



Navigating the Global Refugee Regime: Law, Myth, Story

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ABSTRACT

This article engages in a cultural study of refugee law “from below,” that is, from the perspective of refugees. Bringing to bear insights from critical refugee studies, I argue that today’s global refugee regime is a gatekeeping apparatus that protects Global North wealth and borders, though this function is masked by humanitarian narratives. UNHCR articles and Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West*, while contrasting examples, both demonstrate the fraught primacy of story in refugee law and politics. Refugee discourses proceed through navigational storytelling, as authors encounter, name, reframe, dodge, and challenge prevailing myths that paint the regime as care.

KEYWORDS

Refugees; critical refugee studies; refugee law; Mohsin Hamid; storytelling; narrative

Introduction

What does it look like to think about, write about, *imagine* refugee migration from the perspectives of those who have the most at stake – refugees? The problems refugees confront range from the granular to the expansive. The agent one pays for passage. The American-produced shrapnel that kills an elderly woman in her home. The way rumors swirl without reliable telecommunications. The citizens who inch toward open violence against migrants.¹ And, in the broader sweep, the inequalities and racially stratified, postcolonial conditions that generate refugee flows from the Global South to, well, mostly the Global South, and, for a few, the Global North. Meanwhile, laws governing refugee protection and resettlement, which should offer a scaffolding to safety, are opaque and bewildering to navigate. That is because they were not meant to be navigated *by refugees*.

Today’s refugee regime – the global infrastructure of international and domestic laws, institutions, and legal processes that contour refugee flows – serves mostly a gatekeeping function for wealthy nations, mitigating the costs of refugee crises while fulfilling the humanitarian needs of a tiny percentage of the 70.4 million people who live in indefinite, forced displacement worldwide. Nevertheless, the dominant cultural narratives about the refugee regime that circulate in the Global North are narratives of salvation that center the self-proclaimed rescuers of refugees, or narratives of threat by an encroaching tide of refugee Others. These narratives mask a legal system that sets nearly impossible conditions of survival for refugees – most of whom do not even meet the legal threshold to qualify for protection. And yet refugees, who have dire needs and minimal power, often possess little more than their stories with which to fight for survival. Their stories are their currency in specific juridical processes – e.g., narrating their plights to legal specifications when seeking

asylum – and, more broadly, in a global affective economy² in which they must perform vulnerability and gratitude to obtain aid and protection. This article begins with the premise that all politics – and, therefore, all refugee politics – are story driven, and all refugee storytelling is political.

This article examines the legal and political conditions and social imaginaries and counter-imaginaries in which stories about refugees take form and circulate. My argument about the crucial role of storytelling in the global refugee regime proceeds in three related points: first, that the regime conserves resources for Global North nations by inhibiting refugee migration; second, that the regime masks and sustains itself through humanitarian narratives that valorize the regime as care while reinforcing the structures of refugee vulnerability; and third, that all refugee narratives, however produced, engage in *navigational storytelling* as they encounter those masking narratives. This analysis brings to the surface the ways refugee law and its ancillary cultural processes function in relation to refugee storytelling. That is, the global refugee regime shapes political strategies of those who tell refugee stories (whether or not they are refugees), infuses the content of the stories, sets conditions on their transmission and reception, and ultimately delimits what stories are possible or legible and in what circumstances. In shaping the narrative environment – the conditions of refugee storytelling – so deeply, the refugee regime also constrains the political possibilities of refugee-related discourse.

I begin with observations about the global refugee regime framed by critical refugee studies, an emergent field that elevates refugees' own knowledge-making and links refugee experiences to military empire, colonialism, and racial and gender hierarchy. I next discuss how refugee law, myth, and story interrelate by reading two literary/cultural texts, a series of articles from the UN refugee agency's website and Mohsin Hamid's magical realist novel *Exit West* (2017), to illustrate how refugee politics play out through storytelling in the shadow of the refugee regime.³ While these texts arise in different contexts and media, I "critically juxtapose"⁴ them to reveal continuities in how they *navigate* a neoliberal social imaginary that offers limited narrative routes to refugee advocacy. To navigate this imaginary is to name, reframe, dodge, and challenge prevalent cultural narratives. As Hamid's novel suggests, refugee survival and wellbeing require an almost magical reallocation of the world's power, resources, and physical safety – one that the global refugee regime and its masking narratives are designed to forestall.

Critical Refugee Studies and the Global Refugee Regime

To examine the global refugee regime from the standpoint of critical refugee studies is to engage in a cultural study of the law "from below," that is, from the perspectives of those who do not make the law but are subject to it.⁵ Critical refugee studies begin with the refugee as an analytic paradigm and knowledge producer. Arising from intersections of Southeast Asian American studies, postcolonial studies, and feminist theory, such studies make visible the structures of power, empire, militarism, and racial and gender hierarchy that shape refugee experiences – as well as refugees' ways of knowing, speaking, and responding to those structures.⁶ For example, critical refugee studies have critiqued the language and conditions of "humanitarianism," as they see in the United States' refugee "aid" the same infrastructure and apparatuses – technology, logistics, materiel, geographic routes – that underwrite American military empire.⁷ Unlike practitioner-centric refugee

studies conducted in international law, international studies, and political science that tend to reinforce the refugee regime even as they critique it,⁸ critical refugee studies reorient the study of refugees so that refugee epistemologies and experiences become visible guiding principles.

Policy and academic discourses about refugees may assume different “problems” they are trying to solve, which shapes the possible solutions.⁹ Consider that a refugee *has* a problem: displacement causing urgent survival needs and social and legal precarity. But for governments and institutions involved in sorting her fate, the refugee *is* the problem – her existence, moral and political obligations or disincentives to address her needs, logistics and costs of refugee aid. Critical refugee studies push scholars to center the former approach (the refugee has a problem), while also making visible how the latter (the refugee is a problem) has dominated academic inquiry about refugees to date. Such a move, common to critical race and ethnic studies and feminist theory, is both identitarian, constituting “the refugee” as a recognizable (if variably bounded) subject, and epistemological, highlighting that for refugees the view from below may differ drastically from the view from above.

Through the lens of critical refugee studies, the refugee regime appears as the legal infrastructure that largely sets the conditions of survival and wellbeing for refugees. It determines what refugees must do or endure to live. It does so in ways that protect the interests of imperial Global North nations, mostly by controlling refugee mobility to prevent refugee migration to the Global North. The result is an elaborate legal-administrative system in which fewer than one-third of *de facto* refugees fulfill the legal criteria for protection, and of those, fewer than one percent are deemed eligible for resettlement, not all of whom will be resettled.¹⁰ Whatever durable solutions refugee law offers on paper, most refugees’ interactions with the global refugee regime occur as they try to navigate around roadblocks it creates, while continuing to live and keep loved ones alive in the meantime.

To call the refugee regime a *regime* is to foreground the fact that whatever humanitarian aspirations accompany refugee law, the contouring of refugee flows is governmental and intergovernmental, and is therefore a political process that operates through (the threat of) state violence and/or (the withholding of) state protection. Critical cultural studies of law lay bare the fact that all “[l]egal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death.”¹¹ Laws comprise the regime’s blueprint: top-down normative pronouncements made legible and enforced by state violence. Internationally, the refugee regime consists of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (together, Refugee Convention); and the treaty’s administering agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Nationally, the regime is an unwieldy network of domestic laws and practices through which member nations execute or avoid their treaty obligations, per demands of their domestic politics. Like most law, refugee law is reactive, lagging behind emergent technologies of power deployed against refugees and not addressing the production of new refugees. The Refugee Convention is based on two principles: *non-refoulement*, the rule that asylum seekers cannot be turned away or forced to return to their countries of origin; and *burden sharing*, the idea that member nations should share the costs, labor, and risks of refugee aid. Dependent on cooperation, refugee law’s actual functioning follows member nations’ interests, primarily the protection of territorial sovereignty: each nation’s ability to control its borders and terms of belonging, including whether and which migrants can enter and stay. Another is

cost reduction, which some have argued was the law's "original aim . . . [I]f the concerns of the law are humanitarian this is only marginally and incidentally so."¹² The UNHCR was designed not to threaten nation-state sovereignty or create financial obligations, and nearly 70 years on, the agency still lacks guaranteed funding from the United Nations, meaning voluntary contributions from member nations can be stopped at any time.¹³ In other words, refugee law's *raison d'être* is to address the problems refugees *pose*, not the problems refugees *face*.

Thus, the refugee regime enables the current international political consensus that "states have no legal obligation to resettle refugees or other forcibly displaced [people], they recognize no moral obligation to resettle refugees, and Western states are, for various political reasons, unlikely to resettle large numbers of refugees."¹⁴ It is no surprise that "most states feel entitled to exclude refugees, and this motivates many of their policies."¹⁵ Exclusion of refugees by potential destination countries is facilitated by refugee law, which narrowly defines refugees based on World War II-era European refugee flows: Convention refugees must be outside their country of origin (that is, they have crossed an international border) and they must demonstrate that they cannot return home due to well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. This definition excludes internal displacement as well as violence and upheaval not captured by the treaty definition of persecution. Lacking legal options, most refugees never migrate farther than a neighboring country, so many end up living years, even decades, in refugee camps or other precarious conditions across the Global South.¹⁶ Because the Refugee Convention outlines no consequences for violation, some nations have built increasingly elaborate, inhumane infrastructures to prevent arrivals, detain and torture asylum seekers in the name of "deterrence" and "security," and punish non-refugees who help refugees, all in violation of non-refoulement.¹⁷ Moreover, nine of the top ten refugee-hosting countries are in the Global South, an inequity in burden sharing.¹⁸

These seeming failures of refugee law are not a malfunction of a system designed not burden wealthier nations. Rather, they are the logical outcome. Outside of critical refugee studies, many studies of refugees or "the refugee problem" (e.g., in international relations, international law, and political science) tend to accept the refugee regime's self-proclaimed humanitarian goals even when offering critique. The refugee, within those discourses, is a problem for non-refugees to solve; the infrastructures of refugee aid and resettlement are understood as primarily charitable in nature; and the shortcomings of the system *as a humanitarian system* are largely understood as operational, requiring fine-tuning or additional resources rather than reconceptualization. Even when such scholarship is critical of the refugee regime, it tends to be practitioner-centric, reinforcing top-down structures of authority that have thus far failed to center refugee perspectives or needs. For example, in a recent special issue of the journal *Refuge*, titled "Power and Influence in the Global Refugee Regime," the editor acknowledges that the refugee regime does not function optimally as a humanitarian system, but identifies that as primarily a problem of "politics," namely, the UNHCR's inability to secure sufficient international cooperation to fulfill its mission: "Who has power? When? Under what circumstances? What are the various forms of power?"¹⁹ Such examinations of "power" in the refugee regime are geared toward improving the ability of the "right" actors to exercise influence. Other scholars identify factors that could direct a pragmatic approach: the United States tends to support refugee

assistance when “the refugees themselves are seen as a manifestation of U.S. policy interests” (e.g., those fleeing communism) and when there are high media visibility, domestic constituencies lobbying for aid, and strong congressional support.²⁰ Understanding such factors may assist refugee advocates in formulating better political strategies to achieve marginal increases (if that) in refugee assistance as particular crises arise, but it does not budge a system that is fundamentally structured to protect states from having to accept or aid refugees. The intervention of critical refugee studies is to begin from the premise that the refugee’s own perspective matters and that such a perspective “from below” may elucidate the need for and urgency of more radical reforms than incremental shifts of power within the present refugee regime. That is, to view the regime “from below” is to illuminate and value the problems, small and large, that refugees themselves face, and to allow those problems and refugees’ concomitant navigational insights to transform scholarly understandings of humanitarianism. Critical refugee studies urges us to place the very conditions of refugee aid within structures of race, gender, religion, and class that operate in a volatile transnational framework.

Masking Narratives and Navigational Storytelling

The refugee regime sustains itself partly by camouflaging its workings through storytelling – that is, by continually organizing information into narrative, engaging myth and affect to give social and political life the figure of the refugee. It may be helpful here to distinguish between story and narrative. Narrative is a form that knowledge can take, “a series of causally related events communicated by some anthropomorphic being in some identifiable time and space.”²¹ Narratives offer a theory of causation, how or why events came to be, and mostly unfold linearly. Story, with an implied link to the act of storytelling, encompasses narrative form and invites engagement with the social dynamics surrounding narrative production and circulation. Story and stories arise from historically and politically contingent, socially embedded narrative-making practices that may include language, art, or performance – or some combination, as is often the case with refugees’ adaptive story-making. My use of story is also a nod to the Asian American literary trope of “talk-story,” which honors familial storytelling as a living tradition that merges with literary production.²²

While many scholars have importantly examined texts *by* refugee writers, my focus is the milieu in which refugee stories of any origin circulate. That milieu is a global and transnational discursive space already heavily populated by stories *about* refugees, and shaped by logics and politics of refugee objecthood and subjecthood that critical refugee studies has illuminated. Against this backdrop, I adopt the expression *navigational storytelling* to describe story-making by and about refugees in relation to the refugee regime and its sustaining narratives. The metaphor of navigation references refugees’ physical migration and centers the strategic forms of knowing, speaking, and being that refugees cultivate while living and moving in legal precarity. In particular, the phrase highlights that storytelling is essential to refugees’ wayfinding and waymaking: for refugees, to navigate is to make one’s way both literally and figuratively, and to story-tell is to chart and traverse perilous cultural and political waters. Even when migration is forced, it is never entirely devoid of intention or agency; refugees navigate their circumstances sometimes literally in boats or through forests and always figuratively through survival-oriented information

gathering, synthesis, and dissemination. While non-refugees also engage in navigational storytelling (as will be evident in my readings), I am setting refugees' fierce, canny resourcefulness as my true north, the paradigm of knowledge-making and wayfinding that limns the social and political worlds refugees and non-refugees coinhabit and co-create.

To illustrate how story functions in/with/against the refugee regime, I turn first to advocacy journalism from UNHCR's website, an archive of human interest-style stories relating to the refugee regime as care (that is, refugee aid work), resettlement, and current crises, in addition to agency reports and legal documents. Public domain texts, such as websites, provide an analytically useful "contact zone"²³ between ideologically situated entities like the agency and its potential funders. A multimedia series titled "This Land Is Your Land," written by journalist Joanne Levine, appeals to an audience that may be hostile to refugees: "heartland" America under Trump.²⁴ The title refers to Woody Guthrie's 1944 song that is today often sung as a patriotic folk anthem despite its anti-capitalist message. Published in May through August 2017, during Trump's first year in office, the UNHCR's "This Land" series profiles four archetypal figures – "The Rockefeller," "The Pastor," "The Veteran," and "The Father" – to advocate for increased "compassion and support" toward refugees, while upholding four corresponding pillars of American conservatism: capitalism, Christianity, militarism, and patriarchy. All profiled are white and three are male; the sole woman is "The Rockefeller," a philanthropist whose name is Miranda Kaiser but whose profile is titled with her famous patrilineal surname. Articles, photographs, and videos tell how and why the four have chosen to assist refugees, using narrative to argue that longstanding American values support helping refugees.

The series affirms an enduring masking narrative of the refugee regime, America's "exceptional history of welcoming refugees," described on the main page of "This Land." Like citizens of other resettlement nations, many Americans tend to embrace a national self-image built around this masking narrative.²⁵ In the profile of "The Rockefeller," Kaiser, a fifth-generation descendant and heir of the industrial baron John D. Rockefeller, Sr., traces her lineage back to the Mayflower Pilgrims, "refugees fleeing persecution in Europe who laid the foundations of the United States" in 1620. According to the article, the Rockefeller family not only built the nostalgically described family mansion on whose grounds Kaiser "grew up frolicking," but also "helped set the American standard for welcoming the stranger" through generations of philanthropy. Their private success as capitalists, in other words, went hand in hand with their legacy as generous benefactors for newly arrived refugees. Kaiser herself co-directs a nonprofit organization, the Refugee Center Online, that hosts a virtual network to support refugees as they resettle in the United States. The organization hosts a website, USAHello, that connects refugees with GED and citizenship classes, job placement assistance, and referrals for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. In her interview, Kaiser references the present political moment of Trump's presidency – "a lot of refugees who are already here are very afraid of what is happening" – as she reaffirms her family's longstanding desire to extend to refugees "the compassion, opportunity and safety that are so deeply woven into ... the traditional American response to refugees."

Kaiser's narrative about "the traditional American response to refugees" iterates a myth, a story repeated so many times, in so many forms, that it acquires cultural authority to explain historical events or phenomena. Myths are ideological, as they reinforce dominant values and beliefs of the community in which they circulate; and they are often so familiar

that they need not be fully narrated, but can be conjured with “symbols, ‘icons,’ ‘keywords,’ or historical clichés.”²⁶ Myths are not true or false, but they select and organize historical information to make it useful in the present. The myth that America leads the world in providing refuge is grounded partly in fact – as the webpage says, the United States has resettled over three million refugees since 1975 – but it also excludes information that disrupts the myth, such as that throughout modern U.S. history refugees fled nations where U.S. military action created unlivable conditions. A particular irony: the UNHCR was created partly in response to an incident in 1939 in which the United States turned away a ship of Jewish refugees, many of whom were later killed in the Holocaust. The *St. Louis* is why non-refoulement is the guiding principle of refugee protection. That primal scene of international refugee law is not only usually omitted (as it is here) when relating America’s role, but is also masked by the alternate narrative of U.S. rescue and benevolence.

Cognizant of high stakes for refugees and itself, the UNHCR must continually persuade others of its value as it solicits funds and political support. With U.S. funding crucial, the UNHCR affirms the American exceptionalism narrative and strategically re-presents other familiar narratives, crafting a mythic landscape to appeal to an American Everyman. This Everyman holds mainstream (i.e., conservative) values and is skeptical of refugee admission due to the political right’s claim that refugees pose a security risk. The headline for “The Veteran” states that for Scott Cooper, a former Marine, “compassion for refugees is key to genuine security.” Following the imposition of Trump’s “Muslim ban,” Cooper began lobbying Congress “to attest to the rigor of the U.S. refugee vetting process”; it was continuing his “mission” from Iraq and Afghanistan to now advocate for military interpreters and Syrians seeking asylum. He explains, “There is a false narrative that refugees are somehow not vetted....Nothing could be further from the truth.” By proclaiming that military service gives rise to his commitment to refugees, Cooper counters the threat narrative: “As a veteran, this is about who we are – this is about our security.” UNHCR subverts a common argument against refugee admissions – “security” – through the figure of an assumed authority on security. At the same time, the profile implicitly affirms Cooper’s military authority and relies upon it as the arbiter of threat and security.

Navigational storytelling is not good or bad, left or right; it simply names how discourse about refugees must proceed among existing myths and structures of feeling. Levine, who wrote “This Land,” has frequently reported on international human rights from a white liberal perspective while working for Public Radio International and Al Jazeera English. She speaks to a Global North audience of potential advocates, using the familiar strategy of cultivating “compassion” among white readers toward nonwhite, often non-Christian people who are suffering. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “[e]motions provide a script.”²⁷ In this case, the story navigates a polarized American political milieu by reassuringly affirming some elements of a dominant social imaginary and gently challenging others.

Critical Counter-Imaginations: Hamid’s *Exit West*

In contrast to the UNHCR’s storytelling, Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, a 2017 magical realist novel, appears to radically rescript forced migration. On one hand, the UNHCR’s “This Land” series navigates dominant myths about refugees to support the UNHCR’s work and is not subtle in affirming the refugee regime’s humanitarianism. As website content, it falls between journalism and advertising; its strategies are familiar and low risk. Hamid’s novel, on the other

hand, decenters the refugee regime: using an ironic trope of magical doors, it leads readers to identify (at least abstractly) with refugees during a global moment in which forced migration and the violent policing of Global North borders are simultaneously on the rise. As navigational storytelling, Hamid's novel takes a different route, bypassing most of the refugee regime to demonstrate the regime's uselessness for most refugees, while conserving elements of the universalizing humanitarian discourse in which the refugee regime still largely masks itself. In *Exit West*, protagonists Nadia and Saeed begin dating in an unnamed, predominantly Muslim city where a sectarian civil war is escalating. Amid the violence, magical portals materialize "without warning," transforming a "normal door" into a "special door," and just as mysteriously close again.²⁸ The doors are a clever, dramatic, and tongue-in-cheek literary device for highlighting the spurious and random-seeming nature of refugee life and refugee aid. The surprise of what lies on the other side of a magic door is a metonym for a refugee's entire, uncertainty-filled passage. The door, in other words, is a spatial figure for refugee migration and the serial juxtapositions it uncovers. The many extremities of forced migration inspire a way of understanding the world that accounts for gross inequality, trauma, and other disorientating circumstances. Y  n L   Espiritu's method of "critical juxtaposing" brings together "seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces in order to illuminate ... [the] afterlives of war and empire."²⁹ While conventional comparative approaches may accept objects of analysis as "already-constituted and discrete entities," critical juxtaposing treats them as fluid and examines them, as Espiritu puts it, "in relation to each other and within ... a flexible field of political discourses."³⁰ Critically juxtaposing seemingly unconnected phenomena suggests they may relate to one another dialectically or causally. In this article, I critically juxtapose Hamid's novel against the UNHCR's stories to illuminate ethical and political dimensions of speaking about/for refugees. I also read *Exit West* on its own through critical juxtaposition, with the magical doors spurring analytical work by the reader of Hamid's novel.

Doors are an emblematic bit of infrastructure: concrete, purposeful. Whatever technologies may lock or block it, the door itself is simple, a physical barrier that opens and closes under particular conditions. Doors also have familiar metaphorical meanings: to "open doors" means to create opportunities; to "leave the door open" means to preserve a potentiality like a relationship or career path. Hamid's magical doors boil down all these valences into an almost satirically simple mechanism: for a refugee, the "way out" of a country is never so simple as walking through a door. For starters, a doorway is far smaller and faster to traverse. Hamid's doors compress space-time, instantaneously depositing a racially marked, gendered body where it does not "belong," and collapses the complex traumas of a transnational refugee passage to momentary physical exhaustion. But the drama of Hamid's magical passages lies less in the improbable transit than in the stark contrasts between – juxtaposition of – disparate identities, economic circumstances, and geographies that are brought into uncomfortable proximity. As well, the multitude of such passages and the namelessness of most of Hamid's refugees create the impression of an archetypal refugee narrative that represents large-scale migrations. By creating parallel scenes in seemingly unrelated parts of the world, and either drawing attention to similarities or jarring them together, Hamid engages the reader in an ethical questioning: Where do I fit in this universe of haves and have-nots? What conditions of life do I take for granted? Do I have responsibility for, and how might I alleviate, others' suffering? While Hamid's readers could include refugees and certainly include readers in the Global South, most are relatively

privileged – at least, living high enough on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to be passing time with a novel.

In the first scene of a magical door passage, a “pale-skinned,” affluent Australian lies asleep alone in her house, wearing her husband’s t-shirt and a wedding band.³¹ The woman’s house has an alarm system that is used only “sporadically, mostly when her husband was absent,”³² and she keeps handcuffs in her nightstand (for pleasure, not security). Her white, feminine vulnerability is on display, ringed by patriarchal protections, from the husband who normally provides her security to the law enforcement apparatus she may summon in his absence. She is unconscious to an extraordinary scene in her bedroom closet:

[T]he closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness – the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging.

He too was dark, with dark skin and dark, woolly hair. He wriggled with great effort, his hands gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide. His neck followed his head, tendons straining, and then his chest, his half-unbuttoned, sweaty, gray-and-brown shirt. Suddenly he paused in his exertions. He looked around the room. He looked at the sleeping woman, the shut bedroom door, the open window. He rallied himself again, fighting mightily to come in, but in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat.³³

The tone is ironic yet urgent, with an allusion to Joseph Conrad’s colonial novella, *Heart of Darkness*, appearing amid eight instances of “dark” in the space of a few lines. Hamid flips the script on white fears of dark-skinned intruders, as this intruder arrives laboriously and fearing discovery. The white woman’s sleeping vulnerability poses a grave danger to the refugee rather than the other way around. The scene proceeds like a pantomime of a man being attacked, voiceless as a struggle captured on security video. The passage produces a reading experience somewhere between voyeurism and surveillance, as we spy the woman’s exposed slumber and the man’s most vulnerable moments – his extreme fear, exhaustion, and hope upon arriving in Australia. Finally, the newly arrived man escapes the woman’s bedroom through her window. He makes no contact with the woman, but, rather, both remain in their separate spheres: “The woman who slept, slept alone. He who stood above her, stood alone.”³⁴

This scene is an early example of what I call a “meanwhile” scene, one of the novel’s strategies for painting a world of jarring inequalities, in which people who barely understand each other fight to survive or to defend their ways of life. The meanwhile scenes are concurrent with the main narrative of Nadia and Saeed, who live through successive displacements in several countries. Meanwhile is not necessarily a binary relation; it may be a triangulation, as with the arriving refugee, the sleeping woman, and Nadia/Saeed; or it may index a multitude of concurrent scenes forming the novel’s ethical universe. A multitude of scenarios happening concurrently add up to a world in which rich and poor, white and nonwhite, live not only at the same time, but in dialectical relationship to one another. Security for some depends on endangerment of others; survival strategies employed by the endangered in turn affect the risk calculus for more people. “Meanwhile” temporalizes critical juxtaposition, inviting analytical reading. The emplotment of meanwhile is narrative, but it offers an argument: because simultaneous events cannot

be narrated/read simultaneously, the text orders details and directs whether and how to alternate. Such choices are philosophical and political as well as artistic; they spur cognitive and affective responses in the reader, who apprehends the multiple scenes in relation to one another.

The meanwhile scenes also perform the work of accretion, illustrating that there are *so many refugees*. Halfway through the novel, Nadia and Saeed prepare to leave their warring home; having contacted an agent about possible passage, they await his response. The scene shifts to an “elsewhere” in which “other families were on the move,” a world of forced migration the protagonists are about to join.³⁵ The narration zooms in on one refugee family arriving in a luxury apartment complex in Dubai. Relative to the earlier Australian arrival, this scene intensifies the trope of heavy securitization in destination countries.

On security camera the family could be seen blinking in the sterile artificial light and recovering from their crossing. They each had a slender build and upright posture and dark skin, and though the feed lacked audio input it was of sufficient resolution that lip-reading software could identify their language as Tamil.

After a brief interlude the family was picked up again by a second camera, traversing a hallway and pushing the horizontal bars that secured a heavy set of double fire-resistant doors and as these doors opened the brightness of Dubai’s desert sunlight overwhelmed the sensitivity of the image sensor and the four figures seemed to become thinner, insubstantial, lost in an aura of whiteness, but they were at that moment simultaneously captured on three exterior surveillance feeds, tiny characters stumbling on a broad sidewalk . . .³⁶

The reader’s view is mediated almost entirely by surveillance technologies, from our ability to place the family demographically thanks to high resolution and lip-reading software (a Tamil couple, daughter, and son) to our tracking and evaluation of their movements (“blinking,” “stumbling” as they “recover[ed] from their crossing”). Even with their geographic specificity these nameless are representative, described with general words like “dark,” “woman,” or “Tamil.” Their pasts are not explained; they are assumed to have reasons for leaving, probably war or some other geopolitical calamity. The generality with which they are introduced enables the reader to envision a global context for Nadia and Saeed’s story. The “brief interlude” during which the family is between cameras is out of narratorial view; description resumes when the family reappears on “a second camera.” This camera’s highly sensitive sensor produces four unnamed “figures” who appear “thinner, insubstantial, lost in an aura of whiteness,” though the distortion is compensated for by three redundant exterior feeds. The allusion to “whiteness” as a blinding element is consistent with Hamid’s frequent, ironic use of racial idioms. These dark-skinned “tiny characters” are hardly individuals in the sense of irreplaceable, agential, liberal subjects – usually inscribed in English literature as white. And that is the point: they are prevented from becoming such subjects by the distancing technologies through which they are regarded by the rooted, property-owning non-refugees whom home surveillance serves.

Rendering impoverished, exhausted migrants through surveillance cameras underscores the central irony of securitization: that it “secures” the already secure from the vulnerable. The last two decades, especially the last several years, have seen the evolution of drastic “migration management” strategies in the Global North to obstruct the arrival of some classes of migrants, including refugees. These outgrowths of the refugee regime are justified by wealthy governments in the language of “security,” “deterrence,” and “management,”

and include territorial and extraterritorial strategies such as border walls, offshore detention, the refusal to rescue migrants at sea, the deportation of already arrived (even long-resettled) refugees, and more.³⁷ The admin-speak that accompanies such measures naturalize their exclusionary function, voiding ethical concerns.³⁸

Readers in the Global North may be led to empathize with refugees, but that does not diminish the fact that they are also a latent border patrol policing refugees' illicit arrival. The security that allows leisure reading aligns the reader with the sleeping woman and her alarm system, creating a layered, troubled identification between the reader and multiple characters. The book is distinctively affective, provoking strong emotional responses in an unusual way: numerous sentences merge cool, ironic abstractions with unabashed sentimentalism. The conglomeration of literary styles mimics the ramshackle diversity of camps and other makeshift migrant communities, but the multi-registered voice also reflects the rocky emotional-political terrain of Hamid's readership. Nadia and Saeed's attachments and consequent griefs are rendered at the level of sentence structure and narratorial voice. As their departure nears, sentences grow longer and longer, accruing clauses with commas, as if resisting the separation and finality a period would bring. For example, after the two pay an agent to allow them and Saeed's father through a special door, Saeed's father refuses to leave. In a 199-word sentence, the young couple try in vain to convince him:

But Saeed's father was thinking also of the future, even though he did not say this to Saeed, for he feared that if he said this to his son that his son might not go, and he knew above all that his son must go, and what he did not say was that he had come to that point in a parent's life when, if a flood arrives, one knows one must let go of one's child, contrary to all the instincts one had when one was younger, because holding on can no longer offer the child protection, it can only pull the child down, and threaten them with drowning, for the child is now stronger than the parent, and the circumstances, are such that the utmost of strength is required, and the arc of a child's life only appears for a while to match the arc of a parent's, in reality one sits atop the other, a hill atop a hill, a curve atop a curve, and Saeed's father's arc now needed to curve lower, while his son's still curved higher, for with an old man hampering them these two young people were simply less likely to survive.³⁹

The repetitive use of "one," "the child," and "the parent" to explain the unnamed father's thought process creates an air of eternal truth, even dipping into pedantic abstraction by charting "the arc of a child's life . . . a hill atop a hill," before finally rendering concrete the stakes of the father's decision: that if he were to accompany them, "these two young people were simply less likely to survive."⁴⁰

Refugee experiences are heavily documented and administered by those who can keep an emotional distance – one can envision UNHCR infographics, for example, charting the numbers of refugees over time, mapping their movements – so imaginatively "charting" this other, subjective, and intangible aspect of refugee experience feels oddly familiar. Subsequently, in an even longer, 261-word sentence, Saeed's father insists the two go and asks Nadia to promise she will stay with Saeed until he is safe. The sentence and chapter close with the grim acknowledgment that henceforth no one will ensure Saeed's father's wellbeing, so "by making the promise he [Saeed's father] demanded she [Nadia] make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind."⁴¹ This broad pronouncement about love and loss universalizes, asking the reader to acknowledge the refugees' humanity, but not in the objectifying way of most humanitarian discourses. While the refugee regime relies on

a compassionate “we” who are privileged and rooted, sentimentally aiding an unrooted other, here “we” are those who migrate.

Elsewhere in the novel, the narration echoes the construction of this other(ed) “we” through pointed use of pronouns like “they” and “you” and collective designations like “natives” and “migrants.” Alternately sincere and ironic, sometimes both, such expressions elicit not only sympathy, but also ethical pondering and critique; they direct readers to consider to which collectives they belong and what roles they may play in the global drama of forced migration. Unrooted, Nadia and Saeed migrate from city to city around the world, from one precarious setting to another – an island in Greece, a migrant ghetto in London, a hillside in Marin, California. In London, they encounter a city under siege due to anti-migrant hostility: paramilitary “nativist” forces threaten to clear the areas where hungry recent arrivants, Nadia and Saeed included, have taken up unpermitted residence. As tension builds, Nadia and Saeed discuss the impending violence, given that “the natives were so frightened that they could do anything.”⁴² Nadia considers that, if roles reversed, perhaps she, too, would feel threatened by a wave of incoming migration, to which Saeed replies that a similar situation had occurred in their home country due to war. Nadia replies, “That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose.”⁴³ In the end, the white Londoners – the “natives,” per Hamid’s characteristic postcolonial irony – retreat, unable or unwilling to enact the violence necessary to clear the ghetto:

Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants, and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one part to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one.⁴⁴

The anaphoric “perhaps” signals the refugees’ musings about the hostile citizens who surround them – an attempt by the fictional migrants to put themselves emotionally and ethically in the shoes of the “natives,” those who wished to deny refugees place. The narrator is transparently *not* omniscient, and traces the refugees’ thoughts more than those of the citizens. The refugees’ attempts at empathy, rendered through free indirect discourse, may disorient but ultimately instruct the reader, who may identify more closely with the non-migrants in London but here is given the perspective of the refugees as a model.

Hamid’s novel is an act of critical counter-imagination with respect to the refugee regime. Its positioning of the reader as surveillor, its frequent reversals of racial and colonial idioms and perspectives, and its drive to contextualize refugee plights as a global phenomenon steer the novel away from other popular strategies used by non-refugee writers, such as currying compassion or pity for a helpless, voiceless migrant, or exalting the “sentimental rescue-and-gratitude tale.”⁴⁵ The novel reframes the refugee regime as, at best, irrelevant to refugee wellbeing, and at worst, a framework for disciplining refugee bodies to conserve security and wealth for the privileged. To focalize refugee experience as Hamid does is to see the refugee regime as fundamentally spurious and ineffective as a structure for humanitarian aid, and as bolstering severe and widening global inequalities that break down along lines of race, class, and nationality.

But *Exit West* is not unequivocally a “resistive” text; nor does it reflect a “refugee voice,” as Hamid is certainly not a refugee. The novel and Hamid operate within a racialized, gendered, global literary economy in which some migrant bodies – cosmopolitan, educated, male, English-literate – are accepted while others (*other* Others) are erased. A Pakistani writer of English literature, Hamid is a favorite of middlebrow, liberal, Global North readers; he is best known for *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), page-turner novels that engage with hot-button issues of globalization and uneven development. As a celebrity author, he crosses borders more or less at will, unlike his refugee characters who migrate surreptitiously and at great risk. But his brownness and Pakistani identity give him authority (in the view of many English-language readers) to speak for the entire Global South. One reviewer gushes, “In contrast with the debased language of extremism, militarism and nationalism, his is a humane and rational voice demanding a better future” – as if those two ideological positions are Hamid’s only options.⁴⁶ Hamid seems to understand and utilize his niche: he cannily navigates the ambient compassion that pervades discourses about the South in the North. Hamid speaks to white, progressive readers’ desire to “feel for” and (temporarily) identify with the wretched of the earth. But instead of trading trauma for compassion, *Exit West* is matter-of-fact about violence and directs the reader’s emotions toward relationships – characters’ love and longing for, even ambivalence toward, one another. Hamid walks a fine line with his detached, universalizing, omniscient narrator, whose abstraction paradoxically tugs readers’ heartstrings.

I have focused on texts about refugees that are more or less advocacy texts, as they employ strategies that curry compassion and understanding among non-refugees toward refugees. This is not to detract from critical refugee studies’ proper focus on refugee voices, but to bolster and contextualize it. If scholars are to treat refugees as a “source of knowledge,”⁴⁷ as Yên Lê Espiritu urges, we need a critical framework for understanding what it means for refugees to speak, to be spoken for, or, as is often the case, to engage in mediated expression that falls somewhere in between. Hamid’s novel stylizes a gap between theory and practice of refugee migration, rule and reality, going so far as to replace a bleakly oppressive refugee regime with a fantastical alternative, the spurious “special door.” Hamid does away with a legal infrastructure that is useless for most refugees, the UNHCR system that leaves most refugees in limbo. By replacing the UNHCR with *magic*, the novel dispenses with a tiresome critique of a faulty system (we have scholars to do that) and leaps to an implied conclusion: refugees might as well wait for a magic door to open, if they are waiting for the United Nations to rescue them.

Notes

1. These scenes come from Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West: A Novel* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).
2. Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.
3. Mai-Linh Hong, “Narrative in the Shadow of the Refugee Regime,” *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Thought* (2017), <https://theaccountmagazine.com/article/hong-narrative-in-the-shadow-17>.
4. Yên Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 21.

5. Here I adapt the phrase “history from below,” commonly attributed to historian Edward Thompson, whose work on the English working class set an influential paradigm for critical historiography.
6. Espiritu, *Body Counts*; YẾN Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 587–615.
7. Espiritu, *Body Counts*; Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
8. The field of critical refugee studies does not encompass all “refugee studies” that critique the refugee regime’s structural inequalities or failures. In recent years, much work by scholars of international law, international relations, political science, and geography is skeptical of the regime’s claimed humanitarian bases and clear-eyed about the challenges, if not impossibility, of changing the system from within. Some refugee studies have begun to tease out how race, gender, and postcoloniality shape refugee experiences. See Susan F. Martin and Elizabeth Ferris, “U.S. Leadership and the International Refugee Regime,” *Refuge* 33, no. 1 (2017): 18–28; Serena Parekh, *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Robyn C. Sampson, “Caring, Contributing, Capacity Building: Navigating Contradictory Narratives of Refugee Settlement in Australia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 98–116; Rebecca Stern, “‘Our Refugee Policy Is Generous’: Reflections on the Importance of a State’s Self-Image,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2014): 25–43; and Doug Rutledge and Abdi Roble, “The Infrastructure of Migration and the Migration Regime: Human Rights, Race, and the Somali Struggle to Flee Violence,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 3, no. 2 (2010): 153–78.
9. Patricia Tuitt, *False Images: The Law’s Construction of the Refugee* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 7.
10. “Mid-Year Trends 2018” (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019), 3, <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5c52ea084/mid-year-trends-2018.html>.
11. Robert M. Cover, “Violence and the Word,” *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986): 1601.
12. Tuitt, *False Images*, 7.
13. Gil Loescher, “UNHCR’s Origins and Early History: Agency, Influence, and Power in Global Refugee Policy,” *Refuge* 33, no. 1 (2017): 78.
14. Parekh, *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*, 4.
15. *Ibid.*
16. “Forced Displacement in 2016,” *Global Trends* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017), 16; Parekh, *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*, 4; and Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Building the Infrastructure for the Observance of Refugee Rights in the Global South,” *Refuge* 25, no. 2 (2008): 13.
17. Patricia Ehrkamp, “Geographies of Migration I: Refugees,” *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 6 (December 2017): 813–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516663061>.
18. “Forced Displacement in 2016.”
19. Milner, “Introduction: Power and Influence in the Global Refugee Regime,” 3.
20. Martin and Ferris, “U.S. Leadership and the International Refugee Regime,” 19.
21. Greta Olson, “The Turn to Passion: Has Law and Literature Become Law and Affect?” *Law & Literature* 28, no. 3 (2016): 338.
22. “Talk-story” comes from Maxine Hong Kingston’s genre-defying *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston’s now-canonical book, first published in 1976, transposed truth and fiction, oral and written, to challenge expectations of cultural authenticity at a time when expressive writing by Asian Americans was still read mostly for anthropological value rather than as art.
23. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 14.
24. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “This Land Is Your Land,” UNHCR, accessed June 19 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/this-land-is-your-land.html>.
25. Stern, “‘Our Refugee Policy Is Generous.’”
26. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 5.

27. Ahmed, "Affective," 12.
28. Hamid, *Exit West*, 72.
29. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 21.
30. Ibid.
31. See note 28 above, 7.
32. Ibid., 7–8.
33. Ibid., 8–9.
34. Ibid., 9.
35. Ibid., 90.
36. Ibid., 91.
37. Ehrkamp, 815–816.
38. Ehrkamp, 816.
39. Hamid, 96.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 97–98.
42. Ibid., 164.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 166.
45. Mai-Linh K. Hong, "Reframing the Archive: Vietnamese Refugee Narratives in the Post-9/11 Period," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 41, no. 3 (September 30 2016): 18–41; and Nguyen, *Gift of Freedom*.
46. Duncan White, "Discontent and Its Civilisations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York and London by Mohsin Hamid, Review: 'A Humane and Rational Voice,'" *The Telegraph*, December 15, 2014.
47. See note 29 above, 121.

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