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Disorienting empathy: Reimagining the global border regime through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

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Abstract

This article explores how literature can sensitise us to our potential implication in the injustice and violence of the global border regime. The violence of borders today sustains a large economic and political system that "produces precarity and disposability, exposes migrants and refugees to harm and exploitation, and reinforces global inequalities". While it manifests itself in direct events, policies, and actions, the violence produced by the global border regime is structural, widespread, and racially charged. Citizens of the global North are not precisely perpetrators of border violence, yet they bear a certain kind of political responsibility for the experiences of trauma, death, impoverishment, and discrimination that borders generate and institutionalise. Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), I investigate how we can recognise ourselves in the position of the 'implicated subject' (Michael Rothberg) through a process of what I call 'disorienting empathy'. This form of expanded and self-aware perspective-taking elicits our concern for others, but simultaneously de-centres our self, leading us to reflect critically on our subject position and on our potential indirect involvement in systemic violence. By examining *Exit West*'s literary strategies, I argue that empathy, non-appropriative identification, and disorientation can generate a self-reflexivity about our responsibility in relation to the global border regime. Drawing on affect theory, literary theory, migra-

tion studies, and critical race theory, the article highlights contemporary fiction's capacity to represent diasporic experiences and reimagine the freedom of movement in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS
borders, disorientation, empathy, implication, refugees, responsibility, solidarity

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the key features of the current geopolitical predicament is the tension between international migration and violent borders. Even though it is very difficult to gather accurate data, UNHCR figures show that the number of people who were forcibly displaced worldwide has increased by 50% from 1990 to 2020.[1] We live in the age of "the diasporisation of the world" (Di Cesare, 2017, p. 159).[2] Global events such as the financial crisis, Venezuela's economic collapse, Syria's civil war, the 2015 European 'border crisis'[3] the Rohingya refugee crisis, the rise in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, the increasing number of environmental disasters, and the war that is unfolding in Ukraine at the time of writing, have pushed migration to the top of the political agenda in many countries (see Hollifield & Foley, 2022). Indeed, as Angela Davis said in a (2018) talk at Harvard, the issue of immigrant rights is "the major civil rights issue of the 21st century".[4]

This article explores how literature can sensitise us to our potential implication in the injustice and violence of the global border regime. Building on an analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) I will discuss how we might recognise ourselves in the position of the implicated subject via a process of what I call 'disorienting empathy'. As Michael Rothberg defines them in his influential reconceptualisation of political responsibility, implicated subjects are subjects who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (2019, p. 1). The analytical lens provided by the framework of implication is particularly apt to study the violence *produced* by the global border regime which, while it occasionally manifests itself in tragic mediatic events, emerges from regimes of domination, racial and social dynamics, and discourses that are embedded, widespread, and structurally functional to a "system that seeks to preserve privilege and opportunity for some by restricting access to resources and movement for others" (Jones, 2016, p. 5). If we seek to attribute responsibility for border violence, we could consider state agents who apply physical violence on migrants as perpetrators, border technology entrepreneurs as accomplices, and politicians who incite hate and xenophobia towards the migrants as the instigators of such violence. Yet legalistic and individualising frameworks fail to capture the systemic nature of the violence and injustice produced by the global border regime. The factors that generate border violence are multiple, structural, large scale, and inscribed in the long *durée* of racial capitalism and (post) colonial management of migration flows. Given that the racialised global regime is entangled with "a system of resource extraction and continued 'sweated' labour in the global South, and the creation of 'immigrant labour' in the North" (Danewid, 2021, p. 147), citizens of wealthy countries are not precisely perpetrators of border violence, yet they bear a certain kind of political responsibility for the experiences of trauma, death, impoverishment, and discrimination that borders generate and institutionalise. Following *Exit West*'s planetary and universal account of migration, in this article I will take a broad perspective that looks at the features and patterns shared by different contexts of migration across the globe. It is clear that to weigh up the responsibilities of the multiple agents directly or indirectly involved in the global border regime we should zoom in into each geographical and socio-political context, attending to the specificity of each border regime. Yet training our lenses on the general enables us to recognise the transregional commonalities between different contexts of border

violence and the fact that the global border regime is the outcome of the actions and inactions of many individuals and organisations who pursue their particular goals and interests.

Given that the question of implication depends on one's subject position, I should clarify the perspective from which I approach Hamid's novel and the discussion of the global border regime. While Black feminists have rightly called attention to our "locus of speech" (Ribeiro, 2019; see also Cammarata, 2021, p. 7), the social positioning from where we tackle a specific topic, we also need to consider our "locus of reading". By this I mean the relations of power and epistemic privilege or disadvantage—determined by the intersection between one's race, class, gender, and sexuality—that inform a reading experience. As a white, male, European scholar and as a migrant and descendant of migrants (if we assume the United Nations definition of the latter as a person who moves to a country other than that of their usual residence for at least 1 year), I must recognise what Stephanie Malia Hom (2019, p. 7) calls "divide between those who move by choice and those who move by force" and the coloniality of the current European models of citizenship and migration control highlighted by scholars like Miguel Mellino (2012, 2019), Nicholas De Genova (2016), and the members of The Black Mediterranean Collective (2021). Acknowledging my locus of reading does not mean subscribing to an essentialised vision of culture and society, but rather being aware of my condition of privilege and of the impossibility of impersonating members of marginalised and racialised groups.

Building on these premises, this article explores how *Exit West*'s aesthetic representation of migration and diasporic subjectivities can "seductively sabotage" (Mihai, 2022, p. 52) reductive and self-absolving narratives about border violence and the radically different experiences of mobility open to migrants depending on their race, gender, class, and passport power (or lack thereof). Drawing on Mihaela Mihai's work on the "aesthetics of care" (2022), I contend that, thanks to its pleasurable dimension and mediated reconstruction of refugees' experiences, a novel like *Exit West* can nurture a complex and conscionable understanding of international migration and expand readers' political imaginary. My argument is that through some specific literary strategies Hamid's novel invites its readers to empathically take the perspective of migrants who suffer the injustice of the global border regime. The kind of empathy elicited by *Exit West* does not re-centre the experience of privileged subjects, but rather disorients the cognitive, emotional, and social habitus of its audience, potentially leading the reader to reflect critically on his or her subject position in relation to the global border regime. This affective grammar offers useful resources for dismantling the lurking effects of "ethnic absolutism" (Gilroy, 1993) and fosters what we might call a 'diasporic imagination' that cracks open ossified conceptions of belonging, citizenship, and mobility.

To develop this argument, I have organised the article in three parts. Section one analyses *Exit West*'s plot and identifies the key ethical-political questions that it presents to its readers. The second section argues that the play of identity and difference at work in *Exit West* simultaneously elicits empathy and disorients the reader. In the final section, I discuss how such "disorienting empathy" invites us to consider our implication in the violence of the global border regime and to take responsibility for the more or less indirect ways in which we prop up and reproduce its structural violence.

2 | *EXIT WEST* AND THE AGE OF MIGRATION

Written by a Pakistani-born author who has made of migration a mode of life, *Exit West* tells the story of Nadia and Saeed, a couple who are compelled to escape from their war-stricken country because of the escalation of violence. The story begins in an unnamed postcolonial country, seemingly with a Muslim majority, "in a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not openly at war" (Hamid, 2017, p. 1). Nadia and Saeed are young professionals with urban lifestyles similar to those of their peers throughout the globalised world. Saeed is attached to his family and the praying ritual, while Nadia is more open and independent, and wears a black robe as a way of safeguarding her freedom. As their relationship is starting to blossom, the conflict intensifies and the militants close in on their city, in ways that might recall the battle of Mosul (Iraq), Syria's civil war, or the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In an interview, Hamid declared that he modelled the city on Lahore, his own birthplace, but he avoided to mention the

name for sentimental reasons and because he "wanted to open it up—to have people from other places imagine this as their city, so [as] to widen the entry point into the novel" (Frostrup. & Hamid, 2017).

Gradually the militants take over territory throughout the city and, as violence spirals out of control, Nadia and Saeed lose their jobs and Saeed's mother is killed. We hear of bombs, beheadings, air strikes, drones, and of the imposition of ISIS-like fundamentalist rules. Hamid portrays some scenes of violence with "a mixture of clarity and restraint" (Motion, 2017), "[declining] to turn the destruction of the city and its people into a spectacle, the way they would be normally visible to those outside the country, watching its doom from a digital distance" (Nguyen, 2017).

Then the narrative introduces an element of magical realism[5]: black doors that can instantly take people elsewhere, away from the nightmare of the civil war:

> A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. Most people thought these rumours to be nonsense, the superstition of the feeble-minded. But most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently nonetheless.
>
> (Hamid, 2017, pp. 69–70)

As the presence of the magic doors becomes more consequential, militants punish people who look for them and "even the most reputable international broadcasters [acknowledged that] the doors existed, and indeed were being discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis" (83). Thanks to these portals "an unprecedented flow of migrants [...] was hitting the rich countries, who were building walls and fences and strengthening their borders, but seemingly to unsatisfactory effect" (71). Eventually Nadia and Saeed pay a people smuggler to get access to a door and, after stepping through the darkness, they appear on the Greek island of Mykonos. After "waiting in motion" (Lagji, 2019) in the island's refugee camp, the couple crosses another door and emerges in London. Here they share a house with other migrants from the global South and try to rebuild their own lives despite the surrounding uncertainty.

This shared temporary residence offers Hamid an opportunity to reflect on the questions of belonging, identity and nationhood. Several migrants start to congregate with people of their own nationality or religion, or with whom at least they seem to have a superficial commonality. Nadia and Saeed thus find themselves in a Nigerian-majority house. Being "the only man from his country", Saeed feels uncomfortable in the house, for the presence of strangers "touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear [in him]" (Hamid, 2017, p. 146). Wishing to stay close to his countrymen, Saeed proposes to change house, but this creates frictions with Nadia:

> 'Why would we want to move?' she said.
> 'To be among our own kind', Saeed answered.
> 'What makes them our kind?'
> 'They're from our country.'
> 'From the country we used to be from.'
> 'Yes.' Saeed tried not to sound annoyed.
> 'We've left that place.'
> 'That doesn't mean we have no connection.'
> 'They're not like me.'
> 'You haven't met them.'
> 'I don't need to.'
>
> (149–150)

Through the description of the house dynamics Hamid skilfully invites the reader to question the meaning of belonging and the processes of inclusion and exclusion through which we identify with a group, establishing an "emotional attachment" (Guibernau, 2013, p. 28). Saeed's longing for sameness and familiarity, in a world where global

movements are accelerated by magic portals, "conjures a resurgent nationalist, isolationist response" (Lagji, p. 226) to free movement and cultural exchange. Yet the attempts to build a community around the idea of sameness also allow Hamid to deconstruct the ideal of nationhood and the fiction on which it is based. Listening to the "Nigerians", Nadia understands that

> [they] were in fact not all Nigerian, some were half-Nigerian, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of the border, and further that there was perhaps no such a thing as a Nigerian, or certainly no one common thing, for different Nigerians spoke different tongues among themselves, and belonged to different religions

> (2017, p. 144)

The tensions and affective geographies of the house reflect the more severe confrontation that is building up in the capital. As a multitude of migrants "[pours] into London" (Hamid, 2017, p. 126), taking refuge in the empty spaces and squatting unoccupied mansions, the strains between the migrants and part of the local populations become more acute. Nativist mobs attack the migrants and riots explode in their part of London.

The nativists' threats and slogans echo the Brexit campaign (Gheorghiu, 2018, pp. 90–91; Sadaf, 2020, p. 641) or the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (2017), but they are occasionally pushed in a dystopian direction to lay bare the potential outcomes of today's anti-immigration and "great replacement" ideologies. There are "scenes of nativist backlash" (134), social media chatter of "a coming night of shattered glass" (132), military actions, and the foreboding of a final showdown between light London (the government and the nativist forces) and dark London (the migrant ghetto, where electricity has been cut off). Yet even in this Manichean scenario there are nuances, grey areas, and forms of resistance: some volunteers and aid agencies help the migrants, some migrants arm themselves to take revenge, identities and positions get blurred. "The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter" reminds Nadia of "the fury of the militants in her own city" (156). Despite the fights, incidents, and murders, the government and the nativist forces eventually back down and negotiations ensue:

> Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and that the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one.

> (164)

From this moment onward, the narrative compresses contemporary and future migration flows in a short time span, depicting an "age of migration" (De Haas et al., 2019) in which international population movements reshape societies around the world and the global order as a whole.

Nadia and Saeed, who had started working in camps that mushroomed on the outskirts of the capital known as "London Halo", finally walk through another black rectangle and move to a favela-like shanty on the hills of Marin, California. The demographics of Marin, where "there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago" (Hamid, 2017, p. 195), offers another opportunity to reflect on the relative nature of native-ness, on what it means to be from somewhere, and on the absurdity of assigning rights, privileges or disadvantages according to the randomness of birth. The novel highlights how the global border regime is not just unjust and violent, but also constructed along racial lines:

> It seemed to Saeed that the people who advocated this position most strongly, who claimed the rights of nativeness most forcefully, tended to be drawn from the ranks of those with light skin who looked

> most like the natives of Britain—and as had been the case with the natives of Britain, many of these people too seemed stunned by what was happening to their homeland, what had already happened in so brief a period, and some seemed angry as well.
>
> (196)

The exclusionary mechanisms of "white borders" (Jones, 2021) eventually prove inefficient to stop the movements of people seeking a better life, and the concluding chapters quicken and expand contemporary trends of migration, portraying "the whole planet on the move" (Hamid, 2017, p. 167). While the social situation improves, hinting at a post-national future in which borders are vanishing and nationhood is increasingly insignificant, the changes experienced strain the relationship between Nadia and Saeed, who in a sense "migrate away from each other" (Perfect, 2019, p. 192).

While the pseudo-utopian prospects of *Exit West*'s ending might be read as naïve or as narratives that risk flattening the diverse experiences of migration, occluding the suffering and injustices suffered by many refugees and racialised migrants, I would argue that this kind of reading misses the point of the novel's artistic representation of mass population movements, which is to decolonise our imagination and dismantle the naturality with which we look at states, borders, and national divisions. In the following sections I will analyse how *Exit West* does this, foregrounding the ways in which "disorienting empathy" urges us to acknowledge our implication in the violence produced by nation-state ideology and the global border regime.

3 | DISORIENTING EMPATHY

In his collection of articles, *Discontent and Civilizations* (2014), Hamid makes a telling statement about his work:

> In my writing, I have tried to advocate the blurring of boundaries: not just between civilizations or people of different 'groups' but also between writer and reader. Co-creation has been central to my fiction, the notion that a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader. Co-creation is central to my politics as well. I believe that we co-create the overlapping societies we belong to, large and small, and that we should be free to try to invent new ways of being and interacting.
>
> (xviii)

This idea of co-creation resonates strongly with Rita Felski's conception of "postcritical reading". "Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives", Felski invites us "to place ourselves in front of the texts, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (2015, p. 12). Interpretation becomes here a co-production between text and reader, an experimental mode of engagement that brings to life new meanings and makes the text contemporary. Opening up this space of co-production does not mean forfeiting the commitment to socially engaged and historically informed interpretations, as Bruce Robbins has claimed (2017b). In my understanding, "postcritical reading" does not stand for uncritical or depoliticised, but rather for approaches that promote reading as "a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (Felski, 2015, p. 173). As Michael Docherty suggests, casting texts and readers as co-creators of meaning "might augment the range of textual approaches available to a scholarly reader, perhaps checking excesses of paranoia or suspicion, encouraging the reader's receptivity to and willingness to work with rather than against texts. Receptivity to the postcritical stance might thus prevent the critic from lapsing unknowingly into a quasi-colonialist attitude to the text-as-subject" (2022, p. 967). In other words, my interpretation of *Exit West* falls under the rubric of what Yves Citton calls "*une lecture actualisante*", a way of reading that seeks to bring to life and elaborate on a text by tapping into its "connotative virtualities" (Citton, 2017). Hamid's novel is

particularly suited to this kind of reading, for it encourages its readers to imaginatively project themselves in the place of another and explore the conceptual and affective dimensions that such experience discloses.

Drawing on Shameem Black's *Fiction Across Borders* (2010), we could define *Exit West* as a "border-crossing fiction" in two senses. First, because although it does not represent the journey; it is about the challenge of crossing political, geographical, and social borders. Indeed, "a border is not just a line on the map; it is a system for filtering people that stretches from the edges of a territory into its heart" (Trilling, 2018, pp. xii-xiii). Second, because *Exit West* tackles the question of envisioning alterity, embracing the challenge of representing "social difference" (differences of nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender that "invoke troubling [...] hierarchies of power") (Black, 2010, p. 2). While Hamid is a migrant, he did not live through the ordeals experienced by stateless refugees (nor has he enjoyed the privileges of white migrants from the global North). As Black argues, representing social difference "[has] long been considered a problem" in "postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic-minority forms of literary criticism" (2). Writing across borders is often suspected of reinstating hegemonic hierarchies and committing some form of representational violence. Cognizant of the warnings of late twentieth-century theories of representation, contemporary literature is critically aware of the difficulty of putting oneself in the place of another and imaginatively reconstructing someone else's world and experiences. And yet, artistic fiction "cannot help but speak for and about others" (21), unless it wants to turn into a solipsistic, self-absorbed exercise. As Black puts it, "if every attempt to write beyond the experiential scope of the author forms only a displaced mirror of the author's own predicament, the resulting view of the world yields only a portrait of imaginative imprisonment" (31). So, how does *Exit West* negotiate the need of speaking across social difference without turning into an act of discursive domination? Analysing how Hamid's novel represents something not experienced by its author and most of its readers is crucial to understanding the dynamics of what I call 'disorienting empathy'. Indeed, the latter involves an ethical and responsible engagement with alterity.

Exit West deploys several narrative strategies to encourage ethical and self-aware perspective-taking across social borders. As I noted above, the namelessness of Nadia and Saeed's city and the transnational ordinariness of their lifestyles prompt readers to consider that the country engulfed in a civil war may be their country one day. In being ambiguous about cultural markers and descriptions, the narrative becomes expansive and inclusive. Indeed, the "crystalline simplicity of Hamid's prose, the quasi-allegorical portrayal of his characters' travails", and the fact that only two characters are named "invite[s] readers to place themselves in a related position" (Felski, 2020, p. 107). Moreover, by eliminating Nadia and Saeed's journey from the narrative, the literary conceit of the magic doors spotlights their affective states, their feelings *before* leaving their country and *after* arriving in a new country. Given that mediatic representations of refugees often concentrate on the journey—barbed wires, dinghies, lorries, leaving out those elements brings into relief Nadia and Saeed's similarity to *Exit West*'s potential readers *and*, simultaneously, the radical difference of their lived experiences and of the obstacles they face. This disorienting, emphatic experience is emphasised by the novel's "delicate balancing of sameness and difference" (Felski, 2020, p. 107). On the one hand, the narrative foregrounds how similar Nadia and Saeed's aspirations, habits, and emotions are to those of other young people around world, calling the novel's readers to identify with them. On the other hand, the novel uses a set of narrative strategies to disorient potential Western readers: it breaks widespread stereotypes on the black robe (which can take on different meanings, even playful or emancipatory); it intersperses the narrative with a series of vignettes from all over the world that yield a multifaceted picture of global migration; it exposes the radical dissonance between a privileged white subject's and a racialised subject's experiences of migration; and it inserts descriptions of terrible atrocities in the texture of a city that could be *ours*.

In his review of *Exit West*, the Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen, himself a refugee, captures this productive tension between empathic perspective-taking and critical attentiveness to otherness and asymmetries of power by addressing the implicated privileged reader with a disorienting *you*:

> You wake in the morning and drink your coffee or tea. You drive a car or a motorbike, or perhaps you take the bus. You go to work and turn on your computer. [...] You have hopes, dreams and expectations. You take your humanity for granted. You keep believing you are human even when the catastrophe

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arrives and renders you homeless. Your town or city or countryside is in ruins. You try to make it to the border. Only then, hoping to leave, or making it across the border, do you understand that those who live on the other side do not see you as human at all.

(Nguyen, 2017)

By eliciting empathy across social difference, *Exit West* asks its readers to imagine themselves as potential refugees and urges us to critically examine our subject positions and how the privileges that they might afford may be "*causally linked*, however obscurely, with the fates of distant and sometimes suffering others" (Robbins, 2017a, p. 3). In other words, *Exit West*'s literary strategies have the potential of stimulating what José Medina (2013) calls "epistemic friction" between, on the one hand, readers' empathic affinity with Nadia and Saeed's emotions, aspirations, and desire to move and, on the other hand, the discrimination and foreclosure of possibilities that the refugees experience. Powered by the novel's capacity to "*pleasurably sabotage* the limitations inherent in our habits of perceiving, remembering, and imagining" (Mihai, 2022, p. 52), this epistemic friction can trigger a process of critical reflection that pushes us to reckon with our potential implication in the global border regime and to question why our different social positionalities lead to outrageously different experiences of migration.[6] Using *Exit West*'s language, we could say that the disorienting empathy produced by Hamid's novel invites us to ask why the doors should open to some and closed to others because of the accidents of their birth, the colour of their skin, or the nationality they happen to have.

Empathy, "sharing someone's feelings and responding with concern to those feelings" (Felski, 2020, p. 105), is a vexed subject in critical theory and literary studies (Keen, 2007). In an important work on "implicit understanding", Alexis Shotwell has criticised liberal models of solidarity that arise out of a sense of empathy. The main risk here is to re-centre the white subject's privileged experience and hegemonic perceptual framework. As Shotwell argues, "a solidarity that relies on an expanded sense of 'us' is potentially an imperialist, misguided, individualist effort that rests on a continued primacy of whiteness (among other things), forcing real differences to become legible as false sameness" (2011, p. 104). To avoid building solidarity on the shaky foundations of a privileged subject's dominating empathy, Shotwell draws on Max Scheler (1970) and Sandra Lee Bartky (2002) to propose the alternative concept of "feeling-with" (Shotwell, 2011, pp. 109–110). This genuine *Mitgefühl* (feeling with, fellow-feeling), is a kind of political sympathy, an understanding of another subject's circumstances that maintains the "otherness of the Other" (Bartky, 2002, p. 77), allowing us to generate solidarity across difference.[7]

Bartky and Shotwell are right in warning us about forms of empathy that, by drawing analogies between the experiences of privileged and subaltern subjects, risk re-centring dominant frameworks of knowledge and perception, and end up obliterating the subjectivity of person who suffers. I share their concerns about white liberal empathy, but I do not believe that empathy is always and necessarily imperialist and that it is bound to create a relation in which a subject usurps someone else's perspective and experiences. To a certain extent this is a terminological divergence, for my conception of "disorienting empathy" is largely in tune with their idea of "feeling with". While empathy is inherently ambivalent and does not automatically lead to political action, I think that it is counterproductive to drastically rule out its potential for solidarity work. Empathy, sympathy, and "feeling-with" are much more entangled (both in their conceptual history and in practice) than rigid conceptual distinctions allow (Pulcini, 2020, pp. 19–27). And thanks to complex brain patterns and our mind-reading capacities, human beings are biologically wired for empathy and mental state inferences (De Waal, 2019; Harris, 2017, pp. 10–20; Pinker, 2012, pp. 689–714; Stringer, 2012, pp. 105–137).

To better qualify my conception of "disorienting empathy" I would like to refer to Ian Williams's *Disorientation: Being Black in the World* (2021). Williams defines "disorientation" as

the effect of racial encounters on racialized people, the whiplash of race that occurs while minding one's business. It reminds you of your race, usually at a moment when your internal experience is not framed in racial terms, and reorders the pattern of your interactions around race. It disrupts

> your reality. It is enacted on you—it interrupts. It stalls the forward momentum of your life. You can't prepare for disorientation. […] Sometimes the consequences are irritating. Sometimes they are deadly.
>
> (36–37)

A black woman enters a lift and the body language of the white woman inside tightens and she clutches her purse. A black man is pulled over by a white police officer who questions him about things unrelated to his driving ("Is this your vehicle?"), holding his hand on the gun. Or, as it happened to Hamid, you apply for a visa to go to Italy to visit your girlfriend and the racially discriminating bureaucracy reminds you that you are seen as totally Other, as a potential terrorist or security threat (Hamid, 2014, pp. 21–23). Disorientation is the response that racialized people have to random or unprovoked reminders of their race. The recovery from each of these racial experiences is painful and burns up lots of mental energy.

White people do not experience this kind of disorientation. Indeed, not being racially disoriented and not having to think about race are precisely some of the privileges of whiteness. But, following Williams's own invitation (47–51, 119–120, 153), I would argue that white and advantaged people *should* have experiences of disorientation that dislocate ossified and subliminal racial hierarchies. White disorientation cannot be compared to the racialized experiences suffered by people of colour or to the troubles of refugees. But when it avoids usurping, trivialising, or impersonating the "otherness of the Other", disorienting empathy can contribute to a "productive dialogue across perceived social borders" (Black, 2010, p. 32). In other words, disorienting empathy does not lead to an appropriation of the other, but to an expropriation of the self.[8]

Exit West elicits this kind of empathy through a double movement: on the one hand it connects readers to Nadia and Saeed's struggles, attuning the former to the characters' affective, interpersonal, sensorial states; on the other hand, it destabilises that very connection by highlighting the differential treatment reserved to refugees *and* the ways in which readers are often entangled in the regimes of domination that prop up the violence suffered by refugees. This double movement does not collapse the distance between self and other, but rather promotes an exchange across social difference that can potentially disrupt the common sense by challenging widespread assumptions about migration, borders, and national belonging. Understood in this sense, the disorienting empathy elicited by *Exit West* can facilitate an expanded, de-centring, and self-aware perspective-taking that can lead to a critical reconsideration of our potential implication in the violence produced by the global border regime.

4 | IMPLICATED SUBJECTS AND THE GLOBAL BORDER REGIME

The violence of borders creates, upholds, and perpetuates an unequal regime that "allows wealth to accumulate in the hands of corporations and powerful states at expense of workers around the world" (Jones, 2016, p. vi). The global border regime is *productive* (King, 2016, p. 2), for its exclusionary mechanisms generate multiple levels and forms of violence. They produce direct physical violence, traceable to concrete actions or decisions, which may take the form of police raids, walls, razor wire, and dehumanizing surveillance technologies. Border violence is also *structural* because it ensues from the interaction of many individuals and institutions and it generates effects that are broad, systemic, and durable. Indeed, "the paradox of expansive mobilities for some and foreclosed mobility for others" (Hawthorne & Kelly, 2020), engenders profound asymmetries in power, rights, wealth, and life chances on a global scale. This complex structure of management and control is *colonial* because it "[rehearses] ongoing racialized histories of exclusion, extraction, and exploitation, but in a distinctively contemporary configuration of technology, security, economy, violence and care" (Sanyal, 2021, p. 325). The "coloniality" of the global border regime foregrounds the intertwinement of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and sexism contested by decolonial thought/praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The violence of borders is *racialised*, because it is based on "aggressive identity politics" that "[default] certain identities" (Malik, 2019, pp. 140, 145)—being white, with a certain culture, tradition, and worldview—through exclusionary practices and policies coached in the language of security, control, sovereignty, and care. As Alana Lentin

notes (2020), "while western governments of all political stripes may not refer openly to the language of biological race, they all advocate for the control of migration along racial lines and enact discriminatory policies which reproduce race internally" (p. 46). Finally, border violence is *discursive* because it circulates as a hegemonic political frame of mind that sees states and border divisions as eternal rather than historical, as natural and immutable rather than as humanly constructed political configurations.

This brief account cannot possibly include and scrutinize all forms of border violence, but it helps to understand how citizens of the global North are implicated in the violence of the global border regime in various forms and degrees. As Debarati Sanyal argues (2021), "contemporary borders do not implement a genocidal or extractive calculus, but instead, a distinctive configuration of technocratic management, commodification, humanitarian care, and necropolitics: an arithmetic of disposable life" (p. 326). As citizens of democratic countries that enforce such violent configuration we might be implicated, "folded into" (Rothberg, 2019, p. 1), border violence. While they rarely have direct and immediate effects on the broader dynamics of international migration, our actions, inactions, material practices, political views or indifference make us politically responsible for the global border regime. Sometimes we might also be responsible in more material and concrete ways, for example, in contexts where colonial legacies, "labour-value commodity chains" (Suwandi, 2019, pp. 42–67), extractivist capitalist operations, or support for wars and autocratic regimes make us complicit with the conditions that force millions of people to move. Depending on our positionality and political opinions, we therefore may be considered as enablers, functionaries, agents, beneficiaries, unwilling or enthusiastic supporters of the global border regime.

The disorienting empathy provoked by *Exit West* brings into relief such spectrum of implicated positions by providing a mediated representation of people's involvement in the global border regime. Besides the issues examined in the previous sections, the novel stresses the socio-economic divide between the global North and the global South, highlighting how digital technologies broadcast and disseminate the visibility of such divide (see Hamid, 2017, pp. 38–39). This global inequality translates into a radical disparity in relation to freedom of movement. Visas "had long been-near impossible" for people like Nadia and Saeed, and when they are most needed, they become "truly impossible for non-wealthy people to secure" (50). As refugees look for a safe route to escape war, economic distress, and environmental disasters, rich countries "[build] walls and fences and [strengthen] their borders, but seemingly to unsatisfactory effect" (71). This creates a racialised system of mobility control that blocks, siphons, and sifts migrants to maintain an unequal and unjust global order, flouting the principles of the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention:

> the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from—although almost no one ever did—or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poor places to guard them all.
>
> (Hamid, 2017. p. 101)

The disorienting empathy elicited by *Exit West*'s narrative brings us close to Nadia and Saeed's emotional states, pushing the reader to consider the reasons that underlie mass global movements and to question why such movements are often violently opposed or restricted by the governments of the countries where he or she may belong. However, the passage from disorienting empathy to a self-critical reflection on one's implicated position is neither automatic nor certain. Hamid's invitation to co-creation might lead in other directions, where *Exit West*'s universalizing gestures and empathic perspective-taking could usher "a politics of pity rather than justice" (Danewid, 2017, p. 1681). By taking a long, expanded view of migration and leaving out refugees' dangerous experience of movement across space, the novel might run the risk of banalising the actual ordeal of migration, rendering transhistorical what is linked to specific geopolitical predicaments and entanglements of economic, social, and racial boundaries. In an article that questions Hamid's universalist approach, Yogita Goyal has indeed argued that "Hamid's slogans like 'we are all migrants' or 'we are all refugees' distort the specific lived experience of the displaced person for whom such

categories were invented, discarding the legal category for humanising metaphor" (2020, p. 256). Nonetheless, on closer inspection we notice that *Exit West* weaves into the story of Nadia and Saaed a series of references to the roles of race, class, gender, and political rights that, while they do not provide specific geopolitical accounts or social details, they do remind the reader of significant structural and material inequalities in people's experiences of migration. In *Exit West*, the world is "full of doors" (152), but the latter work in different ways depending on the migration flows that they regulate. The novel also intimates the potential and ambiguities of emphatic perspective-taking by offering an example of 'inverted' disorienting empathy:

> [...] Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them, and Nadia said once again that the natives were so frightened that they could do anything.
> 'I can understand it', she said. 'Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.'
> 'Millions arrived in our country', Saeed replied. 'When there were wars nearby.'
> 'That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose.'

> (161–162)

The introduction of these nuances in the novel highlights the limitations of an aesthetics of disorienting empathy, which needs to strike a difficult balance between its border-crossing, self-transcending aspirations and the subtle risks entailed by the act of imaginative projection. There is a delicate productive tension at work in the practice of disorienting empathy, which consists in going as far as we can to understand the other without obliterating actual differences and eliding unequal relations of forces. Achieving some sort of equilibrium requires a critical attention to what is lost and what is gained, in each case, through foregrounding particular transnational affinities and affective commonalities.

For the reasons exposed above, I believe that the ethical and political claims that *Exit West* makes on the reader do not paper over our historical and contemporary involvement in the injustices of the global border regime. While empathic structures of feeling may encourage "white innocence", an ethical perspective that treats migrants as "charitable subjects" and turns questions of implication, complicity, reparation, and structural reform into matters of generosity, hospitality, and grief (see Danewid, 2017, p. 1675), a truly *disorienting empathy* leads to responsibility and challenges our self-representation as innocent bystanders. By unveiling the umbilical cord that links privileges in the global North to systemic disadvantages in the global South, *Exit West* encourages a discussion that questions the very foundations of the political system we live in.

Crucially, this critical questioning is combined with an infusion of hope and optimism. For Hamid, to counteract the violence of the global border regime we need to dismantle the fear that gives rise to nostalgic and supremacist views of the past and begin to imagine new and attractive futures that can attract us away from nationalism and nativism. Towards the end of *Exit West*, the narrative introduces the story of "an old woman who had lived in the same house her entire life" (206). Although she has never changed her location, everything around her did change, "and when she went out it 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. We are all migrants through time" (209). This story encapsulates Hamid's effort to reimagine the global border regime. By condensing the migrations of the next few centuries in a short lapse of time, *Exit West* prefigures a post-national future and new forms of belonging. This revolutionary act "liberates us from the tyranny of what was and what is, [freeing] us to imagine what could be" (Kiwanuka & Hamid, 2017).

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that *Exit West*'s literary strategies engage the reader by stimulating an affective process that I have called 'disorienting empathy'. This kind of empathy consists in an ethical and responsible form of perspective-taking that eschews the dangerous pretension of fully knowing and inhabiting the position of another, especially when the encounter between self and other—whether fictional or real—is shaped by sharp inequities of power. Instead of seeking to appropriate or master the other, disorienting empathy generates a healthy process of "epistemic friction" that can transform the cognitive, affective, ideational, and moral habits of the empathic subject. The experience of disorientation can indeed promote a much-needed critical reflection on our positionalities and on the different ways in which we might be implicated in the structural violence and injustice of the global border regime. However, there is nothing certain or linear in the process that goes from disorienting empathy to critical reflection and solidarity. Not all readers of *Exit West* will feel disorienting empathy, and the disorientation that they might experience may not disrupt entrenched habits of thought and structures of feeling. Yet the quasi-allegorical portrayal of Nadia and Saeed's travails can offer relevant hermeneutical and affective resources for reconsidering our political responsibility in relation to the global border regime and for imagining models of international migration that honour the principles of global justice and freedom of movement.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html [accessed on 20/01/22].

[2] Unless otherwise specified, all translations from non-English texts are my own.

[3] There is a debate around the most appropriate term to refer to the so-called 2015 European 'refugee crisis'. For example, while Daniel Trilling uses the term "border crisis" (2018, p. xii) to point out that it is Europe's unconscionable border management that has aggravated the situation, Patrick Kingsley prefers to talk of an "asylum crisis" (2016, p. 294) because it is the continent's uncooperative and dysfunctional asylum systems that have led the chaos. Despite the terminological differences, the conclusion is the same: it is Europe's cruel and impractical border regime and migration policies that have turned a comparatively moderate flow of refugees (in relation to Middle Eastern countries and other areas around the globe) into a 'crisis'.

[4] https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/04/angela-davis-speaks-on-immigration-at-harvard/ [accessed on 20/01/22].

[5] Hamid's conceit of the magic doors could be characterised as magical realism insofar as it introduces a fantastical element in an otherwise realistic setting (see Gheorghiu, 2018; Perfect, 2019; Sandhu, 2017). Rodriguez Fielder (2021), however, prefers to talk of "mythological realism" for the mythic tone and omniscient perspective of Hamid's dry prose provide the framework for a fable-like narrative that interweaves realistic and supernatural elements.

[6] Following Mihai, the conception of aesthetic pleasure advanced here "incorporate[s] discomfort and pain" (p. 54), in the sense that individual readers—whatever their social and cultural positioning—can appreciate *mediated* representations of reality (fictional signifiers that allude the signified of international migration) that are troubling and challenging, but also intellectually, sensorially, and affectively engaging.

[7] As Bartky explains, interpreting Scheler: "What is 'immediate' here, I venture, is the idea that once the proper background conditions are satisfied, I can 'leap' out of my own experience into an intuitive understanding of the Other's emotional life. This leap from the 'I' to the 'Thou' is not a merger with the 'Thou' nor is it a comparison between an 'I' and a 'Thou' which would be little more than a reconstructed 'I.'" (2002, p. 83)

[8] Talking about the question of envisioning alterity, Black makes a relevant point that shows how border-crossing perspective taking does not amount to impersonation, but to a non-appropriative way of engaging significant otherness: "Admitting one's inability to inhabit the perspectives of others sometimes enables the very breakthrough that allows for the encounter with significant otherness once considered impossible" (2010, p. 44).

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