Sufi Stargazing: Constellating Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Exit West (2017) is an award-winning novel that grapples with the contemporary refugee crisis by drawing subtly from Sufi cosmology to challenge conventional western assumptions about refugee narratives. An omniscient narrator reworks these conventions—which alternate between the dehumanizing trope of the masses in what Liisa H. Malkki calls the anonymous "sea of humanity" (388) and the humanistic focus on individuals, which emphasize journeys of displacement to settlement (see Nguyen and Phu), by following the westward journey of two young professionals, Saeed and Nadia, from their budding relationship in an unnamed, Islamic country to places where they seek refuge. Their migrations are facilitated by passage through mysterious "doors," spontaneously appearing portals around the world which enables travel between distant places, from Greece to England to the United States. Rather than dwelling on the journey from displacement to resettlement, their story focuses on the locations, or nodes, along this journey where the characters dwell until conditions become unfavorable. Having ultimately exited west, the protagonists' return to their homeland renders the novel's title—an invocation of the conventional trajectory of refugees from ostensible chaos to refuge—profoundly ironic.

Beyond features of speculative fiction, the portals open vignettes of others around the world and enable multi-nodal storytelling, defying the linearity associated with the spatial trajectory of conventional refugee narratives. Each subplot offers a distinct narrative node that, when considered together form a narrative constellation, that makes complex yet relational stories discernable. The narrative structure pushes the bounds of linear plot design until it expands multi-directionally into a vast narrative universe that conveys how intricately all entities within creation are interconnected and interdependent—in short, the principle of relationality.

From the blue cover with iridescent speckles to textual content, *Exit West* draws the reader's gaze and thoughts to stars and constellations (communities of stars)—as well as to the interplay between light and dark, without which the stars would not be visible. Moreover, although individual star locations are fixed, the ways in which human beings epistemologically group them into constellations differs, and overlaps, from place to place, from people to people. A constellational consciousness requires being cognizant of such inter-related diversity

in cosmologies and experiences. Indeed, the novel's constellational perspective is reinforced through its structure, which functions as a form of terrestrial constellating with autonomous, geographically distant stories adjacently unfolding, challenging readers to search for and contemplate inconspicuous connections. In addition to Nadia and Saeed's storyline, numerous vignettes spotlight different characters as they consider entering through or emerge from doors around the world. Each character and their story, positioned within its own social, cultural, and political matrix, is like a star that exists autonomously in the night sky. However, to integrate these points towards a constellational understanding, readers draw on their specific cultures and ontologies to inform their interpretation of the stars in relation to one another as they form discernable, storied patterns.

In Hamid's novel, refugee positionalities—the various socio-political matrices within which people experience refugeehood—act like stars. When these stars or positionalities are interpreted relationally with other positionalities, they function like constellations: revealing and illuminating. They reveal the ways that harm, to people and the natural world, are entangled across the planet and illuminate pathways to balanced cohabitation of the Earth.

The novel represents refugee agency through characters who seek to live in accordance with the principle of relationality to nurture balance and coexistence. This article explores the significance of relationality in *Exit West* through consideration of the novel's evocation of stars and what I call a *constellational consciousness*, which I contend, is informed by Sufi worldview. This constellational consciousness helps to reconceptualize the figure of the refugee as poignantly positioned to expose the global matrices through which imperialism and neoliberal capitalism operate in contradiction to relationality, thus, damaging beings and their relationships. Moreover, the figure of the refugee has the potential to foreground planetary interconnectedness and inform new ways of living in communities that are attentive to the local and global scales of relationality.

To account for the complexity of refugee positionalities, I apply a critical reading method that focuses on critical constellations, a concept that attends to stars and their invocation of an ethics of relationality. I adapt this method from Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's notion of "constellations of coresistance," which she conceptualizes as multi-scalar mobilizations of relationality—from a small community to world-spanning solidarities—towards justice and liberation. As I discuss elsewhere, methodologies grounded in relationality foster "self-reflexive analyses of cultural texts that are attentive to the lands and cosmologies from which they are shaped" (Author 45). Therefore, as a refugee scholar in the Canadian settler-state, I develop this methodology in conversation with Indigenous thought. This

constellational method is akin to the practice of "critical juxtaposing" as developed by Yến Lê Espiritu (21) in critical refugee studies and which Mai-Linh K. Hong adapts in her account of *Exit West*'s magical doors as structures of connectivity which activate a refugee epistemology that serves as a "visible guiding principle" of the novel, "engag[ing] … reader[s] in an ethical questioning" to consider their own positionality and responsibilities within these compounded juxtapositions (36). I expand on Hong's argument by drawing on Sufi cosmology to offer a planetary, juxtapositional, self-reflexive reading that enriches discourse on relationality.

Though not overt in *Exit West*, Hamid has previously noted the influence of Sufi mysticism on his works—especially evident in his use of second-person narration. While scholars Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek briefly mention the Muslim faith in their analysis of prayer in *Exit West* "as an act of radical worlding" (448), the analytic potential of Sufi influence remains discursively untapped. I contend that Sufi cosmology permeates the novel. For example, Sufi notions of relationality can be inferred in the conceptualization of light and dark that differs from an oppositional view of light and dark prevalent in Western discourse. Additionally, at the intersection of relationality and refuge, is the *Sufi khidma*, a traditional form of community lodging, through which anthropologist Amira Mittermaier asserts that Sufi relationality is rooted in "an implicit form of justice," "lived and embodied" (64). Unlike neoliberal humanitarian charity with its hierarchical separation between giver and receiver, and the assessment and accommodation of needs based on capitalist productivity, the Sufi understanding is that meeting the needs of the other is a practice of justice. Mittermaier explains that the khidma exemplifies justice through the fundamental understanding of "the profound dependency and interdependency of humans" that to be human is to be in need (64). This conceptualization of radical need resonates with debates in critical refugee studies, which likewise oppose the assumptions of humanitarian discourse that refugees are a problem for the nation-state to solve (see Hong; Nguyen; Nguyen and Phu; and Carter)—xenophobic assumptions rooted in Christian Imperialism, as Nasia Anam posits.

Understanding refuge within Sufi relationality challenges neoliberal humanitarianism, and Orientalist premises, and underscores critical refugee studies' emphasis on refugee agency. Moreover, *Exit West*'s portrayal of the refugee is inflected with Sufi cosmology's depiction of humans as part of the natural world. Thus, my analysis of Sufi relationality encompasses the interdependence of humans and other terrestrial and celestial beings. A Sufi lens provides insight into the potential for constellational consciousness and collective mobilization towards a future shaped by environmental and sociopolitical justice.

This article explores relationality through an examination of *Exit West*'s depiction of Sufi-inflected tropes of light and darkness, the alignment of human activity with stars, and the potential limits of this alignment. First, I consider how the interdependence of light and dark challenges the oppositional binaries foundational to Eurocentric constructions of self and other that rationalize white supremacy, Euro-American imperialism, and the exploitation of nature and analyze moments in the novel where human activity embodies the principle of relationality. Moreover, I examine how the narrative facilitates an ethics of relationality through a spare disclosure of details that stimulates reader reflexivity and shields refugees from voyeurism. Second, I consider the challenges of constellational storytelling in the settler colonial context. In Marin, California, the narrative configuration of Indigenous peoples, white colonizer-settlers, Black Americans, and refugees offers a hopeful vision of solidarity and future-making. However, the novel's spare style emulates colonial erasures of Indigenous peoples. I assert that a constellational consciousness can mitigate against such risks by striving to include positionalities most disparate from one's own. Despite these limitations, I argue that the novel's subtle evocation of Sufi epistemological frameworks helps trace skyscapes and landscapes as a means of reorienting refugee narratives towards relational ends, beyond the constraints of the nation-state.

Darkness, Relationality, and Nature's Balance

> your darkness is your candle, the limits of your confines are the quest.
> …
> listen, shadow and light are interdependent
> rest your head and lay beneath the tree of piety.
> —Rumi, "Ghazal 2155"[1]

Early in *Exit West*, Saeed recalls his family's practice of "stargazing" with a telescope on their balcony (Hamid 15). On rare occasions, air pollution permitting, they could "look up at objects whose light, often, had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born—light from other centuries, only now reaching Earth"—and experience what Saeed's father calls "time-travel" (Hamid, *Exit* 15). This stargazing, then, is also a meditation on obstacles that prevent movement through time and space, such as the pollution that hinders the family's capacity to see the stars and—in terms of the novel's overarching concern with migration—the human-made structures that obstruct people from moving from one place to another.

In another significant sky-gazing moment in *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia sit together on her terrace and find themselves "glimpsing occasionally a gash of moon or of darkness, and otherwise seeing

ripples and churns of city-lit gray" (Hamid 46). Under these conditions of obscured vision, Saeed gaze lowers and he is overcome with

> a feeling of awe … with which he then regarded his own skin, and the lemon tree in its clay pot on Nadia's terrace, as tall as he was, and rooted in its soil, which was in turn rooted in the clay of the pot, which rested on the brick of the terrace, which was like the mountaintop of this building, which was growing from the earth itself, and from this earthy mountain the lemon tree was reaching up, up, in a gesture so beautiful that Saeed was filled with love, and reminded of his parents, for whom he suddenly felt such gratitude, and a desire for peace, that peace should come for them all, for everyone, for everything, for we are so fragile, and so beautiful, and surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this, and then he regarded Nadia and saw that she was regarding him and her eyes were like worlds. (Hamid, *Exit* 46-7)

This passage echoes the poetic contemplations of Sufi poet and philosopher, Jalal al-Din Rumi (Rumi), which serve as epigraph to this section, as darkness lights Saeed's vision. The feeling of awe as he looks from the sky to his skin and then to Nadia's beloved lemon tree infers what Rumi calls the metaphorical "tree of piety." In amongst their rich usage in Sufi poetry, trees often symbolize creation, which is rooted in the spiritual world (see Barginksy). In this passage, Rumi reveals that through the tree of piety—meditation on and submission to the sacred order of creation—one can recognize the interdependent duality of darkness and light. Moreover, this duality guides the human quest, which for Sufis is to exist in spiritual unity with all of creation. Saeed is overcome with "love" for this tree and sees a shared ontology between himself and its "rootedness" in the earth and its "reaching" towards the sky. Saeed sees himself rooted to, and reaching from, this same earth by way of his parents or kinship and through his embodied connection to place. Through Saeed's revelational experience of relationality, Hamid illustrates what it means, in Sufism, for love to serve as "the prism for relating to the universe" (Hamid, "Mohsin Hamid"). Notably, in this moment, Saeed is intoxicated by hallucinogenic mushrooms. While literary scholar Liliana M. Naydan, relates Saeed's sense of "wonder" to (drug or digitally) induced disconnection from the world (436), I argue his state draws on prominent Sufi tropes that depict a profound connection to reality as a relational ontology. Importantly, from a Sufi perspective, material reality emerges from spiritual reality. Thus, Saeed experiences spiritual relationality through the love engendered by his perception of physical interconnection.

The renowned Iranian scholar of Sufism, Nasrollah Pourjavady (132-33), explains that metaphors of wine and intoxication are used "for the whole process of the cultivation of love in the mystic's soul." In the passage, Saeed is the intoxicated lover and, depending on perspective, his beloved can be Nadia or the tree. Both interpretations are consistent with a Sufi understanding of love because lovers "need

not necessarily be human" and "while love manifests itself as a relationship between innumerable lovers and beloveds, essentially it is one" (Pourjavady 130). Ultimately, love is a force that aligns human perception with spiritual reality. For Sufis, as Pourjavady further asserts, the purpose of love is to "take our individual souls from this world back to the spiritual world of the Soul, where all souls are united" (130). Sufi relationality then, is rooted in the idea that spiritually, all beings are united in love and that the conflicts, catastrophes, and oppressions that are created by, and contribute to, divisions in the material world are manifestations of human failures to embody the spiritual attribute of love—the oneness of all creation.

Saeed's epiphany traces lines between the sky, the tree, the earth, his body, his family, and Nadia that, collectively, draw an image of relational wholeness. Reflecting on this, Saeed longs for a "peace" to come for "everyone" and "everything"—peace, being a condition of balance achieved when people live in accordance with relationality. To break with this precept is to produce what he calls "conflicts." These conflicts can be conceived of as forms of pollution (like the city's sky glow) or other human-induced imbalance (through violence and other harmful actions) in the natural world. Additionally, when Saeed's gaze falls on Nadia, she is revealed to be more than one node within this constellational epiphany. Saeed sees relationality expand within Nadia whose "eyes were like worlds." She contains worlds and shows how the individual can be part of a constellation while also embodying galaxies. Or, in the words of Rumi ("Roba 1759"), "All that is creation is within you."[2] The individual is part of the spiritual or divine unity and the human body is itself a sign of this relational oneness. Therefore, to have peace is to live in accordance with the divine unity of creation as expressed in the natural world.

Beyond the stars, the novel uses the interplay of light and dark in other ways that evoke relationality and subvert the dominant Western aesthetic and cultural binary which construes light positively and dark negatively. Scholars have discussed how thematic content and narrative devices, such as the doors, are instrumental in the novel's challenging of the binary oppositions that structure colonial logics (see Al-Nakib and Karam). I contribute to this discourse through a contemplation of how *Exit West* reflects Sufi cosmology in its recognition of the interdependent nature of light and dark.

Hamid establishes the importance of considering darkness or blackness in terms of cosmologies beyond Judeo-Christian Eurocentrism through Nadia's black abaya-like robe—the first obvious reference to Islam in the text—which conceals her body but not her hair and face. The Eurocentric binary construes black vestments worn by women as symbolizing Islam's sinister qualities and the Orientalized dark body as the depraved savage against which whiteness defines itself as enlightened and civilized (see Edward

Said's *Orientalism*). However, the novel's depiction of darkness reimagines the racialized and gendered Other as empowered and discerning. To the surprise of Saeed and the readers, Nadia's donning of a black robe in their Islamic country, where it is not mandatory, is not a sign of religiosity. Rather, as she explains, she wears it so "men don't fuck with" her (Hamid, *Exit* 17). She continues to wear it in Europe and the U.S. for the same reason, emphasizing that to exit west does not mean escape sexism. This black robe represents a racialized woman's autonomy and need for self-preservation against worldwide misogyny.

The novel further subverts both dominant Western and Eastern associations of gender and sexuality with such coverings. Far from oppressing Nadia's sexuality or preserving her chastity, the black robe is instrumental in creating the conditions for the development of Nadia and Saeed's romance. In their country, hegemonic gendered ideologies about kinship and propriety prohibit unrelated men and women from intimate intermingling. Consequently, to visit Nadia's apartment, Saeed dons a black robe to disguise himself as a woman and uses the dark cover of night to move through her neighborhood and enter her apartment. Thus, their relationship, like a constellation, emerges in darkness.

Although Hamid's description of the novel's mysterious doors has been criticized by some as a reductive, privileged glossing over of the specific histories and barriers to movement experienced by refugees (see Goyal) and interpreted by others as "an admission … that such suffering is ultimately unrepresentable in narrative fiction" (Perfect, 196), it also invokes and contests the hierarchical opposition of light and dark. Significantly, these special doors differ from ordinary ones because of their darkness. Indeed, the impenetrable darkness of these doors and the tremendous gravitational pull they exert on entrants call to mind black holes where light, dark, movement, and time behave differently than on Earth. The first door opens into the bedroom of a sleeping white woman in Surry Hills, Australia. Though the room is "bathed" in the artificial light of a router, the door is "a rectangle of complete darkness" (Hamid, *Exit* 8). The exceptional strength of "gravity" against which a man pushes himself through this door is evident when he is described as finally "trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (Hamid, *Exit* 8-9).

This racialized description of the door, which the narrator likens to "the heart of darkness" (Hamid, *Exit* 8)—unmistakeably references Joseph Conrad's canonical novel. However, close attention to the concatenated paragraph structure reveals that, although *Exit West* deliberately summons racist elements of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Hamid takes care to subvert them, as Amanda Lagji and Al-Nakib have previously discussed.

Significantly, the recently emerged, dark-skinned man rises from the floor, and the narrator observes:

> His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly. Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him…. Growing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up, he was aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person is almost nothing. (Hamid, *Exit* 9)

The narrator initially evokes Conrad's anti-Blackness, then quickly negates it through the concatenation of alternative suggestions: "Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him" as he looks for a way out of the room. The man's eyes are not demonically rolling; they are scanning the room for passage. In fact, seeing the sleeping woman only triggers empathy in the man based in human "fragility" and the awareness that "alone a person is almost nothing." Josephine Carter asserts that this first vignette establishes the "shared vulnerability" of the human state and that by failing to recognize such intersubjectivity, the neoliberal state dehumanizes both the citizen and the displaced alike (629). The figure of the refugee, even in this spare subplot, powerfully illustrates the principle of relationality—relationships are primordial to human existence.

Moreover, the text does not provide a full account of what the man has had to endure to pass through this door, thereby refusing the manufactured, exploitative confessions or testimonies institutionally demanded of refugees. Scholars have documented the bind between the refugee subject position and legal bodies' compulsion for the extraction of refugee trauma narratives (see Rousseau and Foxen; Vogl; and Zagor). In contrast, Hamid only elliptically alludes to the fact that the man's experiences were "not infrequently perilous" and offers a suggestive sketch, providing enough information for complex and nuanced critiques of imperialism, migration, and displacement while protecting the intimate details of this man's experiences from voyeuristic appetites for refugee stories fashioned into testimonies of trauma.

By describing the man's home circumstances as "not infrequently perilous," Hamid builds that same nuance or subversive structure into the novel's distinctively sardonic style, which is characterized by winding sentences interrupted and delayed by undercutting subclauses and by the frequent use of em dashes. This cumbersome phrasing gives pause and counters the reductive assumption that refugees' homelands are absolute hellscapes. Hamid's concatenating sentences wedge open possibilities to render a humanizing, if spare, sense of interiority to this Black male character.

Additionally, this passage intimates the novel's precept of darkness as depth. The darkness of the Congo River that signals racial

difference and unsettles European colonizers in Conrad's novel is now reinterpreted in *Exit West.* The Congo is incomparably dark because it is the world's deepest river. Later, Hamid uses this water-informed understanding of the capacities of darkness to describe refugee-occupied London.

In London's mounting xenophobia, initially darkness continues to signify and challenge racialization. Hamid uses a racist epithet "little monkeys" to describe children who were part of the influx of the "dark bodies" of refugees in Palace Gardens Terrace (*Exit* 138). Through its distinctive rhetorical structure, the narrator unravels the racist trope through a cascade of subclauses, which complicate both racism and the man over nature oppositional binary. The narrator explains that this trope is invoked:

> not because to be dark is to be monkey-like, though that has been and was being and will long be slurred, but because people are monkeys who have forgotten that they are monkeys, and so have lost respect for what they are born of, for the natural world around them, but not, just then, these children, who were thrilled in nature, playing imaginary games, lost in the clouds of white like balloonists or pilots or phoenixes or dragons, and as bloodshed loomed they made of these trees that were perhaps not intended to be climbed the stuff of a thousand fantasies. (Hamid, *Exit* 138-9)

Hamid does not attack the slur from the position that racialized people are as human as white people and thus also superior to nature. Instead, he takes issue with the denigration of the natural world. In fact, these children pause in the affirmation of their humanity in the calm between the ebb and flow of violence, "as bloodshed looms," by respecting and embracing that they are "born of … the natural world"—as are urban spaces—in this vibrant depiction of relationality. This depiction of relationality partially overlaps with what Magdalena Mączyńska articulates as Hamid's casting of the refugee as "[e]co-[co]smopolitan [a]llegory" (1103) through which the novel makes a case for the non-hierarchical "universal belonging" (1101) of all humans—a belonging that is both border-defyingly planetary and anthropocentrism-defyingly ecosystemic.

The theme of darkness-as-depth re-emerges as the novel grapples with notions of belonging when electricity is cut off from the mansions in London where Nadia and Saeed temporarily live with other refugees. Misconstruing the potential of darkness, this was the government's attempt to make the refugee-concentrated areas of the city unlivable. In so doing, the government divides the space in two: "light London" and "dark London," thus, exemplifying the western binary thinking that the novel subverts. Far from utopia, "bright as ever … glowing up into the sky and reflecting down again from the clouds" (Hamid, *Exit* 146), light London's excessive artificial light at night, like the sky glow in Saeed and Nadia's city, disrupts the circadian rhythm of life and cuts Earth's inhabitants from visual

connection to the sky and universe. Contrastingly, dark London's night sky is not aglow, only dotted with "drones, helicopters, and surveillance balloons," all technologies deployed to watch, police, threaten, and detain the refugees. However, beyond such violence, the darkness creates an atmosphere for profound occurrences much like "blackness in the ocean suggests not less light from above, but a sudden drop-off in the depths below" (Hamid, *Exit* 146). Ultimately, darkness hinders state surveillance (helicopter spotlights and geothermal technology are no replacement for fully lit streets) and nurtures the possibilities for deepening community connections.

As darkness makes celestial bodies visible from the Earth, it also creates the conditions for networks of human relationships and communities to form on the land. When the majority of the refugee inhabitants of the mansions in dark London begin reassembling themselves by nationality, the house where Nadia and Saeed live becomes a "Nigerian House" under the leadership of Nigerian elders (Hamid, *Exit* 147) as migrants are prompted to largely relocate and reassemble by nationality. However, Nadia gradually understands that Eurocentrism misconfigures both identity and language:

> over time she understood more and more, and she understood also that the Nigerians were not in fact all Nigerians, some were half Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of a border, and further that there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian, or certainly no one common thing (Hamid, *Exit* 148).

Nadia's meditation that there may be "no such thing as a Nigerian," is hyperbolic. Of course, there are people who identify as Nigerian or who are identified by the Nigerian state as such. However, the chain of qualifiers complicates this identity and brings attention to the borders of the modern Nigerian nation-state and the communities that they subsume or sunder. Darkness provides the atmosphere for a relational depth that Nadia experiences in community and which exposes national identity and borders as constructed by or in response to (European) imperialism. Just as a constellation becomes legible through the relationality between stars and those on the land, the features of the council become discernable only through consideration of each member's positionality as they meet to address community needs and responses to amplifying state violence. Against the backdrop of dark London, the night provides cover for communities to come together and create new ways of caring for the collective.

In its usage of light and dark, *Exit West* appears to heed Rumi's exhortation to meditate on the interdependence of light and dark and the power of understanding this duality to tap into the potential of living in accordance with the principle of relationality. Moreover, the novel demonstrates how refugee positionalities can reveal and critique the limits of modes of domination based in cosmologies wherein binary oppositions are foundational—such as racism, sexism,

nationalism, and (neo)colonialism. Beyond critique, the novel subverts neoliberal assumptions about refugees by depicting them as adept community-makers who embody and enact relationality.

Constellational Consciousness in Imperial and Settler Colonial Spaces

A relational critical methodology lends insight into the ways that "native" and "diasporic" are complexly situated in racial terms as it highlights the need to consider multiple positionalities in relationship to the land. These multiple positionalities become palpable in the novel through the terms "light London" and "dark London," which reflect the racial valence of nativism in this European context, for the novel emphasizes that London's nativists are predominantly white. As critic Avtar Brah observes, the term native, and indeed, diaspora, are "an underlying thematic of racialised conceptions of Britishness," even if Brits do not claim them explicitly (187). However, refugees, construed as threats to British natives are not recognized as natives, even though they were natives in their own lands. Although native and diaspora are often assumed to be mutually exclusive terms, Brah's concept of "diaspora space" brings to light their inextricable links. For Brah, diaspora space marks "a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes … includ[ing] the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put' … where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native" (205). This concept elucidates how, in the context of both London and Saeed and Nadia's home country, racialization and empire are forces that define "native" and nativism in xenophobic terms. In *Exit West*'s London, as violence escalates and the Elders' council advises patience while the youth want armed resistance, "Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them" (Hamid 163). Saeed's concern inverts the racist trope of the savage natives capturing European explorers for human sacrifice. The bloodthirsty "natives" here are the white people in the seat of "civilization," which is grounded in white supremacy and xenophobia.

The narrator develops definitions of "native" in the diasporic space of Marin, California through consideration of Indigenous communities —but in ways that do not fully engage the ethical potential of relationality broached through the novel's subtle invocation of Sufism. In this section of *Exit West,* Hamid shifts from a critique of nativist xenophobia and racist violence in Europe to a consideration of possible affinities between diasporic and "native" subjects under settler colonialism. Although this section is often referenced with respect to critiques of nativism and envisioning alternative forms of coexistence (see Al-Nakib; Carter; Geidel and Stuelke; Goyal; Gheorghiu; Karam; Knudsen and Rahbek; Lagji; and Sadaf), critics have not fully

considered the significance of Hamid's portrayal of Indigenous-refugee relations and future-making. Indeed, as Brah explains, it is important to note the difference between nativism, stemming from a position of dominance, and the variability and specificity around discourses of Indigeneity, suggesting that, when taken up by Indigenous peoples of previously colonized states (e.g., Pakistan) or present-day settler-colonial occupations (e.g., the U.S.), "the native positionality becomes the means of struggle against centuries of exploitation, dispossession and marginality" (191). In *Exit West,* the narrator concedes:

> In Marin there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts—or perhaps more often, wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviours indistinguishable from anyone else. At the trading posts they would sell beautiful silver jewelry and soft leather garments and colorful textiles, and the elders among them seemed not infrequently to be possessed of a limitless patience that was matched by a limitless sorrow. Tales were told at these places that people from all over now gathered to hear, for the tales of these natives felt appropriate to this time of migration, and gave listeners much needed sustenance. (Hamid 197)

The narrator makes what appears to be a simple claim only to undermine it by a series of subordinate clauses and the occasional "em" dash, which functions like a typographical wink that accentuates how the initial phrase should be viewed with suspicion. Specifically, the narrator claims that there are "almost no natives" in Marin because they had "died out or been exterminated long ago." If the reader missed the cue to contemplate the contradiction between almost none and the totality of extermination, the narrator reiterates the point that these people would be seen "occasionally," exposing the absurdity that belies the first two descriptions.

Here, Hamid places the colonial myth of the vanishing "Indian" in a stereotypical place of post-contact: the trading post. Staging the racist settler colonial fantasy within a colonial venue, Hamid's em dash undercuts this scene with speculation: "or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviours indistinguishable from anyone else." This suggestion is somewhat effective at countering the idea that "natives," or Indigenous people, would somehow be identifiable by some stereotypically anachronistic markers or mannerism. Yet the narrator elides the fact that the Indigenous people of what is called Marin City, and the surrounding area are the Coast Miwok (see Sokolove *et al*.)—in effect, he disappears them. While minimizing details in other locations operates positively by prompting readers' self-reflexivity, the narrator's emphasis on the indistinguishability of Indigenous people is susceptible to obscuring the unique relationship they have to their land under settler-state occupation and, thus, risks affirming justifications for the continued displacement, dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

However, the novel also depicts Marin as home to a substantial Black community as well as host to refugees from all over the world. Thus, the Indigenous inhabitants of Marin might be "indistinguishable" in that their everyday attire and interactions within the city are just as diverse as anyone else's—especially to a newcomer like Saeed whose perspective is focalized in this passage. Strangely, Hamid's narrator continues to materialize the presence of this community within the space of trading posts wherein Indigenous peoples sell art, jewelry, and handmade textiles and where their elders possess the stereotypical qualities of both "limitless sorrow" and "patience." Readers awaiting another of the novel's subversive subclauses will be disappointed, for it does not come. In these telling moments, the novel ends up affirming colonial myths and stereotypes that the narrator initially troubles.

Yet, while gift shops are often sites where tourists consume Indigenous culture, these trading posts also function as places for "people from all over" to gather and listen to the "tales" of the Indigenous people as told *by* them. Western critics have a history of appropriating and misinterpreting Indigenous peoples' stories (see Darnell and Garroutte and Westcott). Additionally, non-Indigenous writers and artists continue this theft by building careers and wealth from these stolen stories. Moreover, settler society perpetually denies and erases Indigenous peoples' stories and testimonies against colonialism. By contrast, the novel transforms the space of the trading post from a settler-curated node of exploitation and commerce to a gathering place where diasporic people listen to the stories, histories, legends, and personal accounts—that Indigenous people choose to share. The omission of the content of the stories is reminiscent of the form of protection from extractive voyeurism the narrative provides for refugees.

Without more context, however, it is unclear how these stories "felt appropriate at this time of migration" and gave "sustenance" to the refugees, especially since the previous chapter describes this as a time when "the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places" (Hamid, *Exit* 169). Is it because these Indigenous people have certain traditional stories about migration? Does it have anything to do with the Indigenous peoples' accounts of the various waves of newcomers, colonialists, settlers, and migrants? Or perhaps with resonant experiences of displacement and dispossession? What is it about these stories that sustains the displaced and dispossessed? The novel raises these questions without providing contextualized details to nurture relationality.

Moreover, casting Indigenous people as the nourishers of other communities risks slipping into racist, exploitative conceptions of Indigenous people as spiritual shamans, a stereotype that burdens

many racialized peoples. While Indigenous storytellers provide sustenance to refugees, it is not clear how the new arrivals embody relationality. Recalling relationality and the Sufi khidma, for example, the embodiment of justice would necessitate acknowledgement of the original inhabitants of the land and their long-standing human governance of the territory. At these moments, the novel exposes the limits of Hamid's representation of the complexities of refugee experiences.

Despite the novel's shortcomings in imaging a refugee relationality informed by Indigenous positionalities, the narrator continues to problematize nativism and belonging in relation to other racialized identities. The narrator suggests that after Indigenous "natives," there are two more "layers" of "natives" to consider in Marin (Hamid, *Exit* 198). The second layer consists of those who claim nativeness by birth, either their own or their ancestors', "on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern Atlantic" (Hamid, *Exit* 197). The people of this layer, Saeed notices, are most ardent in claiming "nativeness," those he says resemble the "light skin" "natives of Britain" and further resemble the British in their disbelief and anger at the mass arrival of refugees from around the world (Hamid, *Exit* 198). Compared to the first natives that the novel describes, this light-skinned group makes a claim of belonging not to a local place but to a massive swath of land whose parameters at the mid-northern Pacific and Atlantic coasts are established through the wars, coercions, and negotiations of European and settler colonial states. In the novel, the light-skinned group, or white Americans, draw on the Doctrine of Discovery as grounds of entitlement to this expanse of land, much as white Europeans claim Europe.

The third layer of "nativeness" that Hamid conceptualizes is entirely different from the others; specifically, it refers to the descendants of Africans forcibly brought to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade. Saeed, a foreign onlooker, a new arrival uninvited by any government—be it an Indigenous authority or the settler state—experiences and observes critical differences between these three spheres of claims to nativeness or originary belonging. Saeed states that this layer of nativeness is not as "vast in proportion" as the others (Hamid, *Exit* 198), suggesting that this claim is more to belonging than Indigeneity (an ancient, enduring relationship to place) or European claims to race-based dominion over the entire Earth. Though this group may not be vast in proportion, Saeed recognizes them as "vast in importance" because its social world was "shaped" by it and "unspeakable violence had occurred in relation to it" – and yet this group "endured, fertile" (Hamid, *Exit* 198). There is no doubt that the enslavement of Black people in America and the various other forms of anti-Blackness endured by their descendants, such as the Jim Crow segregation laws, ongoing police brutality and over-

incarceration, are forms of unspeakable violence. However, the narrator uses the term "exterminated" where "unspeakable violence" would also have been apt in the discussion of the first layer of nativeness, or the Indigenous peoples of the Americas in general and the Coast Miwok specifically.

Saeed's interior reflections as he attempts to relate to this tri-loci asterism offer clues about why the portrayal of Indigenous experience is not as easily relatable to his current situation. In this moment when the extensive migration of human beings has become so massive that it appears to match the volume of peoples who stay within their traditional territories, Saeed is one of the drastically displaced, having traversed oceans and expanses of land. In this displacement and experience of racialization and xenophobia, Saeed sees a connection with the Black descendants of the enslaved and is thus drawn to them. He describes their displacement to North America not as an uprooted people but as "a stratum of soil that perhaps made all future transplants possible" (Hamid, *Exit* 198). Instead of a plant that is removed from a matrix of relationships from which it originates and is transplanted or tossed onto another's soil, Hamid conceives of enslaved Africans and their descendants as living soil. They embody the relationships European imperialism attempted to sever and, in so doing, destroy. Here, Hamid emphasizes that the waves of racialized diasporas that followed and continue to arrive in the U.S. have themselves been able to "transplant"—to root, to grow—only because of the enduring and nourishing labor of Black people and communities.

Not unlike the community and comfort Saeed and other refugees experienced in the Indigenous orators' storytelling, Saeed finds solace in the sermons of a Muslim Black American clergyman whose words were "full of soul-soothing wisdom" (Hamid, *Exit* 198). And although Saeed and the clergyman's daughter fall in love, the novel avoids romanticizing this solidarity by depicting Saeed's varied relationships with members of the Black community. Though he earns its members' trust by working alongside this community, some continue to feel "unease" about his relationship with the woman while others merely "tolerated" it (Hamid, *Exit* 219). This woman is drawn to Saeed's "attitude of faith" and his "[expansive] ... gaze upon the universe, the way he spoke of the stars and of the people of the world" (Hamid, *Exit* 220). The young woman's attraction to Saeed's expansive view and his love of constellations of stars are perhaps what draw him to her, someone whose expansive worldview moves her to mobilize collectives of people.

The relationality, and its spiritual valence, that Saeed sees in the stars and their relationship to the Earth and its inhabitants is something that this woman works to make a reality in the physical, local world, as exemplified in her own involvement with the local "plebiscite movement" that aimed to give each person in the Bay Area a vote,

regardless of citizenship, through "the creation of a regional assembly" that would "speak for the will of all the people" in an effort for "greater justice" for all the area's residents (Hamid, *Exit* 221). Recollecting the triangulated constellation of Indigenous peoples, descendants of European colonizers, and descendants of enslaved Africans from the beginning of the Marin storyline, the explanation that the assembly would "coexist with other preexisting bodies of government" (Hamid, *Exit* 220) may appear to be a recognition of the primacy of Indigenous law and land stewardship in the Bay Area. However, the narrator's description of these bodies as "entities for which some humans were not human enough to exercise suffrage" (Hamid, *Exit* 221) suggests that it is a reference to settler colonial governments.

While Saeed's expansive vision of stars and people may be impressive, the novel's vision falls troublingly short in a settler colonial context. This also marks the possible limits of the novel's constellational cultural production, as it can be easy to emphasize positionalities that are most similar or perceived to be most proximate to one's own while not accounting for those that seem so different or distant that they are omitted from depiction. Hamid's invocation of Sufism that grounds the novel's relationality does not fulfill the radical potential of this non-Western cosmology. Indeed, this approach is only effective if it includes positions most disparate from one's own. The task of exposing the mechanisms of Euro-American imperialism and guiding human movement towards respectful models of coexistence means expanding perspectives to encompass a fuller view of relationality in its broader potential.

Conclusion

In *Exit West,* Hamid conceives of the world in terms of balance and openness to the historical contexts and lived realities of diverse people and communities, from those with whom we are kin to those we may not even know exist. This is the constellational relationality evoked from the book's cover art to its storytelling structure to the modes of human collective mobilization and creativity imagined in the novel. A constellational method of critical analysis involves opening one's field of view to include even, or especially, the positionalities that may be perceived as most different from one's own within a collective vision and movement toward liberation and peace. Together, these diverse positionalities understood through relationality, Sufi mysticism in this case, reveal the complex ways in which all are interconnected as human and non-human beings and can inspire the creation of networks of solidarity that honor the natural world.

Notes

1. Translated by Feraidoon Moradipour and author.
2. Translated by Feraidoon Moradipour and author.

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