Reading the Novel of Migrancy

SHERI-MARIE HARRISON

Abstract

This essay argues that novels like Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*, Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* exemplify a new form of the novel that does not depend on national identification, but is instead organized around the transnational circulation of people and things in a manner that parallels the deregulated flow of neoliberal capital. In their literal depiction of the movement of people across borders, these four very different novels collectively address the circulation of codes, tropes, and strategies of representation for particular ethnic and racial groups. Moreover, they also address, at the level of critique, the relationship of such representational strategies to processes of literary canonization. The metafictional and self-reflexive qualities of James’s and Nguyen’s novels continually draw the reader’s attention to the politics of reading and writing, and in the process they thwart any easy conclusions about what it means to write about conflicts like the Vietnam war or the late 1970s in Jamaica. Likewise, despite their different settings Hamid’s *Exit West* and Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* are alike in that they are both about the movement of stateless people across borders and both push the boundaries of realism itself by employing non-realistic devices as a way of not representing travel across borders. In pointing to, if not quite illuminating, the “dark places of the earth,” the novel of migrancy thus calls into existence, without really representing, conditions for a global framework that does not yet exist.

Introduction: Of Migrant Caravans and Novels

“Not univocal, not propositional, not thetic, the novel as critique is essentially thought on the move, the restless, spastic generativity of conceptuality riven by negation of dialecticity itself.”

(Kornbluh 401; emphasis added)

In recent years, what I am calling novels of migrancy have appeared on multiple long and short lists for prestigious book prizes, like the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize; often they have been the winners. Although they are written by authors from various locations and are about diverse subjects and contexts, they all nonetheless center the movement of bodies and commodities in a manner that thematically enacts “thought on the move” and by extension exemplify Anna Kornbluh’s sense of “the novel as critique” (397). They include books such as Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Viet
Thanh Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, but also books like Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, which does not actually leave the United States but, like the others, does map alternate forms of transnational and collective politicization beyond nation-state organizations. I argue here that, taken together, these books enumerate unthought political horizons beyond the nation through their experimentation with form and genre. The manner in which they pivot on motion enables revivified modes of critique suited to the shared global challenges of our time, such as refugee crises, resurgent White supremacy, and climate change.

In “We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique,” Kornbluh acknowledges that Rita Felski’s approach to postcritique is “refreshing in its quest for more commanding studies of literature’s agency—for less emphasis on literature as ideology, as technology of domination, as chained to context—and for more comprehensive accounts of what is affirmative and affirmable in the humanities” (398). Nonetheless, Kornbluh rejects Felski’s suggestion that the source of these problems with critical methodologies is “our exhausted feelings about the mood of critique and proposing chipper feelings as the answer to crisis.” Kornbluh suggests, however, that “we can […] embrace that Felski has the wrong answer (affect) to the right question: how can literary critics and humanists generally be more affirmative? There are heartier things to be affirmed about literature than the affects it arouses in individuals.” “Literary form,” she says, “is more social than that” (398).

By “more social” Kornbluh means that literature offers precisely the counterhegemony that has fueled the perennial crisis of the humanities. With a long and political-economic view of crisis, we can best conceptualize that the arts and literature contravene modern democratic capitalism through their constitutively speculative, generative utopianism—their deliberate building of something other than what already exists, their formalization of other, different, better ideas and relations than what is already here. In departing from the merely made world and proposing other worlds, literature operates both the negative and affirmative poles of critique, positing imaginative, alluring alternatives to our raging, dystopian hellscape of capitalist contradiction, climate catastrophe, and insurgent global fascism. (398–99)

One might argue that implicit in Kornbluh’s prescription is a post-national understanding of literature, insofar as capitalism, White supremacy, and climate change are all already well-versed in moving post-nationally. I would like to suggest that novels of migrancy, in their always already post-national and persistently mobile aesthetic commitments, offer us “a mode of knowing (knowing language, knowing possibility, knowing sociality), precisely in the tradition of critique” (Kornbluh 399; emphasis in original). Indeed, to the extent that migration is a central thematic and formal feature, novels of migrancy exemplify the novel as critique in that they are literally on the move.
Rather than simply inaugurating new generic nomenclature, I use the term “novel of migrancy” to distinguish the novels in question from earlier ones that, however transnational in origin, remained tied to—and committed to reproducing in local contexts—the genetic affiliation with the nation: novels like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, or anything by Russell Banks. The novel of migrancy, by contrast, seeks to think beyond the nation: just as an earlier version of the novel helped invent the nation by serving as what Franco Moretti has called “the symbolic form of the nation-state” (20), we might understand the novel of migrancy as a harbinger of emerging forms of transnational organization.

To look for real-world analogues to what I am discussing, we might consider the caravan of Central American migrants that, in late 2018, refused a plan of regularization offered by the Mexican government. Under the terms of the “*Estás en Tu Casa*” (“You Are Home”) plan, part of a larger Central American migrant management program carried out by Mexico with the United States’ support, migrants would agree to remain in the states of Chiapas or Oaxaca. In exchange, they would be eligible to apply for a temporary work program and eventual regularized migrant status, as well as social services such as healthcare and education. The migrants voted and by majority rejected this plan. In a statement posted to Pueblo Sin Fronteras’ Facebook page, the caravan lists reasons for rejecting this plan, among them that it “does not truly respond to the causes of the Central American exodus, and therefore does not solve their needs from a perspective that respects their human rights in a holistic way.” The migrants further declare that they do not “want any more prison cities or prison states where migrant people are confined without freedom of movement.” Seizing on the spectacle of mobility, the migrants close their statement by calling “on civil society, on human rights organizations, and on people in general to be alert and watch our path to avoid, monitor and condemn any abuse or harassment against members of this exodus and those who accompany it” (emphasis added). In refusing a plan that formalizes a confined, contingent, and ultimately precarious existence, “the caravan strategy is predicated on the hope that the attention of others—the populations of the world, not the governments—will ultimately provide a measure of safety” (“Border”).

In their appeal to populations of people in general, rather than to a nation-state, the caravan gestures to an alternate political horizon inaugurated by their status as a mobile spectacle, visible in its mass to a global audience. It thus asks us to think about how “migration as an autonomous social movement, or a movement which poses a subject whose focus is obviously not—and cannot be—the electoral arena, suggests another political horizon altogether, in which mobility is a form of resistance and the basis for new subject positions within capitalism, considered in its global dimension” (“Border”). The caravan’s rejection
of regularization demonstrates how migration in this spectacular form “upsets [...] the assumption that the agency of politics is legible only insofar as it is documented or territorially sanctioned, and therefore can be translated through representational forms” (“Border”). The rejection of a regularized status within a nation-state particularizes a yet to be defined space of resistant being, and as such

the caravan forces us to contend with the political efficacy of these forms of self-activity that are indifferent or opposed to electoral contestation; that are registered instead in another terrain altogether; that measure their success by the degree that they cultivate political agency and construct organizational forms that point beyond the state and its apparatuses, beyond the nation, legal citizenship, and social partitions. (“Border”)

Novels of migrancy map alternate forms of transnational and collective politicization beyond state organizations in a manner that is similar to the migrant caravan movement, with its extra-national politics and foundational concern with transitional mobility.

Although I have been influenced by Caren Irr’s work, as I detail below, I also call such novels “novels of migrancy” to separate them from what Irr describes as an expanded version of U.S. fiction (see Toward the Geopolitical Novel). Irr’s work, for all its attention to transnational frameworks, ultimately resettles the novels she discusses within a national framework, thereby effacing the work they do in productively de-naturalizing the nation. What I am concerned with here is the sort of contemporary novel in which representations of the global movement of people, drugs, guns, and/or money, among other commodities, corresponds to the negotiation of permeable boundaries between genre, field, and habits of canonization. The most important effect of these novels is not simply representing transnational content, but refusing forms of established political or generic categorization.

The novel of migrancy works outside institutions, but is not wholly separate from them, any more than is literature itself. Among the sites where this form is becoming visible as a cohesive body of writing is within the economies of cultural prestige that circulate around major book prizes, including the Booker and the Pulitzer. Indeed, major book prizes are constituting engines for what we are now calling global fiction. The Booker in particular, with its inclusion of all fiction written in English and now even a translation prize, is creating a literary field in which the national or political designations that cordoned off bodies of fiction like American or postcolonial literature are no longer as rigid as they once, perhaps mistakenly, seemed to be. Indeed, to the extent that these designations were always permeable, prizes like the Booker are forcing readers, critics, and scholars to acknowledge how literary fields have never existed in isolation of each other, despite our best efforts and institutionalizing endeavors. Additionally, when prizes gather novels written in or translated into English from across the globe on long or
I argue this particular point using Chimamanda Adichie’s Americanah and Teju Cole’s Open City—both examples of novels of migrancy—in Harrison, “The Neoliberal Novel.”

**Novels of Migrancy**

In thinking about the ways that book prizes help to define trends in contemporary fiction, I am interested in how books like James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer*, Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, and Hamid’s *Exit West*, all mainstays of shortlists and prize winners in their year of publication, might be understood as exemplifying a new form that does not depend on national identification, but is instead organized around the transnational circulation of people and things in a manner that parallels the deregulated flow of neoliberal capital. In their literal depiction of the movement of people across borders, these four very different novels collectively address the circulation of codes, tropes, and strategies of representation for particular ethnic and racial groups. Moreover, they also address, at the level of critique, the relationship of such representation to processes of literary canonization. The metafictional and self-reflexive qualities of James’s...
and Nguyen’s novels continually draw the reader’s attention to the politics of reading and writing, and in the process thwart any easy conclusions about what it means to write about conflicts like the Vietnam war or the late 1970s in Jamaica. These are both places, not coincidentally, where the covert operations of the CIA culminate in the undermining of local governments, assassination attempts, and the growth of formidable narcotics and weapons trafficking networks. Likewise, despite their different settings—one takes place in a version of the global present, the other in an alternative antebellum United States—Hamid’s Exit West and Whitehead’s Underground Railroad look quite formally similar, since both are about the movement of stateless people across borders. In this way, both push the boundaries of realism itself by employing non-realistic devices as a way of not representing travel across borders. For Hamid, this is the unexplained door in space that allows refugees and others in his book to travel from an unnamed city to Mykonos to London to Marin County. For Whitehead, it is the very Whiteheadian device of a literal underground railroad connecting stops in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and points north.

The unnamed narrator of Nguyen’s The Sympathizer is the son of a Vietnamese woman and a French priest, was educated in America, and, in keeping with his biological and educational backgrounds, has worked as a dual agent for South Vietnamese officials and a CIA agent while also leaking information to North Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War. At the beginning of almost every chapter, this narrator signals in one way or another that we are reading the confession he has been compelled to write and revise while confined as a “patient” (rather than a “prisoner”) in a communist reeducation camp. He is captured while attempting to re-enter Vietnam as part of an American-sponsored plan to send troops back to overthrow the communist government. He tells us, “I had spent the last year since the ambush, rewriting the many versions of my confession, the latest of which the commandant now possessed,” after he had noted that “[l]ike Stalin, the commandant was a diligent editor, always ready to note my many errata and digressions and always urging me to delete, excise, reword, or add” (Nguyen 296). The narrator’s 295-page confession presents his divided loyalties to the commandant (and of course the reader). Having worked as a double agent since early adulthood, he considers himself a communist and a revolutionary, but he has also formed friendships with those who are supposed to be his enemies and whom he is supposed to be spying on. According to the Commandant, his sympathetic confession betrays “elitism and Western inclinations,” demonstrates firm conviction for neither side, and prompts the commissar who heads the camp to authorize his torture. The “final phase” of the narrator’s “reeducation” will be when he
is “transformed from an American into a Vietnamese once more” (307). Under extreme duress, he admits to complicity in the rape and torture of a female communist agent and in his father’s murder.

While his torture is successful in revealing to him the dangers of divided loyalty, it nonetheless causes a psychic split that is repaired by copying his confession. He says that “my drool dotted the pages as I saw my entire life unfold over the months it took to copy the confession. Gradually, as my bruised forehead healed, and as I absorbed my own words, I developed a growing sympathy for the man in these pages, the intelligence operative of doubtful intelligence.” He questions himself: “Was he a fool or too smart for his own good? Had he chosen the right side or the wrong side of history? And were not these the questions we should all ask ourselves? Or was it only me and myself who should be so concerned?” During the copying process, he also realizes that the answers to these questions “were not to be found in those pages” (357). He asks for more paper and begins to write about what happened after he confessed. In what remains of the novel, the narrator disassociates himself from the man represented in the pages of his confession, “a man with two minds,” for whom he begins to feel sorry. This man had not realized that such a man best belonged in a low-budget movie, a Hollywood film or perhaps a Japanese one about a military-grade science experiment gone terribly awry. How dare a man with two minds think he could represent himself much less anyone else, including his own recalcitrant people? They would never, in the end, be representable at all, regardless of what their representatives claimed. (358)

Here, we begin to see the allegorical dimensions of the narrative, through which the unnamed narrator’s French and Vietnamese heritage and American education make him into a symbol of Vietnam itself. Among the things skewered in this representation is both the centrality of the ideal citizen subject in ethnic national narratives and the kinds of cultural and entertainment commodities such allegorical treatments of subjectivity produce, such as films or novels with trusted native narrators. Yet to read the character simply as an allegory of hybrid nationality misses the formal moves through which the novel ultimately resists categories such as the nation altogether.

I have retold at length the portions of the novel that relate to the confession, the process of writing and revising it, and the questions it raises about the politics of literary representation in order to bring attention to something Nguyen himself says readers do not seem to notice: the novel’s metafictional preoccupations. Nguyen says, “I think that people have not really been up with that dimension of the novel, with how much the novel’s concerned with the act of writing and the act of critiquing, both of which are key to the mode of the confessional and self-criticism and so on, which are so fundamental to the book” (M. Nguyen and Fung 215). More than a framing device for the novel, the confession functions as its main metafictional vehicle. Moreover, structuring the
book around the confession encourages the reader to imagine the object she is holding—the book itself—as the narrator’s actual confession. As if to make sure we do not miss this point, on page 296 the narrator tells us that “[t]he commandant sighed and laid the final sheet of my confession on top of the 294 other pages that preceded it, stacked on a table by his chair.” The first 295 pages cover the narrator’s experiences from the fall of Saigon, when he arranged to escape with a group of officers, including “the General” he served as aide de camp, to the ambush where he is captured and taken to the reeducation camp, and they end with the moment at which he finally completes his confession satisfactorily. The final page that the commandant puts atop the other 294 is the one just before the page where the reader of the hardcover edition encounters the commandant laying down the final sheet (the text is revised to reflect the different pagination of the paperback edition). The book itself continues; after the narrator copies his confession post-torture, he continues to add to it in a manner that emphasizes authorial self-reflexivity.

Crucially, what comes after the confession, and occupies the remaining seventy-one pages of the novel, are protracted dialogues that culminate in complex metafictional and satirical critique of autochthony, nationalism, and writing. A reeducation designed to make the narrator Vietnamese reflects the troubling ways autochthony continues to organize literary studies, linking writers and texts geographically to the land of their birth. As Caroline Levine suggests, “[w]hen we equate birth with belonging, then, we are repeating and reinforcing the basic assumptions that drive nationalist ideologies—that nations are native formations, cultures, and values that grow as a coherent group, as if out of the ground” (653). Attendant with this belief are “arguments for racial purity, hatred or enslavement of outsiders, jingoist warmongering, and claims to rightful inheritance” (653-54). Levine reminds literary scholars that it is an “urgent obligation for us not only to expand our scholarly attention beyond the nation but also to refuse the nation’s restrictive and naturalizing models of belonging” (654). If in *The Sympathizer* the narrator’s confession is his life on the page, his torture by his captors breaks his body in order to bring forth the desired Vietnamese subject. On the one hand, the fact that the specially designed torture room is hyper-white, resembling paper, highlights the ways in which the narrator’s body and story converge during his torture and over the course of the book. On the other hand, there is also the allusion to the beginning of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, where Ellison’s narrator insists that “light confirms [his] reality, gives birth to [his] form” (7). Where light in Ellison dispels his narrator’s invisibility and defines his form as a racialized subject in the United States, in *The Sympathizer*, the light of the torture room confirms the absurd reality of attempting to bring forth an uncompromised autochthonous subject through writing. Moreover, that the narrator is only released from torture after he expresses the desire for death and pronounces the word “nothing” to signal his own psychic
decimation, also offers, in the fashion of the novel as critique, a symbolic representation of negated dialecticity.

James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is similarly preoccupied with how individuals write and revise representations, but James crucially avoids the trap of self-referentiality by giving his novel multiple competing narrators. For James, the form, politics, and voice a particular narrative should take is a central component of a novel that not only sees characters deliberating about how a story should be written or told, but that approaches the same story from the perspectives of fifteen narrators. At the center of his sprawling novel is a fictionalized version of the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976. This event transpires just short of halfway through the novel, however, and, as such, it is clear that there is far more afoot in Jamaica between 1976 and 1991 than this particular murder plot. For my purposes here, the most important facet of the novel’s various self-reflexive involvements with how to tell the story of a single event is the way in which the narrative is embedded in a mid-1970s moment on a Caribbean island that is implicitly global in its time and beyond. The attempt on the Singer’s life is inextricable from the CIA’s covert operations across the globe, including those in Vietnam, which are now a defining part of Cold War narratives. Also inextricable from this context are the ways in which these operations fostered the development of global routes that were subsequently used for traffic in illicit commodities, such as humans, narcotics, and weapons. In both novels, reflections on the work of writing and criticism function in a way that makes these connections more apparent.

Of the fifteen narrators in James’s novel, it is perhaps Demus, with his self-consciousness about self-representation, who most closely resembles the divided mind of Nguyen’s narrator. Crucially, the Demus sections also share *The Sympathizer*’s concern with who is allowed or has the resources to represent members of an underclass and with the shape such representations should take. A crucial similarity between the two novels is how both authors demonstrate the challenges to autonomy faced by each narrator over how his actions and motivations are represented in print. While different in form—Demus’s narrative is oral, Nguyen’s unnamed narrator’s is written—both narratives are confessions of sorts. Demus explains how he came to participate in the plot against the Singer’s life as one of eight would-be assassins. In addition, both Nguyen’s narrator and Demus are hyper-conscious of the forces of power that will mediate their confessions, the commandant and commissar in Nguyen’s novel and “the writer” in James’s.

Thus, just as Nguyen’s unnamed narrator finds himself with divided political loyalties because of the complexities of a national conflict that migrates with him and his compatriots to America, Demus’s decision to participate in the assassination attempt provides a crucial context for what becomes the war on drugs, waged on American soil. In the novel, Demus tells us that “this is what I want to say before the writer say it for

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2 Bob Marley is never named in the novel, but is instead referred to as “the Singer” throughout.
me. When the pain was so bad that only strong weed could help me, the only other thing that help was the Singer” (James 56). Demus’s awareness that there are writers interested in representing his story manifests itself in another of the novel’s narrators, Alex Pierce. Alex is a reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine, who goes rogue on the story his editor sent him to Jamaica to cover—whether or not Mick Jagger is cheating on his wife with local Black women—in favor of a bigger, more interesting story he imagines is developing around the Singer.

In many respects, Pierce is right. There is indeed a much bigger story. He says “there’s a version of this story that’s not really about him, but about the people around him, the ones who come and go that might actually provide a bigger picture than me asking him why he smokes ganja. Damn if I’m not fooling myself I’m Gay Talese again” (James 221). In many ways, this is what *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is: a story about the bigger picture. As I argue elsewhere, however, in “believing the Singer is key to accessing ‘the real Jamaica,’ Alex falsely imagines that Jamaican realness is a singular thing that can only be found in hyper-local sites like downtown ghettos or dancehalls, ignoring completely the presence and influence of operatives from a government intelligence agency from his own country” and thus missing a crucial part of the whole puzzle entirely (Harrison, “Excess”). He thinks the big picture is (a romanticized version of) the nation, when it is in fact the transnational forces remaking the nation through the global traffic of weapons, narcotics, and people that links Jamaica to the United States and Central America. In portraying the writer as American, myopic, and given to ethnocentric romanticizing, James demonstrates why a character like Demus would want to explain himself before the writer does so on his behalf.

Thus, Demus confesses, “[m]e is a wicked man, me is a sick man, but me would never join in this if I did know that he want to rub out the Singer. This hurt me brain worse than anything ever hurt me before” (James 57). Demus’s sections in the first half of the novel explain how the combination of a lifetime of exposure to traumatizing violence, humiliation, and abuse by anyone and everyone more powerful than him, his addiction to cocaine, and a character named Josey Wales knowing just the right ways to disparage the Singer led Demus to participate in the plot. Before the writer writes it for him, Demus tells his listener / reader that “people who say they don’t have a choice just too coward to choose” (James 56). His explanation is not one of regret or repentance for his role in an attempt against the life of the “reggae superstar of the world,” designed to explain and generate a demeaning sympathy for him and those like him. His involvement in the assassination plot is instead a choice he owns and one that to his mind is made consciously and courageously. Elsewhere, I have noted that Demus’s confession is a departure from “narrative depictions of meek and righteous sufferers who are caught without voices and choices within their local disenfran-
chising circumstances, and who encourage in readers not only sympathy but also, perhaps, charity to help them out of the quandary their inept governments created” (Harrison, “Excess”). In declaring his choice to participate in this violence as an act of courage, rather than cowardice, “Demus is critical of how writers skew such agency and intentionality—even as it is exercised by violent men—in the service of telling a particular kind of story about a specific place and its people that consequently bolsters geopolitical divisions between the powerful and the powerless” (Harrison, “Excess”).

Nonetheless, as the novel draws to a close, Demus is long dead and Alex, fifteen years after the assassination attempt, finally attains his literary journalistic aspiration—his Gay Talese piece—through the publication of his real Jamaican story: a multi-part series for The New Yorker titled “A Brief History of Seven Killings—A Crack House, A Massacre and the Making of a Crime Dynasty” (654). In this piece, Pierce attempts to pull together the strands that connect the 1976 assassination attempt, the growth of an international narcotics trafficking empire, and a 1985 crack house massacre in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Unfortunately, Alex only gets to publish four of the seven projected parts, because the series attracts the attention of violent Jamaican gang members who work in the international drug trade, and who eventually come after him for exposing their activity. Even more importantly, the article is still missing the critical pieces of the puzzle that reveals the CIA’s complicity in the drugs and weapons trade. Pierce thus tells a story of illicit criminal activity that merely translates his previous stereotypes about Jamaica onto a larger stage, and misses the forces that destabilized a democratically elected government in Jamaica and decimated African American communities in New York. Given the massacre’s Brooklyn setting, James probably also wants us to remember how the violence occasioned by the drug trade lowered property values in ways that ushered in an era of racialized gentrification. The narrative of Alex’s journey towards writing this series of articles is but one of the ways James’s novel manifests its self-reflexive and metafictional preoccupations. But it is perhaps the one that most clearly demonstrates how easy it is for individual narrators to miss the larger picture, even when they think they are looking for it—and how, by contrast, the truth emerges only across narrators’ various stories.

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In the accounts I have given of Nguyen’s and James’s books, I have considered how contemporary book prizes pick winners that combine two interesting—and not necessarily connected—elements: formal strategies of unreliable narration, and thematic concerns that transcend national boundaries, such as migration, civil unrest, and conflict. Even prize-winning books that do not seem to share these qualities on some
level in fact do. Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, for instance, takes place solely in the United States, but it is in fact concerned with migration across internal state borders by characters who—being enslaved—are legally denied citizenship in any nation. With this in mind, I would like to shift my discussion to Hamid’s and Whitehead’s novels in order to show why the parameters of the novel of migrancy are not simply geographical but formal. In brief, this is the case because these novels attempt to imagine a form of transnational narration that does not yet exist. If we believe, with some critics, that the novel invented the nation, we might say that it is now inventing whatever comes after. Ironically, it is in their reticence in representing the processes of movement from one place to the next that both Hamid’s and Whitehead’s novels gesture towards the counter-hegemonic structure necessary for representing what might come after nation.

Rather than immediately moving to fix *Exit West* and *The Underground Railroad* in their historical moment, I would like to leave such connections provisionally open while I consider some of the otherwise contingent-seeming formal correspondences between the two books. For instance, both focus on a heterosexual couple whose failure to cohere in the expected manner (Hamid’s couple breaks up, while Whitehead’s never quite coalesces) might be taken as a commentary on the European-descended novel’s traditional reliance on marriage as a metonym for other social forms. We might also here consider the more cynical understanding of marriage as a means of property consolidation and transfer. To the extent that marriage has functioned in a brokerage relation to property rights, the couples’ failure to cohere demonstrates the ways in which that avenue to power consolidation is unavailable to either of the couples—either because they are property themselves, or because they live in places of violence, turmoil, and contingency where shared property is no longer conceivable or possible. In this way, both novels reflect their interest in places that lack the bureaucracies that legalize and legitimize people’s relationships to each other and their options for building sustainable lives.

The magical doors in *Exit West*, through which characters exit one country and enter another, provide near-instantaneous transportation accompanied by a feeling of disorientation. In one instance the narrative effects a scene change from one of its protagonists, Saeed, working in an unnamed city, to a door about to open in Sydney by invoking the motion involved in sending and receiving an email: “as Saeed’s email was being downloaded from a server and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney neighborhood of Surry Hills” (Hamid 7). Hamid’s doors parallel an email’s ability to travel (almost) instantly across space. In the latter movement there is an electronic collapsing of space; in the former both space and time are collapsed in an instance of travel that occurs much faster than it would take to cover the actual distance from one place to the next.
While Whitehead’s underground railroad is anything but instantaneous, there is not much to describe about the trip. When the escaped slaves Cora and Caesar take their first voyage, from Georgia to South Carolina, the engineer makes a point of telling them to “[l]ook outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America.” There follows, however, only a paragraph of description of the boxcar in which they travel, ending with Cora “look[ing] through the slats” to see only “darkness, mile after mile.” The next paragraph, the last one in the chapter, begins, “When they next stepped into the sunlight, they were in South Carolina” (Whitehead 69-70).

In Whitehead’s case, we might attribute this reluctance to represent movement through space to his incorporation of the prose genre of the slave narrative. There, too, travel from the slaveholding South to the nominally free North often goes unrepresented, for very practical reasons. Here, for instance, is Frederick Douglass at the moment, in Chapter XI of his Narrative, when it comes time to relate his own flight from bondage:

I now come to that part of my life during which I planned, and finally succeeded in making, my escape from slavery. Before narrating any of the peculiar circumstances, I deem it proper to make known my intention not to state all the facts connected with the transaction. My reasons for pursuing this course may be understood from the following: First, were I to give a minute statement of all the facts, it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties. Secondly, such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore among them; which would, of course, be the means of guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling chains. (59)

Likewise Harriet Jacobs, who devotes two chapters to her own trip north (which begins years after her own escape to various retreats in the town where her master lived), acknowledges the need for reticence: “I was to escape in a vessel; but I forbear to mention any further particulars” (Jacobs 125). This reticence about particulars is not necessarily a feature of The Underground Railroad’s novelistic antecedents. The most famous neo-slave narrative, for instance, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, devotes a great deal of detail to the scene of Denver’s birth, with the help of a White woman named Amy, during Sethe’s escape. Of course, Whitehead is nothing if not alive to genre conventions, but the question remains why he might draw on this one in particular. The practical purpose served by this convention in nonfiction slave narratives written before the Thirteenth Amendment obviously does not apply to a work of historical fiction—let alone one set in an alternate version of the antebellum South where more than just the underground railroad differs from history as we know it. Historical transpositions aside, we might here note that Whitehead is, like Hamid, writing about people who are fleeing an oppressive situation across multiple borders.
In Hamid’s case, we can attribute the reluctance to represent travel to three provisionally related ideas. The first arises as a condition of Nadia and Saeed’s refugee status, and the ways in which their movements, as well as the movements of others we see emerging from doors throughout the novel, cannot be accounted for—or, to use bureaucratic language, cannot be documented by legal immigration systems. In this respect, we might understand the unrepresentability of travel across borders in both novels as a reflection of the absence of bureaucratic structures that make such travel possible. How do stateless people move across state borders? We do not really know.

The second idea is the contrasting relationship that Hamid draws between the precarity of life as a refugee and the security and stability offered by owning property in cities where the cost of living is spectacularly high. Here it is important to note that Sydney, London, Tokyo, and San Francisco are among the sites where refugees emerge from doors in the novel. The novel describes the portal in Sydney as follows: “the 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” (Hamid 8). Through the allusion to Conrad’s novella, the colonial baggage, literary and historical, of Marlow’s iconic voyage up the Congo River also arrives in this bedroom, with all its attendant assumptions and prejudices. The emergence of a man, “with dark skin and dark, wooly hair” from a dark closet into the bedroom of a pale sleeping woman is a conventional setup for violence. Nonetheless, Hamid disrupts the predictable narrative of home invasion by portraying the dark man emerging from the womblike darkness, of the closet, and not the pale woman lying in bed, as the vulnerable party. Hamid contrasts the relative safety of a home with a security system, even with a stranger emerging from an equally strange closet portal, with the refugee’s experience of “[g]rowing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances” in which he became “aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat” (Hamid 9). To the extent that refugees are not only stateless but essentially homeless, in locating Saeed and Nadia’s—and a few other migrants’—exits into cities with some of the highest costs of living and property values in the world, Hamid juxtaposes precarity and security and asks us to think about the relationship between the two.

The third idea, finally, is the relationship of simultaneity in a digitally connected though increasingly unequal world. By relating the first appearance of a door to an email, the novel also demonstrates an ironic link between technological connectivity and precarity. This link later gestures towards a kind of connectivity that is unseen, beyond national frameworks, and is construed as a kind of normalized extra-national precarity. Describing his protagonist Nadia’s time in London, Hamid writes that “once as Nadia sat on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone across the street from a detachment of troops and a tank she thought she saw online a photograph of herself sitting on the steps
of a building reading the news on her phone across the street from a detachment of troops and a tank, and she was startled, and wondered how this could be, how she could both read this news and be this news” (157). This disorienting simultaneity of existence enabled by digital media is an example of how the novel compounds moments of inexplicable motion, parallelism, and simultaneity to signal the various processes necessary for apprehending the circumstances of instability of our present. The structures and practices that emerge around these processes do not serve to clarify or represent what is missing, but rather to normalize precarity as the status quo.

When Saeed and Nadia make it to Marin, a town in the hills overlooking San Francisco, “[w]ireless data signals were strong, and they secured a solar panel and battery set with a universal outlet, which accepted plugs from all around the world, and a rainwater collector fashioned from synthetic fabric and a bucket, and dew collectors that fit inside plastic bottles like the filaments of upside-down lightbulbs, and so life, while basic, was not quite as rough, nor as cut off, as otherwise it might have been” (Hamid 194-95). Their final dwelling place in the novel is thus not one that resembles anything we have come to think of as safe or stable. At the most basic level, there is no state-provided electricity or running water. Nonetheless, in the absence of state resources, refugees like Nadia and Saeed make do, and in the process demonstrate the circumstances of undocumented stateless existence.

In not realistically representing travel, I would like to suggest, and in linking it to other phenomena that are similarly difficult to represent, Hamid’s novel does two interrelated things. First, it demonstrates how our contemporary transnational realities are punctuated by motions and relations that we are unable to document or explain. While Nadia, Saeed, and others experience travel through the doors as a relatively safe and easy process, there are others like two Filipino girls who emerge in Tokyo, or a family who exits in Dubai, who are not as lucky. Here, we might say, the book adopts the perspective of its first-world readers, for whom those living in precarity are not visible, at least until they turn up in our news feeds as pictures of drowned toddlers like Alan Kurdi, or as headlines about migrant children separated from their parents and lost in U.S. custody, or as videos of steadily growing migrant caravans moving north. This is, perhaps, a general feature of the novel of migrancy, which juxtaposes spaces of visibility and invisibility that are also spaces of humanity and its denial. In not representing travel, Hamid demonstrates the extra-legal and extra-national nature of not only the travel, but the systems developing to deal with them—systems such as the “Estás en Tu Casa” plan of regularization—and thus more pressingly the novel also demonstrates the ways in which the precarity of life as a refugee becomes normalized.

As this suggests, finally, the novel of migrancy is not just about trying to make the invisible visible, although this is certainly one of its
goals. It is also, crucially, about limning or seeking to call into existence, without really representing, conditions for a global framework that does not yet exist. Put in the most direct way, we do not yet have systems in place that would allow us to imagine paths to security for those living in precarious situations across the globe. This is no accident, since, as economists and others have made clear, capital needs national borders to move across in its search for the lowest tax rates, the cheapest labor, and the fewest regulations. In pointing to, if not quite illuminating, these “dark places of the earth,” the novel of migrancy nudges us toward imagining a post-national world in which travel from place to place could be represented because it would be something other than furtive, confusing, and purposefully obscure.

Works Cited


