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IMAGINING UTOPIA THROUGH COMMUNITIES IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*

Recommended citation: Schetrumpf, Tegan and Aleks Wansbrough. "Imagining Utopia through Communities in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 8.2 (2022). DOI: https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2022.14.06.

Abstract: Mohsin Hamid's novel, *Exit West* (2017) takes place in a world where magical doorways allow refugees passage between countries. Following the couple Saeed and Nadia – refugees from an unnamed city undergoing fundamentalist insurrection – the novel explores their grappling amid different political tensions. While commentators have discussed the way Hamid re-frames migration as form of connectivity, and the portals as utopian forms of escape, this article investigates the economic specificities of such connectivity, through three near-future communities that Hamid imagines for Nadia and Saeed: a Kensington townhouse reclaimed by refugees, the "London Halo" work-for-housing program, and the shanty city of Marin, San Francisco. These collectives defy the logic of capitalist realism (Fisher). In this way, utopian potential exists within the novel both in terms of magical thinking against the system (Adorno) and as embodied forms of solidarity amid crisis (Žižek and Jameson).

Keywords: *Exist West*, Utopia, Jameson, Žižek, Adorno

British Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid, has expressed the importance of finding hope as a function of writing. Interviewed about his novel, *Exit West* (2017), Hamid explained, “I want to try to imagine a future I’d like to live in and then write books and do things that, in my own small way, make it more likely that that future will come to exist” (Hamid and Gross). This expression goes to the heart of current debates around utopian thinking and the future. If it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, *Seeds* xii) (Žižek, *Ideology* 1) (Fisher, *Realism* 1), then what *should* a future look like? Critical discourses have arisen around this question. Should utopia be conceived of in contrast to the present, as a future radically other and perhaps inconceivable to our own times? Or could the parameters of utopia emerge through the very coordinates of contemporary crises? This article focuses on two different conceptions of utopian potential in *Exit West*. The first, a radical embrace of possibility amid crisis, which we frame through Jameson and Žižek’s theoretical perspectives, and the second, a whimsical type of escapist and magical realist (Kowal 22-42) negation of contemporary injustice, framed by Adorno. While the more whimsical ideal of utopia has dominated analyses of Hamid’s imagining (Knudsen and Rahbek 442-454), (Naydan 433-51), (Ramzan), it is the political and economic realities of Hamid’s potentially utopian locations that we accentuate, noting that Hamid does not resolve these two modalities.

The premise of *Exit West* is that magical doorways appear and allow refugees to travel between countries. Readers follow the romantic couple, Saeed and Nadia – refugees from an unnamed nation undergoing fundamentalist insurrection (that may remind the reader of Pakistan) as they grapple with different political tensions regarding refugees in Mykonos, then London and San Francisco. Hamid positions the reader to engage with harrowing situations from an empathetic, but rather distanced, reasoned stance, framing his commentary on the political and economic realities encountered through the conflicting responses of Saeed and Nadia. Saeed tends to be more drawn to traditions of nation and religion, while motorcycle-riding Nadia prefers to embrace the new.

Hamid challenges the idea of a contemporary refugee crisis, cognizant of migration as an ongoing form of connectivity between people – since all people migrate through time and have to adapt to new circumstances. The conceit of the doorways is effectively a thought experiment about open-border policies, which may undermine or dissolve the nation state. This consequence is made explicit by the authorial voice: “Without borders, nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory (…) many were arguing that smaller units made more sense, but others argued that smaller units could not defend themselves (…) some insisting on union and some on disintegration” (Hamid, *Exit* 171). It is in this politically charged environment that radical change becomes possible. Over the course of the novel, Hamid envisions three near-future communities for Nadia and Saeed: a refugee squatters’ community in a Kensington mansion, then the “London Halo” work-for-housing program, and finally a shanty city in Marin, San Francisco. These collectives defy the logic of capitalist realism (Fisher, *Realism*) and neoliberal forms of atomisation and can be viewed as utopian in their ability to imagine any system of social organisation that progresses beyond contemporary lived experience.

For Hamid, “Politics is shaped by people. And people, sometimes, are shaped by the fiction they read (…) Making up stories is an inherently political act” (Hamid, *Fiction*). Our exploration of the political implications of utopian potential in Hamid’s novel requires a contextualisation of utopia in the recent historical political imagination. Given the dialectical sophistication of Marxian critiques, particular focus will be placed on two seemingly incompatible framings of futurity: Adorno’s utopian imagination as a negation of the present, and Jameson and Žižek’s location of utopian potential in possible alternative ruptures to late capitalism.

Critical Perspectives on Imagining Utopia

By the 1950s, the horrors of the Nazi regime and Stalinism had dampened the utopianism that had been prevalent as the century commenced. Utopia was considered dangerous, and was linked to totalitarianism, mass death, and disrespect to the victims of genocide. Although Adorno was not a critic of utopian thinking, he nevertheless (perhaps inadvertently) summed up this sentiment when he argued that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry (Adorno, *Prisms* 34). The ambiguous remark, clarified in different ways (Adorno, *Dialectics* 19), seemed to suggest that hope for a more beautiful and perfect world had become a barbarous contrivance, even broaching that such romantic imaginings had been partially responsible for these terrors. Dystopian fiction inverted utopian planning. Novels such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), did not unmask that utopian planning couldn't work, but rather suggested that it was the success of such utopian plans that amassed human suffering: tropes of utopian fiction from Plato to Thomas More were realised in monstrous allegories for Taylorism and Fordism, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany. Amid the rise of dystopian literature, key theorists of the Frankfurt school, such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, championed a sort of negative utopianism, against the one dimensionality of the instrumental world. Adorno argues for the necessity of imagination in contrast to mere societal reproduction:

> When you start to think, you cannot stop short at purely reproductive thinking. This does not mean that things will really work out like that, but you cannot think without thinking that otherness. The general stultification today is the direct result of cutting out utopia. When you reject utopia, thought itself withers away. Thought is killed off in the mere doubling process (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Manifesto* 15).

In other words, thinking in terms of practical implications tends to contravene utopian potentiality, merely doubling the world by constricting imagination to the already-existing social reality. Thus, utopian thinking is fundamental to emancipating thought from mere instrumental thinking. Indeed, without utopia thought becomes mere cognition. As Adorno puts it, "[u]topia, as the consciousness of possibility (…) is blocked by possibility" (Adorno, *Dialectics* 210).

But a sort of dystopian rationality also pervades Adorno, who claims that it is through accentuating suffering that we confront the need for a future. As Adorno memorably quipped, "the splinter in the eye makes the best magnifying glass" (Adorno, *Moralia* 15). Marcuse also expresses this, tracing the logic of the Holocaust through the mechanistic and dehumanizing tendencies of contemporary society (Marcuse 83; 185; 260-269). Arguably then, during the late Twentieth century, persistent critique of capitalist consumerist realities became the refuge of the imagination, abnegating any possibility of socially embodied forms of change.

Hamid is writing against this pervading dystopian rationality. Indeed, a rethinking of utopian potentiality has occurred in recent years, concerned less with an unachievable ideal, and instead with a desire to overcome the contemporary conditions of capitalism. In the early 21st Century, Mark Fisher lamented that the potential for utopia to become dystopia led to a resignation toward capitalism, whereby capitalism was considered the only viable, if imperfect, system (Fisher, *K-*

Punk 657). Fisher drew from Jameson and Žižek who provide compelling accounts of potential subversions of the capitalist world. In *An American Utopia* (2016), Jameson imagines that one way to break from contemporary capitalism might be some form of coexisting dual government powers – for example, a militaristic dictatorship at the level of the nation state, alongside local governments comprised of socialistic worker councils. Hamid evokes this notion of dual powers hopefully, yet ambiguously, near the close of his novel. Meanwhile, Žižek argues that crisis provides an opportunity for a radical expansion of new forms of social organisation. This imagined break from capitalism more fundamentally informs Hamid's approach to the utopian imagination, and since many of the crises that Žižek finds rupturing potential in arguably derive from the present conditions of capitalism – such as the so-called refugee crisis and climate change, this imagination of utopia also casts doubt on capitalism's presupposed viability.

Hamid himself provides a framework for hope amid dystopia, noting in *The Guardian* that a "[r]adical, politically engaged fiction (…) need not focus on dystopias or utopias, though some of it probably will. Rather it needs to peer with all the madness and insight and unexpectedness and wisdom we can muster into where we might desirably go (…) a radical political engagement with the future" (Hamid, *Nostalgia*). This future can be glimpsed in the three imagined communities in which Saeed and Nadia participate, that function as thought experiments in *Exit West*.

Occupying Kensington: Redistribution of Resources and Resistance

Hamid's first thought experiment about a community with utopian potential brings moral challenges to ideas of legality and ownership along divisions of both class and racial privilege pertaining to notions of the Global North and South. When Nadia and Saeed leave the refugee camp at Mykonos, feeling hungry, dirty and tired, they take another magical door to an unknown location, arriving in a London mansion that is habitually unoccupied, although regularly serviced by a maid. The economic disparity between the refugee protagonists, carrying all their worldly possessions in two back packs, and the unseen owner of mansion is indicated by the naïve wonder of the protagonists, for whom the Global North is an othered experience, accessed via media: "Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel, of the sort seen in films and thick, glossy magazines" (129). Authorial intrusion reminds the reader that this naïveté is born of their Global partitioning: "it was quiet, so quiet they imagined they must be in the countryside – for they had no experience of acoustically insulated glazing – and everyone in the hotel must be asleep" (129). Indeed, they find the mansion, which has a grand staircase and salons, sitting rooms and bedrooms enough to house fifty people, "almost unreal" (129).

Despite their need, and the apparent likelihood that the owner can reasonably afford the privation, Saeed and Nadia at first use an absurd amount of restraint, taking no more from the private property than a host would likely offer a guest,

> while there were boxes and cans of less perishable food in the cupboards, they did not want to be accused of stealing, so they brought their own food out of their backpack and boiled two potatoes for breakfast. They did, however, take two teabags from the house, and make themselves tea, and each used a spoonful of the house's sugar as well, and if there had been milk they might have helped themselves to a tiny splash of that too, but there was no milk to be found (118-19).

The situation of the refugees is so precarious that they fear the police and possible punishment. Yet they are also inhibited by an internalized moralism and sense of impropriety, borne not of their present reality, but of the social mores and axioms instilled by their past community that existed prior to the advent of the magical doors. Hamid's implicit reframing of right and wrong through need and basic human dignity is emphasized when the couple quibbles over access to the shower. Saeed scolds Nadia, "This isn't our house" (134), implying that they may take from the mansion only what is necessary for barest survival, rather than items for comfort or pleasure. Nadia, who typically embodies new or radical perspectives in the novel, demands a lengthy shower. Her perspective is morally endorsed by Hamid, who focalises on Nadia's thought processes about feeling clean in order to feel human: "Nadia wanted to take a shower more than anything, more even than she wanted food", further noting, "what she had just done, was for her not about frivolity, it was about the essential, about being human, living as a human being (...) and so it mattered" (122). Indeed, given that access to water is a codified human right, it is possible to conclude that Nadia's stance on the issue is not particularly radical. However, the exchange is important, because Saeed raises the intuitive concerns some readers might have about the seizing of private goods and property, and through Nadia, Hamid rebuts them, recalibrating what counts as a moral action in their particular situation. What is moral, for Hamid, is primarily determined by need, and then by socialistic notions of wealth redistribution. This belief is reflected in pointed similes Nadia makes while toweling dry,

> When she at last emerged she felt like a princess using them, or at least like the daughter of a dictator who was willing to kill without mercy in order for his children to pamper themselves with cotton such as this (…) as if they had never been used before and might never be used again (134).

Having underscored the exploitation and waste inherent in the concept of achieving the status of a multimillionaire, Hamid has fifty more refugees appear in said multimillionaire's house, with a more relaxed attitude to using the mansion's provisions. Only Saeed continues to feel guilty, "He was the only one to object when people started to take for themselves items of value in the house, a position that struck Nadia as absurd" (143). Yet even Saeed seems to see moral necessity in the redistribution of wealth. He engages in daydreams with Nadia, "they discussed how houses such as the one they were occupying might be divided into proper apartments" (148). Here, the adjective "proper" implies a formal subdivision rather than the squatters' collective agreement, but also carries the connotation that using this large space for multiple families rather than one "absentee owner" (139) is a morally better use of the property.

The petty crimes of theft and property damage are soon overshadowed by the ensuing violence of government raids and nativist riots. Hamid uses the ironic term "nativist" to describe predominantly Anglo British-born people who resent immigration; the name tauntingly reminiscent of the atavism and backwardness the British empire attributed to its colonial subjects. Once the refugee squatters are discovered, police arrive in riot gear, with two special forces officers, "armed with what appeared to be sub-machine guns, and on their black vests was the word POLICE in white letters but these two looked to Saeed and Nadia like soldiers" (123). Hamid's choice to capitalise "police" indicates a militarisation of law enforcement. Paradoxically, the police serve as a common antagonist that unites the refugees: "in their terror they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers. A sort of camaraderie evolved (…) being penned in made them into a grouping, a group" (137).

The refugees refuse to vacate, germinating political protests. Arguably, these protests are somewhat allegorical for the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in 2011 as a response to economic inequality. In the novel, Hamid's cumulative mentions of Kensington and Chelsea, Hyde Park and Westminster – wealthy suburbs full of habitually-empty mansions – direct attention to London's "1 percent". The occupation is no longer justified solely by need, but by a moral imperative of economic redistribution, from the Global North to the Global South. This aspect of the protests is gestured to through Hamid's imagery of comparative skin colour: "Other dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people, bedraggled (…) formed a crowd" (138). For the refugees, nonviolent resistance of the police is contextualized by the trauma experienced via police and soldiers in the homes they have fled, and for this reason, and perhaps for reasons of racial prejudice, their personal safety and security is at heightened risk during acts of civil disobedience. Thus, the refugee occupation may also evoke the Black Lives Matter movement, which first began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who fatally shot Trayvon Martin, a young black man in Florida.

The UK government cuts access to electricity and basic services to force the refugees out, and the region becomes known as "Dark London", where "rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed" (156). In response, the refugees organize, aligning themselves via ethnic or religious groupings for a greater sense of security.

Nadia joins a local, self-assembled council run by elders of the predominantly Nigerian co-inhabitants of their mansion, and two bordering mansions, where she is the only non-Nigerian in attendance (157). Despite her age and ethnicity, Nadia is accepted by this community because of her community-spiritedness – she often helps her neighbour, a large, Nigerian grandmother up their stairs, and this woman vouches for her (158). These meetings are largely tedious deliberations about room disputes and rationing – reminiscent of a Neighbourhood Watch meeting, or a local Party branch meeting under a socialist regime – but to Nadia "they represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new" (159). The council insists on a non-violent strategy against the looming government raid: "All agreed that the most important thing was to manage the impetuousness of the youngsters, for armed resistance would likely lead to a slaughter, and non-violence was surely their most potent response, shaming their attackers into civility (166).

This advocation for the potency of non-violence is juxtaposed by another house that Saeed visits, filled with his own countrymen, who arm themselves for reluctant martyrdom (167). The house reminds him of militants from his homeland, causing a metaphorical feeling of "something rancid in himself, something rotting within" (167). Saeed accepts a pistol from them, but decides that, "he was being ridiculous, and must return it" (168). Readers may imagine many such local groupings, espousing a range of political views, have sprung up all over Dark London. When the operation begins, an officer is shot, and rumours abound that "blood baths" have taken place, that children burned alive in a cinema nearby (176). From these tragedies a moral victory ensues, and the government withdraws. Rhetorical ambiguity is achieved through anaphora: "Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done (…) Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed" (180).

While this end to the stand-off tends toward the whimsical imagining of a more just and humane response to refugees in contrast to contemporary lived experiences, Hamid has arguably depicted a kind of grass-roots communism. Jameson proposes that "power moves to the networks to which people turn for practical help and leader ship on a daily basis: in effect, they become an alternate government, without officially challenging the ostensibly legal structure" (4). Žižek further contends that contemporary conceptions of communism are too idealized, and cites examples of what he frames as communistic responses to the COVID pandemic,

> 'Communism' comes in, not as an obscure dream but simply as a name for what is already going on (or at least perceived by many as a necessity), measures which are already being considered and even partially enforced. It's not a vision of a bright future but more one of "disaster Communism" as an antidote to disaster capitalism. Not only should the state assume a much more active role, organizing the production of urgently needed things like masks, test kits and respirators, sequestering hotels and other resorts, guaranteeing the minimum of survival of all new unemployed, and so on, doing all of this by abandoning market mechanisms (Žižek, *Pandemic!* 103).

Žižek thereby suggests that utopian potentiality exists amid the worst situations, necessitated by capitalist and global crisis. Hamid's novel explores this, but also intimates the way that stressed communities can regress back to old hierarchies of ethnic and religious loyalties. Yet, even questionable organisations can embody resistance and solidarity, Žižek intimates through the behaviour of Brazilian gangs in the favelas,

> usually engaged in brutal struggles for the control of their territories, who concluded peace for the time of the epidemic and decided to collaborate in providing help to the old and weak. This sudden change was possible because street gangs were already in themselves an assemblage of different aspects: not just a form of crime but also a form of solidarity and resistance by groups of youth to institutional power. (Žižek, *Samarra* 474-75).

Of course, such structures, while providing support, also entail risks.

Hamid treats utopian potential as interpersonal, communal, cooperative and local. While Žižek and Jameson affirm these mechanisms, they also see a greater need for the nation state. As Žižek argues, cooperation needs to be local and also operate between states, including both "global solidarity [and] local self-organization" (Barria-Asenjo and Žižek 12). In contrast, Hamid's scepticism about the role of the nation state in brokering meaningful, hopeful change is explored in Saeed and Nadia's next location: the worker's camp at the London Halo project.

Forty Metres and a Pipe: the Migrant Worker Camps

Adorno uses the term "negative dialectics" to suggest both a utopian negation of present actuality, an ability to resist the present, and as a way to overcome prescriptive and praxis-oriented critiques. In a sense, Adorno argues that it is by critiquing and thinking outside of the system that freedom can exist, rather than in action "after the attempt to change the world miscarried" (*Negative Dialectics* 3). Praxis instead risks thinking in instrumental and dehumanizing ways. Adorno thus had a complex relationship with utopian thinking, lamenting that 19th century utopian thinkers were often not utopian enough (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Manifesto* 47), seeking only to create arrangements that could integrate within the existent political order. The limitations of this approach are likewise critiqued in Hamid's novel, where projects that are truly new are represented as more vibrant than contrasting integrated approaches.

The second community functioning as a thought experiment of the novel is the London Halo project, which is one of these integrated approaches: “In the formerly protected green belt around London a ring of new cities was being built, cities that would be able to accommodate more people again than London itself” (182). The angelic symbolism suggests that building more infrastructure is perhaps one moral solution to the contemporary refugee crisis – but within the world of the novel, also reminds the reader that innocent civilians died for this compromise. Since the Halo Project meets with legal acceptance, its major benefit is that of providing stability. Hamid generalizes: “Saeed and Nadia had the sense that overall, for most people, in Britain at least, existence went on in tolerable safety” (183).

Nadia and Saeed arrive at one of the government-run worker camps building the Halo, a cross between a refugee camp and an unemployed workers’ initiative. They live with other refugees in a partitioned tent and perform hard labour in exchange for placement on a waiting list for ownership of one of the apartments being built. Hamid imagines a new ideology that underpins this project, the “time tax”:

> A mutually agreed time tax had been enacted, such that a portion of the income and toil of those who had recently arrived on the island would go to those who had been there for decades, and this time tax was tapered in both directions, becoming a smaller and smaller sliver as one continued to reside, and then a larger and larger subsidy thereafter (183).

The time tax presumably soothes the nativist’s sense of privation in the short-term, whilst encouraging stability in the region, as migrants put down roots and implicitly, assimilate. Yet, this framing reimagines the relationship between the individual and society beyond the nation state – it now matters not where one was born, but how long one intends to stay. The renegotiating of nationalist identities and labels therefore posits how government could continue to function and provide stability in an open-border world.

However, Hamid complicates this depiction through an historical allusion to the American Civil War (1861–1865). The colloquialism, “migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity” (182) deliberately evokes Union General Sherman’s Special Field Orders No. 15, which, during wartime, allotted land to freed former slaves (Tait)

(Myers). Colloquially, Sherman's order was known as giving freed families, "Forty acres and a mule". Indeed, many former slaves believed gaining ownership of the land they had previously worked was part of their emancipation (BlackPast). In reality, many families were never allotted land, and after the Civil War ended, President Andrew Johnson tried to veto the wartime provisions that had already been made (Johnson n.p.).

This allusion underlines two tensions inherent to the Halo Project and its associated time tax, the first being that there is a complex history of economic, physical and political violence between colonial nations such as Britain and the colonized places from which most of the refugees come. Indeed, just as former slaves in the U.S. felt a moral right to land redistribution, so too might migrants claim they are owed an unpaid debt from colonizer nations. Such a notion creates a double entendre within the term "time tax" whereby the justness of the outcome of the negotiation depends on how far back into history one extends the time duration – given that colonizer nations are also guilty of migration, land seizure, and unlawful occupation. Again, Hamid gestures to a moral argument for land and property distribution to the refugees that goes beyond need and socialist principles, to a fundamental, historic deficit between the Global North and South. The second tension underpinned by the allusion is that peace-time saw the U.S. Government at its highest levels rescind the notion that former slaves had rightful land claims. By associating the London Halo with this historical moment, Hamid foreshadows that these homes might be taken from the refugees at some point in the future, or else function as a more up-market camp or ghetto to keep migrants separate from nativists. This is arguably one of the limitations Adorno foresees in utopian projects that integrate with the status quo, since hegemonic power has not truly changed hands.

For Saeed and Nadia, who are now having problems in their romantic relationship, the worker's camp is not an entirely hopeful place – despite assurances of a private apartment in as little as a year. While the physical and economic safety being offered to the refugees is a motivator for many, evident in the polysyndeton, "husbands and wives and mothers and fathers and men and women were working extra shifts" (186), the sense of camaraderie, local organization and self-assembly is largely absent from this location. Although there is a tentative building of relationships as some Native foremen deign to eat lunch with their migrant workers (193), the bureaucratic scale of the project perhaps inhibits the formation of local community.

Or perhaps, there is nothing truly new, in the sense of politically radical, in what they are doing. Both nativists and the migrants themselves seem to view the project as a charitable handout to the migrants, rather than an act of self-determination. Saeed notes the behavior of one new family to the camp: "they were ashamed (…) they did not yet know that shame, for the displaced, was a common feeling, and there was, therefore, no particular shame in being ashamed" (200–01). Ultimately, Saeed and Nadia abandon their place on the waiting list at the London Halo and move on through another door – signifying that it is possible to imagine something better.

The work conditions that the couple confronts could either be considered a type of modern slavery, or as a step toward a fairer society. One could, in Jamesonian and Žižekian terms, claim unideal socialist arrangements are better than disaster capitalism. After all, for Jameson and Žižek, utopia exists as a potential alternative against the system that nevertheless may dialectically emerge from the catastrophes of the system, and then become a conceivable alternative to the current order. Yet one could also frame such ambiguities through Adorno, for whom utopia exists only as a negation of the present conditions via a resignation that an alternative is not yet conceivable.

A New Jazz Age: The Shanty Migrant City of Marin

For Hamid in *Exit West*, any scenario with the potential for utopia must be vibrant and generative. This is evident in his third thought experiment, encapsulated by Marin, San Francisco. The benefits of the shanty city to Nadia and Saeed are the inverse of those of the London Halo project – it is built from corrugated-metal and packing crates, lacks infrastructure such as running water and electricity, is entirely self-organized and only quasi-legal. Yet the city is adapting and thriving,

> Wireless data signals were strong, and they secured a solar panel and battery set with a universal outlet, which accepted plugs from all around the world, and a rainwater collector (…) so life, while basic, was not quite as rough, not as cut off, as otherwise it might have been (207-208).

Hamid suggests one reason that the "overwhelmingly poor" Marin locals remain hopeful is because of the beautiful view from the hills, overlooking the ocean (209). This pathetic fallacy enriches Nadia and Saeed's relationship, expressed in the fanciful accumulation, "they began to speak of nothings once again, of travel and the stars and the clouds and the music they heard all around them from other shanties (215). Though the romantic aspect of their relationship is dwindling, both Nadia and Saeed make connections amid their new community, from neighbours who advise how best to build an "earthquake-friendly" shanty (207) to Nadia's habit of hitching lifts from passing pickup trucks to her new place of employment (208).

The most enriching aspect of Marin's success is "the mix of its people" (209). Hamid evokes the melting-pot metaphor regarding regional food as a marker of cultural development: "There were new cuisines that were being born, for many of the world's foods were coming together and being re-formed in Marin, and the place was a taster's paradise" (234-35). Likewise, the hyperbole of Nadia's dialogue, "Well, somewhere down there is everything in the world anyone could want to eat" (224) suggests Marin's utopian potential. However, Hamid's melting-pot idealism is critiqued by Sercan Hamza Bağlama, who argues,

> they settle down and enjoy a multicultural utopia with almost no natives. Such an optimistic end might sound like a desirable and utopian future for the protagonists; however, it needs to be analysed critically. This kind of apolitical humanism is divorced from the realities of the totality and, for that reason, legitimises the myth of multicultural existence and multi-ethnic democracy (Bağlama 155).

Whilst the melting-pot metaphor arguably lacks realism in the lived experience of persons of colour, Hamid is rendering a whimsical utopian imagining, as he did earlier through the UK government's cessation of violence in Dark London. For Hamid, Marin is evocative of an ongoing festival (222). He conveys this through asyndeton and sensory appeal,

> Indeed, there was a great creative flowering in the region, especially in music. Some were calling this a new jazz age, and one could walk around Marin and see all kinds of ensembles, humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin with gleaming metal with matte plastic, computerized music and unamplified music and even people who wore masks and hid themselves from view. Different types of music gathered different tribes of people, tribes that had not existed before (234).

Through historical allusion to The Jazz Age, which came to represent youth culture in the 1920s, Hamid imbues his imagined shanty city with the rich counter-cultures associated with Black music, and the African diaspora. The term also evokes notions like the speak-easy during Prohibition, one famous historical example of local organisation that operates outside of traditional government approval.

By this juncture in the novel, the moral inhibition and fear of reprisal regarding technical illegalities that Saeed and Nadia initially experienced as refugees is much relaxed. Nadia's workplace, a food cooperative, is described as being located in "a hastily built commercial zone" (208) and the colloquial tone of the authorial voice describes it as "likely in violation of some code or other, regulations were not much in force any more" (230). Like the fusion music and cuisine of Marin, the food cooperative symbolises something new in the novel, the term suggesting a not-for-profit organisation with a stronger sense of social collectivism than traditional private-owned grocers, and yet eschewing the connection to centralised government oversight associated with public ownership. Decisions at the cooperative are decided by participation and negotiation. Nadia notes,

> there were rooms available, storerooms upstairs, in the back. These rooms had cots, and workers in good standing at the cooperative could use them, stay there, seemingly indefinitely, provided one's colleagues thought the need to stay was valid, and one put in enough extra hours to cover the occupancy (230).

The tendency towards self-organisation is clearly one further aspect of Marin's success. Yet the shanty city is also looking for ways to integrate with, if not be absorbed into, existing regional government. Saeed has befriended a local preacher's daughter, who is a campaign leader of Marin's plebiscite movement,

> which sought a ballot on the question on the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from. How this assembly would coexist with other pre-existing bodies of government was as yet undecided. It might at first have only moral authority, but that authority could be substantial, for unlike those other entities for which some humans were not human enough to exercise suffrage, this new assembly would speak for the will of all the people, and in the face of that will, it was hoped, greater justice might be less easily denied (237).

Through the plebiscite, Marin arguably seeks to embody Jameson's notion of dual government powers, via a self-assembled political movement that Hamid attributes moral power in contrast to established authorities. Yet in the next chapter, Hamid has shifted the narrative forward in time, moving on from Marin mid-story in what could almost be termed *ex medias res* – thus the consequences of the ballot are never resolved for the reader.

There is tension in this shift. Hamid has, just introduced an emergent technology, touted to circumvent the issue of verifying a city of voters without fixed addresses:

> One day the preacher's daughter showed Saeed a little device that looked to him like a thimble (…) she said that this could be the key to the plebiscite, that it made it possible to tell one person from another and ensure they could only vote once, and it was being manufactured in vast numbers, at a cost so small as to be almost nothing, and he held it on his palm and discovered to his surprise that it was no heavier than a feather (238).

It is not clear from whence the technology has come, who is financing its production or has distributed it to these voters, who have neither electricity nor water. It is left to the reader to speculate whether the new technology is the boon the preacher's daughter describes, or whether it may be a sinister gift, allowing migrants to be tracked and identified by the existent hegemonic powers in the region.

It is also possible to critique Hamid's overuse of the adjective "new" as a distanced descriptor of Marin's developments. "New" may suggest the creative and imaginative capacity of the thing described, without that thing being necessarily radical or utopian. Hamid's stance throughout the novel has been to generalize in order to universalize, such as his withholding of the name of Saeed and Nadia's home country and religion. Furthermore, a concretized prescription of the future may fail to leave the necessary openness for the reader to imagine utopia; or as Adorno may have it, the utopian future may be as yet unable to be fully conceived and articulated.

Nevertheless, Marin, of all the communities explored in the novel, seems from Hamid's perspective to have the most utopian potential. As a thought experiment it combines the best aspects of self-assembly, collective resistance and local council seen in the Kensington townhouse with the self-sufficiency and city planning of the London Halo. More significantly, the city has given rise to new political and technological approaches, and created new music, food and culture through inclusivity and cultural exchange. *Exit West* has often been framed as a critique of global capitalism (Bağlama), and in the words of Jessica Maucione, the novel "imagines a possible desirable future, subverts capitalist myths of inevitability, and implicitly relegates the current apocalyptic narrative trend to a failure of imagination" (260). Marin certainly offers a glimpse of a more ethical and collaborative form of capitalism, but it is unclear whether it may offer a glimpse beyond capitalism.

(Un)Conclusion: Seeing the Stars as Utopia or Nostalgia?

The end of the novel is anti-climactic. Saeed and Nadia, no longer lovers, meet many years in the future. Saeed invites Nadia to travel via the doors to Chile to see the stars, and Nadia agrees, but the novel concludes that they do not know whether that evening would ever come (247). As such, the novel offers a sort of indeterminacy. Given that the relationship between the two protagonists changes with each shift in their political circumstance, the personal can be treated as metaphorical for the political – closing the novel at this moment between may indicate that history has not concluded, that utopia has not been found. The rumination on their past relationship evokes a certain nostalgia, and a sense of missed possibility with the relationship between Nadia and Saeed. Perhaps this signifies what Mark Fisher would call a lost future, an imagining of how the future could have been, but one that has not eventuated (Fisher, *Ghosts ch.* 1). Drawing on Jameson, Fisher argued that a retreat to nostalgia suggests that a sense of the future has been cancelled, a sense that one cannot truly grow (Fisher, *Realism* 26, 58-59).

Yet Hamid's thought experiments provide glimpses of near-futures that are alternatives to the present and are arguably generative. Since they have fled, the migrants often have limited economic resources other than their own labour. Each community negotiates with a certain amount of success with the established political powers in their region – as the novel moves on from each place, there is a foundation left upon which to build. The title, "Exit West", can easily be read as a challenge to Western exclusionary immigration policies and, in an even more utopian way, a call for the dissolution of the nation state, but it could also be a subversion of Sartre's claim in *No Exit* that "hell is other people". Rather than being trapped in a mysterious room without escape from others in Sartre's play, in Hamid's novel, it is the characters' ability to freely escape *to* others, in many locations, and to connect with them which gives the future promise.

Forms of social organization gesture both to embodied utopian structures but also to an unresolved potential. There are Žižekian crises that bring about unideal disaster communisms. In the novel, there is an intimation that greater local forms of organization may yet generate a better future. Each of Hamid's imagined communities is somewhat self-assembled, voluntary and participatory. At each geographical location, migrants to some degree participate in determining their own political realities, restructuring their lodgings and communities, physically, economically and socially. As such, disaster communisms may yet generate a world of community and free mobility. At the same time, the use of whimsical ideals function as an Adornian negation of the conditions of the present, thus suggesting that a better world still cannot be born from or function within contemporary conditions. As Adorno implied, utopia is necessary precisely because we inhabit dystopia. Hamid's novel remains ambiguous as to whether it reaches for the closer prize of a more ethical capitalism or dares to grasp at a post-capitalist future beyond current imaginings.

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