Space “in Time” for Them: Ethnic Geographies under Construction, Refugee Traumas under Healing in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*

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Abstract

*Exit West*, by Mohsin Hamid, centres on a young couple’s ordeals as they move under a refugee and migrant status towards the west. The dystopian scenario and scenery of war is continually duplicated while the agony of the characters’ deterritorialization is articulated in silenced space travel through imaginary “doors.” These Ithacan journeys are not memorialised in print; instead, they symbolize an unexplored site of trauma in a universe of ethnic geographies under construction. These human landscapes constitute what Arjun Appadurai, in his “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” calls *ethnoscapes*. *Ethnoscapes*, like Marc Augé’s “non-places,” as elaborated in his *Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, are key theoretical terms in this paper. I aim to investigate the spatio-temporal dynamics of the instant entering and exiting of doors as well as the mechanics by which the couple’s traumatic dislocation further interferes with their perception and experience of space, thereby informing their struggle for survival and adaptation to the war and post-war realities documented in the novel. I also aim to examine the last “door” of the novel as a metaphor of a haven-home, reached when the characters’ incessant movement meets its most effective anti-climax in a state of non-paralysed stasis.

*Keywords*: refugee trauma, migration, dislocation, *ethnoscapes*, non-place.

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“I couldn’t find flowers,” he said.
She smiled at last, a half-smile, and asked, “Do you have a gun?”
(Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* 64)

Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, published in 2017, was heralded as one of the most remarkable books of the year.¹ The story centres on a young couple’s ordeals as they move, under a refugee status, to Europe and then to America, from their war-afflicted country. The events registered in this unnamed oriental country echo those currently taking place in such Middle East countries as Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The course of the narration is linear, although it is often interrupted by ten short embedded stories, which figure episodes in the life of ordinary people all over the globe. The protagonists are Saeed and Nadia, both in their twenties. They meet in an evening class and their relationship evolves parallel to the escalation of the civil war sweeping their city. Nadia moves to Saeed’s flat in search of protection, amid a war context of

¹ [*Exit West* is the winner of the 2018 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and of the inaugural Aspen Words Literary Prize. It was selected as one of *The New York Times* Book Review’s 10 Best Books of 2017 and it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2017. For a comprehensive compilation of online media critical response to *Exit West*, see “Exit West, Mohsin Hamid: What the Reviewers Say.” *Literary Hub*, bookmarks.reviews/reviews/all/exit-west/].
bomb dropping, severe curfews, and the deprivation of food and public utilities. Imprisoned as they almost feel in Saeed’s home, the young couple receives information regarding some magical doors which can transport people to safe places. The journeys in-between the doors are never described in the novel. What is foregrounded is, instead, the young refugees’ odyssey of coerced dislocation and dehumanisation in their struggle for survival and adaptation in the new host places. The first successful tele-transportation brings Said and Nadia to the Greek island of Mykonos, where the couple settles in a crowded refugee camp that then gives way to a house and a workers’ tent in London, after the second door journey. The hostile and calculative migrant politics of the western metropolis’ authorities and citizens remind one of the couple’s previous war experience. The way out of this oppressive dystopia is the last stop in the American seaside city of Marin, where the couple settles and the doors journey reaches its end.

It is exactly these tele-transportation doors, the novel’s major narrative device, which have perplexed its readers, primarily as to its relationship to science fiction and, then, as to the interplay between magical and historical realism. The conundrum of their use is also one of the crucial reasons why the novel deserves particular attention. With space travel being a characteristic of the science fiction genre, and with the fantastic element of telekinesis reminding one of magical realism, Exit West could be, at first look, placed within that spectrum. Still, closer examination would prove that, in Exit West, the world awaiting at the other side is not located in another universe; nor is it true that the migratory journey transports the protagonists to a future time zone. Rather, dystopic future societies become fully fused with existing, segregated ethnoscapes, while the void of the unknown is replaced by the void signalled by the unregistered details of the refugee space journey. Furthermore, the major quest in some science fiction works for the meaning of life and human’s destiny is transfigured into the current struggle for survival. In this way, the speculative nature of science fiction elements in the novel acquire the most unshakable, realistic touch of historical realism. Via this bending and blending of genres, the reading experience involves the fictional, the verisimilar and the real, alike. Hamid’s novel seems to advocate that the future is now, sitting right next to us and inscribed in the present historical and political situation. The printed page points us back to the news and articles about refugees incessantly moving in space, not in time. Magical realism’s fusion of the magical, mythical and real gives way to historical realism’s insistence on a historical awareness of the present. All the silenced migratory journey details can be readily located in the photos and videos of refugees travelling on boats and crossing borders. The novel’s black journey hole can be tinted orange when examining visual archives featuring the orange life jackets of real people. According to the 2016 UNHCR report entitled “Global Trends,” it is these people who make up a total of 65.6 million individuals displaced at the end of 2016, about 300,000 more than in 2015 (2). The sense of flux in the novel mirrors the findings of the report, when the latter confirms that twenty people were forced to flee their home each minute in 2016 (2). Thus, the novel’s refugee odyssey does not only deliver a strong political message but, also, and most importantly, records history in fiction.

The present analysis situates itself within the diasporic postcolonial studies framework. Following Steve Fenton’s approach in Ethnicity: Racism, Class and
Culture, ethnicity is understood “as the moving boundaries and identities which people, collectively and individually, draw around themselves” (10). Emphasis is placed on how these moving boundaries are drawn by the couple’s traumatic, coerced dislocation. Deterritorialization further interferes with Nadia and Saeed’s perception and experience of space, thereby informing their struggle for survival and adaptation to the war and post-war realities documented in the novel. These realities form the context where, according to Fenton, ethnically conditioned social, political and economic relations are triggered or suppressed (10).

Alienation and spatial segregation both at home and in resettlement countries utterly influence the formation of the various human geographies of Exit West. The interaction between space and the ethnic individual will be further examined against the background of the ever-changing compound character of what Arjun Appadurai calls ethnoscapes. This term suggests that geographies are to be understood as the outcome of the mapping of space in ethnic terms. This mapping is influenced by the above-mentioned fluidity of boundaries and identities as crystallized in the movement of the ethnoscapes of refugees and migrants and their subsequent interaction, at their settling and dwelling places, with the ethnoscapes of locals and natives. In his influential “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Appadurai examines five different types of imagined world landscapes, which interfere with global economy, and the politics of global cultural flow. Among these types, ethnoscapes occupy a central role in both Appadurai’s analysis and in Exit West, representing the fluctuating “landscape[s] of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live” (33). The suffix -scapes, Appadurai explains, is indicative of the fluidity of these landscapes, comprised of different sorts of actors, historically, linguistically, and politically conditioned and situated (33). Among them, the scholar locates nation-states, diasporic communities, subnational groupings and movements of religious, political, or economic character as well as intimate groups, such as families and neighbourhoods (33). It is difficult not to see the crucial role that the historical and political context of the refugee crisis plays in the novel. Likewise, it is easy to identify Appadurai’s “actors” in Exit West’s historical and political background. Indeed, Nadia and Saeed are in continual interaction with changing human landscapes. This first refers to the human landscape of their homeland, swarmed with people seeking refuge. The couple will soon be part of this same diasporic, deterritorialized community of refugees and migrants as they leave their homeland when war afflicts it as well. The process of adaptation and survival is continually jeopardised by acts of hostility coming from the novel’s natives, nativists, militants and civilians at the different spaces that Nadia and Saeed temporarily inhabit. Moreover, and in accordance with what Appadurai claims, territorial belonging is liquidized via rootless and restless spatial movement throughout the novel; such is the massive movement of populations which “appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (33). The phrase

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2 The -scapes, in order of analysis are ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes. The function of mediascapes in the novel is analyzed in the current paper.
“unprecedented degree” communicates the sense of insecurity and turmoil ingrained in the new, the unintelligible and the previously unwitnessed. It also reminds us of the unprecedented historical actuality registered in the shockingly high numbers of refugees in UNHCR’s recent reports.

The physical space where the human and ethnic groups of refugees and migrants move and dwell in Exit West corresponds to what Marc Augé defines as non-places in his Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. The fluid, moving, and compound character of Appadurai’s term, ethnoscapes, already recalls Augé’s definition of space as a frequentation of places, itself originating from a double movement: that of the traveller and that of the changing landscapes which they cross and which their memory stores in snapshot fashion (85). Space is subsequently divided by the scholar into two categories, the first being anthropological space, which creates the organically social. Linking land with society, nation, culture and religion, it is formed by individual entities and it is reigned by history, relations and identity. By contrast, non-places set the basis for neither singular identity nor relational identity; they are spaces of transition and anonymity wherein distinct individuals are perceived as equivalent and unconnected, and ones that individuals do not really dwell in, but either enter or leave.3 I shall argue that in-between their migratory journeys, Hamid’s protagonists in Exit West move and dwell in these non-places. In their recurrent entering-exiting movement through the anonymous non-places of the refugee and migrant camps, his characters are “equivalent” in their being ethnically different from the natives. This ethnic difference from the dominant ethnospase suffices to eliminate any further ethnic diversities within the refugee/migrant group itself and reduces the refugee/migrant ethnospa to a state of cultural, national and identity anonymity. The ethnic geographies of the novel are hence shaped by both ethnic discrimination and ethnic indiscrimination, reflecting a definition of ethnicity as both material and abstract, physically attested and mentally projected (Fenton 8). It is no wonder that the only names mentioned in the novel are Saeed and Nadia; these names serve as prototypical male-female name categories for each and any unnamed and anonymous refugee and migrant. The novel’s major narrative device, the entering and exiting of doors, serves as a metaphor facilitating the categorization of Saeed and Nadia as the inhabitants of non-places par excellence.

As mentioned above, the silenced and atemporal space travel through imaginary “doors” articulates the migratory journey. By means of this “magical” teleportation, journey time becomes anonymous too as an enigmatic, undocumented journey that is instantaneous and unusual cancels the notion of passing time. This is significant as it displays another of this paper’s main contentions, which pertains to the interaction between time and space and to the mechanics that bend the notion of time in the novel. By lacking a dimension of progression, journey time seems not to be running at all, forming a frozen background for a constantly shifting landscape of spaces and individuals. This bending of time directly links to the incomprehensibility as well as traumatic nature of the migratory journey. In Unclaimed Experience: Trauma,

3 Among them, the anthropologist places the airport, the motorway, the hotel and the supermarket.
Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a wound inscribed in the mind, an enigma of survival in that “the trauma consists in having survived, precisely, without knowing it” (16, 57, 64). Considering this, the novel presents that the most traumatic part, the heart of the refugee nightmare, lies in the journey itself. The silence surrounding the journey is a choice dictated by, first, a matter of emphasis—as the novel primarily negotiates issues of adaptation and survival within non-places—and, second, by the limits and unintelligibility surrounding this kind of human experience. What the characters themselves may be unable to figure out during each rite of passage, the novel silences. Commenting on the impossibility of representing trauma in his essay “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Dori Laub notes: “there are never enough words, or the right word, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech” (63; emphasis in the original). The traumatized are, according to Caruth, the carriers of a history that evades their grasp and understanding (Explorations 5). The historical actuality of the novel can make up for this fictional amnesia, providing the reader with plenty of extra-fictional visual and print resources. One of Exit West’s highest achievements is precisely the creation of a meaningful dialogue of trauma reconfiguration between the fictional characters and the reader.

Right from its beginning, the novel stresses the interrelation between a human landscape of people and the space and time of war: it features “a city swollen by refugees” where, “as with life,” people “for one moment are pottering about [their] errands as usual and the next [they] are dying . . . ” (Hamid 1, 2). The cityscape is thus introduced as an overarching metaphor of life and death, swollen by its interaction with the mixed ethnoscapes of refugees and local citizens and shaping a diasporic context of continuous human flux in space. This formerly explored and unified space is now felt as alien, unrecognizable, segregated and amputated: a “mental map of the place where [people] had spent [their] entire life now resembled an old quilt, with patches of government land and patches of militant land” (66). The most perilous of all spaces are at the borderlines of these patches, non-places, liminal grey zones of war where territorial anonymity is paired with a death warrant, which devastates buildings, and makes people vanish. Such a situation corresponds to Harrell-Bond and Voutira’s definition of the refugee status: “[i]n anthropological terms, refugees are people who have undergone a violent ‘rite’ of separation and unless or until they are ‘incorporated’ as citizens into their host state (or returned to their state of origin) they find themselves in ‘transition’ or in a state of ‘liminality’” (7). Refugees suffocate in a variety of such liminal spaces. Some of them struggle to achieve their goal-fantasy of a past, yearned-for reality by “trying to recreate the rhythms of a normal life” (Hamid 23). Others refuse to move at all, reduced to a state of stasis pregnant with death. The interplay between recreative mobility and deliberate immobility reflects “the role and position of the migrant within a number of spaces and scales,” which, according to Ayona Datta in “Diaspora and Transnationalism in Urban Studies,” shapes the translocal geographies of people who are either in transit or in stasis (99). In the novel’s case, the latter category refers to those already dislocated refugees who are
determined to achieve a balance between the instinct of survival and their refusal to fight for what is supposedly unquestioned: the human right to citizenship and residency in a host country.

In this setting of terror and deprivation, internal home geographies acquire a new, metamorphic status, thereby affecting and defining the characters’ relationship to themselves and to the others. War remolds home space as ominous, unrecognizable and interchangeable, with uneasiness obliterating any feeling of comfort. Saeed sleeps in the sitting room and Nadia, alienated from her family and hosted in Saeed’s apartment, occupies Saeed’s room, while mattresses give way to piles of blankets. Saeed’s father suffers displacement within the now unfamiliar space of the conjugal bedroom where, for the first time in his life, he sleeps alone and feels lonesome following his wife’s sudden death from a stray bullet. In the suffocating space of this box house, time is fluid and guarantees a sense of movement aspiring to soothe the characters’ physical and emotional paralysis: the three flatmates travel through “varied and multiple streams of time” as they move between redefined spaces, present experiences and memories of the past (Hamid 75). It bears noting, at the same time, that the house is one of Pierre Nora’s “places of memory,” standing, as Augé notes, for a memorial to days past for “what we see in [it] is essentially how we have changed, the image of what we are no longer” (55). The house is both a present, dwelling place and a place of memory associated with the characters’ changed identity and citizen status, that of essentially homeless citizens in the time of war.

The characters’ feeling of disorientation and suffocation is coupled with constant, undefinable, limitless and relentless surveillance. Such a practice informs space with the meticulous mapping and control of human movement, exercised by “the lenses peering down on their city from the sky and from space, and by the eyes of militants, and of informers, who might be anyone, everyone” (Hamid 88-89). To paraphrase Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, surveillance and observation operate their extensive, disciplinary mechanisms of panoptical power on Nadia and Saeed’s individual bodies. These mechanisms dominate the plague-war stricken city, mixing inspection with the false promise of immunity from death: surveillance constitutes a power that is both visible and unverifiable in this “[dys]topia of a perfectly [ruined] city” (201, 198).4

The narrator informs us that “[r]umors 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” (Hamid 69). When the confirmation of the door-travelling escape plan arrives, the double, centripetal and, at the same time, centrifugal power of space ingrained in the word “here” triumphs via its varying correspondence to the time zone to which each character is assigned. Such power further interferes with the characters’ interpersonal relationships and survival. To be more specific, Saeed’s father’s “here” is the burial locus of his dead wife and, although a present space, it is circumscribed by the time limits of a past zone that he cannot abandon. Time is felt as space and the

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4 Foucault’s phrase originally reads “this is the utopia of a perfectly governed city” and refers to seventeenth-century pre-panoptical disciplinary measures of surveillance and confinement taken by town authorities in response to the appearance of the plague.
father “prefer[s] to abide, in a sense, in the past, for the past offered more to him” (91). In his delirious speech to Nadia, in a long paragraph without full stops where words are connected with repeated “ands” and just one “but,” Saeed’s father agonisingly tries to convince Nadia of the centrifugal power that both her and Saeed’s “here” needs to have. This is a “here” of war, devastation, and death which should be expelling them out of a present that seems to hold no future.

Passing through the first door’s darkness and opacity, “both like dying and like being born,” Nadia and Saeed are almost magically transported from their bombarded city, to the countryside of the Greek island of Mykonos, where they will reside in a refugee camp (Hamid 98). As abovementioned, the narrative process focuses on details concerning post-journey survival. The journey itself, as well as the traumatic hardships encountered and overcome in its duration, are evaded. To apply Judith Butler’s terminology from Who Sings the Nation State? travel in space is suppressed in this “dystopic” and traumatic kind of refugee travel narrative (7). Butler reminds us that survival and adaptation to the new place greatly depend on the specific “somewhere” where the refugee arrives. This may be a place like Guantanamo, where territory is a zone of terror exercised by state power, or, as in the Gaza strip, “an open-air prison” (7). In the novel’s case, arrival on an island seems promising. Nadia’s feeling “cold and bruised and damp,” spread as she is on the floor of a bathroom upon arrival in Mykonos, is contrasted with the couple’s elated feeling soon afterwards, when they successfully reach the “top of the[island] hill,” breathing in the air of freedom of the vast island landscape (Hamid 98, 103). However, this momentary triumph over oppression bears a traumatic toll on the couple’s relationship: Nadia and Saeed reach the crest but, standing one behind the other, “they loo[k] around at each other but they [do not actually] see each other” (103). The couple’s initial signs of alienation are enhanced by the conditions of quarantine, precariousness, and food shortage in the refugee camp where they settle. The couple struggles to adapt to the small, restricted space of a home-tent, sleeping fully dressed, as the night is cold. With island space geographically mapped in ethnoscapes terms, the refugee camp is segregated from the prestigious, touristic part of the island and its brown-skinned people need to accept denial of access to the quaint old town, particularly at night. Prohibition reflects the contractual relation in which users encounter access to non-spaces. Augé highlights that, when needed, the user is reminded of that regulatory contract’s existence (101). Mykonos is, accordingly, armed with uniformed men, who constitute authority symbols of what Fenton would call a “de jure representation and enforcement of ethnic boundaries,” and who prevent any fusion between local and refugee ethnoscapes, reminding the latter of the rules regulating their stay at the segregated refugee non-place of the island (17).

When Nadia and Saeed enter the time capsule again, they “emerg[e] in a bedroom with a view of the night sky” of a cityscape (Hamid 117). The act of emerging evokes

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5 The novel’s reference to a Greek island blatantly links back to the historical actuality of such islands as Lesvos, Samos and Chios that are overcrowded with more migrants than their refugee spots can accommodate.

6 Meaning “by law.”
the notions of baptism and awakening, endowing this new journey with the quality of a new formative experience, a challenge of survival and adaptation to a different scape. The refugee camp of Mykonos cedes its place to the paradisiac prison of a promising labyrinthishine structure: as it gets dark, unknown people “emerge,” in their turn, out of their rooms. Once again, space is mapped in terms of moving ethnoscapes: Nigerians, Somalis and Thais co-exist under the roof of this migrant-occupied house, some fleeing it as soon as possible. Those left behind are caged in their cell rooms, cherished because of the safety they provide, feared because of the confinement they entail and recall: “narrow bedroom[s], [transformed] at least partially, temporarily, into a home” (120). The notion of home as haven is jeopardised when the police and local people mandate that the over-fifty residents evacuate the house’s premises. The evacuation practice is a “constitutive form” of deterritorialization which Braziel and Mannur call “externalizing exclusion” (“Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies” 16). As expressed in the novel, externalizing exclusion sets the grounds for a conflict between the varying ethnoscapes of locals and immigrants whose movement brings them in conflict with each other. The house is thus part of a larger ethnic geography. Skin colour plays a key role as a physical denominator of ethnic diversity: “dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people, bedraggled, like the people of the camps on Mykonos” (Hamid 125). These people form a chanting and protesting crowd against the police, forcing the latter to withdraw. Very soon, local anti-refugee riots are organized and in a city swollen with soldiers, armoured vehicles, drones and helicopters, people are killed or raped. Such practices follow a pattern of political scapegoating adroitly highlighted by Quayson and Daswani in “Diaspora and Transnationalism: Scapes, Scales, and Scopes.” The migrant Other, the refugee, is portrayed as threatening national security; the homeland is to be conveniently securitized against such immigration threats (16). As a result, the climate of segregation, surveillance, confinement, terror, death and war is transplanted from the couple’s hometown to the western metropolis. Contracted like a fatal disease, the dystopian scenery of oppression reproduces itself. Adaptation is jeopardised. The sense of moving to geographically new places is annihilated by the duplication of the urban and ethnic geographies of violence in which Nadia and Saeed still have to move. The traumatic local is bitterly fused with the expelling global, furnishing a possible, indirect answer to Appadurai’s haunting question: “what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?” (52).

The novel answers that space itself has become somewhat illusory, as has the national state. Such space-state illusion sweepingly affects and distorts any experience of reality in which the continually displaced individual is forced to live and survive. According to Homi Bhabha in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” the nation has turned into “a space that is internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic

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7 As narration moves from Mykonos to London, the term “refugee” cedes its place to the term “migrant,” further denoting the evolution of Nadia and Saeed’s citizen status, always in terms of the changing ethnoscapes of which they become a part.
authorities and tense cultural locations” (299). In Exit West, national space, instead of accommodating and giving voice to the exilic and marginal, marginalizes and victimizes the political and ethnic opponent or, even worse, the anonymous or fantasized opponent in general. The nation is represented as a person with schizoid “multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration,” more prone to dissonance than to homogeneity (Hamid 155). Particular attention in this context should be given to a specific incident in Exit West, where the collapse of the nation-state ideal, and, with it, of a world based on homogeneity, forms a context in which spatial and national segregation can be mirrored in the scission of an individual’s disoriented self. Time is also of key importance here. The incident refers to the moment when Nadia, standing on the steps of a building and reading the news on her phone, comes across an online photograph of her own self, standing, at the same given time, on those same steps: “She had the bizarre feeling of time bending all around her, as though she was from the past reading about the future, or from the future reading about the past, and she almost felt that if she got up and walked home at this moment there would be two Nadias” (154-55). This splintering, media-circumscribed incident unavoidably brings us to the role of mediascapes as identified by Appadurai. Mediascapes, he asserts, function in such a way that

the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes [individuals] see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world. (35)

The irony in Nadia’s case is that, in this fusion of the realistic and fictional, the experience of the chimerical, aesthetic and fantastic object does not refer to an imagined world, but it is to be located on the very steps on which the character sits. To make things worse, not only is this world not imagined but, also, the object in question, upon which Nadia’s gaze falls, proves to be the subject itself: a self-reflected gaze that hits the surface of the screen only to be driven back to the eye of that same beholder. Such time-disorienting and self-engaging designation of the mediascape likewise recalls Augé’s characterization of cable and wireless networks as non-places “that mobilize extra-terrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself” (79; emphasis mine). Nadia’s another, “second” image shows how reflection can emerge as deflection, a distorting lens through which the real is fantasized only to be translated into a new, mediated and self-alienating type of reality. The sense of

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8 Appadurai’s mediascapes show how information is produced and distributed through electronic capabilities such as newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios. The easy accessibility to this information and images by a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world brings to life a media-generated cultural imaginary where the real and experienced is fused with the distant and imagined.
time and the edifice of life itself as something experienced directly and in unmediated fashion collapses.

Much like Nadia, Saeed is subjected to the sweeping effect of time fluidity as well. This experience is closely related with a newly formulated ethnic geography in the Greater London area. The circumscribed space of a worker camp where migrants work and dwell in the small, curtain-partitioned spaces of big plastic and metal pavilions. The idea of a partitioned dwelling space within the space of a big pavilion and within the greater fence perimeter of a working camp showcases how ethnic space can be segregated and partitioned within the limits of an already segregated area. Edward Soja in his Postmodern Geographies foregrounds such relationships among the division of labour, urban mapping and residential segregation. The scholar discusses urban and regional restructuring processes, characterized by a series of indicative trends and changes, each of which evidently influenced spatial organisation in the 1980s. Among these trends, he situates “major changes in the structure of the urban labour markets” as well as “an increasingly specialized residential segregation based on occupation, race, ethnicity, immigrant status” (186). This is very much the case with the London labour market in Exit West.

The migrants’ feelings of segregation and isolation based on their ethnicity are accentuated when linked to the incomprehensibility of the experience of the modern slave-mercenaries who enlist themselves in the camp to buy their freedom and residency rights. Saeed works in the camp under a foreman’s supervision. In his effort to organize and supervise the migrants’ work, the foreman “fe[els] caught between the past and the future,” a past of manual work and a future of rebuilding and reconstructing a new planet Earth (Hamid 177). It is precisely in this absent present that the migrants’ work takes place and it is precisely this new planet Earth to which Saeed is, a priori, denied any right of equal share. The compensation is restricted to a home on only forty square meters of land and a pipe. Hence, hundreds of working hours are condensed in the promise of a small piece of privately owned habitable land, which, yet, still appears to correspond to the notion of a home. Such a notion of home recalls what Datta calls a “home that is lived in its absence... which [migrant workers] build[d] [primarily] for others in order to make a living in a city of destination” (100). Seen under this light, Saeed’s labour orients him towards a future where home and citizenship are pre-savoured in deprivation. Big homes are built for the antagonistic ethnoscape of native Others, who will boast ample spaces of habitation and who already enjoy residency rights by birth, not through struggle. In essence, Saeed’s labour does “not only disqualify [him] for citizenship but “actively” ‘qualif[ies]’ [him] for statelessness,” circumscribed as he is, at this next step of his refugee odyssey, within the polis (15). He is no longer an externalised excluded, to remember Braziel and Mannur’s term, but as Butler would have it, an interiorized outsider (16). This degenerative evolution to an utterly dispossessed status of citizenship and statelessness unearths the “corporeal, material, relational, and temporal dynamics of transnational urbanism” pinpointed by Datta and echoed in Exit West. The migrant’s bodily labour is materialised in the concrete shape of buildings
through a process where exchange relationships with the “host” authorities are constructed based on working hours that promise so very little in return for labour. Overall, time works only to disorient and dispossess (10). The slavery of labour forced upon migrants in terms of their ethnic identity further recalls David Harvey’s geographical reading of Marx’s Manifesto in Spaces of Capital. Harvey emphasizes the bourgeoisie’s command over space as an indication and expression of its power over all modes of production (376). Elsewhere, he comments on the link between the perpetuation of bourgeois power and the suppression of worker rights and aspirations (389). Such is the case in Exit West. London’s state capitalistic authorities perpetuate a cycle where central state power and state decisions regulate the geography of human life by subjecting it to a succession of “stateless” statuses: from that of a refugee, fleeing war, to that of a migrant proletariat worker enslaved in his struggle to survive in a Western, capitalist city, his aspirations limited to the forty square meters mentioned above. To recapitulate, deterritorialization induces both characters to lose the sense of belonging to a homogeneous nation and to a home or resettlement state. As ethnicity informs politics, cultural and economic adaptation are jeopardised. In a context of ethnic segregation and workforce exploitation, where state power is structured on ethnic hierarchies, the isolated migrant’s self is accordingly split and disoriented. Such disorientation does not only question conventional or traditional conceptions of space; it also interferes with the notion of time, split and dissolved as it is in the binary dimensions of the past and the future. The absence of a reference to the present, in both Nadia and Saeed’s case, is indicative of the unintelligibility of the dislocated, ethnically segregated slave-worker experience. Dehumanizing experience dictates that refugee and migrant life be put on hold, in suspension between a distant past of peace and belonging and an unpredictable future.

The last stop of the couple’s space travel is the Californian city of Marin. Marin’s peaceful landscape provides the means for an evolution in the couple’s citizen status, setting the basis for an eventual cultural and economic adaptation. The deathscapes of war and violence, which have dominated the novel, utterly vanish. Hawk-resembling surveillant drones are replaced by tiny ones, the size of hummingbirds. A spirit of “intermittent optimism” and essential freedom from oppressive observation beats into the heart of this poor city under construction which, located in America, informs the shaping of the couple’s refugee identity with what reminds us of Stuart Hall’s Third, New World Présence Américaine, “the empty [American dream] land where strangers from every other part of the world collided,” the “signifier of migration itself” (243). Marin is located on an American land, where “the [refugee] as the prototype of the modern or postmodern new World nomad” dwells (243); Appadurai’s constantly moving ethnoscape of refugees and migrants seems to be settling down. In this way, the idea of the moving process meets that of progress, while hope for a haven measures itself against the remembrance of former tents, apartment rooms and

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9 In his “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall distinguishes between two types of cultural identities: a fixed, uniquely shared one and one that is under continuous construction, conditioned by the intersections and games of history, culture and power. Inscribed in the realm of rupture and difference, this second type is a compound of the African, European, and American presences within it.
curtailed spaces which now emerge as a shanty “overlooking the world’s widest ocean” (Hamid 193). What is more, Marin’s unique ethnic geography renders nativeness a relative, polyprismatic term including those assimilated, indigenous people who survived extermination, then the ones who consider themselves descendants of people born on that land and last, those others who are thought to descend from African slaves. These multiple layers of nativeness inform the integration of the newcomers with a procedure of what could, this time, be called “internalising inclusion.”

In a novel built on the notions of redefinition and uncertainty, decayed romance is transformed into a siblings’ love. While in Mykonos and in London, the couple’s dehumanisation intensifies their estrangement and alters the identity of their relationship: they “[find] themselves changed in each other’s eyes,” avoiding physical contact, arguing and walking around as a pair of workers and not as an amorous couple (Hamid 186). This is no wonder, as death has accompanied the young couple all along, “for the end of a couple is like a death” (204). Still, this end has emotional rather than physical connotations: apocalypse is, (un)surprisingly, “not apocalyptic” (215). In other words, the end prescribed by death does not arrive as romantic love is metamorphosed into a siblings’ love, designating decay as rebirth. To quote Hall, the couple’s “diaspora identities… produce[e] and reproduce[e] themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (244). The identity and nature of their relationship is part of this process of rebirth. Saeed is reborn as a young man who finds peace and a new love through praying, a practice that, throughout the novel, has been a refuge, a source of faith and emotional fortitude for the character. Via the persistent narrative technique of deflection where nominally critical information is casually presented as trivial, the reader learns that Nadia, on the other hand, goes through a more physical sort of awakening as to her sexual orientation, when she enters a same-sex relationship. Apart from the above, what is common in both cases is that Saeed and Nadia forge a new, active type of migrant citizenship. Former subjection to power is replaced by the responsibility to offer back to the American Dream land, via the regenerating experience of a sense of belonging to new communities (Quayson and Daswani 13). Saeed becomes an active member of the local Muslim community and Nadia bonds with her colleagues at the Food Cooperative. This liberating and soothing feeling of belonging compensates for the characters’ grief of separation and, most importantly, for the emotional and physical decomposition which expatriation has made them undergo.

Half a century later, the site of the expatriation trauma marks the novel’s open ending as Nadia and Saeed meet again in their native city, whose life is “far more persistent and more gently cyclical than [that] of people” (Hamid 227). Encircled by the “familiar but also unfamiliar,” Saeed and Nadia’s “conversation navigate[s] two lives”: an amalgam of former selves who struggled together and of present paths parted, of familiar memories past and alienating instances of the present (228). A

10 In essence, during their exit west and at the beginning of their stay in London, Nadia and Saeed undergo the effects of externalising exclusion. At the second phase of their London stay as workers, they become internalised outsiders.
future meeting in the deserts of Chile is set or, even better, it is not set: “and they rose and embraced and parted and did not know, then, if that evening would ever come” (229).

In concluding this discussion, I would like to emphasize the vital role of an important part of the novel: I am referring to the ten emblematic tales that freeze time as they, instead, jump through space, mirroring the novel’s major spatio-temporal interrelationships. These are short stories of home intrusion, surveillance, loneliness and reconciliation, among others, with different, unnamed protagonists. The tales seem to culminate in that of an old woman who, having spent her whole life in the same house in Palo Alto, California, is alienated within the once familiar space of her neighbourhood, now occupied by newly come strangers. “We are all migrants through time,” reads the short tale (Hamid 209) and, as Jerry Heron would suggest, “we will no longer go to the border: the border will (be)come us” (qtd. in Braziel and Mannur 18). Consequently, towards the end of this novel of redefinitions, another major theme, migration itself, is subversively redefined in both spatial and temporal terms. For here, migration is stripped of its so far exclusive coefficient of space: one can migrate through space, surely, but when it comes to time, there is no “one” or “can” or “maybe.” We all migrate through time. For whatever space defeats in an instant and silenced time-travel through doors, time articulates in the universality of a non-spatially-conditioned migratory experience. With its slow passing, time can ostracize people, designating familiar spaces as anonymous, alienating non-places, identifying any person on earth as a potential candidate for isolation and oppression, rendering forced movement through space as dolorous, as forced stasis through time. Augé notes that all social existence today is composed by some experience of no-place (119) – or no-time, I would add. The migrating Other can, hence, become each world citizen’s migrating self, for we are all found in the same traumatic position. Going back to Caruth, she notes “in a catastrophic age, trauma itself may provide the link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (Explorations 11). Exit West advocates a shared, universal traumatic experience of literal and metaphorical departure through space and time, from one’s own self and from whatever both comprises and undermines one’s cultural and ethnic identity. Collective trauma sets the basis for a meaningful dialogue between the moving and static ethnoscapes that occupy non-places in the catastrophic age of refugee crisis.

Works Cited


