city' (p. 181, my emphasis).

The association between the doors in *Exit West* and contemporary digital technologies is explored by Chambers, who states that the novel's vignettes (which she refers to as 'cut-piece scenes') serve to 'give an indication of the space-time compression effected by the doors, symbolizing our ubiquitous screens in an exponentially technologizing world' (2019,

p. 237). Furthermore, she contends that, on balance, 'migrants have perhaps been more empowered than disempowered by their devices' and that digital technologies help to 'reduce the disparity, the divide, between rich natives and poor migrants' (ibid, p. 244). Accordingly, for Chambers, Hamid's 'suprareal doors untether new, posthuman modes of perception in spaces that are starkly reticulated by the divide between nativists and migrants' (ibid, p. 243). Conversely, Lagji argues that Hamid's doors 'exacerbate the existing unequal power dynamics between the global North and the global South' (Lagji, 2019, p. 219). My own position is that, in imagining a world in which human beings have gained access to largely ungovernable networks of instantaneous travel across vast distances, *Exit West* encourages us to consider the ways in which capital, images, information, and misinformation are already transmitted across such networks, and the potential for those networks both to be emancipatory and to exacerbate inequalities. Moreover, it is important that the novel clearly attempts to make its readers empathise with its refugee protagonists, whilst also reminding them (or at least, reminding those readers who have no direct contact with displaced people) that their experiences of refugees are mediated by these actually-existing networks – and, indeed, that such networks are not particularly conducive to our recognising the humanity of others. Nadia's experience of looking at an online photograph that she thinks is of herself is a case in point – by this stage of the novel it is likely that we identify strongly with her, and yet looking at this image she feels alienated from herself.

Finally, while the notion that literary fiction can have a tangible positive impact on the world by producing empathy in readers is itself questionable (see Keen, 2007), in the service of generating such empathy Hamid arguably makes some contentious, universalising gestures. As demonstrated above, Chambers and Lagji disagree on whether *Exit West*'s doors ultimately exacerbate or reduce structural inequalities, yet both acknowledge that Hamid universalises in some questionable ways. Alongside other assertions about humanity in

general – there is no narratorial 'I' in the novel, but a universal 'we' is often employed – *Exit West* asserts that transience is a 'loss [that] unites humanity, unites every human being' (Hamid, 2017, p. 202), and that 'we are all migrants through time' (p. 209). This is an echo of Salman Rushdie's claim, thirty-five years earlier, that it 'may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity' (Rushdie, 1982) – which is, of course, itself an echo of the opening line of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (Hartley, 1953, p. 5). Moreover, *Exit West* suggests that human beings are not only temporal but also relational migrants; as above, Nadia and Saeed are portrayed as migrating with and yet also away from each other. For Chambers, 'the idea that everyone is a migrant may conceal more than it reveals, and it is unclear from the text to what extent Hamid goes along with' this notion, which 'raises uncomfortable questions about Hamid, as an affluent, cosmopolitan author, speaking for refugees and downplaying the specificity of their trauma in his well-intentioned phrase' (2019, p. 238). However, that Hamid subscribes to the notion of universal migrancy seems clear: three years before the publication of *Exit West* he claimed, in his introduction to *Discontent and its Civilizations*, that 'all of us, whether we travel far afield or not, are migrants through time' (Hamid, 2014, p. xvii). Elsewhere Hamid has gone further, claiming not only that we are all migrants but that we are all refugees. In the final chapter of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* the following claim is made: 'We are all refugees from our childhoods' (Hamid, 2013a, p. 219). While it might well be pointed out that this assertion is made by that novel's narrator rather than its author, Hamid has made a very similar comment in interview: 'if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience and the universality of the refugee experience – that *those of us who have never moved are also migrants and refugees* – then the space for empathy opens up' (qtd. in Chandler, 2017, my emphasis). Here, again, Hamid seems to be somewhat in alignment with Agamben, who

states that 'man's political survival' only becomes 'imaginable' once 'the spaces of states […] have been perforated' to such a degree that 'the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is' (1995, p. 119). Imogen Tyler argues that Agamben here 'romanticizes the refugee as the figure of bare life par excellence' and treats it as 'a sentimental trope'; for Tyler, in Agamben's formulation, refugees are 'harnessed for their (political) signifying force, and then performed as an "unspeakable truth" (we are all refugees) in ways that abstract and disembody "the figure of the other" from any embodied referent (actual refugees)' (Tyler, 2006, p. 197). If Agamben's political notion of universal refugeehood (that we are 'all' refugees because our supposedly inalienable rights are in fact contingent on our citizenship) is problematic, Hamid's temporal notion of universal refugeehood (that we are 'all' refugees because we experience the loss of the past) is arguably even more problematic. Lagji observes that Hamid's statement 'threatens a reductive view of refugees, emptying out refugees' distinctive experiences of violence, dispossession, and devastating loss', but suggests that Hamid is likely 'well aware of the risks, as well as the rewards, of seeking connection across differentially positioned movements and immobilities alike' (Lagji, 2019, pp. 218-9). Giving Hamid less leeway than Lagji does, admittedly, I would characterise his assertion that we are all refugees as not only erroneous but also irresponsible. To insist that all refugees are human beings is vital; to insist that all human beings are refugees, however, is wrongheaded. We may all experience the 'loss' of the past as such, but this is not analogous, nor even productively comparable, to the experience of being forcibly displaced by war, persecution, or natural disaster. Fortunately, *Exit West* itself does not make such a claim – instead, it makes the far less imprudent suggestion that we are all 'migrants through time' and, to Hamid's credit, poignantly shows that any one of us could *become* a refugee.

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