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Through the Doors of Globalization to A Postnational Imaginary: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, a borderless world unfolds through the magical-realist

conceit of doors that could lead to anywhere, like portals across continents. The doors accelerate

human movement, with refugees flooding from the global south to the global north, while also

creating a constellation of spontaneous, disparate migrations from the Philippines to Tokyo, Rio

de Janeiro to Amsterdam, and Kentish Town to Namibia. Published in 2017, *Exit West* was

released in the midst of an unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe due to the Syrian conflict,[1] in

the immediate wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum,[2] and coinciding with Trump's executive

order blocking migrants from several Muslim-majority countries. The novel is thus prescient in

its imagination of a near distant future that not only critiques contemporary discussions of border

walls, exclusionary and nativist rhetoric, but also presents an optimistic vision for a world with

porous borders. This paper divides into two sections: in the first section, I will look at the

magical doors as a metaphor for globalization — *Exit West* expands on Arjun Appadurai's

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[1]According to a Pew report, the 2015 surge of 1.3 million marked the largest annual flow of refugees to Europe
since 1985 (Connor).

[2] See Khan for further discussion of the rise of nativist nationalism in Brexit Britain, despite Britain's relatively
limited intake of refugees displaced by the Syrian War compared to the efforts of other European countries such as
Germany.

characterization of globalization as a set of "global flows" (*Modernity at Large* 37) by focusing on the simultaneous circulation of peoples as forms of digital rupture and of "globalization from below" (*Globalization* 3); in the second, I trace what happens after Saeed and Nadia arrives through each special door, proposing that "postnational" communities are formed in various stages of settlement (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*). Saeed and Nadia's different experiences of globalization also point to how new deterritorialized patriotisms can be created in the aftermath of displacement, illustrating Appadurai's evocation of imagination as a social practice.

Moving through Doors: A Metaphor for Globalization

In this section, I focus on the doors as a literal and figurative metaphor for globalization. On the level of the literal, the doors facilitate that facilitate instantaneous movement across national borders, creating global flows as Appadurai argues in *Modernity at Large* — such flows are characterized by the collapsing of the effect of distance, their "immediacy," and the emphasis on simultaneity in "the Global Now" (3). The "simultaneous circulation" of the refugees through the doors are evoked through the novel's use of simultaneous vignettes (*Modernity at Large* 4). In this way, the doors in themselves are a form of digital technology, boldly melding together media and migration — two major, interconnected diacritics that Appadurai identifies (3). On the level of the figurative, the doors make possible 'globalization from below': a series of social forms that have emerged independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system to contest, interrogate, and reverse their developments (*Globalization* 3). While regulated migration through border control — 'globalization from above' — is characterized by the "predatory mobility of unregulated capital or the predatory stability of many states," migration

through sporadic, uncontrolled special doors in *Exit West* shift the unequal power dynamics between the global north and the global south towards the latter (7).

The special doors in *Exit West* embody the speed, simultaneity, and convergence embedded in Appadurai's version of globalization — in fact, the doors resemble digital technologies. Indeed, the scholarship so far on *Exit West* has predominantly been focused on reading the doors in relation to the digital technologies that also appear in the novel, though often bracketing their magical realist nature. For instance, Michael Perfect points to the doors as "largely ungovernable networks of instantaneous travel across vast distances" (197). Claire Chambers too explores the "space–time compression effected by the doors, symbolizing our ubiquitous screens in an exponentially technologizing world" (237).[3] Building on Chambers and Perfect, I would like to argue that the doors are not only digital portals but also a physical manifestation the "sheer speed, scale, and volume" of globalization (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 37). As rumors of the doors first begin to circulate in the unnamed city that Saeed and Nadia live in, they learn that special doors "could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" in an instant (72). The doors are like the phones that Saeed and Nadia own, "transporting them to places distant and near" (39). Like the chaotic, high-velocity, and expansive movement in global flows (what Appadurai calls "not coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent"), the refugees traveling instantaneously through doors resemble capital, information, and images. Yet, the disjuncture created by the doors are greater than other objects in global flows — the sheer volume of the flows through the doors result in ruptures akin to 'black holes.' Just as Appadurai identifies globalization as a historical

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[3] Likely a reference to what David Harvey popularized as the time-space compression in his account of global capital ("Postmodernity").

"rupture," a "dramatic and unprecedented break between tradition and modernity" (*Modernity at Large* 3), so are the doors a rupture in the spacetime fabric of the nation. In concrete terms, the movement that they facilitate engender "black holes in the fabric of the nation" in London (129). While the "blackness" (30; 90; 104; 130) of the doors initially convey a sense of menace and opacity, the doors fade into normalcy in the final one-third of the book, their blackness no longer emphasized as the world adjusts to the globalizing force that the doors have unleashed. When the doors gain the pervasiveness and conventionality of digital technologies, the choice of some characters who choose not to enter through the doors — for instance, the old woman in Palo Alto — become akin to disconnecting from digital technologies even as the global landscape becomes wired up.

Hamid's style of simultaneous vignettes also show the "simultaneous circulation" of the refugees, evocative of global flows (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 4). In every chapter, there are interspersed vignettes of other unnamed characters traveling through doors across the globe. These vignettes start abruptly and end without resolution, like brief (and never returned to) snapshots of another's life in concurrence with Saeed and Nadia's narrative. As such, although Saeed and Nadia are the only two characters with names in the novel, they seem less like protagonists and more like focal points that we return to in a sweeping account of disparate threads. In the splicing of Saeed and Nadia's narratives with glimpses of other synchronous journeys, like the swiping between digital screens, the novel is evocative of a roaming lens zooming in and out and occasionally doing a panoramic sweep across the globe. By cutting away from the main narrative to other characters (many in the West), the global north and the global south are in simultaneous circulation.

The doors' resemblance to digital portals also shape the novel as magical realism, melding together media and migration — what Appadurai labels as the major forces of globalization in *Modernity at Large*. The simultaneity made possible by 'digital capitalism' — my spin on Appadurai's 'electronic capitalism' and Benedict Anderson's 'print capitalism' — deterritorializes users and creates communities with "no sense of place" (*Modernity at Large* 29). In the circulation of digital media, social imaginaries are engaged in the "global culture of the hyperreal" (*Modernity at Large* 29). The hyperreal nature of digital capitalism echoes the magical realist promise of a "hyper-reality" of international or at least mythical proportions cut adrift from local realities that might baffle the reader (Warnes 4). As Warnes defines the genre, magical realism as a mode of narrative "naturalizes the supernatural, presenting real and fantastic coherently and in a state of equivalence with one another" (6). In this way, the familiar reality of doors are inscribed with the hyperreality of digital media and magical realism. That such modes of digital production and circulation become also the mode of physical travel applies the features of digital media to otherworldly migration. In this magical realist move, *Exit West* thus pushes beyond Appadurai's postulation of the joint effects of media and migration "on the work of imagination," by building a world where these two diacritics are already inscribed within one another (*Modernity at Large* 4).

While the subjectivity and personhood of the refugees might seem suspect when reduced to objects in motion, transported through vast networks, their autonomy in choosing whether to be in perpetual mobility (such as Saeed and Nadia's self-driven trajectory) set them apart from the other hegemonic forms of globalization, dictated by the logic of global capital, the system of

nation-states, and even centralized control of internet connectivity. As such, the doors make possible an organic, multidirectional globalization from below, challenging the "neoliberal practices of class domination and financial and military imperialism" that characterize the top-down force of globalization (Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism" 84). Though states attempt to control and govern the doors, they end up largely futile in the face of the doors' uncontrolled, sporadic nature. In this way, the doors become places of, what James Clifford calls, "hybridity and struggle, policing and transgression" (109).[4] When the doors first emerge, the guarding of doors to more desirable places and the policing of doors leading out from poorer places by respective states point to the strict control of mobility and the skewed inequalities of access — in favour of the global north. Saeed and Nadia have to tap on underground agents that sell information on the doors in order to leave their unnamed city; their actions are a form of struggle and resistance against the remnants of border control. While the states initially see the doors in binary terms, as "on/off switches in the flow between two adjacent places," either attempting to lock people out or lock them in, the doors grow increasingly widespread, allowing for unrestricted movement with "irrational possibility" (*Exit West* 73). The doors thus becomes sites of hybridity, leading to an unprecedented movement of peoples on nonisomorphic paths — not simply people exiting west, but rather in a criss-crossing of vectors. The perpetual mobility offered by the doors irrespective of the global north/south divide dissolve the fixity and rigidity of borders. For the poor, the vulnerable, the dispossessed, and the marginalized, the doors allow them to subvert the economics of globalization and to equitably access mobility that initially exists in the shadows of the state, in the liminal inter-state spaces, but eventually as part of an emergent world order with hybrid dynamics.

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[4] See Clifford's essay on "Traveling Cultures."

In the Aftermath: Building Postnational Communities

Having examined the magical realist conceit of the doors and the style of simultaneous vignettes as a manifold metaphor for globalization, this section explores what happens to globalization in the aftermath of movement and displacement. I trace what happens after Saeed and Nadia arrives through each special door, focusing mainly on their final (and most lengthy) stop in Marin County. In the community-building that takes place in London and Marin, I propose that a 'postnational imaginary' emerges, drawing on Appadurai's concept of the postnational as "a global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place," with the implication that while nations might continue to exist, loyalties will be mobilized by national forms largely divorced from territorial states (169). I argue that *Exit West* pushes Appadurai's notion further, by not only presenting diasporic patriotisms to deterritorialized homelands (in Saeed), but also exploring a world where 'nations' — or even 'transnations' — do not matter anymore (in Nadia). Saeed and Nadia's different experiences of globalization illustrate a various possibilities of a postnational imaginary, transcending Appadurai's theoretical framework.

By compressing the journey into an instant, *Exit West* chooses to focus on the affective dimensions of what comes after — how refugees wait. While Saeed and Nadia's city of origin is unnamed, the three subsequent cities they travel to through doors are named: Mykonos, London, and Marin County — all cities in the global north. I find Chambers' suggestion convincing 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"

(244). The differences in their experiences of the three cities illustrate how globalization is an

uneven, localizing process, instead of a story of cultural homogenization. By starting off first at

Mykonos with refugee camps by the coast, the novel draws on familiar tropes of Mediterranean-

crossing in contemporary discourse. As stateless subjects who stay in camps, Saeed and Nadia's

time in Mykonos are "full of waiting" and "days of boredom" (113). As Amanda Lagji points

out, the existential and affective experiences of waiting persist after the doors (219). Ironically, it

is during their time of waiting on the island — as citizens-in-waiting, deportees-in-waiting,

travelers-in-waiting — that Saeed and Nadia are most suffused with immobility. Noticeably, they

also occupy "the periphery of one of the big migrant camps," remaining detached from the rest

of the migrants (113). Mykonos, in an overview of their trajectory throughout the novel, is more

like a pause or a rest stop in between journeys — a momentary suspension of movement. When

Saeed and Nadia leave Mykonos for London, their affective experience expands along with the

changes in spatiality. In the London house, with "a room to themselves…a door with a lock"

(124), the couple is "penned in together" with the other migrants by London police and soldiers

(128). While still immobile like in Mykonos, and "waiting, waiting, like so many others" (137),

the house setting fosters a "camaraderie" among the residents that might not have evolved had

they been out in the open (like in the migrant camp) (128). However, as the tension in London

escalates with increasing violence from nativists, the novel's observations opens up the

temporality of waiting to an universal experience — Saeed and Nadia's wait in the buildup to

conflict between nativists and migrants is described as "the calm before the storm, but is in

reality the foundation of a human life, waiting there for us between the steps of our march to our

mortality, when we are compelled to pause and not act but be" (138). In such a rendition, the

affective experience of waiting become a shared condition and the lines between refugees and the rest of society blurs.

Saeed and Nadia's increasingly divergent experiences of globalization from London onwards gesture to different ways of postnational community-building. On one hand, Saeed demonstrates Appadurai's conception of the diasporic, displaced subject growing in loyalty towards a "delocalized transnation," which "retains a special ideological link to a putative place of origin but is otherwise a thoroughly diasporic collectivity" (172). On the other hand, Nadia thinks beyond the notion of nations, reflecting a postnational world beyond even diasporic networks, transnations, and mobile patriotisms (as imagined by Appadurai) — instead, she maps new affective geographies along non-national lines.

In London, Saeed grows more attached to the delocalized homeland (a transnation) in the face of the nativists' nationalism and perceived homogeneity of those around him, representative of more conservative, nationally-inflected modes of belonging. As the city implodes under the pressures of ethnonationalisms, with a growing chasm of violence between nativist provocateurs and migrants, the migrant community too begin to draw lines among themselves. In an analogy to the shuffled deck of cards, the migrants reassemble themselves in "suits and runs of their own kind" or rather "superficially like with superficially like" (146). Though displaced from their countries of origin, the clusters of refugees in London gradually take the shape of national loyalties. Saeed, in particular, finds the migrant community "jarring" — initially, it is because he finds it "stressful to be packed in so tightly with people who spoke in tongues he did not understand" (132); later, as the house becomes known as a Nigerian house, awareness of being

"the only man from his country…touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of fear" (149-150). In turn, Saeed begins to identify with those from his country, which he calls "[his] own kind" (153). Appadurai views this as loyalty to a nonterritorial transnation — when diasporic communities are safe from the depredations of their home states, they become more attached to a delocalized imaginary of their nation of origin.[5] More than that, Saeed's anxieties of being the minority or the other propels him to seek "nonterritorial principles of solidarity," that is, divorced from the territorial state (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 165). Praying with his countrymen made Saeed "feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human" (152). The postnational imaginary that takes shape among Saeed's religious countryfolk is "a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation" (155). Though ostensibly postnational, such a framework of belonging still reminds Saeed of the militants in their unnamed city (156). Saeed's emotional response to the formation of spatial communities in London reflect the construction of locality "as a structure of feeling," often in the face of the erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social formations (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 199). As a diasporic subject with deterritorialized patriotisms, Saeed demonstrates a globalization experience that is as much characterized by expansiveness as it is by loss and stronger attachments to his ideological homeland — "the further they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it," as Nadia reflects (187). His experience of nostalgia, fear, loss, and diasporic

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[5] One could see this as a kind of "trojan nationalism" (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 165), a version of what Benedict Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism." Bhabha powerfully argues that while the nation-state has lost its ethical authority and compromised its political sovereignty, displaced peoples still seek a hybrid of affect and political effect in their belongings ("Spectral Sovereignty" 142-143). Similarly, the losses of sovereignty in Saeed's country of origin manifest in avatars of 'spectral sovereignty,' that is, a furious affective and imaginative sense of 'national' belonging (Bhabha, "Spectral Sovereignty").

community formation along 'transnational' (delocalized but still tied to an ideological nation) is set up against Nadia's.

Nadia's experience of globalization counters Saeed's and growingly diverges from him in community-building and self-identity. She sees "the birth of something new" in the migrant communities in London (148) and thinks that "a new time [is] here" (159). This idea of the birth of a new kind of world is evocative of her own passage through the first door — described to be "like dying and like being born" and "a kind of extinguishing" (104) — as well as the first appearance of the door in the novel where a man emerges like through a birth canal: "With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal. He lay still, spent." (9) The emphasis on rebirth, with the language of genesis ("dampness," "foal," "final push"), gestures towards the migrants entry into a new world. While through the eyes of Saeed, the postnational seems not too estranged from the world before doors, Nadia becomes the newborn eyes through which we a fresh world taking shape. Nadia becomes the only obvious non-Nigerian who attended the council meetings of the elders at the three 'Nigerian houses.' She learns to see 'Nigerian' as an artificial label that simplifies the diversity in their identities — the 'Nigerians' spoke different tongues, belonged to different religions, and came from different localities — and reflects that perhaps there was no such thing as a Nigerian (148). As nations splintered (for example, Britain is described as "a man whose head had been chopped off and yet still stood"), the novel observes outright that "without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play" (158). The novel leaves us in no doubt that Nadia "[relished]" this unraveling of nations and the new imaginary thereafter — a freedom "like wind in her face on a hot day when she rode her motorcycle and

lifted the visor of her helmet" (159). The vivid imagery of lifting the visor is one of openness and vulnerability, but also the physical lifting of a barrier against the external world. Her release and eagerness to leave behind the old world of nation-states anticipates the postnational community that begins to form in Marin County.

While the world of the migrants (migrant camps in Mykonos, segregated houses in London, worker camps in London Halo, etc.) float at the interstitial spaces between state territories in the earlier half of the novel, after the anti-climactic non-clash between the nativists and the refugees in London, the migrant experience becomes the permanent framework of an emergent, postnational order. Though initially the doors are seen as "apocalyptic," life eventually goes on and plausible desirable futures began to emerge (217). With a great creative flowering in Marin, different types of art gathered different "tribes" of people, tribes that had not existed before (218). New cuisines were being born. A regional assembly for the Bay Area to coexist pre-existing bodies of government — "a moral authority" (220) more so than an organ of the state. It is also in the United States that nativeness becomes more nebulous and the novel questions what qualifies as a native of a particular place at a particular time. In a county full of non-residents, displaced peoples, the introduction to Marin moves us through different nationalisms towards a postnational space. It starts first with the Native Americans, who had "died out or been exterminated long ago" (197); it continues with the White Americans, whose ancestors had been born on the land that stretched "from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic" (198); and it ends with the descendants of enslaved peoples, mostly African Americans. Through these multiple layers of nationalisms, tracing the historicity of lineages like the layers of soil in an archaeological dig, the novel presents nativeness as "a relative matter"

(197). The migrants, then, are the new natives to be added onto these layers of soil. The postnational imaginary thus becomes one where nativeness no longer matters and allegiances towards nations based on how far back one can trace one's migration is rendered meaningless. Extending from Saeed's still nationally-inflected experience in Marin (he ends up with the preacher's daughter, who is born of a woman from Saeed's country) towards Nadia's queer, liberal, and unbounded exploration, the bounded territories of the old world give way to diasporic networks which evolve into the flourishing postnational communities where the nation and the state both become obsolete, and new formations of class, religion, culture, and affections develop; identities become plural, serial, contextual, and mobile.

In *Exit West*, the world faces an unprecedented scale of migration that Appadurai couldn't have imagined in 1996 when he penned *Modernity at Large* — Hamid's magical realist doors compress the next century or two of human migration into a year. As a work of fiction, *Exit West* nuances Appadurai's imaginings of new patriotisms, the postnational, and of globalization. Its underlying cry is: One day we will all be migrants. Indeed, the novel gently claims as much: "We are all migrants through time" (209). As the global north evolves into the global south, with a creative flourishing and fusion of diversities constantly in flux, Hamid's speculative positing of a postnational future is more than just a fabulist's prolegomenon for this century — it captures a world that the humanity is hurtling towards. While the novel starts off with migrant camps, barbed-wire fences, urban segregation, and incendiary nativism, a much more optimistic vision appears as it begins to ask: What is globalization once movement and displacement stops and people start to build new communities? Saeed and Nadia's answers

reverberate, and in different ways, both go beyond the self-identity of nationalism toward the complex textuality of the postnational.

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