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‘What it feels like to be an other’: imaginations of displacement in contemporary speculative fiction

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Abstract

*This essay explores how contemporary speculative fiction can offer new ways of imagining the refugee experience. Looking at Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017) and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), it argues that the cognitive estrangement effect, or the way in which each text encourages the reader to distance themselves from reality, can help the reader build a bridge between the world of the refugee and that of the reader. Central to the discussion will be the genre’s use of the term *novum*, with reference to concepts of time and space. Not only do these elements contribute to achieving cognitive estrangement, they also have a fundamental role to play in the lives of refugees. Drawing a parallel between the *novum* as speculative fiction’s most important trope and the role of the real *novum* in refugee lives shows how the genre reflects the disruptive changes brought about by the displacement of refugee populations. In addition, the flexible use of time in each text has proven to be a useful tool for helping the reader imagine how being a refugee impacts on one’s sense of time and, subsequently, one’s agency—an element which will be explored through an analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus*, as well as insights from David Hoy’s reading of Martin Heidegger’s prioritisation of the future. As speculative fiction’s main task is to imagine alternative realities, a third central element of the discussion will be ways in which the genre utilises space. Ultimately, it is argued that refugee narratives do not have to be strictly realist, as fantastical elements help readers to transcend the personal imagination—and sometimes that is what is needed to envisage the unthinkable.*

Keywords: Speculative fiction; Science fiction; Refugee experience; *Novum*; Time; Space

An alternative reality

The texts central to this essay are Omar El Akkad’s *American War* (2017) and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), both of which are imaginations full of realism, though intensified through the use of the fantastical. *Exit West* centres on Nadia and Saeed, who meet in an unspecified city reminiscent of Kabul, fall in love and flee together when their country deteriorates under the pressures of war. Using magical doors, they move from one place to another, a narrative device with which Hamid explores what it means to love someone while leaving behind one’s home country. *American War* imagines a world in which the Southern states of America are at war, following main character Sarat while she forcedly leaves home, settles in a refugee camp, ends up in prison and finally, after many years, returns to her place of birth. The meaning of

home is equally prevalent in both stories, as is the way in which being on the move impacts on one's sense of self. As works of speculative fiction, both novels encourage their readers to swap reality for an alternative universe, and, as I will argue, this can ultimately offer new ways of imagining the refugee experience.

The influential speculative fiction writer Judith Merril claims that science fiction is 'the only vehicle of political dissent',¹ not least because of its ability to place a mirror in front of the reader. Though this cannot be denied, I argue that the way in which the genre creates 'alternative fictional worlds'² is equally crucial for its suitability in helping readers imagine a world as far removed from them as that of the refugee. However, that is not to say that the political force of the genre is merely a result of its affinity for Otherness. Where Jessica Langer writes that 'the figure of the alien and the figure of the far-away planet are deep and abiding SF signifiers'³ ultimately representing 'all kinds of otherness',⁴ I argue that this strong focus on Otherness only further enforces the image of the refugee as Other, thus going against what I believe makes science fiction stand out: its ability to build a bridge between the reader and the otherwise nearly unimaginable refugee experience. That said, I am not implying that the refugee is completely distinct from the reader. Readers might well be or have been refugees themselves, or know someone who has had this experience. However, I do believe that being forced to leave one's home country cannot easily be imagined by those who have not gone through something similar, and it is for those in particular that I believe speculative fiction, in helping to create a fuller understanding of unfamiliar situations, can be a useful tool.

Before moving on, it should be noted that science fiction is a contested term frequently overlapping with fantasy, dystopian fiction and magic realism. Science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin aptly summarized this by saying that 'the genres of fantasy and SF overlap to such an extent as to render any effort at exclusive definition useless.'⁵ Acknowledging this, and keeping in mind that *American War* and *Exit West* are all partly fantastical, but not necessarily scientific, a term much more fitting to this essay is speculative fiction, defined by Marek Oziewicz as 'a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating "consensus reality" of everyday experience.'⁶ This definition perfectly lends itself to discussing my chosen texts, as they each encourage their readers to distance themselves from the real world and instead view reality in a different light, away from consensus. While *Exit West* does this by imagining a world without borders, *American War* asks what it would look like if Americans had to flee their own homes. What these scenarios share is their cognitive estrangement effect, which is what speculative fiction uses to prime 'the audience for questioning the dominant status quo',⁷ ultimately making it easier for them to imagine foreign worlds. In achieving this effect, El Akkad and Hamid have each dipped into subgenres including magic realism and science fiction, and I argue that it is in these zones of overlap that the authors' ability to represent refugees lies. As Jeffrey Wechsler writes, 'magic realism does not invent a new order of things; it simply reorders reality to make it seem alien.'⁸ Similarly, Carl Freedman refers to SF as 'the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for

¹ Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 115.

² Carl Freedman, qtd. in Eric D. Smith, *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

³ Jessica Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

⁴ Langer, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, qtd in Langer, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

⁶ Marek Oziewicz, "Speculative Fiction," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017), 2.

⁷ Oziewicz, "Speculative Fiction," 11.

⁸ Jeffrey Wechsler, "Magic Realism: Defining the Indefinite," *Art Journal* 45, no. 4 (1985): 293.

granted, implicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of one's cognition.'⁹ In other words, both of these subgenres are centred on cognitive estrangement, and as that is the element central to this essay, I will not be focussing on the way in which these genres might differ from each other.

Instead, I will focus on the cognitive estrangement effect and the ways in which El Akkad and Hamid have used time, space and the novum—speculative fiction's most important literary trope—to achieve this. Not only do these concepts play central roles in speculative fiction, they also have a fundamental impact on the way in which refugees perceive the world. Drawing a parallel between these elements will help me reveal how speculative fiction can help the reader imagine the refugee experience in an innovative way.

The novum as apocalypse

Nothing distances the genre of speculative fiction from other types of literature as much as the novum does. Coined by Darko Suvin in 1979,¹⁰ this term refers to the necessary concept introduced in SF texts to make proposed worlds plausible: 'it is the central imaginary novelty in an SF text, the source of the most important distinctions between the world of the tale and the world of the reader.'¹¹ As this source must always be 'scientifically apprehendable', and 'validated by cognitive logic', it is what, in Suvin's eyes, distinguishes SF from other speculative genres such as magic realism. The novum, then, 'must imitate the sorts of things that stimulate science in the real world; establishing a distance from reality,'¹² a concept which Suvin called cognitive estrangement. This estrangement allows readers to continuously compare the alternative SF world with their own, ultimately making it possible to shine a new light on reality. That said, it is questionable whether SF works centred on time travel and alternative universes are indeed logically apprehendable: if a concept is only possible within the constraints of the proposed world anyway, does it matter whether it is scientifically plausible or not? As Csicsery-Ronay argues, 'a well-constructed work of fantasy might develop its magical premises with compelling narrative logic.'¹³ I would add that the cognitive estrangement so inextricably linked to SF is just as valid for works of speculative fiction with a stronger focus on the fantastical. Looking at *Exit West*, for example, the magical doors through which Saeed and Nadia travel are by no means scientifically plausible; yet the way in which they distance the reader from his or her own world is what allows them to question reality. All fiction does this up to a certain extent, but in speculative fiction 'this process is heightened'.¹⁴ Where 'realism's reality effect requires an object world that, by being inert, can establish the material limits of ethics, the material universe in SF is clearly in active dialogue with cultural axioms,' writes Csicsery-Ronay.¹⁵ Thus, in proposing a world without border control, Hamid encourages the reader to question today's pressing immigration issues, and the novum is what makes that possible.

The negative apocalypse

⁹ Freedman, qtd. in Eric Smith, *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 3.

¹⁰ Darko Suvin ed. Gerry Canavan, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2016), 76.

¹¹ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 47

¹² Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 73

¹³ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 73

¹⁴ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 50

¹⁵ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 56

Apart from being a literary trope, the novum is also seen as a negative apocalypse, dividing time into a past and a future,¹⁶ or, life before and after the novum. Once the magical doors in *Exit West* are revealed, the entire concept of immigration is altered: as in a world without borders, everybody is migrant but no one is a refugee. The novel's main characters may be forced to leave their hometown, but the fact that all over the world, everyone seems to be on the move ensures that they are not different. The doors allow them to be citizens of the world rather than having to deal with immigration laws or long-term encampment. By fundamentally changing their own reality, they have divided Saeed and Nadia's lives into a past and a future. For the reader, this before and after is evident on a different level too. In *Exit West*, the use of magical doors has allowed the authors to focus on the refugee experience in a way that differs from the norm. Literature on forced immigration is often presented in realist form, and inevitably, the refugee's traumatic journey is often a central part of that. However, Hamid chooses to skip this part and instead focuses on what happens before and after the journey of transition. For refugees, life after fleeing a home country will never be the same, and everything that happened before will abruptly and irreversibly become a thing of the past. As such, the magical doors, as novums, are not only replacing the refugee journey—they also function as metaphors. The negative apocalypse caused by the novum, here, comes to signify the disruptive impact of the traumatic refugee journey. Yet they are equally symbolic of the hopefulness that the same journey can bring:

Nadia and Saeed, too, discussed these rumours and dismissed them. But every morning, when she woke, Nadia looked over at her front door, and at the doors to her bathroom, her closet, her terrace. Every morning, in his room, Saeed did much the same. All their doors remained simple doors [...] but each door, regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility, became partially animate as well.¹⁷

In the novel's magic realist world, we witness a merge of the fantastical and the real, through which the characters themselves experience cognitive estrangement. Though Nadia and Saeed do not want to believe in something as irrational as magical doors, they find themselves looking out for them and, subconsciously, starting to believe in this alternative reality. Not only is this alternative reality a symbol of hope, it highlights what is wrong with the real: a world with closed borders. As a result, believing in magical doors becomes a metaphor for believing in a better future, even though this may require 'a twinge of irrational possibility'. In focussing on the anxiety felt by those wanting to leave their homeland, without knowing or thinking about the dangers and difficulties it might entail, *Exit West's* use of the novum reveals a part of the refugee experience not often explored. What moves people to flee their countries, how well are the risks considered, and what do they know about life on the other side? To Nadia and Saeed, all doors become 'partially animate'; in the same way their focus on the future is emphasized, with life behind the doors symbolising new beginnings.

The novum of reality

A less metaphorical and more literal meaning of Suvin's trope can be found by looking at real novums. Like its literary counterpart, a novum of the real world is apocalyptic in the sense that it causes paradigms to shift. As Csicsery-Ronay puts it, 'it is only the possibility of radically new things emerging in the course of time that distinguishes history from myth, whose events gain significance as repetitions, recursions.' A real novum, then, can be anything ethical, scientific or material that radically changes the course of human life. Today, however, this means that 'there is a novum around every corner',¹⁸ and rather than relying on traditional

¹⁶ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 57

¹⁷ Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), 70.

¹⁸ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 58.

patterns, adaptability has become the norm. Despite this, it is still possible to speak of turning points; new inventions are created every day, but only a small percentage of them significantly change the human way of life. For refugees, certain innovations have had more impact than others. Again turning to *Exit West*, the way in which Nadia and Saeed experience the war through their phones forms a fundamental part of the narrative:

Once as Nadia sat on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone [...] she thought she saw online a photograph of herself sitting on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone [...], and she was startled, and wondered how she could both read this news and be this news.¹⁹

As smartphones are now considered to be absolute necessities for those in exile,²⁰ refugees are no longer just the subjects, but simultaneously the spectators of the news. Technology, in connecting the world, has facilitated globalization, and globalization, as Hamid suggests, will eventually lead to a world where everyone—whether a refugee or a Londoner—lives a similar life. Nadia’s smartphone allows her to experience reality as a member of a global society, not as a refugee who is placed outside society. This fundamental shift in identity shows how technology can indeed function as a novum of the real world.

Another example of the real novum can be found in *American War*, where deadly drones and other weapons of modern warfare are destroying American civilization. Both on a national and personal scale, the effects of these drones are apocalyptic, and throughout the text, the country deteriorates, transforming the America we know today into a place of ruin.²¹ The deadly drones force the main characters to flee, and can therefore be seen as novums dividing the characters’ lives into a past and future. The publisher of this novel promotes it online as an imagination of ‘what might happen if America went to turn its most devastating policies and deadly weapons upon itself.’ This imaginary scenario is the literary novum, but the events described within the work, echoing those witnessed by El Akkad himself as a frontline journalist,²² reveal the real novum:

Only the Birds flew overhead – soundless warring craft designed to spy and to kill from great distance, their movement and intent once controlled by men in faraway places, who had only the grainy, pixelated footage of vaporized targets to gnaw on their experience. Early in the war, the Birds were the Union’s most effective weapon, until a group of rebels detonated a bomb at the military server farm that kept the drones under the control of their remote pilots. Now the machines, powered by the solar panels that lined their wings, flew rogue, abandoned to the skies, their targets and trajectories random.²³

Despite the apocalyptic impact of these weapons, the above passage shows how carelessly they are operated. Controlled from a great distance, the traumatic consequences of drone destruction are only felt by innocent citizens who are subsequently forced to flee their homes. The country has deteriorated to such an extent that no one bothers to control the deadly drones: America has indeed driven itself to ruin. The lack of response following an attack on a military server farm further suggests that killing from a great distance leads to a lack of responsibility. As international relations theorist Ken Booth writes, the German-American scholar of international law, John Herz, considered post-war weapons of mass destruction, and their impact on society, to be the ‘absolute novum.’ Herz argued that ‘the traditional territorial unit

¹⁹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 155.

²⁰ A 2016 UNHRC study found that mobile and Internet access is as critical to refugees’ safety and security as food, shelter and water. UNHRC, "Mobile connectivity a lifeline for refugees, report finds", 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/9/57d7d4478/mobile-connectivity-lifeline-refugees-report-finds.html>.

²¹ Omar El Akkad, *American War* (New York: Picador, 2017), 6.

²² El Akkad, *Fiction in a Dangerous Age: TEDxSonomaCounty*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 December, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ntq66ojdoh4>.

²³ El Akkad, *American War*, 41.

of security [...] had been rendered untenable because of the permeability caused by the development of nuclear weapons, which opened up even the most powerful states to catastrophic destruction.’ And suddenly, ‘a radically new world confronted human society.’²⁴

Though the impact of *American War*'s 'deadly drones' cannot be compared to the historical impact of nuclear weapons, I argue that the way in which drones have formed the remote nature of modern warfare enables them to be seen as novums. In *American War*, they are so omnipresent that the novel's characters come to refer to them as birds: just like the flying animal, they have become part of their natural environment. Nevertheless, these 'birds' force Sarat and her family to leave their home in the South, ‘where the Blues and their Birds [...] caused terrible carnage.’²⁵ If the trope of the novum makes it possible to compare deadly drones to nuclear weapons, then speculative fiction becomes a particularly suitable genre for dealing with modern warfare: it is for this reason that the subgenre became increasingly popular during the post-war era. While ‘the initial literary response to the atomic bomb was muted’, the analytic chemist Paul Boyer notes that ‘authors of speculative fantasy and SF [...] took up the theme with alacrity.’²⁶ As nuclear war never took place, and never could have taken place ‘without destroying the possibility of representation,’²⁷ cognitive estrangement has proven to be the perfect tool for imagining ‘the inconceivable’.²⁸ Of course, the fundamental difference here is that deadly drones are already part of our reality. As El Akkad has shown in his dystopian yet truthful novel, people living far away from the drone-operated conflict areas cannot imagine the degree of destruction that these weapons bring.

Imagining the past, present and future

Speculative fiction uses creative conceptions of time. The term 'speculative' itself implies an element of hypothesis, and the narratives are generally expected to be taking place in the future—but there is more to be said. As Csicsery-Ronay explains, ‘the genre interposes virtual futures that serve both as tools for organizing thought, and as illusions to defer awareness of immediate being.’²⁹ As such, speculative fiction, and science fiction in particular, is not set in the future because it is about the future, instead, ‘it uses the future as a narrative convention to present distortions of the present.’³⁰ Imagining other worlds can be done more effectively without the limits of possibility. This, expectedly, is why most speculative fiction chooses futuristic scenarios over present parallel worlds.

Even if they are not presenting future worlds ‘as if they are being empirically experienced’,³¹ speculative fiction encourages its readers to clearly envision worlds far away from their own reality without having to question it. In spite of the genre's frequent use of otherworldly elements, these imagined worlds do not have to be alien in the literal sense: they can be removed from the reader in a psychological manner as well. An example of such a world is that of the refugee, whose living conditions differ starkly from that of those not forced to leave their homes. In addition to living between places, the refugee must live between times, between past

²⁴ Ken Booth, “Navigating the “Absolute Novum”: John H. Herz’s Political Realism and Political Idealism,” *International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2008): 510.

²⁵ El Akkad, *American War*, 121.

²⁶ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 257.

²⁷ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 101.

²⁸ Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 101.

²⁹ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 78.

³⁰ Samuel R. Delany, here qtd. by Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 78.

³¹ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 76.

and future. This impacts the ‘cognitive, bodily, emotional and existential [...] experience’³² and can ultimately lead to a diminishing sense of self.

The nonlinearity of time

Speculative fiction has the ability to treat time as nonlinear. As already discussed in the previous section, *Exit West* skips the traumatic journey that so often dominates refugee narratives through the use of magical doors. Hamid states that the question of how refugees get from one place to another is ‘however traumatic and horrific [...], only a tiny little moment in the lifetime of a human being,’ while ‘most of the story is about what made you leave and what became of you when you arrived.’³³ This explains his choice in using the fantastical, as it has not only allowed him to focus on what happens before and after the journey but also enabled him to reflect on the meaning of time when one is in exile:

Days passed like this, full of waiting and false hopes, days that might have been days of boredom, and were for many, but Nadia had the idea that they should explore the island as if they were tourists.³⁴

When Nadia and Saeed find themselves in a Greek refugee camp, they have a hard time relating themselves to the other refugees. While most refugees in long-term encampment ‘find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo’³⁵ with time simply passing by, Nadia seems to think this is unnecessary. Rather than staying in some sort of in-between mode that transfers the past into the future, she chooses to actively live her life in the present. The use of genre has thus allowed the author to build a bridge between the novel’s characters and its readers. In comparing refugees to tourists, Hamid suggests that the refugee experience is not as different from our own as we might think. He further emphasizes this idea by writing that ‘we are all migrants through time’.³⁶ Just like refugees leaving their home country behind, we all have to part ways with our past.

The habitus and the past

In exploring Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus, David Hoy highlights its contrast with Heidegger’s vision of time: ‘Where Heidegger sees possibilities coming into the present from the future, Bourdieu sees the reproduction in the present of past objective structures.’³⁷ Based on past conditions and experiences, the latent dispositions that constitute a person’s habitus, for Bourdieu, allows the individual to anticipate future actions. However, this is only true in circumstances in which conditions remain identical or at least similar.³⁸ That is to say that the concept of habitus is applicable when the only possible future is the one we already know, ‘read directly in the present of the presumed world,’³⁹ which, ultimately, is entirely based on past experiences. If this is indeed true, what happens if circumstances drastically change? As Bourdieu says himself, ‘the presence of the past in this kind of false anticipation of the future performed by the habitus is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of the probable

³² Anne Sigfrid Grønseth, *Being Human Being Migrant: Senses of Self and Well-Being* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 13.

³³ Mohsin Hamid, ‘*Exit West*’ reading and Q&A at Washington Politics and Prose Bookstore, online video recording, YouTube, 16 March, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVM7xEMJPK>.

³⁴ Hamid, *Exit West*, 108.

³⁵ Sarah Deardorff, “How long is too long? Questioning the legality of long-term encampment through a human rights lens,” in *Refugees Studies Centre Working Paper Series 54* (2009): 7.

³⁶ Hamid, *Exit West*, 209.

³⁷ David Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 113.

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu tr. Richard Nice, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 62.

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, 64.

future is belied,⁴⁰ which is often the case for those having to involuntarily migrate. For refugees arriving in new countries, the past is all they know. Though they might focus on the future for hope and strength, there is no way of knowing what could possibly happen, and habitus is no longer efficient. Anne Sigfrid Grønseth explains that:

As embodied history, or habitus, implies the presence of the past in the present and conditions the possibilities of the future, living on the borders – as migrant, refugee, asylum seeker [...] – profoundly challenges the sense of self as it is associated to what is forthcoming.⁴¹

Following this logic, living on the border of past experiences and the unknown future can have a significant impact on experiences of the present. Normally enforced by our ‘embodied history’, a present can no longer live through the past when the two have nothing in common. As a result, ‘time is no longer experienced as forthcoming but as an empty and threatening absence of a future, mixed with a diffuse longing for the past,’⁴² a phenomenon accurately depicted in *American War*. Towards the end of the novel, main character Sarat quotes a sentence from a text someone read her in the refugee camp: “in the South there is no future, only three kinds of past – the distant past of heritage, the near past of experience, and the past-in-waiting.”⁴³ For the Southerners in encampment described in this passage, even the present has become a type of past in which people merely wait for the future: time comes to a sort of standstill. Here, refugees would not only live through their own past but their country’s heritage as well, illustrating how a broken home can take away all hope for the future. Like Bourdieu’s paradox, this lack of a future continues to put an emphasis on the past.

The idea of living in the past is magnified further by El Akkad’s presentation of present-as-history, through which he helps his readers to imagine having no future to look forward to. Csicsery-Ronay states that ‘It is the illusion of a completed future that allows science fictions to be told,’⁴⁴ suggesting that one can only look back at present as history by the creation of an imaginary future. The imaginative structure of a speculative fiction does not have to be about the future, but rather, as in *American War*, it must allow readers to reflect on their society by giving the illusion of a future that acts as an alternative present. This distance is necessary to imagine new worlds, allowing readers to ‘shuttle back and forth between the fictive world and consensus reality’⁴⁵: *American War* would not have had the same effect if it had taken place in the present. Another example of El Akkad using genre to put emphasis on the passage of time can be found in the following phrase: ‘the day assimilated the dark, the dark assimilated the day. Years passed.’⁴⁶ This is how Sarat experiences time in prison, and while the descriptive strategy is not unique to speculative fiction, the speed with which time passes is. As the novel covers roughly fifty years (2074-2123), there is plenty of space for the author to fast forward, which, in this case, helps the reader to imagine how displacement might impact one’s sense of time. Just as the years pass Sarat by because she is in prison, the years are passing by the reader because no details of what happens in the meantime are given. This makes Sarat’s disorientation when being sent home all the more convincing.

Going back to the habitus and its impact on a refugee’s sense of self, *American War* shows how this can escalate through Sarat’s character development. We meet her as a child and quickly learn that she is ‘stubborn, hard, undaunted by calamity’,⁴⁷ yet ‘eluded by the

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*, 62.

⁴¹ Sigfrid Grønseth, *Being Human*, 15.

⁴² Sigfrid Grønseth, *Being Human*, 15.

⁴³ El Akkad, *American War*, 316.

⁴⁴ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 76.

⁴⁵ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 76.

⁴⁶ El Akkad, *American War*, 257.

⁴⁷ El Akkad, *American War*, 12.

purpose of a lie'.⁴⁸ When her family is forced to leave their home and move into 'Camp Patience', Sarat appears to be different than all other kids who are 'alien to her'.⁴⁹ Instead of being drawn into their group, she befriends the radicalised Southern agent Albert Gaines, who teaches her about war until she breaks down, saying: 'I don't wanna hear about them anymore. I don't wanna read about them or memorize their capitals or learn how they did us wrong... I want to kill them.'⁵⁰ Enforced by isolation, trauma and grief, this mindset becomes stronger as the novel proceeds, showing how a person's habitus, or lack thereof, can negatively impact the sense of self. Towards the end of the novel, Sarat 'believes there is nothing good in the world',⁵¹ and subsequently fails to settle in her old family home at the end of the war. This proves that going back home does not change anything when it is no longer in line with past conditions. Despite home being geographically the same place where Sarat grew up, the life she used to live there is over. This alienation effect illustrates how one's habitus is not just linked to location but is also deeply rooted in personal experiences. Sarat becomes obsessed with ending the war because war is all she knows. During her years in the refugee camp, survival in war zones is what she learned to achieve. Lacking any other life experience, this becomes the habitus through which she anticipates future actions. El Akkad has said himself that 'his intention [...] is not to make the reader admire Sarat.' Rather, '[...] he hopes that by the time the reader gets to the end of his novel [...] they understand how she got to the place where she is.'⁵²

When it comes to exploring the ways in which refugees experience the past, the present and the future, neither Bourdieu's nor Heidegger's perceptions of time seem fully satisfactory. Where Bourdieu offers a helpful explanation for the fact that refugees tend to dwell in the past, his concept of the habitus fails to acknowledge that people can change. For Heidegger, however, the very possibility of reinventing oneself explains why we should give priority to the future. The way in which a traumatic past might impact this theory remains unclear. One clear truism is that trauma is different for all refugees, and speculative fiction succeeds in representing the variousness of experience. It does not pretend that time is one thing; each text deals with time differently. While *American War* jumps through nearly fifty years, *Exit West* deliberately skips a key part of the refugee narrative. This lack of consistency is precisely where I believe speculative fiction connects to the refugee experience. Though their concepts are seemingly opposing, both Bourdieu and Heidegger highlight lack of control over time. As this section has shown, this feeling can be significantly strengthened by displacement.

Locating exile

While science fiction is often centred on concepts of outer space and space travel, a definition of space more suitable to describing how El Akkad and Hamid treat it is that of the 'virtual imaginary space', into which 'real life experiences are displaced'.⁵³ This use of space has a similar effect to both the concepts of novum and treatment of time discussed in previous sections, insofar as virtual space allows the reader to take a step back from reality. In speculative fiction, Langer writes, 'the image of the far-away land, whether the undiscovered country or the imperial seat, comes to signify all kinds of diaspora or movement.'⁵⁴ Looking at *Exit West* and *American War*, these lands are not just far away from us in a geographical sense,

⁴⁸ El Akkad, *American War*, 13.

⁴⁹ El Akkad, *American War*, 86.

⁵⁰ El Akkad, *American War*, 170.

⁵¹ El Akkad, *American War*, 328.

⁵² Laura Miller, "American War by Omar El Akkad review – terrorism in a future US," *The Guardian* (14 October 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/04/american-war-omar-el-akkad-review>.

⁵³ Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven*, 5.

⁵⁴ Langer, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

but they are equally far removed from our psychological reality. For many people the refugee narrative is a foreign one, making it hard to understand what living in exile must be like, and speculative fiction can bridge this gap by literally bringing the refugee narrative closer to the reader's reality. *American War* does this by imagining a second civil war in a future United States: 'Nothing in this book hasn't happened;' the author writes, 'it just happened to other people.'⁵⁵ As a foreign correspondent in places like Syria and Guantanamo Bay, El Akkad witnessed the war and terror described in his book first-hand. By placing these horrifying experiences at the reader's doorstep, he makes them part of their imagination. *Exit West* likewise brings the world of the refugee closer, suggesting that there is no real difference between the reader and the refugee.

The myth of the cosmopolitan refugee

The immigrant experience is often described in light of cosmopolitanism.⁵⁶ But as postcolonialist scholar Simon Gikandi notes, 'the refugee is the Other of the cosmopolitan', made 'rootless by compulsion, this figure is forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows.'⁵⁷ Thus, even though both refugees and immigrants find themselves in between cultures, this does not mean that they can both adapt to new cultures with the same ease. Another fundamental difference between 'cosmopolitan' immigrants and refugees is the way in which they arrive at their new destinations. 'Most refugees encounter this world for the first time in the camps when they are being primed for life in those still far away places,'⁵⁸ Gikandi explains, whereas immigrants can generally afford to engage with metropolitan cultures long before and after they leave their homes.

In addition, as Gikandi notes himself, the need for understanding the Other is undermined by the fact that refugees are expected to join the cosmopolitan revolution. 'Quite often, what appears to be the refugees' refusal or inability to take advantage of the cultural goods of cosmopolitanism reflects anxieties and fears in the face of radical alterity,'⁵⁹ he writes, suggesting that the 'cosmopolitan elite' thinks their ideals are equally applicable to refugees. However, in pretending that cultural otherness does not exist, cosmopolitan populations ignore the absence of cultural context, which would be needed for refugees to understand a set of strictly foreign values. Thus, sticking to what they already know is not out of an unwillingness to adapt, but merely out of fear to be exposed as the Other. Moreover, due to their 'shifting legal status', Agnes Woolley states that refugees partly lose 'both their capacity for political self-determination and for asserting the kinds of affirmative hybrid identity open to legitimated migrants.'⁶⁰ *Exit West* seems to reflect on this state of affairs in two opposing ways. The novel is clearly imagining a world in which refugees are merely seen as migrants, while acknowledging that their freedom has restrictions:

⁵⁵ Omar El Akkad, *Fiction in a Dangerous Age: TEDxSonomaCounty*, YouTube (18 December 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ntq66ojdoh4>.

⁵⁶ Where the English Oxford Dictionary defines cosmopolitan as being 'familiar with and at ease in many different countries and cultures,' Gikandi sees it as merely a 'redemptive narrative of globalization, which is in contrapuntal relationship with the condition of being stateless.' Simon Gikandi, "Between roots and routes: cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality," in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New directions for the new millennium* ed. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh (Oxon: Routledge, 2010): 26.

⁵⁷ Gikandi, "Between roots and routes," 26.

⁵⁸ Gikandi, "Between roots and routes," 26.

⁵⁹ Gikandi, "Between roots and routes," 26.

⁶⁰ Agnes Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the 21st Century* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 14.

In exchange for their labour in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty metres and a pipe: a home on forty square metres of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity.⁶¹

It is the juxtaposition between the promise of freedom and the limits of the government's terms that is of interest here. On the one hand, Hamid shows how in this borderless universe, migrants are being encouraged to reap the rewards of cosmopolitan society. On the other hand, they are still formally separated, and thus prevented from self-determination. As such, the novel sits on the border of being a dystopian and utopian imagination of the future, presenting a world in which London witnesses working camps and aggressive military operations.⁶² Nevertheless, the story ends on a positive note, with Nadia and Saeed meeting half a century later in their hometown.⁶³

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Hamid said that he did not want to write a '50th percentile of what humanity's likely to look like', but rather fantasised about what would happen 'if we look with a degree of optimism towards the future.'⁶⁴ However, with the negative experiences of refugees still being so prevalent in the novel, I argue that it is a good example of the way in which cosmopolites wish to see the world. For both legal and emotional reasons, it is unrealistic to think that refugees, while involuntarily mediating life through clashing cultures, would be able to enjoy 'hybrid identities' in the way that cosmopolitan migrants do. *Exit West*, in theory, imagines a borderless utopian future, but it fails to do this without revealing where such an approach might fall short. 'Missing the states they fled, refugees do not want to be cosmopolitan because they have no idiom for this experience,' Gikandi writes. 'Yet, they are global because they cannot return to their old spaces of identity and must somehow learn to live outside both the nations that have rejected them and those that have adopted them.'⁶⁵

Spaces of separation

A place where the shifting legal status of refugees is perhaps most pressing is in encampment. Designed to be temporary, refugee camps are meant to serve as emergency centres, which often means that they are unable to offer access to basic human rights and thus fail to meet international human rights laws.⁶⁶ This contradiction between humanitarianism and politics is what leads Giorgio Agamben to call refugee camps 'the pure space of exception'.⁶⁷ Stating that 'the rights of man are separated from the rights of the citizen,'⁶⁸ Agamben also refers to this distinction as 'bare life/political existence', or 'exclusion/inclusion'.⁶⁹ While refugee camps serve the humanitarian purpose of protecting people from life-threatening conditions, the long-term nature of the refugee crisis has significantly problematised their place within international law. '[T]he camp represents a permanent space dedicated to the impermanence of its inhabitants; a place where the rule of law is defined by its suspension'⁷⁰, journalist David Farrier states. He adds that camps allow for 'the disorderly presence of the other' to be

⁶¹ Hamid, *Exit West*, 168.

⁶² Hamid, *Exit West*, 159.

⁶³ Hamid, *Exit West*, 227.

⁶⁴ Alex Preston, "Mohsin Hamid: 'It's important not to live one's life gazing towards the future'," *Guardian*, 11 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/11/mohsin-hamid-exit-west-interview>.

⁶⁵ Gikandi, "Between roots and routes," 26.

⁶⁶ Deardorff, "How long is too long?" 5.

⁶⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 78.

⁶⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 78.

⁶⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.

⁷⁰ David Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*, (Liverpool University Press, 2011), 13.

contained, maintaining the orderly continuity of the nation, while also defining its limits. The camps thus serve to sustain the separation between refugees and society on a legal and political level, but the fact that they are often located in ‘remote, politically marginal border areas’⁷¹ makes this distinction geographical, too.

This social exclusion has an impact on how refugees perceive the world. Deprived of their right to self-determination, life in encampment becomes a sort of in-between-land. Due to bureaucratic complications, refugees often end up staying in encampment for much longer than they should,⁷² keeping them from taking part in society. To Agamben, this lack of political existence signifies ‘bare life’, by which he refers to humans without an agency. Looking at *American War*, this seems true only to a certain extent:

“He still does work for the Blue soldiers? [...] I’m surprised the rebels haven’t strung him up for it.”

Lara shrugged. “He’s the kind can make friends with anyone. [...] It’ll catch up to him one day, but at least he’s working toward something, not like the rest of us, sitting still day after day till they bury us here.”

Lara stood. “You sure you don’t wanna come to the service?”

“You go on,” Martina said, “I’ll catch you at the game tonight.”

Lara shook her head. “Nothing as sad as a lapsed Catholic”, she said.⁷³

Although his novel is a dystopian imagination of America’s future, El Akkad acknowledges that life in encampment is not entirely hopeless. Indeed, most refugees spend their days waiting around for something that might never come, but it is the fact that they do not have to that matters most here. The above passage shows that refugees in camp Patience can still enjoy economic independence, engage in leisure activities and decide for themselves whether they want to be religious. Of course, these freedoms have limits, and the prospect of never leaving the camp might undermine the need for self-development, but there is space for people to turn their bare life into something more.

So yes, there is only limited freedom within camps, but as Adam Ramadan writes in his essay on ‘Spatializing the Refugee Camp’, many encampments have also ‘proven to be active arenas of agency in which refugees organise and resist their marginalisation, in military and far more mundane ways.’⁷⁴ *American War* also depicts many ways of dealing with marginalisation, as some people choose to actively rebel against their exclusion while others quietly give up on national beliefs. Again, the fact that choice exists for refugees is vital here, because choice differentiates refugee camps from the concentration or detention camps Agamben originally described as states of exception. What is new about Guantánamo Bay, he wrote in 2005, ‘is that it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being.’⁷⁵ The only legal situation to which he argues this could possibly be compared is that of Jews in Nazi camps ‘who, along with their citizenship, had lost every legal identity’. However, he continues, ‘they at least retained their identity as Jews’, while for detainees at Guantánamo Bay, ‘bare life reaches its maximum

⁷¹ Anna Schmidt, qtd. in Deardorff, “How long is too long?” 9.

⁷² Deardorff, “How long is too long?” 14.

⁷³ El Akkad, *American War*, 77.

⁷⁴ Adam Ramadan, “Spatialising the Refugee Camp,” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2012), 71.

⁷⁵ Giorgio Agamben tr. Kevin Attell, *State of Exception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.

indeterminacy'.⁷⁶ Following this logic, the concept of 'bare life' can only be applied to those who, despite being excluded, are still somehow included within the legal system. For this reason, I argue, applying the term to refugees is problematic. The position of refugees in encampment is not similar to the detainees in Guantánamo Bay, but rather the opposite; their rights are different from that of citizens because refugee camps are not governed by the nation-state but by an outside sovereign power such as the United Nations. Because host nations are not held responsible, refugee camps can be seen as states of exception on a global level, or, as political theorist Stuart Elden puts it, as 'international states of protection'.⁷⁷ Replacing 'exception' with 'protection' seems suitable not only because refugee camps are humanitarian spaces by design, but also because it avoids the problematic assumption that encamped refugees lack agency. Following close analysis of a Palestinian camp in Lebanon, Ramadan concluded that 'the refugee camp is more than just a humanitarian space of physical relief and welfare, more than a space of exception [...]; it is also a space of refuge from the bewildering disorientation, insecurity and marginality of exile.'⁷⁸

As *American War*'s dialogue between Lara and Martina has already illustrated, El Akkad seems conscious of the reality of these exceptional states, and he devotes time to exploring the internal politics of refugee camps. In addition to showing how social relationships are a crucial part of their makeup, he also pays close attention to their geographical layout:

The layout of Camp Patience resembled that of a circle drawn into quarters. The Mississippi slice occupied the northwest quadrant, Georgia the southwest, Alabama the northeast, and South Carolina the southeast. Refugees were assigned tents according to their native state. [...] To the west, it bordered the blistered remains of the Tishomingo County Game Refuge. To the north, beyond the highest, most daunting fences, lay Tennessee.⁷⁹

This detailed explanation helps the reader imagine what the camp looks like as well as where it is located. Its geometric shape suggests that it is set out in an orderly manner and the different slices show how nationality is still relevant within the borders of the camp. Both of these factors also imply the presence of an overarching government, which, following the words of Elden, would mean that this is indeed an international state of protection where the sovereign power of each native state is limited. Linking this description to Ramadan's statement would imply that the camp's orderly arrangement has a positive impact on the refugee's sense of orientation and security. Perhaps, for refugees arriving in a strange, foreign land, this lack of real-life chaos can help them to become grounded more easily. As this section has shown, integrating into new societies can be incredibly challenging for refugees. A design that facilitates living amongst people from their own country while in encampment might help these refugees to feel less alienated.

El Akkad's imagination of Camp Patience is, of course, not representative for all refugee camps, though his detailed descriptions give an insight into the experience of life in encampment. The descriptions made even more suggestive by the placement of the camp in the American South, so that readers are encouraged to imagine a specific and familiar place as a dystopian, burned down landscape. By bringing a civil war and camps for the internally displaced geographically closer, *American War* makes the global refugee crisis much harder to ignore.

Conclusion

⁷⁶ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4.

⁷⁷ Stuart Elden qtd. in Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," 69.

⁷⁸ Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," 74.

⁷⁹ El Akkad, *American War*, 73.

Representing refugees in contemporary literature presents an imaginative challenge, which authors often respond to by adopting stylistic realism. Though Omar El Akkad and Mohsin Hamid both partly admit to this, I have argued that they only managed to conquer the imaginative challenge by doing things differently. As works of speculative fiction, *Exit West* and *American War* focus on exploring and imagining the feelings of strangeness inherent to being a refugee, ultimately showcasing how this genre strongly connects to the refugee experience. Central to this connection is the genre's effect of cognitive estrangement, which I have discussed by specifically looking at the novels' use of the novum, concepts of time and depictions of encampments in space.

As the first section has shown, both the real and the fictional novum can help readers imagine how disruptive changes can impact a refugee's sense of self, revealing how the lives of refugees are often divided into a before and after. The second section focused on the way in which refugees might experience time, and how each text reflects on this. Though there is no way of knowing how time affects each individual refugee, the fact that speculative fiction treats time as nonlinear can offer readers a new way of understanding what it must feel like to not be in control of one's life. The third section looked at cognitive estrangement in light of space. As *Exit West* and *American War* all geographically bring the world of the refugee closer to that of the reader, this approach encourages readers to visualise the alien position of the refugee.

The ultimate aim of this essay was to demonstrate how the genre of speculative fiction can help us imagine the world of refugees in ways that other types of contemporary literature cannot. For many people, the refugee experience is like another universe, and as it is speculative fiction's job to represent other universes, it is a genre very much worth exploring in this context. Not only does speculative fiction offer ample possibilities to create a fuller understanding of the unknown, it also has the ability to place a mirror in front of society, reflecting on pressing social issues in innovative and thought-provoking ways.

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