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## The Precarious Balance of Refugees: Rupture and Connectivity in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) and Helon Habila’s *Travelers* (2019)

*L'équilibre précaire des réfugiés : rupture et connectivité dans Exit West (2017) de Mohsin Hamid et Travelers de Helon Habila (2019)*

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### Résumés

English Français

Contemporary novels about refugees often question the appropriateness of traditional narrative forms to relate stories of forced migration which involve a fragmentation of the self and of one’s sense of reality. Writers opt instead for forms which are as disjointed as the experience of refugees themselves. This paper explores the precarious balance between a poetics of rupture and an aesthetics of connectivity in two novels about refugees: *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid and *Travelers* (2019) by Helon Habila. It first examines the strategies developed by both authors to destabilize form in order to reflect the refugees’ shattering ordeals during and after their forced displacements. The multiplicity of stories as well as the shifts in focalization and narrative modes testify to the impossibility of inscribing refugees’ experiences within a single coherent and homogeneous pattern. However, Hamid and Habila also draw from the potentialities of the novelistic genre to devise formal ways of connecting apparently disparate story lines and thereby suggest possibilities for cross-cultural solidarity between refugees who share a common condition of vulnerability.



Les romans contemporains sur les réfugiés remettent souvent en question la pertinence des formes narratives traditionnelles pour raconter des histoires de migration forcée qui impliquent

une fragmentation du soi et du sens de la réalité. Les écrivains optent plutôt pour des formes qui sont aussi disjointes que l'expérience des réfugiés eux-mêmes. Cet article explore l'équilibre précaire entre une poétique de la rupture et une esthétique de la connectivité dans deux romans sur les réfugiés : *Exit West* (2017) de Mohsin Hamid et *Travelers* (2019) de Helon Habila. Il examine tout d'abord les stratégies développées par les deux auteurs pour déstabiliser la forme afin de refléter les épreuves bouleversantes traversées par des réfugiés pendant et après leurs déplacements forcés. La multiplicité des récits ainsi que les changements de focalisation et de modes narratifs témoignent de l'impossibilité d'inscrire les expériences des réfugiés dans un seul schéma cohérent et homogène. Néanmoins, Hamid et Habila exploitent également les potentialités du genre romanesque pour imaginer des moyens formels de relier des histoires apparemment disparates et suggèrent ainsi des possibilités de solidarité interculturelle entre des réfugiés qui partagent une condition commune de vulnérabilité.

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## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** réfugié, précarité, vulnérabilité, fragmentation, connections, Habila (Helon), Hamid (Mohsin), littérature postcoloniale

**Keywords:** refugee, precariousness, vulnerability, fragmentation, connections, Habila (Helon), Hamid (Mohsin), postcolonial literature

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## Texte intégral

<sup>1</sup> In the 2018 special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* on refugee writing, Claire Gallien remarks: “Refugee literature and arts [...] ask fundamental questions about *how* to articulate experiences of the limit” (Gallien 2018, 738, my italics). Such extreme experiences can be narrated by refugees themselves (or former refugees turned residents) in fictional or non-fictional books (in the form of memoirs, testimonies or autobiographical accounts);<sup>1</sup> they can be communicated through the mediation of journalists or writers reporting on the lives of refugees, or imagined by novelists, short-story writers, poets or playwrights creating fictional characters and trajectories.<sup>2</sup> In novels, writers can choose to represent the ordeal of refugees through realistic narratives that rely on linearity, causality and the prevalence of a monological voice (that of a refugee telling their own story, or of a narrator sharing the story of a refugee). However, many novelists question the appropriateness of traditional narrative forms to relate stories of forced migration which involve a fragmentation of the self and of one’s sense of reality, caused by what Edward Said, writing about exile, calls the “unhealable rift [that is] forced between a human being and a native place” (Said 2000, 173).

<sup>2</sup> To represent this disrupting rift, some writers feel the need to push the boundaries of fiction and destabilize form, more particularly challenging the emplotment of a story within a coherent whole. As Claire Gallien argues, “language and form cannot remain unaffected by the inhuman circumstances they describe. By placing language and form under threat, and by making room for the disjointed, the disarticulate and barely audible, literature and arts contravene th[e] ‘narrativising imperative’” (Gallien 2018, 743). This necessity to adapt form to tragic experiences has been thoroughly addressed in the context of Holocaust literature in particular and in trauma writing more generally. As suggested by Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard in *Narrating “Precariousness”*, in some instances, “the very means of representation themselves become precarious as they struggle to express what seems to evade or even explode the sense-making mechanisms of narration” (Korte and Regard 2014, 10). In order to convey the fragility and “bareness” of the lives of refugees, that is “life exposed to death” as defined by Giorgio Agamben (1998, 88), writers may therefore look for a form that is as disjointed, bare and perilous as the experience of refugees themselves. They may



choose to develop what Jean-Michel Ganteau has called a “vulnerable form”, one that “not only shows but also performs the vulnerability that it thematises” (Ganteau 2013).

- 3 My aim in this paper is to examine the mechanics of form as a means of lending expression to experiences of forced displacement in two contemporary novels: *Exit West* (2017) by British-Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid and *Travelers* (2019) by Nigerian novelist Helon Habila. I will show how the vulnerability and precariousness of refugees – or “travelers” to use Habila’s term – is communicated through vulnerable and unsettling narrative forms which, in turn, may disrupt the reading experience. I will also argue that while reflecting the shattering trajectories of displaced persons, refugee narratives often simultaneously suggest means of connection, interdependence and solidarity, both in the diegesis and through formal devices. While *Exit West* and *Travelers* record the fragmentation of lives caused by forced migration, they are not outright defamiliarizing or experimental narratives as they retain a narrative unity and continuity, and partly rely on conventional narrative devices. I will therefore explore the precarious balance between a poetics of rupture and an aesthetics of connectivity in these two novels. After briefly exploring the instability of the term and category of “refugee” itself, I will examine the strategies used by Habila and Hamid to destabilize form in order to reflect the discontinuous experience of refugees. I will then illustrate their reliance on the relative stability and unity of the novelistic genre, which may be a reflection of the stability displaced persons hope to secure in the host country but which can only be achieved narratively through the secret connections between their seemingly disparate stories.

## The instability of denomination

- 4 The precarious and vulnerable condition of the refugee who, for Simon Gikandi, is “the Other of the cosmopolitan” (Gikandi 2010, 26), is reflected in the instability of the term itself. Claire Gallien addresses the taxonomic debate by referring to a 2016 piece entitled “Qui dit quoi?” (“Who Says What?”), penned by the *Coordination Sans Papiers 75/Paris*, which underlines that “behind each word lies an ambush and that the choice of designation between migrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, exiled person, *sans-papier*, foreigner, immigrant, dismissed plaintiffs, and illegal immigrant is always politically and ideologically charged” (Gallien 2018, 738). According to the Geneva Convention of 1951, refugees are people who no longer live in the country of their nationality “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (“Convention”), and for the United Nations Refugee Agency, a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence” (UNHCR). In recent years, there have been calls for a revision of the term to include the economic and ecological factors forcing people into displacement. According to David Farrier, refugees are the “new subalterns” (Farrier 2011, 5), and for Claire Gallien, “the term ‘refugee’ is an occidental construction used to refer negatively to a person who has lost the protection of his/her own country and been forced into bordercrossing” (Gallien 2018, 739).
- 5 In *La Fin de l’hospitalité*, Fabienne Brugère and Guillaume Le Blanc suggest using the term “refuge seeker” as the people who are called refugees are often people waiting to become refugees, asking to be granted the status, name and identity of a refugee (Brugère and Le Blanc 2017, 62-63). Bridget Haas calls them “citizens-in-waiting” or “deportees-in-waiting” (Haas 2017, 75) and argues that this experience of protracted waiting is best captured as a “rupture” (interrupting mobility) rather than a “transition” (Haas 2017, 81). A refuge seeker or “refugee-to-be” (Asaad 2019, 68) is thus placed in an



in-between or liminal position, waiting in an airport, in a camp, at the border, limit or threshold between two worlds, no longer belonging to the place they left, not yet belonging to the place they currently inhabit. It could be tempting to envisage this unstable position through the prism of Homi Bhabha's concepts of the "in-between" or the "third space" which the theoretician employs to refer to the cultural space occupied by "borderline existences" (Bhabha 1994, 312). However, Gallien rightly argues that this framework is inadequate in the context of refugees, as for them, the border does not entail "resistance and creative agency" (even if it may) as much as "danger and death" (Gallien 2018, 741). The position of the refugee seeker is therefore often more fragile and unstable than that of the migrant.

- 6 In *Travelers*, as noted by Eleni Coundoriotis, "travel" is Habila's "preferred term to convey a multiplicity of highly individuated scenarios of migration against the backdrop of Europe's inhospitality to Africans during the 2010s" (Coundoriotis 2022, 193)<sup>3</sup> while in *Exit West*, the term "refugees" is used as early as the first sentence to refer to "a city swollen with refugees" (Hamid 2017, 1). In both novels, the travelers' and refugees' precariousness of location and status is mirrored in the form of the books as will be seen from an analysis of the two books' opening sentences, their structure and handling of narrative voice.

## Disconnected stories / fractured voices in Helon Habila's *Travelers*

- 7 The first sentence of *Travelers* is deceptively marked by a great syntactical stability and lexical simplicity: "We came to Berlin in the fall of 2012, and at first everything was fine" (Habila 2019, 3). Place and time are clearly identified, and we later learn that the characters are a middle-class couple, an African-American artist and her husband, the narrator in Book 1, a Nigerian PhD student and teacher, who have moved from the United States to Berlin for a year. The "fine" stability of the opening sentence is however disrupted by the expression "at first" which proleptically announces that this balance will not last, the trip to Berlin being "[a] break from [their] breaking-apart life" (13). While the wife goes to Berlin to paint portraits of migrants for an art project called *Travelers* (but keeps resolutely and unethically distant from the sitters), the Nigerian narrator, who will remain unnamed throughout the novel, accompanies her reluctantly as for him, "every departure is a death" (12). The alliteration in the plosive [d] in this statement and the polyptoton of "break"/"breaking" in the previous fragment reflect the violent rift provoked by dis-location and re-location. The narrator contrasts this deadly departure with his "immigrant's temperament, hoping for home and permanence in this new world" (11), in other words, striving for stability. In Berlin and elsewhere, this man who is "[p]resented to us at first potentially as an Afropolitan" (Coundoriotis 2022, 194), i.e. a cosmopolitan, urbane African with transnational ties and a fluid identity, becomes acquainted with refugees, immigrants and exiles who tell him, in various forms and more or less reluctantly, their painful story of forced departure from their home country and separation from their family.

- 8 The fragmentariness of the lives of the people whose stories are told is reflected in the structure of *Travelers*, what Outwile Tsiplane calls its "nomadic turn", as it moves from one life-story to another (Tsiplane 2019). Despite the indication "a novel" on the front cover of the hardback edition, *Travelers* proposes the successive and seemingly disconnected stories of migrants or refugees: each is told in a separate "Book", without any obvious transition from one to another, making the volume resemble a collection of



interlinked short stories. The genre of the short story may seem to be particularly well-suited to narratives about refugees because of its affinities with the fragment, the margin and the “lonely voice” to echo the title of Frank O’Connor’s seminal study of the genre (O’Connor 1962). Several writers have chosen this literary genre to write about the fragmenting experience of refugees, including Viet Thuan Nguyen in *The Refugees* (2017), or Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes in *breach* (2016), set in the “Jungle” in Calais. David Herd and Anna Pincus, the editors of the four volumes of *Refugee Tales* (2016-21), have opted for the looser form of the “tale” (inspired by Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*), to initiate a collaboration between British writers and refugees, asylum seekers or detainees. For Janet Wilson, such narratives encourage “multi-directional readings and multiple perceptions of the refugee character” (Wilson 2021, 266).

9 In *Travelers*, the sense of reading apparently disconnected stories is reinforced by the fact that each “Book” adopts a different narrative mode and shifting internal focalizations: while some stories are mediated by the narrator, others are told by the refugees themselves, either chronologically or in fits and starts, in direct speech or in letters. Thus, the first-person narration by the unnamed narrator in Books 1, 4 and 6, gives way, in Book 2, to a third-person narration with an internal focalization on a refugee named Manu, from which the narrator of the previous section is absent. Book 3 proposes a third-person narration with a focalization on a woman from Zambia called Portia who finds herself in Switzerland with a mysterious man, only identified as “he” (Habila 2019, 111), whom we eventually recognize as the narrator from Book 1 whom the young woman had met a few days before in Berlin. Portia is therefore now the person observing the Nigerian protagonist who has become a minor character about whom she knows less than the reader. A long portion of Book 4 is told in direct speech by a refugee from Somalia who tells the narrator his story linearly while they are travelling on the same train. Within Book 5, set on the unnamed Italian island where the Nigerian protagonist is stranded after a series of mishaps,<sup>4</sup> the narration is unstable, constantly shifting from one mode to another, one story invariably interrupting another: it comprises a third-person narration focalized on a local inhabitant, Matteo, who rescued a woman and her child on the beach; a first-person narration by the unnamed narrator turned undocumented migrant as he tries to get his bearing on the island; and a third-person narration transcribed in italics when Matteo tells the story of the rescued woman. The sixth and last Book is set several years later in London where the narrator meets Portia again, and they help Juma, a Nigerian asylum seeker on hunger strike, who tells them the story of his ordeal both in direct speech and later in a letter transcribed in italics. As the novel progresses, the voices of the refugees become more audible and occupy more space, testifying to the narrator/character’s growing attentiveness to their stories.

10 Such variations in modes of narration and in voices, which account for the fragmentation of the text, testify not only to the multiplicity and singularity of stories of refugees, which cannot be contained within a single coherent and homogeneous pattern, but also to the multiplicity of *ways* of articulating and perceiving these stories. The non-linear and elliptical dimension of the book sometimes unsettles the reader when some crucial information of place, time or characters is omitted, placing the reader in a vulnerable hermeneutic position, a minor form of the type of precariousness refugees face in their new and often hostile environment. A similar hesitation and unbalance are also to be found in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*.



## Sudden rifts in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*


- 11 While *Travelers* starts with a deceptively stable opening, in *Exit West*, the first sentences encapsulate a tension between near-collapse and attempted connection, an oscillation which persists throughout the novel: “In a city swollen with refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days” (Hamid 2017, 1). These opening sentences seem to be stumbling, moving forward and retracting, as reflected formally in the punctuation marks that interrupt the flow, the conjunctions “but”, “or”, “and”, and the negations that belie what immediately precedes. The narration oscillates between the tentative offering of information as is expected in the incipit of a novel and its withdrawal or mitigation marked by the epanorthosis or self-correction: the city is “still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war”. The city is therefore positioned in a precarious balance, an in-between place between peace and war, between “still” and “not yet”, or, as mentioned further down on the same page, “teetering at the edge of the abyss” (*ibid.*).
- 12 Likewise, the reader is placed in an in-between situation of knowledge and ignorance, and will be kept in that position of undecidability through a great part of the novel. The first sentence is saturated with indefinite articles, which is not unusual for the first sentence of a novel, but while the man and woman are identified in the next sentence as Saeed and Nadia, throughout the book, the city itself remains unnamed (just like the narrator in *Travelers*) and the group of refugees who “swell” the city are kept unidentified, unheard and unseen, merely existing as an indistinct mass, whose origins and reasons for being in the unnamed city are never explicitly revealed. While the anonymity of the refugees contributes to their enforced invisibility and what Judith Butler calls “the violence of derealization” (Butler 2004, 33), the lack of precise national landmarks in the novel has been interpreted by several critics as a sign of the universality of “contemporary experiences of space and time in the globalized world”, one “that extends beyond national borders” (Jeanniard du Dot 2019).
- 13 In the first sentence of *Exit West*, the two characters also seemingly follow an arc of opening and then withdrawal as they meet but do not speak, foretelling a future of silence and restraint when they later become refugees in the West and prove unable to communicate their feelings to each other. Instability also affects syntax through the second elliptical nominal sentence (“For many days”), which could have concluded the first sentence, but is instead isolated between two full stops, bringing in yet another correction but also fracturing the rhythm, as though the text itself was tripping over a first difficulty. This faltering opening to Hamid’s novel may be seen as a way of communicating from the start the fragility and precariousness of life which can dramatically topple over in an instant. This “sense of the fragility of things” (Hamid 2017, 223) is suggested at the bottom of the opening page: “one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying” (1-2).
- 14 The combination of continuity or habit and sudden abruptness or irruption of the event, the shock, the change, the break, is what the novel repeatedly conveys both through *what* it narrates and *how* it narrates it. For instance, the death of Saeed’s mother in the now-at-war unnamed city is told in such a violent way, appearing in the middle of a 21-line sentence which starts by explaining why Nadia resisted the idea of moving in with Saeed’s family and then includes the following: “she might have waited much longer had Saeed’s mother not been killed, a stray heavy-calibre round passing through the windscreen of her family’s car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed’s



mother's head" (72). The sentence does not stop at this shocking information which takes the reader by surprise, but continues for another nine lines, explaining first that when she was shot, Saeed's mother was only checking inside the car for a misplaced earring – a banal gesture in her everyday life – and then that after that death, Nadia decided to stay with Saeed and his father. The narration here seemingly drowns the most arresting and shattering information in a continuous flow of words, as if attempting to conceal or attenuate the shock of the event, to maintain the pretence of continuity. However, the linearity of everyday life and of the narration has been brutally fractured by the sudden shot and graphic image, destabilizing the reading experience and reflecting the violent eruption of war within the quieter rhythms of the characters' lives. In *Exit West*, Hamid frequently resorts to such overlong sentences which "deliberately denaturaliz[e] English syntax almost to breaking point" (Chambers 2019, 228), the "careening syntax" and "breathless syncopation, reflecting the relentlessly desperate condition" of the refugees-to-be (Chambers 2019, 231).

15 A similar sense of an abrupt rift, rupture or fracture in the thread of the characters' lives and in the narration itself is exemplified by the way refugee seekers leave their home country and enter a new one. In *Exit West*, unlike in *Travelers*, refugees do not make long and excruciating journeys, but, as in children's books or in science fiction, merely step through mysterious "black doors", cracks or fissures in space and time, and find themselves in another country in the blink of an eye, as if by magic. While realistic novels may transcribe in a linear way the painful and lengthy experience of displacement of refugees (which is how some refugees tell their excruciating stories in *Travelers*), in *Exit West*, the fantastical shift from one place to another is abrupt and sudden. This suddenness reflects the shock of the rift but also elides, in a way that can be ethically problematic, the harshness and dangers of transit even if the exhausting teleportation through doors is likened to both "dying and [...] being born" (Hamid 2017, 98).<sup>5</sup> Paul Veyret justifies this non-mimetic allegorical mode by arguing that such a mode "contains its own precariousness and hermeneutic vulnerability" (Veyret 2020, 129) and might therefore be more liable to reflect the precariousness of the refugees' experiences.

16 The sudden displacements in *Exit West* are also related to what virtual reality offers in our globalized world, as phones are like doors to faraway countries, collapsing the borders of nation-states, and connecting distant places and people. The phones' antennas "sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be" (Hamid 2017, 35). Liliana Naydan and Claire Chambers have analysed the significance of digital technologies in *Exit West* as being both a means of connection (beyond national borders) and disconnection ("dividing users' attention", Naydan 2019, 434) as Saeed and Nadia "live as simultaneously connected to and yet disconnected from one another, their homes, and the nations to which they migrate" (Naydan 2019, 434). As noted by Chambers, their phones "help them keep their distance while at the same time connecting them" (Chambers 2019, 220). In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai had already drawn attention to the types of instability similarly engendered by migratory movements and the development of digital processes: "when [the story of mass migrations (voluntary and forced)] is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities." (Appadurai 1996, 4)

17  The surreal modality of transport in *Exit West* is introduced early in the novel but before the reader has been told about it, so that the first scenes showing people stepping through doors can only be understood retrospectively, defamiliarizing the immediate



act of reading. The instantaneous and destabilizing shift from one place to another – both literally through the dark doors and virtually through social media – is also reflected narratively through the juxtaposition of the main plot and mysterious parallel narrative lines. The former involves Saeed and Nadia in the unnamed city and then as they step through portals to leave their city at war, first to go to the island of Mykonos, then to London and finally to Marin near San Francisco. The secondary narratives concern unidentified characters in faraway countries, who only make brief appearances and then disappear altogether from the diegesis. Such micro-stories usually appear after a blank on the page – a visual fracture – but are presented as simultaneous with the main narrative line.

18 The first interruption starts thus: “As Saeed’s email was being downloaded from a server and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney neighbourhood of Surry Hills” (5). Once the brief scene in Australia has been told, the return to the main plot takes place after a blank and likewise emphasizes the contemporaneity of events: “While this incident was occurring in Australia, Saeed was picking up fresh bread for dinner and heading home” (8). The narration thus combines continuity and discontinuity, first by highlighting simultaneity between the two moments in distant places (introduced by “As” and “While”), then through the sharp narrative and visual shift from one scene, one continent and one character to another: the narrative is “simultaneously interrupted and also fluid or connected because of Hamid’s transition” (Naydan 2019, 443). In the not-yet-at-war unnamed city, Saeed is performing banal, innocent, ordinary activities, whereas in the named place in Australia, the “incident” concerns the emergence of a mysterious dark man from the darkness of the sleeping woman’s closet. The reader understands only much later in the novel that the man in the closet was not there to harm the woman but had just travelled through one of the magical black doors and is a refuge seeker.

19 Several similar disjointed vignettes regularly interrupt and unsettle the main narrative line, whisking the reader to intriguing scenes in Tokyo, San Diego, Vienna or Amsterdam. They often appear unfinished or ambiguous, their incomplete state reflecting the uncertainty that affects both readers and characters. As noted by Naydan however, they are a “disruption [that] leads to connection” (Naydan 2019, 443), as the readers are encouraged to draw connections between the various scenes, both in the main narrative and in the secondary plots. This simultaneous pull towards disruption and connection is a common feature of *Exit, West* and *Travelers* which draw from the potentialities of the novelistic genre to suggest ways of relating seemingly disparate events and situations, and of creating bonds across communities.

## Fracturing and connecting

20 In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead writes that “if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead 2004, 6). Our previous analysis has shown that a departure from linearity is precisely what *Exit West* and *Travelers* perform, the former taking the narration in various directions at once and condensing time, the latter juxtaposing story lines. The rifts in the narrative as well as the rifts in the space-time continuum in *Exit West* constitute a powerful means of reflecting the “unhealable rift” (Said 2000, 173) of being forced to leave one’s country, one’s home, one’s family. As Saeed and Nadia keep moving from one place to another, from one refugee or worker camp to another, Saeed reflects on everything he has lost and which has left him “unmoored, adrift in a world where one could go anywhere but still find nothing”



(Hamid 2017, 188).<sup>6</sup> The form of *Exit West* and *Travelers* is likewise adrift, slipping away, moving from one narrative line to another, one country and one character to another.

21 And yet, this narrative precariousness is always countered by a simultaneous drive towards some form of stability and unity within the novelistic genre. In *Exit West*, just as the world is “full of fracturing” and everyone is “coming together” and yet “also moving apart” (155), just as nations are “like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration” (155), the narrative itself is both fracturing into disparate fragments and trying to resist the fracture by maintaining the main narrative line of Saeed and Nadia, even if the young people are irremediably drifting apart and eventually “part into separate lives” (225).

22 In *Travelers*, the fragile link or “weak glue” (Coundoriotis 2022, 197) between the juxtaposed stories is provided by the Nigerian protagonist as a more or less attentive recipient, bringing to mind Judith Butler’s question of “whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance and what makes that ethical encounter possible, when it does take place” (Butler 2015, 99). Habila’s narrator/character listens to the refugees’ stories first with detachment and distance, and then with more “compassionate understanding” (Ramsey-Kurz 2020, 172), which explains why the first story resembles “an incomplete collage of fragments” while the narratives that follow are “more and more densely knit and carefully deliberated” (Ramsey-Kurz 2020, 172). This evolution in the protagonist’s attitude is epitomized by the move from his tentative “I wondered what his story was” (Habila 2019, 8), when meeting Mark (an out-of-status film student from Malawi turned “nomad”, 67) in Berlin in Book 1, to the more resolute “What mattered was to hear what happened next. I wanted to know” (177) in Book 4, when listening to Karim (a refugee from Somalia). This shift in attentiveness and in modes of storytelling testifies to a changed ethical response on the part of the protagonist, who increasingly acquires the ability to “listen carefully” (208). His attentive ear rescues the refugees and their stories from indifference, erasure or oblivion, and makes the lives of those who perish (like Mark in Book 1 or Juma in Book 6) “grievable”, providing “the narrative means by which ‘the human’ in its grievability is established” (Butler 2004, 38). To quote Amitav Ghosh in the author’s notes to *The Glass Palace*, “every life leaves behind an echo that is audible to those who take the trouble to listen” (Ghosh 2000, 552). It is by paying close attention to the stories of a multiplicity of refugees and migrants that the protagonist of *Travelers* is able to “link legacies of loss” and create connections between diverse traumatic experiences: “listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community” (Craps 2012, 156).

23 In addition, unexpected links are revealed between characters of the different Books in *Travelers*, and between the experiences of refugees from all over the world in *Exit West*. In Habila’s novel, Manu, the refugee from Libya whose story is told in Book 2, was one of the sitters of the narrator’s wife, and was briefly mentioned in Book 1. In Book 5, when the woman who was found on the beach and had lost her memory suddenly remembers who she is, it turns out that she is Manu’s wife and that they had been separated when, fleeing Libya, their boat sank. When the Nigerian refugee in London writes the story of his journey in Book 6, the reader realizes that he had been on the same boat as Manu and his wife. These thin narrative threads or echoes, though improbable from a realistic perspective, form a fragile continuity between seemingly disconnected stories and between individuals whose ties to their home, country and family had been severed.

In *Exit West*, the main narrative and the secondary plots are juxtaposed without ever crossing (no character from a secondary plot ever meets a character from the main



narrative), and yet they all participate in a similar process of migration and are therefore secretly connected. They form a narrative continuity and echo the solidarity Saeed and Nadia maintain despite the decline of their love, or the one Nadia develops towards refugees from other countries. While the rift with one's country is painful to most characters, the passage is "unexpectedly pleasant" to others (Hamid 2017, 172), who step through doors not as political refugees but in order to connect with other individuals or for economic reasons. This is the case of the unnamed elderly man in Amsterdam and the wrinkled man in Rio de Janeiro, who constantly travel back and forth between their two cities, and eventually become lovers, or of the unnamed mother and daughter who regularly meet on either side of doors. However, as Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot rightly points out, "the narrative avoids the pitfall of depicting an idealized community of migrants who leave their differences aside" (Jeanniard du Dot 2019). Saeed, for instance, finds it more difficult than Nadia to step beyond his own community.

- 25 The connections that Nadia and the protagonist of *Travelers* develop, together with the narrative echoes between various stories across different countries may evoke what Michael Rothberg has called "rhizomatic networks", which operate "beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state" and "exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction" (Rothberg 2010, 7). It is this community of experience across several countries which can create what Rothberg calls "intersecting solidarities" (2016, 366), since "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, [...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 1996, 24). This sense of implication is what encourages the attentive listener and reader of *Exit West* and *Travelers* to make connections between seemingly dissimilar journeys and display their "capacity to recognize one's face in the face of the foreigner and to valorize the traces of the far-off in the nearby" (Mbembe 2021, 215). Recognition may arise from the awareness that the "history of movement and migration touches everyone, including those who have not migrated themselves" (Lagji 2019, 228), like the elderly woman in California in *Exit West* who has lived in the same house all her life, and yet declares: "We are all migrants through time" (Hamid 2017, 209). Her observation of her rapidly changing city and of the multiplicity of migratory movements leads her to make this powerful statement which points towards a common humanity, and suggests "how the desire for a different existence or a new chapter in one's life makes us all, in some sense, migrants" (Chambers 2019, 237).<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

- 26 By juxtaposing stories in *Travelers* and elliptical micro-narratives in *Exit West*, Helon Habila and Mohsin Hamid offer a kaleidoscope of fragments which "makes for the creation of a vulnerable form", by which Jean-Michel Ganteau means "a form in which the apparent autonomy of each [narrative] is flaunted the better to be negated" (Ganteau 2019, 80). The vulnerability of the fractured form thus not only mirrors the fragility which affects refugees in their displacements and lives, but also paradoxically unites distant lives and stories, as each juxtaposed narrative is not autonomous but secretly related to the others. Refugees connect narratively, beyond the visual divisions on the page marked by blanks, sections or asterisks, and despite the hostile anti-migrant policies to which they are subjected in the host countries. In spite of their differences in backgrounds, nationalities, religions or genders, they share a common condition of vulnerability which can be viewed through the prism of interdependence



and may therefore constitute a dynamic force based on the possibility for an empathic opening to the other's vulnerability which is a mirror of one's own vulnerability, what Jean-Michel Ganteau calls "a loop of vulnerability" (Ganteau 2015, 11).

27 This loop is exemplified by the support Saeed and Nadia give and receive in the various camps they inhabit in *Exit West*, or by the empathic listening to individual stories by the protagonist in *Travelers*. In both novels, the mosaic of people on the move, forever adrift and unmoored, acutely suffer from loss, but also sometimes find strength and solidarity in the shared experience of loss and what Liliana Naydan calls an "aesthetics of connectivity" (Naydan 2019, 447). In *Exit West*, Saeed laments the loss of his parents, of his country and of his love for Nadia, and yet he feels – some might say too naïvely or sentimentally – that "this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry" (Hamid 2017, 202). The form of *Exit West* and *Travelers* seems to register this double pull: towards loss, fragmentation and discontinuity on the one hand, and towards connection and interdependence on the other. This unresolved and permanent tension may be considered ethical in that it does not erase or homogenize the suffering and vulnerability consecutive to forced displacement but suggests possible ways of creating bonds between and with vulnerable people, either in the diegesis or through narrative means.

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## Notes

1 To give just a few examples of the generic diversity and richness of non-fictional texts written by refugees in the late 2010s, one could refer to the collection of memoirs and essays edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced. Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018), and the memoir penned by Kurdish-Iranian poet and journalist Behrouz Boochani, *No Friends but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018), which chronicles his five-year detention on the island of Manus in Papua New Guinea and was partly composed in prison as text messages. Some writers test several genres to record a painful experience that is still haunting them, like, for instance, Iranian-American writer Dina Nayeri in her 2017 novel *Refuge* and her 2019 non-fictional text *The Ungrateful Refugee*.

2 In "Genres of Refugee Writing", Anna Bernard notes that "the full range of writing by and about refugees spans poetry, short fiction, novels, drama, graphic narrative, children's literature, letters, theory, journalism, legislation and human rights reporting" (Bernard 2020, 66). Her study focuses more specifically on poetry, verbatim theatre and graphic narrative.

3 In *African Titanics* (written in Arabic in 2008 and translated into English in 2014) by Eritrean writer Abu Bakr Khaal, the boat people fleeing North and East Africa for Europe see themselves as "travellers" and not refugees.

4 After he loses his passport and boards the wrong train, the protagonist becomes an undocumented migrant in a refugee camp in an Italian island where he suffers a mental breakdown, his life toppling over abruptly. According to Eleni Coundoriotis who comments on this unexpected narrative turn, "the plot's improbability destabilizes the novel's realism" (Coundoriotis 2022, 197).

5 The stepping through the door, though rapid, is experienced as a struggle (the first refuge seeker described in the book "wriggle[s] with great effort", "gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide", 6-7) and a form of birth: "With a final push he was through, trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (7). The suggestion might be that the refugees forcefully start a new life with a new identity in the new country, but their first reaction at their point of arrival is one of utter disorientation and the refuge seekers soon find out that they are not welcome in the host countries which have been "building walls and fences and strengthening their borders" (71), thereby imposing rigid lines of articulation to strictly separate the natives from the migrants.

6 The narrative voice notes that "the whole planet was on the move" (167) and "All over the world, people were slipping away from where they had been" (211).

7 Chambers rightly points to the problematic nature of this "well-intentioned phrase" and of the use of the pronoun "we" which, while asserting a solidarity with displaced people, tends to downplay "the specificity of their trauma" (Chambers 2019, 238).

## Pour citer cet article

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