Living in Other Places:
Genre and Globalization in the Contemporary Anglophone Novel

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation reframes current debates over the role national culture and international connection plays in contemporary anglophone fiction in the formalist terms of genre studies. The processes and consequences of globalization continue to vex both authors who attempt to narrate them as well as those critics who attempt to make sense of the worlds those authors create. These challenges call for new rubrics from outside the matrix of nation, world, and globe, new ways of navigating the torrent of competing theories, to crystallize a path forward for the contemporary novel and its study.

The methodological strategy I propose is to turn to the narrative logics of genre fiction, which has become newly relevant after the so-called "Genre Turn" in the contemporary novel. What readers expect when they pick up a work of genre fiction is indispensable in establishing what those novels can imagine. Through readings of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2008), China Miéville's *The City & The City* (2009), N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), *Living in Other Places* argues that the expectations that structure the historical novel, the detective novel, the blended category of science fiction and fantasy (SFF), and the emergent genre of the global novel itself provide clear, practical strategies for both conceptualizing global, international space, and navigating that space in everyday

practice. These novels do so by staging an internationally hybrid history for the nation-state, pedagogically training readers into actively noticing the elements that keep nation-states together (and apart), worldbuilding new ways of imagining a whole world, and intimating the modes of interpersonal recognition called for as we experience the consequences of a globalized planet. The result is a new approach both to the study of genre and to the question of what the novel can do in articulating a shared global system.

Dedication

To my porch, and to everyone who came by.

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Writing this dissertation would not have been possible without, and I mean this as sincerely as I can without alerting the algorithms designed to detect academic dishonesty, my intellectual interlocutor and dear friend, Alyssa Granacki. Every sentence you read that is too long, including this one, is one that slipped out from under her incisive editorial eye, and are my fault, not hers. I didn't ask her to edit my acknowledgments (but I did consider it).

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talking and other things (mostly talking and other things). I'm honored to have shared the whole of my time here with them, even if we haven't all been in the same place for a while. I've also sat around other tables of various sizes with Kathleen Burns, Joanna Murdoch and Chandler Fry from my cohort, Carolin Benack, Caoimhe Harlock, Emma Davenport, Catherine Lee, and James Draney from others. I appreciate each of you for making my writing better, but also for being my friends.

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intense as they were, also some of the best. I shudder to think what those months would have been like without them all. I'm immensely fortunate I never had to. Chris Huebner and Mickey D'Addario are the two people in my life with whom I'd most like to attend a Billy Joel concert, or a ska show in a garage. They understand just how high that praise is. That's why they top the list.

The last few paragraphs, if traced in a handy Venn diagram, would produce a lovely little spirographic rose of overlapping circles. Above all else, that has been the best part of my time here. The best writers and thinkers in all the land, the best trivia teammates and contestants, the people who kept me sane before the pandemic and all the way through it – they're all the same people, and those with whom I have shared a life, intellectual and otherwise, for these past seven years. If I'm half as lucky to have such a wonderful community around me moving forward, I'll be twice as lucky as I deserve.

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that cargo shorts simply were not acceptable, and, for always helping me keep things – truly everything, no matter how big or small – in perspective; and to Uriel, for constantly pushing me to think more joyfully and carefully about the stories we watch, and the stories those stories don't tell. I'd like to think that, in this moment, you all live in my shirt, but that I also live in all of yours. I'll see you at the next Mambo House.

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Finally, thank you to my brothers, Patrick and Connor, who are more a part of me than I often admit, and to my parents, Nancy and Chris, who see only the best parts in me always.

Introduction

Humble adman Leopold Bloom looks askance of an irate Citizen: "– A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people in the same place… or also living in different places." Joyce's *Ulysses*, published almost exactly one hundred years ago to the day, asks, among other things, what it means to be from a place, and what the nation has to do with it.[1] Although the world has changed drastically over the past century, this dissertation asks similar but broader questions about the contemporary Anglophone novel. What can it tell us about living not just in different places, but other places – the historical nation-state, to be sure, but also impossible cities, fantastical places, and worlds like our own but not quite. These overlapping "other places" present themselves as questions. What role does the nation still have in defining our world, if any? What forms do nations, the world, or the globe take *en route* to asking those questions? What new answers might emerge at their intersection?

My argument begins with one specific, but generalized and generalizable, premise – that the world has become, meaningfully and irreversibly, in both material conditions and in the way we think about it, globalized. We can see this is true most strikingly in the furor of those resisting it. Call it nostalgia, call it fascism, call it the

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[1] James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler, Claus Melchior, and Wolfhard Steppe. New York: Random House, 1986, 272. Set, of course, on June 16th, 1904, the first edition of the full codex book was published by Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Company* on February 2nd, 1922, after being serialized in *The Little Review* from March 1918 to December 1920.

death throes of Western hegemony, or the weak and never truly fulfilled promise of the liberal international order of nation-states after ostensible decolonization. The resurgence of right-wing nationalism, in the US, the UK, and elsewhere.[2] In the global financialization of trade and money after the Bretton Woods Agreement, and during the proleptic détente of the Cold War after World War II and its transmogrification into a generalized affect of "war" on "terror" (what is more terrible, terrifying, than war, especially one waged wherever and whenever one finds "terror?"). The dissolution of individual empires into the global, globalized and globalizing Empire of capital. The internet, climate change, the pandemic – all envelop the world, all threaten it. This entire project is poised at the glinting edge of this more global consciousness, and the paroxysms of resistance to it. Even if the flows of information, of literature, and of capital have always been there, as scholars across the humanities are showing with ongoing and blistering historical work, what is emergent is a new awareness of this sense. There is no leeward side to the very idea of globalization, of the crashing together

[2] There is perhaps no better single metonym for the crisis of nationalism than the events occurring in Ukraine, literal hours before the final edits on this introduction. Vladimir Putin asserts that Ukraine is a foundational element of Russia, citing the nationalisms of the late- and post-Soviet Era as fraudulent, failed, arbitrary. The process that led to the formation of Ukraine as a sovereign nation after the fall of the USSR is therefore, to Putin's mind, a world-historical error, and he demands they be brought back into the fold. To the contemporary autocrat, Russia is entitled to national self-definition, "bound by blood, by family ties" with Ukraine indissoluble from that bind, and Putin is enforcing that theory of the nation by imposing the history of Russia's imperial past onto the present. Ukraine, despite its protestations, is afforded no such sovereignty by its single-minded adversary. The result is war. We will understand at least some of the consequences soon enough. (Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia. Accessed February 24, 2022. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828).

and potential dissolution of national cultures. And what is globalization at its core if not people living in other places?

Ulysses poses the questions it does through the tactical deployment of different genres, drawing from the demotic forms of its day: jarring newspaper headlines, ribald stage-plays, sentimental romances, circumspect catechisms. We see the same impulse to draw in more popular, populist forms of narrative in today's literary fiction: ghosts and aliens linger and threaten in the edges of impossible spaces; supernatural forces and superpowered people bump up against cowboys, crooks, and detectives; cyborgs and hyperintelligent AIs vie for supremacy over desolate flu-, zombie-, and postcapitalism-ridden landscapes.[3] In short, the category of "global Anglophone novel" has emerged just as literary novels themselves have become stranger, more open to the genres so often cast as illegible to, and thus historically excluded from, the very category of

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[3] *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) by Jesmyn Ward, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) by George Saunders, *The Solar Bones* (2016) by Mike McCormack, *Embassytown* (2011) by China Miéville, *The Book of Strange New Things* (2009, trans. 2014) by Michel Faber, *Equilateral* (2013) by Ken Kalfus, the *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) by Jeff Vandermeer, *Lagoon* (2014) by Nnedi Okorafor, *The Three Body Problem* (2008, trans. by Ken Liu 2014) by Cixin Liu, *Piranesi* (2020) by Susanna Clark, *The City We Became* (2020) by N.K. Jemisin, *The Bone Clocks* (2014) by David Mitchell, *Zoo City* (2010) by Lauren Beukes, *Black Leopard Red Wolf* (2019) and its sequel *Moon Witch Spider King* (2021) by Marlon James, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) by Michael Chabon, *The Power* (2017) by Naomi Alderman, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) by Cormac McCarthy, *The Hunger* (2018) by Alma Katsu, *The Sisters Brothers* (2011) by Patrick de Witt, *The City of Bohane* (2011) by Kevin Barry, the *Dublin Murder Squad* novels (2007-2016) by Tana French, the investigations of Henning Mankell's *Wallander* series (1991-2009, trans. 1997-2011), *The Windup Girl* (2009) by Paolo Bacigalupi, *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan, *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro, The *MaddAddam* Trilogy (2003-2013) by Margaret Atwood, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel, *Zone One* (2011) by Colson Whitehead, *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) by Chang-Rae Lee, *New York 2140* (2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) by Kim Stanley Robinson – this hardly scratches the surface of those novels, either considered firmly within so-called "literary fiction" or just barely aside of it, that have snuck the contours of not-strictly-realism into how we think about those novels we call "contemporary."

literary they now promise to reshape. I propose that now in the contemporary moment, modes of more "popular," "lower" forms of genre fiction offer us some potential, practical, and practicable strategies – if not for solving the ongoing crises poses by globalization, at least for imagining how to live in space with one another in a world that already assumes globalization as a fact.

The processes and consequences of globalization continue to vex both authors who attempt to narrate them as well as those critics who attempt to make sense of the worlds those authors create. Altogether, though, the emergence of these questions regarding the global novel signals an ongoing explosion of theories about the world, and an exciting substrate in which to place one's own work – the energy, enthusiasm, and sheer number of pages produced in response to the questions of moving from the nation-state model to that of the globe and the world makes it clear that new explorations are, hopefully, welcome. But more importantly for the purposes of the argument presented here, I think the challenges of globalization call for new rubrics, new ways of navigating the torrent of competing theories, to crystallize a path forward for the contemporary novel and its study.[4] I do not propose a singular or totalizing solution or model for what has happened to the novel under the aegis of globalization. I

[4] One might also think of other operant terms – international, intranational, transnational, transatlantic, circumatlantic, circumpacific, glocal etc.

am an adman rather for a new way of approaching these problems: that we turn to genre fiction.

I advocate that those of us working on the contemporary novel bring together two ongoing strands of criticism: that which attempts to reckon directly with this globalized world in spatial, cultural, and social terms, recognizable most clearly in literary studies in the subdisciplines of World Literature, postcolonial studies, the contemporary novel, and their respective responses to theories of the nation(-state); and the critical idiom of Genre Studies, which emerged in part out of the boom in cultural studies and the erosion of boundaries between "literary" fiction and its low-brow discontents since the 1980s. What results from bringing these critical discourses together, I argue, are new modes of conceptualizing globalized space, and new ways of thinking through, rather than about, genre. Most importantly, these new ways of thinking offer new ways of being, new modes of attention, new practical strategies for acknowledging that our world is globalized without erasing the value to be found in our differences.

Why "Globalization?" Why "the Anglophone?"

I take as my archive the self-reinforcing canon of the contemporary Anglophone novel, written by authors spanning the globe but published and marketed within the

New York-London matrix of publishers, for a few reasons.[5] Chief among them, as I demonstrate in the final chapter, there is an insistence on globalness itself in this novelistic system, the edges of which are loosely defined by the influence of literary award culture,[6] the legacies of the European colonial system, and the contemporary political and cultural residue of the British Commonwealth.[7] I use the term "Anglophone" itself for similarly instrumental reasons, and as shorthand for the globalizing project inherent in the term. This project was motivated by the ongoing debates in contemporary literary studies around the question of the "global novel:" the terms "Global Anglophone," "world Anglophone," and "global novel" have become capacious and yet legible signifiers pointing together at a nascent literary subdiscipline, as demonstrated by recent special issues in *Post45*, *New Literary History*, *Interventions*, and *The Global South*, with clarifying introductions by Nasia Anam, Debjani Ganguly, and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan respectively.[8] These ongoing, hyper-contemporary

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[5] See Chapter 4, pages 237 and 273-78 for a more detailed and specific accounting of one subgroup of the archive of the contemporary Anglophone novel, gathered together as a canon that I argue we should recognize as an emergent genre of the global novel itself within the broader field of contemporary literary fiction.

[6] See James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2008.

[7] See Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Basingstoke; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, and Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013, both also discussed in further detail in Chapter 4, page 257, footnote 31 and 280, footnote 52, respectively.

[8] Nasia Anam, "Introduction: Forms of the Global Anglophone." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/introduction-forms-of-the-global-anglophone/; Debjani Ganguly, "The Global Novel: Comparative Perspectives Introduction." *New Literary History* 51, no. 2 (2020): v–xviii; Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, "Introduction: South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone." *Interventions* 20, no. 3 (April

debates in the academy reflect an evolution of multiple geographically and socially ordered modes of interpretation and literary-critical production into a cohesive, if striated, argumentative whole. In other words, there now exists something we can point at and call a global novel, whether we like it or not, and even if what exactly we're pointing at shifts under strict scrutiny.

In order to understand this recent fixation on the global, it is necessary to review the novel's longstanding relationship to the nation, the subsequent disruption of those ties, and the efforts to supersede them in our hyper-globalized moment. To assert that the novel, as a literary form, is intimately connected with questions of political formation, specifically the nation-state, is at least in part to beg the question. But their ongoing and complex interconnection is well-established in the literary critical history of the novel, and the figureheads that have theorized their mutual formation. György Lukács in *The Historical Novel* (1983) positioned the historical novel as the substrate on which a national literary culture can be forged,[9] a mechanism for collective social consciousness that Antonio Gramsci expanded in his writings on the National-Popular

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3, 2018): 309–16. Another special issue, "Contextualizing the Global Anglophone Novel," is slated for publication this year by the journal *The Global South.*

[9] György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

form.[10] Benedict Anderson (1983), perhaps the most famous cultural anthropologist in literary studies, argued for the centrality of the realist novels of Balzac, Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (alongside the technology of the newspaper) in creating nations as imagined communities, a function of Benjaminian homogeneous empty time and born out of an implied sociality among the members of a shared national identity.[11] Homi Bhabha (1990), extending Anderson's intuitive formulation of the relationship between the novel and the nation, flipped the terms. The novel did not only make the nation possible to imagine, Bhabha argued, but we should understand the nation itself as a legible form of narration, a fundamentally literary project of – "textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems" out of which "nationness" emerged, papering over the ambivalences and incongruities present in any singular definition of the nation in the first place.[12]

Bhabha's formulation remains so influential precisely because it provides for the incorporation of longstanding resistance to the easy marrying of the nation with the novel. Frantz Fanon (1961) lamented, borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois, the trap of colonial double-consciousness in the formation of national culture as practiced by those intellectuals who find themselves within colonized spaces but feel themselves always

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[10] Antonio Gramsci, "Popular Culture." In *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, edited by David Forgacs. New York: NYU Press, 2000.
[11] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006.
[12] Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration*. London; New York: Routledge, 1990, 2.

apart from them.[13] Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978) refigured the traditionally understood hegemony of the West broadly and Western nations specifically as arising out of a solipsistic definition of the East as Other, a self-definition by negation.[14] This rejection of the hegemonic role of the nation in the history of the novel tracks with the legacy of post-colonial and de-colonial thinking, critical efforts to destabilize the nation-state as a mode of organizing culture and society as exemplified by critics writing from and about sites outside of the hegemonic European imaginary. Bhabha himself, but also Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Giyatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Simon Gikandi, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Susan Z. Andrade[15] and the participants in the broader critical conversation too wide-ranging for the limits of this study all contributed to a deep skepticism about the fraught nature of the nation, and the conception of a national literature in the first place. Most significantly for the present discussion, this necessary tilling of the literary soil occurred alongside and in concert with the necessary and long-denied irruption of voices from beyond the metropole that has resonated throughout the

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[13] Franz Fanon, "On National Culture." In *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 1961.
[14] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
[15] Chinua Achebe, "The Role of a Writer in a New Nation." In *African Writers on African Writing*, edited by G.D. Killam. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973; Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State." *Transition*, no. 31 (1967): 11–13; Giyatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993; Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History. Princeton.: Princeton UP, 2000; Andrade, Susan Z. *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.

latter half of the 20th century. As Salman Rushdie wrote in 1982, it is in this period that the Empire began to write back.[16]

Rushdie's straightforward call-to-arms signaled that the unified, homogenous and hegemonic national literature had collapsed in the face of these new, non-white and non-Anglo-American voices writing in English. This irruption has been and continues to be reflected in the ongoing surge of novels from and about places other than the West in the Anglophone literary canon of the post-World War II era, through the so-called Canon Wars of the 1980s, and continuing into today. But it also made possible a new, forcibly globalized way of thinking about novelistic literary production. In destabilizing the nation as a principle organizing force in the way critics think about novels and the way authors write about global interconnection, the critical interventions of the 1980s also provide the historical background against which the questions of the contemporary global novel could be posed in the first place.

As the national-literature model for the novel slowly began to crumble under the scrutiny of post- and decolonial criticism, the subdiscipline of World Literature – a more ecumenical approach to the questions of the world and the globe, and the literature(s) of it – emerged over the same period of the mid-to-late 20th century, out of the same post-World War II crisis of national definitions of culture. As a way of articulating a more

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[16] Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance." *The Times*. July 3, 1982. For a more in-depth discussion of Rushdie's role in the development of the global novel, see Chapter 4, pages 273-278, and footnote 54.

global and less nationalistic perspective on the literatures of the world, as the name of the subdiscipline implies, World Literature proceeded in parallel while borrowing heavily from the methods of interrogation cited above. Inaugurated by Erich Auerbach's "On Philology and '*Weltliteratur*'" (1969), World Literature as a discipline takes as its central concern the question of how to imagine a synthetic cosmopolitanism, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. How, as Said himself asked in the introduction to his translation of Auerbach's essay, are we to envision a "universal literature, or literature which expresses *Humanität*, humanity" which "transcends national literatures without, at the same time, destroying their individualities?"[17]

Recent entries in theories of World Literature have posed alternating models for organizing our approach to literature into a globalized world, and with it, manifold orientations towards the principle of cosmopolitanism. Some take the national model and expand it, often to demonstrate its weaknesses when stretched to the scale of the world. Kwame Anthony Appiah's cosmopolitanism (2006) rests on mutual ethical responsibility to one another, including those with whom we do not share "the formal ties of citizenship."[18] For Bruce Robbins (1999), world literature and thus cosmopolitanism is more continuous with the nation than it might seem, albeit in ways about which we should be skeptical. He writes that "though the potential for a conflict

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[17] Edward Said, Introduction to Erich Auerbach, "Philology and 'Weltliteratur,'" Translated by Maire and Edward Said.'" *The Centennial Review; East Lansing, Mich.* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 1.
[18] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006, 13.

of loyalties is always present, cosmopolitanism or internationalism does not take its primary meaning or desirability from an absolute and intrinsic opposition to nationalism. Rather, it is an extension outward of the same sorts of potent and dangerous solidarity."[19] For others, the nation and with it the white, more strictly European, and therefore Orientalist and imperialist imposition of the Anglophone itself, is to be decentered or outright rejected. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) reconfigured the Western hemispheric matrix of Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, Caribbean Studies, British Studies and the transatlantic flows between them, reorganizing the Western hemisphere extranationally around the cultural forms and expression of diasporic Blackness.[20] Berthold Schoene in *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009), Emily Apter in *Against World Literature* (2013), and Amir Mufti in *Forget English!* (2016) call for a global perspective that resists the essentialist Western bent of the nation as a formation, calling for processes of envisioning the world that do not rely on legibility to the Western audiences that reify the nation in the first place.[21]

Others have attempted to think about literature on the world scale by tracing the geographic flows of literary production, circulation, and reception, thereby articulating systems of interconnection that supersede any individual nation. Pascale Casanova's

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[19] Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress*. Cultural Front. New York: NYU Press, 1999, 6.
[20] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.
[21] Schoene, Berthold. *The Cosmopolitan Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009; Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London; New York: Verso, 2013; Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2016.

World Republic of Letters (trans. 2004) depends upon an international market of cultural capital with Paris at its core.[22] Mariano Siskind (2014) argues it was Latin America *modernismo* that finally forced the literary field to reckon with its own globality.[23] Rebecca Walkowitz (2015) insists that the very nature of texts being produced in an already globalized literary market results in a sense of the contemporary that is always already "born translated."[24] Aarthi Vadde (2017) locates a historical precedent for our contemporary globalized world in the modernist internationalism of the first half of the 20th century, a position consonant within the contemporary study of modernism at the planetary scale advocated by Susan Stanford Freidman (2001, 2015) and the corrective geographic expansiveness argued for by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (2006, 2008, 2016).[25] Debjani Ganguly (2016) postulates a world arising from the totalizing

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[22] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2004.
[23] Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*. FlashPoints. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2014.
[24] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.
[25] Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914-2016*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017; Susan Stanford Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism." *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 493–513 and *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time*. Modernist Latitudes. New York: Columbia UP, 2015; Douglas Mao and Rebecca L Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006; Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006; Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. "The New Modernist Studies." *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 737–48; Eric Hayot and Rebecca Walkowitz, eds. *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*. New York: Columbia UP, 2016.

effects of informational capitalism, with the global novel as its symptomatic literary form.[26]

For some critics, a return to the potential for individual works of literature to create worlds is key to our understanding of what the world even is in the first place. Pheng Cheah (2016), synthesizing the resistance to imperialism with a positive construction of a world, cites literature's normative force of "worlding," arising from literature's capacity to invest its readers in a specific relationship to time, especially at the point of contact between the regimented and disciplined time of European capitalism and colonial resistance to such capture.[27] Eric Hayot (2012) treads a similar path, arguing that it is fiction's aesthetic capacity to create worlds, "something like the unity of form, diegesis, and feeling composed by the rough totality," that is key to our understanding of the world in World Literature. It is through this aesthetic project, Hayot argues, that literary worlds can "often leave open an aperture to a realistic version of their contemporary world," a mimetic relationship between texts that assume an already globalized world within its pages and our sense of the geographic globe itself. [28] Matthew Hart (2020) encourages critics and readers to think "extraterritorially,"

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[26] Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.
[27] Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.
[28] Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 2012, 42, 48.

taking as his exemplars contemporary novels that incorporate into their narration modes of political and spatial articulation that reject unified national definition.[29]

Finally, some central figures in the discipline of World Literature reverse the terms of literary production and the world entirely, encouraging us to consider the world as having emerged from the very processes of circulation and friction that Auerbach set out to preserve. For these critics, the clearest inheritors of Auerbach's project of *weltliteratur,* the world starts at its own scale. David Damrosch (2003) insists that the world in world literature is a process, less aligned with any particular spatial orientation of the world and instead formed out of the heteroglossia that emerges from literature's circulation in the first place.[30] Franco Moretti (2000) has conjectured on the usefulness of distant reading, proposing literary superstructures ("units that are much smaller or much larger than the text," including "devices, themes, tropes") as modes of tracing family resemblances through the world-system.[31] Wai Chee Dimock (2006) has proposed that genre itself might let us break the bounds of national literatures entirely, reorganizing our disciplinary and discursive parameters around the resemblances found in their iterations across the world.[32]

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[29] Matthew Hart, *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Columbia UP, 2020.
[30] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* Translation/Transnation. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
[31] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 54–68, 57.
[32] Wai Chee Dimock. "Genre as World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents." *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (January 2006): 85-101.

Here, at the intersection of genre and the world, I propose we go more specific than Dimock suggests we do, and consider how reading genre fiction on its own terms might provide modes of thinking through these questions. How to imagine, envision, construct, intellect, create, define, articulate, denote, or delineate a world seems, at the very least, immensely challenging, no matter which verb one might choose. But what happens if we look not just at genre but at specific *genres* – namely, the oft-maligned and so-called non-literary genres – not just as sets of texts through which we can trace global interconnection but as forces that give shape to our ways of thinking through the challenges posed by the realities of globalization? What can individual genres themselves, and therefore the non-literary genres of fiction more broadly, teach us about how to navigate the world and the globe?

Why Genre?

Institutions like the Booker Prize and the National Book Award in the US – the foremost awards in contemporary, year-to-year literary fiction in English – have continued to (rightfully, I'd say) valorize novels that are thematically concerned with the very same issues of globalization that motivates this dissertation. But there is also an undeniable upswell in the role so-called "genre fiction" has come to play in the literary field of the present – so much so that Jeremy Rosen opens his 2018 "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction" with the admonishment, "[b]y now, it has become a critical

commonplace to remark on the boom in literary fiction that incorporates various kinds of genre fiction."[33] I agree. And when Rosen continues on to say, "[i]n fact, even pointing out what a cliché it is to observe this trend has become a cliché," I realize that what I'm doing is turning an acknowledgment that this is critical commonplace into a clichéd critical commonplace itself.

Nevertheless, what is significant to me and this project is that the shift Rosen is pointing to began, at least in the academy, in roughly the same period as the shift to a more globally-oriented way of thinking about the novel. But questions of genre in the contemporary novel have until now operated almost entirely in parallel to the questions of the global novel, and with a similarly fuzzy expansiveness that one finds in the theories posed about the world. Much of the scholarship over the last decade-and-a-half on genre has been focused – with impressive and generative results – on rejuvenating what they see as a calcified field of scholarship by turning to a more fugitive definition of the term. The PMLA Special Issue "Remapping Genre" (2007), opens with a dynamic introduction by Dimock, who argues, in line with her exhortation to think of genres as world-systems, that we should break out of a container model of the term. She proposes a new orientation to genre that considers what would happen if we thought of genre more as a "runaway reproductive process: offbeat, off-center, and wildly exogenous"

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[33] Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction." *Post45: Peer-Reviewed*, August 9, 2018, 1.

rather than as taxonomic definitions for what a text is or isn't.[34] Stephen Owen, in his article in the same issue, extends the argument and grounds it historically. He provides a concise historiography of Western genre study to show how such categories and taxonomies of genre break down when viewed through alternative histories.[35] Ultimately, he argues that it would be more useful to consider genres as a series of family resemblances, rather than strict formal categories, a position that accords with Moretti's proposed graphs, maps and trees.[36]

There is a breathless excitement to these more runaway approaches to genre, opening as they do a comparativist project that allows connections across geography and time that reject domesticated patterns of critical thought. But there is something unsatisfying in this outrush, denying as it does that which makes genre recognizable. The dynamism of this critical approach outstrips the more general, non-academic sense of the term that is more likely to be salient for us as readers and consumers of books, rather than as critics of literature. Rosen describes in detail the tension in the term "genre." One sense, used primarily by literary critics, refers to any "existing literary framework or recipe that writers may adapt and vary according to their needs."[37] The

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[34] Wai Chee Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA*, Special Topic: Remapping Genre, 122, no. 5 (October 2007): 1377–88, 1379. See also Dimock's efforts to locate the precedents of American literature in the deep history of global literary exchange, from Gilgamesh to the present, in Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008, and *supra*, footnote 28.
[35] Stephen Owen, "Genres in Motion." *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1389–93.
[36] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London: Verso, 2007.
[37] Rosen, 2; "Recipe" being an intentional borrowing from Thomas Pavel's 2003 article "Genres and Norms and Good Habits," (*Literary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 201–10), a theory of genre that is diffused throughout

other, more general and more colloquial, is shorthand for describing popular, non-realist forms of cultural production – science fiction, fantasy, detective fiction, historical romances, etc., "a subfield of literary production that is largely synonymous with 'popular fiction.'"[38]

One way of thinking about this turn is to historicize it as post-postmodern: once culture itself has become pastiche, everything can be taken seriously as an influence, any form of cultural production becomes worthy of creation and study. No longer walled off from critical attention, so the argument goes, all manner of artistic objects become available to cooption and reworking, and so the interdiction against drawing from popular modes fades. Rosen certainly seems to think this is what happened, as he couches the rise of "low" genres in literary fiction in extractive terms, where popular genres are a resource from which literary authors can draw motifs, narrative structures, and archetypes to rework into proper art.

But that's unfair both to the authors, and to the wells from which they draw. Such close adherence to generic expectation requires time spent, and we can infer a certain appreciation. A poet could not write a formally "correct" sonnet without knowing its rules, and they could not come to know those rules without an appreciation

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this dissertation but which more specifically subtends my approach in the final chapter (see Chapter 4, pages 240-41).

[38] Rosen, 1.

for the form. Would they be willing to put the time in otherwise? Why must we assume that good art can only come from ironic detachment from low forms? This seems an unnecessary reassertion of the modernist ethos of the lone genius with elect access to appreciation of art – what if they just really like the non-literary genres they find themselves writing in?

It seems, at least, that some of them do. Marlon James won the 2015 Man Booker prize for his raucous historical novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a manifestly literary novel with a modernist experimental bent set in the Jamaica and New York of the 1970s to the early 1990s. Shortly thereafter, James told *Man of the World* magazine that he planned to "geek the fuck out" and write an "African *Game of Thrones,"* complete with "witches" "demons," "goblins," "mad kings," a "big appendix on magic techniques," and "two hundred pages on a mysterious dwarf race that lives underground."[39] "I'm gonna do it," he promised, and he did: the idea grew into his *The Dark Star* trilogy, comprised, so far, of his polyglottic and harrowing fantasy novel *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019) and its sequel, *Moon Witch, Spider King* (2022), with a third volume to come.

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[39] Nate Jones, "Marlon James's Next Book Will Be an 'African Game of Thrones.'" *Vulture*. Accessed January 10, 2022. https://www.vulture.com/2015/12/marlon-jamess-new-book-will-be-an-african-got.html. For a discussion of the role such appendices play in the building out of such fantasy worlds, especially as JRR Tolkien thought of them, see Chapter 3, pages 172-77, and footnote 23 especially. It's also worth noting that James went on to compare the wealth of resources from which to draw from the history, traditions, and mythology of Africa to that of England, namechecking Hilary Mantel, the central author of Chapter 1: "We have stories of royal succession that would put *Wolf Hall* to shame. We beat the Tudors two times over."

James is not the only one. Before Colson Whitehead won the Pulitzer Prize for his novels *The Underground Railroad* (2016), a work of speculative historical fiction wherein the actual Underground Railroad is reimagined as a literal train, and *The Nickel Boys* (2019), a searing account of Jim Crow-era reform schools in Florida, the author made his first big break as an avatar of this so-called genre turn. In an interview with *The Atlantic* shortly after the publication of *Zone One* (2011), Whitehead's zombie-apocalypse takedown of neoliberalism, he sardonically dismisses the distinction between "literary" and "genre" fiction – "they don't mean anything to me. They're useful for bookstores, obviously."[40] What seems to matter most is that Whitehead draws his influences from wherever he may find them: he cites "late-70s Marvel, so Spider-Man, X-men," and writes "I was inspired to become a writer by horror movies and science fiction." The experimentation of magical realism and Beckett, he continues, "to me, they're just variations on the fantasy books I grew up on." This isn't unique to Whitehead, though. He sees this democratic orientation towards the literary field as a generational one:

> The only generalization I'll make is that I think that people of my generation are more comfortable making the foray into genre. Because of macabre books, Stephen King—and probably cable. I think culture changed in the '70s and '80s and people were exposed to different kinds of culture. A lot of my friends share

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[40] Colson Whitehead, "Colson Whitehead on Zombies, 'Zone One,' and His Love of the VCR." Interview by Joe Whitehead. *The Atlantic.* October 18, 2011. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/colson-whitehead-on-zombies-zone-one-and-his-love-of-the-vcr/246855/. It's worth noting that Whitehead's latest novel, *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) fits easily into yet another of the pulpier genres, albeit one more commonly found in film – set in 1970's New York City, *Harlem Shuffle* is nothing if not a paradigmatic heist saga, complete with bagmen, fences, and getaway drivers, elaborate plans, double-crosses and comeuppances.

> the same influences, and we have fewer hang-ups about such arbitrary distinctions. Look at the phenomenon of the blockbuster, whether it's an adventure like *Indiana Jones*, or something like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. You're exposed to that pretty early. And you're supposed to walk away because you start reading Ernest Hemingway? It's just one of many influences that makes you into the writer you are today.[41]

So, while it may have already become cliché for critics to note the turn towards genre, noting that it has coalesced as a writerly strategy doesn't require that we treat it as a cynical one. Rather, if we take these representative authors at their word, it's clear that we should consider what is happening within the genre turn sincerely and earnestly: these are authors who unabashedly consume and appreciate these non-literary genres for what they are.

It is this latter, unironic and straightforward way of thinking about genre than I am interested in throughout the following pages. Along with the fact of globalization, I take for granted that there is still space within a more expansive critical conversation of genre for attention to this more demotic sense of the term that Rosen lays out. As one of the central authors in this study, China Miéville, writes, "I grew up reading genre, and though I've become really interested in it at a theoretical level, at a gut basis I'm

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[41] Whitehead, "On Zombies." No small coincidence that another exemplar text of this pivot towards non-realism, Emily St. John Mandel's post-pandemic novel *Station Eleven* takes its key motif (and the title of the 6th episode of its recent HBO adaptation), "Survival is not sufficient," from an episode *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, even as the novel is structured around a traveling troupe that plays the symphonies of Mozart and Bach and performs the full playbook of William Shakespeare.

interested in genre because that's what was formative for me, as a reader."[42] From there, though, comes a deeper investment, and one without a hint of ironic distance: "I think that what tends to interest me is the unexamined political assumptions of genre."[43] For Miéville, this awareness of the potential of genre goes "usually unexamined," but I'd push it even further to suggest that genres can give shape to our assumptions whether they are examined or not. I am in support of thinking outside of the containers of genre. But I posit we can also consider how authors and non-academic readers – those I address in this dissertation but also readers and authors of "genre fiction" broadly – understand, appreciate, and work firmly within generic modes even as we might recognize their limited taxonomic capacity.[44] I argue we can still think categorically without thinking in strict taxonomic terms, and therefore without discarding our intuitive sense of genre. Despite how any individual novel revises its generic form, there is still a clear sense when a novel either *is* or *is not* a historical novel, detective novel, a

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[42] China Miéville, "A truly monstrous thing to do." Interview by John Pistelli and Alphonse van Worden. Long Sunday, October 12, 2009. https://web.archive.org/web/20091012023448/http://www.long-sunday.net/long_sunday/ 2005/07/a_truly_monstro.html.

[43] Miéville admits there are exceptions, "because there's plenty of self-conscious revisionist genre out there, so there's a relatively easy radical chic to be accrued - and not unimportant just because it's easy! - by pointing out, problematising and ideology-critiquing those assumptions" ("A truly monstrous thing to do.")

[44] For a counter-example, namely what I see as a problem with a taxonomic model rather than one that finds a core in each genre and follows that logical center, see Tvetzan Todorov's aptly named "Typology of Detective Fiction," (In *The Poetics of Prose*, translated by Richard Howard. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1977), wherein he summarizes what he sees as eight axioms of the detective novel. Immediately after he constructs his taxonomy, however, even Todorov sees the cracks, and his reading immediately fractures into a multi-axial analysis of the detective novel, the thriller, the whodunit, and recombinations of the above. This is exactly the problem of taxonomizing something as capacious and fluid as the novel: the moment rules are codified, something will break them. If one is inclined to oppose such structuralist approaches, this may be sufficient reason to discard the methodology.

work of scifi or fantasy, a global novel, etc. If we insist on thinking of the fugitive, contingent definitions of genre as their only site of creative potential, we run the risk of losing sight of just how generic some of the present literary fiction itself really is.

Instead, I take genres for what they are, and how their solidification into recognizable generic types implicitly train and expect us to think. As John Frow writes, all texts – from the newspaper headline in a shop window to the most literary of our novels – are shaped by complex sets of knowledge that are defined culturally, socially, and personally. Due to the heteroglossic nature of such generic interplay, "Even when a text disrupts all the expectations we might have of it, these expectations nevertheless form the ways in which we can read it and the ways in which we can change our minds."[45] Genres function, in other words, as "forms," in the sense offered by Caroline Levine (2015), where "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" can and should be addressed directly, so that we might "grasp both the specificity and the generality of forms—both the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford."[46] Why? Because, as Anna Kornbluh (2019) charges us to remember, form (and formalism) builds.[47]

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[45] John Frow, *Genre*. The New Critical Idiom. London; New York: Routledge, 2006, 28.
[46] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton UP, 2015, 3, 6.
[47] Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

This expansive accounting for the nature of genre is a reader-centric one. It shifts the focus on genre away from a strictly taxonomic accounting towards one where genre is understood as an interplay between formal features and readers' expectations of where, when, and how those features are deployed (or not) by authors. The result is a way of reading genre fiction that builds new ways of thinking, strategies that are malleable but that nonetheless remains tethered to its generic predecessors. It is this sense of genre – that a novel's generic expectations are essential not only in guiding our own approaches to reading them but also in generating a formal logic inherent to the genres themselves – that I move we apply to questions posed by globalization in the contemporary anglophone novel.

Why the novel? Why now?

Two final questions remain: why the novel, and why now? For good measure, I define the novel as any longish prose work of fiction, with at least the implication of the trappings of traditional publishing: chapters, maybe, but at the very least a title, pages, maybe even paragraphs, some form of physical binding or the skeuomorphic equivalent one might poke at on an e-reader etc. There are debates to be had over what a "novel" is. As thinking through genre asks of us, I'm relying in this dissertation on the sense that a novel is what we think it is, acknowledging that there will always be experimentation at the edges.

The "contemporary" in the label "contemporary Anglophone novel" is perhaps the easiest to explain. At least, it is the most straightforward, and certainly the most personal. I am and always have been a reader of contemporary fiction, genre and otherwise, and found myself consistently drawn to reading and thinking about the novels that held the attention of my non-academic friends and family. Though I admit to a bit of tautological thinking, I have continuously found in contemporary literary production a fusion of genre as method and globalization as question, a coming together of these two strands that could only have happened in the present moment. Before returning to graduate school, and indeed for most of my life in the run up to that decision, I was not only a reader of contemporary fiction, but more simply the kind of reader described by Merve Emre in *Paraliterary* (2017) as a "bad reader." That is, a reader that has been "socialized into the practices of readerly identifications, emotion, action and interaction." It's not just the practices of reading, though, but the reasons behind their attachments. These bad readers, she argues, were and are "rooted in a political culture" of the second half of the 20th century, a culture that valorizes not only a "habitual relationship between aesthetic representations and readers' lived experience" but also the ways that such aesthetic representations manifested as acts of international communicative practice.[48]

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[48] Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017, 3.

Emre's broader deep-dive on the sociology of American letters in the midcentury lays bare a dense network of institutions, literary products, and people, all working in concert to create a system designed to forward an understanding of literature as a site where thinking beyond and across borders became a default way of reading. This system, in tandem with the post-war fusion of the literary arts with the professional academy (what Mark McGurl terms "The Program Era" [2011][49]), has defined the field of contemporary fiction as a matrix of writers – both authors and critics – writing to one another about how, as my title indicates, to live in other places, with readers reinforcing this market as a market through their affective and attitudinal desires to see such questions investigated. To put a finer point on it: in her chapter "Reading Like a Bureaucrat," Emre sifts through the literary-cultural history of the People-to-People program, an organization formed by Dwight D. Eisenhower to encourage international cooperation by sending American students abroad. I myself am a product of this matrix – an alumnus of two such People-to-People trips, and of the very kinds of institutions documented by McGurl.

But I've also always been a different kind of "bad reader" – as interested in the sprawling scifi and fantasy sagas of my youth as I later came to be in the (post- and post-post-)modernist experimentations in form that have defined literary fiction since the

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[49] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2011.

beginning of the 20th century. My two prized possessions are, in no particular order, a copy of the eighth printing of Joyce's *Ulysses* ("The first with the reset type!" I'll proudly explain to anyone who cares to listen, "There's no period at the end of 'Ithaca!'") and my custom-built shadowbox housing all of K.A. Applegate's young adult *Animorphs* novels, fifty-four novels and their spinoffs, amounting to thousands of pages about teens defending Earth armed only with the power (granted to them by a dying alien prince) to transform into animals after acquiring their DNA. These have always been the competing directions I've been pulled in, but the contemporary novel suggests they might not be so opposed after all. As McGurl documents in *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021), our present moment is uniquely open to the blending and fusion of generic forms.[50] Under the monopolizing capitalist logic of Amazon and literary commerce more broadly, and the totalizing data capture of the internet, the system of genre that keeps the "literary" separate from "genre fiction" has not so much collapsed but rather has subsumed the former into the latter.

I have found nothing else as compelling as I do the novels of the present, because no other period has moved so thoroughly past the distinctions I've ignored in populating my own bookshelves. This dissertation serves not only as methodological

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[50] Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*. London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2021. McGurl takes recourse to the same cliché regarding the invocation of the genre turn as I do above, when he writes, "Observing the many contemporary novelists of high artistic esteem who have been playing with popular genre forms, recent criticism has found one of its recurrent themes in the so-called genre turn in literary fiction," 37.

argument that we should bring together the global novel and the study of genre, but also as a diagnosis of the field of the contemporary novel as one that is already defined, at least in part, by the combination of these two ways of thinking in the first place. Understanding that I am, in effect, a "bad reader" has not dissuaded me, but motivated me. If I have been trained by the American academy to consider myself a part of a global, internationally-connected polity in our shared present, then here I offer a way to grapple with the generic shapes such connections may take.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation begins and ends with figures that leave home and return to it. Along the way, I take genres as verbs – Staging, Noticing, Worldbuilding, and Intimating – and consider the role genre has in actively shaping our strategic approaches to the central animating question of the whole dissertation – how to live in other places.

The argument proceeds chronologically, in a sequence that follows the evolution of the nation itself: all of my primary objects of study are from the last decade, more or less (2009-2017), but each novel participates in a genre that solidified in a particular historical context, from the beginning of the modern nation-state in the early modern period to today. I should note that these are, in intention and in practice, case studies. Each chapter is centered on readings of exemplar novels (or, in the case of *The Broken Earth*, a trilogy of novels), and are comprised of two major argumentative steps. First, I

historicize each chapter's given genre, using close readings to clarify not only that these genres are alive and well in contemporary literary fiction, but to make clear the specific logics that those genres (and I would argue, by extension, all genres) train their readers in thinking. Then, once established, I turn those modes of thinking on the nested series of questions that I laid out in the very beginning – the interrelationships between the nation, the nation-state, the world, and the globe.

The first half of what follows relies on two very firmly defined genres – historical fiction and detective fiction – as models for how genre can teach us to navigate the real-world consequences of national borders. In the first chapter, "Staging," I argue that Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) adopts the popular, stage-dressed form of the historical novel to perform a commitment to historical accuracy. This insistence on performance interpellates its audience into a sense of history in the immediate present. Other critics have argued that in our period of post-national globalization, the historical novel has been rendered purely nostalgic and reactionary, incapable of envisioning a real collective, and therefore has become marginalized to the literary periphery. In deploying the generic expectations of the popular historical novel, *Wolf Hall* establishes England itself as a malleable performance of national history, while positioning the novel's protagonist Thomas Cromwell as thoroughly international. The result is a reinvigorated literary image of Tudor England that shows how nations are and always have been

forged from a field of international contingencies while nonetheless remaining coherent and recognizable.

In the second chapter, "Noticing," I read China Miéville's detective novel *The City & The City* (2009) as it follows the investigation into the murder of a young graduate student across the borders of two distinct nations that, inexplicably, share the same geographic space, demarcated only by differences in cultural practices and murkily-enforced state authority. Miéville's novel serves as an exemplar text which posits that the work of imagining the nation is homologous to the work of a detective. In the course of its twinned mysteries – who killed the young graduate student and why, but also how it is that these countries overlap the way they do – Miéville's novel posits a strategy of attention, in which all of everyday life provides possible evidence for what the nation might be, but what we choose to notice forms the nation as it actually exists (if it does at all). By turning our attention to an ongoing practice of noticing – in contrast to that of defining or excluding, synthesizing or concluding – the detective novel trains its readers into thinking of both national and globalized space as a rhythm of reevaluation and constant renewal.

The latter half of my project moves away from the nation-state *per se*, considering the role readerly expectation plays in our approach to thinking on the scale of the world and the globe, and the differences to be found in these two approaches. In the third chapter, I intervene into the methodologies of World Literature by turning to the

category of Science Fiction/Fantasy (SFF). I propose that the strategy of worldbuilding endemic to this blended genre functions as a structural parallel to how literary critics have attempted to make sense of any given world, including our own. Drawing from the critical reservoir of World Literature, I take as my central literary texts *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin (2015-17), a sprawling work of fantasy in which the whole planet is periodically rent asunder by ongoing natural catastrophes and in which only small pockets of ad hoc communities manage to survive. If the historical novel resituates the individual and historical nation-state as an internationally implicated formation, and the detective novel provides a method for navigating the spaces where specific nation-states butt up against each other, SFF reconceptualizes the world as the collision of infinite sub-theories of communities and worlds that accrete and churn into one another, threatened only by the imposition of a single way of imagining it.

In the final chapter, I read Mohsin Hamid's 2016 novel *Exit West* as a novel perched at the very intersection of contemporary Anglophone fiction and genre fiction that undergirds my whole analysis. As *Exit West*'s dual protagonists proceed through unexplained doors in space from an unnamed country in the Middle East, to a refugee camp in Greece, into a Georgian mansion in London, and finally the outskirts of Silicon Valley, the novel purposely activates and refuses readerly expectations of novels framed around global movement. In treating such novels as precedent, *Exit West* demonstrates retroactively that these novels have coalesced into their own genre – an actual "global

novel" as a genre of fiction in the contemporary moment, and not only a discursive mode or critical heuristic – with a recognizable investment in free international movement. The result is a new generic form that should be considered in much the same way we approach historical romances, detective fictions, and SFF as "genre fiction;" a strategic literary reserve that privileges interpersonal intimacy as the key ethical mode of a globalized world, both superior and anathema to the imposition of limitations by individual nation-states.

Altogether, there is a telos to the argument presented here, which runs as follows. First, we must assert that every nation we find ourselves in is fundamentally an international formation – this is a reclaiming of national histories. From there, through carefully practiced skills of observation, we must learn how to navigate the contradictory spaces such assertions of internationalism create. What emerges then is something on the scale of the world, which we must understand as coming together through the constantly iterative process of tracing connections with one another, connections we must imagine as always premised on an implied potential intimacy with those other people – we build our worlds as a world, and then consider how to navigate it together. The novel, and the world, have become global. Genre, I propose, teaches us how to reckon with that.

I – Staging

In modern parlance, we'd call *Wolf Hall's* Thomas Cromwell a fixer. He knows the right people to talk to, and when. How, both home and abroad, to get things done. Fluent in French and Spanish, English and Latin, with connections in Antwerp and bank accounts in Venice, he "never lives in a single reality, but in a shifting shadow-mesh of diplomatic possibilities."[1] From our contemporary perspective in the 21st century, we think of him as English, but "the unknowable, the inscrutable, the probably indefeasible Master Cromwell" (528) moves through and beyond the country he calls home, turning the whims of monarchs into the fabric of nations.

Cromwell does all this astride a stage festooned with historical detail and populated by recognizable personages, and so *Wolf Hall* demands we read the novel as a thoroughly documented account of England's formation. Throughout its present tense narration, Westminster looms, ledgers are kept. Henry VIII drinks and blusters his way through the pages. Anne and Mary weave tapestries, sew napkins, and negotiate the political stakes of their courts and courtships. Thomas More pontificates, Cromwell machinates. Literary critics have argued that the historical novel, a genre characterized by elaborate historical decoration and traditionally linked closely to the nation-state, has been rendered irrelevant in the period of globalization that has emerged since post-Cold

[1] Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall: A Novel*. 1st U.S. ed. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2009, 25. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

War consensus.[2] Symptomatic of this slide from the center of political signification, these same critics argue, is the genre's accelerated drift towards the literary periphery. Where once the historical novel was a key component in imagining a collective national identity, in our current era of inter-, intra-, and supranational formations, the historical novel, it would seem, has been relegated fully to the unserious, the unliterary, more akin to the dollar store romance novel than the nation-making projects of Scott and Balzac.[3]

But in hyperbolizing these signifiers of history, of *past*-ness, while presenting through a newly present Cromwell the realities of global interconnection that drive its plot and character motivations, *Wolf Hall* makes clear that the contemporary historical novel still has the power to reshape historical national identity, not in spite of its popular trappings, but precisely because of them. *Wolf Hall*'s publication and immediate, massive success – both commercial and critical – in the midst of a newly emboldened nationalist movement in England as typified by Brexit signals a tension in how we think

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[2] See Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe." *London Review of Books*, July 28, 2011. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe, and Fredric Jameson. "The Historical Novel Today; Is It Still Possible?" In *The Antinomies of Realism*. London: Verso, 2013, both discussed in further detail in the following section.

[3] Rachel Teukolsky ("Why Does the Historical Novel Need to Be Rescued?" *Public Books*, January 14, 2013. https://www.publicbooks.org/why-does-the-historical-novel-need-to-be-rescued/) helpfully steps back from this argument, deftly situating *Wolf Hall* in its generic context. The genre has been read to proffer both progressive and conservative political fantasies, she writes, both of which "have tied the historical novel to a kind of shameless crowd-pleasing, a mass appeal that overlaps at times with the bodice-ripping sexuality inseparable from the romance genre." Teukolsky ends her thoughtful review with a noted ambivalence, writing "While Mantel avoids many of the pitfalls troubling the modern historical novel, in the end it is probably too pat to declare that she single-handedly 'rescues' the genre." While I agree that "rescue" is too strong a word, I argue that Mantel reclaims the political potential of the very elements given over to "shameless crowd-pleasing."

of the historical novel.[4] By relying on the pageantry and stage-performance aesthetic of more popular, less literary iterations of the historical novel, *Wolf Hall* firmly establishes itself as capable of intervening in English national historiography – that is, in how the novel's audience conceives of English national history itself. Mantel positions Cromwell in the middle of the stage, situating him not only as a fixer, but as a central actor in bringing about England's transition from a feudal nation arranged around the sovereign power of the monarch into a bureaucratic nation-state. In elaborating a particular history in which Cromwell exercises new and newly English state power through his extended network and experiences abroad, Mantel paradoxically reifies this historical moment as

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[4] This battle for English national identity is not being waged only in the abstract sphere of political posturing, but also pointedly in a series of ongoing curricular debates in the educational system of the United Kingdom. See the series of political speeches delivered by Michael Gove, the Conservative Party MP and former Secretary of State of Education under David Cameron from 2010 to 2014: "It's Time for Modern Compassionate Conservative Education Policy." Speech, Conservative Party Conference, Blackpool, October 1, 2007. http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599789; "Failing Schools Need New Leadership." Oral Statement to Parliament, October 7, 2009. https://michaelgovemp.typepad.com/files/gove-2009-conference-speech-2.pdf; and "Curriculum, Exam and Accountability Reform." Oral Statement to Parliament, February 7, 2013. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/curriculum-exam-and-accountability-reform. Gove, a bombastic supporter of Brexit, has been a key figure in the Conservative Party's ongoing efforts to reform the English curriculum away from anti-imperialism and back to a celebration of Englishness, and thus in reforming contemporary English historiography as such. Positioning himself as fighting back against (rather tepid) instructional reforms throughout his tenure, Gove has pledged to give students "the chance to take pride in our country's history" (2007), restore "the proper narrative of British History - so that every Briton can take pride in this nation" (2009), and recenter the history curriculum around "a clear narrative of British progress with a proper emphasis on heroes and heroines from our past." Gove puts quite the fine point on it, writing in an op-ed entitled, subtly, "I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools" that "the guilty men and women who have deprived a generation of the knowledge they need" constituted an amorphous "Blob" of academics living on a metaphorical "Red Planet" who are "more interested in valuing Marxism, revering jargon and fighting excellence" (*The Daily Mail*, March 23, 2013. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html).

a moment of flux, and thus redefines in international terms the whole of English history that comes after.

In our current political moment dominated by reactionaries attempting to recast England as a closed-off Fortress Britannia, this two-step – activating and staging an insistent historical Englishness, while casting Cromwell as an equally internationalist figure at the center of that national history – reorients both our understanding of the role of the historical novel as a genre, and the relationship between novels, national history, and the international order. In doing so, Mantel reinvigorates discounted generic features of the historical novel for our contemporary moment, when globalization has purportedly rendered individual national histories obsolete as viable literary mechanisms for social ordering.[5] By insisting on the fundamentally performative role of historical particulars in imagining a nation's history, *Wolf Hall* interpolates its readers into a collective project of refiguring that history, and the form of the nation itself, as an international process from its inception. The novel stages an elaborate performance of

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[5] I am indebted, here and throughout this chapter, to Matthew Hart's lucid and compelling chapter on *Wolf Hall* (and Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy), "A Border That is Not a Border" in his 2020 monograph *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2020). In the chapter, Hart articulates a robust theorization of how England functions in *Wolf Hall* as a fully extraterritorial space, where "England is represented as the kind of space … in which international borders, far from existing at the edges of the country, have become distributed throughout public and private space" (144). As a result, he argues, *Wolf Hall* posits a way of thinking of the nation-state "in which the assertion of English political autonomy is predicated upon the country's openness to the European continent." My focus here on theatricality is intended to demonstrate how the historical novel as a genre works in the present to redefine the past – more specifically, how the pageantry of the *Wolf Hall* is essential to redefining English national history in terms that are compatible with Hart's theorization of national, international, and extranational space.

England's national past, and Cromwell navigates through and beyond it. In doing so, the novel opens up new paths for the genre of the historical novel in which national history and global interconnection are not counterposed to one another, but are mutually constitutive of one another, and always have been.

The Historical Novel Today

In order to recognize what is new about *Wolf Hall*'s embrace of the genre after globalization, it is important to situate the novel against arguments that the genre's less popular, more literary iterations have been rendered obsolete *by* globalization. The historical novel has, traditionally, hewn closely to the nation-state: so closely, in fact, that for most major critics the genre seems to have lost the ability to perform any sort of imaginative geopolitical work now that our critical apertures have opened to more supranational formations. As Perry Anderson summarized in 2011, "[t]he historical novel… is a product of romantic nationalism,"[6] obliquely referencing György Lukács's claim that "The appeal to national independence and national character [in the historical novel] is necessarily connected with re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonour."[7] Embedded in this claim of historical fiction's romantic nationalism is an implicit warning against the dangers of

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[6] Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," 3.
[7] György Lukács, *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983, 25.

nostalgia. If the historical novel cannot help but romanticize the nation-state, so the argument seems to go, it might not be up to the task of remaining relevant in our globalized world. More worryingly, it might also valorize the worst impulses of nationalism that underwrite a host of historical horrors – empire, colonialism, global war, xenophobia. The historical novel runs the risk of becoming hopelessly national*ist*, swamped under the ideologies that pose the nation as fundamentally antithetical to the idea of a connected world. In this reading, the fervor of rejuvenated right-wing politics – and the "nationalists vs. globalists" meme that underscores it – sweeping western Europe and the US afresh would find a welcome home in the genre.

Moreover, the literary historical novel might not only be worryingly nationalist, but worryingly inert altogether. Responding directly to Anderson, Fredric Jameson diagnoses this romantic nationalism as terminal, for related but different reasons: "The historical novel seems doomed to make arbitrary selections from the great menu of the past, so many differing and colorful segments or periods catering to the historicist taste, and all now, in full globalization, more or less equal in value."[8] For Jameson, it would seem that this form of the historical novel – which he dubs "Harlequin histories" – has been so beset upon by the trappings of costume drama and faithful historical reconstruction that its contemporary form has been rendered fundamentally apolitical. As such, in its degraded, contemporary form, the historical novel cannot "make History

[8] Jameson, "The Historical Novel Today," 459-460.

appear," cannot provide a "representational glimpse… of the future of society secretly at work within its present."[9] Where once the historical novel functioned as a technology for imagining a collective national identity with all the liberatory potential such a communitarian orientation might enable, the political possibilities of the historical novel are exhausted now. Jameson, skeptical of the contemporary historical novel – "Is it still possible?" – holds that the nation-state's ability to serve as a viable structuring principle in imagining social collectivity has collapsed. The result is a genre enervated, offering little to wed the form to any attempt at imagining a future under the aegis of globalization.[10] We've moved on, we're "post-national." Or so we tell ourselves.

Yet, for all this, the historical novel has seen a resurgence in contemporary literary fiction. As James English demonstrates, there has been a noticeable pivot in Anglophone literary fiction (as indicated by such metrics as the Booker Prize and bestseller lists) towards novels of the non-present in the period since the 1980s.[11] As Alexander Manshel piquantly summarizes, "[l]iterary fiction has never been more

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[9] Jameson, "The Historical Novel Today," 262. The phrase "make History appear" is Jameson citing himself, from "Making History Appear," *Valences of the Dialectic*. Verso, 2009, 533-612.

[10] Jameson's proposed solution is to turn to a different genre altogether; namely, speculative science fiction, writing, "however outrageously, that the historical novel of the future (which is to say of our own present) will necessarily be Science-Fictional inasmuch as it will have to include questions about the fate of our social system" ("The Historical Novel Today," 298).

[11] James F English, "Now, Not Now: Counting Time in Contemporary Fiction Studies." *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 408. Through rigorous data-analytics, English shows how Anderson's contention that "the historical novel has become, at the upper ranges of fiction, more widespread than it ever was at the height of its classical period in the early 19th century" (Anderson, 8) is not inaccurate, but rather incomplete: as alluded to in the title of English's article, the shift has been a bipolar one, with contemporary literary fiction looking both forward to the future and backwards to the past as it has pivoted away from "contemporaneous" fictions (406-8). The curious position of *Wolf Hall*'s marriage of historical setting with present-tense narration is discussed in further detail below.

historical – nor historical fiction more literary – than at present."[12] Focusing English's corpus survey of the contemporary novel, Alexander Manshel proposes a further refined list of contemporary novels, with a substantial treatment of the novels of Ben Lerner and Ruth Ozeki, ultimately collating them into a subgenre that he calls "the recent historical novel."[13] These novels, "grounded in catastrophe… reveal not only the contradictions at the heart of contemporary historical consciousness, but also the crucial blind spots in literary criticism's approach to narratives of the past"[14] which have arisen since the paradigmatically postmodern genre of "historiographic metafiction" as theorized by Linda Hutcheon.[15] These novels wrestle with what it might mean to write historically now that postmodernism has exposed history itself as composed and metafictional. While these novels are constructed around the "peculiar mores," or "the 'feel' of a great event,"[16] notably absent from these novels are the stage-dressing of history, what Lukács calls "local color," the very same "costume setting," that Jameson claims marks the contemporary historical novel for failure, all of which are foregrounded in *Wolf Hall*. The

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[12] Alexander Manshel, "The Rise of the Recent Historical Novel." *Post45: Peer-Reviewed*, September 29, 2017: 1. https://post45.org/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-recent-historical-novel/.
[13] Manshel, 2. Manshel's full list of novels covers a rather robust paragraph, with citations of twenty-four other novels from the last two decades, grouped thematically around such markers as "the events of 9/11 and its aftermath," "recent natural disasters," the war in Iraq and rise of international terrorism, "the 2008 financial crash," and "the early career, election, and inauguration of Barack Obama" and ranging from Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) through Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) and all the way to Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* (2017).
[14] Manshel, 2.
[15] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism : History, Theory, Fiction*. New York : Routledge, 1988. For further, more detailed discussion, see below, pages 51-53.
[16] Jameson, "The Historical Novel Today," 459.

new subgenre identified by Manshel is itself a compelling analytical category, but leaves open the question of what to do with the persistence of novels that activate a deeper sense of history than just the proximate few decades before our present.

Turning their attention away from specific contemporary historical novel themselves, other critics assess the genre more broadly in literary-historical terms. Namely, they see in the historical novel a collective object through which we might examine global history in terms of capital's relationship to realism. Jed Esty, documenting what he calls the rhyming "Realism Wars" of the late Victorian Era (1880-1900) and the Cold War decades (1940s-60s), cites the contemporary historical novel as a possible resettling into realism after the fragmentary, experimental aesthetics of the postmodern period, mentioning Mantel by name aside a long list of authors with whom scholars of contemporary fiction will be well familiar.[17] Mukti Lakhi Mangharam has proposed reading the historical novel longitudinally across epochs, from which we might be able to see "global capitalism as an interpretative horizon – a common referent" – whose realism is "central rather than incidental to this representation of capitalist expansion" from the inception of proto-imperialism to the postcolonial era.[18] For both critics, the historical novel functions not as a reflection of national or

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[17] Jed Esty, "Realism Wars." *Novel* 49, no. 2 (August 1, 2016): 337. Further speculating about the resurgence of the historical novel in the "'world lit' canon," Esty cites Mantel alongside "Amitav Ghosh, Mario Vargas Llosa, Colson Whitehead, Chang-Rae Lee… David Mitchell, Richard Flanagan, and many more…"
[18] Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, "Grounds for Comparison: The Historical Novel and the Making of the Modern World System," *ELH* 86, no. 3 (2019), 806-8.

international character but rather as a methodological object through which to see a global reordering at either end of imperialism. To associate the historical novel, then or now, with the nation *per se* would seem to be naïve.

If historical novels are obsolete due to their traditional alignment with the nation-state, or unserious due to their aesthetic commitment to the pageantry of the past, then why are they still significant to the literary field of the present as evidenced by their persistent (re)production? What to make of *Wolf Hall,* a literary historical novel published in our globalized present that nonetheless so deeply embraces a specific national past? The answer lies in the very stage-pageantry of the genre that Jameson derides, and therefore in appreciating the imaginative power it accords to the historical novel. The contested literariness of the genre elides the purchase that its "lower," more demotic form has on its essential qualifier – the "history" in "historical novel." Instead of thinking of the "costume setting" of the historical novel as naïve, unsophisticated, nostalgic romance, we can recognize that these seemingly low-brow elements have the ability to signal a direct intervention into the historiographic record by activating an insistent present in both time and place for these historical details. In doing so, *Wolf Hall* cuts through the supposed paradox in the genre in which the genre's more high-brow, sociopolitically trenchant literary form has become defanged as a result of globalization,

its low-brow, mass-market costume drama form is disqualified as unserious or unliterary, and both might be worryingly nationalistic.[19]

Despite protestations to the contrary, the fragmentation of the genre into "so many differing and colorful segments" has not in fact left the genre inert. Rather, it is only against this backdrop of the genre's enervation that *Wolf Hall*'s celebration of historical detail becomes an essential piece for understanding the genre's continued vitality. I argue that the contemporary historical novel, having fully embraced the seeming arbitrariness of selecting a historical period and setting under "full globalization," can now rely on the generic performance of historicity – that is, a performance of the past that is constitutive of the genre – to tell us about how nations persist and function in a global system. To do so, I consider the stage-setting details of the historical novel that Mantel relies on under a rubric that more closely aligns to the more national-popular form of the genre as described by Antonio Gramsci. As he helpfully reminds us, the broader genres of the popular novel and the popular historical novel specifically infuse an ideological-political character into the cultural production and consumption of the "people-nation," by means of "educat[ing] and elaborat[ing]…

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[19] See again Teukolsky, but also Anderson, who writes in the same survey ("From Progress to Catastrophe') that "most literary genres have included a variety of registers" but "the dominant pole within a genre will usually be fairly clear-cut – Symbolist poetry… lying at the elite end of the spectrum, thrillers at the popular end. The peculiarity of the historical novel, however, has been to elude any stable stratification of high and low."

the intellect and moral awareness" of said populations.[20] The popular novel, by dint of it being popular, holds a particular purchase on shaping a broader, more collective understanding of national culture; the popular *historical* novel has the capacity of intervening in how its readers understand national history. *Wolf Hall* is uniquely positioned to take on these stakes precisely because of the historical novel's purchase on national history as such. The historical novel, in all of its forms, is foundational in how a reading public – especially a *national* reading public – forges an imaginary for their own history.

The Road to Wolf Hall

Since the beginning, Mantel has been a historical novelist, although her path has been a bit circuitous. Published in 2009, directly on the heels of the global financial crisis, *Wolf Hall* marks an uncontested high point in Mantel's career as a writer. But prior to securing literary acclaim with her Cromwell Trilogy, she had published eleven novels. The first to reach market was *Every Day is Mother's Day*,[21] a novel of straightforward if bleak domestic psychological realism, which came out in 1985, fully 24 years before the commercial juggernaut of her *Wolf Hall* hit the shelves and the review pages.[22] But the

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[20] Gramsci, Antonio. "Popular Culture." In *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, edited by David Forgacs. NYU Press, 2000.
[21] Hilary Mantel, *Every Day Is Mother's Day*. 1st Owl Books ed. New York: Henry Holt, 1985.
[22] And the adaptation circuit – see footnote 72 *sub*.

first novel she actually wrote, *A Place of Greater Safety* (eventually published in 1993),[23] bookends her as a writer of historical novels. Another behemoth of a book, coming in at over 700 pages, this earliest novel traces the events of the French Revolution through the eyes of Georges Danton, Camille Desmoulins, and the divisively remembered Robespierre. This earlier novel gained a bit of academic traction, although delayed: Jameson cites *A Place of Greater Safety* as "one of the rare successful novelizations of a genuine revolution."[24]

It is telling that, despite this later praise, *A Place of Greater Safety* initially failed in finding a publisher.[25] And so, Mantel turned to writing more standard and

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[23] Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993.

[24] Jameson, "The Historical Novel Today," 485-6. Jameson praises the novel for having made "Robespierre's politics of Virtue… narratively conceivable again," something he calls a "a genuine political intervention" (491). This, he writes, "would not seem to be an extraordinary literary feat" (489) were it not for the fact that by returning Robespierre's radical political program to the arena of interpersonal relations, Mantel's Robespierre "might have something active and constructive to offer us" in the "current absence of any genuinely socialist politics" (490-1). This is glowing praise from the elder statesman of literary studies, but it came in 2013, twenty-one years after the novel's publication. GoogleTrends (an imperfect tool, of course) marks the first reference to Mantel's earliest novel in August 2009. *Wolf Hall* was initially published on April 30th of that year.

[25] In an interview with *The Paris Review* (Hilary Mantel, "Art of Fiction No. 26." By Mona Simpson. *The Paris Review*, Spring 2015. https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6360/art-of-fiction-no-226-hilary-mantel.), Mantel discusses in detail the process that led to *A Place of Greater Safety* being published. She began writing it immediately after earning her undergraduate degree in 1974 and had finished it by December of 1979. Still and all, she recalls, "I couldn't sell it, I couldn't get anywhere with it at all" noting, "[i]t was not a good time for historical fiction, and I knew from writing to agents and the dusty answers I got that even getting the book read was going to be impossible." Its eventual publication came only after Mantel had published her next four novels and established herself as a reviewer as well. I hesitate to suggest that it was somehow Mantel who failed in securing a publisher, mostly because of the precarity of professional novelists generally and the seeming arbitrariness of who or what specifically gets chosen for publication out of a field of possible novels that make up a trend. I am willing to forward a provisional argument – that it was not so much the reception of the genre of historical fiction that kept *A Place of Greater Safety* from reaching success while *Wolf Hall* catapulted such that it did, but rather that the latter's imbrication with questions of globality and nationalism, coming just after the 2008 financial crisis, seemed more timely. Perhaps, though, it's simply not that helpful to compare two different novels in such a way.

straightforward literary realism while at the same time developing a more global sensibility. Pivoting from the historical novel, her next two books, *A Change of Climate* (1994) and *An Experiment in Love* (1995),[26] auger the geographic expansiveness of *Wolf Hall*. The former opens in Norfolk, England, but moves back in time to 1950s Bechuanaland (which later became Botswana after decolonization), where Mantel lived for a period with her husband. The latter, *An Experiment in Love,* details the coming together of three working class young women in London, one of whom the daughter of Eastern European immigrants, as they attend a parochial school and later the University of London. *Beyond Black* (2004)[27] nudges the door of realism slightly, tracing the travails of a medium and her assistant around the Home Counties. Fay Weldon, writing in a review of *Beyond Black* for the Guardian, describes by negation the line the novel toes: "If, as a reader, you feel briskly and brightly that dead is dead, alive is alive, and anything else is nonsense, this novel is probably not for you. Too weird, you'll say."[28] The novel gestures towards the gothic, or the supernatural, but never fully embraces the contours of a proper "genre novel."

Mantel's other novel in this period, *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998), is an exception in the opposite direction, in that it provides useful fodder for defining what exactly counts

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[26] Hilary Mantel, *A Change of Climate*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1994; *An Experiment in Love*. 1st American ed. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996.
[27] Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black*. 1st ed. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005.
[28] Weldon, Fay. "Review: *Beyond Black* by Hilary Mantel." *The Guardian*, April 30, 2005. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview30.

as a historical novel.[29] If we follow a more Gramscian model that accounts for the "Harlequin histories" in defining the genre, it would count easily: *The Giant, O'Brien* is set in 1780, and is a fictionalized account of the Irishman Charles Byrne (later O'Brien), who stood at a whopping 8-foot-plus, and the Scottish surgeon John Hunter, who was obsessed with anatomical anomalies and who purchased Byrne's body after his death.[30] But unlike both *A Place of Greater Safety* and *Wolf Hall* (and the latter's sequels), *The Giant, O'Brien* is intensely focused on the intertwining of just two characters, Byrne and Hunter, without the sprawling cast of characters that are defining features of Mantel's other historical novels. What we do find is a preoccupation with national identity that we might recognize from *Wolf Hall*. She writes, in an interview appended to the 2010 edition of the novel, that the narrative "became part of this awakening and the feeling grew in me that in order to find myself I had to go back and capture that voice, that Irishness. So the novel became about the giant utterly, and the giant's people, and the giant's transition from speaking Irish to speaking English, exploring what is lost, and

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[29] Hilary Mantel, *The Giant, O'Brien*. 1st ed. New York : H. Holt, 1998.

[30] Byrne's skeleton was on display in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London until the museum closed for renovations in 2016, (Hannah Devlin, "'Irish Giant' May Finally Get Respectful Burial after 200 Years on Display." *The Guardian*, June 22, 2018, sec. Science. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/jun/22/irish-giant-may-finally-get-respectful-burial-after-200-years-on-display), which is one way to embed someone in history, I suppose. Currently, there is public debate about returning Byrne's skeleton, and a Change.org petition to have him buried at sea as he publicly requested before his death. ("Bury 'The Irish Giant' With Dignity." Change.org. Accessed February 1, 2022. https://www.change.org/p/board-of-trustees-of-the-hunterian-collection-bury-charles-byrne-with-dignity). It has 126 signatures.

what is gained in the process."[31] There is a sense in this description of Mantel working through some of the same concerns that animate *Wolf Hall.* What does it mean to be from a particular nation? What is lost and gained in the process of its development? It seems that Mantel's intuition is that it must be grounded historically, but it takes until *Wolf Hall* for coherent, recognizable national culture to find purchase in a particular historical period.

In returning to historical fiction, Mantel finds her way back to the questions that animated *A Place of Greater Safety,* and thus also returns to the problems of navigating national history in an era when national history has seemingly been rendered moot. *Wolf Hall* begins with the childhood of Thomas Cromwell, marked by the text as taking place in 1500, but picks up in earnest in the year 1527, with Cromwell having already secured an advisory role to Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York.[32] By the time Cromwell has made it to court, Henry is already married to Katherine of Aragon, and she has already drawn his ire by not providing a male heir. The novel's overarching plot, such as it can be said to have one under all the pageantry of detail, is structured around the historical moments we are familiar with from history.

According to Lukács in *The Historical Novel*, the pageantry of the genre "demonstrates by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in

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[31] Hilary Mantel, *The Giant, O'Brien*. Mantel's ruminations on national culture and history can be found on pages 8-9 of the appended postscript.

[32] There is some debate about the actual date of Cromwell's birth, but most peg it somewhere around 1485, making him about fifteen years old at the novel's opening. See Elton, MacCulloch, et al.

precisely such and such a way."[33] He continues, dismissive in turn of those who are dismissive of the "authenticity of local color" to argue that "this artistic demonstration of historical reality… is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interactions with acting individuals."[34] This interpellation of historical events, in their "intricacy and complexity," through the "manifold interactions of acting individuals" is as deft a description of Cromwell's machinations as one might find in reviews of *Wolf Hall*. Moreover, Lukács writes of the historical novel broadly that "the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, of the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human being are portrayed."[35] Through all of *Wolf Hall*'s dense prose, we are focused entirely on the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of Cromwell and his family, including his wife and children, his employers/patrons, including Wolsey and later Harry himself.

Lukács typifies Scott's heroes as "always a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman. He generally possesses a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence."[36] Again, seems a perfectly serviceable description of the fixer Cromwell, further reinforced when Lukács continues on to say that the hero usually also has "a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-

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[33] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 43.
[34] Lukács, 43.
[35] Lukács, 39.
[36] Lukács, 33.

sacrifice, but which never grows into a more sweeping human passion, is never the enraptured devotion to a great cause."[37] Cromwell never becomes a zealot, at least not in *Wolf Hall* – rather, he works steadily within and outside the English Court in service of his patrons, without an apparent selfish desire to social climb himself.[38]

Nonetheless, *Wolf Hall* comes after a series of crises in the historical novel since Lukács so decisively theorized the form. As elucidated by Linda Hutcheon, the postmodern historical novel reworks the discourse of history itself into another site of involution and pastiche. Writing in the late 1980s, Hutcheon challenges us to avoid obfuscating the paradoxical nature of postmodernism for the sake of a coherent program. Postmodernism, she argues, is a poetics of paradox, and never a resolvable hermeneutics. She writes, "if you ignore half of the contradictions [inherent in postmodernism] it becomes quite easy to see the postmodern as either neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary."[39] Historiographic metafiction, she argues, performs a delicate balancing act on the edge of

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[37] Lukács, 33.

[38] There are clues, including his own private meditations on the role of biblical authority, that gesture towards a more nascent zealotry that appears in the novel's sequels. But at least in *Wolf Hall* itself, these theological concerns are more logistical problems for Cromwell than they are crises of faith. For a more detailed accounting of the real Cromwell's motivations, see below, page 74-75.

[39] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism,* xiii. Hutcheon cites as an example two of the bulwark theorists of postmodernity, Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard, writing "[i]n theory… the contradictions are not always this overt, but are often implied – as in the Barthesian anti-authorizing authority or the Lyotardian master-narrativizing of our suspicion of master narratives." A full accounting of culture, art, history, etc. under postmodernity must reckon with these internal contradictions. Hutcheon does so by proposing we think of postmodernity as a poetics; one that we might be able to historicize but which cannot historicize itself.

the paradox, and thus is a representative mode of fiction in the postmodern period. The genre is neither overburdened by traditional master-narratives nor does it fall into self-negation in an attempt to reify a self-undermining system.

Hutcheon cites the novels of García Márquez, Doctorow, Rushdie, et. al. as the exemplar genre of the postmodern period, all of which might rightly fit neatly into Manshel's category of the recent historical novel. We might add to these the pillars of the global Anglophone novels, such as they can be considered a functioning literary typology.[40] The novels of late-millennial hybridity – the Zadies Smith and Kazuos Ishiguro around which "global Anglophone literature" coalesced as a field of study in contemporary fiction in the first place – perform a similar relationship with history. "Historical fiction (*pace* Lukács) usually incorporates and assimilates [detail and historical data] in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world," Hutcheon writes, while postmodern historiographic metafiction "incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data."[41] Doctorow's turn-of-the-20th-century New York in *Ragtime* (1975), Rushdie's Indian independence and the coming of age of the nation and its avatars in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Ishiguro's interwar smoking chamber geopolitics in *Remains of the Day* (1989), Smith's multicultural Y2K feverishness in *White Teeth* (2000) – all turn to a specific

[40] Or more accurately, a contemporary genre unto itself. Calling the global Anglophone novel itself a genre is a provocative claim, admittedly, but one I stake out in further detail in the final chapter of his dissertation.
[41] Hutcheon, 114.

moment in history in order to say something about our more contemporary present. They are as a result incapable of "making History appear," busy as the genre of the historical novel in its present form has become with disrupting history to make some other point about national character.

This contemporary legacy of the historical novel is one that traces its evolution from the realism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to today through the literary mode of modernism, and it's worth rewinding a bit to see how we got here. A trio of novels by Virginia Woolf – *Orlando* (1928), *The Years* (1937), and her posthumously published *Between the Acts* (1941)[42] – provide a useful case study for what happens when the two components of "national history" are disaggregated from one another, and questions of nation are foregrounded while history becomes pastiche. These novels posit two different experimental solutions to the rupture of the historical novel under modernity, with *The Years* as a pivot point: fluid, period-breaking modernist experimentation in *Orlando,* and an intense reification of the performative nature of

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[42] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*. Edited by Suzanne Raitt and Ian Blyth. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2018; *The Years*. Edited by Anna Snaith. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2012; Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. Edited by Mark Hussey. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2011.

national culture in *Between the Acts*, both of which dismantle and critique a particular form of English national character.

Orlando seems at first blush the obviously place to go for a sense of the English historical novel that disrupts history in a performative sense, but in doing so it drifts away from definitions of the genre that are more legible in the critical tradition. This is, of course, illustrative. *Orlando* challenges a definition of the historical novel genre that relies exclusively yet broadly on some mediated relationship with history, but it does not forge a coherent national sense from its pages. As Woolf's protagonist moves from the Elizabeth era, through periods and genders, a canonical history of England is at one and the same time asserted and debunked. Its opening section takes place in the year 1588 (a mere forty years after Cromwell's execution), but it concludes in the year 1928 – the present of its publication. Despite the gulf of nearly 350 years, Orlando ages at a completely different pace; like Orlando's gender, her age is radically deconstructed, reaffirming the contingency and arbitrariness of narratives that seem otherwise unassailable. Orlando can be both male and female (and frequently comments on her own sense of fluidness between the two poles), and she can exist outside of the accepted function of time by living through four centuries while staying thirty-six.[43] Orlando's performative rejection of the discourses of gender and time places her in an extraordinary position, and this exceptionality highlights the subjectivity inherent in the

[43] *Orlando,* 310

construction of such discourses, a contingent quality that is central to the modernist understandings of grand narratives as explicitly constructed rather than absolute. And thus, it's worth noting, Orlando and *Orlando* place themselves outside of Lukács's typology of the historical novel that focuses on "always a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman." Orlando is neither mediocre, nor is she properly a gentleman by the novel's end.

The modernist historical novel's attack on a consistent, mappable historiography does not stop with the character herself, however, but rolls throughout the text as it moves through time. The scenes that make up *Orlando* place the protagonist in the center of representative moments in British cultural history. Beginning in the Elizabethan era of the late sixteenth century – and just a few decades after the events of *Wolf Hall* – *Orlando* marches on through other significant periods. The novel touches on the Georgian era, when Orlando visits with Alexander Pope, the Victorian era, when Orlando is pressured to marry, and finally ends in the 1928 of the novel's conclusion and publication. This dislocation in time serves to fragment more than just Orlando's own personal subjectivity. If any of these eras had been the focus of the entire novel, then it would have been the perfect opportunity to expand and reflect the specifics of that single era as it has come to be defined by retrospective historiography. Even then, *Orlando* could only be defined as a historical novel inasmuch as it is a novel about the past, but not a full participant in the genre. Instead Orlando, and *Orlando,* hops from era to era without

presenting "the *connection* between the spontaneous reactions of the masses and the historical consciousness of the leading personalities" that Lukács defines as also necessary to a historical novel.[44] The connections are implied via narrative collage, but Orlando remains outside of history even as she passes through it. By presenting three hundred years of a nation and culture's history, *Orlando* subverts the possibility of staging any single period in history by structuring itself around the arbitrariness and non-connection of those sections.

Like Cromwell in his own time, Orlando serves as the fluid core around which her novel is constructed. But in the case of Woolf's assay at modernist historiography, the protagonist's fluidity overflows history. The one destabilizes the other. As the reader follows Orlando, England shifts at a clip, without enough time to linger in any particular national formation, whereas *Wolf Hall* firmly roots itself – luxuriates, even – in the time of Cromwell, building a sophisticated reorientation of the period. And so *Orlando* purports to be a historical novel in activating, as Hutcheon calls it, "an air of dense specificity and particularity,"[45] but studiously avoids condensing national history into any particular moment, and thus only ever achieves historicity – a sense of past-ness – and never any purchase on history itself. As recognizable as each section may be *in*

[44] Lukács, 44.
[45] Hutcheon, 114.

history, it veers too far into the speculative to be properly considered a historical novel.[46] It's not fantasy, but only because such a generic definition would be anachronistic.

For all of the ways in which Woolf's final novels invoke history, they also bear witness to the difficulty posed in writing a Lukácsian/Scottian historical novel of the 20th century. Woolf began writing *Between the Acts* in 1928, a decade after the publication of *Orlando,* and just a year after she published *The Years*. Of *The Years*, she wrote that her intention was to:

> give a picture of society as a whole; give characters from every side; turn them towards society, not private life; exhibit the effect of ceremonies; Keep one toe on the ground by means of dates, facts; envelop the whole in a changing temporal atmosphere; Compose into one vast many sided group at the end…[47]

My modernist colleagues will recognize echoes of Joyce's attempt to capture the whole of Dublin within the pages of *Ulysses*, enacting a modernist intention of creating a book

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[46] Perhaps *Orlando* would fit more comfortably in the third chapter of this dissertation, "Worldbuilding," except that the world-building of Woolf's speculative fiction builds to a recognizable early-20th century London, and not a fantastical fictive world.

[47] Woolf, Virginia, *The Years,* xl. The above quotation continues, with Woolf writing that, after she has composed the facts into "one vast many-sided group at the end," she intends to

> shift the stress from present to the future; and show the old fabric insensibly changing without death or violence into the future – suggesting that there is no break, but a continuous development and possibly a recurrence of some pattern; of which of course we are ignorant.

This anticipates another argument made by Fredric Jameson in "The Historical Novel Today." His answer to his own question about the possibility of the historical novel is no, not really: the only way to truly write a proper historical novel nowadays is to pivot to genres of speculative science fiction ("a recurrence of some pattern; of which of course we are ignorant," Woolf speculates). Jameson finds a possible solution in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. However, as discussed above, he is working within a very specific Lukácsian definition of the historical novel that privileges utopian political work over and above the formal, generic features that Mantel relies on in crafting *Wolf Hall.*

of the whole world.[48] But for all of Lukács's griping about modernist literary texts, the intentions laid out here by Woolf fit right in with what he identifies as the power of the historical novel as such. Woolf crafts "[c]haracters from every side," turned "towards society, not private life," just as Lukács praised Scott for focusing on mediocre men, not just the epic hero.[49]

As a novel, though, *The Years*, Woolf's fictional document of the Pargiter family, sweeps broadly and quickly – one single day a year per chapter, and discontinuous years at that – over the half-century that marks the shift into what literary critics loosely refer to when they cite "modernity." This raises another question familiar to those same modernist colleagues: How to craft a coherent national history from the substrate of the dissolution of tradition, one structuring premise of modernity itself? *Orlando* and *The Years* both disrupt a continuous notion of national history by spinning their narrative out over time, inscribing the "history" of the historical novel into shifting, experimental narration at the cost of a coherent vision of Englishness. Snapshots over time, continuity aggregating only through their juxtaposition; the logic is more cinematic than narrative, montage over plot. For both novels, what is left is a proto-postmodern paradox, where

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[48] Mallarmé's *Un coup de Dés,* Musil's *A Man Without Qualities*, even Ezra Pound's Cantos all aspired to a similar totality. And just as with *Between the Acts*, the author of each died before they could produce a definitive complete edition. Joyce of course did not die before finishing *Ulysses*, but he did his best to shove the form of the novel itself into a casket with *Finnegans Wake*.

[49] Recall Lukács description of the historical novel's ability to bring forth "the being of the age," which "can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, of the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human being are portrayed" (39).

the only unifying historical identity to England is the contradictions and shifts inherent to any such narrative project. Absent are the load-bearing columns of historiography that frame the performance of history in *Wolf Hall*, leaving only the cultural remnants of historical allusion. It's modernist formal inventiveness at its finest, but even at this most refined literariness, these later novels by Woolf gesture towards the obvious interrelation of historiography and the nation while providing few answers for how the historical novel might challenge this historiography in the first place.

Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (published posthumously in 1941 after being edited by her husband Leonard), is posed as an answer to the problems raised by *Orlando* using some of the intentions she had set for herself for *The Years. Between the Acts* drives narrower in time in order to show a more stable, historically locatable notion of Englishness. The novella presents a day in the life of small, well-heeled and bucolic village as it bustles about in preparation for its annual holiday pageant. Set amidst World War II, the novel attempts to establish a particularly performative national character in order to undermine it as an actual material history of the period. Picture-book Englishness is reasserted in the backyard while actual global interconnection is kept decisively off-stage, but the disruption of Englishness in the face of global conflict looms ever-present. Ignoring England's imbrication in what we now call a World War does nothing but reassert its entanglement – to ignore that such a massive, rending war is happening in Europe seems a lame attempt by the townspeople to assert an

exceptional position for England that is immediately undermined by the fact of who was doing the fighting. This sleight-of-hand, easy to point out and thus ineffective as magic tricks go, pins *Between the Acts* to its historical period, but leaves a fractured version of the generic historical novel. By attempting to present a stagey, coherent sense of Englishness while ignoring the nation's interrelation with greater Europe, *Between the Acts* fails to adequately attend to the manifest reality of global interconnection in the period. Instead, national culture can only be presented as a farce, a stage-show for children, and not to be taken seriously. *Between the Acts* offers a critique of national culture without a full accounting for its persistence or power as an organizational principle in the minds and lives of everyday bourgeois life. Perhaps the implicit dismissal of such nationalist cultural arrangement is an admirable goal in and of itself, but it does not leave us with a coherent strategy for working through the intersection of a specific nation's history with wider international concerns.

The intensely mediated and self-referential approach Woolf takes towards historical detail renders history, when translated to the postmodern novel, into another discourse to be deployed and pastiched. What is lost in these historiographic metafictional novels is the sense of history-ness, of verifiability, so thoroughly dissolved is the genre's grasp on documentary historiography as such. But if the concept of history has become defanged as an organizing principle around which to build a novel within postmodernity, what are we to do with *Wolf Hall*, which is so profoundly tied both to

documentary historiography *and* generic style? Again, as Manshel's research evinces, the historical novel in its generically recognizable form has not gone away, even as it may have drifted away from its valorized position at the core of literary fiction.

Antonio Gramsci, perennially attuned to the power of more demotic forms of ideological production, grappled directly with the very subset of novels that Jameson dismisses some eighty years later. In fact, rather than looking back and seeing an oversaturated field of the historical novel, Gramsci laments at length the "non-existence of 'popular' literature" in Italy. In doing so, he articulates what it is exactly he thinks the turn of the century Italians were missing: "the feelings of the people are not lived by the writers as their own, nor do the writers have a 'national educative' function: they have not and do not set themselves the problem of elaborating popular feelings after having relived them and made them their own."[50] That is, to Gramsci's experience at the time, there was a prevailing dearth of a national literature in Italy.

Right in the center of this literary gap of the modern Italian state, Gramsci notes the section of negative space that is shaped like the historical novel. "[B]esides its historical character," Gramsci writes, the historical novel "has a politico-ideological character but less marked…" which ranges from a "conservative-reactionary… exaltation of the aristocrats and their faithful servants" to those novels which have "no overt democratic-political tendency" but which are "pervaded by 'passive' and generic

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[50] Gramsci, 365.

democratic feelings."[51] That these are seemingly apposite political projects is of little account; the failure in Italian letters is that there are no historical novels in the first place. Without a domestically produced historical novel, questions of how to imagine a national history are moot, as are the limits of what is possible within a conception of a "National-Popular," because there is nothing staging them. This, for Gramsci, is a problem, and one that precedes the problem of what the historical novel can do. They must first exist in order to do something with the national-popular conception of history, regardless of their internal reactionary politics.

This is where I think we should be locating *Wolf Hall*: first and foremost as something that insists upon an assumption of historicity, regardless of the form's potential complicity with neo-reactionary politics. It is only once that is established that one can see how the novel works backwards to challenge our understanding of not only of our present moment, but also of the historical moment of Cromwell's era. In considering the genre of historical fiction as something that is accessed, deployed, worked within, we can begin to see how the differences between history and fiction, history and style, collapse into a unified structure that relies on a hidden premise of accuracy without requiring its readers to invest themselves further in pursuit of

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[51] Gramsci, 371. These descriptions, the former referring to the historical novels of Ponson du Terrail and the latter to those of Alexandre Dumas, parallel Hutcheon's balancing act between "neoconservative nostalgia" and "radical disruption," even as the polarization between the two seems a bit less full-throated in the novels Gramsci is discussing. A less obvious distinction, but a distinction nonetheless.

verification. It is, in short, a performance of both accuracy and immediacy, rather than accuracy itself, that sustains this other way of understanding the genre.

This is especially true of *Wolf Hall,* which takes the critiques of the nation developed in the modernist novels of Woolf and internalizes them, threads them with the material history of documentary historiography, and weaves them back together. For Mantel, the way forward is to redouble the performativity of history, accepting that the stories a reading public tells themselves about their history has the same objective purchase on the nation as a stage performance does – which is to say, quite a lot. And the novel does so by welcoming us into its theater.

All of England's a Stage

Wolf Hall posits national history, in this case that of England, not merely as a mediated record but specifically as a performed one. All of its trappings as a historical period drama, including its ornate neoclassical frontispiece framed by margins that invoke ivied Corinthian columns, its five-page cast of characters, and family trees at the beginning of the novel and the profusion of details within it, set the stage.[52] The same goes for the dual epigraphs: the first, taken from Vitruvius, invokes classical taxonomies of theater, and the second, from a 1520 morality play by John Skelton, doubles down on

[52] The first edition, published in the UK by Fourth Estate, lacked the visual decoration and subtitle appended later to the opening paratexts, but it's telling that they were added to the American editions. Clearly, someone involved in the publishing and marketing of *Wolf Hall* recognized the potential power of highlighting the novel's performative historical quality.

the theatrics of it all, painting the novel in broad, allegorical terms. But these markers of period drama should also be understood as an implicit argument about the role this aesthetic of performance has in creating a national-popular sense of history in the first place.

Sometimes, this staginess is obvious, and a few of the more explicit examples should suffice. There is a literal play within this grander play, in which the Cardinal Wolsey is tortured by devils after failing to procure the king's annulment. Patch, the actor playing Wolsey, tells Cromwell, "You should have stayed over there," there being Italy. "Why you come to my country?" Cromwell of course, is not from Italy, but Patch might be excused for the mistake. More telling is Patch's response when Cromwell looks at the sweating actor with pity after the show. "How can you act this part?" Cromwell asks. Patch replies, "I act what part I'm paid to act. And you?" (248). With this, Patch pinions Cromwell with the wisdom of the novel's chief fool – Cromwell is a state-actor and a stage-actor, both at once.

Other elements of the plot are less fictional but no less dramatic or stage-worthy. The fruit of Cromwell's political victory over Wolsey, Anne's wedding to Henry, is itself realized quietly: a chapel at dawn, "almost in secret, with no celebration, just a huddle of witnesses" (395). But Anne's elevation to the Marquess of Pembroke beforehand and coronation afterwards are both pitched as theatrical tableaux, with Garter knights standing watch, noble ladies of England flanking the new Queen, Mary bringing a

coronet on a cushion, red and purple velvets, black ermines and black hair, the train of a blue gown, warhorses, trumpets, and a *Te Deum* sung over all (357, 432-33). This is the height of "costume drama;" there is no dearth of performance in this re-enactment of history.

The novel's investment in performance as aesthetic production – literal proscenia and morality plays in the novel's text – is reduplicated narratively in a pair of much remarked-upon syntactic features of *Wolf Hall*: its consistent deployment of closely-controlled present tense, and the (often frustrating) choice to refer to Cromwell primarily as "he" throughout, rather than naming him in the fashion typical of third-person omniscient narration.[53] The novel's opening pages, in fact, refuse even to introduce Cromwell properly – we learn his name is Tom from a direct address from his sister (8), and we can initially only infer his surname because this unidentified "he" is referred to as the son of Walter Cromwell. It's not until the second chapter that the narrator calls him by his name (17), and even then it remains a rare occurrence. As Mantel herself has written of her experience writing the novel, "The events were happening now, in the present tense, unfolding as I watched… He seemed to be occupying the same physical space as me, with a slight ghostly overlap." Mulling over another of her narrative choices, she continues; "It didn't make sense to call him

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[53] See again Hart, who comments on the same syntactic features I argue constitute a formal performativity, arguing (convincingly) that they also serve as a focal point for the "scalar drama" of the Tudor Reformation, swelling from Cromwell's "pronominal person" outward to encompass "the whole island of Britain" (147).

'Cromwell,' as if he were somewhere across the room. I called him 'he.'"[54] Even as she talks about her own process of writing, Mantel figures the historical moment of Cromwell's era as an ongoing present, where events from a half-millennium ago are not being reported and inflected, but are rather occurring in the here and now.

Both of these authorial choices – present tense, pronominal vagueness – are constitutive of the deeply ingrained performativity of the novel, which serves to interpolate its audience into a collective reimagining of England's historical past. We think of "present" in terms of time, on some sort of continuum from past perfect to future, with the present shifting along with us as we go. But the present tense also insists on presence, a "here we are" that is lost in the reported speech of past tense. Mantel's use of pronouns is a further reinforcement of this communal present, in both time and space.[55] From the perspective of the author, Mantel makes a perfectly serviceable

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[54] Hilary Mantel, Hilary, "How I Came to Write *Wolf Hall*." *The Guardian*, December 7, 2012, sec. Books. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/07/bookclub-hilary-mantel-wolf-hall. Mantel, ever self-aware, proceeds to comment not only on her own choices, but on the reception thereof: "[t]his device, though hardly of Joycean complexity, was not universally popular." There's the barest hint of litotes here: the syntactic vagueness of the "he" and the choice to write in the present tense has occasioned criticism of varying intensity from book reviewers, most loudly Philip Pullman, who wrote of the present-ness of the present tense, "if every sound you emit is a scream, a scream has no expressive value. What I dislike about the present-tense narrative is its limited range of expressiveness. I feel claustrophobic, always pressed up against the immediate" ("Philip Pullman Calls Time on the Present Tense." The Guardian, September 17, 2010. http://www.theguardian.com/global/2010/sep/18/philip-pullman-author-present-tense).

[55] Mantel is, of course, not the only novelist currently writing in the present tense, but the critic Richard Lea does see *Wolf Hall* as a trendsetter in this respect ("Make It Now: The Rise of the Present Tense in Fiction." *The Guardian*, November 21, 2015, sec. Books. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/21/rise-of-the-present-tense-in-fiction-hilary-mantel). Lea cites Kevin Barry, David Mitchell, Marlon James, Paul Murray and Attica Locke as inheritors of Mantel's, writing that "This contemporary upsurge can perhaps be traced back to Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*," continuing on to note that "While the past tense has been the convention,

argument that it wouldn't feel natural to address someone immediately by their name – demonstrative pronouns needn't be warped into adjectives ("that man") or proper nouns when their referent is standing right in front of you, literally or figuratively. But by forcing the readers of the novel to assume this immediate position by relying on "he," it is as if we too are there, along with Mantel (or, more appropriately, the narrator) watching the events of English history unfold before us.[56]

Altogether, the aesthetics of performance that frame and run through the novel blend with the syntax of the narration itself, forcing the past into the present, and our present into the past. What emerges is a virtual narrative space which demands to be read as an embodied now which in turn assumes a collective audience for the performance – everyone who is reading this novel. Whether or not it is appropriate for critical readers to elide the fundamental incongruities between stage-production and prose narration, the novel's insistence on its own performativity begs the question, asking readers to set aside these incongruities and adopt this embodied position while reading. By framing the historical period of Cromwell's England in such straightforwardly theatrical terms, Mantel renders history itself tactile, mutable, and

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the default for fiction… [*Wolf Hall*] wasn't the first time she had brought history to life by pulling it into the present time," as Mantel deploys similar narrative strategies in her earlier novel *A Place of Greater Safety*.

[56] For further, thoughtful analysis of how the performativity of *Wolf Hall* accretes in its narration, especially in the audiobook version of the novel, see Bryan Nakawaki. "'Words, Words, Just Words': The Dramatic Role of the Narrator in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* Audio Book." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 2014): 586–99.

observable, not as reportage but as something witnessed experientially in space. History itself becomes something that should be understood as collectively imagined in our present. Thus, the language of the novel is performative, in the active sense described by JL Austin:[57] the novel *performs* history, makes history happen, through the creation of the shared space between itself and its audience. The performance, then, is of history itself, rendered immediate and present for us, its readers.

The novel's syntactic immediacy and aesthetic dependence on performance makes history manifest in its content. But the broader academic apparatus of its composition and reception extends this interplay with history by occasioning a revision in professional, academic historiography as well. The novel is dedicated to Mary Robertson, the longtime curator of medieval and British manuscripts at the Huntington Library, which houses Mantel's papers.[58] Robertson's own scholarship, including her doctoral thesis, is indebted to the work of G.R. Elton, who writes in his introduction to *Tudor Revolution in Government* that Cromwell was variably understood as "the leader in the great revolutionary moment of the Henrician Reformation" or the "subservient tool of a king whose fouler work he did with ruthless (and regrettable) efficiency." Elton's titular revolution swirled around and through Cromwell, who "matter[ed] only in so far

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[57] JL Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J.O Urmson and Marina Sbisà. 2d ed. The William James Lectures; 1955. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

[58] Here, again, I refer and am grateful to Matthew Hart for his elucidation of the relationship between Robertson, Elton, and Mantel, and to my fellow participants in the virtual conference, "An Overflow of Meaning: Reading and Re-reading Hilary Mantel," hosted by the Huntington Library in October 2021.

as one meets him at every turn in the story of administrative reform."[59] Robertson, putting a finer point on Cromwell's centrality to the affairs of state, writes of his "Ministerial Household" that it was "an institution informally bridging the gap between a medieval civil service based ultimately on the king's own household and a modern bureaucratic civil service centered on the departments of state."[60]

By deliberately citing Robertson, and by extension Elton, Mantel seems to have adopted their historical premises. As Matthew Hart summarizes, the position of both Elton and Robertson is that Henry's reign was "a period of real transformation in the English state," and that this transformation can be traced precisely to the period covered by the goings-on of *Wolf Hall*.[61] In both Elton's and Robertson's telling, as Hart continues, "Cromwell's centrality to that process, as both an individual and as the head of a new sort of 'ministerial household,' has been neglected or caricatured."[62] Or, I would suggest, *had* been, until their work, and by extension, *Wolf Hall*. The pugnacious Welshman is understood in this collaborative history as the sort of world-historical figure capable of single-handedly bringing about the modern English nation state. It was Cromwell's advice to the Henry VIII to "consolidate the territory he governed under the exclusive sovereignty of the king in parliament" that drove "a revolution from the

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[59] G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1953, 6.
[60] Mary Louise Robertson, "Thomas Cromwell's Servants: The Ministerial Household in Early Tudor Government and Society." PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1975. 13, as cited in Hart, 149.
[61] Hart, 150.
[62] Hart, 150.

medieval to the modern state." The modern state "in all its self-conscious independence," thus solidifies, supplanting "the medieval state in which king, parliament, and even the nation occupied a much less ascertained place."[63] The nation turns to modernity; *Wolf Hall* shows us Cromwell doing the turning.

This imbrication with professional historicism runs even deeper than Mantel's citation of Elton by way of Robertson, swelling outward to the author's own contemporaries. In the acknowledgments to his exciting new biography *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*, Diarmaid MacCulloch directly cites Mantel as a "particularly stimulating and generous intellectual companion,"[64] and the first sentence of his introduction notes an obvious truth: "Thomas Cromwell's name has happily become much more familiar in the last decade, thanks principally to Hilary Mantel's inspired novel series beginning with *Wolf Hall*."[65] Of the philosophy behind his book, MacCulloch attests that his "primary purpose is not to write a history of England in the early sixteenth century, but to place Thomas Cromwell on that stage."[66] MacCulloch, himself a student of G.R. Elton, takes up Elton's and Robertson's positioning of Cromwell at the center of political machinations in Tudor England, although his version of the man is one more fully informed by Cromwell's own religious formation. Putting Cromwell on the stage, MacCulloch sets out to recenter "how important Cromwell's

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[63] Elton, 7.
[64] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Life*. London: Allen Lane, 2018, 8.
[65] MacCulloch, 10.
[66] MacCulloch, 13.

religious agenda was to his political actions, how great a part it played in his destruction, and how much can be recovered from his often elaborate efforts to conceal his religious motivation from the imperceptive,"[67] even as Cromwell's Protestantism was of the "Italian dissenting style: urbane, cultured, worldly."[68]

MacCulloch's monograph is an important and subtle revision of the man and his historical period, and that point should not be lost. But it also provides essential context for evaluating the aesthetic apparatus of historicity that has arisen around Mantel's novel. Published in the wake of *Wolf Hall*, the existence of *Thomas Cromwell: A Life* subtends an even finer distinction in how we think of the novel's relationship to national history. Namely, that from the perspective of our present, the *performance* of historical accuracy supplants and supersedes the need for granular accuracy. One needn't be a senior professor at Oxford to collate the depth of documentary evidence necessary to craft a biography of Cromwell, but it certainly helps, and the novel's dedication to Mary Robertson and ongoing connection to MacCulloch's work lends an associative authority to Mantel's novel as a work of fiction.

MacCulloch himself might not consider Mantel a writer of historical novels ("I might have got bored of the comparison [between the historian and the novelist] if I didn't think Hilary was brilliant, and not really a historical novelist, but just a brilliant

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[67] MacCulloch, 13-14.
[68] Rory Rapple, "Review | The Many Mysteries of the Powerful and Deadly Thomas Cromwell." *Washington Post*, December 14, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-many-mysteries-of-the-powerful-and-deadly-thomas-cromwell/2018/12/14/68cbefba-b518-11e8-a2c5-3187f427e253_story.html.

novelist who in this instance has decided to write a novel about the 16th century"[69]) but in doing so, he elides the specific purchase the genre of the historical novel has on the mechanisms of history-making, and the authorizing power academic history has over Mantel's novel itself.[70] Mantel and MacCulloch have given speaking engagements together, and have spoken glowingly of each other in interviews and blurbs for one another.[71] This public pairing of fiction writer and professional historian bolsters the idea that *Wolf Hall* relies on a performance of history for its appeal, and for its ability to inflect English historical understanding.[72] It is specifically because Mantel's novel is a historical novel, not in spite of it, that such a performance of history is relevant. Mantel does not ignore or circumvent the documentary evidence of the history, but extends what is there, tacitly asserting the novel's accuracy in both content and historiographic

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[69] Diarmaid MacCulloch, "I got very irritated with Henry VIII'. Interview by Alex Preston. *The Guardian*, July 13, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/13/diarmaid-maculloch-thomas-cromwell-a-life-interview-hilary-mantel.

[70] Another point on which Mantel and MacCulloch diverge: she refers to herself as a "historical novelist" in the aforementioned *Guardian* article, albeit with snarky self-deprecation – "I can't do plots, I thought, so I will let history do them for me" (Mantel, "How I Came to Write *Wolf Hall*").

[71] Mantel, in a back cover blurb of *Thomas Cromwell: A Life:* "This a book that - and it's not often you can say this - we have been awaiting for four hundred years." See also Church Times. "Hilary Mantel and Diarmaid MacCulloch at Launde Abbey: Remembering Thomas Cromwell," August 1, 2019. https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/2-august/regulars/podcast/hilary-mantel-and-diarmaid-macculloch-at-launde-abbey-remembering-thomas-cromwell.

[72] MacCulloch, and other historians working in the wake of *Wolf Hall* provide the "history" in the performance of history, but we might just as easily consider the BBC miniseries adaptation to be the extratextual "performance" that supports the other end of that balancing act. Place this on a fulcrum of critical acclaim and recognition by prestigious literary awards such as the Booker, and there we have the full apparatus of the literary phenomenon *Wolf Hall* has become.

narrative[73] – historians and novelist, not at odds with one another, but publicly engaged in a mutually reinforcing project of historiography.[74]

In its profusion of archivally-resourced details, *Wolf Hall* is a paradigmatic entry in what Ansgar Nünning calls the "documentary historical novel." For Nünning, historical fiction exists on a spectrum, between those that attempt straightforward, uninterrogated relation of historical fact in a narrative mode (the "realist historical novel") to Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction," novels that take up as their central organizational principle the very question of writing history itself.[75] The documentary historical novel, however, attempts to be even more realist than the realist novel itself, by incorporating into its material evidence of its own verifiability. The matrix of historical citation and Mantel's ongoing engagement with it sets a particular discursive precondition for the novel and how we should read it. Just as we know that actors are

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[73] See Hilary Mantel, "Art of Fiction:" "I'd read all the history books and novels I could lay my hands on and I wasn't satisfied with what I found... Then, not many months in, I came to a point where the facts about a certain episode ran out, and I spent a whole day making things up."

[74] There are other ramifications of this pairing, especially for the later novels in the Cromwell trilogy. MacCulloch relates in his interview with *The Guardian* both Mantel's scrupulous adherence to the facts as well as her adaptability in the face of updated historiography, saying, "Hilary likes her story and her characters to be as close to what we know of the past as possible. And I know my biography has been very useful to her, because the third of her novels has been influenced by it. She's been a bit miffed, in a gentle way, at the way in which she accepted things that were essentially wrong about Cromwell because she took them from the conventional narrative. And she has made adjustments in the new novel to reflect this" ("I got very irritated with Henry VIII').

[75] Ansgar Nünning, "Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology." *Style* 38, no. 3 (2004): 352-403. By all accounts, Nünning's massive two-volume project, *Von Historischer Fiktion Zu Historiographischer Metafiktion* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1995) provides the definitive typology for historical fiction and contextualization of Hutcheon's work. It also has not, as of now, been translated into English, and so I must rely on the abbreviated typology provided in his article in *Style.* That I am even aware that such a valuable resource exists, despite my own inability to read German, is itself a compelling artifact of difference persisting on the level of nation and culture even as academia writ large has grown beyond the borders of any one nation's critical tradition.

not their characters, the historical "facts" are not the happenings of the novel.[76] Nonetheless, we appreciate the emergent sense that they overlap for the time they are on stage, and what such a staging allows us as the audience to consider.

In *Wolf Hall*'s case, it we are asked to consider the formation of England as a nation-state itself. Arguments that situate the early 16th century as the birth of modern England are contested,[77] but what is clear is that no matter where one locates Cromwell's political motivations – forthright revolutionary, Machiavellian manipulator, sincere champion of the Protestant Reformation, or all three at once – Mantel agrees with Elton, Robertson, and MaCulloch's collective argumentative ante: Cromwell as a singular force in the bringing together of the modern English nation state, wielding singular administrative power.[78] Mantel underscores the potential of this moment, actively

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[76] This impulse towards documentary historiography was also present in Woolf's self-theorizing of her late novels – with *The Years* she intended on "Keep[ing] one toe on the ground by means of dates, facts."

[77] See Elton, but also the ongoing debates around when, exactly, we should locate the beginnings of the modern English nation state in M.J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000, and C.A. Bayly, "Passages from the Old Regimes to Modernity." In *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons*. The Blackwell History of the World. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

[78] Until MacCulloch's opus, there were few book-length studies of Cromwell's life. Take for example John Schofield, *The Rise & Fall of Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant*. Stroud: History Press, 2008, which mostly relies on Elton's claims about Cromwell, and reviews of which can only be found on Amazon and personal blogs, indicating that it made very little splash. A more recent biography, potentially occasioned by the publication of *Wolf Hall* and written by Tracy Borman (*Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2014), was described in *The Guardian* as "disappointingly light on facts" (Lucy Hughes-Hallett, Review of *Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant* by Tracy Borman. *The Observer*, September 21, 2014, sec. Books. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/21/thomas-cromwell-untold-story-review-tracy-borman-sketchy-portrait) and in *Library Journal* as "a thorough and pleasantly readable study, much in line with John Schofield's *The Rise and Fall of Thomas Cromwell*" but ultimately "it breaks little new ground." (Kathleen McCallister, Review of *Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant*, by Tracy Borman. *Library Journal*, November 15, 2014. https://www.libraryjournal.com?reviewDetail=thomas-

restaging it as a crucial moment of instability in English national history – if we should recognize Cromwell's period as the moment in which the modern English nation-state came into existence, by extension it is also a moment uniquely porous to reinvention and revision. The national/international tension that runs through Mantel's Cromwell results not only in a fascinating protagonist in an engaging work of literary fiction, but becomes constitutive of how we should be understanding English national history.

The representation of and association with history becomes a new history for the nation itself. The stage is the profusion of detailed settings – the echoing buttresses of Westminster Abbey and the crepuscular dinginess of the larder alike – and the actors perform in the present tense. This insistence on the profusion of historical detail is not new to historical fiction, or fiction more generally. But its self-aware performance *of performance* is an intensification of Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction," and perhaps an essential redoubling. The implication is that the radical rupture of the (post)modern historical novel, where history *per se* no longer has much purchase on the genre, has itself been rendered traditional and passé. By foregrounding the significance of *performance* of past-ness as essential to the making of the nation-state, the "air of verifiability" that Hutcheon characterizes as more atmospheric than material becomes

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cromwell-the-untold-story-of-henry-viiis-most-faithful-servant). MacCulloch generously cites the difficulty of parsing Cromwell's archive as the reason that "so few of the recent attempts at biography of the man... succeeded in capturing much of him" (*Cromwell: A Life*, 12).

refreshingly essential to how we reckon with both the past and the reverberations that newly recovered past has in the present.

There's a small scene, relatively early in the novel, which neatly demonstrates how historical particulars, performative markers of historical-ness, and descriptive, present-tense attention to interpersonal bureaucratic statecraft ebb and flow into each other to form Mantel's distinctive style. At the end of the novel's first section, "Visitation," Cromwell is attending the Cardinal Wolsey as he serves as the advance party for Henry's trip to Winchester College in 1541 (55). As soon as they arrive, Cromwell meets with George Cavendish, Wolsey's usher, in the kitchens of the college. Throughout the encounter, there are vibrant descriptions of the raw material that surrounds them. "The larders are impoverished and such supplies as they have shown signs of ill-keeping and plunder. There are weevils in the flour. There are mouse droppings where the pastry should be rolled… the *battery de cuisine* is an insult, and the stockpot is mildewed." It continues, with Cromwell taking the slightest action: "he breaks eggs into a basin, each one with a hard professional tap… 'How old is this egg? Change your supplier. I want a nutmeg. Nutmeg? Saffron?' They look at him as if he's speaking Greek" (56).[79] Nearly a full page is given over to an intense profusion of details that serve primarily to give the proceedings an air of specificity and historical weight. There are shades here of Roland Barthes's "reality effect," or Franco Moretti's concept of

[79] Greek being of the few languages Cromwell can't speak, seemingly.

fillers, both conceptualized as ways of rounding out the experience of literary realism – "Narration," not of plot "but of the everyday"[80] – except the effect is more specific. While these details are not "historical" in the documentary sense, they evoke a robust sensorium of what can only be described as *oldness*, as Hutcheon would have us expect. Here in the larder, what we are reading is a description of the past that is rendered into a material present.

And yet, the solidity of these material details stands in juxtaposition with the intense political machinations of the two men. It is in this same larder that Cromwell and Cavendish, after cycling through potential successors to Wolsey as Chancellor, settle provisionally on Thomas More, shaking hands on a bet over whether or not he will accept (57). This conversation, set amongst the dingy and be-weevil'ed kitchen, will prove significant both to history and to the novel's plot. Thomas More was famously executed by Henry VIII after he refused to sign off on the king's divorce, a major moment in the history of the modern Anglican church, and in English religious *and* secular history more broadly. Mantel knows this, and signals it – More's beheading also cleaves the goings-on of *Wolf Hall* from its sequel. But this tiny conversation between Cromwell and Cavendish, seemingly undertaken in passing, frames and shapes both the

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[80] Franco Moretti, "Serious Century." In *The Novel*, 1:364–400, ed. Moretti. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006, 368; and Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986. For other, genre-specific uses of the Reality Effect, see Chapter 2, page 125, for the role such details play in providing an indeterminate field of potential clues that need to be sifted through in the detective novel, and chapter 3, page 172-77, for how these details are necessary not just to construct a sense of realism, but of the believability and integrity of an imagined built world in science fiction and fantasy.

entire novel and much of the historical record of the period that remains with us today. By collapsing major moments in the historical record – More's appointment to Chancellor, and the misgivings expressed by these political actors adumbrating the eventual outright conflict between More and Henry – into a scene so laden with what might otherwise seem to be the mere adornments of the past, Mantel gives her players room to perform statecraft against a backdrop of history.

By locating this scene in the larder, Mantel is showing us how the sausage gets made. That's because even the making of these "mere decorations" is essential – details about the *creation of details* are rendered as politically laden. We see it here in the kitchen, but also in another space of domestic labor. Some two-hundred pages before either of the dramatic tableaux cited above, Cromwell visits York Place and finds Anne and Mary at their sewing in the last of eight anterooms (York Place, no small hovel), festooned with tapestries of Solomon and Sheba (184). In a conversation undertaken in both French and English, he attempts to suss out Anne's intentions and machinations regarding the king's divorce, but she remains cagey and frustrated. "[I]f the king wants it, and the cardinal wants it," she sighs, "then I must say, Master Cremuel, it is all taking a marvelous long while to come to pass!" (187).[81] Unconvinced of the Cardinal Wolsey's ability to secure an annulment, Anne dismisses Cromwell.

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[81] See MacCulloch, *Cromwell: A Life,* 8: "[Cromwell's] name was indeed increasingly written as 'Cromwell' in official documents, and it is not surprising therefore that non-native speakers, mostly reading rather than hearing the name, did their best with formulations such as 'Cromuello.'"

He finds himself in the immediate company of Mary, Anne's sister and the erstwhile paramour of Henry, who, having also scurried away from this tense standoff, brings her sewing with her. Cromwell notes this as being strange, but allows that "perhaps, if she leaves it behind, Anne pulls the stitches out" (187). No single party, apparently, is capable of fully trusting another to carry off the full web of machinations themselves. But it is *what* she is sewing that is essential here. Cromwell asks Mary what she is making: "It is Anne's new coat of arms," she replies, on "her petticoats, her handkerchiefs, her coifs and her veils; she has garments that no one ever wore before, just so she can have her arms sewn on, not to mention the wall hangings, the table napkins…" (188). Here we have labor traditionally coded as feminine being essential to the makings of the state, itself an important corrective to modes of historiography that happily and unconcernedly center hypermasculine "world-historical figures," often men.[82] Here Mary's embroidery does just as much in codifying a political identity for

[82] This more strategic understanding of power, especially when combined with the efforts Mantel takes to paint the women of Henry's court as similarly capable of political manipulation, does further subtle but important work to undermine a more insalubrious generic tic of the historical novel that often places women specifically and non-landed people generally in peripheral roles. In coding Henry, the actual king, as rancorous, volatile, and perhaps not a little stupid, he is shown to be truly *unruly* – that is, unfit for ruling. The hypermasculine world-historical figures around which national history has traditionally been organized are replaced, between Cromwell and Anne, with those who more intuitively understand whence power actually derives. (For a detailed accounting of one specific woman – the "Catholic prophetess" Elizabeth Barton – in the grand political drama of *Wolf Hall*, and how Mantel recasts her as a significant challenge to patriarchal claims to power by both Henry and Cromwell, see Robinson Murphy, "Elizabeth Barton's Claim: Feminist Defiance in Wolf Hall." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 36, no. 2 (2015): 152–68.

Anne – and thus, the political legitimacy of Henry and Anne's coming marriage – as Cromwell's own political machinations in the kitchen.

The raw materials she is sewing are all the makings of costumes, reinforcing the performative nature of statecraft. Anne and Mary's handiwork is a premonition of outright political battles to come, a reification of the Boleyn/Norfolk faction of the court that will, with great fanfare, be destroyed in *The Mirror and the Light.* But to contemporary readers, the historical pageantry of petticoats, handkerchiefs, wall-hangings and table napkins both provide the Tudor Era costume drama elements of the historical novel while also crafting coherent markers of English national culture. The salient questions are not whether such historical details are there to lend an air of verifiability, or whether they are significantly assimilated into the plot. Rather, the presence of these details in a historical novel of the making of the English nation-state indicate that the presence of these stage-setting details is essential to the process of nation-making in the first place.

If there were any doubt of the convergence of the interpersonal, the historical and the geopolitical in the novel, Cromwell's own ruminations after his conversations with the two sisters cast it aside. "Walking away – eight antechambers back to the rest of his day," Cromwell immediately considers what these otherwise small conversations might mean for the makings of political reality moving forward. What he sees is that "there is a world beyond this black world. There is a world of the possible. A world

where Anne can be queen is a world where Cromwell can be Cromwell. He sees it; then he doesn't. The moment is fleeting" (189). Mantel, in wading into the debates about how we might reconstrue a national past without dipping into melodrama or xenophobic nationalism, provides a solution here. For Cromwell, and thus Mantel, a world where Anne can be queen is a world where England is recognizable as a sovereign, stable, and governable nation with her sharing its throne, and a world where Cromwell can be Cromwell is a world that accepts and embraces the full incongruities of the myriad cultures and languages that Cromwell himself embodies. This is the world that *Wolf Hall* itself imagines in our present by provoking us to consider it as having always been true in the past.

In *Wolf Hall*, the neo-mythic past that the historical novel looks back to – clouded as it is by nostalgia for something that never existed – is staged as the backdrop for someone like Cromwell to perform. As he operates within the bureaucracy of state and without it through his private conversations in the eaves of the halls of power, we as readers learn to think through the genre of historical fiction, allowing us to understand the otherwise paradoxical idea that radical potential can emerge out of neoconservative nostalgia, if we let it.

The Indefeasible Master Cromwell

So, what kind of performance does Cromwell give on this stage? The nostalgia for a particular fictionalized history of England relies on a firm foundation of both generic precedent and historical documentation. Cromwell himself is more difficult to pin down. Partly, this is a result of the particulars of Cromwell's life that have come down to us – or more pointedly, haven't. Archives of the period typically were arranged as a sort of in-tray and out-tray, with draft copies of outgoing missives held for archival reasons before signed fair copies were sent out. In Cromwell's case, however, this archival out-tray was destroyed almost entirely. As MacCulloch surmises, "[s]uch a vast loss of the out-tray can only be the result of deliberate destruction,"[83] most likely by two of Cromwell's own officers, in order to destroy evidence between the call for his arrest and his eventual trial. As a result, even what we know in the strict documentary sense is heavily inflected by what other people thought of Cromwell. From his in-tray, we can only make inferences based on what his other associates decided to send *to* him; we know far less of his own personal thoughts on matters at hand – his out-tray.

For Mantel, however, this proves a boon. If, as she avers, she read all the history books and started writing fiction where the history books ran out, we can see this massive lacuna in Cromwellian biography rendered into the fabric of her portrayal of the fixer. It is into some of these gaps that Mantel injects Cromwell's internationalism,

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[83] MacCulloch, *Cromwell: A Life*, 11.

providing a practicable account of national power that derives from international connection. Mantel takes the established historicized view of Cromwell as a forceful maker of the nation-state and breaks it open, using what is left out of the historical record to show how Cromwell's power to craft the nation derives from his appreciation of how nations exist only in relation to one another. Where there are gaps in documentary evidence, Mantel places her Cromwell in the wings and the cellars, away from prying eyes and scrawling note-takers. When political stakes shift but it's not certain how Cromwell was involved, there are clandestine meetings in changing rooms and pubs. And when Cromwell's own thoughts on a matter of state, theology, or principle are lacking in the record, they are reinscribed into the novel through internal monologue characterized by thoughtful deliberation, strategic evaluation, and a grounding in Cromwell's experiences abroad.

In doing so, *Wolf Hall* contrasts less rigorous models of the nation-state that depend on the centralization of power and the establishing of borders. Mantel's England, and by extension the nation-state as a broader ideological formation, only emerges as a result of a dense international network, not in spite of it. Though "globalization" might otherwise serve to disaggregate individual nations into a universalized and homogenized field of international connection, *Wolf Hall* demonstrates the falseness of that dyad. The nation can only form by embracing – not retreating from – global interconnection.

Cromwell shows us how. Mantel updates her protagonist by demonstrating how his impressive influence derived not from traditional shows of force but from craftier bureaucratic nudges and shoves, tactics that were diffused throughout the broader managerial network of Western Europe. This supranational perspective is essential to Cromwell – that is, it is a foundational element of his biography and worldview. Born in Wales, he speaks Welsh (11). While serving in the French army, he marched on Italy, and thus speaks a bit of both of those languages, as well as "military" Spanish and, of course, "diplomatic" Latin (21). As an agent of the English court, he obviously speaks English. His internationality is not purely linguistic or ideological, but practical, reinforced as much by the dynamics of international geopolitics in which he operates as it is by the events of his life.

Mantel's Cromwell has embedded himself so thoroughly in his own experiences of pan-European travel that these reminiscences irrupt even during the funeral of his first wife, Liz Wykus.[84] Back from the king's visit to Westminster, Cromwell resituates himself in Austin Friars, the monastery in the heart of London that Cromwell made into his home and grounds. He finds himself mourning amongst a host comprised of his family and friends – "a swarm of women and children and robust men," along with his

[84] That Liz died of the bubonic plague that ravaged England on and off for three centuries is a timely reminder – for us, reading amidst the impact of COVID-19 – that international borders are at their core conceptual, cultural artifacts, rather than material realities. That different nations continue to respond to the pandemic with wildly different plans (or lack thereof) bears another frustrating truth: that while borders may be cultural artifacts, they nonetheless have very real ramifications for those of us (all of us) living within them.

sisters, his nieces and nephews, and the assorted "lawyers and merchants, accountants and brokers" that make up his household and extended family (99). Even at the intensely grounded and personal scene of the death of his wife, Cromwell's attention drifts inwards, back, and abroad by way of internal monologue: "In the year before he came back to England for good, he had crossed and recrossed the sea, undecided." The narration loops with Cromwell's thoughts, as he recalls "so many friends in Antwerp, besides good business contacts" before turning to Italy. "If he was homesick, it was for Italy: the light, the language" (101). He recognizes the fragmentation of his own identity in this moment, lingering for a moment on his name – "Tommaso as he'd been there." Yet, while "Venice had cured him of any nostalgia for the banks of the Thames" and "Florence and Milan had given him ideas more flexible than those of people who'd stayed at home," there was still something that "pulled at him – curiosity about who was dead and who'd been born, a desire to see his sisters again, and laugh" (101). The man at the center of the Tudor Revolution in government feels his own geographic center constantly in flux.

That these ruminations come amidst personal tragedy serves to highlight how Mantel imbricates Cromwell's internationalist experience with the domestic and familial ties that gird his household. Cromwell is no cosmopolitan, in the strict, etymological sense. He is not a "citizen of the world," despite his deep affinity for and affiliation with nations other than those he can properly call his own. Having been born in Wales (a

nation much more distinct from England at the time than our contemporary sensibilities would have it, habituated as we are to the modern formulation of the United Kingdom),[85] and having spent so much time abroad, Cromwell nonetheless feels the pull back to England.

This more sophisticated sort of cosmopolitanism, which allows Cromwell to feel tied to multiple nations all at once rather than disaggregated from the nation-state as a concept, is one that recognizes the complicity of the nation embedded within an expansive global perspective. In order to be cosmopolitan, writes Kwame Anthony Appiah, one must embrace "the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship," recognizing that "[p]eople are different… and there is much to learn from our differences."[86] Cromwell feels this deeply, as we witness his memory buffeting from nation to nation, even at the moment where his attention might rightly sit with the very kith and kin that the cosmopolitan would extend his sympathies beyond. Cromwell's ruminations at his wife's funeral show the roving

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[85] In fact, if one takes the vote breakdown for the Brexit Referendum of 2016, (perhaps not the most rigorous indicator of nationalist sentiment, but an evocative one nonetheless), Wales collectively hews closer to a centralized, independent and bordered Great Britain, voting to leave the EU at a rate just slightly behind England (52.5% for Wales, 53.4% for England). For comparison, only 44.2% of Northern Ireland voters preferred leaving the EU, and only 38% of Scottish voters. Paradoxically, in throwing in with the idea of a bounded UK so heartily, Wales's voter-share for Brexit is both intensely nationalistic at the level of the whole island, but dissolutely internationalist at the level of the relationship between itself and England (BBC News. "EU Referendum Results." https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results).

[86] Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006, 13.

locality of such a form of cosmopolitanism – when he should perhaps be most present in England, he turns to memories of Belgium and Italy. But in moving there, even just in his imagination, he feels the pull back to England. Cosmopolitanism here functions not as an Archimedean point outside of the entire system of nation-states. Rather, Cromwell is cosmopolitan in that he is positioned in a relational and contingent practice of internationalism, grounded in one's own place yet reliant on a recognition of difference as an essential first step in articulating our shared obligations.

This understanding of cosmopolitanism recenters it on an ethos of the personal and domestic, serving as a reminder that even the most cosmopolitan among us still have somewhere we call home. The collapsing of Cromwell's internationalist sensibilities into the intensely domestic sphere of his wife's funeral, then, embodies a second strand of Appiah's cosmopolitanism, the call to "take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance."[87] Beyond highlighting his own personal cosmopolitan experience and ethical obligation, Cromwell's internal monologue during the funeral demonstrates he is international when he is domestic, but also that the domestic is bound up in internationalism by nature of those who comprise

[87] Appiah, 13.

the relationship. Janus-like, Cromwell faces both home and abroad in every interaction, even something as intimate as his own wife's funeral.[88]

Cromwell's ability to navigate through these intertwined spheres of life shows their ultimate practical unity in the England that Mantel crafts. The result is a dizzying multivalence to some of Cromwell's meetings, where matters of state and personal conflict merge into one and the same and are made present in a way that grand narratives of history cannot. In the course of securing legitimacy for Henry's wedding to Anne, we follow along with Cromwell into another scene of closet drama, this time in the snug of local pub. Cromwell makes an appeal to Harry Percy that he lay down any public claim he might make to a previous betrothal to the king's consort. Percy, a feudal earl whose "task," according to Cromwell, was to "secure the north" against Scotland, served in his youth in the household of Thomas Wolsey, and claimed to have been betrothed to Anne before King Henry (another Harry, of course) had become enamored of her (347-49). Cromwell takes seriously the personal values and beliefs of Percy, but this no mere domestic scandal. For a fixer like Cromwell, grumbling from a spurned lover is the sort of interpersonal spat that might swell into a vast geopolitical imbroglio, and as such must be dealt with summarily. "Any silly promises you made had no effect in law," Cromwell tersely informs Percy. "Whatever understanding you think you had,

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[88] "Domestic," a Janus-like word itself, can of course refer to home both in the geopolitical sense as well as in opposition to the professional or the public.

you didn't have it" (349). He builds to a threat, darkly warning that if the Duke of Norfolk, Anne's uncle, "hears the slightest imputation against [Anne's] honor, he will drag you out of whatever hole you are cowering in and bite your bollocks off" (350). This taut bundle of historical figures, political maneuvering, personal grievance and romantic drama is as representative of *Wolf Hall*'s commitment to rewriting history as any of the broader historical set-pieces that are staged throughout. The novel is after all, I've argued, a performance of history; the closeness of the drama allows the audience to witness Cromwell's nation-making power in its most intimate, immediate form.

Through this tangle pierces another one of Cromwell's musings, and here Mantel gives what may as well serve as a précis for where the fixer locates national power as a whole. Annoyed at the young Harry Percy's vim-and-vinegar speech about "true love" and "pledges" (348), Cromwell gives a more specific edge to his threat, growling that he will call in Percy's debts from "all over Europe," which would result in the young magnate's inability to keep his tenant armies supplied. "If you cannot ensure" these provisions, Cromwell menaces, "you are worse than useless. The king will take your title away, and your land, and your castles, and give them to someone who will do the job you cannot" (349). Cromwell's thoughts again turn towards to unmarked internal monologue as his ire rises, and we get the clearest, sharpest insight in the whole novel into the source of Cromwell's considerable power. "Let's say I will rip your life apart," Cromwell silently posits, glowering at Percy. "Me and my banker friends." A dip into

third person follows, with the narrator posing rhetorically "How can he explain to him?" (349). The pronouns here, with their inbuilt vagueness and the syntactic interchangeability that allows for Cromwell to be thinking of either Harry the soldier or Harry the king, generalizes the fixer's approach from a specific threat to Percy into a grander philosophy of how power functions:

> The world is not run from where he thinks. Not from his border fortresses, not even from Whitehall. The world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from places he has never imagined; from Lisbon, from where the ships with sails of silk drift west and are burned up in the sun. Not from castle walls, but from countinghouses, not by the call of the bugle but by the click of the abacus, not by the grate and click of the mechanism of the gun but by the scrape of the pen on the page of the promissory note that pays for the gun and the gunsmith and the powder and the shot (349).

Cromwell's threat is not an empty one, but it also does not inhere in traditional models of power organized around either interpersonal force or national conflict. None of Cromwell's banker friends are those we might consider the world-historical figures of the epic, nor are they marked by close proximity to those same world-historical actors, as Lukács might have anticipated. Instead, they are unnamed – perhaps even hypothetical – bureaucrats, accountants and financiers spread across Europe. They marshal their influence not altogether, and perhaps not even in coordination. There are no fronts where armies face off against one another, just as there are no "border fortresses," no north to secure, no Whitehalls to defend. The force to make and unmake the fortunes of English state authority, and thus the borders of England itself, is a

fundamentally international one. It lies in the ability of said bureaucrats to activate the networked relations of trade and finance that underwrite the military actions around which less keen, less subtle histories might be arranged. Cromwell's power, in short, is not that he has any himself, but that he knows how to reshape the field of interconnection in his favor.

So, when it comes to forging the English nation-state, Cromwell does not turn to the likes of Harry Percy – Percy is an obstacle, not a player. Instead, he props up those we might imagine to be the true players, due to their station, and situates them on the world stage. Just before the marriage of Anne and Henry, the narration prods the reader: "It is time to say what England is, her scope and boundaries" (312). This obviously accords with the sense of the nation that is delimited by its geographic borders (which must then, in turn, be secured). But to define England, the narrator continues, is "not to count and measure her harbor defenses and border walls, but to estimate her capacity for self-rule." It is a softer form of power; not military force but rather "the compacts that hold the world together," which the narrator enumerates, in lieu of counting defenses and borders, as "the compact between ruler and ruled, and that between husband and wife." The truism that the personal is the political holds here. But the implications are more geopolitically specific than that: the domestic is the international, the local is global. Both the nation and the world are held together through bonds of

mutual, international responsibility much more strongly than they are by martial – or marital – exclusion.

Henry's attempt to divorce Katherine may have triggered this crisis in monarchical power as well as England's relationship with Europe, and it must appear that Henry's desire to publicly marry Anne is the path to bringing England back together, intact and unified. But Cromwell knows this is just a performance, musing later:

> The fate of people is made like this, two men in small rooms. Forget the coronations, the conclaves of cardinals, the pomp and processions. This is how the world changes: a counter pushed across a table, a pen stroke that alters the force of a phrase, a woman's sigh as she passes and leave on the air a trail of orange flower or rose water (566).

The grand performances of history – the "coronations… the pomp and processions" are the domestic spectacles through which the work of "two men in small rooms" are enacted. Mere recognition of this dynamic, however, is not enough. What elevates Cromwell's role is his understanding, *pace* Appiah, that the makings of England are as bound up in the compacts between and among national powers abroad as they are in the compacts between ruler and ruled, or husband and wife. Cromwell operates in a world that appreciates the "obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind" but also recognizes that "tak[ing] seriously the value not just of

human life but of particular human lives,"[89] that is, the lives of the rulers and ruled themselves, swells the interpersonal into the geopolitical.

Moreover, Cromwell realizes that these domestic performances need recording in order to be intelligible to the international community. Immediately after the marriage of Anne and Henry, Cromwell returns to his office in Westminster and "sits down to his drafting" (395). The immediate performance of marriage – Henry and Anne's marriage – thus undertaken, it falls to Cromwell to turn that performance into the material reality of history. The first lines of the public pronouncement of marriage, the ones he actually writes before being interrupted, read, "This realm of England is an Empire." Here Cromwell performs the alchemy of state that surrounds the monarch, refiguring matters of love into the architecture of the nation, but it is not far enough. He turns the next phrase over in his head – "*The realm of England is an Empire, and so has been accepted in the world, governed by one Supreme Head and King"* (396, emphasis original). It is not enough to merely state that England is an Empire, as an empire, by definition, begins from within and extends outwards. The actual codifying power, Cromwell recognizes, comes from without. Anne and Henry's marriage must not only be recognized by the English but be "accepted in the world." In order to say "what England is," one must think beyond its borders while performing the grand acts of state that

[89] Appiah, 13.

make such actions internationally legible. In writing publicly to the world both home and abroad, he attempts to make it so.

Conclusion: Truth, Lies, and Good Stories

The historical novel, throughout its long legacy and for all of its fictiveness, has danced along the line between politics and fiction, the raw material of history and the performative power of nation-building. And so it is no surprise that Mantel's Cromwell, the ultimate player of the game, reckons the power of writing. Early on in the novel, before Cromwell has begun working for Henry, Cromwell's son Gregory muses to him about the king's ancestry, and how it could be traced back to Merlin. He finds it in a book – a historical novel, you might say – with twenty-one chapters, surely a massive tome to be carrying around at the time. He intends to read them all. With all the innocence of a child explaining a book to his father, Gregory incises the value of historical fiction as such: "Some of these things are true, and some of them lies. But they are all good stories" (205).

Some of what comprises historical fiction are lies, but much of it is true – that's what makes it historical. Either way, though, the genre itself proposes a set of good stories, a recognizable subset of novels with hefty page counts and a forthright invocation of the past that draws a certain kind of reader over and over. Those readers may be in search of something particular – an understanding of a nation's history at a

moment in time, the dramatic flourishes of a period that are recognizable. But the historical novel today, as a genre, does something different with those particulars. By positing as its setting the historical moment of England's emergence as a global, geopolitical power divorced from territorial disputes between monarchs, *Wolf Hall* forces its readers, from any nation, to reckon with the stories they tell themselves about the category of the nation writ large. Mantel, and thus Cromwell, understand that the good stories they tell stand in close relation to truth, but are not bound by them. As Cromwell himself muses at the burial of his father, "It is the absence of facts that frightens people: the gap you open, into which they pour their fears, fantasies, desires" (331). Mantel pours Cromwell into those gaps, and together they fill them with ink.

As the conceptual utility of the nation-state as an organizing principle for our understanding of the present falters in the transition into an ever-more-globalized discursive ambit, fissures continue to erupt. The historical definition of nations no longer obtain, or at least don't seem to, as we see the vast networks of interconnection supersede the myths of collectivity and community that hold nations together. Cromwell, fluid as he is, international as he is, is shown to have the power not to fuse the English nation-state back together but to bring it into existence in the first place, his ink serving as the glue.

Just after the execution of Thomas More, his most resolute opponent, Cromwell returns to work. "He has his sketch map across the page," Mantel writes in the novel's

final paragraphs. “England in a drizzle of ink.” His calendar, “quickly jotted, running down it,” marks a series of meeting which he must rearrange (603). Maps, calendars, meetings, accounts; Cromwell writes them all down. *Wolf Hall,* as a historical novel, revels in just these sort of details, bringing its audience together as an audience, in both space and time, to participate in a new image of what England was, and thus what England is. The final *mise-en-scene* of the novel, as the curtain falls, shows us Cromwell (and by implication, Mantel), pen in hand. The act of writing itself becomes enveloped in performance, and we watch as Cromwell ensures that this new image of England will not, must not, be understood as having arisen in a vacuum. We leave the theater with a newfound appreciation that the nation – all nations, England and otherwise – has always been global, and remains so today.

II – Noticing

The City & The City opens precisely as any pulpy detective novel would. Our heroic yet world-weary detective Tyador Borlú arrives to the scene of a murder, his cagey younger partner already there to give him the rundown. The body of a woman readers will come to know as Mahalia Geary, an American PhD candidate in archaeology, was found by anxious teenage drug users regretting their choice to involve the police when they realize they might themselves become roped into the investigation.

At the scene of the crime, our trusty detective notices an elderly woman walking down the street. Borlú displays in a flash the expected skills of an experienced gumshoe. Narrating in the first person, as he does the entire novel, our protagonist describes the automatic assessment of a potential witness:

> She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In my glance, I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, of looking.[1]

A good detective, Borlú. He's observant. He is able in a "glance" to mark down potentially useful identifying characteristics while also asking himself whether she might have something to offer his minutes-old investigation. That this happens so naturally and easily, and so quickly, is a testament to how ingrained the process of observation is to our investigator (and his investigation).

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[1] China Miéville. *The City & The City: A Novel*. Reprint edition. New York: Del Rey, 2010, 12. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

This automaticity is what makes his next reaction confusing, even startling, when Borlú seems to intentionally shut off those instincts:

> With a hard start, I realized she was not on Gunterstrász at all, and that I should not have seen her. Immediately and flustered, I looked away, and she did the same, with the same speed. I raised my head… When after a few seconds I looked back up, *unnoticing* the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in her foreign street at the facades of the nearby and local Gunterstrász, that depressed zone (2, emphasis mine).

Borlú, the trained detective, pivots, "immediately and flustered," from considering a potential witness's value to "unnoticing" her, decidedly not something we'd expect such a professional noticer to do. This tension, between the paradigmatic expertise of the detective, and the "unnoticing" that comes immediately thereafter, is what drives the pulse of the novel. In *The City & The City,* as we can expect from a detective novel, every detail may be a clue – but which clues Borlú, and thus we as readers, are *permitted* to notice, to acknowledge, to make sense of, are limited. From the novel's very first pages, Miéville challenges us to think like detectives, to see the expectations of the genre not as a limitation, or a gimmick, or as innovative reworking of a "low" literary form, but as the core logic for unraveling the case – why Geary was murdered, but also precisely *where?* What are we permitted to notice?

It's not until some forty pages in, at the beginning of Chapter 5, that the conceit of the novel is revealed: *The City & The City* stages the seemingly impossible interposition of two fictional cities – Besźel and Ul Qoma – complete with their own

languages, histories, names and cultures in overlapping geographic space.[2] This is why Borlú feels compelled to "unsee" the old woman who was not, in fact, on Gunterstrász. By law, residents may only notice elements of their own country, and must "unsee" – see and *choose to ignore* – anything from "beyond" the border. The narration uses the word "unsee" repeatedly throughout the novel, but the vernacular use by the novels' characters obscures a more subtle distinction between "seeing" – a passive taking-in of visual information – and "noticing" – a more active way of processing said information, based on both instinctive and trained decisions. More ominously, if anyone within these cities fail to "unsee," they are liable to find themselves disappeared by Breach, the secretive extra-state agency tasked with enforcing these same borders.

Miéville himself centers the novel's generic qualifications in an interview appended to the mass-market edition of his novel, where he plainly states "I consider it a crime novel, above all."[3] It's not *just* a crime novel, though. The distinctions between "crime novel," "detective novel," "police procedural," "murder mystery" etc. are so

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[2] This burying of the lede, Miéville's resistance to typical up-front worldbuilding, is a habit of his – Miéville's previous novel, *Kraken* (2010), forestalls any direct elucidation, opting instead for an ever-unfolding rebus of magical influences that pervade central London; his 2011 novel *Embassytown* takes fifty-six pages before the narrator directly addresses the central strangeness of that novel, the so-called "non-referential language" of an alien race. Counter to the frenetic worldbuilding of his massive *Bas-Lag* trilogy (*Perdido Street Station* [2001], *The Scar* [2002], *Iron Council* [2004]), there's a caginess in these later novels, serving both to build suspense as well as to reinforce the generic forms each take (detective novel, noir suspense, and science fiction) without making it too easy – you'll get it, reader, but you're going to have to work for it. (For one way to make sense of all this suspense, specifically in *The City and The City*, see Theodore Martin, "Waiting." In *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017, discussed in further detail below, pages 116-118.)

[3] "A Conversation with China Miéville," *Random House Reader's Circle Reading Guide*, as found in *The City & The City*, 316.

subtle that parsing them out would undermine what is precisely so recognizable about the form. *The City & The City* is explicitly a *detective* novel, and as such what is essential is not only the process of resolving a particular crime but the efforts taken by a professional detective in securing that resolution. By staging the thought experiment of overlapping nations through the generic structure of the detective novel, *The City & The City* insists that we consider Miéville's engagement with the genre on its own terms. Miéville is not experimenting with the form of the detective novel *per se*, but rather he deploys the genre as a solidified logic for navigating contradictory sets of evidence and conclusions in order to expose the paradoxes of transnational difference and fusion.

If we are to work the case, we must first survey the scene. How these two nations function side by side in partially overlapping physical space is as mysterious as the identity of Geary's murderer, and to begin the investigation we have to consider why such an interposition of nations seems paradoxical in the first place. I argue that Miéville's way out of this paradox is to adopt the logic of the detective novel, where constant (re)incorporation of old evidence and new clues is necessary for moving the investigation forward. I then turn this logic back onto the question of how to navigate the twinned cities of Besźel and Ul Qoma, ultimately arguing that although there is no definitive "solution" to the paradox, thinking like a detective allows for a new superpositioned way of thinking of the nation that is positively constructed and non-exclusionary.

This is a strategy for critics, parsing the residual hold the nation still has on our approaches to thinking about the novel in the era of globalization. More importantly, though, it is also an epistemic model for navigating the tensions between community and difference that arise in the edges of space that has been mapped, often clumsily and unfairly, for political ends and with little account for already present communities, with or without the consent of those who find themselves within those borders. Thinking like a detective does not abolish the lines on maps, nor does it invest them with any greater significance. Adopting the logic of the detective provides a method to reconcile the competing truths that the nation as a social formation persists – and seems to have been re-emboldened – precisely at the moment when the borders between them are being exposed as fictions.

What *The City & The City* proposes is fiction that is less about developing a hard and fast systematic theory of what a nation *is*, and more an understanding of nation – and national difference, and national consensus – as fundamentally akin to detective work, where what we start with is what we notice, and an awareness of what we're refusing to notice. Difference and interconnection between the two cities, both in history and in the present, are not posed as incompatible in Miéville's novel, but as the substrate through which the murder mystery moves. *The City & The City*, as a detective novel, serves as the scene of the crime, where attempts to define the relationship between individual nations are seen as false conclusions, challenging our need for such solutions

in the first place. The novel lays out new terms of what is possible in how we might think about global interconnection, forcing us to consider that drawing any final, summative conclusion is necessarily an act of *un*seeing as much as seeing. To do so, we must first survey the scene. What is the nation, anyway? And what can the detective novel teach us?

Case Brief

Sometimes, it's easy to parse the difference between these two strange nations. Much of each city is considered "total," meaning there is no overlap between the two, and thus there is little chance of breaching. Of course, such areas of totality being uncomplicated means they are also less interesting, and our narrator Borlú spends much more of his time in or adjacent to the "crosshatched" areas where they collide. He constantly notes the effects and affects of national difference, and we must do the same. As the novel's setting unfurls, everyday cultural practices take on legal significance. Architecture (17), clothing (18), food (54), languages and alphabets (41),[4] even colors –

[4] "Older fronts in tumbledown of classical Beszź style;" "drab cuts and colours that enduringly characterise Beszź clothes;" "Ul Qoman food… cinnamon lentils, thick sweet tea;" "Illitan and Beszź sound very different. They are written, of course, in distinct alphabets. Beszź is in Beszź: thirty four letters" that look "like Cyrillic" while "Illitan uses Roman script." Other visual and cultural evidence stacks, obviously, throughout. For the best and most comprehensive cataloguing of the differences between Beszźel and Ul Qoma, see Barbara Elizabeth Hanna and Peter Cowley, "Breach of Contact: An Intercultural Reading of China Miéville's *'The City and The City*.'" *Portal; Sydney* 11, no. 2 (2014). Their careful attention to these differences is laudable, even if I want to claim, as I do below, that such distinctions are significant only inasmuch as it is possible to draw them in the first place and not in the material of the differences themselves.

"You can see the trimming in the shade called Besźel blue, one of the colours illegal in Ul Qoma" (53) – the background noise of living and moving through a city become highly charged indices of what can legally be noticed, and what must be unnoticed under threat of swift punishment by Breach.[5] To even *be* in Besźel and Ul Qoma, one must become a sort of detective in the extreme, making constant high-stakes decisions about what is relevant and what must be ignored. The system seems impossible. No matter how elaborate the crosshatching might be, how intricate the procedures of enforcement or how deeply internalized the national borders are in the minds of the Besź and Ul Qoman people, surely there must be gaps, surely no such superposition of two distinct nations is tenable?

Miéville exploits these gaps throughout the novel, referring to these "crosshatched" zones that can't be pinned down in one nation or the other, "*dissensi*," spaces that are contested as being owned by both (50), and especially by narrating the third section from within Breach.[6] What is the citizen of Besźel or Ul Qoma to do, faced with actively competing sets of inputs? This instability narrativizes the ongoing fugitivity of the nation as a concept in the first place, despite the obvious role it has in our day to day lives. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, amidst a resurgence in

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[5] Significantly, this behavior is learned, not automatic; a process undertaken from the moment of birth. *TC&TC,* 66: "The early years of a Besź (and presumably an Ul Qoman) child are intense learning of cues. We pick up styles of clothing, permissible colours, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast. Before we were eight or so most of us could be trusted not to breach embarrassingly and illegally, though license of course is granted to children every moment they are in the street."

[6] Indicated not only by the plot, but also by a separate section break, 239.

nationalism following the fall of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav wars, and the Rwandan genocide, the new interdisciplinary subfield of "nationalism studies" emerged from the work of such influential sociologists, philosophers, historians, and political and media theorists as Anthony Smith, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson. These thinkers, in conversation with one another, attempted to disentangle the concept of nationalism from both the political and social community that is the nation and the legal and disciplinary frameworks of the state.[7] For Gellner, the nation as a stable geopolitical and culturally recognizable object formed as an imposition from the elite, a "generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication" within and empowered by state apparatuses.[8] Eric Hobsbawm takes Gellner's understanding of the nation and nuances it *en route* to theorizing the nation-*state,* requiring that separate constructions of the ideology of nationalism and the mechanisms of the state both come into being before it's merged form, the nation, can arise. He writes, "[n]ations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around."[9] The nation as a symbolic structure, following Hobsbawm, functions "prospectively" within the structures of nationalism, but the nation as an extant political formation can only

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[7] For a concise and efficient survey of the historical development in the late 1980s and 1990s of "nationalism studies" as a discipline, see the introduction by Joseph Theodoor Leerssen in *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History*. Amsterdam UP, 2006, 13-22.
[8] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. *New Perspectives on the Past.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1983, 57.
[9] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. The Wiles Lectures given at the Queen's University of Belfast. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1990, 10.

ever be defined *a posteriori*, a "social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the nation-state."[10] Hobsbawm's theory merges Gellner's top-down imposition of the nation as a collective identity with a bottom-up attention to the on-the-ground material history of political struggle, and the technological and social advances of the 19th century that allowed for such a conception. "For this reason," he writes, nations are a "dual phenomenon, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below… in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people."[11]

Thinking in terms purely of "nation," and not national*ism*, the ideology of the nation, the system in *The City & The City* seems impossible. The imposition of the nation from above requires, besides just the mechanism of enforcement, a delimited sphere of both citizens and territory. Even with the exceptions of the cross-hatched zones, the whole system seems impossible only if we take for granted a certain casual, work-a-day definition of nation that centers geography as a determining factor – nations as distinct, geographic regions we can imagine on a Risk board, with dotted lines tracing potential global connection but dark, bold lines asserting that nations are as indelibly different from one another as Kamchatka and Irkutsk, and that any crossing will require a potential outlay of troops. Such a reductive model makes sense for a board game; it

[10] Hobsbawm, 9.
[11] Hobsbawm, 11

makes far less sense in the real world, where Kamchatka is a peninsula, Irkutsk a city, both are in Siberia, both have been parts of The Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation, and neither have ever been their own nation. That it is possible to even imagine them as nations implies that geography itself must have *some* role in the definition.

Resituating geography back into the question of the nation about a decade later and from a more international perspective, Jürgen Habermas, in *The Postnational Constellation,* articulates, "the conditions for a successful implementation of positive, compulsory law" in the context of the nation "require that the social delimitation of the political community has to be combined with the territorial delimitation of the geographical area that will be under the control of the state." In short, "membership in a state must be defined territorially."[12] In this formulation, nationalism arises alongside the state, and they are bound together with the terrain. But only when both conditions are met can a state be imbricated with the cultural makings of nationalism to create the modern nation: "Constructed through the medium of modern law, the modern territorial state thus depends on the development of a national consciousness to provide it with the cultural substrate for a civil solidarity."[13]

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[12] Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*. Translated and edited by Max Pensky. 1st MIT Press ed. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001, 63.
[13] Habermas, 64.

This sort of mediated articulation, heavily influenced by Benedict Anderson's intuitive theorization in *Imagined Communities*, begins with a population's ability to imagine themselves as part of a shared whole greater than the sum of its parts, allowing for the nation, in its current sense, to come into existence.[14] For Anderson, thinking more sociologically and psychologically, the nation operates not as an imposition from above but horizontally, out of a shared imagining only possible through the technological innovations of the realist novel and the newspaper, and the markers of national identity are forged from (imagined, illusory, mythic[15]) shared cultural habits, customs, and signifiers organized in what he, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, calls homogenous empty time.[16] Ultimately, thinking of the nation as a purely ideological formation forces us to understand it as theoretical – not what a nation is but how it functions, how it is imagined. To borrow for a moment from the vocabulary of video games, they are generated procedurally, emerging as the conclusions to an argument built out of clues rendered by an underlying code, where the code is what the nation is, and what we see

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[14] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006.

[15] Earlier work by Hobsbawm, specifically in *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Past and Present Publications. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge UP, 1983), is useful here, both to my argument and for understanding Anderson's historical project. Hobsbawm opens his introduction by citing the very same stage decoration of state that I argued in the previous chapter Mantel was attempting to revise for a more globalized era. "Nothing appears more ancient," Hobsbawm writes, "and linked to an immemorial past than the pageantry which surrounds the British Monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations" (1). It is these "invented traditions" – which Hobsbawm defines as a "set of practices, normally governed by tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition" – which "automatically implies continuity with the past" (1). If Anderson insists on simultaneity, Hobsbawm anchors that simultaneity in the past.

[16] Anderson, "Cultural Roots," 9-36.

is processed and filtered through that code. Contradictions in what two given people might consider as markers of the nation are overridden by the programming that asserts that it's not the differences that matter, not really, but rather that so long as two people are reaching the same conclusions – imagining the same nation – the differences will be smoothed out in the final rendering.

We see a poor reflexive and hollowed-out version of these modes of imagining in the current global wave of far-right nationalism, with Donald Trump as its masthead and Brexit as its advance guard. "Build the wall," "close the borders" become foremost concerns in the project of securing national sovereignty, and an assertion (rather than a materially grounded reality) of a unified myth of a homogenous shared culture fills in the space behind it. There is no doubt aggressive xenophobia undergirding these ideas, but in their insistence to reduce the nation back to its borders, they nonetheless articulate something very real and clear, and also backwards: our everyday perception of the nation-*state* – a modern administrative institution that emerged from the exigencies of colonization and buttressed in its retreat during decolonization – has collapsed almost entirely into national identity while maintaining the sense of geographic borders that are neither a *priori* or *a posteriori* to the nation, but almost singularly constitutive of it.[17]

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[17] For a lucid accounting of the mechanisms by which borders come to proceed the nation, and their seeming endless proliferation in the era of globalized capital especially when considered as a disciplining force of the attendant labor force, see Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. For a pithier summary, Ayesha Siddiqi nails it in one: "every border implies the

These competing models of how the nation forms as a coherent ideological object – top-down and resulting from the institutionalization of the state in the modern period (Gellner); the capturing by political elites of more authentic national impulses born from bottom-up political and ideological formation of the people (Hobsbawm); reflexively and iteratively through media and technology (Anderson); or strong-man assertion of national identity in direct opposition to the will of an always-other and disreputable political and cultural elite – all lead to the same conclusion: while national*ism* as a concept makes a certain form of sense, or is at least theorizable, a single definition of "nation" remains fugitive. As Anthony Smith, one of these forefathers of nationalism studies, summarized in his 1994 monograph titled, you guessed it, *Nationalism,* the complex ideology of the nation can be understood variably as, "a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation," "a language and symbolism of the nation," and "a doctrine and/or ideology of the nation, both general and particular."[18] But while "nationalism" seems diagnosable, he goes on to admit that the definition of the term "nation" itself is "undoubtedly the most problematic and contentious term in the

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violence of its maintenance" (Ayesha A. Siddiqi. Tweet. *@AyeshaASiddiqi*, September 2, 2015. https://twitter.com/AyeshaASiddiqi/status/639054385797038080.)

[18]Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*. Oxford; New York : Oxford UP, 1994, 6. Smith, himself by training a historical sociologist, is more attuned to the formation of nations as a functional sociological mechanism, which grounds his theories both in the subjective experience of recognition in and between ethnic groups, and the modern institutionalization of the nation-state in nineteenth century.

field."[19] He identifies the polarized sources of this definition, ranging from the "'objective' factors, such as language religion and customs, territory and institutions" to the "'subjective' factors, such as attitudes, perceptions, and sentiments." Smith takes as his representative theorists Josef Stalin and Benedict Anderson, respectively, but in doing so admits that while "these definitions undoubtedly isolate important features of the concept of nation,"[20] they are ultimately limited in their ability to accurately circumscribe the nation as distinct from other social formations, and elides groups that are recognizable as a nation but that might lack some of the more objective criteria (his prime example of the latter is that of the diasporic nation, but we might also add the ongoing territorial disputes, simmering at one level of heat or another, in and about Northern Ireland, the West Bank, Kashmir, Ukraine and others).[21]

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[19] Smith, 10.

[20] Smith, 11.

[21] As mentioned in the introduction, the sudden intensity with which Ukraine has been positioned in the center of current geopolitics provides as contemporary an example as possible, coming just days before the completion of this manuscript, of the challenges of extricating a sense of geography from the nation. Compare two models of the nation, proposed by Vladimir Putin and Kenyan Ambassador to the UN Martin Kimani. Putin's sense of the nation inheres in shared "history, culture and spiritual space," undergirded by "relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties." He sees this principally ethnic vision of the nation extending to territory within the Donbass region, which, to his mind, justifies his violent encroachment into the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Kimani, on the other hand, and with the legacy of colonization fresh in the cultural memory of Kenya, recognizes that had the nations of Africa "chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity," they "would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later." As Kimani argued passionately to the General Assembly, the nations of Africa chose to accept the borders that were inherited, "rejecting irredentism and expansionism on any basis, including racial, ethnic, religious or cultural factors," opting to pursue "continental political, economic and legal integration" instead of asserting national definitions "that looked ever backward into history with a dangerous nostalgia" (Bill Chappell, "Kenyan U.N. Ambassador Compares Ukraine's Plight to Colonial Legacy in Africa." *NPR*, February 22, 2022, sec. Europe. https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082334172/kenya-security-council-russia). Kimani's position is not without its problems, eliding those who would reject those very legacies of imperial cartography that the ambassador rhetorically accepts as a premise. But as hyper-

Smith's attempt at threading the needle in providing a functional definition is useful, but ultimately shows that "all this is rather abstract and theoretical" because "[w]hen we move from ideal-types to empirical instances, we find approximations and exceptions."[22] *The City & The City* is rife with such approximations and exceptions – indeed, its central mystery is dependent on these very challenges. This much is obvious, as we've already seen. But the novel is not content with keeping the central conflict between nations a purely local one, although it moves the full scope slightly off-page. There is slippery elision that happens in the novel between the titular cities and the nations of which they are constituent capitals. On the one hand, the entirety of the novel takes place within the geographic limits of the two cities. But on the other, there are allusions to *national* level tensions between the two, including implications of a naval war between the two sometime in the recent past (194).[23] As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai argue in their aptly-titled article "Cities and Citizenship," the city, rather than the nation, serves as "the strategic arena for the development of citizenship." Cities, "with their concentrations of the non-local, the strange, the mixed, and the public…

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contemporary examples of the wide range of theories of the nation, and the very real implications of adopting a principally ethnic definition, there can hardly be a more pressing, or more relevant, articulation of the need to theorize new ways forward.

[22] Smith, 14.

[23] Regarding potential geopolitical conflicts that might be triggered if Borlú continues to investigate the case, one of his partners chides, "The fucking war might get dusted off. You might even say something about your dad. His dad was in the UQ Navy… Got tinnitus or some shit in a fuckin idiot's skirmish with a Besź tugboat over some disputed lobster pots or whatever" (194).

engage most palpably with the tumult of citizenship."[24] The collapse between nation and city in the novel then, following Holston and Appadurai's argument, reads less as a strategic shorthand and more of a necessary condition for any staging of transnational collision. As they point out, "the paradigm of nation building… celebrates the rural as the fundamental expression of the indigenous and the authentic."[25] The city stands in opposition to such fundamental(ist) expressions. The role of the city, then, in *The City and the City*, is to provide a redoubled site for investigating the limits of two individual nations – not in the abstract, disaggregated sense, but made literal and immediate.

In attending both to the physical, geographic limits of the two nations as well as the cultural, ideological markers, and everything in between, what becomes clear is that it requires the work of the detective to sort through these potential theories of the nation. In discussing the genesis of the novel, Miéville himself talks about the essential role the detective form took in its composition. "For a long time," he says, "I couldn't get the narrative."[26] He "had the setting reasonably clear in [his] head" but it required "audition[ing] various narrative shapes for the book" before the novel could take shape. It wasn't until he settled on the detective form – "partly as a present to [his] Mum, who was a big crime reader, and partly because [he] was reading a lot of crime at the time

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[24] James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Cities and Citizenship." In *Cities and Citizenship*, edited by James Holston, 1–18. Duke UP, 1998, 2.
[25] Holston and Appadurai, 3.
[26] China Miéville, "Unsolving the City: An Interview with China Miéville." Interview by Geoff Manaugh, March 1, 2011. http://www.bldgblog.com/2011/03/unsolving-the-city-an-interview-with-china-mieville/.

and thinking about crime" – that he was able to move from a thought-experiment about two cities sharing the same space to the finished novel:

> I started realizing what was very obvious and should have been clear to me much earlier… that noir and hard-boiled and crime procedurals, in general, are a kind of mythic urbanology, in a way… Once I'd thought of that, exaggerating the trope of the trans-jurisdictional police problem—the cops who end up having to be on each other's beats—the rest of the novel just followed immediately. In fact, it was difficult to imagine that I hadn't been able to work it out earlier."[27]

We don't always need to take an author at their word, but what is notable in Miéville's account is that, while it did not precede the idea of the doubled cities, the detective genre was nonetheless essential to move from formless concept to a novel with plot and structure.[28]

What Miéville's pivot to the detective signals is the author's recognition of the genre's capacity for exploring and narrating the challenges inherent in defining what a nation is in the first place, especially in the genre's mode of delaying a settled "answer" to complex questions until its conclusion. Much of the literary critical history of the

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[27] "Unsolving the City"

[28] Urša Vogrinc Javoršek's "Gaiman, Banks and Miéville – Hybrid Space and Genre" attempts to theorize the relationship between space, political complexity, and genre in Miéville's novel, taking a broader sense of genre to mean non-realist fiction. Even still, her definition of "genre" is overly capacious, relying on the author's own stated goal to "write a novel in every genre" (107, citing Miéville, "A truly monstrous thing to do." Interview by John Pistelli and Alphonse van Worden. Long Sunday, July 1, 2005. https://web.archive.org/web/20091012023448/http://www.long-sunday.net/long_sunday/2005/07/a_truly_monstro.html), arguing that Miéville's overall commitment to generic fluidity remains politically subversive within the sphere of literary production, without quite pegging down what about the detective genre, *per se*, is necessary for *The City & The City*. For Miéville's reflections on genre more broadly, and their latent political economies, see the introduction to this dissertation, pages 22-23; As readers will likely intuit, Miéville's mode of thinking about genre was essential in conceptualizing this whole project.

detective novel is fundamentally focused on fugitivity, delay, extraneity, and the policing of that overflow. As Ronald R. Thomas writes of the detective, his "goal is to explain an event that seems inexplicable to everyone else." Thomas pinpoints the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the origin of the modern detective novel, a literary history that "coincide[s] with periods of unprecedented inventiveness in developing practical forensic devices that extended the power of the human senses to render visible and measurable what had previously been undetectable."[29] The detective novel serves to reify instability in the system of empiricism and thereby assert disciplinary control over narrative excesses in literary form. As Franco Moretti writes, "Detective fiction's ending is its end indeed; its solution in the true sense. The *fabula* narrated by the detective in his reconstruction of the facts brings us back to the beginning; that is, it abolishes narration."[30] That is to say, the wholeness of the detective form can only be recognized in its conclusion, there is no actual journey, just the distance from its beginning to the final resolution. Moretti continues: "In this sense, detective fiction… declares narration a mere deviation, a masking of that univocal meaning that is its *raison d'etre*."[31] This thousand-foot view of the detective novel privileges closure, rendering the page-to-page

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[29] Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture ; 26. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge UP, 1999, 2,7, as found in Theodore Martin. "Waiting," in *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017, 95.
[30] Franco Moretti. "Clues" in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Translated by David Forgacs. Rev. ed. London; New York: Verso, 1988, 148.
[31] Moretti, "Clues," 148.

goings-on into a stylized stasis, interesting in the way a walk through a museum is interesting. None of the individual clues matter except inasmuch as they delay the final explanation of how they function together in the conclusion. Hence, Moretti's "long wait."

Thinking historically, we can track the legacy of the detective novel and situate it in the legacy of colonialism and spatial ordering that was happening simultaneously with the rise of the empiricism concomitant with Empire, especially the English empire. Caroline Reitz's *Detecting the Nation* makes a compelling case for the role of the detective, and the cultural disciplining of the detective story, in the formation of a particularly 19th century conception of England's imperial history.[32] She writes of the evolution of the genre that "[o]ver the course of a long nineteenth century, the detective narrative helped change public perception of domestic criminal justice and imperial expansion by producing a figure for the exercise of such power with whom English readers could identify."[33] Reitz traces the genre's early evolution from the imperial anxieties around violence and nonviolence in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* through to Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle's identification both with Englishness and the colonial project. Along the way, Reitz convincingly historicizes the origins of the modern detective narrative as a process of "turn[ing] national concerns about abuses of

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[32] Caroline Reitz, *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture*. Victorian Critical Interventions. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004.
[33] Reitz, xiv.

authority into a popular story about British authority in the contact zone of Victorian culture."[34] The distension of resolution becomes a function of panoptic colonial surveillance and disciplining, even before one accounts for the fact that the detective moves from the Sherlockian independent gentleman of science to that of state-actor and fully incorporated member of the police force.[35]

The withheld irresolution at the heart of the detective novel is not wholly cynical, though, and not without its uses. Theodore Martin positions the detective novel as a paradigmatic genre of the contemporary precisely because of how it lingers in the site of indeterminacy, stretched out over time. In his compelling chapter on the detective novel, "Waiting," in his monograph *Contemporary Drift,* Martin writes of the genre, "The story of the detective novel in the twentieth century is largely a story about the steady intrusion of doubt and uncertainty into the detective's world."[36] Citing Dennis Porter and Moretti, Martin argues that not only is the distension of time "necessary" to the form of the detective genre, but that the value of the "long wait" of the genre provides a

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[34] Reitz, xiii.

[35] Niall Martin ("Unacknowledged Cities: Modernity and Acknowledgement in China Miéville's *The City & The City* and Marc Isaacs' *All White in Barking*." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 6 (December 1, 2013): 710–24), discussed in further depth below, diagnoses Borlú as police man and *polis* man, a man of the polis, a reading indebted to the argument made by D.A. Miller's influential monograph *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1989). Miller argues for an understanding of the novel as a panoptic technology of discipline, a "tactic of tact" in which "the policing power that never passes for such, but is either invisible or visible only under cover of other, nobler or simply blander intentionalities (to educate, to cure, to produce, to defend)." (Miller 17). Rather than assuming an "an always already policed world" (Reitz, xxi) however, it is only in the later stage of the Victorian period that Reitz sees echoes of Miller's panoptic disciplining. Properly historicizing the early steps in the genre allows us to see its development as a "turn" which "allowed the detective and the imperial project to become extensions of rather than anathema to English national identity" (xiii).

[36] Martin, "Waiting," 95.

unique purchase on our sense of contemporary time.[37] Martin locates contemporary iterations of the genre in the context of post-postmodern uncertainty – the fall of the New Deal liberalism as depicted in the American hard-boiled detective novels of Dashiell Hammet, Raymond Chandler, and Chester Himes;[38] debates internal to literary studies around suspicion, surface, and depth;[39] the pervasive "climate of uncertainty" in a post-9/11 world.[40] All of these together, Martin argues, provides fallow ground for the "long wait of the detective genre"[41] to make clear "something new about the nature of contemporary time—the ever changing circumstances of a present that, though it may be temporarily unknown, is not, in the end, unknowable."[42] The provisional and temporary unknowability, for Martin, offers unique purchase in his larger project to use the forms of genre fiction to "disclose the temporal mediation of meaning: the ways that reading and knowing are subject to time."[43] Martin's project is an effort to "periodize the contemporary" by "think[ing] of the contemporary not as a self-evident historical period

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[37] "Delay is necessary" is Martin's observation, embedded in his citation of Porter. Martin writes, "'The appeal' of the genre, [Porter] writes, 'depends on the fact that closure . . . does not occur right away but only after significant delay.' Delay is necessary, Porter suggests, because 'the longest kept secrets are the ones we most desire to know'" (Dennis Porter. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981*, 30, 51, as found in Martin, "Waiting,"215, footnote 39).

[38] See Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism*. New Americanists. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

[39] See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations*, no. 108 (Fall 2009): 1-21.

[40] Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, 2010, 53.

[41] Martin, 101.

[42] Martin, 101.

[43] Martin, "Introduction," 1.

but as a conceptual problem— and what it means to see contemporary genre fiction as a vital resource for resolving that problem."

The result of thinking through genre temporally, alongside this focus on the endings and resolutions, or, as Martin puts it, thinking of the detective novel as a "means to an end,"[44] misses something fundamental about the *process* of detecting. For Martin, the long wait of the detective novel grants us insight into our experience of time. But the detective novel is not only its resolution, but the process of getting there in the first place. And in the case of *The City & The City,* the process is that of conceptualizing the nation not *a posteriori*, or as the symbolic reflection of political conflict or elite discipline, but imagined from the ground-up in real time, experientially.[45] Miéville has advocated against reading allegorically, which he says "implies a specifically correct

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[44] Martin, 98, here, summarizing Moretti.

[45] My pivot here in attention from time to space in the detective novel mirrors the pivot made by Foucault in his 1967 lecture, "Des espace autres," ("Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias." foucault.info. https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/), in which he introduces his spatial conception of the "heterotopia." For Foucault, "The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history" – that is, society's self-conception as being embedded in time – while "[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space." The desacralization of mythic space in modernity (the collapse of the sacred into the profane, the private into the public, the family into the social) leads to an awareness, according to Foucault, of a great, grand muddling of the rigid codifications of spatial relations. The result of this awareness is a recognition that we live in "heterogeneous space… inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another." The sites which refuse to collapse back into "ordinary cultured space" – i.e. the cemetery, the prison, the psychiatrist hospital – he calls "heterotopias," "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested." It is I hope obvious by this point that these twinned cities constitute themselves as a form of heterotopia. Foucault ends his lecture by saying "The ship is the heterotopia par excellance. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates." Borlú's not a pirate, so he must be a member of the police; his task, then, is to attempt to make sense of this heterotopia. I argue he does so without collapsing either city into an "ordinary cultural space." (See also, again, Javoršek, "Hybrid Space and Genre.")

reading."[46] He prefers operating "metaphorically," which he characterizes as "more fractally fecund, and there's always more and less to it… I don't think any book can be so solved" as an allegorical reading would suggest.[47] If we are to follow Miéville's advice, then it's important to consider what the novel *does* as a metaphor rather than trying to explain what it means as an allegory. This leaves us without a solution for what these two cities might represent, but it does suggest that we might read the novel as a metaphor – literally, a "carrying over" – of a strategy for thinking through the problems of defining nations that arise when trying to account for them in complex globalized space alternatively mapped by culture, ideology, politics, strict geography, and all of these all at once.

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[46] Miéville, in his conversation with Geoff Manaugh ("Unsolving the City"), and after being asked about the presence of specific political allegories in his novels, muses, "My short answer is that I dislike thinking in terms of allegory—quite a lot… The reason for that is partly something that Fredric Jameson has written about, which is the notion of having a master code that you can apply to a text and which, in some way, solves that text… [O]ne still hears people talking about "what does the text mean?"—and I don't think text *means* like that. Texts do things."

[47] "Conversation." Miéville's resistance to reading allegorical clearly calls to mind the response to oft-maligned "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" essay by the aforementioned Jameson, who writes, contentiously, "[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" ("Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text*, no. 15 [1986]: 69). A "major point of contention," as Robert Talley synthesizes of the responses to Jameson's essay, was "[t]he idea that the diverse cultures of Africa, South America, and Southern Asia could be represented as having a single "Third-World" cultural logic." ("Fredric Jameson and the Controversy over 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' | Global South Studies, U.Va." *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South.*, November 9, 2017. https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-thinkers/fredric-jameson-and-controversy-over-%E2%80%9Cthird-world-literature-era-multinational. I agree that such allegorical readings of national literatures unduly reduce the differing characters of diverse nations of the global south, but it seems to me that Miéville is being less directly political and more strategic: allegorical reading is limited in that it flattens the text into a message about a specific situation, whereas metaphor is more active and mobile.

Miéville deploys the detective genre as a strategy for thinking through these problems, rather than proposing a decisive conclusion of what nations are or how they function. Borlú, a paradigmatic detective, consciously chooses to activate and discard evidence, constantly reworking his theory-of-the-case in order to reach his pragmatic ends of solving the mystery of Geary's death. Thinking like a detective allows Borlú to consider where and when real, material differences between the two cities matter, and where and when to ignore them as obscurantist abstractions from the case at hand. Miéville's novel must take the form of the detective novel in order to posit a strategic approach to navigating the intersection between two nations, constructed as they are both out of geography and social practice. We as readers follow the twists and contradictions of Borlú's investigation as it crisscrosses both cities, and along the way the novel shows how any functional definition – any pragmatic mode of existing in politicized, nationalized space – requires the skills of a detective. As visitors to these doubled cities, we are guided by the novel pedagogically into the process of detective work. Tagging along with Borlú teaches us to navigate the nations in the novel – and the global system of nations more broadly – not by choosing one or the other definition and sticking firm, but by recognizing the limber, iterative process of revisiting and revising our definition of what a nation is and how it works in real time when presented with new clues, and thus new paradoxes.

As Borlú tracks down now leads, so do we, constantly revisiting the facts of the case, recombining and reframing them to develop *ad hoc* theories of what constitutes a nation, and discarding those theories when they no longer function. In doing so, *The City & The City* supersedes and inflects academic models of understanding the nation that attempt to pin it down into particular form. It provides a method of moving forward through the contested definitional space of the nation, so that we might investigate other cases that would otherwise ride up against the edges of what the nation allows us to imagine, or disallows us from considering. Miéville's cities remain "unsolvable" as an allegory, but thinking like a detective gives us a method for navigating the "opaque logic" without needing to assume that a solution exists in the first place.

Thinking Like a Detective

To see what *The City & The City* posits for what it might look like in practice to think of the nation the way a detective would, we need to trace the novel's plot. What readers encounter in the novel are two distinct cases, proceeding in tandem. The first is the murder of Geary – the standard how, what, when, where, why of both journalism and detective work. The second case narrows down intensely on one of those questions – the where – in order to force readers to consider what it means to be in an individual nation, and how exactly to enact that being in the first place. What becomes clear as the novel progresses is that neither case can be solved without resolving the other. As the

murder case unfolds, so too do the mechanisms of these twinned nations, forcing the reader to experience what thinking like a detective means if we take it page-to-page, rather than interpreting it as a whole.

A dead body is found in a construction site in Besźel, and there are vanishingly few leads. The coroner reports that the body had been dumped, and thus moved, which points the detectives to a van. In the meantime, an anonymous tip – a call from Ul Qoma to Besźel (34-36) – directs Borlú to investigate the local radical groups, comprised of separatists, who espouse a clean break from Ul Qoma, and *unifs*, short for "unificationists," (43) who insist on merging the two cities. The latter group, the "unifs" are a not-so-subtle stand-in for the global left, regularly entertained and gently prodded but mostly defanged. The unificationists, in their mission to supersede national difference between Besźel and Ul Qoma, clearly espouse a certain form of radical universalism that characterizes most global leftists groups, but, as will be familiar to anyone who has spent any amount of time dealing with avowed Marxists, they are riven through with internal division: "In typical political cliché, unificationists were split on many axes," the narrator tells us, just before an undercover agent in one of the two far-right nationalist group compares the *unifs* to "Swiss cheese… probably more informers and moles in the unif[icationist]s even than in the True Citizens or Nazis or other nutters" (43-44). The phone call and later investigation reveal Geary's identity and her position as a grad student working on the archaeology of the two cities, who had been

connected to radical groups in both Besźel and Ul Qoma. The obvious theory at this point, then, is that Geary was somehow involved with one or the other of these politically aligned groups, taking one side or the other on the question of national sovereignty, and getting mixed up in the internecine violence.

Considerations of style shape the step-by-step work of detecting, especially apparent in this early third of the investigation. Borlú engages in lots of circular conversations in various squad rooms (121-25); He's encouraged to "talk this one out" (123) by his deputy detective. Witnesses are interviewed, reinterviewed, considered as suspects, dropped. These are all standbys of the detective novel, especially the kind that leans into the hardboiled subspecies of the genre. The details are atmospheric, yes, but they speak to a core logic of noticing and revising that the detective novel requires. This process of ongoing revision is made necessary in the detective plot by the proliferation of clues, potential and otherwise, that litter the novel's goings-on. In fact, one of the major difficulties in writing about this novel is its sheer density of literalizations of political difference. The difficulty itself, I think, is partly the point. Miéville, a dedicated Marxist himself, finely tunes the relative political economies of his paired cities, resulting in throwaway lines about Mao (161) and neoliberal investment that seem to reach out of the page to shake the critic by the lapels, demanding interpretation. These details serve primarily to thicken the political substrate of both cities equally, rather than to describe fundamental differences. There is no particular case developed in the novel

about the benefits or downsides of living in either city. Rather, that the differences are dealt with superficially serves to highlight the ludicrous incongruity of insisting on such principled difference when what should be far more urgent for Borlú and his set of sidekicks are the immediate facts of the case directly within sight.

The sheer density of worldbuilding puts us as readers into the same position as Borlú. While the central murder mystery of the novel unfolds through straightforward detective work – working clues, tracking down leads – the reader is bombarded by rabbit-holes of potential interpretation for how the cities function. When Miéville invokes Mao, when he alludes to "the Foucaults and the Žižeks" of the world (90), or when he invents intertexts with fictional works by Chuck Pahlaniuk (134), and Laurence Sterne (51), he goads his more critical readers into running down every possible means of "solving" the novel's internal logic. These rabbit-holes are fascinating diversions, and demonstrate an obvious postmodern over-the-top-ness to the whole endeavor of the thing, but ultimately the vast majority of them are inessential to the plot of Geary's murder. They are in short distractions, diversions. If we're going to get to the bottom of the central case, we readers must see (read) these allusions, and in an instant decide whether they're important to the case at hand. And the short answer is that, as entertaining as they are, they are not in the strict sense *relevant.*

There are once again valences of Barthes's "reality effect" here, a structural accounting for what he calls the "useless details" of narrative fiction.[48] Once literary production moves beyond the boundaries of referential language from description to narration in what we call Realist fiction, he argues, details become either significant to the narrative functioning of a text, structurally, or fall into this category of "useless," serving merely to express literary realism – the reality *effect* of literary texts, an appeal to verisimilitude where no such referential reality exists. The stacked details of the various political alignments to be found in the two cities certainly produce a sense of thickness to the political landscape of the novel, and so deferring to Barthes and explaining them away as an explosion of the reality effect makes sense. But reading the profusion of non-essential "details" as merely producing the reality effect doesn't seem enough. Miéville uses these details not only to build a comprehensive geopolitical network that is at one and the same time both believable and fantastic, but also to build a novel world in which the only manageable way through is to think and notice strategically.

More importantly for Borlú, all of this gumshoe work leads to the conclusion that this seems a clear-cut case of Breach, Geary having worked in Ul Qoma but having been found in Besźel, and therefore he clocks this case as above his paygrade. However, when

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[48] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, 142. As discussed in the first chapter, "Staging," the concept of the reality effect as a diagnostic tool is useful for accounting for the littered details that proliferate through even the most minimalist texts: in *Wolf Hall,* they establish a historicity to the narrative of Cromwell's dealings; here, they provide the raw material necessary for a detective to sift through.

Borlú motions to kick it upstairs to the bilateral Oversight Committee, composed of representatives of both cities, and which has the authority to "invoke Breach" (58), they reject the motion. Although Geary's body had been found in Besźel, and had come from Ul Qoma, they assert that no Breach had occurred – her body had passed legally between the two cities. Rather than being freed of the responsibility of the case, Borlú must travel to Ul Qoma in order to properly investigate. He is still on the case.[49]

The first section of the novel is primarily concerned with establishing the rules of unnoticing, as we see from its opening pages through to the moment when Geary's non-Breach is revealed. The novel up to this point is, more or less, a theory of Besźel that depends on radical exclusion. Borlú's arrival in Ul Qoma forces a development of a new theory, a theory of Ul Qoma. This turn to Ul Qoma makes the work of *noticing* as explicit as unnoticing has become. Simply to arrive in Ul Qoma requires careful training in this form of attention, certified by the authorities stationed at Copula Hall, the bridge point between the two nations within rooms that "were in neither or both cities, that were in *Copula Hall only*," and where the bilateral Oversight Committee alone had authority (131).[50] There are interviews and even tests which require Borlú to "[point] with a cursor

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[49] This is another place where the nation-state, that is, the Althusserian apparatus of the state, is made impotent and rendered into the text rather than serving as an interpretative model for how the two cities function. Borlú's may be an employee *of* the state, but he does not have unlimited access to its power; he works mostly on his own or with a single partner, and his biggest state-sponsored advantages are a work cell phone and expedited visa processing.

[50] That there already exists a cognizable space separate from two cities but recognizably between them is a hint of what is to come, as is the ironic fact that the citizens of both cities could acknowledge such a space while finding competing models of connection between the cities so ludicrous.

at an Ul Qoman temple, an Ul Qoman citizen, an Ul Qoman lorry delivering vegetables, as quick as [he] could," all of which he finds "faintly insulting" (134). These exams resemble the civics tests required to gain citizenship in a new country, albeit far more detailed. But the exams are not designed to promote civic integration, but to ensure constant and vigilant *exclusion*, in Borlú's case of his own home country, merely to exist without Breach crashing down around him. In both cases, what is required is a studious unnoticing of what is nonetheless directly in front of the person navigating the twin cultures, only now the training (and retraining) makes the unnaturalness of the process explicit.

In these moments, Borlú's un- and retraining in seeing a new nation is akin to the protocols of detective work itself, where previously discarded evidence may rear back up, newly and unexpectedly relevant. In an earlier passage, before crossing over to Ul Qoma, Borlú muses on the nature of the cities' unique crime and its imperfect enforcement:

> Those most dedicated to the perforation of the boundary between Besźel and Ul Qoma had to observe it most carefully. If I or one of my friends were to have a moment's failure of unseeing (and who did not do that? Who failed to fail to see, sometimes?), *so long as it was not flaunted or indulged in*, we should not be in danger…. I would not be taken (52, emphasis my own).

What we as readers have been trained to accept about the rules of the city is subtly expanded. Borlú here makes it clear that there must be a limit to Breach's capacity for

total surveillance.[51] But having this process become so much more conscious after decades of it being automatic is striking, and the weirdness of his new circumstances is not lost on the detective. As they are driving away from Copula Hall, Borlú's new Ul Qoman partner Quissim Dhatt muses, "Guess it must be strange." Borlú's internal monologue follows, in which he describes the uncanny effect of walking past places he *could* recognize, if he were allowed. "Yes," he thinks, "I looked at what Dhatt showed me," but "[u]nseeing, of course" (134). These verbs of observation stack – Borlú admits, cagily, "I could not fail to be aware of the familiar places I passed grosstopically."[52] His own cognitive mapping of his home city bubbles up into his field of view, unbidden, "the streets at home I regularly walked, now a whole city away, particular cafés I frequented that we passed, but in another country… I had them in the background now." Finally, things snap into focus: "I was unseeing Besźel… I was seeing Ul Qoma" (134).

But has Borlú breached? Borlú "could not fail to be aware of the familiar place," but is "not failing to be aware" the same as being aware? More pointedly, is "be[ing] aware" the same as seeing? Knowing what Miéville has allowed us to know about the letter of the law and the tests Borlú himself had passed, it would seem that Borlú is

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[51] For an accounting of the passive ramifications of living under a surveillance regime, and the possible advantages it has for rendering what has been previously ignored "visible" by negation, with *The City & The City* as a compelling case study, see Peter Marks, "Monitoring the Unvisible: Seeing and Unseeing in China Miéville's The City & The City." *Surveillance & Society; Kingston* 11, no. 3 (2013): 222–36.

[52] The neologism Miéville coins for places in the two cities that are topographically near each other but nonetheless in separate cities.

committing breach in even seeing these places. As Anderson has argued, citing Ernest Renan in an appendix chapter added to the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*,[53] this process of forgetting is arguably as essential to the formation of the nation as the positive mutual interpellation of national communities – "Now, the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things."[54] Miéville carefully straddles his novel along this line. Even as he is performing the precise form of unnoticing required by cities' interlocking set of laws, he realizes that a national identity based strictly on architecture and social practice, seeing and unseeing, cannot cohere. It is not the literal *seeing* of the other city that is a crime, but rather the *noticing* of it. Who wouldn't fail to fail to see, sometimes? But "flaunt" this noticing or "indulge" oneself in fantasies of interconnection such that seeing becomes active, and irrefutable? In choosing to do something with what one sees, of making automatic sensory experience into material action, active choice becomes an actionable crime of breach. Gone is the "immediately and flustered" reaction of unnoticing that Borlú has been trained in, as a citizen of Besźel.

The doubled persona of Borlú himself shows how deeply the work of detecting and the nation are intertwined in the novel. Niall Martin writes of Borlú that "he is

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[53] Anderson, "Memory and Forgetting," 187-206, in *Imagined Communities,* rev. 2006.
[54] Original French: "*Or, l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en comun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien de choses,"* found in *Qu'est-Ce Qu'une Nation ?* Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882. https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Qu%E2%80%99est-ce_qu%E2%80%99une_nation_%3F; translation from Ernest Renand. *What Is a Nation?: And Other Political Writings*. Translated and Edited by M. F. N. Giglioli. Columbia Studies in Political Thought / Political History. New York: Columbia UP, 2018, 251.

expected to fulfil two potentially contradictory roles." In his role as a detective, he "exemplifies the equation of knowledge with visibility," and is tasked with "revealing the truth which is assumed to be hidden."[55] Fair enough. Martin continues: "However, as a police man, he's also a *polis* man – a man of the city – and as such, is concerned primarily with enforcing observance of the rules and limits that constitute the society of which he is a part." Here is where I diverge from Martin's (otherwise insightful) reading. This latter role, that of "enforcing observance of the rules and limits that constitute the society," is explicitly outsourced to Breach – notably not, and not *of* either nation – when the limits that are being enforced are the actual borders of the two nations. As a man of these particular cities, his role is not that of enforcer, but of investigator, solving crimes within the doubled society, not crimes that violate the doubling of the society itself. This hybrid definition of nation, reified in geography but largely divorced from the disciplinary apparatuses of the state, is the field through which Borlú navigates, despite his position as a nominal avatar of a particular state as a member of the police force. At most, as a citizen of Beszél, he is responsible only for *self*-policing his own potential violations of this broader transnational social order. In Beszél and Ul Qoma, it is less that the detective must double as the average "man of the city"

[55] Niall Martin, "Unacknowledged Cities," 714. See again Ronald R. Thomas, who writes that the goal of the detective "is to explain an event that seems inexplicable to everyone else" (Thomas, *Detective Fiction*, 2).

who polices the social order, but that all members of the social order must double as a detective.

What we see now is a more thoughtful, deliberative decision to unnotice, and a reflection on the ramifications on such a decision. His admission – "Who failed to fail to see, sometimes?" – shows the limits of pure geographic definition of nation, because a border, in its most basic form, is nothing but an imagined line on the ground. It also destabilizes an exclusionary cultural definition, because Borlú can't help but see the markers of his home country, even as he knows he must ignore them. Instead, faced with the need to unlearn his own Besź instincts and relearn a new Ul Qoman set of reflexes, Borlú awakens to the iterative process of nation-building which requires an ongoing series of decisions both about what can be noticed and what mustn't. The retraining necessary to pass from Besźel to Ul Qoma produces an internal friction in Borlú, and the cracks in the definition of nation in this novel begin to show, even as the detective comes closer to a different set of cracks – those in the case needed to solve Geary's murder.

Having unseen Besźel and learned to see Ul Qoma, and having extracted as much evidence as he can from his limited perspective in Besźel of this international crime, Borlú moves swiftly to deepen his interpretive ambit. He seeks out the archaeological site where Geary had been working, and interviews her advisor, who informs the detective of the Geary's past contentious credentials. Years earlier, at an

academic conference, Geary had gained notoriety for her explosive paper on the history and archaeology of Besźel and Ul Qoma. During her MA studies, Geary was known as a Bowdenite, an acolyte of the groundbreaking and controversial work of Professor David Bowden, whose early research proposed a "third city… between the other two" known as Orciny. Borlú's partner, Lizybet Corwi, summarizes: "It's in the *dissensi*, disputed zones, places that Besźel thinks are Ul Qoma's and Ul Qoma Besźel's… Orciny's the secret city. It runs things" (50). In the world of the novel, this theory of a third city is variably understood by academics as either a proto-city that has continued to exist since before the two present day cities – before the event that is referred to as Cleavage[56] which left the cities in their current relationship – or an emergent space that has arisen from the split.

These clues all seem to point back to where Borlú's theory had pointed earlier: Geary's murder being politically motivated, and that she had become wrapped up in the ongoing tensions between Unificationists trying to bring the two cities together and Ultranationalists on both sides, intent on enforcing their own impossible borders. Borlú slots in a new, more specific motivation for the violence, and continues to update his understanding of the crime. Geary, in this new iteration of the investigation, was a

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[56] Miéville, perennially attuned to the subtleties of etymology and individual words, notes, in the interview appended to the mass-market paperback edition of the novel, the apparent playfulness that inheres in "cleave," it "being one of those magic, camply semiotically rich words which means two exactly opposite things" (324) – whether the two cities existed on their own and were brought together, or existed as one city before they were rent apart is left unclear. Rather than answering the question, the novel enfolds this ambiguity into the professorial debates undertaken by the academics in the novel.

secretly recalcitrant Bowdenite who challenged the status quo of the enforced nationalisms of the two cities themselves, regardless of her purported reform. "Mahalia annoyed both lots… We know she certainly managed to get the unificationists here mad, ages ago. And then she did the same to the nat[ionalist]s over there. Any extremists she hasn't made angry?" (83). At this point in the investigation, Borlú seems to have two competing options: either Geary was a threat to the apparent separation of Besźel and Ul Qoma and thus targeted by nationalists, or that, in being too brazen with her own subversive ideas, she would undermine the efforts of the Unificationists trying to bring the cities together. But, as Geary's advisor admonishes, "[n]o one reputable would supervise a Bowdenite PhD" (90). Nancy assures Borlú and Corwi that her student had moved on from such Bowdenite endeavours, that "she'd left all that behind" (90). Pre-Cleavage archaeology is acceptable, but imagining a co-extant space outside or within the bounds of the present status quo of national difference remains beyond the pale. Only investigations oriented towards the past, not interrogations of the present, are deemed legitimate within the corners of the academy in which Geary operated.

In introducing Bowden, Miéville also introduces one of the clearest through-lines of the remainder of the novel: Bowden's monograph, *Between the City and the City*. Of course, there's the bump of postmodern self-awareness that comes with a novel that creates an intertext with itself. But this isn't just cleverness (although, of course, it *is* clever). In a novel about clues and theories, Bowden's book is a theory that is a clue, and

a clue that is a theory. At first, it reads as a clear indictment of the purely ideological models of the nation to which Miéville is responding. In their first interview, Geary's advisor had pointed out that if Geary *had* been an unreformed Bowdenite, working on the study of Orciny, "she'd be doing her doctorate in Folklore or Anthropology or maybe Comp Lit" (87), all more theoretically-driven disciplines, more appropriate for what she assumes is an abstract approach rather than a grounded archaeological one. Borlú even presses Nancy, after she reassures him that Geary had been fully reformed: "The Foucaults and the Žižeks not your thing?"[57] Nancy replies "I respect them, of course, but–" before Borlú cuts her off and asks if there were "any of those, what should we say, theory types, she could have gone with?" (90). But no, Geary *had* reformed herself, Nancy insists. No time for the "theory types."

At this point in the novel, *Between the City and The City*, Bowden's work, is a near-perfect parody of the exact theoretical texts deployed by literary critics attempting to perform ideology critique of the nation. I take Miéville's jibe in good humor, but he is making a point about avoiding the overweening confidence an academic might fall into in developing their own theories for solving (or resolving) the obvious paradoxes of living in a world without a global monoculture. Those kinds of theories belong in "Folklore or Anthropology or maybe Comp Lit," not in the more rough-and-tumble,

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[57] Miéville, it seems, can't help himself. Maybe it's unfair elitism to be surprised that a murder detective would be familiar with Foucault and Žižek, but, really, if he has a problem with the "textual and historic minutiae and tendentious *therefores*" seen below, well…

hands-in-the-dirt disciplines like Archaeology. Of course, that doesn't mean the detectives leave these theories alone, because due diligence requires that they attempt to track down every potential lead. After Borlú and Corwi's conversation with Nancy about the limits of pre-Cleavage archaeology, Borlú drums up his own copy of *Between the City and the City* and attempts to read it as part of his investigation. However, he becomes stymied, finding it impenetrable and impractical:[58] "The combination of textual and historic minutiae and tendentious *therefores* was wearing" (142). Borlú, not finding the key to his case in Bowden's work, finds himself pulling away from it as its promise of providing the solution to his investigation fades.

Having experienced how theories of the nation bump up against the reality of living in the split cities, Borlú's leads have dried up, and he is deadlocked. At the exact moment that a potential lead opens – Geary's subversive politics – it is seemingly snapped shut by other, conflicting evidence from her advisor. While holding both of these possibilities in his mind, the detective continues to investigate the various radical political groups. The phone call from Ul Qoma and the suspicious non-Breach transiting of her body from Ul Qoma to Besźel cannot logically be ignored, as it must be evidence of *some* political motive. But theories continue to swirl around which group, specifically, murdered Geary. This is a murder investigation after all, and Borlú is unfettered by the internecine academic debates of pre-Cleavage archaeology, or of hard material

[58] Which is, of course, very relatable.

historicism vs. continental theory and its scions. In fact, he is frustrated by them. At this stage of the investigation, what is important to Borlú are the raw materialities of Geary's life – who did she work with, who might have held a grudge, who might be her allies? His response to the frustration with the dense academic prose is to make his way out into the city of Ul Qoma.

If we take *Between the City and The City* as an implied indictment of dense, abstract, "theory-type" scholarship on the function of nation, Borlú's response of marching straight out into the streets is his swing to the opposite pole that grounds the definition of nation in the firm, first-hand experiences of its cultural practices. The hard work of noticing requires that there be new material to sift through, and as Borlú wanders the streets, he takes in the effluvium of the new city that remains so close to where he left, "[a]ll around me in knots and coils, effacing the weak lights of my far-off home" (142). He picks through the new/old terrain, aware of the limits he is required to obey: "now, I could see the figures at business in the dark that had been unseeable until now. I could see the homeless dossing down in side streets, the Ul Qoman rough sleepers that we in Besźel had had to become used to as protubs[59] to pick our unseeing

[59] Short for "protuberances," elements of one city that sticks into the other but must nonetheless be ignored. Trash, broken windows, and, here, "rough sleepers" (those experiencing homelessness), are all considered protubs, precisely because they exist unnoticed. The fact that *people* can be "protubs" speaks to the gaps in the biopolitical order of the two cities – recognizing these rough sleepers as individuals with their own intentions and motivations would necessarily interpellate them back into one nation or the other, thus making Ul Qoma or Besźel responsible for their welfare as well as opening them to the potential jurisdiction of Breach. Best just to unnotice them, if the system is to continue.

ways over and around" (143). Within the logic of the two cities, these ad hoc recalculations are mostly pragmatic – Borlú, of course, wouldn't want to breach. But it also demonstrates the pendulum swing present throughout the novel of attempting to reckon with competing paradigms of how to engage with what a nation *is,* and how it functions. The work of a detective requires constant reevaluation of theories with the incorporation of new potential clues, derived from the act of moving in physical space and attending to the material realities of being on the ground – in this case, of now being in Ul Qoma, rather than Beszél.

His wandering brings Borlú back to the site of the dig, extending his ambit to Geary's friends and acquaintances, at first to little avail. Good gumshoe work (and the help of a young passerby who Borlú bribes to deliver a message and thus smoke out anyone suspicious [200][60]) leads Borlú to discover Geary's friend Yolanda, who is hiding from whatever malevolent force took out her fellow grad student. In an effort to protect Yolanda from reprisals, he attempts to bring her from Ul Qoma to Beszél. But as they pass through Copula Hall, a long tunnel through which legal egress from one city to the other is permitted, Yolanda is shot. What follows is a flurried chase scene through the streets around the only permitted interstitial space, with Borlú still in Ul Qoma and the shooter in Beszél. Once he spots the shooter, Borlú "kept [his] eyes on him" but carefully

[60] A possible nod to the Baker Street Irregulars in the Sherlock Holmes novels, the motley street urchins whom Sherlock would use for incognito surveillance. Whether this is a deliberate intertext to Sherlock specifically isn't particularly relevant; either way, this small detail speaks to Miéville's deep appreciation of the genre writ large.

remains "looking at some spot or other in Ul Qoma." He "track[s] him without focusing, just legally" (236). Once again a familiar trope – a detective whipping around tight corners in hot pursuit – is made strange but not unrecognizable. That a detective is compelled to chase a suspect makes sense. That he is not legally allowed to look at his suspect while doing so does not. When Borlú finally corners the gunman, this paradox, between nation as a set of practices and nation as a physical space defined by territory, collapses. It is no longer tenable for the veteran detective, set on unraveling the central murder mystery, to ignore the practical reality of the murderer in front of him for the sake of protecting national coherence. Before the shooter steps into an area of Besź totality, where he knows Borlú must not follow him, the detective instead shoots him. The assassin dies, and Borlú is immediately surrounded by avatars of Breach (237-238).

If our detective were no detective, if his animating motivation was the preservation of one city or the other rather than the dogged pursuit of a closed case, there would be no tension here, and no violation would have occurred. He never would have breached, because he would have been compelled to respect the laws of the nation he was raised in and those of its grosstopical neighbor. Instead, he chooses what to notice and what to ignore, even if what he is ignoring is the very existence of a border itself – ideological or physical, it doesn't matter. Thinking as a detective, as this novel asks us to do, challenges its readers to consider everything as a piece of evidence, equally viable as potentially essential to the case. If we take the notion of the nation itself

as a case and cast ourselves in the role of detective, what we are left with is a formal strategy of interpretation that supercedes the prevailing theories of culture or geography that limit our ability to imagine what it might mean to think across and through borders and difference. There are consequences for thinking like a detective, but also opportunities, those which might open us up to new ways of structuring how we think about the nation that accounts for difference without insisting on homogenized culture or ignoring the very real legal and political ramifications of borders as they persist even under the pressure of intense globalization. The answer it seems, and the novel proposes, is that we position ourselves in Breach.

Breach: "You're not in neither: You're in both"

In the novel's final section, we as readers see the effects of putting this strategic thinking into practice. The investigation of Geary's murder reaches its conclusion as a direct result of Borlú's learning how to navigate fully through both of the cities without collapsing them into each other – the case is nearing its conclusion, but the question of exactly how these two nations coexist remains open, and their disciplinary function remains in effect. Despite the excitement we might feel at seeing Borlú finally wake up to the impossibilities of the two cities, it is in this moment that he is pulled back into fulfilling his duties as a detective, shoots Yolanda's killer in Besźel from Ul Qoma, and becomes a criminal of a higher order.

Borlú's brazen violation of these laws results, it seems, in his ejection from nationalized space. He awakens at the beginning of Part Three within the nonspace of Breach. "It was grey, without adornment… Grey floor in scuffed rubber… There was no sound at all" (242). Borlú finds himself in extra-national, culturally evacuated space in which none of the mechanisms of national difference itself work.[61] "The Breach was nothing. It is nothing… If you commit it will envelop you. Breach is void full of angry police" (248). His carefully honed intuition of noticing – doubly essential in his role as a citizen in preserving the imagined boundaries between the two cities as well as in his professional capacity as a detective – seems almost useless: the most noteworthy feature of Breach itself is that there is so very little to notice. Breach insists on enforcing the competing national sovereignties despite the obvious practical benefits of a detective stopping an assassin, and must account for that which Borlú, through his breach, makes manifest: the fundamental paradox of geographic borders forged entirely from the abstractions of theory and cultural practice. But, in pulling the detective into Breach, the avatars of this shadowy organization empower Borlú to finally, totally, practice the type of synthesized third way of navigating contradictory national identities that the system has implied must be possible since the beginning. His new captor/handler Ashil

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[61] See again Hanna and Cowley, "Breach of Contact," 16-20, for their analysis of the formal (non)features of Breach. After careful attention to the differences between Beszél and Ul Qoma, their article turns to assessments of Breach, Copula Hall, and Orciny as what they designate as potential "Third Spaces," in the novel. Of Breach specifically (18-20), they argue that all agents of Breach are "cloistered in a special class" which serves "to keep cultures apart and therefore to deny interculturality."

renames him "Tye," – "not traditional Besź, nor Ul Qoman, could possibly be either" (253), unmarking his Besź heritage but not quite marking him Ul Qoman – and deploys him and his skills to investigate his own breach.

Unburdened by the need to *un*notice either of the cities, Borlú is finally empowered to notice *both*, and therefore to investigate the case properly. This is not fully liberatory, or easy. There is a breathless moment of walking freely through both cities that demonstrates the impossibility of the split by highlighting the obviousness of their connection. Ashil brings Borlú, now Tye, into a crosshatched square to get him some food, where Ashil moves him towards a Besź food stall. Borlú narrates, "I tried to unsee them, but there could be no uncertainty: that source of the smell I had been unsmelling was our destination… I lifted my foot in Ul Qoma, put it down again in Besźel, where breakfast was" (253). He goes on to relate the impressive psychological impact of what we readers understand to be, grosstopically, such a small feat: "My sight seemed to untether as with a lurching Hitchcock shot, some trickery of dolly and depth of field, so the street lengthened and its focus changed. Everything I had been unseeing now jostled into sudden close-up" (254). This feeling of being between both places also necessarily attends a sense of being incapable of being in either.

But pointedly, the definitions of the two cities do not collapse. Once he leaves the central offices of Breach (perhaps the only place, as Hanna and Cowley argue, truly *outside* both cities), he is immediately confronted with the cultural signifiers that reassert

the two national identities. Borlú's newly empowered position does result in his own ability to navigate through both of them such that they both remain legible and functional, but without the hindrances of being forced to ignore one in order to constitute the other. The social mechanisms of both nations continue to function – the administrative (Ashil pays a Besź vendor in Besźmarques, a Ul Qoman grocer in dinar [253]); the cultural (Borlú notes Besź clocktowers ringing, as well as the "Illitan yells of Ul Qoma" [254]); the architectural ("Ul Qoman light and plastic windows no longer effaced the ochres and stone of its neighbor, my home [254]). Even the borders themselves maintain: "You're with me here," Ashil avers. "You're not in neither: you're in both" (254). Breach functions not as a distinct third space, at least not primarily, but instead as a particular way of thinking, a superposition of the definitions of both Besźel and Ul Qoma that doesn't require their mutually constitutive exclusion. Now that he is *in* Breach, he remains in both cities, and all the potential evidence is available to him. Borlú is finally empowered to see *and* notice all the angles of the case at once. Doing so is at first vertiginous and destabilizing, but it also ends up being necessary. By opening all of the potential avenues of investigation between the two cities, being in Breach allows Borlú to notice and unnotice all the evidence in pursuit of the murderer without the interference of trying to filter the case through the proscription of Breach.

The merry-go-round of potential suspects whirls rapidly as the novel concludes, once Borlú is able to incorporate potential evidence from both sides of the case from

within Breach. What had started as a seemingly simple murder at the beginning of the novel transmutes from an indictment of the usual suspects that form in and around conflicted national spaces. Having run down the leads that point to Geary being the victim of direct political violence from the nationalists and getting nowhere, Borlú is faced with the reality that Geary's murder is more than a simple case of disgruntled political factions. Now in Breach, the ambit of Borlú's investigation widens – not necessarily in practice, as all of the same evidence had been available to him, but in the new connections he now permits himself to notice. Initially dismissive of the fantastic academic theories of Orciny, he is forced to rework his theory of the case to include what he knows about the interrelation of Breach, Orciny, and the more local efforts to enforce or dissolve the borders of Besźel and Ul Qoma. From Breach, he can now recognize the power and limitations afforded by operating outside the exclusionary definitions of the two nations.

Borlú's first order of business after getting his Breach-legs is to track down Geary's own copy of *Between the City and the City*, showing the recursive nature of good detective work. This time, instead of allowing himself to be hindered by the abstruse theoretical language of Orciny, he brings to Geary's copy an attention to the fuller layering of theory and practice that comes with his emergence into Breach. He forces himself to reckon with the materiality of the book. He notices: "All the notes were layered, a palimpsest of evolving interpretation. I did archaeology" (258). He attempts to

construct a theory: "I started page on page trying to read, transcribe, those early thoughts. Mostly what I discerned was her anger." Then his initial frustration crunches in, compounded by the fact that, although he has experienced a fresh breath of freedom with Ashil in the square, he is nonetheless still locked up by Breach. In the face of the opaque and tiresome work of reading Geary's notes, he reverts to his initial instinct of pounding the pavement, doing what a detective does best: "I felt a something-stretched-out over the night streets. I wanted to talk to those I had known in Besźel and Ul Qoma, but I could only watch." Locked away in a cell in Breach, the detective's ability to investigate is once again limited.

Only a combined approach, one that takes into account Geary's engagement with the theories of Orciny *and* the actual, physical clues, gets the detective anywhere. After demanding of Ashil that he be able to investigate properly (259), Borlú begins to untangle the final threads of the central mystery. There's a flipbook quality to the next few pages as the detective cycles between reading, dig site, reading, dig site. Borlú and Ashil to return to the archaeological dig, no longer seeking to flesh out their image of Geary's life but rather to attend to the raw material clues – in this case, artifacts that were missing from the dig's lockers but never passed out into Ul Qoma, meaning that they must have left through Besźel. She would walk, the detectives theorize, into a spot of crosshatching on the edges of the dig, and drop these McGuffins through a hole in her pocket. Dropped in Ul Qoma, picked up in Besźel, they never actually move once Geary

drops them (262). A crime of pure epistemology and not of ontology, a crime committed by both ends of the illicit transaction merely through an act of *deciding* where the object was, and not of actually doing any physical smuggling at all.

This triggers Borlú to return to Geary's copy of Borlú's book *again*, another recursion and another opportunity for reevaluation with new evidence. This time, he "trie[s] to read… a new way" (266). As the theory of the case, the theory of Orciny, and the theoretical constructions of Besźel and Ul Qoma all collapse into each other here at the end of the investigation, Borlú combines them all in his reading practice. He "had been trying to be an archaeologist of her marginalia, separating the striae," but now he "read[s] all the annotations on each page, years of opinions set together" (266). This new method of reading, taking in all of the evidence *in situ*, allows Borlú to see connections that were not possible to see before, filtered as they were through his previous theories of Geary as a political radical. Three notes, cross-references to other obscure academics (266),[62] in Geary's copy of Bowden's book is what finally moves the case forward. "They wrote books claiming Bowden was full of shit" (267), but these were not the notes of someone preparing tactical counterarguments. "The point is that she's citing them. At the end. Her last notes… She changed her mind" (267). The realization hits Borlú, and

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[62] For all of Miéville's chiding of academics throughout the novel, it's not for nothing that a handful of scrawled marginal notes ends up being so significant. Miéville, after all, holds a PhD from the London School of Economics. Footnotes, they say, is where you really show your work, and Geary herself, ever the diligent student, seems to recognize the dangers of buying wholesale the top-level claims of any work of academic argumentation. Miéville seems be leading us by the hand into adopting the same skeptical position.

the reader, like a ton of bricks (or a sufficiently dense theoretical monograph) – as is to be expected and appreciated at the climax of a good detective novel. "God damn, she wasn't killed because she was, some, one of the bloody elect few who knew the awesome secret that the third city existed… Mahalia was killed because she *stopped* believing in Orciny at all" (267-68).

Ultimately the prevailing theories of how the two nations function together, or even any of Borlú's theories about who murdered Geary, are not enough. Rather, it is Geary's physical engagement with Bowden's argument, and Borlú's blending of what he has come to know with what he sees right in front of him, that are necessary for making sense of the mystery of her political allegiances (if any) that had dogged the detective throughout. Borlú's reading of Geary's notes makes the novel's argument by analogy: raw, abstract ideology can only function when it is imbricated with actual on-the-ground material reality. The role Geary's copy of *Between the City and the City* plays in resolving her own murder is a metonym of the iterative process of incorporating definitions of nation that rely on theory alongside considerations of material cultural difference.

From this Archimedean point between the two cities, Borlú tugs at the final threads of the mystery. The clues seem to snap together, and this new evidence inspires Borlú to provisionally conclude and pronounce, in a moment of Sherlockian exegesis, that Geary's murder was a silencing at the hands of global firm fearing an international

incident once her role in the smuggling of archaeological artifacts out of the dig in Ul Qoma and back to Besźel is made public (271-73). She was able to move these objects without alerting Breach, with a surly Besź minister[63] arranging to sell the artifacts to an American corporation who planned on using the purported mystical qualities of the pre-Cleavage artifacts for murky Research & Development purposes. This multi-national fraud depended on belief in Orciny in order to market archaeological artifacts of unknown, but potentially profitable, research value to shapeless institutions of global capital.[64] When she threatened to go public with the scheme, Borlú surmises, she was murdered to ensure her silence.

But when Borlú confronts the Besź minister and a representative of the American corporation about their complicity in Geary's murder, the theory cancels itself out. The minister pulls a gun, and is shot by Ashil, who is in turn shot by Besź ultranationalists, who realize too late that without their leader they are unprotected and therefore flee the scene. International capital escapes culpability, in this case literally flying in a helicopter out into the sunset (285-87). This moment is where Carl Freedman's analysis lands in his virtuoso article on *The City & The City* and political economy, in which he argues that the

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[63] Who, of course, was the same minister who denied Borlú's original petition to invoke Breach. What reads at first as an opaque bureaucratic mystery is now clarified as a straightforward act of self-preservation.
[64] "We had all heard rumours of Precursor artefacts. Their questionable physics. Their properties. They want to see what's true. They've got Mahalia to supply them. And to do it they've got her thinking she's in touch with Orincy. But she realized." (272-73)

novel develops a sophisticated critique via satire of global uneven development. [65] For Freedman, the complex system of Besźel, Ul Qoma, Orciny, and Breach operates as an elaborate smokescreen for the actual political economy that runs both cities – Hardt and Negri's Empire, which he cites as "a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule."[66] Miéville's satire, according to Freedman, is a deflationary one, where the "ghost of weird fiction" persists only to highlight the ultimate key to the detective novel; that at the end of the day, it really is about the money. Geary was murdered to preserve the broad, international system of capital that flows above, below, and around national borders.

But even this is too complicated. In this moment of irresolution, with capital literally escaping into the sunset, Borlú realizes that the minister was "not competent enough at one end, too competent at the other, to make sense of" why pre-Cleavage artifacts might hold any such power in the first place, or to understand the urgency of keeping such a seemingly small infraction under wraps (288). Borlú rapidly updates the possible conclusions for his case and realizes, with all of these new facts at hand, that the actual murderer, the only one left standing, must be the academic Bowden. He was the only element in the case capable of navigating the bewildering political, legal and

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[65] Carl Freedman, "From Genre to Political Economy: Miéville's *The City & The City* and Uneven Development." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 13, no. 2 (September 6, 2013): 13–30.
[66] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000, xii, as cited in Freedman, 28.

cultural machinations that keep Besźel, Ul Qoma, and Breach churning. Bowden, the only truly unreformed believer in Orciny, killed Geary when she confronted him with his lie. Geary died not because she believed in Orciny herself, but because she *didn't* believe it. She becomes a challenge to the viability of Orciny as a belief, as a theory with the ability to effect and affect real, material, political conditions. Isabel Nancy was correct. The young graduate student was not convinced of the reality of Orciny. Rather, it was her specific refusal to believe in a theoretical ur-state that preceded the separate nations, or in a virtual space that somehow existed between and without interference from either Besźel or Ul Qoma, that led to her death.

Conclusion: Open and Shut

Finally, for all of the waiting, Borlú finally has his suspect, and is sure of it. The novel's conclusion provides readers with a synthesized account of how to exist in these irresolvable cities, but does so without resolving the system itself. The grand revelation of Bowden's guilt is folded into the ongoing process of decision-making the novel has trained us as readers to undertake the whole while. With the help of his erstwhile Ul Qoman partner Dhatt, Borlú locates Bowden, as much as is possible in this paradoxical pair of cities. The academic has assumed a position in neither of the two cities, rendering his arrest impossible: "the way he's moving… the clothes he's wearing… they *can't tell* whether he's in Ul Qoma or Besźel" (292). The experience of being in both cities at once –

the native ability of Breach, and the vertigo-inducing experience had by Borlú – has been weaponized by Bowden: "In that uncertain state, no one would stop [him]." Bowden had found a way to monetize his own theory of Orciny, and when he was on the verge of being found out, he made to escape into the virtual space between the two cities that he had always asserted had to be actual, real.

Bowden, through a life of thinking and writing, had conducted a careful study of the smallest details of national culture, down to the way natives of both cities walk, and translated them from the realm of anthropological study into that of actual practice. Borlú is taken aback when he first notices him, narrating, "That gait. Strange, impossible. Not properly describable, but anyone used to the physical vernaculars of Besźel and Ul Qoma, it was rootless and untethered, purposeful and without a country" (296). There are obvious echoes here of Borlú's first moments in Breach, when he was faced with the destabilizing reality of being in both cities at one and the same time. But Borlú exists in a space of *super*position, like the cities themselves, while Bowden can only achieve being in no nation at all. In translating his academic research into actual practice, Bowden has seemingly made himself into the perfect criminal, untouchable by either city and yet not explicitly acting across the cities' borders, and thus not subject to Breach's powers either. But this is a negative freedom. Even if he were to escape by walking on foot out the two countries, he would never be able to return to the life he had made for himself as an archaeologist of Besźel and Ul Qoma. This negation of national

cultures as such allows Bowden to avoid arrest, but that's it. He is stuck not in both cities, nor in the void that is Breach, but nowhere, and with nothing anchoring him.

Here, at the end of the novel, there's a deflation I feel when describing the plot in step-by-step terms, precisely because doing so evacuates so much of the work of detecting that propels the novel forward. But deflating Borlú's investigation into its constitutive steps makes it clear that on the level of plot, *The City & The City* is actually not very innovative in a strict sense. In terms of scale, it certainly seems expansive: each of the potential theories seems to open an ever-wider geographic ambit of nefarious actors, growing to the size and scale of globalized neoliberal capital. But at its core, this global and globalized critique masks the fact that the novel is a recognizably generic murder mystery. Indeed, Freedman himself points this out, writing, "The familiar and deflationary truth is that people do not, as a matter of fact, get killed to prevent the existence of uncanny forces from becoming widely known. People get killed so that other people can make money: a point of decisive *generic* significance" (22). Sure, Bowden stood to make a great deal of money, any good Marxist would be hard-pressed to ignore the deleterious effects of globalized capital, and the same strict economic materialists might not consider globalized capital a "uncanny force."

But as a motivation for a specific crime, it certainly feels a bit too baggy and amorphous. As Borlú charges when he confronts Bowden, the academic's reasons were more personal: "It was because you missed Orciny. A way to have it both ways. Yes,

sure you were wrong about Orciny, but you could make it so you were right, too" (299). Bowden, as an academic – himself a kind of professional noticer – had constructed a theory so intricate, so beautiful that rather than revise it he had killed to preserve it. "Mahalia died because she proved to Bowden that he had been a fool to believe the folktale he created" (300). A theory – in this case, of the nation broadly, and of the relationship between these two nations specifically – is only good insofar as it helps explain the world around you; a good detective knows that theories must be revised before the preservation of a theory becomes more important than what it explains. Bowden's motivation, for all of its abstract, theoretical baggage, and for all of its intricacy and imbrication with the metaphysics of transnational identity, was deeply personal. He was angry he had been figured for a fraud, and scared of the ramifications were the weakness of his theory exposed.

In this final standoff between Borlú, in a archetypical Last Dramatic Speech, Bowden admits to having killed his upstart student not because of her over-enthusiasm in arguing for the existence of the superstate of Orciny but because she "figured out that it was nonsense" (300), a scam by Bowden both to make money and to buttress up his own academic conclusions. Bowden, it seems, never quite gave up on the idea of an ancestral, historical unity of the two cities that persisted, unnoticed. He is in fact so dedicated to this theory that he crafted his own myth of it and killed his student when she found herself doubting its veracity. So pure, so deep, so *radical* was his belief in the

connection between Besźel and Ul Qoma that he becomes completely unnoticeable and unknowable.

Of course, that's his theory, his escape plan. The reality is that Borlú reaches out and grabs Bowden back into physical space, borders be damned. Bowden is thrown into the "bureaucracy of Breach," never to be seen again (307). Borlú had achieved this Archimedean point from which he could see both cities through breaching, but nonetheless he remained in both cities. Bowden believed he had created his own space, where he believed himself capable of existing both outside-of and in-between two separate national cultures. But this space is proven spectral and ineffective in the face of the reality that we all live in actual, physical space. There is no such thing as being outside our own choices of what to notice *or* unnotice, subliminal and automatic as those choices may be.

What is instead true is both that the two cities – the two nations – exist in uneasy tension with one another. Neither the unificationists nor the ultranationalists succeeded in their mission, and neither subversive political group was involved in the murder of Geary. The case is solved (if not prosecuted, not in a sense that we would recognize). Mahalia Geary was not killed by nationalism, nor was she killed by radical unificationists insistent on bringing nations together. She did not suffer at the hands of Breach, the literal avatar of enforced national difference. Not even unscrupulous goons at the behest of global capitalism immediately caused her murder.

No, she was killed by an academic in preservation of his own theory of how nationalism could be historically and structurally dissolved, if only we chose to notice the right things, to follow the right theory. Bowden had learned so much about the individual national cultures to know where to stand literally and figuratively, between both and therefore in neither. But the same expertise that affords him this virtual point does not liberate him. It folds him back into global neoliberal capital. In order to substantiate his theory, he must invent a spectral power that inheres in the artifacts that prove such a spectral space exists, creating an impossible tautology that proves nothing. Compelled to develop a rubric that exists outside both cities, he becomes literally untouchable, unable and unwilling to interact with anyone or anything around him in a meaningful way. And, most poignantly, his obsession with a theory of supranational consensus, despite obvious and irrefutable cultural differences, animates the murder of one of his hardest working, *most* observant, *most* scrupulous students.

He does not notice and then build a case; he draws a conclusion and defines the evidence that supports that case. In doing so, he mirrors Borlú in more ways than simply being the murderer to Borlú's detective. He is an anti-detective, not a noticer but a fabricator, crafting his reality to match his beliefs. He serves as an indictment of theories of national interconnection that choose to insist on consensus at the cost of refusing to notice pragmatic difference. Only when Borlú was able to move through both consensus and dissensus, into Breach and beyond unnoticing, was he afforded real choice in

noticing what was essential to the case, and bring Geary's murder to (some form) of justice.

Borlú's breach comes with its own set of poignant consequences. Having Breached, and having seen the workings of Breach, there he must remain. He protests pointlessly to Ashil, "I'm a detective… not a, whatever. I don't work like you do." Ashil, avatar of Breach, responds: "That's what we want. That's why we're so glad you breached. Times are changing" (311). Borlú's arrival in Breach was a welcome one, as "times are changing" and Breach had been looking for a detective. Breach had, until that point, served exclusively to enforce the borders between the city – but how might the more pragmatic Borlú change their operating prerogative? Must *every* infraction of Breach be enforced, moving forward? Or only when strictly necessary?

In *The City & The City,* difference is not resolved. Orciny remains just a theory, Breach a practice, neither properly a space, and certainly not nations unto themselves. The final page of the novel shows Borlú having accepted his new role: "My task is changed: not to uphold the law, or another law, but to maintain the skin that keeps law in place… We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many other things the question of where it is that we live. On that issue I am a liberal. I live in the interstices, yes, but I live in both the city and the city" (312). Bowden is the villainous anti-detective, an academic so obsessed with his own theories that it renders him stateless. The detective Borlú, Bowden's inverse, becomes attuned professionally and

intimately to the philosophical questions of what makes nations. He is not a detective *in* both cities, but a detective *of* both cities, where the question of what a nation can and should be makes up the docket of his cases.

Just as Borlú the detective exists at the novel's end in the *dissensi* of the impossible cleavage of two cities, so too does our ability to understand the relationship between nations, not beholden to limiting conclusions of what must pass unseen as background noise. It is the noticing itself, the finely-trained eye needed to attend to what stands out among a field of what is otherwise so obvious as to escape noticing, that shapes what is possible. To be a good detective, a good critic, and a person who can function in complex, interrelated, international and globalized space, requires that we attend as much to what we find familiar as to what feels out of place, both what falls within the purview of our preferred models for understanding the relationships between and among nations and what those ways of seeing necessarily force us to unsee in our own practice. To do otherwise is to risk becoming Bowden – nominally free, but so expert as to be unknowable, untouchable, unseeable, and ultimately subject to being thrown back into the machines that make the system.

Borlú, on the other hand? He's a good detective, and has the makings of a good critic.[67] He may not be perfect, but in the end he doggedly pursued the truth of Geary's

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[67] As Shoshana Felman famously wrote, "The detective is only a detective in his (her) function *as a reader*." ("Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977): 176, emphasis original.)

murder no matter how often his theories fell apart. He is not unknowable and untouchable. He's not in *neither*, but in both Besźel and Ul Qoma. Seeing and noticing both cities, recognizing their borders and ignoring them when necessary, accounting for ideological continuities and irresolvable differences equally, all in pursuit of what might ultimately be considered the truth of how two cities, two nations, might function together.

III – Worldbuilding

In the opening lines of his bombastic survey and theorization of the fantasy novel, *Imaginary Worlds*, author and critic Lin Carter lovingly deprecates the fans of his chosen genre – and most others along the way – writing of their own provinciality, "[m]ost people, an overwhelming majority of the populace in fact, read nothing at all beyond their newspapers, a few glossy magazine, and an occasional fat best seller… I cannot believe that [even] devotees of the whodunit, the western, or the 'ladies' Gothic romance' read and collect books in their chosen province of literature as assiduously as do we."[1]

That was 1973. As of today, Wikipedia lists *The Hobbit* as the best-selling individual novel of all time, with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in a close second, with 140.6 million and 120 million copies sold, respectively.[2] Readers of contemporary fiction wandering into a bookstore in search of a work of literary realism will no doubt browse past boxed sets of *A Song of Ice and Fire,* a new prologue to *The Hunger Games* trilogy, a reworking of an early entry in the *Twilight* saga, or the most

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[1] Lin Carter, *Imaginary Worlds; the Art of Fantasy.* Original Adult Fantasy Ballantine Books. New York, Ballantine Books 1973, 1.

[2] "Lord of the Rings Total Franchise Revenue." *Statistic Brain* (blog), January 2, 2018. https://www.statisticbrain.com/lord-of-the-rings-total-franchise-revenue/ and Nicola Chalton and Meredith Macardle. *20th Century in Bite-Sized Chunks*. Chartwell Books, 2017, 129, as cited in "List of Best-Selling Books." In *Wikipedia*, September 15, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_best-selling_books&oldid=1044392150. Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None,* a quintessential murder mystery, clocks in at #5.

recent file in *The Stormlight Archives*,[3] to say nothing of the stranglehold *Harry Potter* still has on bookshop windows and young adult sections. What Carter provisions to the domain of fantasy is a readerly affect of wonder and curiosity: "Perhaps lovers of fantasy" are "incurable romantics – idle dreamers, bored by the everyday world around us – seeking escape from the sordid realities we find repellant." Perhaps, indeed, it is simply this wonder that drives readers back to these works of fantasy.

But these novels are not just individual works of fiction. These novels build worlds. All novels do, of course, but these science fiction and fantasy novels do so insistently, obviously. Middle Earth of *The Hobbit* and its effervescent scion, *The Lord of the Rings.* Westeros, Southyros, and what fans call "Planetos" in *A Song of Ice and Fire* (despite its ignominious deflation at the hands of dual disappointments – the finale of its HBO adaptation and the perennial frustration of readers wanting for the next installment). Panem in *The Hunger Games. Earthsea,* Hogwarts, and their respective wizards. "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed," all under the shadow of *The Dark Tower*.[4]

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[3] Respectively, George R.R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. 5 vols. New York: Bantam Books, 1991-2011; Suzanne Collins, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Scholastic Press, 2020; Stephanie Meyer, *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined*. Anniversary edition, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2016; Brandon Sanderson, *Rhythm of War: The Stormlight Archive,* Book 4. Tor Books, 2020.

[4] Stephen King, *The Gunslinger*. *The Dark Tower* Series, Book 1. New York: Viking, 2003, 1.

"Worldbuilding," while not new, is newly dominant in our discussions of fictional worlds, literary and otherwise.[5] It is the insistence of these generic forms that has something to teach us. In this chapter, I show how the generic strategies of science fiction and fantasy (from here on referred to collectively as SFF), especially the central practice of worldbuilding, can and should be deployed to provide new ways of considering the core questions of the discipline of world literature.[6] Thinking more systematically, less wondrously, and just as curiously, we can consider fantasy and its fellow traveler science-fiction as a unified field of generic production which, in its most refined form, relies on the building of a coherent fictional world – the worldbuilding of this chapter's title – that both exists wholly apart from our own world while also

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[5] For an indication of just how powerful a market-force fantasy worldbuilding has become of late, the budget for the upcoming *Lord of the Rings* spinoff series on Amazon is estimated to rise to over one billion dollars (Joanna Robinson and Anthony Breznican, "Amazon's 'Lord of the Rings' Series Rises: Inside 'The Rings of Power.'" *Vanity Fair*, February 10, 2022. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/02/amazon-the-rings-of-power-series-first-look). Moreover, iterations of worldbuilding also rollick over box office records – of the top 25 highest grossing films of all time by US box office returns, according to IMDB, eight belong to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, two document various Star Wars, and there's a triplanetary solar system of *Jurassic Worlds*. Tolkien and JK Rowling even sneak back in here in this new medium – the finales of both film series, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* come in at 24 and 13. The rest are Fast, Furious, and Disney (IMDb, "Top 250 [Sorted by US Box Office Descending]." http://www.imdb.com/search/title/?groups=top_250).

[6] A brief note here on orthography: throughout this chapter, I use "worldbuilding" rather than "world-building" or "world building" to affirm it as a holistic, unified practice – "worldbuilding" not just as the process of building something which just so happens to be a world, but the iterative process of creating a world *in toto.* Merriam Webster acknowledges that it is not a new phrase unto itself, citing its earliest use in reference to the creation of a fictional world coming in a poem by Hamilton Wright Mable in 1891, and a monograph on Henry James by Elisabeth Luther Cary in 1905, both in hyphenated form ("What Is 'World-Building'?" Words We're Watching: Merriam-Webster. https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-is-world-building). "Worldbuilding" is generally and anecdotally more common at present than the hyphenated version when used by practitioners of the art, especially authors. Jemisin herself uses the unhyphenated term in the title for her recently released Masterclass, discussed below. (The earliest citation of the unhyphenated form listed by Merriam Webster is from another PhD dissertation's argument on yet another work of SFF, Lahna Faga Diskin's reading of Arrakis in Frank Herbert's *Dune* ["Teaching and Reading Science Fiction in College." PhD Diss. University of Michigan, 1975]).

proceeding logically from a set of central premises. This worldbuilding logic, properly applied, renders world literature into a cognizable object of study itself, appropriately understood as its own world. More importantly, it also charts a way forward for the subdiscipline. But most importantly of all, thinking through worldbuilding allows us to refracture any image of a totalized world into one that emerges from, and only from, the collision of competing models as they are practically applied. If, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the detective novel provides a strategy for existing in nationalized space, the worldbuilding of SFF provides a similar strategy at the scale of the whole world.

I use N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy as a contemporary exemplar of worldbuilding in order to trace a method for thinking of world literature in homologous terms to those of SFF.[7] What positions *The Broken Earth* to offer unique answers to questions of world literature is its self-conscious approach to the practice of worldbuilding: the history of the world Jemisin creates is one in which worldwide system of organization and control are regularly imposed, and regularly shattered. The trilogy is autophagic in that way, where the more elaborate the build-up of deep reservoirs of appendices, stonelore, history, cultural markers, naming conventions, organization by racial phylogeny and caste, etc., are unfurled in the trilogy, the more the

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[7] N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season: Broken Earth* Series, Book 1. New York: Orbit, 2015; *The Obelisk Gate: The Broken Earth* Series, Book 2. New York: Orbit, 2016; *The Stone Sky: The Broken Earth* Series, Book 3. New York: Orbit, 2017. From here on, I refer both to the series as a whole ("*TBE*") and to the individual novels ("*TFS*," "*TOG*," "*TSS*") respectively, with page numbers referenced parenthetically in the text.

central plot primes us to be deeply, deeply skeptical of each such organizational practice. The attempts at disciplining this world are what broke it in the first place. In doing so, both the readers and the characters come to realize that the catastrophic "Seasons" of the first novel's title, *The Fifth Season,* are the result of a failed experiment by a pre-historical society that attempted to harness the very power of the planet itself. In attempting to attend to the power of the earth itself, to take a fully planetary perspective, these pre-historical actors attempted to discipline the world. But to hegemonize and regulate the entirety of the global, enmeshed and fluid network of power, both literal and figurative, was impossible, and doomed for failure.

In the world of Jemisin's making, orogenes are humans who possess the innate ability to manipulate the inherent force and energy of the material world. These superpowered individuals have the capacity to reach their consciousness into the strata and substrata of the earth itself, or to draw latent energy from the air around them, and channel what they find into acts of immense force – raising mountains, channeling lava flows, freezing broad areas around themselves. The central fantastical element of *The Broken Earth* is the ability, quite literally, to manipulate territory, to change the shape and face of the earth, to build and destroy the world.

But Jemisin's series tells a lot of different stories; such is the nature of sprawling SFF stories like it, epic in both scope and scale, spreading out over thousands of pages. Critical approaches to Jemisin's novels have centered around the trilogy's extended

indictment of racial and racialized oppression, their deliberate depiction of the slow violence of ecological catastrophe, an investment in the difficulty and necessity of practicing an ethics of care, and the meaningful interrelations of all three.[8] At its core, though, *The Broken Earth* is the story of Essun, an orogene, on a mission to recover her daughter who has disappeared following a massive ecological catastrophe. Essun sets out to find her. She must survive long enough to do so.

It is in the particular intersection of worldbuilding as practice and planetary scale as setting that allows for a reading of *The Broken Earth* that can serve as a methodological model for the contemporary study of world literature. I take as the beginning of the subdiscipline of world literature Auerbach's "Philology and *Weltliteratur,"* which offered a new and iteratively refreshing methodology of "world literature" as a broad practice.[9] Auerbach's vision for world literature, from the outset, was a comparative one, and not a function of exhaustive disciplinary codification. But in surveying recent studies by literary critics working on questions of the world and the globe (Casanova, Damrosch, Hayot, Walkowitz, Cheah, et al), I argue that there has been a turn in the last few decades towards attempts to define the "world" in "world literature" as a singular

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[8] See Alastair Iles, "Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on Race and Environment in Transitions." *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2019); Kirsten Dillender, "Land and Pessimistic Futures in Contemporary African American Speculative Fiction." *Extrapolation.* 61, no. 1/2 (2020): 131-150, VI; Ferrández San Miguel, María. "Ethics in the Anthropocene: Traumatic Exhaustion and Posthuman Regeneration in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy*." *English Studies* 101, no. 4 (May 18, 2020): 471–86; and Shohreh Haji Mola Hosein and Farideh Pourgiv, "Eco-Phobia in Nora K. Jemisin's Trilogy *The Broken Earth*." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, November 2, 2020, 1–12.

[9] Erich Auerbach, "Philology and 'Weltliteratur' 'Translated by Maire and Edward Said.'" *The Centennial Review; East Lansing, Mich.* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 1.

intelligible object of study. Built around various (and admittedly complex, nuanced and provocative) heuristic keys, these critics attempt to map our world by building their own in much the same way that science fiction builds worlds.[10] These recent iterations in the discipline of world literature have moved away from this original *comparatist* project towards thinking of the entire world itself as their object, merging with a rising call to consider *the* world, our world, as a world-system, which occasioned new applications of Auerbachian comparativist models of world-literature as a practice.

In thinking through worldbuilding as a strategy, this perspective on world literature aligns and combines a pair of critical traditions, usually mapped alternatively onto the genres of both science fiction (from here on referred to as "SF") and fantasy, especially as they have merged in contemporary practice. From fantasy I draw the distinction between primary and secondary worlds, as first articulated by JRR Tolkien, and pair it with the robust critical tradition in SF, specifically the core concept of the *novum* inaugurated by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979).[11] For many critics, these two genres might be easily captured under the umbrella term "speculative

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[10] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* Translation/Transnation. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2004.; Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*. Oxford ; New York : Oxford UP, 2012; Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated : The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015, and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, all discussed in much further detail below, pages 203-10.

[11] JRR Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories." In *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, Expanded ed., with Commentary and Notes. London: Harper Collins, 2008; and Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven : Yale UP, 1979.

fiction."[12] But it is essential, I think, not to elide the differences between these approaches by creating a supercategory that decenters what makes them usefully distinct. Rather, considering SF and fantasy alongside one another, I argue that the structural foundations of the more precisely-named blended generic category of "SFF" provides the clearest insight into how we might imagine the world of world literature. Rather than asking what these fantastic stories might tell us *about* our world, what can reading these expansive, interconnected fantasy worlds tell us about *how* we imagine the fullness of the world itself, with all of its internal contradictions? In allowing us to ask these questions, worldbuilding provides not just a testing ground for how individual social and cultural premises might radiate out through a world, but how worlds themselves are constructed.

There's also a relatively (to my mind) straightforward, instrumental reason to consider novels otherwise pushed to the periphery of the literary. To think of contemporary fiction without considering the role of the more historical non-literary

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[12] Much like "worldbuilding" itself, "speculative fiction" is also not a new construction. In 1979, the notable author and reviewer of the fantastical, Algis Budrys, wrote in the Chicago Sun-Times that after the American pulp fantasy fiction magazine *Unknown* "folded during World War II newsprint shortages, word went forth throughout the SF community that there was something called science fiction over HERE [*sic*], where the survivor was, and that fantasy was over THERE [also *sic*], and writers either did one and lived or did the other and starved." This distinction, while it may have been "more or less true for about 15 minutes sometimes in the late 1940s," already no longer held for Budrys: "Writer after writer has been readily demonstrating that there is one thing called Speculative Fiction, or SF, and that there are plenty of authors who can fruitfully approach it from many directions, including technology fiction, fantasy or any number of other genres in between." (Algis Budrys, "Books, October 1979." In *Benchmarks Continued: The F&SF "Books" Columns,* Volume 1, 1975-1982: 151. Ansible Editions, 2012.) For what I see as the limits of thinking in terms of "speculative fiction," see the section subtitled "Some Speculations on Speculative Fiction" below, pages 189-99.

genres of SFF is to ignore a whole swath of recent novels that reach even that "overwhelming majority" of those readers who may not read literary fiction but whose readerly sensibilities are shaped by the imaginary worlds of SFF. Jemisin's first novel, *The Fifth Season,* won a Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2016 – the first time the award was given to a Black writer. The other two novels followed suit, *The Obelisk Gate* winning in 2017 and *The Stone Sky* in 2018, the first trilogy to ever win a Hugo for all three entries. The novels have sold over two million copies, and Jemisin herself has become a celebrity in the literary and publishing world – countless interviews, profiles, podcast appearances, and glowing reviews have established her as one of the most visible writers of fiction writing today. That Jemisin has become such a breakout, crossover success is a signal of the greater trend in contemporary fiction over the last few decades that has seen the walls between literary fiction and genre fiction, in both the academy and to the general readership, begin to crack, and perhaps even to crumble entirely. The premise of this chapter is not, on its face, to argue whether SFF should be considered world literature (although I think it should). Instead, I propose that bringing the worldbuilding strategies endemic to SFF to bear on the theoretical limits of world literature is an exciting opportunity to rethink current methods in world literature. From there, though, I do hope to demonstrate that *The Broken Earth* – and much of SFF that is premised directly on worldbuilding as a core strategy – enacts the critical, academic process of world literature in vibrant, iterative and creative literary form.

The world of *The Broken Earth* develops a robust, coherent built-world that is ultimately riven by internal logics of discipline and control. Thinking in SFF terms allows us to recognize both the creative, generative capacity of these theories without assuming that any individual approach is *correct,* or more accurately descriptive than any other. Considering contemporary theories of world literature as similarly constitutive of a comprehensive built-world but ultimately doomed to failure individually, we might return from the precipice of trying to decide what the world *is* and reinvigorate the Auerbachian model in which it is out of contingency, relationality, and the strategic deployment of relevant critical models that an idea of the world can reemerge.

Top-Down: The Broken Earth *and the Building of Secondary Worlds*

Among the whole crowded field of SFF, Jemisin's novels are useful specifically because of how deliberate and forthright she is about *how* she crafts her literary worlds. As a writer of SFF, rather than strictly fantasy *or* science fiction, Jemisin brings together the intense worldbuilding characteristic of fantasy since Tolkien with the central conceit of a *novum* that has been proposed by Darko Suvin as the constitutive feature of science

fiction.[13] Following Jemisin's lead, I argue that instead of thinking of the border between these two genres as things to be policed, they should be considered together as a holistic way of thinking that provides new modes of imagining a world.

SFF worldbuilding – the type of worldbuilding characteristic of this consciously blended category – depends on two rules, as I see them, derived from dominant strains of thinking about, alternatively, fantasy and science fiction. First, that fictional worlds should attempt to be coherent and proceed logically, no matter how fantastic their premises or details. Secondly, that these fictional worlds are nonetheless built around some specific element that is not strictly bound to the laws of reality that form the primary world that we all inhabit – the very fantastic element that secondary worlds must work to maintain as coherent and logical. These modes of imagining fictional worlds overlap, obviously. All writers of fiction in some way engage in both. But as readers, we are encouraged by these alternative modes of understanding SFF to think in competing, opposed directions. Either we start with the whole of a fictional world,

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[13] In a blog post announcing her stint as the first editor of the *New York Times* column "Otherworldly," Jemisin self-reflects: "I'm an eclectic reader, so the new column will obviously feature science fiction, fantasy, horror, some YA, some graphic novels, some anthologies, and even some nonfiction where it impacts the genre," showing the capaciousness of genre fiction she considers within her ambit as a reviewer. With the breeziness of someone well familiar with these corners of the publishing world, she herself envelops all of these categories later in the same introduction under the umbrella "SFF," writing, "I still have books of my own to write; I *do not* have time to vet the entire SFF book world." ("My New Side-Gig." Epiphany 2.0, December 29, 2015. https://nkjemisin.com/2015/12/my-new-side-gig/). In articulating her investment in SFF, rather than SF, fantasy, or "speculative fiction," Jemisin's language is also symptomatic of a desire to reinvest SFF with the particularities of its forebears after decades spent in linguistic homogenization. (It's also worth mentioning that her first column published for "Otherworldly" opens as a review of, among other novels, China Miéville's *This Census-Taker* [2016]).

fantastic or otherwise, as a solidified whole within which a plot and its elements are drawn, or we are drawn to focus on a specific change or fantastic invention that has been imagined, around which a world swells as a consequence. Jemisin herself alternatively refers to this latter narrative invention as the "speculative element" and "Element X," both of which amount to different conceptualizations of the same thing. But whereas distinctions between these two methods of mapping built-worlds might otherwise be used to distinguish *between* SF and fantasy, in bringing them together Jemisin articulates an approach to writing that disregards such distinctions.

Jemisin regularly leads worldbuilding workshops, in which, step by step, she walks participants through the process of creating an engaging fantasy world.[14] In these

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[14] She provides the slides for these workshops on her website, granting readers and critics direct access into her creative process, a process that is all too often obscured by the time such creative procedure arrives in our hands as a finished codex book. The slides of the presentation, titled "Growing Your Iceberg: Crafting a Secondary World That Feels Ancient in 60 Minutes (or less)" can be found at http://nkjemisin.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/WDWebinar.pdf, and this course has also been repackaged as a recently-released course on Masterclass.com ("N. K. Jemisin Teaches Fantasy and Science Fiction Writing | MasterClass." Masterclass.com. https://www.masterclass.com/classes/n-k-jemisin-teaches-fantasy-and-science-fiction-writing). I originally encountered this presentation simply by Googling "Element X NK Jemisin" after encountering the term on the /r/worldbuilding subreddit, a subcommunity dedicated to SFF worldbuilding on the social media platform reddit.com, and it's worth noting that the presentation cannot, as far as I can tell, be accessed directly by link from nkjemisin.com. The formal conventions of a dissertation are such that I feel wary about including such a resource, stumbled upon via research methods that I can't help but feel might appear less-than-rigorous. But this kind of ad hoc, non-academic encounter with the term speaks to the generative capacity of worldbuilding outside of professional writing, and the structure of this latter half of her workshops, premised on a series of cascading questions, mirrors the array of online fan hobbyist communities and "worldbuilding workbooks" that have sprung up in the past decade or so. (See Randy Ellefson, *Creating Life*. Evermore Press, 2017; T.M Holladay, *The Only World Building Workbook You'll Ever Need: Your New Setting Bible*. Independently published, 2020; T.G. Franklin, *World Building Guide & Workbook*. PaperSteel Press, 2018; A. Trevena, *30 Days of Worldbuilding: An Author's Step-by-Step Guide to Building Fictional Worlds*. Independently published, 2019, and the like, all available on the first page of Amazon's search results and available for delivery to your home in 24-48 hours. Note also that many of these workbooks are self-published – creatives building their own worlds in more ways than one.)

workshops we see both the remnants of this distinction and the elision between them. Her presentation begin by pushing her participants to think creatively within the context of SFF: it opens with some prefatory notes on the history of science fiction, the concept of the "iceberg" – "A common adage of speculative fiction writing is that worldbuilding should be like an iceberg: only 10% should be visible above the surface, with the rest hidden underneath" – a consideration of "low immersion" to "high immersion" in narration, and finally a recommendation that "research is your friend."

The third section of her workshop slides, titled "Let's Build a World," commences at planetary scale (as do her novels).[15] "Pick your planet!" she enthuses, adding some basic questions – "Habitable (to the people you'll create)? Inimical? Continents, archipelago, all ocean, no water at all?" – while lightly reminding her imagined seminar, "*Your story's people will have adapted to the above too.*"[16] After proceeding through a series of exemplar decisions, in which Jemisin postulates realistic weather and climate patterns, and an archipelagic constellation of continents to dictate certain distinct features of the planet, she writes of her newly imagined exemplar geography, "[o]ur world gives us the basics: Agriculture difficult, Tsunamis, earthquakes, storms frequent, life dependent on trade and the sea."[17] Jemisin's workshops lead attendees through the creation of their own new world, before it is

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[15] "[Y]ou need context," the narrator tells us on the first page of *The Fifth Season.* "Here is a land."
[16] "Growing Your Iceberg," slide 15, emphasis original.
[17] "Growing Your Iceberg," slide 25.

polished and fleshed out. Obviously, it's tricky to assume that a retrospective and commodified Masterclass-style calibration of Jemisin's own writerly process must necessarily translate to how we read her finished novels. But we can still nonetheless see artifacts of this process in the final books as we receive them as readers.

Again, following Jemisin, let's begin with the "macro" worldbuilding and work our way down. The excitement a true aficionado of SFF feels when cracking open a doorstopper novel and encountering a map cannot be overstated, and these same aficionados are greeted with a two-page spread of The Stillness right at the very beginning. Since Tolkien, these line drawings promise that the world the reader will encounter is intelligible and, literally, mappable. From the maps in *The Broken Earth,* we know a few things immediately: the world of *The Broken Earth* is that of The Stillness, a mega-continent that is alone on its planet, akin to our own terrestrial Pangea, comprised of a "Minimal Plate" and a "Maximal Plate," bisected by a crosshatch of fault lines and mountain ranges. But while a technical description of a *planet* might be reasonably reducible to its geography, worlds are, of course, more subtle things, as the existence of maps imply. Someone had to make these maps, someone or something had to name these geologic formations. "Worldbuilding" in the literary sense is extended here to include the broader categories of culture, history, social formation.

The rhetoric of a planetary scale runs through the distinction of macro and micro-worldbuilding, as Jemisin defines them. "Macro worldbuilding is the creation of

the physical environment in which… this culture developed, these characters emerged from, this story takes place."[18] This latter bit, "Let's Build a People," is micro-worldbuilding, a contranym – the smaller scale building of the whole of a world. After prompting her audience to establish the materiality of their settings, she segues into the task of building a people and a society, writing that "sociology gives us the rest." Lingering for a moment here with the maps, we can still and already see echoes of her proposed methodology in the world of *The Broken Earth*. The maps give us fault lines, but their existence in the first place also imply a diegetic authority within the world of the novels that have the technological capacity to survey space, and the technology of abstraction which is required to draw the maps in the first place. As we read, we can surmise that this map is the product of the academic apparatus of which the Yumenescene Fulcrum, the seat of centralized hierarchical quasi-governmental power, is a part.

Sustaining our attention to the novels' paratexts, the completeness of Jemisin's built world is further signaled by another feature of SFF, namely the extended appendices a well-conditioned reader of SFF would be unsurprised to find at the back of the books. Maps lead us into the fictional worlds of SFF, and appendices stay with us as we might leave the pages of the narrative proper.[19] In the first volume, readers are

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[18] Transcription of the introduction to "Masterclass," asyndeton *sic*.
[19] For a compelling reading of *TBE's* paratexts, including the ongoing deployment of "stonelore" from the perspective of history rather than that of narrative, see Erika Harlitz-Kern, "History and SFF: Historical

treated to two such appendices. The first, "*a catalog of Fifth Seasons that have been recorded prior to and since the founding of the Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation, from most recent to oldest,*" orients the happenings of the series in deeper, albeit fictional, time (*TFS* 451, italicization original). The period surveyed stretches from 9800 "Before Imperial" up to "2719 Imperial," a range of 12,500 years. (*TFS* 455, 451). Whether or not a year in the world of *The Broken Earth* is equivalent, roughly or otherwise, to a terrestrial year here in our reality doesn't much matter – regardless, the effect is that this is an old, established world, with a history that is available to the practice of historiography itself. "Before Imperial" implies a history of subjugation by an Empire, which itself implies the growth of an individual sovereign power into an entity that has the capacity for such imperial calculus, and therefore of competing sovereignties that must have existed in order for such an Empire to be thusly imperial.[20]

The world – both the planetary and geographic one, and the world populated by peoples – that is implied by the mere presence of the paratextual conventions of SFF (the maps, the appendices, the sheer page-count of the series) links directly with the manifest

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Sources and N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy." Tor.com, December 17, 2019. https://www.tor.com/2019/12/17/history-and-sff-historical-sources-and-n-k-jemisins-broken-earth-trilogy/.

[20] The diegetic historiography of the world is further established by the inclusion of an "Editor's note," which allows for historical coherence to emerge from an implied instability in history. This supposed editor caveats that "[m]uch of the information about Seasons prior to the founding of Sanze is contradictory or unconfirmed," but these earliest seasons have been "agreed upon by the Seventh University Archaeomestric Conference of 2532" (*TFS* 454). Geohistorical indeterminacy itself is rendered legible and disciplined in this appendix – the very process I suggest the appendices are enacting as whole for the trilogy.

history as provided in the series' narrative. At the level of deep history and empire, geography intersects with the interpersonal and social: again, as Jemisin reflects, "Macro-worldbuilding is the creation of the physical environment in which… this culture developed, these characters emerged from, this story takes place." The Stillness is populated by a multicultural patchwork of humans, whose differences are mapped in terms both geographic and phenotypical, ranging from the darker-skinned Midlatters, at the continent's center, where temperatures are generally more hospitable, out to the paler Coasters to the East and West, Nomidlatters to the north and Somidlatters to the south. At the present of the story's beginning, the continent is controlled in whole by the Empire of Sanze, centered in the continent's central city of Yumenes. From this basic geography, we can see how the character of the people within it developed.

Sanze is functionally a "global" society, considering that it spans the far reaches of the planet's solitary continent. When Essun describes one of the trilogy's primary antagonists, Schaffa, she reflects that "[h]is skin is almost white, he's so paper-pale… He has long flat hair, which together with the skin might mark him as an Arctic, though the color of it – a deep heavy black, like the soil near an old blow – doesn't fit. Eastern Coasters' hair is black like that, except fluffy and not flat, but people from the east have black skin to match…. Nothing about him makes racial sense" (*TFS* 29). It is this final sentence of commentary – that Schaffa doesn't "make sense" – that by negation reinforces how clearly these phenotypical markers could otherwise be used to map the

racial sociology of the Stillness. The history of Sanze has produced a cosmopolitan heuristic in how characters (and the narration) scan new introductions – descriptions of hair style, skin-tone, and general temperament are mapped against these geographically-determined qualifiers, although often in contradistinction to hard and fast racial or culturally essentialist terms.

By combining "macro-" and "micro-" worldbuilding, what Jemisin has done altogether is build a robust "secondary world." The term, which is credited primarily to JRR Tolkien's influential essay "On Fairy Stories" (1939), introduces a distinction that has proven durable in the way critics of fantasy specifically have considered their objects. In order to articulate the role creative worldbuilding might play in interrogating the methods proposed by scholars of world literature, it is first important to articulate a distinction made in SFF between "primary" and "secondary" worlds. It is this distinction, rather than that between genres (realist vs. non-realist, SF vs. fantasy) that allows readers to envision *The Broken Earth* as a fully realized world despite its inherent fictionality and its fundamental physical impossibility.

Tolkien writes of authors of fantasy, "[w]hat really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.'" Although Tolkien has been taken up by writers of fantasy for obvious reasons, and although the nested context of his theory is explicitly fantastical works ("fairy stories"), it's worth noting that nothing precludes reading his theory as holding for all those creating literary worlds. All authors are sub-creators; in

his schema, God is the only true creator of the primary world. What the *sub*-creator achieves, he theorizes, is to make "a Secondary World into which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true;' it accords with the laws of that world."[21] These secondary worlds – the worlds in which every work of literature operates – may function in parallel with our own.[22] That is, the laws of physics may generally be the same, the geography – be it local, planetary, or extraplanetary – might generally accord with what we know about our own reality, albeit small changes may be made here and there. But this is not strictly necessary. The paradigm of primary and secondary worlds holds both for worlds where faster-than-light travel is undertaken with the same familiar weariness as a flight out of Newark, and for the worlds where the most impossible reality is that one might fly out of Newark *without* imagining you are undertaking a perilous and impossible world-historical adventure.

SFF, with its deeper investment in creating worlds that are obviously and emphatically different from our own, doubles down on the distinction between primary and secondary worlds. The apparatuses that frame the *The Broken Earth* – the maps, the

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[21] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 52.

[22] For a study of subcreation and worldbuilding that is more deeply informed by Media Studies and which extends the primary/secondary world distinction to broader, more ecumenical SFF worlds – think *Star Trek, Star Wars,* fan communities, the concept of "canon" vs. "non-canon" etc – see Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. Wolf brings the critical strand of worldbuilding endemic to fantasy together with the efforts by Pavel to theorize the role of imagined worlds in post-structuralist critical technique. Augmenting Tolkien's formulation, Wolf argues that SFF specifically operates under of rubric of both primary and secondary worlds – and is defined by such a relationship – but also that such a formulation can be extended to include the iterative worldmaking that emerges out from and above individual creative efforts.

appendices, the histories – and the organizing sociological principles that sprawl over the novels' descriptions all point to the world of *The Broken Earth* as world, built out both in time and in space. Or, as Tolkien put it in a letter to a foreign publisher about his own appendices, "they play a major part in producing the total effect… in producing the compelling sense of historical reality."[23] The codification of history and social infrastructure, both explicit and implicit throughout *The Broken Earth*, establish the world of The Stillness as a coherent and intelligible whole, a world in the strictest sense available to fiction – a secondary world.

If this is the case, then, what questions are rendered possible by the SFF novel, specifically its inheritance directly from the fantasy novel, with its generic preoccupation with generating entirely new, non-realist worlds? By lowering the generic walls around fantasy, it becomes clear that *all* literary worlds serve as a fully secondary world, a space apart from our own world wherein questions of logic are constrained by that which "accords with the laws of that world." For Tolkien, this is the privileged ambit of the fairy story, what we have now come to call "fantasy." For SFF, however, this process of

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[23] JRR Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, 228. There's Barthes's pesky Reality Effect again, this time building out the world in works of SFF. Compare the paratextual apparatuses in *TBE* to the requests Tolkien lamented, in a letter to fan and editor J.H. Cotton Minchin in 1956, for ever more detailed information about the world of *The Lord of The Rings*: "while many like you demand maps, others wish for geological indications rather than places… Musicians want tunes and musical notations. Archaeologists enquire about ceramics, metallurgy, tools and architecture. Botanists desire more accurate descriptions of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin* and *mallos*, and of *symbelmynë* [Tolkien's name for various flora in his world]. Historians require more details about the social and political structure of Gondor, and the contemporary monetary system" (*Letters* 248). So comprehensive was Tolkien's desire to provide these appendices that the process of writing them actually delayed the third volume of the series, *The Return of the King* (1951), so that they could be included in the finished book.

creating secondary worlds not only creates a new whole, but, in drawing in the speculation of SF, they also create in that secondary world the space for more granular, specific questions of how that whole functions.

Bottom-Up: Suvin's Novum, *Cognitive Estrangement, and Orogeny*

If fantasy imagines entirely new social, historical, and cultural systems within a created world, SF, working from the ground-up, explores and speculates about what key changes from our own world would need to be made in order for these systems to develop and function. Jemisin attends to both. This pole of SFF's aesthetic paradigm of imaginative disruption, when the distance between the secondary world of a text and our primary world is built up from a singular element that is more specific and more easily definable than the grander questions of sociology and culture, aligns with the attitude of what Darko Suvin dubs "cognitive estrangement" – "a point of view or look implying a new set of norms" that constitutes a "poetics of SF" that is "coherent through the ages and within itself, yet distinct from nonfictional utopianism, from naturalistic literature, and from other non-naturalistic fiction."[24] Suvin's project throughout his 1979 monograph *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* is an attempt to both systematize and justify the rigorous study of SF. From our current present, such an effort seems unnecessary, as

[24] Suvin, 6, 4.

the non-realist mode has moved thoroughly from the periphery of literary study into the core of the contemporary field.[25] But it is the specific element that creates this cognitive estrangement, what Suvin calls a *novum*, that defines the poetics around which SF is built. As Istvan Csiscery-Ronay avers, writing three decades later, "few critical concepts have had greater influence on SF theory than the *novum* as the defining trope of the genre."[26] It makes sense, then, that a full accounting of how the specific cognitive strategy of the *novum* functions in practice provides an even clearer picture of the "micro-worldbuilding" that Jemisin deploys in conjunction with the macro, and is also, I argue, essential to understanding how world literature is imagined in practice by contemporary literary critics.[27]

Borrowing the term from Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, Suvin defines *novum* as "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality," which is totalizing inasmuch as "it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects of thereof."[28] While the flow-chart of Jemisin's creative project as presented in her workshops runs from the

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[25] What is less salient now is Suvin's proposed intention of distinguishing SF from other "non-naturalistic" fiction – especially that of fantasy, which he seems to have a particular bugbear for, writing, "SF retrogressing into fairy tale… is committing creative suicide" (8). Readers and critics, myself included, obviously disagree.

[26] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2008, 26.

[27] For a pointed elucidation of cognitive estrangement's political potential and limitations, including a restriction to science fiction and not fantasy, see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2007.

[28] Suvin, *Metamorphoses*, 64, citing Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976 and *Experimentum Mundi : Frage, Kategorien d. Herausbringens, Praxis*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975.

planetary down to the interpersonal, picking up the "speculative element" on the glide path from the global to the local, Suvin's runs the opposite direction, using our own primary world as a template and adjusting the terms in accordance with what the author is inventing, making strange, making new.

Anyone familiar with *The Broken Earth* from reviews or from having read it themselves should immediately recognize what the trilogy's *novum* is. The principle fantastical element is what the characters of the novel call "orogeny," an in-born ability natural to "orogenes" that allows them to manipulate the physical properties of the world around them. This is Jemisin's foundational *novum*. A profile of Jemisin in *The New Yorker* opens (without a hint of irony or cliché) that the beginning of this story came to her in a dream: "in her sleep, she found herself standing in a surreal tableau with a massif floating in the distance. 'It was a chunk of rock shaped like a volcanic cone – a cone shaped floating mountain,' she recalled." [29] A floating mountain is an astonishing enough idea to build a world around, but Jemisin immediately recognized the potential consequences of such an image:

> Standing before the formation was a black woman in her mid-forties, with dreadlocks, who appeared to be holding the volcano aloft with her mind. She was glaring down at Jemisin and radiating anger. Jemisin did not know how she had triggered the woman's fury, but she believed that, if she did not ameliorate it quickly, the woman would hurl the smoldering massif at her. Jemisin awoke in a sweat and jotted down what she had seen. "I need to know how that person became who she is—a

[29] Raffi Khatchadourian, "N. K. Jemisin's Dream Worlds." *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/27/nk-jemisins-dream-worlds.

> woman so angry that she was willing to move mountains," she told me. "She was angry in a slow burn, with the kind of anger that is righteous, enough to change a planet. That's a person who has been through so much shit that she has been pushed into becoming a leader. That's an M.L.K. I needed to build a world that would explain her.[30]

"I needed to build a world that would explain her," this figure that grew into the trilogy's protagonist. This image of a floating mountain and a woman furious about such a state of affairs, of both destruction and creation was the origin point, the image around which the rest of the narrative world was built. The work of fiction that emerges from this image is the result of a series of answers to cascading questions: how can this woman move this mountain? Is she the only one who can move mountains? Why is she angry? Who is she angry at? How would others respond to this ability?

Thinking concurrently in terms of the secondary world of fantasy and the speculative futurity of SF allows for a parallax view of both this moment and of the fictional world of *The Broken Earth*. Taken from the bottom-up perspective of a *novum* rather than the top-down worldbuilding envisioned by Tolkien recontextualizes the whole of the fictional world that has been established through the maps and appendices, and the wealth of worldbuilding details that proliferate throughout the series, all of which would find welcome home in the workbooks and fan communities that make up so much of the amateur worldbuilding community.

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[30] Khatchadourian, "Dream Worlds."

But it is *how* the sociology of the world she builds moves forward in time as a structural *novum* for the trilogy that builds its central indictment against strict disciplinary formations. To return to the earlier slide of her worldbuilding presentation where she states, "sociology gives us the rest," she continues on to say "even **one** sociological difference can have profound effects."[31] The resulting answers are a mix of speculative sociology that meets, from the bottom up, with the top-down worldbuilding that emerges from a consideration of plate tectonics and continental drift. Tolkien's mode of worldbuilding is a totalizing, holistic one, a top-down imagining of worlds, plural, that operate interdependently and separately. Suvin's logic, otherwise, proceeds logically from the bottom up, theorizing a secondary world, both close to our primary world generally and meaningfully distinct only in terms specific to how it diverges in accordance with a central device which engenders estrangement in its readers.

The sociology of *The Broken Earth* is organized around a matrix of competing axes. The first is between the "macro-" and "micro-worldbuilding," as discussed above. The other two are more grounded in the forming of the people of the Stillness: on the one hand, there is the geographically defined stratum of Nomidlatters and Somidlatters, etc, that emerges from the raw topology of Jemisin's built world. This diffused structural inequality subtends the civilizations of the Stillness in such a way that it upends the dominant racial caste system of our own world – paleness is, literally and figuratively,

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[31] Jemisin, "Growing Your Iceberg," slide 26, emphasis original.

the outlier, whereas people with darker skin make up the Leadership classes and wield political and cultural power throughout the Empire. By upending racial caste in her physical description of her characters, she counters what she sees as a historical racial inequality in the archive of fantasy. In a short essay on her blog, titled, "The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing," Jemisin links the legacy of another trope of fantasy, that of the orc – "violent, mindless or less intelligent than human beings, brutal and thuggish and Always Chaotic Evil" – to explicitly racialized tropes about the Other. For Jemisin, orcs are "human bodies + bad magic" (*sic*), and therefore "irredeemable," because "[t]hey've got all the stuff that's in humans — emotions, a degree of intellect, sometimes free will — but it's all *wrong*." By rendering her protagonists in such a way as to both reify and invert the racial logic of our own primary world in her secondary world, Jemisin is countering the implicit logic of fantasy orcs, which she sees as "fruit of the poison vine that is *human fear of 'the Other.'*"[32]

But there is yet another matrix of social ordering, overlaid and riven through the world of The Stillness: the orogeny that allows for Essun and her daughter, and others like them, to move mountains. These powers come with an intense social cost. Orogenes, rather than being respected for their immense power, are reviled. Also referred to by the denigrating slur "rogga," orogenes are considered a universal underclass. Young children who are identified as orogenic are frequently killed by their own neighbors and

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[32] Jemisin, N.K. "From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing." Epiphany 2.0, February 13, 2013. https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/.

loved ones. Those lucky enough to be "rescued" by the seemingly autonomous order of Guardians find themselves taken to The Fulcrum, a sort of state-sponsored hybrid gymnasium/sanitorium for training young orogenes in the capital. There they are trained in the ways of orogeny and prepared for a life of indentured servitude – their powers are rendered useful, enough to justify that they be allowed to live. Orogenes, and by extension, orogeny, serve as the structuring principle around which the sociology of the world she has crafted is organized, suffusing her own creative *novum* throughout the trilogy.

Jemisin unfolds the history of caste that structures most of the social geography of The Stillness even more deeply than phenotypical race. Despite the presence of human beings that can move mountains with their mind and a bit of touch and training, the society in which they find themselves a part of forms around this new ability – and disciplines its practitioners – in ways that are fascinating to readers precisely because they feel so utterly predictable. She crafts a subtle but resonant allegory of power, racial discrimination and racialized violence that reverberates through the social ordering of orogenes and non-orogenes. It is in centering these orogenes as both immensely powerful – capable of building worlds, literally – and yet universally othered that Jemisin's racial allegory is especially evocative and provocative.[33] There is a certain

[33] For a more in-depth examination of the explicit relationship between racial formation and worldbuilding, including an intuitive reframing that posits race itself as a form of worldbuilding recognizable from popular

cynicism to *The Broken Earth*, which seems to accept as a historical premise that egalitarianism cannot help but succumb to fragmentation and the reinscription of hierarchy.[34] In invoking the righteous anger of Martin Luther King, she also evokes his oft-decontextualized moment of worldbuilding: "I Have a Dream." So, too, does Jemisin. King's dream is assertion of a new reality, a new world organized around the principles of egalitarianism and the flourishing of all people, through a radical program of social reordering from the ground up. For Jemisin, that powerful instance of social reordering might come from the potential of her protagonists to reshape society. But first, she must establish her world before proffering alternatives, as later sections of this chapter demonstrate.

Many of the same elements that are easily scanned as emerging from the geography of The Stillness can easily be reinterpreted as having derived from the intense disciplining of the orogenes. Yumenes is near the center of The Stillness, perhaps

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genre fiction, see Mark C. Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. New York: Fordham UP, 2018.

[34] John Reider (*Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. The Wesleyan Early Classics of Science Fiction Series. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2008), provides a more deeply historicist account of the relationship between colonial epistemes of racial hierarchy and science fiction (as his title suggests), arguing "The anachronistic structure of anthropological difference" – that is, the regressive idea that certain cultures are more advanced than others based on the self-assured "colonial gaze" of early Victorian adventure writers – "is one of the key features that inks emergent science fiction to colonialism" (6). In a compelling reading of HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, Reider proposes that the moment of first contact between the humans and Martians presents "an incongruous co-habitation of the same moment by people and artifacts from different times," an encounter morphologically capable of expressing both "fantastic desires" – Martians – and "critical estrangement" – the racial Othering of colonialism – "that corresponds to the double-edged effect of the exotic" (4).

to signal its significance in a center-periphery empirical model. But it is also the center because it is the only hub of political power that has managed to survive the tempestuous seasons. The whole of the imperial apparatus that disciplines the continent of the Stillness is built on a reckoning with the inherent power of the orogenes, from continental maps and boundaries to the clothes various castes wear and the roles denizens of the Stillness play in their communities. In perhaps the most devastating revelation of the series, Essun eventually learns late in the first novel that the history and dominance of the Sanzed Empire is built on the horrifying exploitation of "node-maintainers," orogenes with immense inherent magical ability but inadequate control over their power.[35] These victims of what amounts to nothing less than state violence are utterly dehumanized and rigged into "nodes" that span the continent, maintained like pieces of machinery for their ability to quell potential geoarcane events. Jemisin's *novum*, orogeny, disciplines the land as much as it does its denizens, and not just those with access to said power.

The consequences of this disciplining roil throughout the Stillness, from the most personal choices to the most collective. As Fulcrum Orogenes, Essun and her partner Alabaster wear Black uniforms as a signal of their place adjacent to but outside of society. The Guardians, including Essun's Guardian Schaffa, are tasked with monitoring and controlling the orogenes and wear burgundy – all the better to be distinctive and

[35] An obvious allusion to Ursula K LeGuin's "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas," only rendered in epic fantasy scale rather than LeGuin's piercing short prose. The effect, nevertheless, is just as intense.

visible from a distance. Accents from Yumenes, where geoarcanity is most stable and controlled, signal prestige; those from the coasts, further from the center and more liable to experience geologic catastrophe, are considered low-brow. Academies staffed with engineers and scientists that study orogeny and historians who detail the Sanzed Empire and its resilience to the seasons have reputations that proceed them and inspire respect from the elites and disdain from everyone else in equal measure. Individual communities – known as comms – are described in generalizing terms, and individuals are organized around explicit castes systems signaled by "use-names," all designated to maintain the safety and production of civilization in the face of unexpected catastrophe. "Leaders" lead, "Innovators" innovate, "Strongbacks" do manual labor. "Lorists" compile history. Orogenes use orogeny. All members of the former use-names carry about their business under the assumption that is the orogenes who threatens that stability even as they maintain it.

As elements of SFF, these mechanisms of social organization may seem, at best, analogic to those present in our own world. Disciplinary formation, in the academy and otherwise, might replicate these social distinctions. They might even go so far as provide ways of understanding relationships between and among people with different inherent and learned skills in ways that are similarly useful to the utilitarian striations of the society of the Stillness. In being so fully distinct from contemporary human society, *The Broken Earth* serves to highlight the logical conclusions of social self- and community-

sorting. The racialized Otherness of the orogenes coupled with the inversion of the imposed racial hierarchy of our primary world serves as an allegorical indictment of our world. By considering SFF as fundamentally distant from our own world, we can see not only that Jemisin is critiquing the consequences of this social hierarchy, but also laying bare the mechanism of social structuring in the first place.

Breaking The Broken Earth

Operating fully under the hybrid apparatus of SFF, *The Broken Earth* teaches its readers new diagnostic tools for assessing how its world is built, but the resulting prognosis is nonetheless grim. As the series' title reminds us, none of this works, not really. The earth is broken. And yet, by tracing the competing pressures of worldbuilding at play in the formation of *The Broken Earth,* it becomes clear that this brokenness is paradoxically constitutive of the coherent world Jemisin has imagined. The world of the Stillness is built from the bottom-up around orogeny and from the top-down based on its geography, digging both deep into its own history and looking further afield into a speculated-upon future. As Schaffa puts it, somewhere in the world's deep history, "[t]he Moon was flung away from the planet. Maybe that did it, maybe some other things happened, but whatever the cause, the result was the Shattering," the initiating event that, according to the stonelore, sees its cyclical iteration in the so-called Fifth Seasons (*TOG,* 165). Periodically, due to the instability introduced

into the system (as a direct consequence of the attempt to zero out instability) the planet is riven by nearly unsurvivable climactic catastrophe. The world is indeed broken, fractured. How might we move forward?

It is the central conceptual and aesthetic unity of "geoarcanity," which one might readily scan as "earth magic" that unites the broken world Jemisin has created. Along with the central narrative of Essun and Nassun, we are introduced to a mysterious cadre of impossible figures known colloquially as the Stone Eaters. These humanoid figures made of rock are revealed over the course of the trilogy, especially in *The Stone Sky*, to be ancient bio-engineered "tuners," designed by a pre-historical civilization known as "Syl Anagist" to capture the moon and thus channel its inherent "geoarcanity" into a perpetual source of energy. This information is doled out piecemeal, out of order, and across the whole of the trilogy. It is not until the third novel, *The Stone Sky*, that we get the clearest sense of what the technology in question was intended to do. The neologism, "geoarcanity," as defined by the narrator, "seeks to establish an energetic cycle of infinite efficiency. If… successful, the world will never know want or strife again." In order to achieve this, the creatures known to readers of the previous entries as Stone Eaters were designed and manufactured to "weave together those disparate energies" – heat, light, sound, the strong and weak force, magnetism, etc – "to manipulate and… produce a singular force that cannot be denied. To make a cacophony, symphony" (*TSS* 97). In this pre-history, this earlier civilization attempted to construct a massive control

network that would encircle the globe – the Obelisk Gate of the second novel's title – through which they could channel energy and free themselves from the need to exhaust resources to power their advanced technology. "[S]ome of our so-smart ancestors decided to dig a hole to the heart of the world for no rusting[36] reason. No; for power" (*TOG 65*). If Jemisin's *novum* is orogeny, the ability to channel the energy of the earth, it is this historical calamity born of an over-reliance *on* orogeny, geoarcanity, that unifies the bottom-up and top-down modes of tracing the worldbuilding of the novels, combining as it does both a central speculative element with the social and tectonic history of the planet.

As the novels unfold, the intense sociological disciplining of the series' present is shown to be an aftershock of the Stillness's deep history. Instead of total control over the earth's power, what happened instead was a system-wide malfunction. The tuners, upon becoming conscious of their own exploitation, chose to disrupt this process, bucking against their own proscribed role and in a moment of personal, existential risk, intentionally shunted the systems of geoarcanity. The moon was forcibly ejected from the earth's orbit, the entire planet's tidal system is thrown out of whack, Syl Anagist is destroyed and the Seasions begin, all some 50,000 years before the primary events that follow Essun. The Sylanagistine scientists, in attempting to create a system designed to fully harness the whole of the world, inadvertently created the conditions for its own

[36] "Rusting" being Jemisin's gravelly and thematically-appropriate catch-all alternative in her fictional world for the humdrum Anglo-Saxon expletives of our own.

failure. The result is a world that is unfathomably more out of tune than the previous technologically-advanced one that attempted to force even more control on the system. The ironic consequence of having built a deep history of failed worldbuilding is that the literary practice of worldbuilding in the novels is filled out by details of how the present civilization of the Stillness is still broken. The worldbuilding is that of worldbuilding, as the present communities attempt to reassert a coherent and stable world, controlling for both geologic *and* cultural instability.

It is only by thinking in terms of worldbuilding proper, as a narrative strategy constitutive of but disaggregated from either SF *or* fantasy, that we recognize the full breadth of the autophagy in *The Broken Earth*. The trilogy serves as rejection of the impulse towards ordering and structuring, whether it manifests in the distinction between literary vs. genre fiction, fantasy vs. SF, speculative vs. realism, even the planetary and local. Instead, her novels presuppose a unity of their imagined world born of contingency, an otherwise paradoxical notion if a reader does not consider the unique capacity of SFF worlds. Jemisin, in drawing from both generic traditions in a way that is uniquely porous in contemporary fiction, not only breaks down attempts of imposing a hierarchy onto the generic system itself, but also deploys worldbuilding to demonstrate that any attempt at disciplining the whole of the world through one rigid, crystalline structure – around a singular *novum* – runs the risk of collapse.

Some Speculations on "Speculative Fiction"

I argue in the next section that the model of SF worldbuilding, premised around a singular *novum,* has embedded within it fundamental problems of both scale and practice when critics attempt to apply it to the world itself, and that it is SFF, rather than SF, that we should be applying when thinking about the world. But before getting there, it's worth taking a moment to stand askance of SFF proper and consider its relationship to the stalking horse of "speculative fiction" that has arisen recently, and which occupies a similar semantic gap in the way we talk about fiction with elements of both SF and fantasy. It may once have seemed easier to distinguish between "realism" and "speculative fiction" as distinct qualitative markers, but the borders between the two have become porous even as SFF has resurged as an object of serious study. "Speculative fiction" has emerged as a blanket term in an attempt to identify these moments of porousness in works of fiction that were stylistically realist but which nevertheless featured some impossible, fantastical element.

What makes SFF a more useful rubric to think through than both speculative fiction and either of its constitutive generic traditions is what SFF renders legible. In order to articulate Jemisin's – and SFF's, more broadly – relationship to the literary-critical projects of theorizing world literature, I would like to reassert a more head-on embrace of SFF that avoids simply collapsing it into the broader nexus of "speculative fiction." The latter functions as a capacious and thus unwieldy category that elides the creative potential and reservoir of strategies that are available from SFF, with its specific

teleologies and investments. Specifically, in calling any text with elements of the impossible in them "speculative," what is lost is the recognition of SFF to build entirely new worlds that are distinct from our own in meaningful ways, even if "realism" also crafts secondary worlds, and no matter how tightly the speculation is wed to a specific conceptual *novum*.

"Realism" may purport to have more purchase on our real world, in the sense that it may be seen as better up to the task of critiquing our world than its more fantastic(al) generic cousins, but that is not necessarily true. This debate famously played out in microcosm between two luminaries of the speculative literary scene, Margaret Atwood and Ursula K LeGuin. Infamously in SFF circles, Margaret Atwood speaking on the BBC initially disparaged SF as "talking squids in outer space," before going on damage control, reasserting later that she was interested in speculative fiction, "fiction in which things happen that are not possible today." [37] LeGuin, reviewing the essay collection *Moving Targets* (2009) in which Atwood's updated definition was posed, takes umbrage with the implied distinction between high and low that she sees Atwood smuggling into the definition, writing, "[t]his arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awarders. She doesn't want the literary bigots

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[37] Cecilia Mancuso, "Speculative or Science Fiction? As Margaret Atwood Shows, There Isn't Much Distinction." the Guardian, August 10, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/10/speculative-or-science-fiction-as-margaret-atwood-shows-there-isnt-much-distinction.

to shove her into the literary ghetto."[38] Atwood and LeGuin ultimately made up (if there ever was truly a schism, as many readers and members of the SFF fan community so clearly wanted there to be), writing further glowing reviews of each other's work, Atwood eventually penning a moving tribute in *The Guardian* to LeGuin on the event of her passing.[39]

But there is something to be learned from the aperture opening and closing on this "feud" artificially fomented by readers. By turning to the blended supercategory of SFF, rather than exclusionary definitions of fantasy vs. SF, or the broadly unspecific definition of speculative fiction, SFF worldbuilding brings together a continuum of literary texts, from the speculative fiction that adheres more closely to literary realism, all the way to the sword-and sorcery high fantasy, that one could reasonably place on a spatial axis perpendicular to the "primary world." Speculative fiction – that is, literary fiction with a bit of a SF or magical twist – would be nearer to our primary world, high fantasy would be further away. Both ends of the continuum rely on new worlds being created, and both rely on some impossible element, some *novum*. This relationship between the two terms of SFF worldbuilding – a coherent secondary world that is

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[38] Ursula K. Le Guin, "*The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood | Book Review." the Guardian, August 28, 2009. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood.
[39] Atwood, Margaret. "Ursula K Le Guin, by Margaret Atwood: 'One of the Literary Greats of the 20th Century.'" *The Guardian*, January 24, 2018, sec. Books. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/24/ursula-k-le-guin-margaret-atwood-tribute.

distinct from our own on the one hand, and the strangeness of the *novum* on the other – holds no matter where on this axis one might locate a specific literary text.

There is something distinct about SFF that literary fiction with a twist can't quite access. Take as a counterexample something that might fall under the descriptor of "speculative fiction" like Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016).[40] In the world of Alderman's novel, much of the primary world is eminently recognizable, and the general affect is one of realism. Yet in the novel's world, women – all women, the world over – spontaneously develop the ability to create and control massive waves of electrical energy strong enough to kill. That's its *novum*. The rest of the novel proceeds almost procedurally, spinning out an elaborate built-world that is deceptively similar to our own in the minor details so long as one assumes the initial estrangement of the titular Power. A relatively thin plot is spun out through which Alderman can explore what the consequences of such a reorientation of gendered power would have: reeducation camps, geopolitical instability, family members questioning their safety, even a nod to Atwood's own *The Handmaid's Tale* by way of a framing narrative that positions the whole novel as an academic document prepared in a distant future where the upheaval of The Power has become an accepted and normal part of everyday life.

Does this qualify as science-fiction? Sure, for most definitions of science fiction, including Suvin's: Alderman defamiliarizes the gendered violence of our own world

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[40] Naomi Alderman, *The Power*. UK: Viking, 2016.

and pursues the ramifications as it "change[s]… the whole universe of the tale." At best, though, in wedding her (fascinating, provocative) *novum* so closely to the reality of our primary world, *The Power* serves to lay bare the interrelationship between patriarchy and our social system as it currently exists. There is a gesture back to a more deeply entrenched worldbuilding in the frame narratives, which signal a rereading of our deep history in Sumerian artifacts. But in writing in the mode of speculative fiction rather than SFF, Alderman's rewriting of our history can only go so far as to inflect our understanding of society with her critique of the patriarchy; such a novel cannot consider directly the question of how a world forms in the first place.

We see the same limitations take hold in a number of other contemporary literary novels that have been collated under the umbrella of "speculative fiction." Emily St. John' Mandel's *Station Eleven* builds a world around the central premise that there has been a catastrophic flu that has decimated the world's population.[41] Or Colson Whitehead's *Zone One,* where a zombie outbreak similarly decimates the world, or his later novel *The Underground Railroad*, which asks the question "What if the Underground Railroad was an actual railroad?"[42] Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* – what if superheroes were real?[43] Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the central novel of this dissertation's final chapter, posits unexplainable doors in space that open in one

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[41] Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.
[42] Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*. New York: Doubleday, 2011; and *The Underground Railroad*. New York: Doubleday, 2016.
[43] Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. New York: Random House, 2012.

country and into another.[44] Are any of these SF? Realist? There is an obvious response that a truer, more productive worldbuilding might be found in the "harder" versions of SF, where every bit of speculation is firmly grounded in technical possibility, a proposed future based on the realities of the present, e.g. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy or his more recent, climate-oriented speculations that nonetheless sweep to the scale of a world.[45] Whether or not these novels "count" as SF or SFF or Realist depends on who's asking, and where the lines are drawn, as the ever-churning debates over what science fiction even is continue apace.

What unites each of these novels and many like them is that they are built around a central premise – a *novum* – around which a series of sociological questions about our own already existing world can be asked and answered. How would a particular *novum* change the relationship between men and women in our actual society as it is structured now? How would humanity as we know it now react? What reorientations to the way we currently think about race and religion, art and labor, would be opened up if power were distributed differently? What conceptions of space become available if mere geography and borders could be ignored? Are we still human if we live on Mars, can we survive if the planet burns?

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[44] Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West: A Novel*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
[45] Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993; *Green Mars*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995; *Blue Mars*. New York: Bantam Books, 1997; *New York 2140*. New York: Orbit, 2018; *The Ministry for the Future*. New York, NY: Orbit, 2020.

The notion of the secondary world, although drawn from fantasy and augmented by structuralist accounts of the nature of fiction itself, is not mapped precisely to newness, or strangeness, or unfamiliarity. By teasing out and naming the distinction between primary and secondary worlds – a distinction which lives primarily in the legacy of fantasy rather than "hard" SF or speculative fiction – we open up a new angle of appreciating the imaginative work such novels can do. We can pivot away from attempts to determine what "counts" as SFF and think more appropriately about how SFF thinks (or, at the very least, how SFF allows us readers of it *to* think).

Tolkien writes that "the moment disbelief [in the secondary world] arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive secondary World from the outside."[46] The tremulousness of potential disbelief that runs through secondary worlds resonates with Thomas Pavel's argument, in *Fictional Worlds,* for how *all* fictional worlds are themselves a type of sub-creation, although he does not directly cite Tolkien. Pavel writes of realism, rather than SF, that it is a "remarkably courageous project" because "[e]ven to speak of 'their' texts with respect to worlds is an act of faith, since the indeterminacy of reference and the labyrinth of universes seems to preclude such firm attachments."[47] That is to say, such an effort for realism is courageous inasmuch as realism purports more loudly to a primary world, even as we know it is, in fact, a secondary one. As Pavel continues,

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[46] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 52.
[47] Pavel, *Fictional Worlds,* 73.

"indeterminacy is compensated for by the strengths of our" – that is, readers' – "ontological commitments. We confidently regard our worlds as unified and coherent."[48] In suturing their worlds so closely to our own, novels of speculative fiction also trade on the readerly impulse towards coherence that is key to realism; when encountering any fictional world, readers need to move quickly and daringly past any "deep fractures" lest we fall into the crevasse of being reminded that these worlds are fiction. But if one considers all fictional worlds as "secondary worlds," these deep fractures expose an impulse on the part of the reader towards contiguity, rather than being fatal failures of coherence on the part of the author.

Tolkien's imagery – of breaking, failure, abortion – insists on a way of understanding the secondary world as perhaps dependent on the primary world but still integral to itself in some way. How else could they fail so completely if we do not consider them something wholly separate from our world in the first place? The secondary worlds of fantasy (and therefore of SFF) are not, *contra* Pavel, just conceptual spaces where we might try out truth claims about the primary world – and thus tied not only metaphorically but indeed ontologically to the primary world – but instead fully realized worlds of their own accord. *All* literary worlds may be secondary worlds, but the differences on the spectrum between SFF, speculative fiction, and realism becomes much more a matter of degree, rather of kind, where works of SFF are the most upfront

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[48] Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, 73.

about their own fictionality, and obviously distant from the primary world in which we go about our own business. SFF worldbuilding, of the kind that imagines *entirely new worlds*, then, is both as rich a site for considering where and how we think about our own world as any novel whose secondary world is closer than our own, *and* a mode of thinking that offers unique perspectives not only on how our world might be changed, but how we construct our own world(s) in the first place. Once readers understand the distinction between primary and secondary worlds, we *may* be pushed to adopt new orientations towards physics, history, etc – the full proprioceptive apparatus of being a human being, as well as the cultural logics in which we find ourselves embedded – but they are not so much disrupted as no longer assumed as default. This orthogonal view, where "realist" and "non-realist" are replaced as categories by primary and secondary worlds, centers a sense of coherence, legibility, and consistency rather than privileging verisimilitude.

What each of the above novels commonly referred to as "speculative fiction" are *not,* for the most part, is SFF – they are simply not fantastical *enough* to depart fully from the anchor that binds them to realism. The shorthand term "speculative fiction" performs the same sleight-of-hand that the genre itself performs, hiding the full project of its elaborate worldbuilding in the shadow of its perspective – from where, exactly, are we speculating, if not the "real" world? The fantastic is sublimated into adjectival form, masked in these novels by the seeming reasonableness of their propositions after readers

accept the impossible. Would it make sense for the dynamics of youthful love to change if women suddenly had the power to instantly electrocute anyone in their vicinity? Sure. Does it seem reasonable to expect that society would rebuild some form of cultural performance after a devastating influenza pandemic that killed billions? Yes, this of course makes sense, and even seems grounded in the sociology of our primary world.[49] But Alderman and St. John Mandel constantly ask us to suspend disbelief in astonishing ways, once we've accepted the central premise.

The same is true of Whitehead's and Chabon's alternative histories. The questions we can ask then become questions of our own world made strange – the cognitive dissonance that Suvin proposes and to which many practitioners and critics of SF refer. In stepping just aside realism and pointing back at our primary world these examples of "speculative fiction" test the limits of sociological organization as they play out currently, but lose their ability to consider that the way we organize our own worlds are fictions in the first place. They are bound too tightly to our own primary world, and rely too heavily on the readerly impulse to paper over the fissures that may erupt. The end result for each of these works of either "hard" SF or speculative fiction is a specific secondary world that still relies heavily on its proximity to our primary world. As such speculative fiction is limited in its ability to render the concept of the world itself as strange, estranged. Without the distance inherent to SFF, they can at best reflect back on

[49] Each chapter of this dissertation makes at least one allusion to the general circumstances of its composition – that is, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Here that allusion is hardly an allusion at all.

elements of how our world is already organized. SFF lets us test the limits of worlds themselves.

Theories of World Literature, the Limits of SF, and the Possibilities of SFF

The alternative logic of SFF, wherein Jemisin builds a consistent and coherent, yet fully "secondary" world a la Tolkien that is nonetheless premised on a speculative element (otherwise conceivable as Suvin's *novum)*, is the essential skeleton for *The Broken Earth*'s imagined world. Jemisin's top-down and bottom-up methods of worldbuilding merge thematically around a concept of mutual "geo-"s: geography, geology, geoarcanity. But the fact that the resulting world is broken is what makes legible the parallels between SFF, at least in her understanding of it, and a potential step forward in the critical practice of world literature.

Thinking of the genre of SFF as a strategy – specifically, thinking of *worldbuilding* as the core logic for the genre – allows us to move away from symptomatic readings of what SFF imagines to a structuralist reading of *how* it imagines what it imagines. Namely, that literary critics engaged in the work of defining, theorizing, mapping, imagining a "world literature" are, seemingly through a process of convergent evolution, attempting to conceptualize the actual, real, "primary" world as a fictional one, sutured to a single speculative element. The limits and cartographies of the secondary worlds that result from these theories are the limits and cartographies of our

own, but what reading these theories collectively makes clear is that the worlds these theories imagine are not precisely our own, but a series of secondary worlds overlaid on the primary world, despite this distinction being elided in practice.

This conflation of field (the critical practice of world literature) and object (our geographic world itself) produced a subset of theories of world literature that adapted and morphed Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt* into a series of proposed *nova,* around which worlds are built that mirror the scope, scale and contours of our own, "actual" primary world without actually resolving the fundamental impossibility of how to grasp it in its totality. This is a step further than speculation – these worlds are not just our own with one element changed and the potential ramifications analyzed. Rather, these contemporary critics of world literature, in proposing these world-systems, have redefined the primary world with their own secondary worlds as stand-ins. Like the Borgesian swap of territory for map, these critics enact an inversion of the order of operations. Auerbach proposed thinking top-down, imagining all of the literatures of the world as a coherent yet inexhaustible field through which one might trace the interplay of familial relationships that form a coherent whole out of their contradictions (a secondary world). For these critics, the "world" itself becomes the object of theorization, derived from a central *novum*. They have the valence of totality; if one adopts (one of) the models proposed by those critics attempting to make sense of the whole world, the whole world might very well seem to emerge from their strategies for

navigating it. This subset of theories, I'd like to argue, are the ones that are fundamentally SF products. But taken collectively, and recognizing that each individual theory offers not a totalized view of the world but a glimpse into the *process of imagining* the world, allows us to see how each of these theories, these secondary worlds, might work together, as in the hybrid worldbuilding that drives Jemisin's novels, to build a world out of its own instability and difference.

It's useful to start with a closer look at Auerbach's initial proposal and the responses to it in hopes of identifying how his initial conception of *Ansatzpunkt* was distinct from SF speculation, but that nonetheless contained within it the elements that eventually evolved into something resembling a *novum*. In "Philology and '*Weltliteratur*,'" published in 1969 and translated into English by Marie and Edward Said, Auerbach deploys Goethe's definition of *Weltliteratur* – "universal literature, or literature which expresses *Humanität*, humanity" which "transcends national literatures without, at the same time, destroying their individualities."[50] That approach became systematized as the core methodology of what has evolved into the recognizable subdiscipline in literary studies of world literature. Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Auerbach argues, "There is no more talk now—as there had been—of a spirit of mutual exchange between peoples, of the refinement of customs and of a reconciliation of races… it cannot withstand the storm of opposed vested interests –

[50] Edward Said, Introduction to Erich Auerbach, "Philology and 'Weltliteratur,'" Translated by Maire and Edward Said.'" *The Centennial Review; East Lansing, Mich.* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 1.

from which an intensified propaganda emerges – and so its results are immediately dissipated."[51] He advocates for an appreciation of a literary canon that draws from the span of global cultures and languages in order to expressly counter the rising onslaught of cultural homogenization he sees occurring in mid-century European letters. Notably, here Auerbach is arguing passionately *against* the practice of attempting to theorize the world as a whole. Rather, the practice of world literature is one in which the very differences between cultures and literatures are maintained and respected in their own right as intrinsically valuable to the practice of *Humanität.*

Attempting to rescue Auerbach from this paradox, Aamir Mufti, in his essay "Auerbach in Istanbul" (1998) summarizes Auerbach's method as "almost an anti-method."[52] Any approach to, or any approach *of,* world literature must, according to Mufti, "be comprehended not on the basis of its most general, or strictly speaking, universal principle, but rather *contingently,* from one possible location within it or trajectory through it."[53] For Auerbach, in Mufti's reading, the concept of "world literature" is a process rather than an object – a dialectical filiation and affiliation of texts that "emerges out of the particular experience and location of the researcher."[54] And yet, although Auerbach articulates these dueling pressures – the work of attempting to build

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[51] Auerbach, 6.
[52] Aamir R. Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (1998): 95–125, 105.
[53] Mufti, 106.
[54] Mufti, 106.

a broad comparativist project that can successfully *navigate* the totality of the world's literature, without sanding off the edges of each individual literary tradition into a homogenous unitary corpus – the comparative philologist's work, to Auerbach, still results in a "large synthesis, a comprehension of the whole" that depends upon a "point of departure" – the *Ansatzpunkt* in the untranslated German – "a handle, as it were, by which the subject can be seized." He continues; "The point of departure must be the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy."[55] In order to approach a methodology that can appropriately encompass the whole of the world's literary production one must simultaneously hold fast to an organizing principle of aesthetics while allowing one's self to drift freely across the grand corpus of literatures of the world. And so, despite protestations to the contrary, Auerbach is already engaged in the paradoxical effort of theorizing a world for world literature while rejecting that such a whole is proper, or even possible.

This paradox is resolved by taking Auerbach's model and considering it in terms of SFF worldbuilding, even as his critical inheritors have morphed his intellectual project into one of SF, rather than SFF, worldbuilding. Auerbach's approach to world literature is formally akin to the strategy of worldbuilding as Jemisin deploys it,

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[55] Auerbach, 14.

drawing on both the secondary worlds paradigm derived from fantasy and the *novum* framework essential to SF. The world, for Auerbach and despite his protestations, is a wholly secondary space – "a large synthesis, a comprehension of the whole" – into which the reader can enter, *pace* Tolkien. At the same time, there is an insistence that the whole of this secondary world emerges from the solitary *novum* – the *Ansatzpunkt.* Embracing the model strictly requisitioned to SF (and not fantasy, and certainly not both) fatally pierces the ontological unity of this fictional world. It is only when authors and readers are pushed to shift nimbly between both strategies for imagining new worlds – in other words, to think more broadly in the umbrella terms of SFF worldbuilding rather than the limitations of SF speculation – that the system can persist as a site through which one can recognize the limitations of either methodology. Significantly, it is also by thinking through this hybrid model that one can imagine a more capacious and pragmatic approach to what the world actually is and how it functions.

There is an important and obvious difference between world literature and SFF, of course, over and above the slipperiness between method and object that theories of literary world-systems obscure. Auerbach is attempting to build an organizational practice for literature that already exists, and which circulates regardless of whether or not such a theory exists to attempt to organize it. Practitioners of SFF worldbuilding invent the entirety of the world which they are attempting to organize. This shift in

thinking of world literature as a creative endeavor rather than a strictly objective and analytical one is not to undermine the incredible generative capacity of such an approach to world literature by dissolving it into purely subjective and solipsistic judgments of taste (although destabilizing such categories is useful for exposing the invisible hierarchies and biases that work silently to ensconce a mostly male, mostly white definition for what "counts" as literature). Rather, it is to appropriately recognize the immense creativity that is necessary for such a project and practice. This is what I'd like to recover in our understanding of world literature, and in our practice of reading and thinking in the face of a literary field that swells to the scale of the whole world.

At the beginning of this turn towards a more planetary frame of reference, what began with Auerbach as a call-to-action to potential comparatists looking to develop a rigorous method for navigating surveys of literature that wend across periods and geographic space merged with a rising call to consider *the* world, our world, as a world-system, and the results were both immensely generative and holistically incomplete.[56] The result occasioned a new application of Auerbachian comparativist models of world-literature as a practice. Written amidst a transition in literary study out of the postcolonial paradigm and towards questions of globalization in the late 20th century and beginning of the 21st, Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature," first

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[56] For a representative survey of how the idea of world-system, first named and described thusly by Immanuel Wallerstein in 1974, has developed, changed, and evolved across disciplines, see David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi, eds. *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.

published in the New Left Review in 2000,[57] accuses practitioners of the subdiscipline that have come after Auerbach (and, by extension, backwards in time to Goethe, and even Marx) of being too intensely parochial: "comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings. It's been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine." The answer, he counters, is to return the initial premise of world literature – "after all," he writes, "the literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system. The question is not really *what* we should do—the question is *how*."[58] For Moretti, that *how* is his initial proposition for distant reading, a methodology many of us may now recognize.

We see rippling in Moretti's language the same echoes of the SFF scope and scale of these questions: when he invokes a "planetary" system, our perspective is shifted to that of the world itself in space as a totalized whole. I'd like to propose that distant reading as a critical practice mirrors SF (not SFF) worldbuilding as a creative one. In the attempt to regain a grip on this full, planetary system of literature – and therefore, it follows, to conceptualize the whole world as a cultural object – critics of world literature must read distantly and promiscuously, focusing on "units that are much smaller or much larger than the text," including "devices, themes, tropes."[59] In short, Moretti proposes a meta-framework for world literature that relies on the development and

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[57] Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 54–68.
[58] Moretti, "Conjectures," 54-55, emphasis original.
[59] Moretti, "Conjectures," 57.

implementation of a cascading set of *nova*; critics should speculate about specific elements of and in literature, and how those new approaches reshape our understanding of the world. Critics working within or adjacent to this framework fully transformed the concept of the *Ansatzpunkt* into a *novum,* and lost the ontological tension between stability and instability that SFF is premised on. In other words, the/an *Ansatzpunkt* as the organizational principle for a rigorous comparatist study morphed through critical practice into method for investing a *novum* with the necessary critical import around which a model of the total world-system of literature might be organized. What is lost, though, in the elision of world literature as a method into world literature as an object is that the latter is a virtual, procedurally-generated abstract object – a work of fiction.

Here, the strategic worldbuilding of SFF intersects with the theories of world literature that follow Moretti's update to Auerbach's methodology in an attempt to make sense of the literatures of our actual, totalized world. It is also in this period where we can begin to trace the transition from world literature as a practice to "world literature," that is, the literature of the whole world, as the intended object of study itself. If the various "worlds' of world-literature are emergent ones, then, they must also be understood as *created* ones, a built-worlds, organized around specific rules – specific *nova* – and suffused with both the creativity and capacity for discernment that can only be attributed to the individual. What these theories are attempting to describe is nothing more or less than the fullness of a planetary view. In effect, the order of operations is

reversed once again; rather than thinking of the world as a space through which comparativist methodology can help us traverse, the world of each of these definitions becomes a created, fictional abstraction whose edges and limitations are defined by the *nova* of the critical practitioners proposing them.

More pointedly, when one surveys the approaches to world literature that have arisen since the beginning of the 21st century it becomes possible to recognize a pattern: this transformation of *Ansatzpunkt* into *novum* has become a central logic for navigating the world literary system. I write with the assumption that many of the interventions cited below will be familiar to my audience, just as these theories and theorists are not unfamiliar with each other.[60] Rather than attempting to identify a gap in the literature, or what I take as an underdeveloped angle thereof on which to stake my argument (argumentative moves that are expected by generic convention in a dissertation chapter), I take them as a collective object – my primary purpose for this chapter is to introduce critical routines in SFF to the subdiscipline of world-literature. Therefore, some representative, if not exhaustive, examples:

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[60] Similar literature reviews can be found in each of these monographs cited below, steadily incorporating each new entry. In including my own overview, I am attempting to participate in what is obviously an ongoing conversation taking place over the last two decades or so while also trying to draw attention to the contemporaneity of the conversation in the first place. As a quick editorial note, it's worth pointing out that it seems to have become its own form of rhetorical commonplace to begin with one's own reading of Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, if for no other reason than to stake a unique position on how exactly her model is insufficient or wrong. I'd like to think I'm being a bit less grumpy than that, but here I am, nonetheless starting with Casanova. If only every academic monograph had such an ability to force two decades of replies.

When Pascale Casanova writes in *The World Republic of Letters* (1999, English translation 2004) that "the domain of letters, the totality of what [she calls] world literary space" is alone "capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very individual texts," the rhetoric is that of worldbuilding and cultural capital its organizational *novum*. She admits as much, continuing on to say, "This space is… an actual – albeit unseen – world made up of lands of literature; a world in which what is judged worthy of being considered literary is brought into existence; a world in which the ways and means of literary art are argued over and decided."[61] The scope of Casanova's literary archive encompasses the entirety of the planet; therefore, the "world in which what is judged worthy of being considered literary" is itself coterminous with our actual globe. "The world republic of letters" is, in effect, *the* world. *The* world, our world, in Casanova's estimation, is structured by the judgment of what is literary.

Two other critics, David Damrosch and Eric Hayot, writing soon after Casanova, come closest to maintaining the sense that the world in world literature is not a single coherent thing but the emergent property of the discursive process of world literature, but they end up landing on specific *nova* nonetheless. For Damrosch, this *novum* is heterogeneity itself, but defined specifically by global movement and circulation. In *What is World Literature?* (2003), he proposes in that the conceptual category of world

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[61] Casanova, 3-4, cited above in footnote 10 – as are Damrosch, Hayot, Walkowitz, and Cheah.

literature is built around the distortions that happen between nations and languages.[62] Ultimately what is essential is not only movement of texts, but that they move in the first place between places and contexts that are different and thus disjointed. World literature coalesces into a theoretical category formed by passing over and across borders without "destroying the individualities" of any specific national culture. It is a way of reading and appreciating literature that has as its archive the literature of the entire geographic globe – and thus of intellecting a world itself.

Eric Hayot, in *On World Literature* (2012), like Damrosch, differs from the theorists that come shortly after him by focusing on the literary form's ability to create an aesthetic world in the text rather than attempting to theorize an abstract space of exchange that arises from how we read and consider the geographic world itself.[63] He attempts to move away from a consideration of world literature as a method of reading and towards "worlding" as a normative process that forms a virtual world, a sense of autonomy in a text outside of its reading which Hayot glosses as "something like the

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[62] Rather than strictly the imbalances of cultural capital such movement is subject to, as Casanova argues.
[63] Here Hayot is especially elucidating about the semantic slipperiness of the word "world," beginning as he does with some short comments on our use varied uses of the word. On the one hand, we have geopolitical and historical mode of thinking, where "world" refers specifically to the geographic coordinates of a piece of literature's origin (or the author's origin, or the originary site of an author's ethnicity, or where it was initially published, or where it's been translated, or…). On the other, there lies the idea of a world as a fictional, spatialized but not ultimately spatial, experience of being in a "world." a more aesthetic understanding of "world" that derives from the work of both Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy, two critics that command a full (albeit short) chapter of explication. For these critics, the world is more of a sense or a feeling – a wholeness or roundedness that emerges from a text's form. See above, footnote 19.

unity of form, diegesis, and feeling composed by the rough totality."[64] The end result is one in which "worldedness" itself – that is, the sense a fictional world has of its own world – becomes the *novum* at the center of world literature.

In the 2010s, however, models of world literature premised on a singular *Ansatzpunkt/novum* becomes the norm. Rebecca Walkowitz suggests that an aesthetic of being "born translated" is a point of departure around which we can conceptualize a world system of literature (2015).[65] Walkowitz tessellates multiple interpretations of her own conceptual *novum,* considering novels that are written in one language and then translated, novels that insist on their regionality despite their global mass marketing and circulation, novels that eschew such regionality in an effort to achieve globality, and literature that, through translation, insists on a non-possessive collectivity that asserts community without requiring exclusion. "When world literature seems to be a container for various national literatures," she writes, "it privileges source: distinct geographies, countable languages, individual genius, designated readers, and the principle of possessive collectivism." But that is only one way to imagine world literature: "when world literature seems instead to be a series of emerging works, not a product but a process," she counters, "it privileges target: the analysis of convergences and divergences across literary histories." [66] It is through a focus on translation in its many

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[64] Hayot, "On Literary Worlds," 42.
[65] Walkowitz, *Born Translated,* cited above.
[66] Walkowitz, 30.

forms that Walkowitz reconciles these alternating modes of world literature, and it is around this insight, this "new thing," that Walkowitz builds her own theory for how world literature works.

One more extended example: the "key premise," in his own words, the *novum* in ours, of Pheng Cheah's *What is a World?* (2016) is "the hierarchical ordering and control of the world as we know it is based on technologies of temporal calculation." That is, time itself and our relationship to it becomes the ordering principle around which the world is built. The imposition of capitalist time results in a "normative understanding of the world," which in turn "leads to a radical rethinking of world literature as literature that is an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of the process of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes."[67] The world of "world literature" is that which builds itself as a world, but organized explicitly around the disciplining effects of reorganizing society around a normative sense of time.

Other examples abound. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, aptly for our discussion of the intersection between world literature and "non"-literary genres, in "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction'" (2012), argues that it may, in fact, be science fiction itself through which we can trace a world system, and that it is the privileged remit of SF – with its basis in speculation and its interstellar perspective – to imagine a

[67] Cheah, 1.

global perspective for literature in the first place.[68] Emily Apter (2013) valorizes an expressed *refusal* to be translated as its own kind of *novum*.[69] Mariano Siskind, in *Cosmopolitan Desires* (2014), centers Latin-American *modernismo* as the normative force that brought literature into both modernity and globality, co-symptomatic with one another.[70] Debjani Ganguly (2016) constructs a world-system in the present around an

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[68] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction'? Reflections on a New Nexus." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2012, pp. 478–93. Csicsery-Ronay considers the question of world literature in explicitly spatial terms, writing "Every map of globalization and global culture is a cognitive-aesthetic artifact – a 'cognitive map,' if you will, of a territory that is mutating and even passing away in the moment that map is drawn." (488). But "the 'science' of sf now means whatever conjunction of intellectual and technological tools is effective for asserting instrumental political power on the global stage. The 'fiction' means whatever archive of narratives is most powerful in a culture – and indeed across cultures – for seducing publics into enjoying fictions about these scientific powers." It is in following this "expanded sense" that sf can be understood as "the art that has been most concerned with constructing ways of imagining this technoscientifically constructed – and deconstructed – world." (489). In Csiceray-Ronay's formation, the world is structured in sf terms, and thus it is sf that allows us access the impossible fluidity of what he refers to offhandedly as the "Global Great Big Thing" – that is, the wholeness of the world under globalization.

[69] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. Verso, 2013.
This refusal to translate or be translated is tightly calibrated to challenge what Apter sees as the hegemonic "Euro-Romantic, neo-Hegelian, Marxist and humanist pedigree, from Goethe to Lukács, Auerbach to Said" that has come to define the institutional form of the subdiscipline (21). She poses Untranslatability as an antidote to such homogenizing conceptions of world literature, rescuing its "deprovincialization of the canon and the way in which, at its best, it draws on translation to deliver surprising cognitive landscapes hailing from inaccessible linguistic folds" from what she sees as the "reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded 'differences; that have been niche-marketed as commercialized 'identities' (16). In doing so, Apter "invoke[s] untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors" (17). This would seem on its face to run against the sort of worldbuilding impulse I myself am arguing these critics are invoking. But insisting on an incommensurate, untranslatable scope and scale of the world nonetheless posits a secondary world in which such incommesurability is a possible option, just as Auerbach initially claimed to intend. It is a world built of negation, in some sense, but it is a world nonetheless.

[70] Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2014. Siskind defines world literature as "the material production of a literary world that does not preexist the circulation of the texts and objects that makes its form visible." More specifically, world literature for Siskind is a "universalist, modernizing, strategic discourse on the literatures of the world, whose structural presence in Latin America can be traced to the early 1880s. This world literature is crucial to the understanding of the cultural politics of *modernismo,* as well as the transcultural relations that constitute its meaning" (7-8). Siskind's argument serves not only as a useful and welcome

embedded globalness to the contemporary novel that has only become possible in the age and with the technology of informational capitalism – that is, the collation and manipulation of data.[71] Aamir Mufti (2016) sees a continued and pernicious Orientalism as the constitutive element of world literature, when a proper accounting of the broader world-system can and should properly reject the hegemony of English as a *lingua franca* and historicize the influx of non-Western influences into the project from its inception.[72] Readers can likely provide other examples.[73]

Thus collated and arranged, what becomes clear is that in attempting to describe *the* world, what critics have actually done is create a solar system comprised of different

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corrective to the hegemonically Western approaches to world literature, but also as a method for reinscribing the world around a new *Ansatzpunkt*. The "world" that is created, again, is one that mirrors the scale and scope of our own, but is not strictly the same. It is a constructed, literary secondary world that happens to overlap with our own.

[71] Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.

[72] Aamir R Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2016. Mufti writes, "The modern discourse of world literature… pays scant attention to the very historical process that is its condition of possibility, namely, the assimilation of vastly dispersed and heterogeneous writing practices and traditions into the space of 'literature' (57). The way forward is to recognize that it was "through the philological knowledge revolution… that non-Western textual traditions made their first wholescale entry *as literature,* sacred and secular, into the international literary space that had emerged in early modern times in Europe as a structure of rivalries between the emerging vernacular traditions, transforming the scope and structure of that space forever." Mufti accurately diagnoses that the world of world literature is an unstable and ultimately fictional one, differing from the others cited here in proposing that what we should do is reject such a formation on ethical and historical grounds, or at the very least remain deeply, deeply skeptical of it.

[73] Including Kwame Anthony Appiah's formulation of cosmopolitical ethical indebtedness to those with whom we do not share citizenship (as discussed in the context of Thomas Cromwell's internationalism in Chapter 1, pages 86-88), and Aarthi Vadde's modernist internationalism, which functions as a precursor to the contemporary state of globalized interconnection as she traces it through the long legacy of generative formal chimeras stretching from Rabindranath Tagore, James Joyce, Claude McKay, and George Lamming through to Michael Ondaatje and Zadie Smith (*Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism beyond Europe, 1914-2016*. Modernist Latitudes. New York: Columbia UP, 2016.)

worlds that look mostly like our own but are distinct, and premised around specific *nova*. To borrow from Kwame Anthony Appiah, is the "world" in "world literature" the "world" in "worldbuilding?"[74] Not necessarily, especially if we rely wholly on the *novum* model as figured specifically in SF. That array of worlds would remain a series of discrete theories were it not for the fact that they are all attempting to theorize our actual world in a "macro" sense: the planet Earth with its geography, its deep history, its maps and appendices and lore and sociology.

But if we embrace the idea of the "world" in "world literature" as the product of creative, literary worldbuilding, more akin to the literary production of SFF authors than the critical output of scholarly assessment and theorization, we can see that this solar system is in fact a better analogy for our world than the perspective any particular planet in it would allow us to recognize. Instead of choosing a specific theory of the world – the organizing principles of time, of capital, of translatability and untranslatability, of *modernismo* and speculation and worldedness itself, along with any and all potential contenders for organizing *nova* in our own navigating of *the* global world – what if we embraced them collectively? As we attempt to make sense of a globalized world, where, if at all, are the stakes *raised* if we consider the nature of "the world," as fundamentally fictional, and where might those stakes be lowered, allowing for productive co-imagining without the need to assert a "correct" analytic description?

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[74] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336–57.

Take this image as apposite to the planetary perspective proposed by Nietzche, in the opening to his 1873 essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense."[75] Nietzsche writes, from the outside looking in, "[o]nce upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history,' but nevertheless, it was only a minute."[76] The perspective taken here, from just outside our world and looking at it and it alone, renders legible the impermanence of human history and the inherent flightiness of any particular formation of a concept. It is a perspective grounded in the provinciality of a single planet set in a dim corner of an infinite field of solar systems. SFF doesn't solve the proto-postmodern paradox of this limited perspective, but I argue it can nudge us slightly further afield, granting us perspective not just on the "movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" that comprise the "truths" any of us have intellected about the goings-on *within* in our world.[77] But it can, I think, for a moment, grants us a glimpse at the same movable metaphors and metonymies, the orbits and rhythms that structure our sense of the world itself.

If we bring the *novum* model together with the top-down secondary worlds model of Tolkien et al, we can begin to realize that our own world is morphologically a

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[75] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1976, 42-47.
[76] Nietzsche, 42.
[77] Nietzsche, 44.

SFF construction. More importantly, mapping the world through SFF terms imagines a "world" in world literature that more closely aligns with the world originally theorized by Auerbach. This created world is *our* world, "large synthesis, a comprehension of the whole," in both scale and practice, which is unified not by a *specific* theory but by the strategic application of *various* "point[s] of departure," various *Ansatzpunkten,* "handle[s], as it were, by which the subject can be seized."

Like the cracked Earth of Jemisin's novels, this approach contains the capacity for reinvention. Through the iterative, earth-rending catastrophes, *The Broken Earth* throws individual theories of the world into relief, and breaks them, demonstrating that any such attempt to build a unified, disciplining model of the world results in their ultimate fractiousness. But the artifacts of such organizing principles do not disappear, and if they erode it is only after millennia. Instead, new ways of imagining the world, our place in it, and our ways of living in it, emerge from their substrate.

Conclusion: "Innovate a Little:" Comms, Worlds, and Ways Forward

In considering current trends in theories of world literature as consummate with the sort of bottom-up speculation inherited – even if subsconsciously – from SF and Suvin's *novum* formulation, our own primary world is subsumed into an ever-receding field of secondary worlds. However, SFF, characterized by the kind of worldbuilding

practiced by Jemisin, brings us closer to a sense of how to envision an entire world without collapsing into this fractal field.

Jemisin's trilogy is defined by a series of catastrophes, not only of the geography of the Stillness in the intense climactic Seasons, but also in its iterating global orders. For Essun and her daughter Nassun, and those around them, the Season that opens the novels signals the end of the Sanze Empire. For the Stone Eater we come to know as Hoa, it was the active destruction of Sylanagistine culture via the Arcane Engine and the tuners' intentional refusal to activate geoarcanity. In other words, the events of the trilogy as a whole are a long, repeated cycle of actively rejecting the disciplinary framework of a world-system. But where does this leave us? There's a case to be made for a retreat from the global orientation that both Geoarcanity and Empire (either Sanzed or Deleuzian) functionally imposed, but as the history of the Stillness demonstrates, pure, anarchic rejection of organization without a model for reconstitution results in catastrophe.

Thinking specifically about how Jemisin grapples with building a world that is, by definition, broken, and the alternatives she offers both throughout the trilogy and in its conclusion, provides a way to marry competing theories of the world in world literature into a sense of the world itself. The trilogy posits examples throughout the trilogy of social ordering that reject the disciplinary function of the Fulcrum before ultimately settling into an open-ended moment of both resolution and crisis in the

novels' final pages. In doing so, *The Broken Earth* ends where it began, challenging the mechanisms of world-formation that have dominated The Stillness throughout its deep history in hopes of bringing more holistic, relational balance to the actual planet without insisting on their complete dissolution as functional components of a world moving forward. This alternative to the *novum* model of worldbuilding, I suggest, parallels a potential alternative to similar models in the study of world literature, and offers a structural model for thinking of our own primary world in both geographic and social terms, recognizing that they are one and the same.

The clearest sociological model for organizing society proposed by *TBE* is that of the Comm.[78] As both Essun and Nassun make their way over and around The Stillness, Jemisin introduces her readers to a broad spectrum of functionally autonomous communities. These aforementioned comms are bound together, as in any society, by the implicit task of keeping its denizens alive and flourishing. They are ordered by use-caste, with members going about the day-to-day business appropriate to their position within the hierarchy, albeit with some flexibility in the calm periods. It is only in the moments of catastrophe – during the Fifth Seasons – that the vast majority of the occupants of The Stillness are exposed to the bare life *in extremis* that otherwise defines the experience of the node maintainers specifically and the orogenes broadly. The traditional comm would seem a welcome respite from catastrophe, but are ultimately

[78] For all of its unfolding mysteries, sometimes the worldbuilding and explication in the trilogy is rather straightforward: "In the parlance of The Stillness, a town is one form of *comm,* or community" (*TFS* 9).

not tenable, not with orogeny in play, as the need for Essun to flee her home comm of Tirimo at the opening of the novels demonstrates. After the Rifting caused a massive shake that should have destroyed Tirimo, but didn't, Essun recognizes the threat she has been guarding against. Tirimo should have been destroyed, but wasn't, which must mean an orogene is present. "Frightened people look for scapegoats," and as an orogene, she recognizes that she could not "wait for death to come" (*TFS* 42-43). During the Seasons, the fear and hatred of orogenes only intensifies, and those with the power to move the earth are cast out onto it, without the stability afforded to them as individuals within a community – a functional death sentence. Ultimately, a community, a microworld built around the first principle of self-preservation but without a flexible egalitarian orientation to who deserves to be saved will reassert the systems of hierarchy and ostracization. The logic of in-groups and out-groups born of the privation that occasioned the formation of these comms in the first place crack them. The traditional comm is no safe place for an orogene, and thus no safe model for a stable understanding of how to build a social world.

Further iterations on the comm emerge throughout the trilogy, however. Some are larger, the size of cities. Sanze itself can be considered a form of comm. But other iterations are more *ad hoc*, relational and strategic, built around a rejection of strict hierarchical ordering. Most noteworthy are two very specific comms encountered by Essun in her journey through *The Broken Earth,* both introduced in *The Fifth Season* and

elaborated upon in *The Obelisk Gate*. The first, Castrima, is a self-sustaining community built into a giant underground geode, run through with the same arcane technology readers will come to recognize in *The Stone Sky* as Sylanagistine. The comms architecture is notable, and its underground location alone is enough to mark it as fundamentally anomalous from other comms. In effect, Castrima itself is a sort of micro-world – all the more apparent from its being built inside a geode, a naturally occurring sphere whose internal system forms in response to planetary flows (heat, pressure, volcanism, tectonics) and the introduction of new elements (water, minerals, other precipitates) from outside of the geode.

Just as geodes snap into regularized form based around a central fundamental law of mineral chemistry, Castrima is built around the same principle, but one that is more fundamental than the caste- or race-sociological imperatives of Sanze. The result is a reorganization, compared to the other comms Essun encounters, of Castrima's social architecture. Led by the "feral" orogene Ykka, Castrima is "something unique… We're trying something different here" (*TFS* 273); namely, that orogenes – who have embraced the slur "rogga" as their own use-name – are figured as essential members of the community rather than as a separated, disciplined underclass. Working all together, those who have found refuge in Castrima rely both on the "deadciv" technology of the old world and the inherent power of orogeny, although without realizing, at first, that they are one in the same, or how they are related. Faced with the intersecting matrices of

how the world around them is ordered, the denizens of Castrima reject it, moving underground and adopting a logic of purer, community-based relationality to create their bubble society. In Castrima's case, as in Tirimo's, it is pure survival of the community as such that becomes the sole organizing principle, but this time with orogenes as part of the system. It's almost too trite to suggest that it functions under the logic of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs," but it is the truth.

As Ykka intones, "This is what we're trying to do here in Castrima: survive. Same as anyone. We're just trying to *innovate* a little" (*TFS* 343). This more pragmatic approach to communitarian survival belies the need for the specific hierarchy demanded by the Fulcrum, but also pointedly does not reject that such differences in ability and utility exist. Ykka understands this: "this world has passed through many hands down the Seasons. Not all of them were quite as stupid as ours about the usefulness of orogenes" (*TFS* 333). As Essun comes to terms with the social ordering of Castrima, she even integrates it with what she has been trained of her own history, reflecting "*Necessity is the only law,* says stonelone" (*TFS* 341). Castrima in effect functions as a metonym for the type of relational, pragmatic activation of organizing principles that necessarily functions outside of the disciplinary structure of both Syl Anagist and the Fulcrum. Castrima is both doing "the same as anyone" but also "innovat[ing] a little,"

turning to the ancient technology where useful, orogeny when necessary, and, most importantly, to each other.

The other substantive alternative to the traditional comm and the Fulcrum that readers encounter is that of Meov, a pirate colony off the coast of the mainland of The Stillness. Earlier, before either Castrima or even Tirimo, Essun collapses on the brink of death after attempting to quell a particularly powerful geoarcane event. She is brought by a Stone Eater to this extraterritorial space, which, like Castrima, eschews traditional hierarchies between orogenes and Stills. Instead, Meov organizes itself as a collective under the leadership of Innon, a particularly powerful orogene and fearsome pirate in his own right. It is here that Essun feels, perhaps, most at home. She enters into a polyamorous relationship with Innon and her mentor Alabaster, resulting in the birth of her first child. Here, outside the restraints of the Fulcrum and the Sanzed Empire, Essun (and the readers) discover another functional social space that is not premised on the disciplining of orogenes. Pointedly, it is amidst this peripheral social sphere and love unburdened by an expectation of monogamy that Alabaster makes the subtext of the empire's formation text. He explains to Essun, in the context of a creation myth of Sanze, that it "was a new empire then, still growing, at the height of its power," which had suffered the loss of its storecaches as a result of the Seasons. "To survive," he continues, "all the Sanzed comms decided to work together, attacking the comms of any lesser races… That's when they started calling us 'lesser races,' actually." (*TFS* 417). For

Alabaster, as of yet unaware of the deeper history of the world, this exploitation is Sanze's primordial sin, but we learn by series' end that it is just a refraction of the same collapse of violent disciplining that broke the earth in the first place.

Neither Castrima nor Meov are sustainable as alternatives, however. The crystalline structure of Castrima, internally ordered, self-contained and separate from Sanzed influence, is invisible to observers until it is broken. Meov, alternatively, resists this ordering, remaining fluid in both definition and in the cultural practices of those that make up the community. Both extremes of social ordering (or lack thereof) are inimical to the grander Imperial forces of The Stillness, and as such are eventually folded into the disciplinary apparatus designed to keep orogenes in check – Castrima is flooded by mercenary war bands aided by Fulcrum orogenes, Meov falls to a Guardian armada.

In parallel to the collapse of these communities around Essun, and over the course of *The Obelisk Gate,* we see through Nassun a rejection of order and stability itself. Unaware of the grand histories of exploitation, and uninterested in "solving" the mysteries of how the world became as fragmented as it had become, Nassun is motivated more deeply by the injustices she herself had experienced. Simply due to her being an orogene, she feels that everyone she loved had been made to hate her, and eventually taken away from her. In another devastating blow to Essun, it becomes clear to her over the course of the second novel in the trilogy that her daughter, who has been growing steadily more powerful as she learns to channel both orogeny and magic in

much the same fashion that the tuners once could, has decided to destroy the world rather than save it. If everyone suffers equally, then no one is suffering. What began as a story of a mother in search of her daughter to save her has, by series end, become a story of a mother in search of her daughter to stop her. Essun has every right to be cynical about her own ability to affect change after her own experience of being brutalized by the hegemonic social order that proscribes what orogenes can and cannot do. Nonetheless, she comes to realize the importance of stopping Nassun, of catching the Moon and bringing stability back to her home.

The first two novels are a cascade of failures and rejections, ranging in scale from the local comms to the ordering of the world itself. The final novel of the trilogy attempts to provide a response by bringing all those who have been failed and exploited by the models that impose a specific way of being in the world, and a final gesture towards more flexible, relational ways of imagining the world. As Nassun marches to end the world, much of *The Stone Sky* is preoccupied by Essun's step-by-step decision to save it by putting a stop to the disruptions of the Seasons altogether. Their paths inevitably cross, and the climax of the whole series stages a dramatic final confrontation between all the major players in both *The Broken Earth* and the world-history of The Stillness. Over the course of the novels, Essun has collected a roving band of loyal fellow travelers: Hoa, a stone eater she discovered shortly after he was reborn from the racking of The Stillness at *The Fifth Season's* opening; Tonkee, a geomest trained in the

Yumenescene universities but cast out from her family for identifying as transgender; Ykka and a pair of feral roggas from Castrima; Lerna, a doctor, friend, and lover from Essun's time in Tirimo**;** Danel, a lorist and erstwhile commander of the renegade raiding group that partnered with the Guardians to destroy Castrima. This new family unit, born out of shared trauma, replicates in miniature the potential of reorganizing the social makeup of the world Jemisin has built, as they descend with the help of Hoa to the ancient city on the far side of the planet to find her daughter, who had made her way there earlier with her Guardian Schaffa at the guidance of Steel, yet another stone eater.

What the finale pages of the trilogy presupposes is that there is an alternative version of approaches to envisioning a future world, born not of intense disciplining but out of iterative, relational creation. The solution, if there is understood to be one, is to forge a new form of global community derived from the ruins of the old – including the technology of Syl Anagist and the ruinous, righteous fury of Nassun. In the end, Essun sacrifices herself for the sake of her daughter, and for the world. Positioning herself in the cradle that partially absorbed the shock directed back at the earth by the tuners of Syl Anagastine, Nassun attempts to channel the vast array of power, the unified field of both orogeny and magic to rend the planet fully, once and for all. Essun refuses to allow this, instead engaging in a swirling, climactic struggle with her daughter, knowing full well that the power might fatally overwhelm her. Nassun, recognizing her mother's sacrifice in this final moment, drops her focus on destroying the world and instead tunes

the Moon back into orbit with the earth, and therefore bring the world back into alignment. In sacrificing herself, Essun saves the world through her daughter. But in doing so, she is calcified into literal rock via the same process that initially transformed the Syl Anagist tuners into the Stone Eaters – Hoa included.

Here, at the end, Essun has made it possible for the earth to continue but without knowing exactly what shape that world will take. In willingly, willfully loving her daughter unto the point of destruction, Essun makes clear the power of being in relationship with one another to supersede any specific model for how the world should function (or be destroyed). The result is bittersweet. "The heart of the world is quieter than usual," Hoa notes after the cataclysmic standoff, assessing the newfound stability in the system. "The Earth keeps its life-magic, and the rest of us get to keep ours without interference. We have given it back the Moon… in exchange, the Seasons must cease." (*TSS* 392). But even this stability brings with it its own wariness among the survivors. "I don't know what will happen to us," Nassun frets, trying to figure out what role the orogenes, these shapers of earth, will play in a newly stable world. Hoa, reluctant to offer anodyne promises of safety and surety, nonetheless replies that there is, at the very least, newfound opportunity: "The current Season will last for some time, even with the Rifting quelled," he says. "Surviving it will require cooperation among many kinds of people. Cooperation presents opportunities" (*TSS* 394).

What are these opportunities? The pair, bereft of the woman who brought them together in the first place, quickly cycle through the potential ways for the systems to reassert themselves – "With the end of the seasons and the death of all the Guardians, it will now be possible for Orogenes to conquer or eliminate stills, if they so choose" (394), Hoa reflects. It would be simple for hierarchical power to be in reinscribed, for a world to be built around the same *novum* of orogeny, in mirrored but otherwise identically destructive form. But "[i]mprisonment of orogenes was never the only option for ensuring the safety of society…. Lynching was never the only option. The nodes were never the only option. All of these were choices. Different choices have always been possible" (*TSS* 395). The novel leaves these options open, and iterative; for Jemisin to define them here would be to impose yet another closed, totalized system on the world.

Instead, Jemisin offers a different kind of a closure; a narrative one, rather than a geographic or social one. There is a particular feature of *The Broken Earth* that I have not, until now, found the right place to mention, despite being perhaps the most obvious narrative feature of the novels: each of the three entries are narrated from multiple, divergent perspectives. The first chapter of *The Fifth Season* opens with "You are she. She is you. You are Essun. Remember?" (*TFS* 15). The second-person narration of Essun's story alternates with two other perspectives, both standard literary third person omniscient, one following a young orogene named Damaya as she is taken from her family by the Guardian Schaffa, the other the day-to-day lived experience of Synenite, a

Fulcrum orogene. This particular narrative device, like maps and appendices, is typical of many high fantasy novels, one more generic strategy that builds out a full world through competing perspectives.

This is not, however, just a stylistic hiccup. Almost inexorably, readers discover a series of cascading unities to this fragmentation, a reduplication of the process of fracturing and reassembling anew that drives the whole of Essun's story. By the end of *The Fifth Season*, it becomes clear that Essun, Damaya, and Syenite are one and the same. This revelation is deepened and broadened in the very final pages of *The Stone Sky*, the trilogy's conclusion. The "you" of the first book has always been Essun. The "I" has always been Hoa, narrating the events of the novels to Essun as she reforms herself into the stone-eater form she has assumed, sometime in the indistinct future ("a year, a decade, a week. The length of time does not matter" [*TSS* 397]), as a side-effect of stopping Nassun and recapturing the Moon. The novels themselves have been an attempt to reteach Essun who she is, to counter the disintegration of her identity after she had calcified, turn into stone. Hoa stays with her, "[b]ecause that is how one survives eternity… Friends. Family. Moving with them. Moving forward." Hoa asks Essun what she wants. "I want the world to be better" (*TSS* 397-398). Essun is Essun because she is also Damaya and Syenite, the world is better because Essun is moving with her friends – from the Fulcrum to Meov, from Tirimo to Castrima, from time

immemorial and into the future. Essun moves with them. They move forward. The world will be better for it.

What we are left with is not an answer to what the world of The Stillness, if there is such a thing, will or does look like – this is, after all a work of fantasy, a fairy story. What the conclusion proposes is simply and profoundly the idea that constructing a world around a single organizational principle is itself the way of thinking that needs to be left behind. We as readers are not privy to what, exactly the alternative might be or look like, because the story ends, on as much as a hopeful note as Jemisin is willing to give us. What readers are left with is a charge to conceptualize a world in which relationality itself is the key organizing principle – a particularly Auerbachian *Ansatzpunkt* in *novum* form. At its core, this new world will be built around the principle of seeking connection across space and between communities, rather than inscriptions of ever-newer rules and boundaries for what a world is and how it works. I suggested earlier that the main point of this chapter was not to delimit whether SFF should "count" as world literature. That remains true. But here, in conclusion, I'd like to suggest that *The Broken Earth* is itself what "world literature" could be, and that the model it proposes be one strategy for considering how it is we think of the world in the first place.

Any individual theory of the "world" in "world literature" can, at best, create a single, distinct world. Similar ones, related ones, but discrete nonetheless. The critical project of world literature that emerges from a collaborative, at times autophagic,

understanding of the world as a system of competing visions that collapse into each other might not be a robust, total theory of the world, as many of the critics cited in this chapter have attempted to develop. But *The Broken Earth,* and SFF more broadly, allows us to forefront our understanding of the world as fractious and iterative, an ever-flowing alluvium through which we must develop strategies for navigating. Sometimes that might mean attuning to the ways individuals and systems shape the earth – the ability to move mountains, to change the weather, to activate capital, cultural and otherwise. Other times it would ask us to map the reverberations of power imbalances through culture – who is being oppressed, and by whom? What do those who have lived under such systems know of their workings, and how to make them better? What inborn capacity for reinvention lies within those who have been denied their own identity?

The Broken Earth is just that. An earth broken by orogeny and the attempts to discipline it, a secondary world that exists within its pages but from which we must emerge at the end. And yet, the world, the actual world, continues on, continues to roil. So, as the very first lines of *The Fifth Season,* in the prologue, urge us,"[l]et's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things" (1). By learning the lessons that science fiction and fantasy worldbuilding can and do teach us, such debates *about* the world become reframed as generative capacities for speculation, not about where the world might go if something new, something impossible were to occur, but what might happen if we imagined our own world in

terms different from those with which we have become accustomed. The end of *a* world, maybe, and the embrace of a world made of many worlds.

IV – Intimating

Over the course of a taut yet lyrical 230 pages, Mohsin Hamid's explosively popular and ultimately divisive[1] *Exit West* (2017) traces the story of Saeed and Nadia, two young lovers from an unnamed, war-torn city as they navigate the ebbs and flows of their shared intimacy. The expressive, almost impressionistic realism of the couple's relationship is paired with a central, seemingly impossible feature. "[R]ectangles of complete darkness"[2] open in hidden corners of one country and lead to new spaces abroad. We are first introduced to these doors in the very first chapter, when a man with

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[1] The novel was a finalist for the 2017 Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Dublin IMPAC awards, and won the L.A. Times Book Award for Fiction. Michael Schaub of *NPR* called it a "breathtaking novel … [that] arrives at an urgent time" (Michael Schaub, "Escaping A World On Fire In 'Exit West.'" *NPR*, March 1, 2017, sec. Book Reviews. https://www.npr.org/2017/03/01/515438471/escaping-a-world-on-fire-in-exit-west) and Jia Tolentino in *The New Yorker* writes that the novel "feels instantly canonical, so firm and unerring is Hamid's understanding of our time and our most pressing questions" (Jia Tolentino, "A Novel About Refugees That Feels Instantly Canonical." *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/a-novel-about-refugees-that-feels-instantly-canonical). Schaub and Tolentino's claims bear out if one considers the cultural capital the novel has already accrued – I first encountered the novel when Barack Obama tweeted out a link to the list of his favorite books of 2017 (posted, of course, on Facebook), a sure sign that Hamid had reached literary recognition for a certain subset of lightly politically engaged, left-leaning literary markets. If people hadn't been talking about it before, certainly the imprimatur from Obama made it so. The hardcover peaked at #12 on Amazon's rankings (according to the now defunct NovelRank.com webtracker), and the paperback edition published by Riverhead Books has stamped on its cover a neat circle affirming *Exit West*'s inclusion on the *New York Times's Book* Review list of 10 Best Books of 2017 (*The New York Times.* "The 10 Best Books of 2017," November 30, 2017, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/books/review/10-best-books-2017.html). The Russo Brothers, of Marvel Cinematic Universe fame, have purchased the rights to a film adaptation, with Michelle and Barack Obama themselves signing on as producers and Emmy-winning and Academy Award nominated Riz Ahmed slated to appear as Saeed (Anthony D'Alessandro, "Russo Brothers' AGBO Partners With Obamas' Higher Ground & Netflix On 'Exit West,'Riz Ahmed Attached." *Deadline* (blog), March 6, 2020. https://deadline.com/2020/03/russo-brothers-exit-west-riz-ahmed-barack-obama-netflix-movie-1202875760/.) The divisiveness came a bit later, and in the pages of more academic circles, as I discuss below.

[2] Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West: A Novel*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2017, 8. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

"dark skin and dark wooly hair" steps through a door into the bedroom of a white Australian woman before stealing through the window into the night (8). At this point, however, readers have no way of knowing what the mechanism for this potential invasion might be, and it is only after rereading that this moment can even be recognized as the first appearance of the doors. The same goes for a soldier who "looked down upon their city" (35), or the young man in the Tokyo district of Shinjuku, who drinks Irish whiskey, recognizes Tagalog, and wears a "suit and a crisp white shirt" which rendered "any tattoos he had or did not have on his arms" invisible (29-30), or the man appearing in an alleyway, with a "knockoff Russian assault rifle by his side" (67). From the very beginning of the novel, this is a story of and about the world, but readers are not afforded the chance to know exactly how or why.

As Nadia and Saeed travel through these doors, they move in the westward direction of the novel's title – first, to Mykonos, Greece, on to a Georgian mansion in London, and finally to the outskirts of Silicon Valley in San Marino, California. While their story progresses, readers encounter an ever-present series of unconnected vignettes, each granting a brief glimpse into another life caught up in the swell of transnational movement, including other refugees fleeing war zones (9), queer characters finding love and connection abroad (174-176), solemn and solitary individuals escaping the bounds of depression and the self-imposed threat of suicide (130).

Much has been made of these doors in space that open from one country in the world onto another. Indeed, without exception every account of the novel I have cited throughout this chapter addresses them, qualifying them alternatively, for example, as a "magical realist touch,"[3] a "striking departure from realism… irrealist,"[4] a "fairy-tale like device,"[5] and, using the novel's own language, "black holes" (129).[6] Surely, these doors invoke the fantastical, or even the scifi, and may very well be lodestars for

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[3] Spencer Dew, "Review of Exit West." *Religious Studies Review* 43, no. 3 (September 2017): 273–74. Personally, I'm reticent to apply "magical realism" if for no other reason than I am persuaded by arguments that locate a subtle condescension inherent in the origin of the term. Homi Bhabha writes, in the introduction to *Nations and Narration* (1990) that the term arises only when "the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis," a liminal position from the edges of modernity in which "'magical realism,' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (Homi Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration*. London; New York : Routledge, 1990, 6-7). As Bernard Martin agues in "On Magical and Social Realism**,"** it is in the distance between "magical" realism and the broader category of the literary, when forms of literary experimentation primarily from the global south, tantamount in literary breathlessness and enthusiasm for the same experiments undertaken by the stalwart cabal of Franco-Anglo-American modernists, were dubbed "magical," that the specter of a certain lack of rigor or empiricism is invoked, a colonial othering that paints magic and thus spirituality as boundless, uncontainable, irrational, premodern and thus unsophisticated. (Gerald Martin, "On 'magical' and Social Realism in García Marquez." In *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, edited by Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell. Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge UP, 1987). It's not magical realism; never has been – the truth is that the doors of *Exit West* are no more impossible than Joyce's Halcyon Days exhorting, "Live Us Again!"

[4] Amanda Lagji, "Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Mobilities* 14, no. 2 (April 2019): 210–32, 219, 223.

[5] Michiko Kakutani, "Review: In '*Exit West*,' Mohsin Hamid Mixes Global Trouble With a Bit of Magic." *The New York Times*, February 28, 2017, sec. Books. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/27/books/review-exit-west-mohsin-hamid.html.

[6] See Michael Perfect ("'Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation': Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 2 [April 3, 2019]: 187–201), who takes the novel's own term, "black holes in the fabric of nations," for the title of his frankly masterful and devastating critique of the novel, writing of the doors that "in imagining a world in which human beings have gained access to largely ungovernable networks of instantaneous travel across vast distances, *Exit West* encourages us to consider the ways in which capital, images, information, and misinformation are already transmitted across such networks, and the potential for those networks both to be emancipatory and to exacerbate inequalities" (9). Pointedly, as Perfect notes, the actual phrase "black hole" is used to refer not specifically to the doors, but to the area in the outer ring of London where the inhabitants who have come through the doors live. Nonetheless, the phrase is an echo of the very first description of the doors, the "dark rectangles in space."

"magical realism" here in a novel that undoubtedly carries the cultural cache of literary realism and none of the baggage of "genre fiction."[7]" Introduced first as rumors that "had begun to circulate," a metonym of the process of circulation they allow (72), and confirmed only by amateurs, "those with shortwave radios" who "claimed that even the most reputable international broadcasters had acknowledged the doors existed" (88), these doors limn the very edges of speculative and real within the text of the novel itself. They simply exist in the world of the novel, and no explanation is ever asked for or provided. They simply *are,* because they are asserted to be.

In our current present, where so many of us are connected by the dark rectangles of phone screens and Zoom boxes, this hardly feels like speculation at all.[8] These doors fidget with the line between realism and speculation, the "literary" and the generic, rendering the division into a question, a provocation to consider what it means that such a thing as fully realized global movement is already possible. By introducing the doors, an inarguably impossible element, to the novel, and refusing to ever account for them fully, Hamid restructures the expectations for a globalized world away from whether or our world *is* such a world and towards questions of what it means that our world is already globalized. Not "are we global" or "what does it mean to be global?"

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[7] Once again, for a discussion of the differences between genre as a way of thinking and genre marketing categories used to distinguish "literary' from "genre" fiction, see Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction." *Post45: Peer-Reviewed*, August 9, 2018, discussed in more depth in this dissertation's introduction, pages 16-19.

[8] See Claire Chambers (*Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), who argues the doors "symboliz[e] our ubiquitous screens in an exponentially technologizing world" (237).

But what new kinds of stories emerge if we accept such a claim as a premise? What is expected? By whom? For what purpose?

I propose that the logic here is the same logic that undergirds yet another theory of genre, as theorized by Thomas Pavel in his appropriately titled "Literary Genres as Norms and Good Habits" (2003). Rather than thinking of genre in terms of "genre fiction" versus literary fiction, Pavel positions genre more broadly as a set of communally-enforced rhetorical orientations, built out of internal norms and good habits, "simply in the sense that within the traditions in which they strive, certain customs of literary production prevail," rather than hard and fast rules.[9] As Pavel's pithy title asserts, the contingency of such definitions of genre is not non-normative. Instead, he argues, they operate "as a set of good recipes, or good habits of the trade, oriented towards the achievement of definite artistic goals."[10] This is a slightly subtler invocation of genre than that summarized by John Frow, whose synthesis has guided much of this dissertation, and who writes, "[g]enre… defines a set of expectations which guide our engagements… This anticipatory structure is of course based on the cues we receive when we first encounter a text, and we could think of reading or viewing as a

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[9] Thomas G. Pavel, "Literary Genres as Norms and Good Habits." *New Literary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 201–10, 205. Pavel articulates a central problem in the history of the novel, namely that the novel form is resistant to specific formal attributes and that our definitions of the "genre" of the novel vary depending on the historical lineage in which we place it. Nonetheless, he proffers some potential organizing principles for recognizable genres of novel, including comedy and tragedy, familiar definitions from the classical tradition, but also the picaresque, the "idealist novel," the "anti-idealist novel," the modernist novel, the epistolary novel, etc. He does so to show the internal ambiguity of such generic definitions, contingent as they are on the relationships each novel's author has with the novel subgenres that came before it.
[10] Pavel, 207.

process of progressive refinement and adaptation of the sense we make of those cues."[11] Whereas for Frow genres "define," for Pavel genres signal an orientation toward some sort of heuristic order. But, inversely, those same expectations can be violated without that violation always being seen as a rejection or refutation. If the latter were the case, then there'd be no need or indeed possibility to write anything new at all – every literary work of global travel since *The Odyssey* would be right out.

Hamid sets Nadia and Saeed on their own odyssey, and in doing so *Exit West* trades on a particularly generic understanding of the global novel, one which collates its own literary predecessors and takes up Pavel's insistence that genre inheres in norms and good habits, rather than specific formal elements or rhetorical strategies. *Exit West*'s refusal to explain the doors is of a piece with the novel's flirtation with tropes found in novels of global movement, invoking potential shapes for global stories to take without fully defining or embracing them. The consistently thwarted expectations brought to bear by *Exit West* bridges the global novel and genre as heuristic. Thinking generically, I argue, allows for an understanding of the global novel that arises from a place of implication rather than expressed requirements.

In other chapters of this dissertation, I've considered genre to be a narrative strategy, recognizable in form, structure, and intertexual elements, all deployed to activate a certain way of thinking, a certain mode of navigating and/or constructing the

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[11] John Frow, *Genre*. The New Critical Idiom. London; New York: Routledge, 2006, 104.

conceptual space of the world. In this chapter, I'd like to nuance that sense of genre as a strategy, taking genre to be a set of formal and rhetorical strategies which depend heavily (but not wholly) on a habituated literary sensibility of its readers. And if these strategies are the way to conceptualize a genre, then *Exit West* provides a model for how to envision a novel that is recognizably global. I propose that we can refigure our conception of the global novel, moving away from a taxonomic assessment of a literary text's formal features – does this "count" as a global novel? – or a critical approach – what does it mean to think of a particular novel in global and globalized terms? – and towards an understanding of how a novel might trade on custom and tradition and in doing so assert itself as a global novel in the first place. *Exit West* shows that any attempt at summarily pinning down what the global novel is will always be a fugitive effort. Instead, we should consider the genre of any work – but especially the global novel – as an assay at participation in a particular custom without devolving into rote repetition.

I argue that the global novel has emerged as its own genre of fiction in the contemporary literary field, born of the legacy of Anglophone novels in the period from the mid-to-late 1980s to the early 2000s, as recognizable in generic form as any of the lower, more demotic genres surveyed so far in this dissertation, and operating in much the same strategic fashion. Here I am referring to a broad swathe of novels, written not just after World War II but also after the collapse of formal European colonization in the 1960s, that take as their manifest subject the challenges and opportunities of living in a

multicultural world through the depiction of global travel or the effects of globalized cultural exchange. This purposely capacious archive includes slightly older novels from the late postcolonial period of the 1980s and 1990s, especially the novels of Tsitsi Dangarembga, J.M. Coetzee, Keri Hulme, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, W.G. Sebald, Zoë Wicomb, et al; the more-recent-but-not-quite-hypercontemporary novels of the first decade of the 21st century by authors such as Peter Carey, Teju Cole, Amitav Ghosh, Mohammed Hanif, Jhumpa Lahiri, Yann Martel, Colum McCann, David Mitchell, Zadie Smith, and Colm Tóibín; novels of the last decade by Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, K. Chess, Damon Galgut, Marlon James, Viet Thanh Nguyen, the seasonal quartet of Ali Smith, and the earlier novels of Hamid himself; the subgenre of contemporary refugee novels collated by Yogita Goyal in her review of *Exit West*;[12] and, already running the risk of making this list overlong or overly self-serving, I'd argue, Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy, China Miéville's *The City and The City*, and recent entries in the genres of SF and Fantasy, including Jemisin's *The Broken Earth*.[13] This archive is broad, but I am confident it is recognizable in a generic sense as a widely representative sample of novels which might make their way into conferences or course syllabi organized around the "contemporary Anglophone novel"

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[12] See footnote 18, *sub*.

[13] Other novelists whose work has appeared in translation from languages other than English – the novels of Johka Alharthi, Roberto Bolaño, Jenny Erpenbeck, Elena Ferrante, László Krasznahorkai, Antonio Muñoz Molina, Ahmed Saadawi, Orhan Pamuk, Olga Tokarczuk, and many, many more – have reached a similar point of cultural saturation and therefore also serve alongside this long list as precedent for the genre of the global novel.

at the university level, and which lay the groundwork out of which the contemporary global novel arises. To make a claim out of this intuitive sense is tautological, but I contend that *Exit West*, in rendering its own influences into generic precedent, retroactively articulates this archive as a recognizable genre, with intimation as its core strategy of articulation.

The specific norms and habits of the global novel is what *Exit West* gives us rather than just ostensibly telling a story about a globalized world. Hamid approaches this legacy with a sense of play and experimentation, gesturing towards the expectations created by the genre of the global novel without fully participating in them. The "global novel," as *Exit West* encourages us to think about it, is not one that necessarily stages the whole world or globe, nor one that gives us tools for navigating it successfully (or unsuccessfully). The central story of Saeed and Nadia is one of establishing and maintaining local, interpersonal intimacy through a global ambit and mediated through the histories of colonialism and uneven global development. As their relationship progresses, the insistent irruption of both the impossible doors and the small vignettes they allow imply – indeed, intimate – micronarratives of this same universalized interpersonal connection. The contemporary global novel assumes free global movement as a norm and poses the potential for intimacy itself to serve as the key good habit for how to be with one another. It also detaches the sense of "global" from a strictly geographic one and sutures it to a sense of generic expectation. By at once activating

those expectations, creating scenarios in which one might see certain modes of living together play out, and neither refusing them nor embracing them, *per se*, the novel allows us to linger in the implication of what such stories could be.[14]

As the title of this chapter suggests, *Exit West* intimates the genre of the global novel without ever explicitly narrating or describing it. To intimate something is to gesture at it, communicate something delicately and indirectly. To do so effectively, one must presuppose a shared register of implied significance, and an intimate – its adjectival cognate – relationship with the audience of said intimation. It is in this relational space, of winks and shrugs, raised eyebrows and lingering glances, that *Exit West*'s full project of presupposing a shared global intimacy flourishes. Most importantly, these allusions to variegated ways of living in other places never resolve into a singular model for how to be or how to live. Despite the material realities of violence, instability, and uneven distribution of both resources and human flourishing

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[14] As Corina Stan writes in *The Art of Distances,* in her chapter on another "global novelist" Damon Galgut and citing Peter Sloterdijk, "the realization that the 'the earth… is the limited site of human operations' requires imagining a coimmunitary system that extends beyond the traditional tribal, national, and imperial formatting, or more recently regional strategic alliances, to include the global" (Corina Stan, *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century Literature*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2018, 219, citing Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. English edition. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2013). Galgut's protagonist, also named Damon, struggles with the limits of maintaining an autonomous self in relation to the Others he encounters in a triptych of travel narratives, and it is in this acrobatic balancing that Stan finds a "novelistic meditation on community – questioned, problematized, imagined anew." The key here for readers and protagonists is Sloterdijk's "good habits," not only of "shared survival" (Sloterdijk, 452) (although survival is certainly paramount in many of the stories of global movement to which Hamid is responding), but of maintaining the *possibility* for community to come into existence in the first place, to "[foster] the creation of a space for the imagination to do its work of remembering that all the people, infinitely different, to which everyday life and travel expose one are singular human beings, protagonists of stories they tell themselves about their own lives" (Stan, 28).

invoked step-by-step through shifting locales and the interpolated vignettes, *Exit West* relies heavily on these expectations, without being overdetermined by them.

This chapter, like the novel, begins with a focus on Hamid's careful tending of the intimacy between his central protagonists, and what it shows us about the difference between "bad universalism"[15] and, I argue, productive genericization. The novel does so by intimating certain ways of reading to its audience without making a definitive assertion for how the novel should be read. From there, it follows the pair across the world to articulate how Hamid gestures towards readerly expectations formed by the novels of global movement that came before it. Different forms of living together, both imposed and chosen, are presented in the novel, but Hamid consistently turns away from them, recentering the narrative on a consistent commitment to being with one another in globalized space without ever demanding a particular shape for that relationship to take. This form of interpersonal intimacy allows for a multivalent and ever-shifting set of propositions for how to exist in a multicultural, international, globalized world. The novel does not provide a specific model for global mutual

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[15] See Debjani Ganguly, "The Global Novel: Comparative Perspectives Introduction." *New Literary History* 51, no. 2 (2020): v–xviii, discussed in greater depth below, pages 251-2. See also Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016, which theorizes a definition of the global novel as "a distinct product of the age of informational capitalism in the sense that its capacity to be world-oriented is inextricably linked to the capacity of a global informational economy to work as 'a unit in real time on a planetary scale'" (Debjani, 2, citing Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 101).

recognition, because to present such a norm as an argument would be to accept that such a claim can and should be evaluated – and, perhaps, be discounted. Rather, it is an assertion of universal human dignity and freedom as a premise, rendered in narrative form and by implication, in the spaces between each stop of their journey.

The work of intimation, I argue, constitutes a generic strategy for the contemporary global novel – one which asserts that we are all already global as a norm, and that expresses care and attention to the possible stories such a novel could tell as a good habit that readers should practice as thoughtful, ethical members of our globalized society. To recognize these norms and good habits, I argue, opens readers up to the small, intimate gestures the global novel has been asking us to recognize all along. Thinking of the global novel as a genre in these terms allows for it to cohere as a recognizable conceptual object that is nonetheless infinitely iterative and innovative, asserting that the world has been globalized while constantly shifting and incorporating variegated visions of what that looks like or how it's done. What emerges, then, is a concept for the global novel – and a practice for living in an ever more connected world – that is universally recognizable without being universal and homogenous, generic rather than specific. To do so, Hamid's novel goes as local as possible, focusing tightly on the ambivalence between recognition and distance at the core of interpersonal intimacy.

Bad Universalism, Generic Intimacy

In a novel so concerned with global, international travel, it is a bit surprising that more than a third of the novel, over 100 pages, takes place before Nadia and Saeed ever travel anywhere. But taking the time to account for the beginnings of the couple's relationship and the setting in which that relationship blossoms is essential for understanding how Hamid sets the stage for an ambivalent interpersonal intimacy that is both specific to the characters and generalizable to how one might be in relationship to global others. It also necessarily focuses readers on the tension Hamid's novel draws between interpersonal intimacy and global scale. The geographic namelessness of the novel's opening, together with the unsettled ideological signaling of the novel's paired protagonists, has the twinned effect of being both recognizable and vague, overdetermined and indeterminate, setting up the resulting plot and iterative global settings that relies on the generic precedent of other, similarly-marketed novels in order to move past them.

There are of course consequences and potential ethical limitations inherent in intimating, gesturing towards, the work of imagining a globalized world, on both interpersonal and ideological/political scales, rather than making it explicit. Critics of Hamid's novel have noted that the very fact that this opening setting is both recognizable yet nonspecific, paired with the central couple's flight from it, renders the novel ahistorical and problematically universalized. Yogita Goyal, in her essay "Postcolonial, Still," writes of the global novel broadly that "the danger of the global

turn, as is well established, is that it refers to everything and nothing at once, making more difficult the critical task of striating and comparing across difference."[16] Arguing from a place of dutiful skepticism of the global novel, Goyal behooves the careful critic to avoid such a collapse of context if for no other reason than the fact that it would render our own reading practice flat, homogenized, inattentive to the significant level of detail necessary for careful comparison.

This uneasiness with the global novel as a critical category manifests in her subsequent, more pointed critique of *Exit West* specifically.[17] Citing Edward Said and the contemporary novelist Viet Than Nguyen, Goyal positions *Exit West* within the context of the "growing genre of the contemporary refugee novel" which has as its central narratological impulse an attempt to "help construct a history of the present."[18] Drawing on Said's formulation of the exile as a figure subjected to the "unbearably historical" effects of being thrust out of one's home,[19] and Nguyen's insistence on drawing a distinction between the figure of the migrant and that of the refugee,[20] Goyal directly

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[16] Yogita Goyal, "Postcolonial, Still." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/postcolonial-still/.
[17] Yogita Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants': The Refugee Novel and the Claims of Universalism." *Modern Fiction Studies* 66, no. 2 (2020): 239–59.
[18] As representative authors, Goyal cites Yuri Herrera (*The Transmigration of Bodies,* 2013), Dinaw Mengestu (*How to Read the Air*, 2010; *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears,* 2013), Lisa Ko (*The Leavers,* 2017), Valeria Luiselli (*The Lost Children Archives,* 2019), Jose Antonio Vargas (*Dear America,* 2018), and Luis Alberto Urrea (*The House of Beautiful Angels,* 2018) – and to whom I would add Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go Went Gone* (2015), Cristine Henriquez's *Book of Unknown Americans* (2014), along with *Exit West* and Nguyen's own novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015).
[19] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Convergences. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000, 174 as cited in Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants,'" 240.
[20] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Introduction." *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Abrams P, 2018, pp. 11-22, as cited in Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants,'" 242.

critiques Hamid's efforts to render Saeed and Nadia's experience as universal, writing that it falls into the exact trap posited by Said when he warned that "to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as 'good for us."[21] Hamid has argued for a recognition that "those of us who have never moved are also migrants and refugees," specifically "migrants through time," as he phrases it in the novel (209), simply due to the nature of growing up and the gulf that opens between the world of our childhood and our present, and the shifts in both the built- and social- worlds around us. This mutual recognition opens up "the space for empathy," he claims.[22] It's a nice thought, which Goyal rightfully marshals against him to argue that such a universalizing position is not enough: "Does this not risk," she asks, "erasing the particularity of the refugee experience and evading the necessary task of stratifying various kinds of coerced dislocations?"[23]

Goyal's argument is persuasive, and I'm sympathetic to it. But here is a place, I think, where the novel outthinks its author. There is slightly subtler potential to be found in *how* Hamid works around the pressures of representation and specificity,

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[21] Said, *Reflections*, 174.
[22] Mohsin Hamid, "We Are All Refugees: A Conversation With Mohsin Hamid." Interview by Caitlin L. Chandler. *The Nation*. October 30, 2017. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/we-are-all-refugees-a-conversation-with-mohsin-hamid/.
[23] Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants,'" 251.

especially when the novel is placed in its literary historical context. It would be one thing to name a specific location for the initial setting or to render its dual protagonists into universalized avatars of ideological conflict, and either way sidestep the material circumstances of its destabilization – to do so would open Hamid to a more robust criticisms of willful ignorance. However, the indeterminacy of the initial setting when contrasted with the geographic specificities that run throughout the novel allows for it to directly challenge the notion that any story that concerns itself with the lives of people suffering from geopolitical violence and displacement must, by nature of centering on that instability, violence, and displacement, render those characters into representative but ultimately uncountable victims of history. These features of the global novel are invoked, but they do not dominate the full sphere of what is possible if we take Hamid's universalizing move and consider it a charge to form empathetic identification with global others, and thereby a shared ethical responsibility for one another.

This shared identification relies on a form of intimacy that, in turn, relies on a fundamental ambiguity inherent to the concept, a careful ambivalence that radiates out through the rest of the novel. In the opening chapters, Hamid foregrounds the building of a relationship against a vague backdrop of an urban locale moving inexorably towards destabilization at the hands of warring insurgent forces and Western neo-imperialist forces. The city itself is unnamed, and remains so throughout the novel, even as specific locations – Mykonos, London, San Francisco, but also Australia, the

Netherlands, San Marino, Marrakesh – accrete throughout its pages. There are enough hints, including the couple's names, to scan the setting provisionally as occurring somewhere in the Middle East, or Pakistan, or some other culturally Islamic location, without resolving such assumptions. Indeed, the vagueness of this setting, along with the doors, is one of the universally recognized elements of the novel in the myriad reviews and critical studies published in the past few years. Goyal lists "Pakistan, Syria, Somalia, Lebanon, Iran, or really any city with a Muslim population" as a possible location, Molly Slavin claims "anywhere in Western or South Asia," Andrew Motion in *The Guardian* scans it as an "unnamed, presumably Middle Eastern city," William Giraldi in *The Washington Post* guesses we will "think Mosul or Aleppo." Jia Tolentino defers simply to "nameless;" Sukhdev Sandhu to "unnamed."[24] For each, this vagueness of setting is reckoned with as a universalizing mode, whereas I argue it functions more subtly than that.

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[24] Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants,'" 247; Molly Slavin, "The Contemporary Global Anglophone Novel, Mobility, and Crisis," *The Global South,* forthcoming, 19; Andrew Motion, "Exit West by Mohsin Hamid Review – Magic and Violence in Migrants' Tale." *The Guardian*, March 2, 2017, sec. Books. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/02/exit-west-mohsin-hamid-review-andrew-motion-migrants; William Giraldi, "Review – *Exit West*, by Mohsin Hamid, Is a Tale of Love in the Time of Migration." *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2017, sec. Books. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/exit-west-by-mohsin-hamid-is-a-tale-of-love-in-the-time-of-migration/2017/02/16/2c5e9e42-f462-11e6-8d72-263470bf0401_story.html; Tolentino, "A Novel About Refugees;" Sukhdev Sandhu, "*Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid – Magical Vision of the Refugee Crisis." *The Observer*, March 12, 2017, sec. Books. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/12/exit-west-mohsin-hamid-review-refugee-crisis. Among accounts of the novel's opening, only two critics seem to have located it precisely, both in Pakistan: Shazia Sadaf asserts it is "quite identifiable as Pakistan" and Claire Chambers argues persuasively and specifically for Lahore (Sadaf, "'We Are All Migrants through Time': History and Geography in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West."* Journal of Postcolonial Writing, vol. 56, no. 5, Sept. 2020, pp. 636–47, 639; Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, 216).

When Saeed himself notes the slipperiness of setting, looking around the Chinese restaurant they have met at for a dinner date a few weeks into their relationship, and remarks, "We could be anywhere. Well, not anywhere, but not here" (24), the effect is to render the setting generic and therefore resistant to overdetermined readings of any individual city in crisis. We see this even earlier, from the very first pages of the novel: while "it might be odd," the narrator intones, that "young people still go to class," in a city "swollen with refugees" and "teetering at the edge of abyss" (3), this oddness inheres less in the fact that these things are happening – of course, in any given city, some form of the day-to-day continues apace – and more in the fact that a novel like *Exit West* would refuse to paint a city in crisis as a city entirely and totally subsumed *by* crisis. The novel posits that even in a space "not yet openly at war" (3) – that is, a place we as readers are to assume will soon be at war – a "young man" and a "young woman" still meet each other, and that something as tremulous as a new romantic relationship can and does emerge. Pointedly, the novel centers this relationship, rather than the ultimate globe-hopping of its plot, on its opening page.

The refusal to be pinned down into easy parsing is reflected in the initial physical descriptions of the dual protagonists. Nadia wears a "conservative and virtually all-concealing robe," which ensured she was "always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch" (16, 3) and Saeed a beard. But Saeed's beard is "not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble," and Nadia's abaya is tactical, a sign not

of religious devotion but a tool to ensure that "men don't fuck with [her]" (16-17). There's an ambivalence to both of these descriptions that signals towards but ultimately refuses the potential for a voyeuristic look into a non-Western culture. Hamid, writing in English for a mostly Western, Anglophone audience, activates the expectation that this is to be a story about young people in the Middle East struggling in the intersection between a conservative religious regime (the abaya, the beard) and a more progressive one, scrambling the terms. Saeed is bearded, but his beard is bookish, studious, more markedly modern than a sign of traditionalist cultural presentation; Nadia wears the abaya, but her clothing is tactical, not devotional, and deployed to assert her own independence. As the indeterminacy of the setting refuses a specific location, Saeed and Nadia are immediately introduced as fuller, more complicated figures that refuse one-dimensional caricature of any particular ideological formation along conservative/religious vs. progressive/secular lines. [25]

The ambiguity in both setting and in character description reflects a *mise-en-abyme* characteristic of hyper-recent debates in literary study, discursive iterations of the same tension Goyal locates in the global novel broadly and in *Exit West* specifically. Here we see a difference between considering the global novel as a literary genre and inflecting our reading of novels with a global perspective as a critical practice. How,

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[25] Even their names function as a subtle, non-explicit signaling of how they should be read, as Chambers intuits, writing, "Hamid engages in onomastic play, because the initials of 'N' and 'S' in his characters' names supplement the missing compass points implied in the novel's title, *Exit* [East] *West*" (Chambers, 216).

exactly, do we talk about novels that stage this kind of non-Western, complicatedly post- or non- or international setting? "Global novel" has become a shorthand, but for what? At least two special issues dedicated to the question – "Forms of the Global Novel" in *Post45* (Spring 2019) (of which "Goyal's "Postcolonial, Still" is a part) and "The Global Novel: Comparative Perspectives" in *New Literary History* (Spring 2020) – have been published since the *Exit West's* publication, both featuring extended close-readings of Hamid's novel.[26] Together they signal a reification of the ongoing debates since the pivot away from the postcolonial into a collective object itself, "The Global Novel," albeit one defined by its own internal ideological and discursive peristalsis.

In the introduction to the former, Nasia Anam asks, "is the Global Anglophone an epistemic category, a disciplinary classification, an alias of the 'postcolonial,' or subset of World Literature? Or is it a literary genre unto itself?"[27] Surveying two sets of collective data regarding the literary academy – the *Modern Language Association Job Information List* and WorldCat – Anam pinpoints the emergence of the global anglophone somewhere in the period between 2010 and 2018. She frames the category as a discursive one that arises not out of the novels themselves nor "from scholarship," but

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[26] Nasia Anam, "Introduction: Forms of the Global Anglophone." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/introduction-forms-of-the-global-anglophone/; Ganguly, cited above ("The Global Novel: Comparative Perspectives Introduction"), is the author of the introduction to the special issue of *New Literary History.* The immense success of the novel in market terms is once again reflected in the novel's ongoing citation in discussions within academic circles of globalization and the global novel. Surely, if nothing else, *Exit West*'s immediate and continued prominence signals that it must be doing *something* interesting, even if that something is often considered to be frustrating.

[27] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 2.

rather from a self-disciplining of the academy and its attendant job market, and a sort of catch-all one at that.[28] She writes, "I think it is fair to say that the term Global Anglophone entered into literary critical discourse foremost as a problematic substitute for established literary terms like postcolonial and World Literature."[29] Understanding the global novel primarily and only as a replacement for the more contentious categories of postcolonial and World Literature, albeit with the edges sanded off, she argues, is a problem. Without "advocat[ing] for a "wholesale embrace of a disciplinary neologism," Anam rightly suggests that "this shift in nomenclature warrants a consideration of what a distinct aesthetic representation of the Global Anglophone might look like."[30] The rest of the special issue makes compelling interventions into our approaches to this

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[28] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 4. According to Anam, the phrase "Global Anglophone" appeared in exactly zero job listings in the years 2008 and 2009, one position in the years 2010-12, three in 2013, six in 2014, a walloping nine in 2015, down to four in 2016, and back up to seven in 2017. Compare Anam's statistical survey with the introduction to yet another special issue – "South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone" in *Interventions* – edited by Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan (which Anam cites), in which Srinivasan writes, "In 2016, a few months before completing my doctoral dissertation on the rhetoric of New India, I discovered I was a 'global Anglophonist.' I use the word 'discovered' because I had applied for academic jobs in multiple fields, and the ones that recognized me were all positions in global Anglophone and world literatures within departments of English in the US academy" (Srinivasan, "Introduction: South Asia from Postcolonial to World Anglophone." *Interventions* 20, no. 3 (April 3, 2018): 309–16). At the time of writing, the MLA job list for 2022 ("Find the Latest Jobs in Modern Language | MLA Job List." Accessed January 15, 2022. https://joblist.mla.org/jobs/) returns six tenure-track positions with "global Anglophone" in the description – including an endowed chair in Irish Studies at my very own alma mater of Notre Dame, suitable for a candidate with an "established international reputation in any area (preferably several areas) of Irish literature," two in which the term is couched in descriptions for positions in Digital Humanities and Composition and Rhetoric, and one faculty role at a private high school in New York City. Just two are straightforwardly "global anglophone" positions – which also return as results for "world literature." "Postcolonial" returns one, a listing for a position in "British Literature." The global anglophone, then, is a new category, and obviously one with legs, but legs in need of a bit of support, it seems.

[29] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 4.

[30] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 8.

"essentially market-produced designation;"[31] Marina Balbija and J. Daniel Elam challenge the category itself,[32] Arthur Rose and Amanda Lagji argue along similar lines as I am here that the global novel is a genre, posing global health and perpetual war, respectively, as formal linchpins.[33] What remains after this parallaxed constellation of approaches, though, is Anam's open-ended question – "What *is* the Global Anglophone, anyway?"[34]

In her introduction in New Literary History, Debjani Ganguly incises a similar tumult in the current understanding of the Global Novel, invoking comparative approaches to triangulate and define this "market-produced designation" on its own terms. Ganguly cites the comparative morphology of Franco Moretti,[35] the imbrication of

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[31] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 11. For another accounting of a different market – not the job market, but the literary market – and *Exit West's* formal and market-driven precedents, I defer to Sarah Brouillette argument in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace.* Grounding her project in the sociology of circulation and reception, Brouillette locates the contemporary anglophone novel within the broader matrix of publishing and cultural capital that emerged as an attempt to reconcile the tension between writers whose work, and indeed authority, derives from their "connection to the specificity of a given political location" and "the dissemination of their texts to reading communities accessing privileged metropolitan markets that are often (though not exclusively) Anglo-American in location and orientation" (Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 3-4).

[32] Marina Bilbija, "What's in a Name?: The Global Anglophone, the Anglosphere, and the English-Speaking Peoples." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/whats-in-a-name-the-global-anglophone-the-anglosphere-and-the-english-speaking-peoples/; J Daniel Elam, "The Form of Global Anglophone Literature Is Grenfell Tower." *Post45* (blog), February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/the-form-of-global-anglophone-literature-is-grenfell-tower/.

[33] Arthur Rose, "Mood, Health, and the Global Anglophone Novel." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/mood-health-and-the-global-anglophone-novel/; Amanda Lagji, "Fragments of a World That 'Doesn't End': The Apocalyptic Impulse in a Time of Perpetual War." *Post45*, February 22, 2019. https://post45.org/2019/02/fragments-of-a-world-that-doesnt-end-the-apocalyptic-impulse-in-a-time-of-perpetual-war/.

[34] Anam, "Forms of the Global Anglophone," 14.

[35] Ganguly cites Franco Moretti, ed. *The Novel*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006,

human rights and the global novel as articulated by Joseph Slaughter,[36] David Polumbo-Liu's model of cosmopolitical subject-formation in the face of difference and otherness,[37] and Rebecca Walkowitz's theorization of the relationship between global literary circulation and the formal and stylistic mode she names "Born Translated,"[38] and others.[39] This "conceptual range," Ganguly argues, allows for the Global Novel to be "conceived… as a belated marker of sedimented histories, their accrual and remediation embedded in the language of the contemporary."[40] That is to say, Ganguly argues that the discursive category of the global novel is best understood as the accretion over time of these overlapping methodologies for understanding, and not just the corpus of novels upon which it depends and iterates. *Contra* what is "often perceived" as the "moniker of bad universalism"– a homogeny which enfolds a "grammar of transnational biopower"

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as a comprehensive and multi-authored application of the comparative morphology she references – I'd probably also cite "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" (*MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207–27) and "Conjectures on World Literature" (*New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 1, 2000): 54–68), the latter of which I discussed in much greater depth in the previous chapter, pages 208-209, for a tighter insight on Moretti's own methodology of comparison.

[36] Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.

[37] David Palumbo-Liu, *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.

[38] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015; again, referenced in more detail in the introduction and in the previous chapter, pages 214-215.

[39] Ganguly, "The Global Novel," vi. This tumult – and litany – chimes with a similar survey I have presented in the previous chapter on worldbuilding. Whereas there I argue that SFF provides a way of understanding the whole of a cultural and conceptual "world," the Global Novel, having grown out of different but parallel literary-critical traditions – world literature vs. the postcolonial paradigm – is, I'd argue, much more directly concerned with the globe as a geographic, physical space. Thinking about the global novel through the lens of genre is my attempt at partially reconciling the obvious resonances I see between two different modes of thinking about the whole planet we find ourselves on.

[40] Ganguly, "The Global Novel," vi.

reliant on "nineteenth-century evolutionary logics" and ultimately "a malevolent form in an already fragile ecosystem of genre" – she positions the global novel as a many-layered conceptual object.[41] To echo *Exit West* itself, it seems this is a genre on the move.[42] For Ganguly, to think of the global novel not as an object but as a cascading series of overlapping processes is to reinvest it with discursive potential: what does the global novel *do* – without demanding a specific definition – versus what the global novel *is.* It also invests the genre with the very set of readerly expectations that Hamid is working with and within throughout the novel.

For Anam, as for Ganguly, the global novel is a set of questions. But I take up the last of Anam's open-ended provocations – "What *is* the Global Anglophone, anyway?" – by returning to one proposed answer in both her introduction and my own. Is the Global Anglophone a literary genre unto itself? I argue an emphatic "yes," in the specific context of the contemporary novel, and if we understand genre to be an activation of certain expectations for what a story like itself *could* and perhaps *should* look like if published today but without demanding a specific formation. More pointedly, I take the global novel to function as a genre within the broader literary field of contemporary fiction inasmuch as it takes as its formal norms and good habits to be

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[41] Ganguly, "The Global Novel," v.

[42] Hamid writes, "[t]hat summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places" (169). The movement of denizens of the globe *across* the globe in the novel neatly reflects the sense of perpetual motion in approaches to the global novel.

the very questions of classification and analysis that attempt to pin it down. The global novel, as a generic form, is an incorporation of each of these potential models for reading itself into its own material, a genre primarily organized around an iterative process of invoking these questions and narratives and organizational structures – norms – and a recognition that each provides a tactically useful way of interrogating the form local communities take in a global, multinational and -cultural world. If the assertion is that global movement is happening, the acknowledgment that there are many ways to live in such a world, each valuable in its own way, are the indirectly enforced good habits of the global novel.

Taken in these terms, the vagueness of the novel's opening belies not a problematically universalized effect or affect of migration. Rather, it is essential for establishing the couple as vectors of generic recognition for the models to come as they travel across the world – the setting is representatives not of a particular site of globalized space, but a primer for how the rest of the novel will interrogate these questions, posed as they are at the edges of the couple's relationship. *Exit West* lays the foundation for this argument by presenting Nadia and Saeed as utterly banal, even generic, representatives of young twenty-somethings in an urban center. The early stages of their burgeoning relationship are noteworthy for their very normalness and recognizability without specificity. While their city becomes increasingly destabilized around them, their relationship builds steadily, if carefully. They exchange text

messages, sneak around behind the back of Saeed's parents, share meals and secret liaisons. Saeed, a committed son, an "independent-minded, grown man, unmarried, with a decent post and a good education" nonetheless lived with his parents (10), and remains committed to them throughout the opening sequence. Later, as the novel proceeds, Saeed's religious commitments become more obvious, as he prays more often and ultimately finds community in like-minded fellow Muslims, especially in London and San Francisco. Nadia, however, feels isolated by the pressures of traditional cultural norms, and she wrestles privately with them, drifting from her family and learning to treasure her independence. – while "the art in Nadia's childhood home consisted of religious verses and photos of holy sites (21), her 'constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith" ultimately lead to her moving out from home, "such that Nadia and her family both considered her thereafter to be without a family" (22). Drilling down on their burgeoning ideological commitments might grant some purchase on reading the couple as metaphors or metonyms for something grander, sure. But aren't their experiences also at their core just the experiences of being in one's twenties and figuring out one's relationship with their family?

These initial differences in familial orientation manifest as broader differences in their approach to romance. Early on, a "rhythm was established" in which it became "rare that more than few waking hours would pass without contact between them." The couple "found themselves… growing hungry, touching each other," but only

metaphorically. "[T]hey had begun, each of them," the narrator editorializes, "to be penetrated, but they had not kissed" (41). From this moment of shared disconnection, Saeed and Nadia approach their incipient courtship at different paces, and with different visions of where it might eventually lead. After taking hallucinogenic mushrooms together, they kiss for the first time, and shortly thereafter "Saeed was certain he was in love," but Nadia "was not certain what exactly she was feeling, but was certain it had force" (54). In an intimate moment a few weeks into dating and after a bit of heavy petting, Saeed seizes up and tells Nadia that he thinks they should wait until they are married before they have sex. Nadia's reply: "Are you fucking joking?" (55). It'd be easy to read this matrix of tensions, especially in this context, as an overdetermined stand-in for the archetypical clash of modernity versus tradition, the more conservative and romantic Saeed encountering a more progressive and liberated Nadia, leading to the both of them finding some form of synthesis in their coupling.

But Nadia and Saeed's different positions on pre-marital sex are not indicative of a grand cultural clash between the two of them. Rather, it is just one difference among many that Saeed and Nadia navigate through together. These seeds of tensions in the relationship between Nadia and Saeed mature over the course of the novel, but here, in the opening pages, they are positioned not as points of tension but as constitutive of the mutual discovery between people that is essential to the beginning of any relationship. Their relationship proceeds on the edges of both intimacy and expectation, constantly

gesturing towards other plots and narrative structures it could have collapsed into but withholding such resolution.

Two potential outcomes for their relationship present themselves to readers expecting some form of resolution from the very beginning: their relationship might follow a predictable marriage plot, a novel of manners (albeit one which expands the concept of domesticity to the scale of the world). In this hypothetical alternative *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia, through international travails and tribulations, come to recognize that their love for one another outweighs their differences, and in the end being together supersedes the personal commitments that would keep them apart. The opposite hypothetical is more cynical: these differences might potentially be recognized as irresolvable in a moment of conflict, leading to the collapse of their intimacy, although perhaps in such a way that readers looking for tragedy will see the *pathos* of two lovers who are forced apart by the emiseration of their circumstances. Neither really happens, though. As their courtship unfolds, Saeed and Nadia are shown to have different attitudinal orientations towards questions of sex, culture, individual liberty. Theirs is a story that can be told of any two lovers, no matter the place. Saeed and Nadia have different values, aesthetic practices, and priorities, and the ongoing maintenance of their relationship – not where it ends up – make up the raw material of their story.

There's an older form of liberalism going on here – not the kind of liberalism that has been collapsed into "slightly left-of-center" in political terms, but in the notion that

the liberal individual subject is the central arbiter of personal choice. Chief among these choices is, as we see in the novel as it proceeds, the freedom of international movement. But there is pointedly a more local liberalism of day-to-day import, wherein each individual subject practices freedom of decision, freedom of movement, within and through both cities and nations, and the freedom of self-identification and sexual expression (and refusal). Ultimately, directly in the face of the circumstances that Nadia and Saeed find themselves in, Hamid constructs an opening to the novel where their individuality is asserted against the closing off of their city otherwise threatened by violence, and expressed in the couple's choice to continue to explore their relationship neither because of their differences, nor in spite of them. That the two are not immediately compatible is challenging, but not insurmountable; however, narrativizing this implied conflict properly fails, because there is no breakthrough moment where someone comes to recognize the other as a human being, thus resolving the conflict in a form of interpersonal Hegelian synthesis. Instead, we get the long, slow slog of attempting to be a good and decent person in community as such.

It's exactly the attenuated refusal of the expectation that Saeed and Nadia's relationship will eventually resolve that makes the beginning of the novel so interesting upon rereading. They are not ignorant of their differences, nor does the narrative smooth them over in the face of some other cataclysm. The difference in values, marked as they *might* be as representative of grand cultural narratives, are interpersonal and

private, rather than geopolitical or ideological. In occupying this consistently provisional space – never resolved, but always gesturing towards resolution – the core romance occupies a space akin to the loose, relational codes of good habits that hold genres together.

But this is not just a story of Saeed and Nadia. By refusing to locate itself in any particular political regime, and to resist making this novel of global movement move anywhere for quite a long time, the novel opens as a story not of particular exigency but of the generalized (and, I'd argue, generic) sense of an overdetermined sense of crisis, and therefore of the potential to be found even within those sites of conflict.[43] Throughout the opening pages of the novel, diffuse violence and immediate interpersonal intimacy stack up against one another. As Nadia and Saeed's city becomes increasingly subject to warring fusillades from militants, they are also drawn together. Even after Nadia expresses her surprise and exasperation, Saeed insists that they withhold having sex with one another "until they are married," and to remain even

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[43] Molly Slavin, in her article "The Contemporary Global Anglophone Novel, Mobility, and Crisis," forthcoming in yet another special issue on the global novel, "Contextualizing the Global Anglophone Novel" in *The Global South,* cites *Exit West* as a paradigmatic entry in another formulation of the global anglophone novel, the "crisis novel." The descriptive term, which she distills from recent work by Emily Horton, Suman Gupta, Janet Roitman, and Laura Berlant, is intended to signal a destabilization the historical legacy of empire and the (post)colony that has come to characterize the global anglophone, "a sort of unconscious sense that the empire is haunting the global Anglophone, but no specific attention to the colonial legacies that continue to influence this literary tradition." The result, Slavin argues, is that the global Anglophone has come to be defined by "a sense of crisis, but not one that can be or is ascribed to any particular historical formation; it seemingly exists outside a sense of time or causality" (4). (Emily Horton, *Contemporary Crisis Fictions: Affect and Ethics in the Modern British Novel.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Suman Gupta, "Crisis of the Novel and the Novel of Crisis." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 42, no. 4 (2015): 454–67; Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis,* Duke UP, 2014; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham : Duke UP, 2011.)

more stringently non-sexual after Nadia moves into Saeed's home. Despite this, however, it is immediately after an upstairs neighbor is brutally beheaded by militants for the crime of belonging to a particular sect that the narrator tells us that "they became unchaste there for the first time," but significantly, "always stopping short of sex" (85). Violence and intimacy are collapsed in narrative proximity, but violence neither erodes the capacity for intimacy, nor does intimacy serve as an escape from violence. Rather, they coexist. Violence threatens the city Nadia and Saeed call home, but it never touches them directly. It is always the intimation of violence, the gesture towards it, in the same way that their relationship is predicated on the shared, implied recognition and "unchaste" intimacy with one another without consummation. It is a mode of intimacy that acknowledges the other without insisting that they must fully collapse into one another.

In other words, permeating the beginning of the novel is an atmosphere of intimacy that is premised, as it must be, on intimation. Not explicit, not fully codified or expressed, but rather hinted at, as one might intimate a private joke by raising one's eyebrow at the opportune time. Intimacy, the sharing of one's inmost, innermost, deepest and most private, is coupled with an expression of care that relies *not* on explicit copulation and resolution (in the sexual act), *or* its rejection, but rather a consistent gesture towards such a union as the un-inscribable core of their relationship All signs

lead to sex, but Saeed and Nadia never get there; at the same time, all signs also lead to some grand conflict, but no such climactic standoff occurs either.

Hamid gestures towards the kinds of stories Nadia and Saeed *might* represent to expose the limitations that arise from assuming every such story must result in either valorous overcoming of one's circumstances or collapse into voyeuristic trauma porn premised on the threat of violence. If we read *Exit West* as a potential model "for understanding how literary and cultural forms can navigate the demands of universalism and difference," as Goyal suggests,[44] it might rightly be considered a failure, demurring as it does any attempt at formally staging the specific atrocities inflicted upon those experiencing forced migration. But read as a novel that allows us to see the limits and challenges of such a model, *Exit West* gathers up the questions raised by Anam and Ganguly, bringing the global novel into focus as an object that is sustained and maintained through the generic expectation that such questions can and should be raised in the first place. In other words, it does not solve the problem of *how* to "navigate the demands of universalism and difference." What it does, instead, is render that question into a narrative form that rejects any singular resolution in the first place. It is the simple and consistent work of building intimacy, building a life together, that dominates the novel even as its geographic scope swells to the size of the world.

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[44] Goyal, "'We Are All Migrants,'" 257.

Nadia and Saeed's relationship comes very, very close to the sort of "bad universalism" warned against by Said, Anam, and Gopal, I'll admit. However, I'd push it just a step further. Just as Saeed and Nadia diffuse into generic figures of twentysomething youths figuring their way forward, the premise of globalized crisis is perpetually present without Saeed and Nadia ever suffering the true limitations such crisis might impose. The careful ambivalence of the novel's setting and the couple's relationship functions *generically*, rather than universally. What is going on here is a universalizing move not through the universalization of violence – not everyone, much less every migrant is subject to specific physical violence of the interpersonal, social, or state-enacted sort. But all are impacted, and the promise of human flourishing provisionally guaranteed by individual liberty is shown to be shaped, inflected, and limited by the diffused premise of violence. Despite the universalization of crisis, what is valorized here is a commitment to mutual self-discovery through shared intimacy with others – not because of the globalized instability and violence, or even in spite of it, but at one and the same time. This commitment, carried through the novel's doors from the unnamed city outward to the world, shows us what attending to these intimated, rather than explicit, stories might look like in practice on a global scale.

Global Process, Generic Production

Whether or not we agree with the political project of global intimacy proposed by *Exit West*, or its presentation as a generic form, it is clear that they are long-running thematic and formal concerns in the author's oeuvre. Hamid is himself an avatar of the transnational movement that is central to *Exit West* and at question in our current conceptions of the global novel. Born in Pakistan, he spent parts of his childhood in the United States, and he was educated at the Lahore American School when his family returned back to Pakistan. He ricocheted back, returning to the US for his undergraduate degree at Princeton, where, without formally declaring as a creative writing (or even an English) major, he studied under Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates before graduating.

His first two novels, *Moth Smoke* (2000) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), depict shadowy, funhouse-mirror refractions of the author's own biography. *Moth Smoke* tells the story of an increasingly disillusioned banker from Lahore as his life descends into bitterness and ultimately drugs and violence.[45] The novel was born from some of his efforts at writing in undergrad, and he continued to work on it while enrolled in law school at Harvard University, in his position in corporate law, and throughout this time working with McKinsey Consulting. Despite his time spent in the US, Hamid's method of writing, as well as its content, was grounded in Pakistan. His position with McKinsey

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[45] Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke*. New York: Picador USA, 2000.

came with a rare opportunity – three months off a year to continue writing, during which he returned to Lahore, where *Moth Smoke* is set. In a glowing profile of him and his fellow writer Akhil Sharma, Hamid seemed surprised at his own good fortune: "Yeah, it's pretty unusual… But it works pretty nicely. I'll work on a study for three or four months, finish it and then go back to Pakistan and write."[46]

His next novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* came seven years later.[47] Here Hamid's penchant for formal experimentation fused with the paradoxes of living in a globalized world in a way that predicts *Exit West*. The entire novel is presented as a dramatic monologue by Changez, a Pakistani man who had been educated and found financial success in the same boardrooms that Hamid found himself in as he rose through his early twenties. While Hamid refashioned himself as a writer after his career in corporate law and consulting, his character instead turns to a different kind of self-aestheticization – religious fundamentalism. The ideals of liberal tolerance clash with the practical realities of American neo-imperialism, and Changez is drawn into becoming a public critic of U.S. foreign policy. The novel ends without definitively indicting – or exculpating – Changez of political violence. It is neither a story of radicalization nor redemption, or perhaps a story of both. Either way, its thematic power lies in Hamid's ability to paint a portrait of a man struggling with the tensions of living between

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[46] Thomas, Landon Jr. "Akhil and Mohsin Get Paid: Moonlighting Salomon Smith Barney, McKinsey Guys Write Novels." *Observer*, April 23, 2001. https://observer.com/2001/04/akhil-and-mohsin-get-paid-moonlighting-salomon-smith-barney-mckinsey-guys-write-novels/.
[47] Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007.

ideologies presupposed to be at war. The result is an early instantiation of the central project of *Exit West* – presenting an intimate account of a figure caught in the middle of conflict without resolving that conflict. A morally ambiguous position, certainly, but one that forces readers to reckon with the individual human scope of broader, ideological conflicts, thereby grounding the consequences of such conflicts in our capacity (or refusal) to engage with those who we have refused to interpellate as common citizens of the globe.

After the formal experimentation of staging *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* entirely as a monologue, Hamid began toying with broader generic expectation. His 2013 novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia,* purports to be a self-help manual.[48] Although the conceit is applied only lightly, each chapter is titled with an imperative ("Move to the City," "Get an Education," and so on), and opens with a direct address in which the narrator gives nominal advice about how to achieve the goal set forth by the novel's title. The self-awareness of generic play that becomes essential in *Exit West* is in full display at the beginning of Chapter 2, including a nascent frustration with the "foreign novel." Hamid writes,

> Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that

[48] Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2013.

> because of globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, if not a desire for self help?[49]

Already, before *Exit West*, Hamid acknowledges that reading a novel for the sake of its foreignness has become tired, "boring." He instead presents a story of globalization set in a vaguely defined "rising Asia"[50] where flows of capital are already globalized and the ability to get "filthy rich" depends on one's ability to find a market – in this case, purified water – that can cater to the goals of internationally funded development. Just as with Hamid's novels before and after it, *Rising Asia* is about globalization and how it "affect[s] life in your own [country]" without resorting to tropes of difference in order to show interconnectedness. And it does so by turning to the expectations of genre, derived from a crowded field of novels with similar thematic interests, in much the same way *Exit West* does. Here, the well of expectation that Hamid draws on is that of the self-help manual, demonstrating his ease with coopting formal structures for his own ends, and his recognition of the power the shape of these structures have in shaping the readerly interpretation of said stories.

Both novels prototype a new way of thinking about globalness that does not depend on the density of multiple locations to assert that it is so. *Rising Asia* turns its focus on the power of economic capital to generate a new sense of the globe, and Hamid uses that backdrop of globalization to enfold the reader, the "you" of the novel into the

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[49] Hamid, *Rising Asia,* 19.

[50] *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes place explicitly in Lahore and narrates the protagonist's life in New York, but even "Asia" seems too specific a setting for Hamid once he gets to the opening city of *Exit West.*

position of a non-Western entrepreneur. Despite the global interconnectedness of capital assumed by the novel-world of *Rising Asia,* the story is nonetheless deeply personal, centering around "you," "your" rise, and "your" desire to build intimacy and family despite the challenges of doing so while *also* becoming "filthy rich." It is a global story, as Hamid understands it, told locally. Ultimately, it is this close personal disclosure of the experience of global movement that defines the edges of what is possible for Saeed and Nadia in the novel, not the realities of global travel between nations that are transposed into the novel.

Cacophony

Rising Asia works within the strictures of intimate second-person – "you." *Exit West* renders that intimate relationship between text and reader generic, opening back up to the potential of free indirect third-person to chart the limits of learning about the stories of the world without necessarily granting their details. The realistic if not quite real doors function as a device that allows this cultivation of intimacy to be maintained at global scale. Having started in a place of intentional, generic vagueness, the novel takes Saeed and Nadia to a new location where that namelessness swirls into a disaggregated, cacophonous site of shared displacement. In taking their full trajectory into account, what emerges is a sequence of narrative gestures, premised on generic

expectations born of late 20th and early 21st century novels of multiculturalism and global movement.[51]

Due to the novel's otherwise tight focalization on Saeed and Nadia at the outset of the novel, the appearance of the doors in their particular story comes seemingly out of nowhere. A few pages after the rumors of these doors make their way into their earshot, they are quickly thrust into a role of narrative significance. Saeed's mother dies, and we learn of this only in the conditional mode as an explanation for why Nadia finally chooses to move in with Saeed. Even here, at the moment of the most personal experience of violence, the narration displaces it, misplaces it, at whiplash speed. Buried in a single, albeit paratactic, sentence, we learn of a "stray heavy caliber round passing the through the windshield of her family's car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head, not while she was driving, for she had not driven in months, but while she was checking inside for an earring she had misplaced" (74-5). This is the closest the couple comes to experiencing direct violence, and by implication both formally on the level of sentence – Nadia "would have waited longer" to move in, "had Saeed's mother not been killed" – and in plot, because it is shortly thereafter that they finally come to recognize that staying in their home as become untenable. Going through one of these doors becomes an act of last resort for the two.

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[51] See above, page 237.

They seek out the services of a fixer who grants them access to a door that has yet to be co-opted by the warring forces, and step through it to emerge in the first of the far-away places that give shape to the remainder of their story. The rest of the novel traces the couple's journey through a series of these doors – first to a Greek island, then on to a vacant Georgian mansion in London, through to a makeshift refugee camp on the edges of San Francisco. There is a hint of a telos in the locations the couple emerge into as their story progresses, from statelessness to disruption of the metropole to the mythic promise of the American Dream in California, aligned axially with the westward movement of the novel's title. It is not one direct exit, though, and that hint of telos is disrupted by the fact that each individual stop provides the novel with the opportunity to explore the potential arrangements of global sociality hinted at by each location without pitching any individual arrangement as the "right" way to live in community.

While in Greece, they are two among a host of international refugees who have come to the island, "speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world" (106). There is an absent presence of state violence and the ravages of living in a refugee camp; "the doors to richer destinations were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured" (106); "The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places" (107) – once again invoking the generalized anywhere Saeed first describes feeling in the Chinese restaurant in their home city. In this moment, the novel moves from a space of

overdetermined instability and violence – the novel of crisis – more properly into a setting that aligns more closely with Nguyen's formulation of the refugee novel. The cacophony of voices belies a forced cosmopolitanism of individuals stripped of their agency. A reader trained by the same entries in the contemporary refugee novel cited by Goyal and Nguyen might fairly expect a grand trauma, a solidaristic uprising, a mass libidinal rejection of imposed deindividuation by the new denizens of Mykonos.

But what eventually drives them out is not grand geopolitical pressure to flee from the liminal site of the refugee camp, but rather an aimlessness and a dwindling cash reserve resulting from being stuck on the island without a job or sense of the future. "Their funds were growing thinner," remarks the narrator, and while there was "desperation" and "fear" in the eyes of those in the refugee camps, the fear was "that they would be trapped [t]here forever" (115). This is violence, but of a slower, less immediate sort, a violence enacted on a person's future rather than their body. There is a quick scene of potential direct conflict, but is defused before it becomes anything significant. Just before they decide to leave the island, the couple finds themselves trapped between two perceived threats. "Four men in the distance" walking towards them transform in the narration into "their pursuers" only after Nadia and Saeed assume they must be interested in stealing Saeed's fishing rod (116). The two round a bend and see a house, outside of which "were uniformed guards, which meant the house contained a door to a more desirable place." Behind and ahead, two threats loom.

What is set up here is a pincer given shape by what we might expect of liminal refugee existence. On the one hand, lawless bandits, "four men" *cum* pursuers, obviously set on theft. On the other, the threat of state-sanctioned violence, uniformed guards creating a border through their defense of the door. We have two potential instantiations of the kind of threats Western Anglophone readers have been trained to subconsciously expect from narratives about refugees; the pernicious stereotypes of migrants as wanton criminals if one is a xenophobe, and the imputations of state-sanctioned violence if one turns their wariness within, criticizing military-grade enforcement as essentially neo-colonial and unjust.

I find this moment to be one of the most fascinating in the novel, precisely because it leads the reader to expectations only to deftly pivot away from them. Pause and consider for a moment another set of possibilities, what would happen if suddenly the collective governments of the world discovered that there were doorways that allowed people to step directly into the hearts of other countries. We'd expect the same sort of efficient military encircling and co-optation we see in countless other science-fiction stories and films – the trope is familiar. Hamid positions his novel directly on the very limns of this sort of science fiction. But this gesture towards speculative fiction shifts how we should be considering the refusal of expectations we see above, in how the novel refuses the trap of synthetic cosmopolitanism. The doors function exactly as they are described – that is, impossibly. There is not even the illusion of pseudo-science

to explain how. They are acknowledged by the governments of the world, but the magnitude of their power is never exploited for the gain of the state, military or otherwise.

Readers of novels about immigration, refugees, international travel, etc. are primed to see the institutionalization of the particular in door in Greece as a familiar beat in an expected story. I expected the drama to heighten, guards to get paid off, derring-do on moonlit nights as our protagonists surveilled and prevailed through the door, checkpoint be damned. Of course, there's another way this moment could have gone. Saeed and Nadia could have attempted the above subterfuge, only to be caught, and subjected to immense brutality. This is the less romantic version of the refugee narrative, where borders are not only something to transgress, but a devastating threshold with brutalizing consequences. Once through – if one makes it – one remains forever changed.

But in this moment, none of these potential narratives is realized. Instead, "the four men never appeared," the guards simply tell them to stay back. In fact, "Saaed and Nadia had never before been relieved to see guards on the island, but they were now" (116). No actual confrontation, just the expectation of one, and they set up camp in that smallest of in-betweens. The next three paragraphs, the last of the chapter, quickly runs through how Nadia befriended a young local volunteer who asked Nadia what the couple needed. The narrator clips along through what the most impossible parts of their

journey *should* be, if this were strict realism: "They said above all they needed a way off the island, and the girl said she might be able to do something." Soon after, the girl locates a new door and they simply move on (118). The potential traumatic stories lived through by those who *couldn't* just move on are hinted at, but neither the couple nor the reader is permitted by the novel to linger on them. Perhaps, as above, I am misreading, and this is moral dilettantishness, bad universalism. Thinking generically, though, I'm left wondering who would be served by lingering in the emiseration of the refugee camp. That this is a stop that Saeed and Nadia are capable of taking acknowledges the limitations on futurity that is a premise of such places. That they move on when so many others seemingly cannot is not a claim that it's "good for them," but rather an assertion – not an argument to be debated or evaluated, but a principled assertion – that everyone should be able to do the same.

Challenging Hybridity

Having secured passage through yet another door, Hamid poses another set of questions, this time about how to live in a more thoroughly imbricated urban location at the heart of the metropole. Is it possible to carve out a hybridized, multicultural society in the global North? Perhaps. As a matter of novelistic literary history, this is an evolution past the rapidly coalescing canon of the contemporary Anglophone novel that can be traced back to the novels of the Empire Writes Back era of Coetzee, Ishiguro,

Rushdie, et al.[52] After the "cacophony that was the languages of the world" in Mykonos, the couple emerges into a large unoccupied mansion in the heart of London. Gone is the cacophony, replaced with pale, nearly completely deracinated space, a bedroom furnished with items "so expensive and well made that Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel, with pale woods and cream rugs and white walls" (121). In this space evacuated of any cultural markers besides those of the literal white bourgeois,[53] they find fellow travelers through the doors and forge a loosely knit community, comprised of people from "as far west as Guatemala and as far east as Indonesia" (127). Their arrival in the city returns a sense of meaningfulness to the lives of the two, and therefore also a renewed vitality to their relationship. The promise here is of a neutral space of pure cosmopolitanism – the couple, and other migrants through the doors, emerge into a blank space, and a new social ordering seems possible.

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[52] As I aver in the introduction to this chapter, citing this period as a "canon" is in part an intuitive claim on my part, born out of the anecdotal experience of having spent much of the last few years teaching, attending conferences, and having conversations with other scholars who self-identify as working on the "global anglophone novel," all of us immersed in the same discursive milieu I've attempted to indicate throughout these footnotes. But it is also borne out by more deliberative, sociologically driven studies, chief among them Peter Kalliney's *Commonwealth of Letters,* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), James English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2008), and Brouillette, footnote 31 *supra,* which together locate a burgeoning canon for the contemporary Anglophone emerging out of modernism and in the intersection of the novel as such with institutions such as the Booker and Nobel Prizes. See also Kara Lee Donnelly ("Metafictions of Development: *The Enigma of Arrival*, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town,* and the Place of the World in World Literature." The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 49, no. 1, 2014: 63–80), who argues that authorial self-narration *as author* actively instantiates a worldliness to the market of the Anglophone novel, and Myles Oldershaw ("Granta and the Advent of the Contemporary," Journal of Modern Literature 43, no 1, Fall 2019: 150+), who locates the temporal sense of the contemporary in shifts in institutional practice of the British literary industry.

[53] The mansion recalls the non-space of Breach, from Miéville's *The City & The City*, which I argued presented a potential escape from the challenges of international collision, but ultimately not an effective or sustainable one (Chapter 2, "Breach," pages 137-138).

Here in the metropole, Nadia and Saeed, and the nascent communities around them, experience the transition from earlier postcolonial iterations of the novel into the hybridization that has come to characterize the period from the late 1980s into the early 2000s. And, in turning away from these models once again, Hamid both gestures at his own literary antecedents and moves past them. Drawing their title from Rushdie's own 1982 essay with a slightly longer title,[54] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin summarized, in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), a pivot away from national models of postcolonial study and towards models of "hybridity and syncreticity."[55] "The postcolonial world," they write, "is one in which the destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms."[56] Rushdie's own novels, especially *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) narrativized the clash between the colony and the metropole and are rendered fantastical by the clash.[57] Other, hopefully representative novels in and around that period present the promise and

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[54] "The Empire Writes Back," Rushdie claims, "with a vengeance." Citing the "vitality and excitement" of Anglophone writers turning the tools of the English language back on the colonial legacy of England itself, and referencing Joyce in Ireland and Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison in the United States as avatars of authors writing in English as "escapees from colonialism," Rushdie writes "now" – that is, in 1982 – "it is happening again, and on a more global scale than ever before." This vitality he attributes to an incomplete list of recognizably postcolonial writers: "Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink Derek Walcott, V S Naipaul, R K Narayan, and many others," but marks his own period as one in which the project of post- and de-colonial writing was making its way to Fortress Britannia. "Thanks to the immigration of the 1950s, 1960s, these new literatures are arriving in Britain" (Salman Rushdie, "The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance." *The Times*. July 3, 1982.)

[55] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. New Accents. London; New York: Routledge, 2002, 32.

[56] Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, 35.

[57] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children: A Novel*. 25th Anniversary edition. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006; *The Satanic Verses: A Novel*. Reprint edition. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.

challenges of hybridity in psychosocial terms. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* (1993) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000) struggle with the responsibilities of memory and legacy of colonial occupation,[58] Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999),[59] with the grief and the limits of individual agency in the detritus of decolonization. Written and circulated at the moment of this shift in postcolonial study towards the global novel, each of these earlier novels perform similar work to *Exit West* in attempting to synthesize the unsteady ground of international cultural movement, staging the possibility, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin put it, for "cross-culturality" to serve as "the potential termination point for an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group 'purity.'"[60]

Here, in the heart of the British Empire itself, the potential syncretism of Saeed and Nadia's initial time spent in London mimics the contours of the early stages of hybridity and syncreticism, laden as those early moments are with the potential to reclaim a blank space for their own. But the reality of what those experiencing global movement actually encounter invades this intimated hope – "the police arrived quickly after" and "soon there was a vanload more of them, in full riot gear." This mutual threat brings the burgeoning community together; "they spoke more to one another than they

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[58] Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*. New York: Vintage International, 1990; *When We Were Orphans*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
[59] J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York : Penguin Books, 1980; *Age of Iron*. New York: Random House, 1990; *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1999.
[60] Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin, 35.

otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers… here they were penned in together, and being penned in made them into a grouping, a group" (127). In coming together, the threat of the police is rebuffed: "when the police called over their bullhorns for everyone to exit the house, most agreed among themselves that they would not do so." As a result, "the deadline for their departure drew nearer… then came and went… and the police had not charged" (128). Eventually, a solidaristic effort, organized organically by the people in the house and bolstered, one might infer, by the kind of public protests of broader diasporic communities that often rise up in moments of potential threat, finally calls the question – "dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people… formed a crowd." They "banged cooking pots with spoons and chanted in various languages and soon the police decided to withdraw" (128). Around the blank, deracinated space of the Georgian mansion, Hamid constructs an image of collective multiracial sociality and solidarity, of the kind promised by the "In This House We Believe" liberals in the US and those activated by the political campaign around Brexit in the UK, an obvious if not particularly mean-spirited (or even critical) nod by Hamid to what is almost certainly his perceived target audience.

But even this community evolves – multiracial solidarity as a mode of political resistance is gestured toward as one of many paths forward, but not a singular solution. Instead, the novel presents another potential dimension of forming community in an era of multiculturalism, wherein national origin is rendered into functionally deracinated

identitarian terms rather than collective solidaristic ones, as a step towards coalitional, bourgeois, community-level domesticity. Later, more recent novels, such as *White Teeth, NW* and *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, *Open City* by Teju Cole, *Americanah* by Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James, *In a Strange Room* by Damon Galgut, and scores more, similarly challenge these proposed solutions, each staging the collision of cultures in the long post- of postcolonial, but after the period of direct decolonization in the back half of the 20th century. Born out of the immediate legacy of the Empire Writes Back era of the 1980s to late 1990s, these other entries in the Global Anglophone novel represent a shift from positing hybridity and syncretism as potential solutions to investigating such practices of living together as a problem to be navigated, albeit in a newer, more globally interconnected mode.[61] Each model proffers their own unique challenges, but they are nonetheless collated under the umbrella of a supranational world.

Exit West follows this retrenchment in multiculturalism – from potential way forward back to persistent challenge – echoing the global novel's own evolution, moving past probing the limits of multiculturalism, hybridity and syncretism by intimating such models as yet another possible social formation among many. Over time, the demographics of the neighborhood begin to shift; "Sudanese," "Hondurans,"

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[61] See once again Corina Stan's chapter on Damon Galgut for one specific model of how the work of living in a global community becomes subsumed back into a challenge to definitions of self and other, and the acrobatic practices of living necessary to navigate those challenges (Stan, "Damon Galgut on Emptying Oneself for Sleep," in *The Art of Distances,* as cited and discussed in footnote 14 *supra).*

"Nigerians" and "non-Nigerians" begin sorting themselves socially, "in the manner of cards dealt from a shuffled deck during the course of a game, reassembling themselves in suits and runs of their own kind" (146). Nadia ends up joining an ad hoc community council formed by the "elder Nigerians" that that have come through other doors into their same mansion and those to either side (147). In the "mundane" proceedings of this council, Nadia finds that they "represented something new in her mind, the birth of something new" (148). Saeed, meanwhile, finds community in a house "around the bend… known to be a house of people from his country… drawn by the familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking" (151). Once again, Nadia finds herself tugged toward something new, while Saeed feels drawn by the familiar, another point where their relationship could, or perhaps should, have faltered. And yet, it is once again a generalized threat of violence that forces them back together, rather than driving them fully apart.

The threat of direct state violence by the police faced by Saeed and Nadia, and the other migrants, is diffused into a broader social sanctioning and intimidation of nativism by the local Londoners. The narrator summarizes the news, again editorializing that "one was tempted to conclude that the nation was like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration." In a passage straight out of the Leave campaign, the narrator continues, "[e]ven Britain was not immune from

this phenomenon, in fact some said Britain had already split, like a man whose head had been chopped off and yet still stood" (158).[62]

Here, the version of cultural globalization that takes the form of multiculturism in the metropole is diagnosed by the narrator as schizophrenic, and perhaps insurmountable. In London, Hamid presents this seemingly intractable tension, between a multiracial and multiethnic community on the one hand and high-alert nativism on the other, eventually, as expected, spills over into streets, backed once more by the state. It appears some form of bloody resolution is forthcoming: "Military" and "paramilitary" forces "fully mobilized" (161), and a standoff seems inevitable after a police officer is shot in the leg. Saeed and Nadia barricade themselves in the Georgian mansion awash in the "smoke and the smell" from a rumored cinema fire that may have incinerated "two hundred migrants" (162). And yet, almost immediately, "something seems to have happened," and the "soldiers and police officers and volunteers… pulled back, and there was no more shooting that night." A week passes, and, the narrator tells us, "the natives and their forces stepped back from the brink." The rationale for why is posited as a series of "perhaps:"

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[62] As I argue in Chapter 1, "Staging," Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* rejects this exact binary of "union" and "disintegration," casting England as it does as both recognizably whole, unitary, but also fundamentally international. The resonances of Hamid's image here of decapitation with Cromwell's own execution by axe on the block is obviously, one must assume, purely coincidental, but the fact that the Welshman's figure looms newly large in contemporary British literature, and that Hamid positions England here in the aporia of both dead and still standing, points at the core strain between nation and the world in our contemporary moment.

> **Perhaps** they had decided they did not have it in them… to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants. **Perhaps** they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eyes, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or **perhaps** the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one (166, emphasis my own).

It's easy, once again, to consider this fuzzy, wishful thinking – a rhetorical appeal to simple human decency as a way forward through the clash between migrants and those opposed to their very existence. But the conditional mode of this section is consistent, and insistent. That there was a cinema fire is only rumored, never confirmed. That each potential rationale for de-escalation, no matter how trite or unrealistic, is rendered in the form of a provisional "perhaps" allows for the *possibility* of such reasons, not a definitive explanation or exculpation. Structured by the process of intimation, rather than explicit narrative *discursus*, such provisional answers regain the *posse* / *potens* inherent in possibility, potential – answers not as flimsy, airy, hand-wavy shrugs of simple "perhaps," but literally "to be able," with the force necessary to accomplish something.

The force of such a possible path for navigating a more globalized world is, once again, only intimated rather than resolved, as the couple soon moves at the very moment when stability seems to reassert itself. Saeed and Nadia secure jobs outside of the mansion "clearing terrain and building infrastructure," in return for which they were "promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a

connection to all the utilities of modernity" (170). And once again, the threat of violence drives them together but the promise of a newly stable homestead wedges them further apart. When Nadia suggests "out of the blue" that they leave London (188), it is an unspoken recognition of the tension that has been pulling at them since the beginning and a similarly unspoken last-gasp effort to reinvigorate their relationship from the stagnation that has overcome it at the exact moment they were building a new social life. Migration to the metropole and an emergent domestic life don't work for the couple. Perhaps more movement could. They step through another door.

When they finally arrive outside San Francisco, the fully realized West of the novel's title, at least two more potential readings pull us in different directions, now that the novel has reached its conclusion, the point of implied resolution. Once again, the narrator acknowledges the ambivalent tension of their new location, when the novel paints Marin, an affluent suburb of San Francisco, as having become "overwhelmingly poor" but with "nonetheless a spirit of at least intermittent optimism that refused entirely to die" (194). The myth of liberal politics in a nominally "progressive" city such as San Francisco permeates life in Marin in this "intermittent optimism," the belief that such a place could perhaps be the best place for two young, moderately well-educated migrants to find their way to a brighter future.

The novel defamiliarizes the concept of "native" here in the West, churning rapidly through a series of possible interpretations for the term: "In Marin there were

almost no natives," here meaning, presumably, indigenous American Indians, "these people having died out or been exterminated long ago" (197). The novel splits those who had simply been born or were the children or grandchildren of those born "on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern Atlantic" (197-8), that is, US citizens, into white Americans, those who claim nativeness "most forcefully," predominantly those with "light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain" and Black Americans, those who "directly descended… from the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves" (198). The result of this enumeration is an anthropological tone, one which for a moment denudes the ideological categories of race and the practices of nativism and racism into an objective assessment, intimating at the possibility that just exposing the fundamental arbitrariness of such distinctions might strip the categories of their practical import. But this, of course, is yet another possibility, not an accurate diagnosis. The real-world situation in the nearby San Francisco – where rents are among the highest in America, the homeless population grows daily, and the technolibertarian philosophy of Silicon Valley grinds down any sense of communal responsibility for those who can't afford to thrive in the Bay Area – renders this dream of integration an unlikely one, and can be seen in the novel as having radiated out to the surrounding area. As Michael Perfect pithily summarizes, "Having begun in an old city that was being destroyed, their

relationship ends in a new city that is being built,"[63] the implication being that the stability of a newly vibrant city community is coming, but not yet achieved.

But, as with their other stops along the way, the narrative is not centered on their attempts at to find their way in an explicitly globalized space, or even their failings at doing so. As always, it centers on the couple doing their best to maintain a mutual respect for one another, even as their relationship slides gently towards separation. Twinned narratives that have, until now, only ever been implied throughout the novel reach subtle fruition – Nadia becomes romantically involved with a coworker, another woman (216), which retroactively imbues her brief moments of mutual recognition with the social worker in Greece and the fellow women in London with a libidinal charge only apparent upon rereading. Saeed, having found something new for himself in a return to his traditional cultural roots, eventually begins opening himself emotionally to the daughter of a local preacher who was from Saeed and Nadia's home country but had found a congregation among the Black Muslim population in the city, a culmination of Saeed's search for something both "partly familiar" and "partly novel" (198-9). New intimacies are proposed, even as they begin to fully recognize that their relationship is ending. These new relationships do not cause their split – there is no climactic fight and no tortuous fit of infidelity that would undermine the intimacy they have built together. The narrator insists upon this point: "Saeed and Nadia were loyal, and whatever name

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[63] Perfect, 191.

they gave their bond they each in their own way believed it required them to protect the other" (203-4). Even in this moment of disunity, they are bonded by the ethics of mutual care and recognition. Having finally exited all the way West, the romantic relationship ends where it began – Saeed and Nadia caring for one another, even as "a spoilage had begun to manifest itself in their relationship, and each recognized it would be better to part now, ere worse came" (214). Nadia moves out, they drift apart. They each build separate lives.

Altogether, their journey provides a zeotropic glimpse at a cascading set of potential global novels. From the opening third, set in an amorphously defined site of crisis, the couple make their way into a paradigmatic refugee narrative. Finding no purchase and no narrative resolution there, the novel swings towards the Anglo-American metropole. Multiracial solidarity and multinational cultural hybridity are invoked as possible endpoints in London, but dismissed as insufficient, and insufficiently unstable. In the promised fully post-national libertarianism of San Francisco, unburdened by the novel of any particular national identity, Nadia and Saeed "lingered in this state of tangential connection" (222) until, finally, they part ways.

As individual set pieces, each feels deflated, even limp, as potential ways of imagining how to live in a globalized world, as Nadia and Saeed sustain their always

somewhat tenuous connection only to eventually turn way from each.[64] Berthold Schoene writes of what he calls "the contemporary cosmopolitan novel" that "[it] is problematic to conceive of cosmopolitanism as a ready-made panacea for globalization without addressing also the questions of how individuals and communities might actually learn to go about living with everyone else in the world, rather than merely coexisting."[65] Schoene is exactly right, and *Exit West* posits no such singular solution. There is a futility at taking on the questions of globalization at a strictly personal level. But taken as a whole, what becomes apparent is at no point are the couple ejected from any of these social formations, and neither do they reject them on their own terms, choosing instead to move on to something new for newness's sake. The narrative draws us along with the two of them and the two of them only, rendering each potential way of being in a globalized world as its own site of investigation, analysis, and critique in a generic sense. No particulars of how to be in the world are demanded of them, and as such the reader is left with the sense that the particulars do not matter. This is not a singular novel of manners for the global era, as it consistently pivots away from any specific, substantive position on how to live in a globally connected world, refocusing

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[64] Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. See also Simon Gikandi, who writes of the tension between cosmopolitanism and the refugee experience, "[R]efugees threaten my identity as a cosmopolitan, a connoisseur of modern cultural goods [...] because they are signs of a dislocated locality, a mote in the eye of cosmopolitanism, of that postcolonial identity which derives its legitimacy from the mastery of the culture of modern Europe. [...] [W]hat does it mean to think of the refugee, rather than the intellectual, as the quintessential figure of life across or outside boundaries? (Simon Gikandi, "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality." In *Rerouting the Postcolonial*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009, as found in Chambers, 216-17).

[65] Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, 2.

the reader on the essential element of each step. Instead, the novel refocuses readers on the sustained effort that it takes to navigate the world together, no matter where we come from or where we're going, as each step in their international travel only intimates, rather than defines, what such a story could look like.

The central narrative around Saeed and Nadia provides the skeleton for the novel. It is also the primary site of misdirection, invoking as it does the expectation that their journey will result in a synthesized cosmopolitan consciousness that reproduces itself in the mode of traditional novel of domesticity, a novel of manners for the global age. However, the final dissolution of their relationship is not presented as a failure between the couple. Neither is it pointed to as liberatory, where the dissolution of the relationship comes as the result of a transformative self-revelation leading to the proposition of a new sociality for the dual protagonists even at the point of generic "failure." The novel's ending insists that the couple's shared experience of global movement informs their personal relationship with one another, but does not legibly mark them in any political sense.

What *Exit West* does is sidestep any *particular,* definitive arrangement of sociality – zero-sum conflict between tradition and modernity, permanent refugee status, fully formed cultural hybridity or post-national cosmopolitanism – or any specific vision for what a globalized sociality would look like in practice, in order to point directly back at the most important thing: the cultivation of intimacy itself. Again, their relationship

never really resolves narratively, not really. Over the course of the novel, Nadia and Saeed drift apart, and no true hybridity or reinforced domesticity is established. Moreover, they never quite embed themselves in a broader form of communal living either, whether it's the refugee community in Mykonos or the hybrid cosmopolitanism of London. The lightest gesture towards where they might end up, with their respective new lovers in San Francisco, is foreclosed when the novel stops following them, until they are reunited at the end – neither the minister's daughter nor the Nadia's coworker are mentioned again.

The end of the novel shows us the end of their romantic relationship, but not, ultimately, of the shared implication of intimacy. In the novel's final pages, Saeed and Nadia meet again. It is fifty years later, in their home city. The narrator gives a précis of their reunion: "Their conversation navigated two lives… they had not wounded each other so deeply as to have lost their ability to find a rhythm together" (230).[66] There is neither animosity nor the potential for the happy ending of love once deferred, now reignited. In meeting in their former home city, Nadia and Saeed challenge the limits of a synthetic cosmopolitanism that insists on the coming together of *different* cultures, by ending where they began.

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[66] See again the description at the beginning of their relationship: "Soon a rhythm was established, and it was thereafter rare that more than a few waking hours would pass without contact between them… in those early days of the romance" (40-41).

The effect of seeing the couple's relationship, strung throughout the series of international locales, is to recognize its consistent calling up and subtle refusal of narrative potential, both for the couple and for what challenges persist in living in globalized community. Their story is, in other words, generic. As Frow argues, generic expectations "form the ways in which we can read [a text] and the ways in which we can change our minds."[67] The normalness of Nadia and Saeed's relationship threads the needle between a series of expectations – the domestic novel that would reproduce a new social order with Saeed and Nadia marrying, having children, and integrating into their new society with an ever-increasing global sensibility as a result of their presence; or the novel of personal liberation, where individuals escape the bounds of relationships they carry from their own personal history and move towards a more integrated self-understanding that recognizes one's own personal agency. Along the way, the pair encounter other forms of embedded post-national sociality, but these are shown to have their own immense challenges. The epilogue, where the couple reunite briefly, is essential for this tension. In coming together but only for a moment, the novel denies any particular ending for their relationship by bringing them together in their separateness. This is not a novel where a new global sociality is insisted upon. But neither is it one where the question of global movement and globalization is cast aside and replaced by radical individualism. The novel instead gestures at the idea that such

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[67] Frow, *Genre*, 28.

narratives are ultimately imposed *on* characters like Nadia and Saeed. And through this imposition, an imagined global community, with its own internal contradictions and paradoxes, emerges.

Conclusion: Imagining Other Places

Saeed and Nadia's story never coheres into one where global travel leads to a singular, totalized global community. Instead, *Exit West* shows the edges of a new way of thinking of the global novel as a genre in and of itself. And while the central plot of the two main characters really is fairly thin, the same imposition of expectation iterates throughout the rest of the novel in the accretion of small vignettes centered on other seemingly insignificant characters that the couple never comes in contact with. Each of these micronarratives work to broaden and genericize the narrative potential of a more globally oriented scope for the everyday life without reducing such a scope to universal homogeny. I've already mentioned two of these small vignettes in the context of the emergence of the doors. First, in the novel's opening pages, when a man with "dark skin and dark wooly hair" steps through a door into the bedroom of a white Australian woman before stealing through the window into the night (8-9). The second, a quick two-page scene wherein a man emerges into a room where another man – who the narrator repeatedly designates as "brave" – meets him, a Russian assault rifle at this side (67-68).

Both of these vignettes work together, contextualizing Saeed and Nadia's story, to give shape to one edge of how readers might expect to read a novel of global movement. The racially coded description of the man emerging in Australia – "dark skin and dark wooly hair" – invading the private space of a white Australian woman activates xenophobic expectations of invasion and violation. That he leaves immediately through the window diffuses the threat of interpersonal violence arising from the cultural differences between the two people. Although he escapes into the night we never hear about this particular character again – he remains a nameless individual rather than an avatar of mass migration through white Australia. If one is predisposed to consider an influx of those with "dark skin and dark wooly hair" to be a legitimate threat (as unlikely as that might be, one hopes, for anyone who would pick up *Exit West* in the first place), the later episode of the man with the rifle elevates the threat to one of semi-organized, revolutionary or insurgent violence. In both cases, outsiders come into a place one can choose to believe they don't belong (a bedroom, one's own country), so that the novel can activate these expectations and – pedagogically – dismiss them, demonstrating in their failure to resolve into an actual narrative form that they are models that should be confronted, but ultimately not determinative or universal.

Like the rest of the vignettes in the novel, these small scenes are compounded around the central plot without ever directly affecting them. The consequences of such moments never arise to the level of geopolitics, or are even truly considered. As with the

moment in Greece where Nadia and Saeed find themselves between two implied threats of violence, their invocation-without-resolution gestures towards what is *possible* of a novel that imagines the whole globe as interconnected without collapsing these possibilities into the real moments of conflict that arise from global movement. Rather, they reinforce that this is a "global novel" in the generic sense. One more theory of genre, I promise, just to close us out: as Wai Chee Dimock explains of genre more broadly, "[f]ar from being clear-cut slices of the literary pie, [they] have only an on-demand spatial occupancy. They can be brought forth or sent back as the user chooses, switched on or off, scaled up or down."[68] *Exit West*, gesturing back to novels deemed "global" before it, is aware of what readers have come to expect of novels of global movement and calls them forward, scales them up to imagine what a unified globe might look like, and then scales them back, switching them off by returning to the central couple's interpersonal drama. This sense of genre – as a tool to be deployed – is useful in this particular instance. But it also elides the inherent fuzziness of genre; genre can be called forth and sent back, but it also inheres in its capacity to be activated and dismissed by implication. Dimock's use of "user" here is telling, camouflaging as it does whether it is the author or the reader doing the using to indicate that generic definitions emerge in the space of reading between author and audience. That's because it's both. To

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[68] Wai Chee Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA*, Special Topic: Remapping Genre, 122, no. 5 (October 2007): 1377–88, 1379.

intimate something by necessity requires that something be communicated without being explicit, and relies on what both parties already intuit to create new meaning without needing to say what that meaning is.

Exit West raises the level of intimation to the scale of the whole world not by insisting that this intimacy persists without us even knowing each other but rather by insisting that knowing that such stories *could* exist means they must exist, even if we do not know their particulars. In other words, it is not necessary that we imagine our own full, intimate connection with the whole of humanity, but merely that we assume such connections make up the whole of human sociality, as indeed they must. In the end, this is a more global update of Benedict Anderson's theory of the nation as an imagined community. For Anderson, the nation emerges from a sense of shared simultaneity, the expectation that the "meanwhile" of the events taking place in a novel and in the newspaper could be shared, in homogenous empty time, among readers.[69] The national collective emerges from a shared imagining that time and place could be shared in the first place, despite the otherwise challenging roadblock that the actors of this simultaneity may persist as "largely unaware of one another;" "indeed, may not even be aware of each other's existence." [70] It's a compelling descriptive model, and one that

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[69] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006., 25.
[70] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26, 25.

served well in the era where the nation-state seemed to be insoluble as an organizing principle of geopolitical space from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries.[71]

But now, the globe has come calling, and as the global novel assumes, we are forced to reckon with the nation and the globe at once. Simultaneity of experience is less essential to this more global sense of community and intimacy. It matters less that such stories are happening at the same time, or that they take any particular form in the day-to-day. More important is the fact that readers share expectations for stories of global movement at all. For Goyal, this Andersonian reading of the novel "does seem to exemplify precisely the logic of the 'meanwhile' that [he] insisted was central to the imagining of a national community" even as "the novel charts the demise of nation-states with clearly demarcated borders."[72] Counterintuitively, though, I argue that the specificity of the named locations, both in Saeed and Nadia's journey, and the locations invoked in each of the vignettes, when read against the vagueness of the novel's opening, does not mark an end to the nation-state, but a superposition beyond them without eliding their structuring force.

The more distinct the stories of people experiencing the effects of globalization, and the more distinct the places those stories are taking place in, the starker the shared sense of global community becomes. The nation, as Anderson formulates it, is premised

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[71] For example, in the context of competing sovereignties struggling to define geographic space, as I discuss in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, "Noticing," especially page 110.
[72] Goyal, "We Are All Migrants," 250.

on the idea that there are other people out there in a grander national community who are experiencing more or less the same day, at the same time. *Exit West* shows us what happens when we are forced to imagine that people the world over are experiencing very different days, at different times, and in different nations, but that nonetheless we are connected through the implication that such a story is possible in the first place.

As with the implied and refused telos of Saeed and Nadia's own journey, Hamid takes advantage of this slipperiness to embed the lightest political argument in the vignettes through his careful ordering of them throughout the novel. At the beginning, before readers have any familiarity with the doors or how they work, the vignettes are characterized by an appeal to racial otherness and violence, and therefore the implied threat that animates so much of the current xenophobia in our politics. This is an invocation of globalization in its least subtle, most reactionary, and therefore most easily dismissed form. By the end, however, Hamid also incorporates what he clearly sees as more positive instantiations of readers' expectations of the global novel. Late in the novel, Hamid introduces an elderly man who lives alone in a balconied flat in Amsterdam, "his last lover having left him bitterly" (174). What begins as casual acceptance of the Portuguese-speaking men and women who arrive through his backyard shed turns into a budding intimacy between the local Dutchman and one of the Brazilian migrants. The elderly man eventually invites one of the men who step through the door, a "wrinkled man with a squint and a cane and a Panama hat" (174) to

join him for a drink on the balcony. Shortly thereafter "the wrinkled man invited the elderly man to come with him through the black door that was inside the shed" (175). And a week after the elderly man steps through the door to visit the wrinkled man's art studio in Rio de Janeiro, a war photographer becomes "a witness to their very first kiss" (176).

Where the Russian assault rifle threatens, this quiet moment promotes a careful utopia which allows for two elderly men, one of whom speaks no Dutch and the other who speaks no Portuguese, to share a moment of romantic intimacy. In these short paragraphs is a story that could well make up an entire novel itself, one in which these two men from thousands of miles apart could overcome the challenges of cultural difference and language to forge a relationship in which neither their age nor homophobic social preconceptions of sexual orientation deny them this connection. But *Exit West* is not that novel. It is instead one that provides the space for its readers to imagine such a story and accept it into the broader utopia where such a connection is even possible. The ramifications of a truly global society are assumed and invoked without the need to detail the makings of that intimacy across the impossibility of global distance. It gestures towards a world where such a thing happens. It intimates it without saying it.

There are two endings to the novel: the local – Saeed and Nadia – and the more generic. The very ending of the novel proper, before the epilogue, dissolves, after the

couple "grew less worried each for the other, less worried that the other would need them to be happy," into a final vignette, this time focused on a maid working in an "emptying village" "[o]utside Marrakesh" (223). She works cleaning the home of a man "who might have once been called a prince and a woman who might have been called a foreigner," but even the palatial home is beginning to succumb, with fewer servants working there every day. The woman "cannot imagine leaving," reflecting that "she was not wanted by the world, and here she was at least known, and she was tolerated, and that was a blessing" (224). Her days have become generic, in the uncritical, everyday sense of the word. She rides the bus to work, drinks coffee with her daughter. She is known by others, no matter how fragile her connection to the place may be.

The daughter of this nameless woman asks her to leave the dying village, in response to which the woman thinks, silently, "One day she might go… But not today" (226). Despite her earlier protestations, she can, in fact, imagine leaving. Hamid knows that her not leaving is just as much a story of globalization as the story of Saeed and Nadia, or of her daughter that has left. There is a gentle intimation that "she might go… but not today," the inverse that completes the promise that "we are all migrants through time," as uttered by a woman in California who never moved but whose community has shifted around her. We are not, in a real material sense, "all migrants," but *Exit West*, the nation-hopping, lightly speculative novel of the world, the whole globe, shows us at the end that being in a place already grounds us in the sense that there is more than where

we are. To be known by another enough to have the question asked, and to know that one might go, is enough. Readers of Hamid's novel know that the possibility of the whole world is always there. We don't need to leave in order to understand it, or really need to understand the world in the first place. The novel proposes that it might be enough to imagine that such movement is possible.

By considering the global novel as a genre and on its own terms, using *Exit West* as a signal that it has thus coalesced and a mile-marker for where the global novel might go from here, we are afforded a new set of questions. Rather than determining whether any such object, collective or otherwise, can fully present the globe, we can think of the global novel as a set of expectations that can be coopted, innovated upon, recombined and transformed in its collision with other genres. But more importantly, this possibility – that one *could* leave, that the whole world is out there, and that each and every one of us is potentially part of one of those stories – is the central, unifying conceit of *Exit West*'s literary world, because it forces readers to consider what each of us would do in a world marked by such potential.

That the maid is in Marrakesh is incidental, marking only Hamid's final reminder that these stories of global movement are possible everywhere. The novel begins in an unnamed city that our readerly expectations tell us to assume is in a nation on the verge of crumbling, moves across the Aegean Sea, stops in England and the United States. It peeks into Australia, pokes its nose into Europe, only to retreat to South

America. When Saeed and Nadia return to where the novel begins, so do we, having left home, found ourselves in the world, and having realized that it shouldn't require leaving to recognize that we share the globe with every one of our neighbors.

Most importantly, it gives a path, albeit a rocky one, towards imagining what it might mean to live in a truly global society. Perhaps this is not the most radical conclusion one could draw, burdened as narratives of global movement are and have been with the vast mismatches in power and agency, violence and comfort, difference and defensiveness and the struggle to assert one's own place in such a world. *Exit West* chooses, in the face of these imbalances, not to assert a conclusion, but rather a premise. The novel speaks "in a cacophony that was the languages of the world" and ends with a subtle invocation that there is always another story that could be told, from anywhere in the world about anywhere else. The possibility of this story, that we can even *expect it to be possible*, speaks to our ability to imagine what it might mean for a novel, and indeed the world, to be global. How to live in that space is and likely always will be contested, and perforce deeply unfair, until ever newer models are proposed and tried. In the meantime, it is our responsibility to continue our attempts at figuring out a way forward, to find a way to live in globalized space. To do so is, at the very least and at the end of the day, just good manners.

Conclusion

I opened this dissertation, indeed titled it, referring to one Irish novelist. It seems to make sense to end with one as well. In her latest novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* (2021), Sally Rooney writes, "Have I told you I can't read contemporary novels anymore?"[1] Right after a withering accounting of the social and business lives of the authors of said novels, her protagonist incises to her friend that the "problem with the contemporary Euro-American novel" is:

> that it relies for its structural integrity on suppressing the lived realities of most human beings on earth. To confront the poverty and misery in which millions of people are forced to live, to put the fact of that poverty, that misery, side by side with the lives of the 'main characters' of a novel, would be deemed either tasteless or simply artistically unsuccessful.[2]

Rooney is on to something. As a critique of any individual contemporary novel (and of the novels in this study, perhaps especially *Exit West*), it's not a bad one, and one is left with the sense that no individual novel could meaningfully confront or represent the lived realities of everyone on the globe. Can the novel really challenge the regimes of oppression that make being in a globalized world so difficult, so very close to impossible? Or is Rooney correct – will the effort always be either tasteless or artistically unsuccessful?

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[1] Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*? First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021, 101. Just shy of the *Ulysses* centennial, alas.
[2] Rooney, 103.

The problem is one, I think, of representation and therefore of realism, which is why I have tried to shift our approach. Rather than thinking in terms of representation or of realism, this dissertation demonstrates that the logical modes embedded in genre fiction provide ways of thinking that pure mimetic representation of the world never could. I close on the argument that the global novel itself has become a recognizable genre – a set of norms and good habits that ensconce a particular liberal approach to fluidity, cross-cultural exchange, and global mobility, for all the good and ill such a representation might serve. I also propose that in considering the global novel itself as a genre, we solidify its center so that we might allow its edges to be a bit more radical, as is the way of things with genre. The global novel, such as it is, will evolve over time, blend with other genres, transform in its collision with other media. What the genre can do – how it allows us to think moving forward – must also be expanded.

The historical novel returns to the formation of the nation and shifts its scale beyond any particular nation's borders. The detective novel tracks down what the nation is. The SFF novel explodes the world so that new spatial and social orders may crystallize. The case studies presented here are all novels at the edges of their own respective genres, relying on the strategies provided them by generic precedent. Here at the end, I'd like to reassert the claim that they are also themselves global novels. As such, each offers us new strategies for thinking through and around the limits imposed by calcified approaches to the global novel and world literature. But the next question

naturally present itself: is there something unique about these genres and their relationship to the questions of the globe? In one way, yes. As I've attempted to show in each individual chapter, each of these genres aligns with a stage of development in the world-system, from the accretion of the nation-state in the early modern period up to the intense globalization of today.

But other genres have as much if not more to offer us. In a recent class – titled, perhaps unsurprisingly, "The Genre Turn" – my students and I sat in the seminar room and discussed what genre can do and how it can help us think. Along with exemplars of the genres presented here, we considered how the Western shapes the relationship between the limits of the nation and its extension, and what the ideology of capitalism has to do with it.[3] We weighed the competing loyalties of spies, and how the spy novel necessarily refracts any individual national identity for its protagonists.[4] We took cosmic horror and turned it inwards, on our own cities, and asked what it might mean for those sites of multicultural conglomeration to serve as singular avatars, working in concert with one another when threatened from the outside.[5] An early draft outline of this dissertation included ideas for a chapter on how the generic conventions of the mass market political thriller – think Tom Clancy, Clive Cussler, Nelson DeMille – have infused contemporary media coverage of global geopolitics, fundamentally curtailing

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[3] Patrick deWitt, *The Sisters Brothers*. New York: Ecco, 2011.
[4] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*. New York: Grove Press, 2015.
[5] N.K. Jemisin, *The City We Became*. *The Great Cities* Trilogy, Book 1. New York: Orbit, 2020.

our ability to think politically in terms other than good versus evil. I've taught a course specifically on extraterrestrials, how the metaphors and metonyms of first encounter shape how we talk about immigration, and whether such a moment of contact might actually result in international, even global collaboration (the students were equal parts skeptical and hopeful, as the best students are). Alternative history is apt for interrogating the political processes that led to the global system we have today, cyberpunk for speculating about how the lack of political pressure on the tech companies of today will limit our freedoms in the dystopian future we may be hurtling towards. Swashbucklers seem primed for a comeback – what are pirates if not stateless agents?

There is also broader potential beyond the study of the novel. Peeking around the corners of each of these chapters is the quiet, consistent presence of other narrative artwork, namely film and television. In many ways, as it often the case, the novel is the last one to the party – it wears its costume with slight unease and a hint of irony. Prestige television drama has made the same pivot to genre that literary fiction has but without any of the discomfort. Consider the offerings of one such prestige channel – HBO – over the last two decades. After the gritty familial and local realism of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008),[6] the televisual analog of literary fiction

[6] Both shows, of course, come with their own popular-genre baggage: for *The Sopranos,* that of the mafia movie, for *The Wire,* that of the police procedural / crime drama. Both shows are shaped by their precedents, gesture towards them often, and rework them, but what they don't do is deny their influences. The result is

turned to historical reimagining in *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), detectives stalking cosmic horror in *True Detective* (2014-2019), the grounded sword-and-sorcery worldbuilding of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), the dystopic morality play of Artificial Intelligence in *Westworld* (2016-2020), and, most recently, the adaptation of the post-pandemic (in more ways than one) *Station Eleven* (2021-2022).

HBO is tromping along, happily continuing its genre turn. But further afield from the high-brow, one actually sees even more clearly the specific interpenetration of genre and the globe. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a useful bellwether, worthwhile and legitimate complaints about its quality and its stranglehold on forced monoculture aside. Two of the most recent entries in the sprawling mega-saga, *Eternals* (2021) and the Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (also 2021), show that the pressures of thinking at the global scale is one of the paramount narrative questions of the day. *Eternals* draws together a diverse set of immortal beings who have embedded themselves in the deep history of societies the world over, who must reunite to stop the destruction of the earth itself (as is so often the case). The smaller-scale *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* pits a blond, blue-eyed, chiseled-jawed and market-researched Captain America as the villain squarely against freedom-fighters railing for the equitable treatment of international and interdimensional migrants. The results are ideologically

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something we might call realism, but even at the beginning of this turn we see that realism is already a generically refracted kind.

sloppy, but the efforts to think about the world in generic terms are there, having broken all the way into the popcorn register of comic book movies designed to sell toys and video games.

This is all to say that considering what genre can help us think through has far broader purchase on our global media atmosphere than what I've tactically remanded to the domain of "the literary." Genre, "genre fiction," is all around us, and not just in the general sense that expectations shape the way we interpret any and all literary and narrative production. The genre of a thing has become a shorthand for describing what we're watching, what we're reading, what we're recommending, oftentimes over and above an actual description or direct comparison. What happens if we foreground the genres of genre fiction not as something that a work of art either participates in or doesn't, but takes forward the logic of these "non-literary," "non-realist" generic forms and ask how they shape our engagement with it?

What new trends might emerge – not just which genres circulate and why, but which ways of thinking come to the fore? What new questions about the world, but also about other modes of organizing our experience of it, might genre teach us? I have proposed that one such use of genre fiction is to help us think about the nature of our globalized world. But what about more local, personal questions – those of agency and identity, intimacy and our relationships with others? Or, somehow, questions broader than that of the world – what can genre teach us about how to think through history or

about ethics? What does genre fiction have to say about the nature of narrative itself – how it's constructed, how it's manipulated, whether or not it exists as a thing unto itself?

This is where the heat is. Genre is what our students are reading and consuming, and where the money is going in the media markets that circumnavigate the globe. Some might see this as late capital decay, a culmination of the failure of literature to say anything new, or at least anything serious, after postmodernism. Maybe it is. But that seems to be throwing in the towel, giving up the ghost, conceding that there's no room left to take narrative fiction seriously if and when it escapes the privileged domain of the serious, the "literary." I for one don't think we need to be so grim.

Rooney's protagonist can't read the novels dubbed literary fiction anymore, even as she finds herself ensnared in one. For my money, though, I'd bet she'd find something new and exciting, novels that provided her with modes of expressing (if not representing) new lived realities, just around the corner in another row of her local bookseller. They're there, just on other shelves, in other places.

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Biography

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