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**"Geography is destiny": Globalization, Space and Mobility in Karen Tei Yamashita's
Tropic of Orange and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West***

“Zeměpis je osud”: Globalizace, prostor a mobilita v *Tropic of Orange* Karen Tei Yamashity a
Exit West Mohsina Hamida

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Abstract

This thesis examines and compares the effects of globalization, spatial organization and mobility restrictions in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. It focuses particularly on their impact on personal identity and community organization, exploring how the novels illustrate the diverse consequences of globalization within urban spaces, socioeconomic hierarchies and cultural traditions. Ultimately, the analysis aims to shed light on the complexities of a globalized world through their literary representations.

The novels' diverse socio-economic and geopolitical settings provide a foundation for a thorough exploration of globalization processes, such as rapid movements of people, information and goods, and technological advancements in communications and transportation. Such processes challenge traditional notions of time and space, shaping the characters' relationships and identities. As populations become more mobile, culture becomes deterritorialized and identities become hybrid, no longer tied solely to nationality but transformed by alternative modes of existence. These dynamics lead to increased cultural diversity, mobility, and interconnectedness, while simultaneously increasing socioeconomic disparities, enabling political hegemony of capital and spatial transformation. Migration, diaspora communities, and multiculturalism are central phenomena that both authors discuss and develop in their narratives.

Yamashita situates her story in Los Angeles, which serves as a microcosm of globalization, and examines how individuals from different social backgrounds experience and navigate the complexities of urban life. In Hamid's novel, the transformation of a city under a militant siege forces its characters to migrate, challenging them to reevaluate their value systems and form new communities of belonging. This thesis focuses on the urban segregation and spatial organization of Los Angeles in *Tropic of Orange*, exploring the consequences of migration, and the emergence of new cultural networks under globalization and the neoliberal agenda of capitalistic frameworks. The thesis then shifts the focus to Hamid's *Exit West*, analyzing alternative approaches to social and spatial organization, the personal transformations of migrants' inner worlds, and ultimately, hopeful reimaginations to rigid structures and mentalities that challenge contemporary global orders.

To conclude, the thesis provides an overview and comparison of the two novels, highlighting their complementary views on globalized societies and the transformations experienced by individuals and communities. It emphasizes the emotional and socioeconomic

changes that migrants undergo and critiques the capitalist motives of international institutions that exploit marginalized workers. Both authors use magical realist techniques to depict the time-space transformations engendered by globalization and offer hopeful visions for a shared future beyond neoliberal structures.

Key Words: globalization, transnationalism, postcolonial literature, ethnicity, identity, community, global village, migration, mobility, setting, magical realism, Karen Tei Yamashita, Mohsin Hamid

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá a porovnává dopady globalizace, prostorové organizace a omezení mobility v románu *Tropic of Orange* Karen Tei Yamashity a *Exit West* Mohsina Hamida. Zaměřuje se zejména na jejich dopad na osobní identitu a organizaci komunit a zkoumá, jak romány ilustrují různorodé důsledky globalizace v prostorách města, socioekonomických hierarchiích a kulturních tradicích. Ve své podstatě je cílem práce poukázat na složitost globalizovaného světa skrz jeho literární reprezentace.

Rozmanité socioekonomické a geopolitické prostředí románů nabízí podklad pro důkladnou analýzu globalizačních procesů, jako jsou rychlé pohyby lidí, informací a zboží a pokroky v komunikačních a dopravních technologiích. Takové procesy podřívají tradiční představy o prostoru a čase a utvářejí vztahy a identity postav. Se zvýšenou pohyblivostí populací se kultura odpojuje od území a osobnosti se stávají hybridními, již nevázanými pouze na národnost, ale změněnými alternativními způsoby žití. Tyto dynamiky vedou jak k zvýšené kulturní rozmanitosti, mobilitě a provázanosti, tak zároveň zdůrazňují socioekonomické rozdíly, umožňují politickou nadvládu kapitálu a mění prostor. Migrace, diaspory a multikulturalismus jsou centrálními tématy, které oba autoři rozvíjejí ve svých románech.

Yamashita umísťuje svůj příběh do města Los Angeles, které slouží jako mikrokosmos globalizace, a zkoumá, jak se jednotlivci z různých společenských prostředí pohybují skrze komplexity městského života. V Hamidově románu se prostory města mění pod obležením militantů, což nutí jeho postavy emigrovat, přehodnotit svůj dosavadní způsob života a tvořit nové komunity s pocitem sounáležitosti. Práce se zaměřuje na městská rozdělení a prostorovou organizaci Los Angeles v *Tropic of Orange*. Dále zkoumá dopady migrace a vznik nových kulturních sítí v globalizované společnosti, kde dominují neoliberalní agendy kapitalistických magnátů. Poté se práce zaměřuje na Hamidův *Exit West*, kde analyzuje alternativní přístupy k společenské a prostorové organizaci, osobní proměny vnitřních světů migrantů a reimaginace rigidních struktur a mentalit, které zpochybňují současné světové řády.

Na závěr práce poskytuje přehled a srovnání obou románů a zdůrazňuje jejich doplňující se perspektivy na globalizovanou společnost a na proměny, které zažívají jednotlivci i komunity. Zdůrazňuje emoční i socioekonomické změny, kterými migranti prochází, a kritizuje kapitalistické motivy mezinárodních institucí, které vykořisťují dělnickou třídu. Oba autoři používají techniky

magického realismu k znázornění proměn v čase a prostoru vyvolaných globalizací a nabízí nadějnou vizi pro společnou budoucnost mimo neoliberalní struktury.

Klíčová slova: globalizace, transnacionalismus, postkoloniální literatura, etnicita, identita, komunita, globální vesnice, migrace, pohyblivost, prostředí, magický realismus, Karen Tei Yamashita, Mohsin Hamid

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1 Introduction

“Titles like *Maquiladoras & Migrants. Undocumented, Illegal & Alien: Immigrants vs. Immigration. Talks about globalization of capital. Capitalization of poverty. Internationalization of the labor force. Exploitation and political expediency. Devaluation of currency and foreign economic policy. Economic intervention.* Big words like that. Enough to get back smoking again.”
—Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*

The continuous advances in technology and high-speed transportation have created a profoundly interconnected world. In this era of constant movement and seemingly limitless contact, less developed, so-called periphery countries can easily participate in the same processes and experience the same events in real time as metropolitan centers and core countries. With rapid flows of images and people between places, distances feel shorter, and the world seems to be shrinking. High-speed communication technologies allow cultures to be in immediate contact, making borders blurred and porous. Although effortless mobility remains a privilege not afforded by many, globalization radically reorders time and space across the globe. Yet, even as globalization produces movement and interconnections, “[t]he suppression of distance by modern technology, transportation, and telecommunications has only enhanced the sense of place, and of displacement, in the age of globalization.”¹

The role of space and mobility fundamentally shapes our understanding of the world and the connections we create within it. By analyzing space in literature, contemporary critics and spatially oriented literary studies explore the active role of spaces and their relevance in both real life and imagined worlds. Literature asks the reader to think beyond their own experiences and to relate to “the realities of many identities that are overlooked, underrepresented, or oppressed.”² In doing so, it challenges traditional frameworks and attitudes that are often rooted in Western-centrism and perpetuated by capitalist power structures. By both reinforcing and resisting hegemony, literature and art can emerge as subtle yet subversive forces in global resistance.

¹ Robert T. Tally Jr., series editor’s preface to *Mobility, Spatiality, and Resistance in Literary and Political Discourse*, ed. by Christian Beck (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), vi.

² Christian Beck ed., “Introduction,” in *Mobility, Spatiality, and Resistance in Literary and Political Discourse*, 1.

This thesis examines fictional representations of contemporary dynamics of space, mobility and globalization in *Tropic of Orange* (1997) by Karen Tei Yamashita and *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid. Both authors have personal experiences with migration, making the themes of “home” and belonging deeply significant in their work. While their novels are not explicitly autobiographical, they are set in locations the authors have directly experienced. These works offer a personal perspective on the world of globalization, with an emphasis on minority representation, ethnic heritage, and the lived experiences of migration.

Tropic of Orange and *Exit West* serve as foundations for exploring the politics of mobility and space in a globalized world, featuring characters who navigate its challenges and inequalities. In *Tropic of Orange*, the seven main characters reflect a spectrum of cultural identities, representing various generations of immigrants with diverse ethnic backgrounds and differing attitudes toward their heritage, current socio-economic status and the rhetoric of contemporary multiculturalism. In *Exit West*, the protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, experience transformations that result in divergent approaches to community building and adaptation within new social and cultural environments. Despite their evolving differences, the couple’s journey together illustrates resilience and offers hope in the midst of uncertain times.

To begin, this introductory chapter presents the theoretical framework of the thesis, introducing the concepts of globalization, space/spatiality, and mobility, along with a brief overview of the authors’ biographies and writing styles. While various processes of globalization and heightened mobility facilitate the movement of people, goods and information across borders, they simultaneously perpetuate socio-economic inequality both locally and globally. Space and mobility emerge as sites of power imbalances, as nation-states attempt to control who moves through certain territories and how they occupy them. Globalization also fundamentally reshapes our understanding of time and space: distances feel shorter due to virtual connections, and our dynamic relationships with space and movement play a significant role in producing social space and forming communities.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita takes the concept of a shrinking globalized space quite literally. By implementing elements of the fantastic and magical realism, she situates her characters in an elastic microcosm of globalization in Los Angeles. Chapter Two of this thesis analyzes how space, mobility and globalization manifest in the novel. Through various characters, both real and magical, Yamashita allegorizes the impacts of globalization on individuals across the socio-

economic pyramid. She critiques the power imbalance and cultural hegemony perpetuated by capitalist structures and neoliberal policies. The first subchapter examines urban racial and class segregation and the power dynamics underscoring the spatial organization of Los Angeles and how those can be overthrown through community action. The second subchapter shifts focus to the changing cultural landscapes of globalization and the allegorical confrontation between the Global North and the Global South, challenging prevailing notions of global interconnectedness. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how physical and social mobility shape migrant identities and personal relationships, shedding light on the oppressive nature of border policies.

Similarly, Hamid's *Exit West*, a more recent novel, allows its characters to escape their circumstances through magical doors that dissolve borders and collapse distance. As Saeed and Nadia traverse diverse global locations, Hamid examines the opportunities, privileges, and sacrifices of mobility. Mobile individuals, no longer defined solely by their nation, face challenges that are physical, economic, but mainly, emotional. Chapter Three opens by exploring the changing spatial dynamics of cities in *Exit West*, the creation of new spaces—both virtual and off grid—and their effects on communities. The second subchapter discusses migration's significant impact on individuals' senses of belonging and value systems, as well as on global structures. Finally, the chapter highlights Hamid's message that by universalizing the migration experience and focusing on our shared temporality, literature offers a hopeful vision for a more equal and interconnected future.

Ultimately, the thesis aims to highlight the power imbalances inherent in contemporary globalized societies and analyze how these imbalances are portrayed in the two novels. Despite being published twenty years apart, Yamashita and Hamid use similar devices—such as metaphors and allegorical characters—to reflect current systematic inequalities, while critiquing key discussions within globalization discourses. Through analysis and comparison of the two novels, we can better understand the evolving nature of globalization and its effects on society and individuals. By analyzing human relationships with space and mobility, along with the underlying power dynamics that shape them, literature emerges as a powerful tool to spark conversations, critique rigid traditional systems, and inspire change.

1.1 Globalization

The world of globalization is undeniably one of ceaseless movement and interaction. In this interconnected world, cultures engage daily, and goods are exchanged abundantly. Borders and boundaries become increasingly fluid and abstract, enabling closer interactions. Economist Theodore Levitt first coined the term “globalization” in his 1983 essay “The Globalization of Market,” and it quickly gained traction in discussions of the growing global economy of the late 20th century. Since then, academics and critics across disciplines, like economy, political science, sociology and cultural studies, have extensively studied the processes and complexities of globalization.³

To introduce the intricate world of globalization and examine this complex phenomenon, Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo offer a particularly profound perspective, noting that the study of globalization is “preoccupied not just with mapping the shape taken by the particular flows of capital, people, goods, images, and ideologies that crisscross the globe, but also with the experiences of people living in specific localities when more and more of their everyday lives are contingent on globally extensive social processes.”⁴ In other words, understanding globalization requires focusing not only on large-scale economic or political processes, but also on local experiences of individuals and the overall cultural dynamics shaped by globalization. By centering the everyday lives of subjects within a complex and interconnected world of and in motion, one can study how individuals and communities “mediate the processes of globalization [and] respond to [them] in culturally specific ways.”⁵

While globalization affects everyone, its consequences on individuals and communities are distributed unevenly. As Inda and Rosaldo point out, “the very processes that produce movement and linkages also promote immobility, exclusion, and disconnection.”⁶ While some individuals or groups have sufficient resources to enjoy the freedom to travel, read international news with no restriction, and consume foreign media, many disadvantaged communities at the bottom of socio-economic pyramids remain excluded from these global networks, being restricted in movement and having limited access to transportation and long distance communication technologies.

³ Those include Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Ulrich Beck, as well as others who are directly referenced below.

⁴ Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, “Introduction: A World in Motion,” in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 5.

⁵ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 5.

⁶ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 6.

Similarly, literary studies analyze the themes and semantics of globalization. Globalization entails the vast socio-economic changes that are “frequently associated with neoliberalism and include the deregulated expansion of speculative capital; rapid technological development, especially in communicative technology; the transnationalization of production and the weakening of labor movements; the reforming of some international trade agreements and an increasing multinationalization of some corporations.”⁷ These exhaustive changes have led to extensive interdisciplinary research that explores the effects of globalization in various areas and articulates the new phenomena it produces, such as “deterritorialization” or “disembedding.” *Literature and Globalization* describes “[t]he constantly shifting topologies and movements of technology, people and money” which have been represented through metaphors like “scapes” and “flows.”⁸ This work highlights how our connections to remote places have resulted in a social “distanciation” while, paradoxically, “improved travel networks seem to banish distance through the ‘compression’ of space.”⁹ These concepts, explored by canonical figures like Arjun Appadurai, Anthony Giddens and David Harvey, have become central to globalization studies.

In recent decades, the latest technological advancements have profoundly reshaped our experience of space and our dynamic relationship to it. These innovations shrink perceived distances and create virtual communities, allowing people to share the same digital space without sharing physical space. Video calls, remote work, and live-streamed events enable social life to exist outside the confines of locality. Remote parts of the world can be in active conversation with the dominant urban centers without requiring physical transport and shared territory. These technological advances, particularly in information and communication, facilitate the spread of cultural elements, whether these include language, traditions, values, or consumer products, across national borders. Migration is on the rise and boosts these flows, increasing the rise of global cities and the formation of transnational communities.

While globalization entails greater economic, political and cultural interdependence, it also suggests a fundamental shift in our understanding of time and space. By linking remote regions with powerful metropolitan centers, globalization represents a “fundamental reordering of time

⁷ Liam Connell and Nicky Marsh, eds., introduction to *Literature and Globalization: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011), xiv.

⁸ Connell and Marsh, introduction to *Literature and Globalization*, xiv.

⁹ Connell and Marsh, introduction to *Literature and Globalization*, xiv.

and space.”¹⁰ David Harvey describes this phenomenon as “time-space compression,” which “involves the ‘shrinking’ of space and the shortening of time.”¹¹ Modern technologies and sped-up social and economic processes make geographical distance less of a barrier to human activity. Today, people in one place can witness events in distant locations in real-time regardless of distance and decisions made in one part of the world can have immediate impact elsewhere.

Anthony Giddens offers a similar concept, “time-space distanciation,” which refers to the stretching of social and other interactions across the globe.¹² He defines globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”¹³ This disruption of the separation of the local and the global creates “a significant dimension of the new spatiality” where borders shift from physical and national to more abstract forms.¹⁴ This dynamic relationship between the local and the global underlines much of contemporary globalization discourse.

Sociologist John Urry highlights how the erasure of distance facilitated by radio, television and the internet transforms spatiality, creating a so-called “global village” and “blurring what is private and what is public, [...] what is near and what is far.”¹⁵ The rapid transportation of images and information interlinks people and places into global networks that foster a sense of false intimacy and closeness. However, Sue-Im Lee critiques Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the global village, arguing that it “fundamentally appeals to primordialism (human family, tribal drums) in translating high-speed electronic medium into a social relationality of intimacy, cooperativeness, and familiarity.”¹⁶ She argues that the universalist portrayal of globalization is misleading, being “unidirectional and imperialist [in] nature,” and exposes the neoliberal realities underlying Western policies, such as the NAFTA agreement.¹⁷

Despite McLuhan’s optimistic framework, many scholars further dispute the idea that globalization is homogenizing, unifying or universally beneficial. The uneven hegemony of Western imperial powers and capitalist corporations dominate international economics and much

¹⁰ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 5.

¹¹ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 6.

¹² Giddens introduces this term in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990).

¹³ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁴ Chris Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (May 2006): 156, <https://doi.org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1177/1368431006063330>.

¹⁵ John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000), 69.

¹⁶ Sue-Im Lee, “‘We Are Not The World’: Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic Of Orange*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 506, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0049>.

¹⁷ Lee, “We Are Not The World,” 508.

of the socio-political discourse, shaping global values and policies. On extraterritoriality, Matthew Hart argues that “what we think of as ‘global’ space is the product of agreements, conflicts, and compromises between national states” and globalization is solely “the long historical project of national institutions and elites.”¹⁸ His perspective highlights the artificiality and underlying power dynamics of globalization, exposing its exploitative character.

One consequence of globalization is the deterritorialization of culture. “Traditionally tied to the idea of a fixed territory,” culture is now “highly mobile,” as Inda and Rosaldo argue.¹⁹ Various cultural processes “transcend specific territorial boundaries” as people cross national borders.²⁰ The flow of culture is often asymmetrical, predominantly moving from the First World (West) to the Third World. This unidirectional flow has given rise to the discourse of cultural imperialism, West-centrism, and Americanization. The spread of American or Western cultural goods, enabled by capitalist consumer logic and monopolized communication systems, contributes to “the absorption of peripheral cultures into a homogenized global monoculture of consumption.”²¹ This dynamic entails the assimilation of certain cultural values, political discourse, and even everyday practices as dress, diet, and language.

Yet, as Inda and Rosaldo point out, this view of cultural imperialism oversimplifies reality by “construct[ing] Third World subjects as passive consumers of imported cultural goods.”²² While cultural flows are often uneven, they are not entirely unidirectional, and culture is not entirely “free-floating.” Instead, it is reinstalled in new spaces, creating a process better described as “reterritorialization.”²³ Migrants and transnational communities are “mobile subjects who draw on diverse assemblages of meanings and locate themselves in different geographies simultaneously.”²⁴ They bring their own cultural values and influences to the dominant West, or vice versa, creating new blends and hybrid forms in areas such as gastronomy, music, art, and religion.

While these transformations can also contribute to the rise of fundamentalist ideologies and intensified restrictive policies, Yamashita and Hamid offer more hopeful visions of

¹⁸ Mathew Hart, *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 4, 10, <https://doi.org/10.7312/hart18838>.

¹⁹ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 10-11.

²⁰ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 11.

²¹ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 14.

²² Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 15.

²³ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 11-12.

²⁴ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 19.

globalization. They emphasize how the dynamic relationship and active communication between local and global cultures create more heterogeneous and dynamic globalized societies, with blurred boundaries and new forms of communities. For a similar reason, Noam Chomsky retains the term globalization with a more optimistic interpretation with a “possibility of an international integration outside of the neo-liberal agenda.”²⁵ Similarly, David Graeber critiques the superficiality of many international institutions, arguing that they do not represent “real globalization.” He claims that if globalization is genuinely understood as “the effacement of borders and the free movement of people, possessions and ideas,” then it remains “a great idea.”²⁶ Imagined outside of capitalist and neoliberal structures, a world of shared cultures and open opportunities for all feels almost utopian.

While acknowledging globalization’s current injustices, fiction emerges as a powerful tool for exploring possibilities outside of the status quo. Turning to literature’s capacity to imagine new worlds, writers can play a role in “reimagin[ing] the whole set of relations between political power and its spatial expression.”²⁷ Both Yamashita and Hamid, though writing in English from educated and affluent backgrounds, share the experience of migrating and searching for a sense of home as minority citizens in predominantly white nations like the United States or Great Britain. Their works critique the effects and consequences of globalization, addressing audiences who are often comfortable, established and privileged. Through reading, such audiences are exposed to unfamiliar experiences, encouraging empathy and inspiring action. Envisioning a world where people come together through shared humanity and temporality, rejecting traditional rigid structures creates space for direct action and transformation. “It’s important for people to imagine futures that do involve huge amounts of change and yet where our grandchildren can be all right. Writing this novel for me almost became a form of activism,” says Hamid, reminding us that envisioning a better world is the first step toward creating it.²⁸

²⁵ Connell and Marsh, introduction to *Literature and Globalization*, xv.

²⁶ David Graeber, “David Graeber,” by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, April 4, 2006, <https://charlierose.com/videos/10730>.

²⁷ Alex Langstaff, “Depicting Extraterritoriality: An Interview with Matthew Hart,” *Journal of the History of Ideas BLOG*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.jhiblog.org/2021/02/17/depicting-extraterritoriality-interview-matthew-hart/>.

²⁸ Carl Wilkinson, “Mohsin Hamid: ‘I’m back!’ ‘Why? Are you crazy?’” *Financial Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/fa70bbb2-035d-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12>.

1.2 Space

The experience of space and humanity's relationship to it transform radically under the forces of globalization. By analyzing representations of space in literature, contemporary critics and spatially oriented literary studies explore the active role of spatial dynamics in both real life and imagined worlds. In his discussion of the role of social space and literature in political activism, Christian Beck argues that modern ideologies, concepts and theories—such as the postcolonial era, technological dominion, and neoliberal systems and policies—make spatial analysis crucial for understanding contemporary culture through literary representations.²⁹ He observes that the “spatial turn” of the late 20th century brought more focus on “the ways in which spaces and places construct identities, behaviors, expectations, communication, and politics.”³⁰

Fiction, with its capacity for imaginative thought, challenges conventional realities by using extensive metaphors to portray the “time-space compression” brought about by globalization processes. Considerable attention has shifted from physical space alone to “the experience of place and of displacement, while exploring the interrelations between lived experience and a more abstract or unrepresentable spatial network that subtly or directly shapes it.”³¹ Literature's ability to introduce readers to unfamiliar experiences gives it the potential to shape new perspectives and offer alternatives to exploitative and oppressive systems. By focusing on the evolving relationship between space and displacement, writers critique power dynamics that manifest in society and expose their interconnections. Reimagining space and its dynamic interactions with human life creates opportunities to rethink how we engage with the world and understand culture. As Hamid remarks, “[m]ost novels aren't directly credited with starting wars. Yet fiction still instigates change.”³²

Scholars have long moved beyond understanding space in purely mathematical, logical and easily defined terms. They now discuss a multitude of complex and multifaceted spaces, including those that are “geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, [and] global.”³³ An influential thinker Henri Lefebvre,

²⁹ Beck, “Introduction,” 1.

³⁰ Beck, “Introduction,” 1.

³¹ Tally Jr., series editor's preface to *Mobility, Spatiality, and Resistance*, vi.

³² Mohsin Hamid and Francine Prose, “Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/books/review/does-fiction-have-the-power-to-sway-politics.html>.

³³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 8.

renowned for his concept of the “Right to the City,” provides a critical analysis of socially constructed space through an anti-capitalist perspective. Highlighting the social nature of space, he argues that “when we evoke ‘space,’ we must immediately indicate: what occupies that space and how it does so.”³⁴ In other words, he examines how space is shaped and produced by social relationships and class hegemony, rather than being defined by geographical or physical markers.

Lefebvre identifies three dimensions of space in a triadic model of spatial production: “representations of space” (conceived space), “representational spaces” (lived space), and “spatial practice” (perceived space).³⁵ Conceived space refers to the concepts developed by urban planners, scientists and social engineers meaning the people in positions of power who actively shape and define spaces. Lived space, on the other hand, represents the ways people think of spaces through symbols and associations. According to Lefebvre, this “space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” has its origin in childhood and “it overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.”³⁶ Finally, perceived space refers to the socially constructed aspects of space, as it is experienced and created through everyday interactions and activities. These three layers overlap and interact, shaping and reshaping how individuals and communities engage with and live in the spaces around them. Most importantly, they emphasize the essentiality of social relationships and socioeconomic disparities in the production of social space.

These ideas agree with Michel Foucault’s perspectives, particularly that “space and power are intimately linked.”³⁷ Both scholars highlight how power dynamics shape spaces and how spaces influence social relationships. As Beck notes, “social relationships are constructed through power’s effect on spaces,” which shows how spatial organization further reinforces systematic social inequalities.³⁸ The dynamics of power ingrained in “the spatial practices of omission, restriction, and policing” are key to understanding how spaces affect entire communities.³⁹ Space as a site of power and resistance is one of the main themes in both *Tropic of Orange* and *Exit West*, which explore how spaces are created and experienced, and how these processes influence the way we navigate relationships with others and with ourselves. Under oppressive powers, the freedom

³⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 12.

³⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38-39.

³⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

³⁷ Beck, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁸ Beck, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁹ Beck, “Introduction,” 11.

of movement through physical spaces, as well as through mental maps of belonging and identity, becomes a crucial human right.

Lefebvre's conceptual triad is illustrated in Yamashita's depiction of the Freeway crash in *Tropic of Orange*. The emptied space of the highway is reclaimed and transformed by formerly houseless individuals who find a new home in the abandoned automobiles of upper-class citizens, highlighting the interactions between the different dimensions of space, their transformations and crucial roles in the production of space. This reorganization challenges conventional notions of "home," revealing it as a mobile and mental construct. As they take over the freeway, the new occupants redefine the intended purpose of the space, transforming it from a car-centric isolating one to a communal zone. In this way, socioeconomic divisions are disrupted, and urban functions are reimagined. This process portrays the various actors involved in the production of social space, examining who conceptualizes it and how, who gives it symbolic meaning, and how people choose to use and navigate it. Similarly, Hamid explores the relationship between power, conflict, and territorial control. War and displacement alter physical spaces, while geographical and national boundaries—that once shaped the sense of home and belonging—are replaced by emotional connections. Hamid sees the potential of new forms of spatial and social organization that go beyond territorial limitations.

Socio-economic spatial segregation divides regions globally and pervades urban spaces in cities of both developed and developing nations to varying degrees. In North and South America, racial and ethnic segregation has a long history, increasingly intertwined with class differences. Urban segregation stems from historical, place-specific, economic and political factors, both local and global, reinforced by public discourse.⁴⁰ These practices divide urban space, inherently limiting residents' social mobility and access to equal opportunities. Segregated areas are often stigmatized, further marginalizing minorities and deepening divisions enforced by institutional powers and local gangs. Such segregation can lead to mistrust among groups while ultimately benefiting the ruling class responsible for creating these divisions in the first place. In his study of urban segregation, Musterd observes that, particularly in the United States, globalization and

⁴⁰ Sako Musterd ed., "Urban Segregation: Contexts, Domains, Dimensions and Approaches," in *Handbook of Urban Segregation* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 2.

neoliberalization have intensified segregation in both horizontal and vertical spaces, with privatization leading to a loss of public networks and citizen solidarity.⁴¹

This raises the question of whether the city is a “work” or a “product.”⁴² Lefebvre argues that these two concepts—one reflective of social activities, shared values, and collective identity, the other commodified and shaped by capitalist forces—interact within the spaces we live in. Yet contemporary political powers and capitalist ventures increasingly turn the city into a product, reducing the potential of space to support social activities and create collective experiences. Spatial organization is influenced by both those who plan it and those who occupy it, with the latter having the crucial role to reclaim urban spaces. Urban structures and dehumanized designs created by those in power are never constructed in a void. Local politics and global forces shape the production of space through mechanisms such as international funding, gentrification, and social ostracization. These dynamics often intensify feelings of territoriality, feeding strong emotions about belonging and loyalty.

Some scholars claim that nationality is a cultural and political construct that fosters a sense of belonging and solidarity among people who may have little in common beyond their imagined connection to the nation.⁴³ This construct has been perpetuated by “classes and elite strata, striving to maintain or contend for state power, [who] popularized memories of a shared past and used this historical narrative to authenticate and validate a commonality of purpose and national interests.”⁴⁴ However, with the accelerating forces of globalization, belonging is no longer necessarily rooted in physicality and territory. Contemporary “global society” is formed by various social networks and communities that transcend geographical borders, where “[the] space of places (the territorial nation-state) is being replaced by a space of flows.”⁴⁵ As identity detaches from the nation-state and national identity becomes delocalized, the myth-building tradition of the nation-state breaks down. This ultimately challenges traditional notions of belonging and the markers of national community building perpetuated by the nation-state to govern over its people as a unified entity.

“Nowadays, however,” claims Jonathan Xavier, “western nation-states are no longer able to adequately discipline and nationalize all the subjects under their domain. They cannot fully

⁴¹ Musterd, “Urban Segregation,” 15.

⁴² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73.

⁴³ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983).

⁴⁴ Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1995): 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3317464>.

⁴⁵ Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” 155.

produce proper national subjects—subjects defined by residence in a common territory, a shared cultural heritage, and an undivided loyalty to a common government.”⁴⁶ New diasporic communities and transnational identities have emerged, centering different values as markers of identity. Hybrid spaces transcend national borders and reshape how individuals connect to larger communities, allowing them to maintain profound connections to more nation-states at once.

Spatial practice and organization in a class society is inherently intertwined with power and capital. Nevertheless, in Foucault’s words, “where there is power, there is resistance.”⁴⁷ Rethinking spaces and challenging rigid spatial structures allows for resistance against the oppressive systems imposed by those in power. Space plays an active role in the transformation of society, as do the people who interact with it. Occupying spaces, organizing alternative social structures, and redefining state borders are all strategies connected to spatial organization and serve as active forms of resistance. David Harvey argues that “superior command over space becomes an even more important weapon in class struggle.”⁴⁸ Whether this command comes from the ruling capitalist class or from unionized workers is the ultimate question.

1.3 Mobility

Globalization theories describe a so-called “world in motion,” a world of social, political and economic networks with accelerated mobilities, rapid flows and scapes.⁴⁹ Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines five scapes of globalization: ethnoscaples, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes.⁵⁰ These scapes represent the complex mobilities and flows of people, commodities (technology), capital, media (images), and ideas (ideologies).⁵¹ Together, these flows create an intensive interconnected global network of growing transnational interdependence. People can now travel and explore cultures beyond their territorial bounds, while immobile consumers encounter distant cultures through media and products.

⁴⁶ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 20.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 95.

⁴⁸ David Harvey, “Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition,” in *Literature and Globalization: A Reader*, 8.

⁴⁹ Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 33.

⁵¹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

However, mobility is far from a universal experience. The discourse surrounding mobility is deeply tied to issues of class and privilege. It is not simply about physical movement but reflects socio-economic status and access to resources. Unrestricted mobility becomes a privilege reserved for a select few. As Inda and Rosaldo argue: “[W]hile the world may be full of complex mobilities and interconnections, there are also quite a number of people and places whose experience is marginal to or excluded from these movements and links.”⁵² Although advances in transportation, such as the commercialization of air travel, have made distances easier to overcome, “travel, unlike mobility, is not perceived as an individual liberty, but rather more of a ‘luxury,’ a privilege of the monied classes.”⁵³ This dynamic highlights the power inherent in controlling mobilities, foreshadowing its role in shaping both individual freedom and socio-economic inequality and raising critical questions about who controls movement and how it should be regulated.

In *Mobilities* (2007), Urry introduces a paradigm where social relations are understood through the intersections of different “mobilities.”⁵⁴ He emphasizes that “[a]ll social life, of work, family, education and politics, presume relationships of intermittent presence and modes of absence depending in part upon the multiple technologies of travel and communications that move objects, people, ideas, images across varying distances.”⁵⁵ Urry identifies various “mobility systems”—such as transportation networks (railways, roads, airports) or communication technologies—as central to social life, but critiques their role in perpetuating social inequality. Unequal and limited access to these systems divides those who benefit from hypermobility and those restricted by economic, physical, or temporal barriers.

Beck echoes this sentiment, arguing that “mobility is concerned with large-scale movements of people, animals, objects, information, and capital, as well as more localized forms of movement, such as public transportation, infrastructure for bike and pedestrian lanes, and overall accessibility for all people. Mobility concerns individuals and nation-states, social institutions, and neoliberal globalization.”⁵⁶ Increased opportunities for movement let us “change our perspective, to remove ourselves from harm or unwanted experiences, to gain individual liberty, to manipulate our environment, to communicate to the world beyond our contained,

⁵² Inda and Rosaldo, “Introduction,” 4.

⁵³ Beck, “Introduction,” 13.

⁵⁴ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 7.

⁵⁵ Urry, *Mobilities*, 47.

⁵⁶ Beck, “Introduction,” 3.

immediate surroundings.”⁵⁷ In other words, mobility is essential to globalization, with people, goods and information moving broadly in interconnected networks, as well as in local concerns such as public infrastructure and accessibility. Mobility therefore enables increased individual freedom and collective interdependence alike.

Despite its potential to liberate, mobility is a site of exclusion and control. Socio-economic or geopolitical barriers often compel those seeking mobility to take dangerous measures to leave the places they wish—or are forced to—abandon. Migrants relocating within national borders, such as from peripheral areas to urban centers, or crossing international borders often face systematic obstacles and abuse. Even if—after enduring many hardships during their migration (such as prolonged periods without proper nutrition, poor hygiene, investing their financial savings, commuting in life-threatening conditions)—migrants “obtain a secure position, they face daily discrimination in the pursuit of their life activities.”⁵⁸ That means that mobility not only facilitates connection but simultaneously becomes “a site of control, power, protection, liberation, opportunity, subversion, and resistance.”⁵⁹

Borders, for example, illustrate the dual nature of mobility and the role of geopolitical hierarchies. As Chris Rumford observes: “Borders and mobilities are not antithetical. A globalizing world is a world of networks, flows and mobility; it is also a world of borders.”⁶⁰ In contemporary societies, borders are no longer just national but take many forms.⁶¹ If national borders are erased under globalization to “facilitate greater economic mobility,” they manifest in other ways, through securing and policing, as nation-states “wish to better control flows of migrant workers, refugees and terrorists.”⁶² Rumford further argues that borders are “increasingly mobile and dispersed” and that they are “are not experienced in the same way by all people.”⁶³ While artificial in nature, borders reflect the intentions of authorities to control movement, functioning as tools of exclusion and regulation. In that way, borders and mobility in general serve as critical spheres where power relations manifest in tangible ways.

⁵⁷ Beck, “Introduction,” 12.

⁵⁸ Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant,” 50.

⁵⁹ Beck, “Introduction,” 3.

⁶⁰ Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” 163.

⁶¹ Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” 156.

⁶² Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” 157.

⁶³ Rumford, “Theorizing Borders,” 159.

In reaction to these challenges, diasporic communities offer necessary support systems for migrants. Rooted in shared cultural heritage and language, these communities create bridges between homeland and host countries, offering social networks that help migrants transition to new environments and maintain transnational connections, while simultaneously enriching the local cultural landscape of the host countries with new perspectives, art or cuisines. As Urry observes, these social networks and communities are no longer strictly rooted in geographical proximity but extend to imagined communities of national heritage and diasporas.⁶⁴ The gradual collapse of static, immediate communities and the growing significance of mobile hybrids reveal the profound impact of mobilities on globalized societies. “Migration,” he states, “disperses family members and friends across vast areas and thus the intimate networks of care, support and affection stretch over large geographical distances. [...] Thus geographical proximity or distance do not correlate straightforwardly with how emotionally close relatives feel to one another, nor indeed how far relatives will provide support or care for each other.”⁶⁵ Advancing technologies in transportation and communication further facilitate these close ties across time and space.

Growing global instability further complicates mobility as disrupted borders, climate change, and international conflicts force people to seek safer and better options elsewhere. Terms like environmental migrant, asylum seeker, expatriate, and stateless person reflect the fragmented and diverse realities of human mobility. Similarly, the concept of transnational migrants challenges the traditional definition of an “immigrant” as someone who leaves their homeland behind to fully assimilate into a new culture. Instead, contemporary migrants embody transnational identities and “maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated.”⁶⁶ These “transmigrant” identities are increasingly supported by the shrinking of distances and growing global interconnectedness where one can have networks outside of the boundaries of the nation-state.

The intersection of mobility and belonging is further explored in *Tropic of Orange* and *Exit West* with the authors criticizing the physical and social borders that restrict movement and highlighting the changing dynamics of migration in their narratives. Yamashita examines large-scale mobilities, particularly labor migration leading to the United States, reimagining borders as

⁶⁴ Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies*, 142.

⁶⁵ Urry, *Mobilities*, 226.

⁶⁶ Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant,” 48.

fluid and artificial, shaped by socio-economic power. The characters of *Exit West* navigate the deeply personal journey of migration, as they traverse “magical doors” that erase physical boundaries but not the challenges of assimilation and displacement. These metaphors emphasize the artificial nature of borders and the underlying political power structures that enforce them. However, the characters continue to face socio-economic and racial stigmatization and systematic inequality, perpetuated through restrictive border policies. Both novels explore the realities of systemic exclusion and illustrate the distinct forms of diasporic communities and the shift from static, localized societies to more dynamic, mobile ones.

1.4 The Authors

1.4.1 Karen Tei Yamashita

Karen Tei Yamashita, an internationally recognized writer, lecturer and author of eight books, was born in Oakland, California on January 8, 1951, to Hiroshi John Yamashita and Asako Sakai.⁶⁷ Her parents were, as she discovered later in life, survivors of incarceration at the Topaz internment camp during World War II. While the family relocated domestically to Los Angeles, in the early 1970s, Yamashita chose to study abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo to research her family’s long history. However, despite being “by bloodline entirely purely Japanese,” she considers such purist rhetoric to be “simply racist.” She explains: “Raised in the U.S. and having lived in Brazil and absorbing languages and cultures and other histories, I’ve become, well, me.”⁶⁸

After earning degrees in English and Japanese literature, Yamashita received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to travel to São Paulo for anthropological research on the extensive history of Japanese immigration to Brazil. There, she lived in Japanese Brazilian communes and collected oral histories, particularly from women. Initially intending to stay for one year, she extended her stay to nine years, establishing many connections in Brazil. Later, back in Los Angeles, she refocused on creative writing, working on translations, screenplays and novels for which she has received numerous literary awards.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Among the most notable are *I Hotel* (2010), *Sansei and Sensibility* (2020), *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) and *Tropic of Orange* (1997).

⁶⁸ Karen Tei Yamashita, “An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita,” by Elizabeth P. Glixman, *Eclectica Magazine* 11, no. 4 (Oct/Nov 2007), https://www.eclectica.org/v11n4/glixman_yamashita.html.

⁶⁹ For a list of those, see <https://www.nationalbook.org/people/karen-tei-yamashita/>.

Yamashita's prose often draws from personal history, cultural heritage and geopolitical dynamics spanning across three continents, as her migrant characters search for community and their roles in a globalized world. Upon awarding Yamashita with the Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation in 2021, Chair of the Board of Directors David Steinberger remarked:

Her body of work has been credited with transforming the approach toward Asian American literary and cultural studies from one that is U.S.-centric to one that is hemispheric and transnational. In prose brimming with electric narrative energy, she employs humor, politics, sardonic wit, and lush polyvocality to invite readers into her nuanced but accessible literary worlds; her writing evinces a breathtaking capacity to transform conventions in genre, voice, intertextuality, and characterization, grounded in the skillful application of traditional literary techniques.⁷⁰

Although Yamashita identifies as an "Asian American" writer, her themes and formal techniques consistently go beyond the geographic and canonical features associated with that label. Her interdisciplinary writing offers social and political critique as she continuously portrays the transnational, multiethnic hybrid identities of contemporary society and challenges the politics of mobility and space. The fusion of personal memories and experiences with historical fact and collective experience as well as her genre-bending form and unconventional narrative style make Yamashita one of the most significant Asian American writers of today.

1.4.2 Mohsin Hamid

Mohsin Hamid was born on 23 July 1971 in Lahore, Pakistan to a father of Kashmiri descent and mother of Punjabi heritage. Reflecting on his childhood, he writes: "[L]ike my parents before me, I was born in a democratic Pakistan but spent much of my youth in a dictatorship."⁷¹ Growing up in a multigenerational household in a war-devastated city—surrounded by violence and drug abuse—and maneuvering through police checkpoints on a daily basis, he recalls his childhood as a period of intense censorship and state control. Regardless of these challenges, he

⁷⁰ "Karen Tei Yamashita," (n.d.), <https://www.nationalbook.org/people/karen-tei-yamashita/>.

⁷¹ Mohsin Hamid, "After 60 Years, Will Pakistan Be Reborn?" *The New York Times*, August 15, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/15/opinion/15hamid.html>.

felt “fiercely patriotic” and longed to return to his homeland even after graduating from the School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

While at Princeton, Hamid attended courses on creative writing under Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, which inspired his approach to storytelling. He continued his education at Harvard University where he graduated with a law degree in 1997. After becoming a management consultant in New York, he worked on his first novel, *Moth Smoke* (2000), until he eventually moved to London, where he obtained a dual citizenship and maintained close ties with Pakistan, frequently returning to write and visit his family.

Hamid’s second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), became an international bestseller, like his debut, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, along with winning several other awards such as the Asian American Literary Award. His subsequent novels—*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), *Exit West* (2017) and his most recent *The Last White Man* (2022)—have continued to attract readers and critics alike, receiving prestigious literary prizes such as the *LA Times* Book Prize and the Aspen Words Literary Prize for *Exit West*.

In his writing, Hamid experiments with form and genre, using techniques such as dramatic monologues, second person narration, and addressing the reader directly, giving his work a fresh tone within contemporary postcolonial literature. Employing anonymity and brevity, his writing reflects universal human experiences, allegorizes the migrant struggle, and examines contemporary socio-political tensions. Hamid has stated that he writes “from experience, not from research” and his distinctive voice has helped bringing Pakistani writers to prominence in Western literary circles.⁷²

In the post-9/11 age of the “war on terror,” political discourse often treats Islamist terrorists and Muslims as synonymous, spreading misleading and harmful stereotypes. Through his writing, Hamid attempts to destabilize this narrative, offering a more honest and human side of Pakistani people. Despite his British citizenship and his time in the U.S., Hamid resists being confined by national labels. When asked about his national identity—whether Pakistani, British or even American—he describes himself as “fully neither,” and believes that “it [is] unwarranted to expect individuals to sign up for allegiance to the nation-state.”⁷³

⁷² Sarah Kinson, “Mohsin Hamid,” *The Guardian*, June 6, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/06/whyiwrite>.

⁷³ Jane Perlez, “Mohsin Hamid: A Muslim Novelist's Eye on U.S. and Europe,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/12/world/americas/12iht-profile.4.7870760.html>.

2 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*

In 1991, Yamashita began working on her third novel, *Tropic of Orange*, which was published just six years later by Coffee House Press, a small, open-minded nonprofit publishing house. Shifting her attention from Brazil, the setting of her earlier works, to North America, Yamashita experimented with form and genre conventions to create a story that, as the book's back cover describes, "irreverently juggl[es] magical realism, film noir, hip-hop, and chicanismo."⁷⁴ The novel is about migration and border-crossing, examining the effects of globalization policies, such as NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement), alongside the political debates and the socio-economic consequences of undocumented Mexican immigrant labor on both sides of the border. The story's outline is mapped out in a chart spanning seven days, with the seven main characters navigating "the multi-layered grids of meaning in Los Angeles and the borders between Latin America, Mexico, and North America."⁷⁵

Drawing on her background in anthropology and the influence of "L.A. fiction" (such as the detective noir genre), Yamashita tries to find a voice—or voices—that would speak for the city. Commenting on such an attempt, she notes: "I don't believe that there is any one voice that *can* represent that city [, so] I wanted to hear different narrative voices, see different visions or points of view representing the City."⁷⁶ The novel tells a story about the underrepresented and overlooked people of Los Angeles, including minorities and the homeless, and tries to create a more accurate and authentic portrayal of globalized society and its cultural diversity—or perhaps lack thereof. Recognizing the ever-evolving nature of Los Angeles' cultural mosaic, especially in recent decades, Yamashita reflects that she "had written the book in response to a very narrow vision of Los Angeles as Hollywood and a racially divided city between blacks and whites, but maybe the current response to the book is precisely this changing recognition of LA as Latino and a crossroads for global migrations."⁷⁷

In *Tropic of Orange*, the seven protagonists each embody a racial or ethnic group, subverting common media and political stereotypes that often undermine individuality. They are all portrayed with distinct but recognizable narrative voices. Personal conflicts unfold against the

⁷⁴ Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), back cover.

⁷⁵ Jean Vengua Gier and Carla Alicia Tejada, "An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita," *Jouvert* 2, no. 2 (1998), <https://legacy.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i2/YAMASHI.HTM>.

⁷⁶ Gier and Tejada, "An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita."

⁷⁷ Glixman, "An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita."

backdrop of local and global disasters that distort time and space, as Yamashita weaves together a “polyphony of heterogeneous voices,” whose unexpectedly intertwined paths lead toward an apocalyptic finale.⁷⁸ This chapter examines the power dynamics underscoring urban segregation and their impact on communities, as well as the challenges faced by mobile individuals adapting to new cultural and political structures. Each subchapter explores different characters’ storylines in relation to local and global transformations, with a focus on spatiality, mobility and globalization processes. Together, the characters reflect diverse socio-economic and ethnic realities, ultimately representing the voice of Los Angeles, if not the globalized world at large.

2.1 The Big Orange

Yamashita’s decision to set *Tropic of Orange* in Los Angeles was deliberate and thoughtful. It allowed her to explore the dynamics of a rapidly globalizing world and its uneven effects on different racial and ethnic communities. Los Angeles, one of the most iconic urban centers in America, is emblematic of the new global order due to its diverse cultural landscape and role as a center of international trade, simultaneously reflecting the challenges of urban inequality and the possibilities of multicultural collaboration. Over the years, it has attracted masses of immigrants who sought out better futures for their families, creating a diverse yet deeply divided metropolis. The city serves as an ideal backdrop for the novel, portraying how capitalism, individualism, and the omnipresent effects of globalization impact urban life and community. While Los Angeles is often celebrated for its cultural heterogeneity, the lived experiences of its minority and working-class citizens tell a different story. Beneath its surface lies a city shaped by systemic inequalities and racial segregation. Yamashita uses the city’s fractured landscape to expose the gap between the idealized status of a melting pot and the harsh realities of marginalized individuals.

In his influential 1967 book, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, Robert Fogelson described Los Angeles as “the archetype of the contemporary American metropolis.”⁷⁹ Unlike older, more centralized cities like New York, Los Angeles developed through decentralization and industrialization. The city’s urban planning prioritized expansion over encouraging close-knit

⁷⁸ Jolie A. Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2020), 48.

⁷⁹ Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930*, Volume 3 in *Classics in Urban History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=19210&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

community, resulting in a fragmented social and spatial structure. Economic inequalities and racial segregation shaped its geography, with affluent white populations living in privileged suburban areas, while marginalized communities—African Americans, Mexicans, and Asians—were restricted to less desirable neighborhoods. Each neighborhood developed distinct identities tied to race, class, and economic activity, reinforcing social divisions.

Fogelson's analysis of Los Angeles as a constantly shifting city resonates years later, particularly in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. In the novel, Yamashita shows how global influences intertwine with linguistic and cultural differences that define life in Los Angeles. However, she disrupts the notion of the city as an idealized, multicultural space. Instead, she reveals the "real" layers of its fragmented map, exposing the contrasts between wealth and poverty, privilege and marginalization by reimagining Los Angeles through the perspectives of characters living on the fringes of society who nevertheless shape the city's identity. As she remarks, "[t]he city is nothing without its people, and every new group of immigrants appropriates the given structures and infrastructures to take ownership of a new home. The city is thus forever changing, but it is home, and this also means that home is also not fixed but changing."⁸⁰

The novel emphasizes the ways in which these characters navigate a divided city, where highways, lifestyles, and language barriers reinforce the separation between the rich and the poor. As literary critic Caroline Rody describes, Yamashita's Los Angeles is "a divided, ungenerous home where people are separated by freeways, lifestyles, languages, race, ethnicity, class, and access to housing, safety, transportation, the airwaves, and the internet."⁸¹ Her portrayal of Los Angeles reflects both its cultural diversity and its deep inequalities, offering a critical lens on the effects of globalization, migration, and neoliberal capitalism on urban space, "manag[ing] simultaneously a global reach and a rich local specificity."⁸²

One of the characters who traverses the geographical layers of the city daily is Buzzworm, a "[b]ig black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet, an Afro shirt with palm trees painted all over it, dreads, pager and Walkman belted to his waist, sound plugged into one ear and two or three watches at least on both his wrists."⁸³ As a self-proclaimed "Angel of Mercy," Buzzworm is known

⁸⁰ Glixman, "An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita."

⁸¹ Caroline Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 130, <https://archive.org/details/interethnicimagi0000rody/mode/2up>.

⁸² Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 128.

⁸³ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 26.

as the “walking social services” of his community.⁸⁴ He moves through the city on foot, conducting fieldwork in areas often ignored by state authorities. In a city designed for cars rather than people, Buzzworm remains rooted to the ground, walking the streets and contacting those who are left behind by government institutions. As Sheffer notes, “[i]n the absence of social services, they create their own networks for communication and resource redistribution,” and Buzzworm exemplifies this through his constant efforts to connect the underserved with resources.⁸⁵ Whether he does so by providing a “rehab number, free clinic, legal services, shelter, soup kitchen, [or] hotline,” Buzzworm acts without judgment, healing the wounds left by a failing system.⁸⁶ His presence highlights how marginalized communities create alternative systems of care and spaces for support in the face of institutional neglect.

Buzzworm’s movement through Los Angeles symbolizes a form of resistance to the city’s rigid boundaries and mapping. While Los Angeles is divided by race, class, and infrastructure, Buzzworm crosses these boundaries on foot and witnesses firsthand the deep inequalities that these communities endure, shaped by racial segregation and the generational impacts of systemic neglect. Moreover, Buzzworm’s collaboration with Gabriel Balboa, the Chicano journalist, further illustrates his role as an intermediary between the marginalized and the mainstream. By sharing “the real stories” of Los Angeles with Gabriel, Buzzworm seeks to raise awareness and break through the city’s apathy toward its most vulnerable residents. In doing so, he “provides crucial intelligence on the city’s underclasses,” attempting to bring their struggles into the public eye and challenge the city’s spatial and social hierarchies.⁸⁷

In his introductory chapter, Buzzworm engages in a conversation with a young “homey,” challenging his nihilistic predeterminism and the hopelessness that stems from growing up in a highly racially and economically segregated area. The young man dismisses Buzzworm’s optimistic outlook on life, saying, “[e]verybody in the hood survivin’. [...] Fuck that survivin’ shit.”⁸⁸ This interaction introduces a critique of urban segregation and territorial oppression, highlighting the difficult realities minorities often face. These underdeveloped neighborhoods are cut off from “major supermarkets, department stores, pharmacies, medical and dental clinics,

⁸⁴ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 26.

⁸⁵ Sheffer, *Understanding Yamashita*, 50.

⁸⁶ Sheffer, *Understanding Yamashita*, 50.

⁸⁷ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 50.

⁸⁸ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 25.

hospitals, banks, factories, and industry” and Buzzworm’s attempt to instill a sense of hope and resilience contrasts sharply with the boy’s defeatist attitude, underscoring the pervasive impact of systemic inequalities on individual outlooks and aspirations.⁸⁹ This scene effectively illustrates what Davis calls the “fortress effect” where the marginalized communities are obstructed from “interactions with other social areas and landscapes in the central city,” which is “not [...] an inadvertent failure of design, but [a] deliberate socio-spatial strategy.”⁹⁰ For the impoverished youth, the neighborhood is often all they know, “like the tattoos on our arms,” forcing everyone to respect territorial distinctions.⁹¹

When comparing Buzzworm’s introductory chapter and his views later in the book, we see him become more concerned and perhaps even radical about urban structuring and the concept of territory in general. In the earlier scene, he mocks the boy’s exaggerated territorial claims: “Out with the crew marking your territory like some dog. Some other dog come piss on your wall, you gonna shoot him. And *I* don’t make no sense?”⁹² However, later in the book, as he witnesses the space he thought he knew continuously shift under the elitist and corrupt system that further disadvantages the people it falsely promises to support, he is more understanding. He begins to contemplate “the geography of L.A., and what the maps of sociologists and economists can and cannot capture about the realities of a place” while studying the map “Balboa’d torn [...] out of a book from him to study. *Quartz City* or some such title.”⁹³

The map in question is the 1972 map of gang territories released by the Los Angeles Police Department, as discussed in Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz*, which investigates how power and inequality shape the city’s landscape.⁹⁴ The map exposes the influence of elites within the realities of racial segregation. Buzzworm, however, is not impressed by the map’s markings. “Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyways?” he asks, shaking his head.⁹⁵ For him, the markings and layers of a territory are far more complex, and any attempt to mirror reality through labels and markers of topography inevitably reduces its character. Buzzworm compares the complex reality of the places he knows to the authoritarian sections of the LAPD map and asks himself: “Was this

⁸⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 151.

⁹⁰ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 229.

⁹¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 161.

⁹² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 25.

⁹³ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 72.

⁹⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 301.

⁹⁵ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 72.

his territory? According to the map, it was in Crips or Bloods territory.”⁹⁶ He assuredly states that “[s]omebody else must have the big map. Or maybe just the next map. The one with the new layers you can’t even imagine.”⁹⁷

J.B. Harley, a historian of cartography, argues that “maps redescribe the world—like any other document—in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences, and priorities.”⁹⁸ These artificial markings fail to reflect the “real” layers that run through the city, along with the relationship between space and power, as well as the subsequent resistance or alternatives to the corrupt system. Moreover, globalization often creates conditions that lead to gentrification by introducing new economic, cultural, and social dynamics into marginalized areas. Investment and labor are sourced abroad, and the city aims to attract international attention, which can significantly reshape the socio-economic fabric of neighborhoods. These transformations typically increase property values and living costs, displacing long-term residents and altering the cultural and social landscape of urban communities.

Buzzworm reflects on how his community has been deeply impacted by neoliberal policies that prioritize profit over communal values. City officials promise to clean up neighborhoods, when in fact they intentionally degrade them to lower the market value in preparation for gentrification. The process begins by “[making] sure the houses [are] left to be broken into and tagged. Let the houses be there for everyone to see. Use for illegal purposes. Pass drugs. House homeless.”⁹⁹ Next, they “[s]low down the foot traffic and the flow. Break down the overpass crossing the freeway. Make it impossible for people to pass. Stop people from using the shops that used to be convenient.”¹⁰⁰ This deliberate neglect reflects the uneven power dynamics of gentrification that reshape the space of the city, further marginalizing disadvantaged communities.

No government authority can define the boundaries of Buzzworm’s community as he gives greater significance simply to the neglected palm trees that line his neighborhood, seeing them as symbols of life that is both “poor and crazy, ugly or beautiful, honest or shameful.”¹⁰¹ Through Buzzworm’s perspective, Yamashita endorses social activism and proposes an alternative form of

⁹⁶ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 72.

⁹⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 73.

⁹⁸ J.B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 35.

⁹⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 73.

¹⁰¹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 31.

gentrification: “[s]elf-gentrification by a self-made set of standards and respectability. Do-it-yourself gentrification.”¹⁰² Instead of waiting for outside forces to displace them, the community can reclaim and restore the space of the city—cleaning up streets, caring for neighbors, and tending to the palm trees. This vision offers a hopeful vision of a self-sufficient neighborhood, one built upon community, not profit.

Yamashita’s alternative vision echoes the 1992 L.A. riots, which she “reimagines [...] as a peaceful revolution.”¹⁰³ The collapse of the Harbor Freeway, “one of the major arteries of the city,” forces people out of their cars and into the streets, making them experience the city like Buzzworm and other marginalized residents.¹⁰⁴ This disruption challenges the “anti-pedestrian bias of the new corporate citadel” and allows the homeless and disadvantaged to cross metaphorical borders, redefine space, and reclaim the freeway as a communal zone.¹⁰⁵ Vehicles, once symbols of isolation, become homes in this new order. “Occasional disputes over claims to territory arose, but for the moment, there were more than sufficient vehicles to accommodate this game of musical chairs. Indeed it was a game, a fortunate lottery, and for the transient, understandably impermanent and immediate.”¹⁰⁶

This reimagined space on the freeway parallels Los Angeles’ settler history and the frontier myth, where, as Fogelson observes, early colonists distributed land by lottery, exploiting the city’s resources for profit.¹⁰⁷ Instead, Yamashita envisions a grassroots community that defies neoliberalism and government neglect. In this moment of “freeway utopia,” past conflicts like those between the Crips and Bloods dissolve, and the community establishes systems of trash collection, urban gardening, and, suddenly, “everybody in L.A. was walking.”¹⁰⁸ The scene offers a glimpse of an alternative organization—a space where everyone is empowered to reshape their environment despite socio-economic status.

Just as the marginalized community reclaims the freeway space for a brief utopia, Manzanar Murakami stands above them, offering yet another perspective on the layered, chaotic geography of Los Angeles. As a “sansei born in captivity,” Manzanar’s name itself evokes the

¹⁰² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 74.

¹⁰³ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 47.

¹⁰⁴ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 229.

¹⁰⁶ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 187.

history of dispossession that shapes the city's present.¹⁰⁹ Houseless by choice, he stands atop the freeway pass conducting the symphony of the cars and their passengers moving through the city. The freeway system dominates and governs the fragmented city's landscape and structure and Manzanar recognizes the pattern of movement that rules the city day and night. Through orchestration and "his painfully acute sensitivity to the sounds of our civilization," Manzanar looks for and creates order in the chaos of the city and "unite[s] families, create[s] a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound."¹¹⁰ Once a successful surgeon, he has abandoned material comforts in search of a deeper understanding of the city's true nature, offering "an alternative to the capitalist order of conspicuous consumption, material accumulation, and the relentless pursuit of 'progress.'"¹¹¹

For Manzanar, the city's layers are more than just physical or social spaces; they are also the interconnected systems below the surface, "the man-made grid of civil utilities."¹¹² "*There are maps and there are maps and there are maps,*" he observes, seeing "all of them at once."¹¹³ By becoming aware of these layers, he reshapes the social divisions into a complete and more interconnected spatial framework. Rody observes that Manzanar, much like cultural critics, sees Los Angeles not only in its transnational context but also in its intricate local character.¹¹⁴ As Manzanar stands atop his freeway podium, like "a priest blessing a multitude," he urges people to open their senses to the world around them—to listen to the layered symphony of human and natural life that makes up Los Angeles.¹¹⁵ He observes:

On the surface, the complexity of layers should drown an ordinary person, but ordinary persons never bother to notice, never bother to notice the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport—sidewalks, bicycle paths, roads, freeways, systems of transit both ground and air, a thousand natural and man-made divisions, variations both dynamic and stagnant,

¹⁰⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 126; Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 33.

¹¹¹ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 50.

¹¹² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 52.

¹¹³ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 52.

¹¹⁴ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 128.

¹¹⁵ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 151.

patterns and connections by every conceivable definition from the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies.¹¹⁶

His “nature-centered vision,” as Rody suggests, reflects an understanding that our “human embeddedness in the natural” ultimately overcomes the artificial and oppressive divisions imposed by human societies.¹¹⁷ Manzanar’s character reminds us that beneath the fragmented ethnic, racial, and social divisions lies a different, more compelling reality: “our shared or contiguous inhabitation of a natural geography.”¹¹⁸

Manzanar’s elevated viewpoint and symphony of Los Angeles ultimately offer a profound reflection on the city’s fragmented space. By reimagining urban landscapes as dynamic, living systems—where natural forces and human actions intertwine—Yamashita’s novel challenges us to rethink the boundaries, hierarchies, and territories that shape our experience of the modern metropolis. By coming together, people can expose the gaps between the city’s elite and marginalized communities, reshaping spaces to be accessible to everyone. Buzzworm’s powerful perspective offers an alternative vision for urban development, one in which grassroots activism overcomes the social and physical hierarchies of the fragmented city. Yamashita’s skillful critique thus reveals how space can be reclaimed and reimagined to challenge the rigid spatial and systematic structures.

2.2 Global Village

In his seminal work *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis examines Los Angeles as a city that “has come to play the double role of utopia and dystopia for advanced capitalism.”¹¹⁹ While Davis’s analysis focuses on capitalism, his insights offer a useful framework for understanding the forces of globalization in *Tropic of Orange*. In the novel, the characters’ narratives unfold within a socio-cultural landscape continuously reshaped by the transformative forces of globalization, paving the way for an examination of its many “deleterious effects on both human communities and the natural environment.”¹²⁰ In the novel, Los Angeles can be considered a microcosm of globalization

¹¹⁶ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 137.

¹¹⁸ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 137.

¹¹⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 18.

¹²⁰ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 44.

where economic policies, cultural exchange and the waves of migration intersect to reveal the promises and hardships of an interconnected world.

Prior to writing *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita wrote a short story entitled “The Orange” for the *Los Angeles Times*. Similarly to the novel, “[the] orange that should not have been” grows connected to a barely visible line of the Tropic of Cancer and moved by external forces, it pulls the equator further down South until it is sold and transported back up North again.¹²¹ On its way up North, the orange warps the land around it, bringing new cuisine to minority communities and mixing up language, ultimately leading to much understandable confusion. Not long after that, this dissolution of geographical distinctions disturbs the standard structures of class hierarchy until the orange, along with its disruptions to the system and movement of cultures, is returned to its place of origin.

In the short story, the titular fruit ripens prematurely because of global warming, while in *Tropic of Orange* it is pulled along by the invisible forces of late capitalism and globalization. The orange becomes a symbol of the shifting landscape, distorting time and space as it moves, and highlighting the unforeseen impacts of shifting economic and political borders on the people and territories it goes through. Social concerns rooted in economic inequality are most clearly represented by the North-South divide marked by the Tropic of Cancer. Described as “a border made plain by the sun itself,” it serves as a symbol of the disparity between the First World and the Third World.¹²² This divide brings the global economic superpower of the U.S. into direct dialogue with the underdeveloped Latin American region, particularly in the US-Mexico borderlands.

Yamashita explores how this socio-economic divide has been shaped by policies, cultural traditions, and a long history of oppression through the character of Arcangel. This pan-Latin American messianic performer travels through the Southern hemisphere, entertaining, laboring, recounting and predicting the history and future of the Americas, representing the culture and politics of its people. Through him, “the self-identified voice and the consciousness of the colonized and of the Third World,” Yamashita “links the history of colonialism to the politics of contemporary transnationalism” and critiques the realities of globalization policies and discourses

¹²¹ Karen Tei Yamashita, “The Orange,” *Plants*, *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-06-30-tm-2223-story.html>.

¹²² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 64.

surrounding them.¹²³ Arcangel thus adopts the orange and takes it with him on his journey to Los Angeles, dragging the attached Tropic of Cancer northwards.

The Tropic, a fixed geographical boundary, divides the Northern and Southern hemispheres but traditionally holds no political or cultural significance. In the novel, however, it is symbolically materialized as a delicate thread, “finer than the thread of a spiderweb,” which runs through an old, overripe orange.¹²⁴ In order to reclaim their sovereignty and independence and challenge the oppressive powers of the U.S., the South—personified by a massive crowd of Mexican laborers—travels North and the literal segregating polarizing line between the two hemispheres moves with them. When the last surviving wrinkly orange travels up North in the hands of a little baby boy, geography itself begins to shift, and the natural reality of space becomes distorted.

As the labor movement advances from the south to the north, crossing national borders following the prophetic Arcangel, it brings Southern influence along with it. Rody notes how *Tropic of Orange* explores “the changing impact of human movements across borders,” illustrating how “new patterns of migration and commerce are transforming U.S. cities by making the migrant experience circular, global, and diasporic.”¹²⁵ Through magical realism, the landscape distorts and shifts with the sudden march of thousands, materializing political and economic policies, as well as global shifts, to symbolize their profound impact on the land, communities, and social structures. Ultimately, this hemispheric migration serves as “a nostalgic return to precolonial times” and helps rewrite history when 500 years old Arcangel invades the North just like Columbus and Hernandes have invaded the South.¹²⁶ “The thing called the New World Border waited for him with the anticipation of five centuries. Admittedly a strange one, but Conquistador of the North he was.”¹²⁷ His “manifest destiny” crowd is met with shouts of “*Catch 'em and throw 'em back*,” as border patrol and Americans “questioned him anyway.”¹²⁸ He is silenced by the sudden “waves of floating paper money: pesos and dollars and reals, all floating across effortlessly—a graceful

¹²³ Lee, “We Are Not the World,” 502; Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 155.

¹²⁴ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 14.

¹²⁵ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 134.

¹²⁶ Claudia Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back: Cross-Cultural Transnationalism in Contemporary U.S. Women of Color Fiction,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 57, no. 1 (2001): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2001.0018>.

¹²⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 170.

¹²⁸ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 170.

movement of free capital, at least forty-five billion dollars of it, carried across by hidden and cheap labor” in which Yamashita emphasizes NAFTA’s reliance on exploiting human labor for profit.¹²⁹

This march climaxes in a surreal World Wrestling Federation-style match where “SUPERNAFTA” faces off against “El Gran Mojado,” a battle symbolic of the unavoidable confrontation between the Third World and the “global village” narrative that NAFTA embodies. The North American Free Trade Agreement, enacted in 1994, promised to create more work opportunities and economic growth by removing trade barriers between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. While it did expand trade, the agreement also contributed to rising economic inequality, particularly in Mexico, where labor exploitation became more prominent. Disproportionately benefiting multinational corporations at the expense of workers and small businesses, it only deepened social and economic disparities.

Yamashita materializes these policies and trade agreements in the wrestling match called “El Contrato con América,” referencing the 1994 “Contract with America.”¹³⁰ According to Sheffer, “[w]ith these flourishes, Yamashita makes clear how politics is a theatrical and spectacular battle of ideas with calamitous material, environmental, and human consequences.”¹³¹ Yamashita transforms the metaphorical divisions of “North” and “South” often used in globalization discourse—the “North” typically representing transnational trade and capital flow, and the “South” signifying marginalized laborers and minorities—into physical, embodied characters. Arcangel himself proclaims that “[SUPERNAFTA] is only concerned with the commerce of money and things. What is this compared to the great commerce of humankind?”¹³² So with the whole continent united in spectacle, the two “cartoonlike superheroes” enter a death match.¹³³

The pre-match introduction of the wrestlers begins with SUPERNAFTA delivering a textbook populist speech celebrating technology and free trade as markers of future progress, followed by El Gran Mojado's counter-address to his migrant followers:

What can this progress my challenger speaks of really be? You who live in the declining and abandoned places of great cities, called barrios, ghettos, and favelas. [...] The myth

¹²⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 172.

¹³⁰ A Republican legislative agenda proposed by Newt Gingrich aiming to reduce taxes and the size of government.

¹³¹ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 45-46.

¹³² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 116.

¹³³ Molly E. Rauch, “Fruit Salad,” *The Nation Archive* 266, no. 7 (March 1998): 29.

https://cuni.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/420CKIS_INST/1pop0hq/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_231521308.

of the first world is that development is wealth and technology progress. It is all rubbish. It means that you are no longer human beings but only labor. It means that the land you live on is not earth but only property.¹³⁴

His speech highlights the absurdity and ingenuity and clever manipulation behind neoliberal slogans about global connectedness and equality. In the words of David Graeber, “the way [what is called globalization] actually works, it’s all about trapping people in places where you then remove Social Security, creating people desperate enough to undersell each other, and allow corporations to move around to take advantage of it.”¹³⁵ While globalization policies may initially appear to eliminate barriers and offer equal opportunities for all, the reality often fails to live up to that pledge, as the promised accessibility remains unevenly distributed.

In her 2007 essay, Sue-Im Lee argues that Arcangel voices a critique of the First World “snappy slogans” that talk about the so-called “global community.”¹³⁶ “We are not the world. This is not a rock concert,” he proclaims, challenging not only his wrestling opponent, who represents the NAFTA agreement, but “denounc[ing] the very notion of a collective, singular subject position that stands as the ‘we’ in the ‘We are the world.’”¹³⁷ In recent years, the concept of a “global village” has become increasingly popular, denoting a sort of global intimacy and interconnectedness, enabled by the forces of globalization, such as transnational trade, migration and subsequent multiculturalism, with electronic communication reducing spatial and temporal distances.¹³⁸

However, Lee argues that this “global intimacy” is simply the latest form of an “imperialist unidirectional universalism,” in which a select few claim to represent all and enjoy the benefits of certain policies.¹³⁹ It is a type of universalist discourse in which the globalist “we” serves as a central figure of universal progress and reveals how the particular (the interest of the First World) assumes the role of the universal (the interest of all). At its core, the globalist ideal of an interconnected global society ruled by transnational trade and cultural diversity is usually just a

¹³⁴ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 222.

¹³⁵ Graeber, “David Graeber.”

¹³⁶ Rauch, “Fruit Salad,” 29.

¹³⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 222; Lee, “We Are Not the World,” 502.

¹³⁸ The term “global village” was first coined by media theorist Marshall McLuhan in his 1962 *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

¹³⁹ Lee, “We Are Not the World,” 503.

political agenda to justify modern (neo)colonial and imperialist efforts of (primarily) the United States to ensure political and economic hegemony over global trade.

Under the guise of progress, innovation and unity, these siren song sentiments claim that such economic and geopolitical changes will benefit all of “us.” However, Archangel reminds people of the harsh truths of these narratives of cultural unity and development: “Everybody’s labor got occupied in the industry of draining their homeland of its natural wealth. In exchange they got progress, technology, loans, and loaded guns.”¹⁴⁰ By condemning this rhetoric, Archangel disproves “the globalist ‘we’ [that] circulates in the First World’s political, economic, and cultural discourse” and debunks talks about “cultural assimilation, development, and progress.”¹⁴¹ So, in *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita does not simply critique globalization itself but questions the limitations of many globalist models for universality, which glorify economic benefits and multicultural celebration while perpetuating an obvious global hierarchy that reinforces First World dominance over exploited and impoverished Third World nations.

With rapidly evolving technology, the seeming connectedness of people across the globe in one shared “village” grows normalized as we become able to share the same virtual space without sharing the physical intimate space. This artificial intimacy is on the rise in the late 1990s when the novel takes place, and the contrast of attitudes is shown in the couple of Emi and Gabriel. Emi, a third-generation Japanese American news reporter, an outspoken “antimulticultural” critic “so distant from the Asian female stereotype, it was questionable if she even had an identity,” is a progressive technological fan.¹⁴² “Only Emi could find a database sexy” says her Chicano counterpart, old-fashioned self-proclaimed “computer-stupid” journalist, who struggles to accustom to the sudden changes of modern times.¹⁴³

After finding out that Emi had sex over the net with someone else, Gabriel ponders about the genuineness of such an intimate contact if not shared in real space and wonders about how to classify such an experience. “They saw the same simultaneous image, give or take for satellite lag and time code correction. Did their eyes therefore touch? Did this count?”¹⁴⁴ Later, he reluctantly

¹⁴⁰ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 126.

¹⁴¹ Lee, “We Are Not the World,” 502; Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 124.

¹⁴² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 21.

¹⁴³ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 168.

¹⁴⁴ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 155.

admits that “[m]aybe she was right. It was a lifestyle [he] had to accept” and realizes that “digital connections” are simply “a new dimension in communicating.”¹⁴⁵

The rapid advancements in communication technology today create a sense of closeness that mimics real-life, face-to-face intimacy and enables human connection beyond territorial boundaries. Marshall McLuhan notably remarked that “[t]oday, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.”¹⁴⁶ This “abolishment” of spatial and temporal limitations online—“a big borderless soup”—inverts the traditional ways of human connection and communication.¹⁴⁷ Questions of online intimacy and infidelity, for example, show how globalization phenomena—such as the high-speed transfer of information and media—on a macro scale profoundly affect individual lives.

In a similar way, the novel addresses the question of authentic cultural experience under capitalism. In a city like L.A., which attempts to challenge cultural differences by bringing people together while celebrating diversity and heritage, the multicultural experience is shaped by the only mode capitalism knows: consumption. This logic of tourist consumption is highlighted in the sushi restaurant episode, where Emi pokes fun at her partner exclaiming: “Here we all are, your multicultural mosaic,” before confronting a patronizing white woman who says: “I adore different cultures. I’ve traveled all over the world. I love living in L.A. because I can find anything in the world to eat, right here. It’s such a meeting place for all sorts of people. A true celebration of an international world.”¹⁴⁸

Yamashita provides a classic example of the gastronomical consumption of cultures and critiques the identification of culture through cuisine and other consumer goods. Often, a diverse array of consumer choices is regarded as an indicator of a nation’s strength and quality. Lee argues that “First World consumers [...] rationalize their privileged mobility and consumption as responsible acts of global citizens” when they interchange “my” consumption with “our” celebration without realizing the unbalanced power dynamics of their celebration.¹⁴⁹ This

¹⁴⁵ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 211.

¹⁴⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

¹⁴⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 211.

¹⁴⁸ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 110-111.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, “We Are Not the World,” 507.

fetishization of cultures mirrors the imperialistic, one-way nature of universalism in the “global village” in daily life.

In contrast, the episode of Arcangel’s visit to La Cantina de Miseria y Hambre offers a glimpse of how this idealized multicultural consumption in the U.S. affects consumer choice in places like Mexico, representing the Global South. “All American beers. But we are in México, are we not?” Arcangel asks, revealing that the diverse multicultural array offered in L.A. results in the Americanization of southern markets, where American consumerism replaces Latino culture.¹⁵⁰ Wallace argues how “[t]he cultural celebration of ‘difference’ is thereby mapped onto a neoliberal celebration of markets; or economic ‘identity’ is transferred to a notion of cultural standardization in the form of Americanization, the tenors produced being positive and negative respectively.”¹⁵¹ U.S. dominance over markets and the economic conquest of the Global South exposes the concealed realities of global cooperation. In a world where First World imperialism and colonialism are veiled as models of progress and development, neoliberal capitalism thrives and sets the norm for the so-called “free” market.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita reveals the complexity of globalization by employing magical elements to underscore the harsh realities behind the sociopolitical rhetoric of progress. The novel critiques the myth of a unified global village, revealing how it often masks the unequal power dynamics between the Global North and South. Through Arcangel and the symbolic journey of the orange, Yamashita exposes how globalization reshapes landscapes and reinforces existing hierarchies rooted in a long history of oppression and exploitation. Globalization processes, such as the Americanization of foreign markets, threaten authentic cultural diversity, replacing the celebration of heritage with capitalist consumption. Technology infiltrates personal intimate relationships, highlighting the profound impact of global intimacy and interconnectedness on individuals. Ultimately, Yamashita questions who truly benefits from these global connections and at what cost.

2.3 Nation of (Im)migrants

Mobility, both literal and metaphorical, is a central theme in *Tropic of Orange*. As the author notes, the novel is “about migration and border crossing and the consequences for those

¹⁵⁰ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 113.

¹⁵¹ Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 147.

who cross and for those who find themselves in the mix.”¹⁵² The seven main characters are constantly moving, both physically through space and within the shifting social and cultural frameworks that define their lives. The ability to move—or the restrictions placed on movement—reveal underlying power structures that favor some and marginalize others. These movements not only reflect changes in social positions but also represent the fluidity of identity in a world shaped by migration. Each character embodies a multiethnic and multiracial experience, made possible by a long history of migration and movement. In that way, “everyone is a transplant from somewhere else, with multifaceted identities shaped by globalization, colonization, and war.”¹⁵³ The rapid flows of people, capital, commodities, and media, alongside advances in transportation, have accelerated mobility—though often unequally. These intensified movements highlight the socioeconomic disparities that are inherent to the modern era of globalization. Set in the post-NAFTA borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico, *Tropic of Orange* “tracks the passage of migrants (documented and undocumented), and commodities (legal and illegal) across [these] borders,” illustrating the profound impact of neoliberal policies on both sides.¹⁵⁴

Molly Rauch, in her review of *Tropic of Orange* titled “Fruit Salad,” begins by briefly tracing the history of the titular citrus fruit, subtly introducing one of the novel’s central themes: migration. She recounts the journey of the orange across continents, revealing that its roots in American soil are tied to Christopher Columbus. Interestingly, “Spain’s symbol of conquest,” the orange, owes its existence to seeds that traveled with Muslims from India to Spain.¹⁵⁵ Yet the orange’s story begins even earlier, with its earliest varieties originating in southern China. This history mirrors the experiences of the characters in Yamashita’s novel, as both the fruit and the people in the story are “immigrant[s], through and through,” symbolizing the colonial and migratory history of the Northern hemisphere. As a dominant colonial power, the United States—the “Nation of Immigrants”—was built on exploitative labor, and the practice of crossing borders in search of work remains deeply embedded in the American migration paradigm.

The demand for migrant labor in the United States has a long history, but it was only in the late nineteenth century that Mexican workers began to accompany, and later temporarily replace,

¹⁵² Glixman, “An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita.”

¹⁵³ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 48.

¹⁵⁴ Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 152.

¹⁵⁵ Rauch, “Fruit Salad,” 28.

predominantly male Asian laborers.¹⁵⁶ Over the following decades, the expansion of the U.S. railroad system created a growing demand for labor, increasing the influx of Mexican workers but also the migration of entire families and women to the U.S. As a result, migration patterns became less exclusively male, and labor opportunities grew in both quantity and quality. These changes have had significant implications for both the U.S. and Mexico, affecting immigration policies, shifting societal attitudes, increasing economic exploitation, and leading to the emergence of multicultural identities. Migrants no longer left their homelands entirely behind, nor did they assimilate into the dominant culture in the same way earlier generations had, resulting in a more complex, transnational cultural landscape.

One key example of mobility in *Tropic of Orange* is the character of Rafaela, a woman caught between two countries as she navigates economic hardship and familial responsibilities. Her movement is restricted by the economic disparities between the U.S. and Mexico, reflecting the struggles of countless migrants in the region. Born in Culiacán to a mother from Yucatán and an Ayacucho father from the Andes, she moves progressively northward in search of economic stability in the U.S. As a Latina woman, her experience differs greatly from that of her brother Pepe, who “didn’t pay no coyote. Just crossed the Rio Tijuana with a bunch of others.”¹⁵⁷ While her brother could cross the border without assistance, Rafaela had to rely on a man—whether her brother or someone else—to find a secure path. As sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo explains, “sons and fathers migrate easily because they are accorded the authority and the social network resources with which to do so. Meanwhile, daughters and wives may not be accorded permission or family resources with which to migrate, but in many cases, they find ways to circumvent these constraints. Through the process of migration, women may develop their own social networks that allow them to contest domestic patriarchal authority.”¹⁵⁸

Initially dependent on her brother’s mobility outside legal frameworks and later on another man for legal mobility through marriage, Rafaela ultimately takes pride in her newfound independence. She earns a college education, founds the East L.A. Ladies Garment Workers Union, and becomes active in social movements such as “Justice for Janitors.”¹⁵⁹ Her story echoes

¹⁵⁶ This shift was largely a consequence of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

¹⁵⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 68.

¹⁵⁸ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 115,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=41600&lang=cs&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁵⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 18.

Jones-Correa's findings that Latina migrants often "take primary roles in community organization in the receiving country" more frequently than their male counterparts, even though they may assume they will eventually return to their home countries.¹⁶⁰ Later in the novel, even after securing a stable economic position, she still finds her family facing daily discrimination. Feeling alienated both socially and economically in a largely unwelcoming white American society and frustrated by the perception that "we're not wanted here. Nobody respects our work. Say we cost money. Live on welfare. It's a lie," Rafaela seeks more for herself and her son and ultimately leaves.¹⁶¹ In doing so, she asserts a level of personal and domestic authority that she did not possess in Mexico.

Rafaela's migration journey can be analyzed through two distinct frameworks often applied to migration studies. The neoclassical model "casts the individual migrant as a purely self-interested economic agent, [...] who compares present income with potential earnings in alternative locations."¹⁶² In contrast, the macrostructural approach conceptualizes migration within a broader global system. However, Jones-Correa points out that "scholars have increasingly rejected a purely individualistic analysis of immigrant decisionmaking to suggest that immigrants operate within social networks, of which the family is the most important."¹⁶³ Although Rafaela's narrative highlights her individuality and positions her as an "active participant in the process of migration, not a victim of structural forces," her decisions are shaped by her family responsibilities, particularly her child and husband.¹⁶⁴ Both migration and feminism, as "radically transformative forces," have played crucial roles in reshaping the social landscape of the United States in recent decades, challenging traditional gender roles and marriage patterns.¹⁶⁵

According to Jones-Correa, while men often maintain familiar social structures in a new country, women are more likely to seek change and adaptation: "Men undergo not only the disruption of the immigration experience, and with it the rupture of family and social networks, but also a relative loss of status as they negotiate entry into the economic sphere of the receiving

¹⁶⁰ Michael Jones-Correa, "Different Paths: Gender, Immigration and Political Participation," *The International Migration Review* 32, no. 2 (1998): 327, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547186>.

¹⁶¹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 71.

¹⁶² Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions*, 5.

¹⁶³ Jones-Correa, "Different Paths," 327.

¹⁶⁴ Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Feminism and Migration," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571 (September 2000): 108, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049137>.

country.”¹⁶⁶ This results in many men accepting lower-status jobs than they held in their countries of origin. Although Jones-Correa’s study focuses on Latino men in New York, his observations resonate with the experience of Bobby, Rafaela’s husband. Described as a “Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown,” his complex identity reflects the intersections of Asian and Mexican migration to the U.S.¹⁶⁷ Through Bobby’s character, Yamashita illustrates the connections between various ethnic communities and highlights the “transnational and cross-cultural similarities” in their migration experiences.¹⁶⁸

Bobby’s personal story reveals both the motivations for migration and the challenges that follow. His family enjoyed a stable life in Singapore, where his father owned a bicycle business. However, that all changed when a larger American bicycle company set up a factory nearby, offering higher wages and quickly monopolizing the market. As Bobby recalls, “[o]ne day, American bicycle company put up a factory. Workers all went over there. New machines. Paid fifty cents more. Pretty soon, American company’s selling all over. Exporting. Bicycles go to Hong Kong. Go to Thailand. To India. To Japan. To Taiwan. Bobby’s dad losing business. Can’t compete. That’s it.”¹⁶⁹ The family’s financial bankruptcy, caused by this megacorporation, forced Bobby’s father to urge his sons to seek a new future in America: “Better go to America. Better start out something new. For the family.”¹⁷⁰

Bobby’s migration journey is further complicated by his decision to pose as a Vietnamese refugee to take advantage of the political climate after the Vietnam War. By exploiting Western guilt and the push for humanitarian aid, he secures a safe passage to the U.S. under false pretenses: “Gotta take care of the casualties. Call them boat people. Call them refugees. Call for humanitarian aid. Call for political asylum.”¹⁷¹ For those attempting to cross national borders from South America, the challenges are often physical, involving the actual border, its legislation, and enforcement, whereas for others, like Asian Americans, the border is often deterritorialized, manifesting more as socio-economic and racial barriers. As Gail M. Nomura illustrates, “[f]or Asian Americans, the American frontier was not a geographical entity but a racial frontier on which

¹⁶⁶ Jones-Correa, “Different Paths,” 326.

¹⁶⁷ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 16.

¹⁶⁸ Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back,” 94.

¹⁶⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 19.

¹⁷⁰ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 17.

¹⁷¹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 17.

they struggled to transform the uncivilized, racially discriminatory justice system into a more civilized one where civil rights are extended to all.”¹⁷²

Various naturalization laws excluded Asian Americans from the mainstream society, discriminatory taxes regulated economic opportunities and school segregation further restricted access to education. In that way, nation-states maintain control over the flow and (socio-economic) mobility of migrant workers and refugees outside of the traditional spatial borders. However, Yamashita explores how in recent years different ethnic communities navigate similar obstacles in their pursuit of a better life in the United States. For instance, when Bobby helps his cousin cross the border, their experience highlights patterns of both Asian and Latinx migration to the U.S. and the political and cultural implications that accompany them. As Sadowski-Smith points out, Bobby’s use of certain border-crossing tactics mirrors the methods often used by undocumented Mexican migrants, showing the parallels between Asian and Latin American immigration experiences.¹⁷³ She adds that the post-NAFTA surge of “illegal” migration in the 1990s, particularly from Mexico and China, led to cooperation between Chinese and Mexican people smugglers—known as “snakeheads” and “coyotes”—turning the U.S.-Mexico borderlands into a significant land-crossing hotspot.¹⁷⁴

To smuggle his twelve-year-old Chinese cousin through border security, Bobby decides to “get rid of the Chinagirl look” by buying various U.S. multinational brand-name clothes and customizing her to look more American: “Now get her a T-shirt and some jeans and some tennis shoes. Jeans say Levi’s. Shoes say Nike. T-shirt says Malibu. That’s it. [...] Drag themselves through the slit jus’ like any Americanos. Just like Visa cards.”¹⁷⁵ Wallace argues that by “[p]erforming American consumerism, they are reborn through capitalism.”¹⁷⁶ She observes that the term “visa,” typically associated with legal entry, shifts to represent “Visa cards,” symbolizing the transnational fluidity of capital. Although Bobby is an American citizen, being “American” “comes to mean American consumerism; ‘nationality’ is a brand-name.”¹⁷⁷ The cousin’s new sneakers underscore this irony, representing the free movement of goods while people face

¹⁷² Gail M. Nomura, “Asian American Frontiers,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 17, no. 3 (1996): 12-13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346865>.

¹⁷³ Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back,” 105.

¹⁷⁴ Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back,” 104.

¹⁷⁵ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 175.

¹⁷⁶ Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 155.

¹⁷⁷ Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 155.

significant barriers to mobility: “Cuz is staring at her new Nikes. Made in China Nikes get in. But not the bro.”¹⁷⁸ In *Tropic of Orange*, “consumerism replaces nationalism as a form of ‘postnational’ identification that can be exported around the world.”¹⁷⁹ This American consumerism is highlighted in other episodes throughout the novel, such as the Sushi Restaurant episode described in the previous subchapter.

To expand on the Asian American and Latino/a overlap, Yamashita focuses on the socio-economic distinctions between these diasporic communities. While capital and commodities move freely across the post-NAFTA borders, “the economic agreement has also contributed to fixing the position of various U.S. racialized groups [...] at the bottom of a global socio-economic hierarchy.”¹⁸⁰ Even though Rafaela comes from a lower socio-economic background than her husband Bobby, upon entering the (reluctantly) receiving country, they both “encounter similar difficulties when trying to acquire the kind of cultural capital necessary for the upward mobility which Emi and Gabriel, by the grace of their birth in the U.S., already possess.”¹⁸¹

Representing the working class that functions within the structures of corporate capitalism, Bobby tries to assimilate through American modes of work ethic—“Working hard to make it. American through and through[,]”—and consumerism but all his efforts will never be enough for the systematic inequalities that his business and his family will always face.¹⁸² Rafaela “had scorned his materialism, but it was his way of showing his love, of trying to delight her with the nice things that other Americans had.”¹⁸³ Trying to conform to these “American” values not only complicates their relationship but also highlights the dissonance between their personal aspirations and the larger forces of late capitalism and systemic inequality, as they struggle to navigate their shifting cultural identities within the new geopolitical landscape.

The two central couples—third-generation Emi and Gabriel, and first-generation Bobby and Rafaela—symbolize different forms of cultural mobility, reflecting how migration has evolved. Rather than representing the traditional immigrant experience of uprooting from one country and assimilating into another, they exemplify a more modern reality. As contemporary “transmigrants,” Bobby and Rafaela maintain continuous connections across borders, shaping

¹⁷⁸ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 197.

¹⁷⁹ Wallace, “Tropics of Globalization,” 155.

¹⁸⁰ Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back,” 94.

¹⁸¹ Sadowski-Smith, “The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Write Back,” 104.

¹⁸² Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 137.

¹⁸³ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 101.

identities that neither fully integrate into one culture nor sever ties with their homeland. Their lives are marked by economic struggles and familial obligations, balancing the life of providing for their families in the U.S. while also supporting relatives back in their home countries, as Bobby does for his father in Singapore. Bobby, in particular, mocks the sense of obligation and gratitude often expected of many immigrants: “Gotta be happy he’s alive in America. Saved by the Americans. New country. New life.”¹⁸⁴ Yet, he wonders if life back in Singapore would have been any different, further commenting on the complexities of his journey.

In contrast, Emi and Gabriel, born and raised in the U.S., are increasingly detached from their ancestral cultures. Their lives are shaped more by their American surroundings than by their cultural heritage, reflecting how later generations of immigrants may become less connected to their roots as they integrate into U.S. society and move upwards on the socio-economic ladder. Gabriel’s attempts to reconnect with his heritage often expose a shallow fetishization rather than genuine understanding. His continuous planting of “exotic northern trees” unsuitable for the Southern land’s climate, combined with his absence from the property himself, emphasize the disconnect in his pursuits.¹⁸⁵ Together, these couples embody the contrasting realities of immigrant life: one of assimilation and detachment from ancestral roots, and the other of enduring transnational connections and economic survival.

To conclude, *Tropic of Orange* illustrates how globalization and migration challenge the traditional notion of borders, both physical and cultural, by emphasizing the fluidity of identities and the complexity of transnational connections. The novel portrays a world where borders are no longer fixed lines separating nations but are instead continually negotiated through the lived experiences of migrants who navigate the intersections of economic inequality, cultural displacement, and racial prejudice. Through its characters, the novel not only critiques the economic and social systems that exploit migrant labor but also celebrates the resilience and adaptability of migrant communities who reshape the cultural landscape of the U.S. while maintaining ties to their origins. In this way, Yamashita redefines what it means to belong, suggesting that in a globalized world, identity is as much about movement and connection as it is about place.

¹⁸⁴ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 137.

¹⁸⁵ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 13.

3 Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*

Having spent part of his childhood in the United States, Mohsin Hamid has firsthand experience with immigration, which has profoundly influenced his writing. As James Procter writes, his work presents a modern vision of the Pakistani national and ethnic identity, one that is not isolated from the Western contemporary world. This vision “breaks with the stereotype (that has prevailed since 9/11) of the region as fundamentally traditional, backward looking, essentially anti-modern.”¹⁸⁶ Hamid’s academic background in international relations gives him a unique perspective that is not only personal and literary but also informed by the geopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics between nations. His fourth novel, *Exit West*, published in 2017, examines how socioeconomic disparities and both global and local politics shape individual and collective identities. The novel explores themes of family, tradition and change in a near-future where migration becomes as common as any other human experience.

“Geographically autobiographical,” the novel is set in an unnamed city which resembles some of those in southwest Asia, an island in Greece, the United Kingdom and the United States.¹⁸⁷ It follows a young couple, Nadia and Saeed, as they escape the political violence taking over their hometown. “As they make their way in strange surroundings, untethered from the very things that first created their identities—family, place, nation—Nadia and Saeed experience transformations both subtle and radical.”¹⁸⁸ Unbound from their cultural traditions, the two navigate unfamiliar environments and explore new social structures. Saeed, weighed down by nostalgia and a sense of familial loyalty, finds solace in tradition and religion. Nadia, on the other hand, liberated from the constraints of her previous home, embraces change and seeks comfort in forming connections with new people.

“At its core, *Exit West* is about the universality of human experience, and the many migrations we undergo in a lifetime.”¹⁸⁹ Hamid argues that migration has the potential to unite humanity if we focus on our shared temporality and our capacity for change. This chapter will explore the effects of physical restrictions on individual freedom, the potential of collective

¹⁸⁶ James Procter, “Mohsin Hamid,” *British Council - Literature*, 2009, <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/mohsin-hamid>.

¹⁸⁷ Anne Brice, “*Exit West* Author Mohsin Hamid: ‘Migration Is What Our Species Does’,” *UC Berkeley News*, September 1, 2020, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/09/01/on-the-same-page-exit-west-mohsin-hamid/>.

¹⁸⁸ Caitlin L. Chandler, “We Are All Refugees: A Conversation With Mohsin Hamid,” *The Nation*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/we-are-all-refugees-a-conversation-with-mohsin-hamid/>.

¹⁸⁹ Chandler, “We Are All Refugees.”

transformation, and the emotional dimension of belonging. Furthermore, it will analyze the shift of national identity in an era of intensified mobility and examine how migration affects relationships—both connecting and distancing people. Finally, it will address the role of technology and global powers in the age of globalization, ultimately presenting Hamid’s optimistic vision for a more hopeful future.

3.1 The Spaces We Create and Share

In the first half of the novel, the characters witness their city’s transformation under a militant siege. The authoritarian power and control inevitably change the realities of both private and public spaces. Public spaces become sites of aggression and policing, marked by clear gendered restrictions. The basic need for a safe home is also under threat, and Hamid explores how people turn to virtual spaces to seek comfort or refuge. As magical doors appear, offering an alternative to these harsh realities, many choose to escape in search of a better future elsewhere. In doing so, they form new communities and are compelled to discover different ways of social organization outside traditional structures.

In order to universalize the issue of migration for his readers, Hamid places his narrative, at least initially, in the two protagonists’ unnamed hometown. This geographical and national anonymity generates a sense of universality which is pivotal to the author’s overall message: that Saeed and Nadia’s story concerns us all. The allegorical city without a place name is introduced in the novel’s first sentence as “a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war” promptly suggesting one of the story’s main thematic concerns: migration.¹⁹⁰ The presumably South Asian city, likely alluding to Lahore, Pakistan, where the author has spent much of his life, soon falls into a state of insurrection under the control of fundamentalist militants. Its structures, atmosphere and the lives of its citizens are completely transformed under their strict rule. This drastic socio-political change profoundly impacts the characters’ lives both in deeply personal ways and in day-to-day aspects of life. The escalating violence and restrictions redefine their spatial boundaries, altering what “home” and personal autonomy mean to them. The power dynamic inherently tied to territorial control manifests itself in the struggle between state

¹⁹⁰ Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West*, 1.

authorities and militants over the city's neighborhoods. What does this control over territory signify, and how does it redefine the characters' relationship to the space of their city?

As we are introduced to the two main characters, Saeed and Nadia, we are immediately confronted with the harsh realities of their lives. Their city, often personified as a victim to the peoples' wars, "had yet to experience any major fighting, just some shootings and the odd car bombing."¹⁹¹ The sensation of these manifestations of warfare is casually compared to "a subsonic vibration like those emitted by large loudspeakers at music concerts" in a disturbing manner by the omniscient narrator.¹⁹² Readers become acquainted with Saeed and Nadia, two students turned lovers, through the simple daily routines and habits they have formed and grown accustomed to. However, as the narrator cynically observes, "that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and instants until the instant when it does."¹⁹³ Against the backdrop of the city's insurrection, we witness their routines begin to change as the rules of free movement and other personal liberties become increasingly restricted.

Nadia, a young woman who lives alone after separating from her traditionalist family, is acutely aware of her environment and has learned ways to protect herself as an unmarried woman aspiring to be independent in a deeply conservative religious society. One of those ways is that "she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe," despite being someone who neither prays nor follows any other religious rules or doctrines.¹⁹⁴ She reveals the reason behind her choice to Saeed as quite simple: "So men don't fuck with [her]."¹⁹⁵ "[R]eady to resist the claims and expectations of the world," this decision to protect her personal space is accompanied by her riding a motorcycle, emphasizing her desire for individual liberty and autonomous movement, along with lying to her widowed landlord in order to secure housing alone.¹⁹⁶ As Knudsen and Rahbek say, "[the robe] is a self-customized emblem

¹⁹¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 2.

¹⁹² Hamid, *Exit West*, 2.

¹⁹³ Hamid, *Exit West*, 2.

¹⁹⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 1.

¹⁹⁵ Hamid, *Exit West*, 16.

¹⁹⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 45.

of her personality, one which also grants her operational integrity in public contexts.”¹⁹⁷ These intricate challenges showcase the strict rules imposed on women in their country, and as the fundamentalists steadily take over, the situation becomes progressively more difficult.

Two scenes highlight the potential threats to Nadia’s safety as a woman. The first is a verbally aggressive road rage incident with a man who refuses to respect her disinterest, and the second is far more invasive. When she goes to withdraw money from the bank to secure her savings in cash, she is groped in the crowd, leaving her “so stunned she could not shout, or speak, reduced to clamping her thighs together and her jaws together, her mouth shutting automatically, almost physiologically, instinctively, her body sealing itself off.”¹⁹⁸ The public modesty of the black robe, intended as a defense mechanism, fails in moments of collective chaos. Only when the mob is separated by gender does she find protection, but is left “bruised and frightened and furious.”¹⁹⁹

This invasion of her physical personal space is contrasted with the lack of physical intimacy in her relationship with Saeed, raising the question of whether restrictions of physicality by religious doctrines lead to such violations in public spaces or merely worsen pre-existing societal power imbalances. Public space proves to be a site of continuous boundary transgressions, both personal and social, where control and violence dominate interactions. This contrasts sharply with the sanctuary of the private sphere, where women like Nadia can simulate a feeling of safety and autonomy—whether through the act of living alone, asserting control over their domestic environment, or establishing relationships on their own terms. However, even private spaces are not immune to the broader societal restrictions, as the rules imposed by the governing powers infiltrate them, highlighting the pervasive reach of power dynamics tied to gender and mobility.

Nadia’s struggle with personal space and safety is reflective of the broader societal challenges tied to physical and metaphorical spaces in the novel. As the militants and the government fight over territory and control, the city’s spatial dynamics—and people’s relationships to it—undergo profound transformations. Some, like Saeed’s mother, “[tried] to recreate the rhythms of a normal life” in their deteriorating conditions and “insisted on claiming that nothing had changed.”²⁰⁰ However this mindset becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as

¹⁹⁷ Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, “Radical Hopefulness in Mohsin Hamid’s *Map of the World*: A Reading of *Exit West* (2017),” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 57, no. 4 (March 2021), 447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1889641>.

¹⁹⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 59.

¹⁹⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 60.

²⁰⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 23, 49.

the government imposes “temporary anti-terrorism measure[s],” such as shutting down internet connections, disabling mobile signals, enforcing curfews, and erecting military and police checkpoints throughout the city.²⁰¹ These measures disrupt daily lives restricting mobility and deepening fears about public spaces, which are perceived as increasingly unsafe. Even for those in government-controlled areas, like Saeed’s family or Nadia’s apartment, safety is never guaranteed. Eventually, these neighborhoods too succumb to militant control.

Saeed’s mother’s “mental map” of her lifelong home becomes fragmented, resembling “an old quilt, with patches of government land and patches of militant land.”²⁰² This fragmentation shifts people’s perceptions of their environments, forcing them to see their homes not as sanctuaries but as prisons. Instead of providing ease and comfort, homes become places where residents feel “marooned and alone and much more afraid.”²⁰³ This shift is represented by the changing relationship to windows as they suddenly transform from mundane features of a house to existential threats, viewed as “the border through which death was possibly most likely to come.”²⁰⁴ Hamid’s portrayal of the city’s changing geography and its psychological impact underscores how power dynamics pervade physical spaces. The boundaries between private and public spaces collapse under the weight of conflict, destroying the sense of security traditionally associated with the home.

In the face of the chaos outside, many people find solace in the virtual world of their phones, which “stood in stark contrast to the day-to-day lives of most people.”²⁰⁵ With the retreat to virtual spaces, the novel examines the contrasting personalities of its two main characters. Nadia, adaptable and eager for movement and change, “saw no need to limit her phone,” embracing all it could offer.²⁰⁶ Saeed, by contrast, “found the antenna too powerful, the magic it summoned too mesmerizing, as though he were eating a banquet of limitless food, stuffing himself, stuffing himself, until he felt dazed and sick.”²⁰⁷ Saeed’s discomfort reflects his connection to the comforts of his physical space, rooted in the security and love of his parents’ home—a reality he sees no need to escape. Nadia, on the other hand, separated from her family and living in physical solitude,

²⁰¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 55.

²⁰² Hamid, *Exit West*, 66.

²⁰³ Hamid, *Exit West*, 55.

²⁰⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 68.

²⁰⁵ Hamid, *Exit West*, 35, 38.

²⁰⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 37.

²⁰⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 35-36.

turns to her phone for connection and comfort. For her, the virtual world offers what the physical one lacks: “sex and security and plenty and glamour.”²⁰⁸ The streets outside hold no such promises.

Hamid highlights the cruel disparities between the First and Third Worlds through these contrasting experiences of virtual and physical spaces. He evokes this divide with haunting images of starving children watching on “some small screen people in foreign lands preparing and consuming and even conducting food fights with feasts of such opulence that the very fact of their existence boggled the mind.”²⁰⁹ The city’s transformation under militant control makes these contrasts even more defined, as the physical and metaphorical boundaries between privilege and deprivation become more pronounced. By comparing the characters’ engagement with virtual spaces, Hamid critiques not only the inequality of resource distribution but also the alienation that comes with both abundance and lack. For Saeed, the excess of the virtual world is overwhelming, while for Nadia, it offers an escape from the harshness of her reality which shows the complicated relationships between technology and physical space.

Another opportunity to escape the perils of physical danger arises when rumors begin to circulate about magical doors leading to distant places. With overland routes made inaccessible or too dangerous to traverse, and visa permits attainable only by the wealthy, the promise of a safe escape through these doors becomes tempting for many. These doors, initially dismissed as speculation, soon prove to be real: black portals to other parts of the world, hidden in random houses and unpredictable in their destinations and capacity. For some, the doors represent a space for personal rebirth, yet their use quickly becomes a target of control. Militants ban the doors immediately and punish their use “as usual and somewhat unimaginatively, by death,” while Western powers label the phenomenon as “a major global crisis.”²¹⁰ As Amanda Lagji observes, the doors expose the priorities of international organizations, which seem more concerned with the irrepressibility of movement than with addressing the root causes that drive people to migrate despite the risks: “The doors, rather than the violence of human rights violations and war, are the objects of outrage.”²¹¹ This highlights a critique of global systems that prioritize restriction over compassion, framing the movement of people as a threat rather than a symptom of deeper crises.

²⁰⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 39.

²⁰⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 39.

²¹⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 82-83.

²¹¹ Amanda Lagji, “Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration through Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*,” *Mobilities* 14, no. 2 (February 2018): 225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2018.1533684>.

As masses of refugees seek asylum in new locations, the question of organization inevitably arises. After successfully finding an agent who helps them go through one of the magical doors, Nadia and Saeed arrive in Mykonos, Greece. Upon arrival, they encounter a refugee camp with many others from diverse backgrounds, where “everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was.”²¹² This initial glimpse of a refugee community is crucial in understanding both the stakes of their situation and the dire conditions awaiting them. While the doors provide an escape from the restrictions of their previous home, they also introduce new challenges and limitations within the globalized spaces beyond these passages. Tegan Schetrumpf and Aleks Wansbrough’s “Imagining Utopias” argues that the three communities encountered during the characters’ journey present alternative models of social organization, particularly among individuals of heterogeneous cultural and economic backgrounds, and operate outside capitalist systems. The first of these communities with “utopian potential” is a squatter house in an affluent Kensington neighborhood in London.²¹³ This community “brings moral challenges to ideas of legality and ownership along divisions of both class and racial privilege, pertaining to notions of the Global North and South.”²¹⁴ Initially, Nadia and Saeed—the house’s first visitors—approach their newfound accommodations with a mix of awe and restraint, exposing their internal conflicts over morality in an unfamiliar context.

In one scene, Nadia takes a lengthy shower, leading to an argument with Saeed over their differing perspectives on what they should take from the house. Saeed, practical and conservative, believes it is only moral to take the bare necessities for survival, while Nadia asserts her right to enjoy basic comforts, like a shower, as part of her human dignity. This tension reflects broader questions of entitlement, morality, and adaptation in conditions of displacement. Other occupants of the house initially share “an internalized moralism and sense of impropriety, borne not of their present reality, but of the social mores and axioms instilled by their past community.”²¹⁵ Over time, however, Hamid explores how dire circumstances transform the concepts of what is moral, as necessity replaces the space for doubt. The space within the house is redistributed between the

²¹² Hamid, *Exit West*, 100.

²¹³ Tegan Schetrumpf and Aleks Wansbrough, “Imagining Utopia through Communities in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 8, no. 2 (December 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2022.14.06>.

²¹⁴ Schetrumpf and Aleks Wansbrough, “Imagining Utopia through Communities,” 92.

²¹⁵ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, “Imagining Utopia through Communities,” 93.

newcomers, a showcase of its redundancy; its singular owner being absent, it now accommodates multiple families with relative ease.

Any potential hesitancy readers may feel about the squatters' claim to the property is "soon overshadowed by the ensuing violence of government raids and nativist riots."²¹⁶ These acts of systemic oppression and violence create a shared antagonist, driving the refugees to unite: "In their terror they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers. A sort of camaraderie evolved [...] being penned in made them into a grouping, a group."²¹⁷ Sharing space, the refugees form a community of resilience in crisis. As the government shuts down power and divides the city into "Dark London" and "Light London," "the refugees organize, aligning themselves via ethnic or religious groupings for a greater sense of security."²¹⁸

Once again, Nadia and Saeed's contrasting reactions to these conditions highlight their divergent perspectives on community and identity. Saeed adopts a more isolationist stance, seeking comfort and solidarity among his fellow countrymen, whose readiness for armed resistance appeals to his growing attachment to tradition and nationalism. In contrast, Nadia embraces a broader, more inclusive perspective, participating in a pan-Nigerian grassroots council that encourages nonviolent collective action. These dual responses—violent and nonviolent—serve as contrasting approaches for addressing authoritarian oppression, illustrating both the fractures and potential within refugee communities. Ultimately, these communities suggest that "utopian potentiality exists amid the worst situations, necessitated by capitalist and global crisis."²¹⁹ Hamid critiques the systems that create these crises while exploring how shared suffering fosters alternative forms of social organization and solidarity.

Local conflicts and global disparities challenge our perceptions of home and our sense of safety. Unable to trust authoritative powers to move freely in public spaces, people increasingly turn to their homes. However, these spaces also come under the influence of power structures, as cultural restrictions infiltrate social dynamics. Nadia escapes these underlying gendered restrictions first through her online presence and, eventually, through the magic doors. As a refugee, the concept of ownership over space becomes destabilized, with necessity and global

²¹⁶ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 94.

²¹⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 124.

²¹⁸ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 95.

²¹⁹ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 96.

inequalities reshaping traditional beliefs. Ultimately, the hope for freedom—both physical and psychological—lies in collective organization and unity.

3.2 We Migrate Therefore We Are

Mohsin Hamid has frequently stated in interviews that he believes “we are all migrants through time” and that “if we can recognize the universality of the migration experience [...], then the space for empathy opens up.”²²⁰ In the context of Donald Trump’s presidency, the UK’s Brexit decision, and the rise of xenophobic political representation across Europe, questions of migration and border control have become central to a global discourse that affects us all. *Exit West* seeks to illustrate how common migration is, reimagining a world with nearly porous, open borders through the magical realist device of the doors. The novel challenges the idea of the nation-state and national identity as well as borders as rigid barriers, suggesting they are largely mental constructs. Through snapshots of various characters and their sudden encounters with migration, Hamid emphasizes the universality of the experience, showing that it concerns more than just Third World asylum seekers alone but impacts people of all social and economic backgrounds.

The magical doors, intentionally avoiding the physical hardships often faced by refugees during border crossings, enable instantaneous travel across great distances, alluding to the technological advancements of a globalized world. Hamid uses this device to examine the causes and consequences of increased personal and transnational mobility, particularly its impact on migrants’ identities, senses of belonging, and interpersonal relationships. Lagji’s research offers an essential perspective intersecting with mobility studies, highlighting the integral role of immobility and waiting within the mobility process.²²¹ For many refugees, the prolonged waiting for asylum, permits, or housing is as much a part of the migration experience as the act of crossing borders itself, and Hamid does not overlook this reality. The novel celebrates “the beauty of transience” and envisions a reimagined future where migration becomes a shared human experience, one of the key aspects explored in this narrative.²²²

With every new journey that Saeed and Nadia embark on, their relationship—both with each other and with themselves—changes. Physical mobility signifies more than just moving

²²⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 209; Chandler, “We Are All Refugees.”

²²¹ Lagji, “Waiting in Motion.”

²²² Chandler, “We Are All Refugees.”

between locations; it creates critical shifts in their romantic dynamic, their sense of identity, and their perception of the world in general. The formative experience of migration is emphasized through the changes that the characters undergo, the losses they endure with every move, and how these shapes their understanding of themselves and their surroundings. As Mohsin Hamid states, “[t]he journey seems the most narratively interesting part, [...] but it is the least useful part. It’s the lifetime up to the journey and the lifetime after that is important.”²²³ Thus, by eliminating the physical hardships of migration through the use of magical doors, the novel shifts its focus on the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement. Saeed, for instance, progressively internalizes the cultural and social power structures of his homeland, giving to nostalgia and feeling an intensified responsibility toward his parents, religion, and cultural traditions. Nadia, on the other hand, proves more adaptable to change and embraces the independence she lacked in her former home. Their evolving sentiments about what constitutes “home” change, as home is no longer rooted in geographical boundaries and becomes a construct defined by emotional connection or the lack thereof.

A central aspect of the migrant journey is the reevaluation of identity. Unable to directly affiliate with geographical or national markers, the characters navigate between recreating the social and cultural dynamics they left behind—Saeed’s approach—or finding new moorings and communities, as Nadia attempts. Saeed’s sense of home and loyalty is deeply affected by his experiences of loss. After losing his mother to a militant bombing in their city and witnessing his father’s refusal to leave, stubbornly dedicated to his late wife’s memory, Saeed’s concept of home becomes inseparable from tradition and family ties. In an attempt to heal from the loss of his home, he grows increasingly attached to familiarity and connects with people from his home country, replicating the customs he knows. However, this affiliation also creates a sense of hostility toward host cities and a rejection of assimilation. His longing to belong is formed by feelings of guilt and responsibility for leaving his father behind. This emotional conflict reflects a common struggle many refugees face, “for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.”²²⁴

Nadia’s journey, in contrast, presents a different pathway for displaced individuals. Her adaptability allows her to make connections outside her cultural origins and navigate new environments more freely. In her exploration of more progressive modes of existence, Nadia also

²²³ Wilkinson, “Mohsin Hamid.”

²²⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 94.

experiences sexual liberation, entering a relationship with a woman. This shows the complete rejection of the restrictive norms of her past and her openness to transformation and reinvention. The two different approaches demonstrate the duality of the migrant experience: one tied to preserving the past and nostalgia, the other oriented toward growth. Together, their journeys highlight the complexity of mobility—not merely as a movement across spaces, but as a rethinking of identity, belonging, and loss.

While migration requires Nadia and Saeed to “redraw their affective internal maps of belonging” and form new transnational identities, it subsequently challenges their relationship.²²⁵ As Hamid writes: “Every time a couple moves they begin, if their attention is still drawn to one another, to see each other differently, for personalities are not a single immutable color, like white or blue, but rather illuminated screens, and the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us.”²²⁶ As each new movement reshapes how they perceive themselves, it deepens the emotional distance between them as well. Their growing alienation becomes most apparent during their time working in the London Halo project. After finding out about his father’s death, Saeed is overcome by a sense of disconnection and guilt, not having been with his father at the time of his passing. Unable to process his grief openly, Saeed represses his emotions and chooses instead to immerse himself in work: “Saeed did not know how to mourn, how to express his remorse, from so great a distance. So he redoubled his work, and took on extra shifts even when he barely had the strength.”²²⁷

The tireless labor and increasing religiosity mark a significant shift in Saeed’s character. He starts praying more frequently and focuses on pragmatic concerns, speaking only of “paving and positions on waiting lists and politics, but not of his parents, and not anymore of travel, of all the places they might one day see together, or of the stars.”²²⁸ Despite finding him more physically attractive than before, Nadia grows more avoidant, realizing that their priorities and outlooks no longer align. “It seemed to Nadia that the farther they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone.”²²⁹ Nadia’s growing sense of independence

²²⁵ Lagji, “Waiting in Motion,” 219.

²²⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 186.

²²⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 170.

²²⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 187.

²²⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 187.

clashes with Saeed's nostalgia for memories of the past, illustrating how migration simultaneously connects and divides.

As the refugees from various social and cultural backgrounds cross paths, they come to embrace their shared experience of migration as a formative element of their evolving sense of self, distancing themselves from the previously established national identities. By "creating a sense of unity through simultaneity, [...] *Exit West* demands that we attend to our shared time, even if our shared space is divided by political and national boundaries."²³⁰ This hopeful vision of solidarity imagines a future where migration becomes a universal experience, one that transcends cultural and national divides to reconstruct new markers of identity.

However, as Lagji argues, "mobility and immobility exist in complex relation to one another," with both waiting and (im)mobility shaping the migrant experience.²³¹ Waiting periods endured by refugees—whether for asylum, bureaucratic approvals, or housing—are not spent passively. Instead, these periods, "full of waiting and false hopes, days that might have been days of boredom," can become spaces for reflection and grassroots action.²³² Yet, anthropologists Brigit Bräuchler and Anaïs Ménard, quoted by Lagji, point out that mobility across borders does not necessarily lead to true freedom. Refugees often find themselves "immobilized in their new places, for instance through the denial of basic rights to land or political representation."²³³ This paradox shows the underlying limitations that migrants encounter even after crossing physical borders. Despite these challenges, the shared endurance of "active waiting" and patience can foster collective identity among migrants, providing common ground for building community.²³⁴ Within this space of shared struggle, opportunities for empathy and solidarity emerge, challenging the divisive forces of political and national boundaries.

The novel focuses not only on the universalizing force of migration but also "interrogates the root of nativism."²³⁵ Hamid challenges the many meanings associated with the label "native," as he uses them in different contexts, exploring temporality as the common denominator of nativeness, rather than geographical affiliation. Unsurprisingly, the theme of nativeness is most explicitly addressed when the protagonists reach the United States, a country with a rich history

²³⁰ Lagji, "Waiting in Motion," 225.

²³¹ Lagji, "Waiting in Motion," 218.

²³² Hamid, *Exit West*, 108.

²³³ Lagji, "Waiting in Motion," 221.

²³⁴ Lagji, "Waiting in Motion," 227.

²³⁵ Lagji, "Waiting in Motion," 227.

of migration and displacement. “In Marin there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, [...] and yet it was not quite true to say there were almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter,” argues the narrator.²³⁶

The first reference to “native” refers to Native Americans, who were displaced and nearly eradicated by white settlers, violently forced out of their land. By relativizing nativeness, the narrator critiques how others—whose “existence [in a country] did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetimes” but comes from being second- or third-generation immigrants—often perceive themselves as “native.”²³⁷ This disregards the deeper history of migration and displacement that had enabled their current privileged position in society. The narrator further expands the concept of nativeness to include African Americans, who are descended from people forcibly brought to the United States as slaves. “While this layer of nativeness was not vast in proportion to the rest, it had vast importance, for society had been shaped in reaction to it, and unspeakable violence had occurred in relation to it, and yet it endured, fertile, a stratum of soil that perhaps made possible all future transplanted soils.”²³⁸ By contextualizing the historical background and layers of nativeness, Hamid acknowledges the unjust social hierarchy rooted in colonization and exploitation. He critiques the subjective nature of national identities and the way geographical affiliations perpetuate socioeconomic power disparities.

The disregard of migration’s crucial role in shaping the contemporary world order, along with the global power imbalances built on colonization and exploitation, highlight the effects of mass migration on socio-economic hierarchies and geopolitical paradigms. The magical doors in the novel, which eliminate physical obstacles of border crossing, serve as a metaphor for overcoming not only spatial limitations but also the mental constructs of nationalism and the idea of the nation state. Simultaneously, they propose “a thought experiment about open-border policies, which may undermine or dissolve the nation state.”²³⁹ The surge of movement permitted by the doors creates unprecedented flows of people, “implod[ing] both the space and time of old national affiliations” and allowing for new forms of social organization.²⁴⁰ “Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they

²³⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 195-196.

²³⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 196.

²³⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 197.

²³⁹ Schettrumpf and Wansbrough, “Imagining Utopia through Communities,” 89-90.

²⁴⁰ Lagji, “Waiting in Motion,” 227.

had to play. Many were arguing that smaller units made more sense, but others argued that smaller units could not defend themselves.”²⁴¹ This reimagining of global structures highlights the instability of nation-states and challenges the readers to envision a future where identity and belonging are no longer defined and confined by borders.

As Knudsen and Rahbek argue, “the feeling of shared humanity must be converted into a new and hopeful geography of belonging that is free of the constraints of nation and its xenophobic distinctions.”²⁴² Instead of forming national identities, Hamid invited his readers to organize on the basis of their shared temporality, movement and the waiting endured along the way. Perhaps in a world of magical doors that allow limitless movement to various places, “it [is] useless to fight in any one.”²⁴³ Hamid’s vision of mobility as a universal experience—if not spatial then temporal—offers a hopeful solution to contemporary modes of existence. The disruption of traditional territory-based nationality allows for new identities to emerge, ones rooted not in national affiliation but in our shared human experience.

3.3 A New Hope

The previous subchapters analyze various transformative processes of migration, such as community building alongside alienation and displacement, the profound effects on identity shaping as a consequence of increased mobility, the role of historical cultural and national institutions as driving forces behind sensationalism and political extremes, and the dual role of technology in both connecting and distancing individuals. The novel implicitly sets its story against the backdrop of a highly globalized world, portraying how the forces of globalization engender socio-political instability and cultural fragmentation, while highlighting the social and political hegemony of the West in contrast to the experience of (though not exclusively) Third World migrants. Hamid, “a child of globalisation himself,” “envisions an interconnected world in which East and West inevitably meet as a consequence of complicated histories of colonization

²⁴¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 155.

²⁴² Knudsen and Rahbek, “Radical Hopefulness,” 448.

²⁴³ Hamid, *Exit West*, 164.

and globalization.”²⁴⁴ However, he depicts this future with optimism, offering a hopeful alternative to the current discourse surrounding “global crises.”

“That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north,” contemplates the narrator.²⁴⁵ The reality of the contemporary world is not far from the magical realist near-future the two protagonists find themselves in. In a dynamic world full of movement, shifts, and flows, it may indeed seem that everyone is moving from one place to another. This universalizing argument is precisely what Hamid attempts to make. Globalization, with its advancements in transportation and technology, enables rapid movement and the spread of humans, goods, and information, seemingly shortening distances in a phenomenon of “time-space compression” or “time-space stretching.”²⁴⁶ The magical black portals that transport individuals through time and space, allowing them to appear intact in new locations, serve as a metaphor for this acceleration of travel. As the characters navigate these new globalized spaces, they undergo various psychological transformations in their search for “home,” which is no longer rooted in physical space but is instead deterritorialized and found in emotional connections.

Despite meeting new people and forming new communities, Saeed and Nadia both experience a persistent sense of displacement and alienation throughout their journey. Feeling estranged from local cultural traditions and adjusting to their lower social status, they both struggle to find their place. From the marginalization and segregation in Mykonos to the violent nativist mobs in London, they face intense emotional backlash from the host cities’ locals. Furthermore, becoming victims of systemic oppression in both accommodations in London—whether through the authorities shutting down power or the discouraging social hierarchy of the Halo Project—Nadia “wondered whether she and Saeed had done anything by moving, whether the faces and buildings had changed but the basic reality of their predicament had not.”²⁴⁷ The hopeless feeling, that not much is different from the militants’ rule in their native city, takes a toll on the characters’ mental state.

²⁴⁴ Wilkinson, “Mohsin Hamid;” Viet Thanh Nguyen, “March’s Book Club Pick: *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/exit-west-mohsin-hamid.html>.

²⁴⁵ Hamid, *Exit West*, 167.

²⁴⁶ As explained in Chapter 1.1.

²⁴⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 156.

The critique of conditions in the West, where political power and hierarchies are much more discreet and hidden compared to the war-torn society of Saeed and Nadia's birthplace, presents itself in various moments. Bräuchler and Ménard argue that neoliberal western policies praise mobility as emancipatory "despite the increasing numbers of refugees, asylum seekers and slaves."²⁴⁸ Hamid makes these distinctions clear in the snapshots of random characters' passages through the magic doors. Yet, instead of focusing solely on the unfairness of voluntary versus forced migration, he captures its capacity to unify. The universalizing sentiment of statements like "we are all migrants through time" and "loss unites humanity, unites every human being" is criticized by Eva Kowal, who nonetheless praises Hamid's ability to depict the migrant experience without trivialization and misrepresentation, focusing instead on two characters more relatable to the average reader.²⁴⁹

However, Hamid has been vocal about his intention to universalize migration as an effort to foster empathy and solidarity by recognizing the shared nature of our experiences in a globalized world. By universalizing, Hamid does not generalize; instead, he emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of both locals and migrants. For example, Saeed is pleasantly surprised by the kindness of a young local boy in London and a teenage girl in Mykonos who volunteer to help the refugees, saying how "there was such earnestness in the boy, such empathy and good intent."²⁵⁰ In the squatter house in Kensington, the refugee community consists of people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, "a dozen Nigerians, later a few Somalis, after them a family from the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand," who attempt to navigate their differences but ultimately disintegrate.²⁵¹ Nevertheless, Hamid questions: "Humans are in motion across time as well as geography. Why must we be divided, the migrant versus the native?"²⁵²

By considering migration a unifying force, Hamid reshapes preexisting dynamics that polarize society and challenges the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy—a tool used by journalists, politicians and the general public to divide and alienate. The stigmatization of refugees and

²⁴⁸ Birgit Bräuchler and Anaïs Ménard, "Patterns of Im/Mobility, Conflict and the Re/Making of Identity Narratives*," *Social Identities* 23, no. 4 (February 2017), 381, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1080/13504630.2017.1281418>.

²⁴⁹ Ewa Kowal, "Immense Risks: the Migrant Crisis, Magical Realism, and Realist 'Magic' in Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Exit West*," *Polish Journal of English Studies* 6, no. 1 (June 2020) 22-42, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=973440>.

²⁵⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 135.

²⁵¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 120.

²⁵² Mohsin Hamid, "In the 21st Century, We Are All Migrants," *National Geographic*, August 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/we-all-are-migrants-in-the-21st-century>.

migrants in contemporary social and political discourse perpetuates a harmful binary structure, in which “locals identify themselves with refinement, progress, civilisation and moral virtue” while viewing migrants with disdain and contempt.²⁵³ In a class-divided society, the ruling capitalist class exploits divisions based on race, ethnicity, and nationality to weaken solidarity among the working class. By directing their anger and frustration toward migrants and minorities—who are often driven to accept exploitative job positions—the majority is distracted from recognizing and addressing the root cause of their oppression: the capitalist system itself. Workers then compete against one another, emphasizing national identity as a divisive factor rather than uniting against their shared exploiters.

On the construction site of the London Halo Project, “natives did labor alongside migrants on the work sites, usually as supervisors.”²⁵⁴ Saeed’s boss, for example, “unlike many of the natives [...] ate his lunch among the migrants who labored under him,” becoming a representative figure for many newcomers.²⁵⁵ The workers’ interactions with the foreman were “the closest and most extended of their contacts with any native, and so they looked at him as though he was the key to understanding their new home, its people and manners and ways and habits[.]”²⁵⁶ In that sense, however, “their very presence here meant that its people and manners and ways and habits were undergoing considerable change.”²⁵⁷ This boss figure is thus characterized as not only economically superior but also socially and culturally above the rest, thanks to his “nativeness” to the country.

Similarly, Nadia, who works mostly alongside women, contemplates about a couple on her site who, though not explicitly her direct supervisors, seemed to her “a bit like the queen and king of a domain populated otherwise solely by women, a transient domain that would last only a few short seasons, and she wondered if perhaps they thought the same and had decided, nonetheless, to savour it.”²⁵⁸ These instances emphasize the complex realities migrants face as they navigate often ostracizing environments. While the refugees in Kensington initially find unity in response to attacks by their shared antagonists—the police and the nativists, which reinforces “us” vs.

²⁵³ Sercan Hamza Bağlama, “Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*: Co-Opting Refugees into Global Capitalism,” *New Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 2 (September 2019), 150, <https://nmes.pubpub.org/pub/llu4zamj/release/1>.

²⁵⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 176.

²⁵⁵ Hamid, *Exit West*, 177.

²⁵⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 178.

²⁵⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 178.

²⁵⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 182.

“them” dichotomy—Hamid also presents more hopeful scenarios. Saeed’s coworkers collaborate with their supervisor in attempts to culturally assimilate, and at Nadia’s job, the workers form a temporary yet reliable community regardless of national and cultural background.

As Saeed and Nadia traverse various globalized spaces, Hamid examines the role of technology: its potential for connections and its capacity to monitor and control. In their search for community and belonging, the power of technology—the high-speed internet and smartphones—becomes central to their experiences. The virtual transience enabled by technology, where one can seemingly access places and connect with others far away, seems dystopian and, frankly, too good to be true, as the connection it offers proves superficial and unsettlingly invasive. The eerie sense of closeness is particularly evident when Saeed first uses his phone to feel closer to Nadia. “[A]t any time of day or night, [his phone] allowed him to start to enter into her thoughts, as she towed herself after a shower, [or] as she reclined on her toilet after emptying her bladder.”²⁵⁹ This moment marks the unnatural intimacy that technology can create, erasing physical distance in an intrusive and almost voyeuristic way.

However, this collapse of physical space can also lead to emotional distancing, as individuals dissociate from the gravity of their immediate surroundings. With seeming indifference to the chaos around her, Nadia scrolls through her phone “[watching] bombs falling, women exercising, men copulating, clouds gathering waves tugging at the sand like the rasping licks of so many mortal, temporary, vanishing tongues, tongues of a planet that would one day too be no more.”²⁶⁰ Her apathy shows how technology enables users to escape to a virtual world, even in the face of violence and mortality. This emotional distancing is also apparent in Saeed and Nadia’s relationship, which worsens as their migration journey continues. Their exhaustion and the struggle to adapt to their new life further complicates their bond, as does the isolating effect of their phones. “[P]hones themselves have the innate power of distancing one from one’s physical surroundings,” the narrator observes, as the two avoid physical intimacy and the devices replace it with detachment.²⁶¹

In an interview, Hamid parallels phones to the magical black doors that transport characters through time and space. Both function as portals to other dimensions, “transporting them to places

²⁵⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 36.

²⁶⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 37.

²⁶¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 185.

distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be.”²⁶² As Christian Moraru observes, “the novel’s phones participate in the irony of dislocation-with-re-location, alongside doors, satellites, drones, and other exit objects.”²⁶³ Once deprived of their phones, characters feel confined and isolated, signaling how dependent they have become on these devices to navigate both their physical and emotional worlds. Technology thus serves both as a tool of liberation and an instrument of confinement.

Another layer to the narrative is the role of technology in surveillance and control. The “invisible network of surveillance that radiated out from their phones, recording and capturing and logging everything,” highlights the pervasive monitoring of modern life.²⁶⁴ This surveillance—present throughout the characters’ journey—works alongside media coverage, which shapes public perceptions of migrants and refugees. The news escalates fear and deepens divisions, presenting a world “full of fracturing [...], of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, [where] as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart.”²⁶⁵ This portrayal dehumanizes migrants and forms a doomerist image of crisis and disruption. Nadia’s dissociative panic upon seeing what she believes to be a photograph of herself online illustrates the unsettling effects of this constant monitoring and instantaneous transmission of images. “[S]he had the bizarre feeling of time bending all around her, as though she was from the past reading about the future, or from the future reading about the past.”²⁶⁶ The disorienting nature of a globalized world, where technology disturbs perceptions of time and space, leaving individuals disoriented in their own realities.

All in all, Hamid has a clear motive in his story telling. By implementing the device of magical portals—leaving out the details of refugees’ journeys—and anonymizing much of the geopolitical signifiers, he attempts to make the migration journey relatable to the reader. “Take away the journey, and you have a person who was in one place, and now is in a different place, something that happens to all of us,” he says in an interview.²⁶⁷ Adding that it is not his intention to “minimize the dangers and difficulties of migration with the doors,” he simply “intend[s] to

²⁶² Hamid, *Exit West*, 35.

²⁶³ Christian Moraru, *Flat Aesthetics: Twenty-First-Century American Fiction and the Making of the Contemporary* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 144, <https://www.proquest.com/legacydocview/EBC/7110269?accountid=35514>.

²⁶⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 188.

²⁶⁵ Hamid, *Exit West*, 155.

²⁶⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 154.

²⁶⁷ Brice, “*Exit West* Author Mohsin Hamid.”

minimize the strength of our instinct to treat our fellow humans as ‘other.’”²⁶⁸ By universalizing and normalizing the migration experience, Hamid urges us to see “the beauty and potential” of migration as a force to unify and create an alternative vision of the global order.²⁶⁹

Rethinking mass migration with a more optimistic tone can become liberating for the contemporary reader. In response to the skepticism and anxieties tied to ideas about the future—one where “the tools we have evolved to deal with upheaval and uncertainty, and with the inevitability of our own mortality, are being undermined. Families are being scattered across the globe. Religion is being repurposed for political gain and consequently emptied of spirituality. Clan and tribe and nation are being challenged by hybridity”—people often romanticize the past and give in to nostalgia.²⁷⁰ According to Hamid, this passive pessimism is “deeply conservative and reactionary” and ultimately leads to “surrender.”²⁷¹ This theme is visible in *Palo Alto*, where an old woman reflects on the changes in her surroundings. She “had lived in the same house her entire life [...] and yet it seemed the world had moved, and she barely recognized the town that existed outside her property.” She reminisces about the quieter streets of her childhood, when she knew the names of every family in the neighborhood, and contrasts it with the current atmosphere of her town. “[I]t seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can’t help it.”²⁷²

As a solution to this powerless nostalgia, Hamid suggests that “storytelling offers an antidote” and that “[b]y imagining, we create the potential for what might be.”²⁷³ He argues that “[i]t’s important for people to imagine futures that do involve huge amounts of change and yet where our grandchildren can be all right.”²⁷⁴ Fictional writing, therefore, inherently has the power to be political and “instigate change.”²⁷⁵ “The future,” he remarks, “is too important to be left to professional politicians.”²⁷⁶ While Hamid’s optimism highlights the crucial role of storytelling, it

²⁶⁸ Brice, “*Exit West* Author Mohsin Hamid.”

²⁶⁹ Brice, “*Exit West* Author Mohsin Hamid.”

²⁷⁰ Mohsin Hamid, “Mohsin Hamid on the Dangers of Nostalgia: We Need to Imagine a Brighter Future,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/25/mohsin-hamid-danger-nostalgia-brighter-future>.

²⁷¹ Alex Preston, “Mohsin Hamid: ‘It’s Important Not to Live One’s Life Gazing Towards the Future,’” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/11/mohsin-hamid-exit-west-interview>.

²⁷² Hamid, *Exit West*, 209.

²⁷³ Hamid, “Mohsin Hamid on the Dangers of Nostalgia.”

²⁷⁴ Wilkinson, “Mohsin Hamid.”

²⁷⁵ Hamid and Prose, “Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?”

²⁷⁶ Hamid, “Mohsin Hamid on the Dangers of Nostalgia.”

is necessary to remain critical of the deeper systematic issues. Global migration and the fate of refugees stem from imperialist power systems which are unlikely to be dismantled in the near future without a confrontation of these realities.

Through Saeed's practice of prayer, Hamid bridges the nostalgia for the past with hope for the future. According to Knudsen and Rahbek, praying is "a profound act of human connectivity and an integral part of the novel's radical hopefulness."²⁷⁷ By focusing on the act of praying rather than its content, Saeed "prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way."²⁷⁸ Meditating on human temporality and morality, he proclaims that "loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our beingness, and our shared sorrow."²⁷⁹ Through prayer, Saeed soothes scars of the past, remains connected to his origin, and reaffirms his belief "in humanity's potential for building a better world."²⁸⁰

This hopeful vision of a world that embraces change and finds unity in diversity is fully realized in Marin, California, where an "entirely self-organized and only quasi-legal [shanty city]" emerges.²⁸¹ The multicultural blend of music and gastronomy exemplifies a thriving, collective society that embodies Sue-Im Lee's concept of "romantic universalism."²⁸² Social organizations in Marin, driven by collective decisions and action, flourish despite being monitored. The residents feel empowered to instigate local political change and enjoy a sense of freedom. Schetrumpf and Wansbrough argue that Marin "def[ies] the logic of capitalist realism (Fisher, *Realism*) and neoliberal forms of atomisation and can be viewed as utopian in [its] ability to imagine any system of social organisation that progresses beyond contemporary lived experience."²⁸³ Thus, Hamid imagines a future where geocultural movement is normalized, and where people work together toward common goals. Reimagining "a more ethical and collaborative form of capitalism," the novel does not provide clear instructions to dismantle oppressive systems. Instead, it offers a ray of hope and a call for unity in the face of change.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁷ Knudsen and Rahbek, "Radical Hopefulness," 449.

²⁷⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 201.

²⁷⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 202.

²⁸⁰ Hamid, *Exit West*, 202.

²⁸¹ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 100.

²⁸² Lee, "We Are Not the World."

²⁸³ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 90.

²⁸⁴ Schetrumpf and Wansbrough, "Imagining Utopia through Communities," 104.

4 Conclusion

Karen Tei Yamashita and Mohsin Hamid masterfully use storytelling and rich imagination to explore the complexities of a globalized world. They focus not only on individual characters and their communities but also on broader global inequalities, power dynamics and their representations in space. The novels share many attributes and complement each other's portrayals and overall message effectively. In both narratives, the authors employ magical realism to manipulate time and space which enables them to materialize the invisible forces driving globalization—such as SUPERNAFTA and Arcangel in *Tropic of Orange*—or to facilitate movement that allows for a deeper focus on key aspects of the migrant journey, as seen in *Exit West*'s magical doors. Ultimately, the novels raise important questions about contemporary global dynamics and transformations, interrogating the root causes of inequality and their effects on communities.

Fluid in genre, *Exit West* can be seen as an immigrant novel, telling a story of people crossing both physical and deterritorialized borders. Through its magical realist device of black portals that mystically transport masses of people from one place to another, the novel incorporates elements of fantasy. However, its sharp critique of real-world global power structures and its exploration of themes like dispossession and restriction of mobility also align it with political or migration fiction. Similarly, *Tropic of Orange* is most commonly classified as magical realism, particularly in the Latin American tradition. Nevertheless, Yamashita “insists that the fantastical elements [...] are an accurate reflection” of current realities.²⁸⁵ Caroline Rody has proposed the encompassing term “border novel” to describe its geopolitical and cultural landscapes as well as its characterization.²⁸⁶ Challenging both genre distinctions and form, Yamashita and Hamid aim to reflect the complex realities of contemporary globalization and its profound impact on individuals and landscapes.

The transformation of cultural and social landscapes under the forces of mass migration is central to both novels. Setting their stories in modern metropolises like Los Angeles and London, the authors capture the current atmosphere surrounding migration and examine the growing socio-economic disparities between the ruling class and the working class. They also critique the

²⁸⁵ Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, 18.

²⁸⁶ Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 127.

intentional distractions caused by culture wars among the middle or lower classes, which help maintain an unquestioned status quo. In Los Angeles, Yamashita portrays Mexican laborers uniting to resist oppressive border policies, alongside an emerging homeless community reclaiming public space from the affluent, car-obsessed majority—both movements sparking mass opposition. Similarly, in *Exit West*, the protagonists encounter hostility in the new places they find themselves in, from Mykonos to London, where they face hatred from local citizens and authorities alike. Through other snapshots, such as scenes of anti-immigration mobs in Vienna, Hamid paints a picture of intensified backlash against migration and its escalation into repressive policies and general discrimination.

The cities in *Tropic of Orange* and *Exit West* serve as backdrops for examining the spatial organization of urban spaces and the power dynamics that shape them. By focusing on how individuals and communities interact with their environments, both novels highlight the reciprocal relationship between social life and urban planning. Saeed's mother's mental map of her hometown is forever changed as the radical intrusions of war disrupt her daily reality. Similarly, the old lady in Marin witnesses her neighborhood's cultural and demographic landscape undergo dramatic shifts, while Buzzworm's grandmother "rolls in her grave" as her former home falls victim to gentrification. Where her house once stood, a parking lot or a shopping mall may now take its place, resonating with Saeed's parents' cherished cinema, which "had been replaced by a shopping arcade for computers and electronic peripherals."²⁸⁷ Both gentrification and mass migration transform the spatial dynamics of urban spaces, as well as the lives of those who inhabit them. In *Tropic of Orange*, an old woman's dress shop, once enjoyed by the entire community, is intentionally neglected by the city bureaucrats to pave the way for capitalist redevelopment. Similarly, Saeed's mother experiences the disappearance of her local butcher and the fabric dyer, "their places of business shattered and covered in rubble and glass," completely erased by war.²⁸⁸

For regular people, these transformations bring daily injustices and general uncertainty, resulting from global economic shifts and invisible yet intrusive forces of power. The novels ask fundamental questions about housing as a human right, as Buzzworm asks, "who was gonna guarantee [they] was gonna have a place to live under the master plan?"²⁸⁹ While the destruction

²⁸⁷ Hamid, *Exit West*, 12.

²⁸⁸ Hamid, *Exit West*, 66.

²⁸⁹ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 73.

of Saeed and Nadia's city is caused by militant and governmental violence, both texts reflect on how power imbalances reshape social and urban spaces with devastating consequences. Ultimately, these forces drive or force people to seek better, safer options and result in entire populations being set in motion.

In both narratives, globalized mobility and mass migration are humanized by focusing on the distinct struggles faced by men and women during migration. Men often seek to replicate familiar social structures and frameworks in their host countries, while women are more likely to welcome change, adapting to their new environments. In *Tropic of Orange*, Rafaela becomes an active member of various social organizations and finds more freedom and independence in the less traditional culture of Los Angeles. Her partner Bobby remains reluctant to adopt new paradigms, assimilating primarily through hard labor and consumerist practices. Similarly, in *Exit West*, Nadia eagerly embraces her independence outside of the patriarchal restrictions of her home country, while Saeed, having grown up with more traditional patterns, seeks solace in the company of his countrymen, increased religiosity, and familiar customs.

Both couples' relationships are increasingly disrupted as their status as immigrants continues to define their daily lives and interactions. In their search for belonging and community, the meaning of "home" becomes fluid and more ambiguous. Bobby and Rafaela, juggling familial responsibilities and evolving views on self-realization, struggle to find emotional stability in their new home. Bobby gives in to escapist workaholism, while Rafaela ultimately chooses to leave. Their reunion at the final wrestling match is emotional, with Bobby clinging to the lines of the Tropic and exclaiming: "What are these goddamn lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?"²⁹⁰ This heartfelt yet uncertain reconnection proves that "local ties of family and community (and the value of self-sacrifice) seem to conquer the global forces of capitalism."²⁹¹

Saeed and Nadia, on the other hand, follow a different path to fulfillment. Their love gradually fades as their migration journeys and personal growth pull them in different directions. When they finally settle in Marin, they realize the bond they formed and shared for mutual safety and companionship is no longer necessary. Despite initial loneliness in the new city, they form connections with new people, leading to their eventual detachment. Years later, they meet bittersweetly in their hometown, reflecting on their separate life journeys and all the "could-have-

²⁹⁰ Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 230.

²⁹¹ Sheffer, *Understanding Yamashita*, 56.

beens.” Ultimately, they recognize that clinging onto nostalgia is futile. By embracing change and honoring the time they shared, Saeed and Nadia demonstrate an acceptance of the transience of relationships in the face of migration’s transformative forces.

Ultimately, Yamashita and Hamid present hopeful visions for the future. Buzzworm’s grassroots “self-gentrification” and the temporary Freeway society in *Tropic of Orange*, alongside the shantytown in Marin in *Exit West*, propose new modes of spatial and social reorganization. These spaces challenge traditional structures rooted in capitalism and instead embrace local emancipation and collective resilience. Through the character of Manzanar, Yamashita embodies what Lee describes as a “romantic universalism.”²⁹² For him, the artificial urban structures of Los Angeles are as elemental as nature itself and he conducts the freeway and its people as one unified, living organism. As Lee states, “Manzanar’s romantic universalism is foundational to a greater vision—a single totality that encompasses not only the geographical span of Los Angeles, but of countries, continents, and oceans.”²⁹³

Both Yamashita and Hamid acknowledge that absolute universalism is unattainable under current global systems of inequality. However, they trust the transformative potential of imagination. Through their use of fantastic and magical storytelling, they critique the rigid and unequal structures of globalization while offering optimistic visions of a future where change is embraced and people are united across borders. As Yamashita writes, the city is “forever changing, but it is home, and this also means that home is also not fixed but changing.”²⁹⁴ Similarly, Hamid reflects on the profound changes that places undergo over time and notes that even those who have never physically moved, “have migrated profoundly.”²⁹⁵

²⁹² Lee, “We Are Not The World,” 505.

²⁹³ Lee, “We Are Not The World,” 505.

²⁹⁴ Glixman, “An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita.”

²⁹⁵ Chandler, “We Are All Refugees: A Conversation With Mohsin Hamid.”

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