

MARZUK, RENE. M.A. Clashing Landscapes in Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*. (2023)
Directed by Dr. Scott B. Romine. 33 pp.

Landscapes are never really just there. As cultural representations spread throughout a wide range of practices, they constitute repositories of knowledge and ideologies. African American fiction writer Charles W. Chesnutt's conjure tales, published between 1887 and 1924, offer an opportunity for the close reading of clashing articulations of landscape that may illuminate how literary landscapes operate more widely. Chesnutt's conjure stories focus on the interactions between a couple of white northerners, John and Annie, who buy a dilapidated plantation in North Carolina after the Civil War with the intention of turning it into a profitable enterprise, and a former enslaved man, Julius, who has lived his whole life on the selfsame plantation. In the conjure tales, as I will argue, John and Julius create different Southern landscapes onto which they project the unspoken elements of their personal coordinates that can only be teased out through close reading, contextual analysis, and interpretation. The distinct Southern landscapes that John and Julius produce as first-person narrators through description, signposting, and, in Julius's case, a poetics facilitated by the conceit of conjure, reveal their ideological positions more effectively than any self-declarative statement.

MARZUK, RENE. M.A. Reading Metamodern Hope: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Intertextuality after Postmodernism. (2023)
Directed by Dr. Christian Moraru. 33 pp.

Mohsin Hamid's New York Times best seller *Exit West* is only partially the story of how Nadia and Saeed, the main characters, fall in and out of love against a background of migration. The 2017 novel is more of a state-of-the-world narrative that foregrounds migration from the global south to the global north as a central feature of contemporaneity, while also exploring the aftermaths of displacement. Hamid does away with the particularities of transnational movement by using the conceit of magical doors that appear spontaneously all over the world and allow passage between the most unlikely places. These doors invariably open to dark, impenetrable spaces described in one instance as "darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness." The novel's references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are consistent enough to encourage an oscillatory interpretive movement between works, which is to say that *Heart of Darkness* becomes as much of a context for *Exit West* as *Exit West* becomes a context for *Heart of Darkness*. Rather than dismantling Conrad's modernist narrative, Hamid revisits its signifiers and reconstitutes them under a different organizing principle. Within the context of metamodernism, Hamid's rewriting of Conrad's novella points toward meanings uncontained in either text, but only available in transit, as readers move back and forth between them.

CLASHING LANDSCAPES IN CHARLES CHESNUTT'S *CONJURE TALES*

AND

READING METAMODERN HOPE: MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*, JOSEPH CONRAD'S

HEART OF DARKNESS, AND INTERTEXTUALITY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

At first glance, a close reading of the warring representations of landscape in Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, informed by their historical and literary contexts, bears little relationship with a tentatively metamodern dissection of writer Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West*'s intertextual engagement with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. A selection of Chesnutt's conjure tales, however, appeared in book form for the first time in 1899, which is also the year when Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was initially published. One can make a case for the participation of both texts in a concurrent cultural conversation, the specific outlines of which could be the focus of further study.

The ideological shortcomings of Conrad's attempted critique of modernity and Western ideals of progress in *Heart of Darkness* have been emphatically pointed out by postcolonial scholars like Chinua Achebe, who accused the Polish-British writer of blatant racism. In the conjure tales, on the other hand, the African American Chesnutt introduces a Black character, Julius, whose sophisticated rhetorical awareness allows him to strategically assert his agency during the Reconstruction era in the United States, and who, as I argue, reveals his ideological coordinates through his engagement with literary landscapes. Finally, Pakistani-British writer Mohsin Hamid performs his own exercise of creative self-assertion through the complex insertion and rewriting of elements from *Heart of Darkness* in *Exit West*, his novel about contemporary migrations that propels an incredibly relevant topic into a capaciously imagined future. Ultimately, both of my projects, initially developed as class seminars, are celebrations of close reading practices as enabled by the modes and methods of literary studies.

CHAPTER II: CLASHING LANDSCAPES IN CHARLES CHESNUTT'S *CONJURE TALES*

Charles W. Chesnutt wrote the series of interconnected short stories known as the conjure tales between 1887 and 1924. Set in the postbellum South, these tales selectively borrow elements from plantation fiction, folktales, regionalism, and even classical literature. They also challenge the contemporary literary representations of the slaveholding antebellum South as a pastoral setting devoid of racial tensions that writers like Thomas Nelson Page, John Pendleton Kennedy, and Joel Chandler Harris had projected onto the surface of American letters. Chesnutt's conjure stories focus on the interactions between a couple of white Northerners, John and Annie, who buy a dilapidated plantation in North Carolina, after the Civil War, with the intention of turning it into a profitable enterprise, and a former enslaved man, Julius, who has lived his whole life on the selfsame plantation. In virtually every story, John's first-person account introduces situations in the narrative present that lead to Julius sharing tales from the antebellum past. In most cases, these tales take a supernatural turn with allusions to conjuring as practiced by Black people, enslaved or otherwise. Once Julius concludes each story—which he tells in dialect—John closes the overall tale with conclusive and contextual remarks that invite a reassessment of Julius's motives. This frame narrative device turns each individual tale into a clash of opposite and opposing discourses anchored in the American South of Reconstruction. Additionally, as both John and Julius articulate their discourses, they also shape the differing landscapes on which their words take root.

In its original context, Chesnutt's intervention in the plantation tradition, to which the predominantly white reading public expected him to contribute a novel angle on account of his African American ethnicity, offered the hopeful author a qualified entrance into the American literary scene from the turn of the century, as a taste for local color and its fictions of authenticity

was on the rise (Baldwin 346; Fienberg 172; Brodhead 4-5). In 1899, Houghton Mifflin published *The Conjure Woman*, a curated selection of Chesnutt's tales, and in 1926 Oscar Micheaux directed a now lost silent film inspired by the book, created by and for Black audiences. Chesnutt's rendition of African American dialect in Julius's nested stories was not only remarkable in terms of execution, but "helped pioneer a literary use of black vernacular" within the African American tradition (Broadhead 1). Logically, early reviewers compared the book with Harris' *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (Ellison), and Houghton Mifflin demonstrated they were not above trying to benefit from Harris's commercial success through association: *The Conjure Woman's* cover art depicted a white-haired black man with white hair flanked by two rabbits, a transparent allusion to Harris's famous characters Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit that bordered on false advertising. In fact, the closest that Uncle Julius comes to interact with a rabbit in any shape or form is in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny," where the former enslaved man surreptitiously gives Annie the rabbit foot he had been carrying for good luck (111).¹ Furthermore, whereas Uncle Remus's allegories do not seem attached to specific geographical settings, the characters in Julius's conjure tales pointedly roam through the same pathways and landmarks that appear in the narrative frames.

Although the idea of landscapes as an artistic genre originated in fifteenth-century Italy, we now think of them as cultural representations that, in a broad sense, include "works of landscape art, paintings, photographs, descriptions in novels and travel guides," associated with

¹ John M. Grammer convincingly notes that "the world of Chesnutt's conjure tales is as unsentimental as the animal world Uncle Remus describes" (72). However, in the case of Uncle Remus, the violence associated with Brer Rabbit and his anthropomorphic coterie exists at a modal remove from the idyllic narrative frame in which the old man tells his animal folktales to a young white listener.

“discourses such as the pastoral, picturesque and sublime” (Wylie 8). Landscape is ultimately a unit of meaning, “both the product and the token of particular cultures, particular knowledges and subjectivities” (Wylie 3, 91-2). In a way that recalls the literary device of the frame narrative that allows authors like Chesnut to create the illusion of objective distance between themselves and their fictional constructs, landscapes are defined as “set[s] of visual strategies and devices for distancing and observing” (Wylie 2). As a coachman, Julius guides John and Annie through an unfamiliar terrain that transcends the merely geographic and extends into the cultural. He narrates all the conjure tales with the exception of “The Dumb Witness,” in which John “enriches” the story heard from Julius with facts “learned afterwards from other sources” (63). According to Robert B. Stepto, Chesnut “never altered the tripartite narrative structure of the conventional framed tale,” with an opening frame that John usually dominates giving way to the folk story that Julius narrates, followed by a closing frame that, in some cases, finds Annie at the helm (viii). For Fienberg, who compares the conjure tales’ framing device with that of Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia*, the strategy “creates the illusion of distance for the comfortable reader, a kind of *cordon sanitaire* which makes it safe to contemplate the words and deeds of social and racial inferiors . . . a strategy of containment which returns the freed slave to a state of narrative bondage” (Fienberg 164). Specifically in Chesnut’s case, however, Sarah Wagner-McCoy understands this strategy as the deployment of a “mask of genre then in vogue among white publishers and readers” (Wagner-McCoy 205). When we think of the frame structure in tandem with existing theories of landscape, John’s framing creates a distance between himself and Julius that appears curiously similar to the distance created between landscapes and those who produce them.

M.M. Bakhtin has thought of the literary landscape as “nature conceived as horizon (what a man sees) and as the environment (the background, the setting) for a completely private, singular individual who does not interact with it” (143). In practice, however, landscapes become ideological sites for the “[sublimation of] individual and private affairs and adventures not connected in any real or intrinsic way with nature itself” (Bakhtin 217). In the conjure tales, as I will argue, a by-product of John’s and Julius’s first-person narratives is the creation of different Southern landscapes onto which these fictional characters project constitutive elements of their individual coordinates that can only be teased out through interpretation. The distinct Southern landscapes that John and Julius produce as first-person narrators through description, signposting, and, in Julius’s case, a poetics facilitated by the conceit of conjure, reveal their ideological positions more effectively than any self-declarative statement.

In John’s case, what he includes and what he leaves out of his descriptions is particularly telling. In Julius’s case, what at first glance could be described as a dearth of descriptions eventually reads as strategic ambivalence toward self-revelation. The conjure tales reveal how literary landscapes not only materialize through formal descriptions, but also through signposting and recombination of signifiers taken from both the human and the nonhuman worlds, an operation that Julius repeatedly performs. Scholars such as Sarah Ingle, for instance, have referenced “Julius’s technique of transforming features of the landscape by using the power of storytelling to alter their meaning” (153). Through storytelling, Julius massages the Southern terrain, both geographical and cultural, into new shapes that may help him forestall or simply point out John’s capitalist designs. Here, it may even be useful to think of the American South after the Civil War as a “contact zone,” after Mary Louise Pratt, who defines the term as social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly

asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Ultimately, I will suggest that the differing landscapes that Chesnutt articulates in the conjure tales are unstable and permeable constructions that interact dynamically with each other.

Although much has been written about Chesnutt’s conjure tales, so far no one has considered their two narrators in connection with their differing articulations of the southern landscape. Jeffrey Myers comes the closest by focusing on the environmental attitudes of John and Uncle Julius to make a case for how these stories “imply a necessity to recognize African American culture as intrinsic to the landscape that southern [B]lacks inhabit, similar to the indigenous American cultures,” a reading that aligns Julius with “ecological and community values” (J. Myers 91, 95). Joshua Bennett, whose research references Myers’s, has also engaged the conjure tales from an ecocritical perspective, emphasizing the instances of “ontological slippage” when the lines between human and nonhuman categories blur through interspecies communication or magical transformation (qtd. in Newman 3-4). Without neglecting the ecocritical angle, I will focus on the production of landscape within the stories from more of an ideological perspective, while also considering the impact of the tales’ structure. John and Julius lay their claims to their surroundings through landscape articulations that reveal their tenuous ideological coordinates.

John’s articulations of the landscape are mostly evident through descriptions and either explicit or implied accounts of transformative action over the land. These constructions align him with the larger national project of “rebranding” the postbellum American South from a section to a region whose untapped resources represented opportunities for northern entrepreneurs after the Civil War. John articulates the Southern landscape to justify his presence in it to himself. Julius, on the other hand, acting from a place of limited agency, appears extremely conscious of his

audience at all times. The fact that his tales always seem to respond in some way to exigences established in the opening frames suggests a keen rhetorical awareness. And although he appears to avoid explicit descriptions of the land, his “South” becomes material enough to challenge John’s mainly because his tales conspicuously share their setting with the narrative present. The geographic continuity stressed by Julius (examples of which appear later in this paper), anchors the whole series to the same place. As the conjure tales go on, evidence of the transformative effect of John’s economic activity over his surroundings coexists with Julius’s haunting of the same territory, a conjure tale at a time, in what almost amounts to a symbolic act of reclamation. This is to say that Julius emerges from Chesnutt’s literary experiment with flesh on his bones, as if taking shape along the text’s peripheral vision.²

Ingle has identified the setting of Chesnutt’s conjure tales as close to Fayetteville, North Carolina (150). In “The Goophered Grapevine,” initially published in 1887 in the *Atlantic Monthly* and extensively revised by Chesnutt prior to its inclusion as the opening piece of *The Conjure Woman*, John refers to the area as Patesville, and adds that he does so “because, for one reason, that is not its name” (3). It is in this story that John introduces the conceit of the conjure tales with a first-person narrative that reveals his identity as a Northerner transplant in the postbellum South, an area that he chooses from an initial pool that includes France, Spain, and Southern California (Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” 3). This list of potential places is a relevant detail that almost constitutes the American South as a foreign territory, one of the many destinations available to the affluent couple. In any case, “Chesnutt maintains a striking degree

² Interestingly, because of the chronological continuity between the outer frames, through them it is possible to catch incremental glimpses of John and Annie’s assimilation into the South, another element that justifies thinking of the tales as tributaries to a larger novelistic structure.

of fidelity to the Fayetteville region's important landmarks and geographical features" (Ingle 150) that connects Julius's stories to each other and to the narrative present from which John and Annie listen. In fact, if there is a line that separates the fantastic world of the old man's tales from the ostensibly realistic present that the main characters inhabit, such a line is occupied by the Civil War itself. Used at various points to explain the South's sorry state, the war emerges less as a historical event than as a natural disaster that "resets" the South's physical and affective environment. At the opening of "The Goophered Grapevine," for instance, John comments on his final choice of place by offering that "it was a sufficient time after the war for conditions in the South to have become somewhat settled" (3). After the Civil War, the fantastic world Julius describes, in which men could be transformed into trees, as in "Po's Sandy," and toddlers into hummingbirds, as in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," gives way to a worldview ruled by positivist reason and faith in capitalistic progress. From the purportedly realistic point of view that John embodies, the magical elements that Julius invokes in his tales can only make sense as elements of a cunning strategy to gain material benefits. As John studiously points out, at the end of "The Goophered Grapevine" Julius's scores his job as coachman (14); at the end of "Po' Sandy," he receives authorization from Annie to hold church meetings in the abandoned schoolhouse that, just at the beginning of the story, John was contemplating to tear down for its lumber (14, 22). Calling out this pattern seems to appease the Northerner's sense of order by casting Julius after his own image; that is, by transferring his capitalistic system of values to the former slave, as in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," where he ironically writes that Julius had a "monopoly" over a beech tree (90). But if the material boons that Julius's secures for himself and his community are undeniable, they do not tell the whole story. In flattening the old man's storytelling to a means to secure material benefits and nothing more, John showcases his inability to see the former slave in

terms other than his own. This is a form of blindness that also permeates his ideations of the Southern landscape. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the landscapes produced by Julius through his tales and dialogic interventions in the narrative frames, demonstrates how the old man transcends utilitarianism and enacts a form of resistance to John's epistemological violence that amounts to a sort of educational corrective.

Additionally, an alternative interpretation of the frame structure of the conjure tales allows us to consider how Julius's stories disrupt John's lines of discourse. Under the guise of entertainment, the freedman takes over the white Northerner's narrative and interrupts it with tales that challenge John's worldview. Rather than being neatly contained within John's discourses, Julius's conjure tales fracture such discourses and threaten their continuity. John must "resolve" these challenges to uphold the illusion of superiority in which he is clearly invested. Both men's contesting productions of the Southern landscape productively illuminate these tensions, but they are also evident in John's evaluations of his counterpart. In the outer frames, John contextualizes Julius's interventions in terms of rhetorical exigence and material benefits. At each of the individual tales' starting points, in addition to describing the narrative context that seems to bring about Julius's storytelling, he usually offers some form of assessment of the formerly enslaved man. In the closing frames, John highlights what Julius has apparently gained, although these advantages are relatively puny and insignificant when compared with the economic benefits that John has been progressively extracting from the South all along.

Initially, the South after the Civil War extends before John and Annie as an epistemological enigma. Not quite a new territory, but not a seamless extension of the rest of the nation, either; it appears to resist the commonplace descriptive discourses available to John, who seems nevertheless compelled to take immediate stock of his surroundings. He assesses the area

in terms of its utility and describes the views he encounters after models culled from the cultural traditions to which he has access. When John and Annie relocate to the American South, they do so purportedly because of the weather, the quality of the soil, and the low prices of land and labor. As John puts it in practical terms, “the [Southern] climate was perfect for health, and, in conjunction with the soil, ideal for grape-culture; labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song” (Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” 3). The Northerner’s too casual conflation of land and labor in this passage inspires suspicions about the ideological underpinnings of what otherwise would seem like an inoffensive array of initial impressions. Incidentally, the idiomatic expression that the land could be bought “for a song” brings to mind the short story “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” in which Julius tells of a conflict among enslaved persons. Annie finds the topic unappealing and, according to John, listens “to Julius’s *recital* with only a mild interest” (Chesnutt 30; emphasis mine). In creating a semantic link between these separate expressions, we may gain a valuable insight into the process through which John’s linguistic choices lock Julius in a subaltern position. Julius’s stories are not only songs, but also, potentially, trading units. We could think of the old man as a peddler engaged in forms of bartering from which he comes away with crumbs that do not compare to the landed property available to John’s own, if also metaphorical, song.

Jamie Winders points out that the victors of the Civil War went through a phase of trying to imagine the South as a “new imperial holding,” a characterization that “became an organizing grammar for both the nation’s reaction to southern defeat and the relationship between a victorious North and a defeated South” (392).³ Accounts of northern travelers after the war show

³ As Jennifer Rae Greeson explains in *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*, efforts to discursively constitute the southern states as an external other can be traced

various attempts to articulate this imperial narrative through “discourses of civilization, descriptions of nature, and discussions of whiteness” (Winders 392), a phenomenon that has precedents in the landscape projections of “European explorers and scientists from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries . . . [with] a gaze that somehow leeches the life out of the scene surveyed and replaces it with either a fabricated set of European preconceptions or a *tabula rasa*, an emptiness, blank but measurable” (Wylie 127). But trying to reconstitute the defeated south as an imperial holding was a complex ideological project that required equal measures of blindness and imagination. Such attempted scripting of the South was a fraught enterprise from the beginning, due to the region’s “paradoxical positioning . . . within the nation-state and the complexities of its reconstruction” (Winders 392, 396). The “imperial fantasy,” however, was only one among various strategies for imagining the future of the nation. The fiction of the period, for example, was invested in romances of reunion or reconciliation between (white) Northerners and Southerners, while political thinkers like the Southern Henry Watterson went through rhetorical hoops to underplay former sectional frictions and point enthusiastically to a common road ahead. In his 1883 speech “The New South,” Watterson insisted that the South was not a problem at all and assured Northerners that “with you the South will bloom as a garden and sparkle as a gold mine” (Watterson 55). But what about the four million inhabitants of this prospective garden who had found themselves suddenly free? In Chesnut’s conjure tales, the consciousness routinely excluded from the hopeful and upbeat postbellum narratives of (re)discovery and reunion claims its place in the American imagination.

back to the days of early national literature (64). In late eighteenth-century literary magazines, “the Plantation South emerged as a particularly knotty chronotope, looking both backward and forward, containing both the disavowed colonial dependence and the projected imperial dominion of the nationalizing United States” (Greeson 70).

It is not surprising that, from the very beginning, John tries to fashion himself as a trailblazer: “I was enough of a pioneer to start a new industry, if I could not find a place where grape-culture [his industry of choice] had been tried” (Chesnutt 3). Grapes had already been profitably cultivated in the South, however, and he ends buying a plantation whose previous owner, Dugal’ McAdoo, who had also owned Julius, ran a successful grape and wine operation supported by slave labor (Chesnutt, “The Goophered Grapevine” 4). According to Cornelius O. Cathey, the cultivation of grapes in the South before the Civil War, “whether for table use or for use in the making of wine, received more attention in the agricultural press, perhaps, than any other item of fruit” (40). In fact, Lewis Cecil Gray calls attention to the booming (or at least up and coming) interest in grape farming that had been stoppered by the war (825). According to census data from 1849, in that year the South produced 44,252 gallons of wine, as compared with a total of 221,249 in the entire territory of the United States (Gray 826). In Chesnutt’s tales, eventually, even the local press refers to John’s new vineyard as a positive example of “the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries” (“The Goophered Grapevine” 13).

Devoid of adjectives, Julius’s references to his surroundings include abundant signposting that can be interpreted in terms of Timothy Morton’s concept of “strong ecomimesis”: an “inside-out form of ‘situatedness’ rhetoric” that authenticates the narrative by situating the narrator in a particular place” (qtd in Raine 326). “In written texts, it [ecomimesis] involves the use of descriptive imagery ‘to generate a fantasy-environment that sits beside,’ or is interpolated within, ‘the steps of the writer’s argument’; ‘the imagery itself is ambient, indicating that which surrounds the narrator’ and by metaphorical extension the reader, and the environment it evokes is ambient in *form* in that it ‘sits in an oblique relation’ to the argument,

not so much illustrating it as surrounding it with a particular ambience” (323). In underscoring elements of continuity between past and present, the former slave’s rhetorical gestures challenge John’s attempts to fashion himself as a pioneer and trailblazer. Julius’s account of Chloe hurrying on to spy on her lover Jeff after receiving a malevolent tip in “Hot-Foot Hannibal” is representative of this strategy: “Chloe slip’ off fum de house en run down de road, *-dis yer same road we come*, en w’en she got mos’ ter de crick-*dis yer same crick right befo’us*-she kin’ er kep’ in the bushes at the side er de road” (127; emphases mine). The persistence of common geographical markers suggests, in this case, the persistence of memory and history. If the roads Chloe travelled have not changed, if they are the same through which John, Julius, and Annie travel in the narrative present, what has changed, then? This may be the implicit question that Julius puts to John’s consideration. Moreover, the suggestion of continuity does not stop at the level of landscape representation and, on several occasions, aligns John’s behavior and attitudes with those of the antebellum plantation owners. The tale “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare,” for example, starts with John complaining about Julius’s grandson, whom he finds “very trifling,” careless, and with no sense of responsibility (91). In the story that Julius tells, slave owner “Mars Jeems” tells his overseer that slaves are “gittin’ monst’us *triflin’ en lazy en keerless*” in order to justify their harsher treatment (94; emphasis mine). John’s presence in the South does not imply a break with the past as much as he would like to imagine it does, and Julius does his slyest best to remind him.

In the landscapes articulated by Julius, certain places like the plantation home, the smokehouse, and the swamp recur significantly. In fact, his stories seem to establish an opposition between the smokehouse and the swamp. It is in the smokehouse, a place for curing meats and storing food, that Dave hangs himself after losing his mind in “Dave’s Neckliss” (41).

In the framing tale of “A Victim of Heredity,” John locks a chicken-thief in the smokehouse (71), although Annie frees him after listening to Julius’s story. Slaveholders’ smokehouses signify a form of material abundance and ostentatious display against which the deprivation of enslaved people becomes starker. Swamps, on the other hand, are always associated with escape and freedom. Poignantly, the plantation’s burying ground, where Dave is ultimately buried, is also located by the swamp (42); and in “Po’ Sandy” Tenie turns her husband into a pine tree by the edge of the swamp, literally on the border of freedom (17). In “A Deep Sleeper,” enslaved woman Cindy is sent to the swamp to find a cure for herself when she feigns illness, although she is actually going there to meet her lover, Skundus (47). From this perspective, John’s desire to cut the woods by the swamp in “The Gray Wolf’s Hant” (81) echoes the actions of slaveholder Marrabo, whose order to cut the big pine by the swamp becomes Sandy’s death sentence (Chesnutt, “Po’ Sandy” 19).

Julius’s stories may be productively understood as technologies of recombination engineered with a heightened degree of audience awareness. Although the conjure tales usually reveal the horrors of the antebellum past, they mostly do so figuratively. According to Lorne Fienberg, the trope of metamorphosis in particular allows the old man to “critique of the pattern of human oppression by commodification during the slave era” while offering his white listeners to “take comfort in the security of the Ovidian literary tradition” (Fienberg 167). However, these cases of transformation, in addition to recalling the tales of Ovid, temporarily eliminate the ontological boundaries between the human and the nonhuman and offer Julius absolute control over a verbal landscape in which such ontological distinctions appear as negotiable. At the same time, as noted by Wagner-McCoy, Chesnutt manages to connect the African American imagination with “a literary mode” assumed to be “the special province of the dominant culture’s

imaginary” (209). Julius’s creative control is also evident in how he takes on the role of storyteller. While in other examples from the plantation genre slaves and former slaves are always prone to spontaneously combust into narration about the good old days of slavery, Julius is always in control of his own flame. Furthermore, the South that his stories articulate is never a warm place for the enslaved. As John observes in “Dave’s Neckliss,” “[Julius] never indulged in any regrets for the Arcadian joyousness and irresponsibility which was a somewhat popular conception of slavery” (33). In fact, he “satirizes [the] idyllic fictions of the antebellum South by exposing the brutality and self-interest of slave owners” (Wagner-McCoy 205). The formerly enslaved man reveals continuities between the narrative present and the postbellum past, and John’s commitment to ignore them is baffling. In “Po’ Sandy,” for instance, John does not seem to notice that his determination to build a new kitchen for Annie, who appears to crave one “after the usual Southern fashion,” echoes Marrabo’s intention to build a kitchen in Julius’s tale (14, 19). John, deeply invested in his narratives of development and progress, cannot possibly conceive the viability of these straightforward analogies.

John’s attempts to grasp his new surroundings into a functional ideological landscape must initially contend with his lack of direct experience of the land, in account of which he resorts to preexisting literary and cultural associations taken from the romantic and gothic traditions. However, as his knowledge of the South begins to rely on embodied experience, thanks in no small measure to Julius’s mediation, his landscapes release many of their initial literary and cultural associations and solidify into topographical markers, like they usually figure in Julius’s stories and speech. The long cultural tradition available to John helps him cover an initial lack of direct knowledge and experience of the South. He always finds something to say about what he sees, even when he knows very little of it. According to Wylie, a landscape is “a

particular way of seeing and representing the world from an elevated, detached and even ‘objective’ vantage point . . . in which the world is conceptualised as an external, separate reality to be rationally perceived and accurately represented” (3). He goes on to associate landscape with “science, rationality and modernity” (3), which seems a fitting description of the angle from which John approaches the South. In John’s descriptions, the South appears as a messy domain of signifiers, a surfeit of ruins and vegetation, but also a place of economic opportunity, mastery over which will eventually grant him material benefits and status.

In “The Goophered Grapevine,” a road takes John and Annie—sans coachman—through “the solemn aisles of the virgin forests, where the tall pines, well-nigh meeting over the narrow road, shut out the sun, and wrapped us in cloistral solitude” (5). Landscape descriptions are not neutral; as W. J. Mitchell point out, “landscape as a cultural medium [as either a visual or linguistic representation] . . . naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable” (2). In this case, John’s representation of the scene in front of him as “virgin” resonates with the imperial discourses he aligns himself with. This linguistic takeover erases the claims that other groups—such as the newly freed men and women—may have over the Southern territory and marks the tall pines as resources available for the taking.⁴ And despite this solemn and reverent description, John’s economic project of “progress” threatens the existence of the cloistral spaces that inspire his poetic register. In fact, he apparently finds no problem, later on, with razing some of these areas. “What would

⁴ Black ownership of Southern land became a short-lived reality after the issue of Field Order No. 15 on January 16, 1865, which redistributed confiscated land during the Civil War to Black families, in forty-acre lots. The terms of this directive originated the expression “forty acres and a mule.” President Andrew Johnson, however, revoked Field Order No. 15 that same year (B. Myers).

you imagine it would cost,” he asks Julius in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” “to have that neck of woods down by the swamp cleared up?” (Chesnutt 81). Furthermore, the architectural turn of his first description suggests a cathedral rather than an actual forest. Where did his practical realism go? In “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” he describes his route to a neighboring vineyard in similar terms: “Our route lay partly through a swamp, and on each side the dark, umbrageous foliage, unbroken by any clearing, lent to the road solemnity, and to the air a refreshing coolness” (Chesnutt 122). The illusion that allows him to imagine that he and his wife are stepping into untouched land casts them both as a Northerner version of Adam and Eve setting foot on a postbellum Southern Eden. In the late nineteenth century, such a conceit necessitates a serious stretch of the imagination. At this initial stage, however, John is basically still a tourist, and it may be useful to consider what Kim Ian Michasiw defines as “the difference between the disempowered traveler and the improving landowner” in relation to the various aesthetic ideals of the picturesque (84). For Michasiw, travelers favor sensationalist landscapes, while “the landowner inevitably perceives his land as subject to him, as an extension of himself—[and] the fiction of ownership banishes the otherness of the land and subsumes the figures of that land under legal categories: tenant, hireling, trespasser, poacher” (82-4). John’s first descriptions of his surroundings identify him as a traveler, if not disempowered, still dazed, and intimidated enough to retreat to the shelter of a readily available cultural heritage.

After making their way through the forest in “The Goophered Grapevine,” John and Annie find evidence of vine cultivation, “here partly supported by decayed and broken-down trellises, there twinning themselves among the branches of the slender saplings, which had sprung up among them—grew in wild and unpruned luxuriance, and the few scattered grapes they bore were the undisputed prey of the first comer” (4). In this case, the evidence of human

activity is qualified by decay and human neglect, so that the vines have ostensibly reverted back to “nature,” which serves to reaffirm, perhaps less self-confidently, the claim of treading uncharted territory. The couple’s third and last stop in this progression is the site of the plantation house, which conveniently presents itself as an empty space because the original house “had fallen victim to the fortunes of war” (5). Referring to the effect of abandoned structures in the picturesque tradition, Michasiw notes that “abandoned mills and cottages could serve as invitation to enclosure and improvement. If these lands were vacant already, who is harmed by their being brought into production?” (Michasiw 78). The empty space that marks the plantation house even in absentia in “The Goophered Grapevine” (but also in “The Marked Tree”) read as a straightforward invitation to reconstruction. Remarkably, John’s description of the ruins, which recalls his previous description of the vines, ties together the different segments of this reconnaissance excursion: “We drove between a pair of decayed gateposts—the gate itself had long since disappeared—and up a straight sandy lane, between two lines of rotting rail fence, partly concealed by jimson-weeds and briars, to the open space where a dwelling-house had once stood, evidently a spacious mansion” (5). Channeling the trope of southern architectural decay through the description of wild nature also allows the narrator to frame natural luxuriance as a problem. The “decayed and broken-down trellises” stand for the columns of the house no longer in existence, while John’s emphasis on the neglected vines emphasizes the need for (his) intervention. The adjective “decayed,” repeated in these consecutive descriptions, effectively carries the recognizable whiff of John’s pioneering delusions.

Shortly after, John and Annie find Julius enjoying a private feast of grapes while sitting on a pine log. These two elements, grapes and pines, symbolize the natural resources over which Julius has no control. As mentioned earlier, John eventually develops a successful wine

operation; his cousin, who had become established in the South before him, operates a successful turpentine business. But for all of John's desire to become a pioneer in his own country, it is difficult to deny that Julius is the presence that, having already been there, threatens this imperial fantasy (Wagner-McCoy 214). In fact, after buying the property, John discovers that "Julius had occupied a cabin in the place for many years" and that he had been profiting from the grapes (Chesnutt 13), a piece of information that either challenges John's characterization of the South as a chaotic setting or illuminates his inability to recognize a system of organization different from his own. From the first encounter between these two narrators one gets the impression that their relationship, however disguised, is one of competition. "There is plenty of room for us all," John tells Julius when, upon meeting him, the Black man rises from the log. Julius does not answer (he does not say "thank you," for example), but sits down again with what John interprets as embarrassment (Chesnutt 6). After some awkwardness, John tries to break the ice by asking Julius where he lives, to which the old man responds, "Yas, suh. I lives des ober yander, behine de nex' san'-hill, on the Lumberton plank-road" (Chesnutt 6). Compared with John's florid attempts to engage with his new surroundings, Julius's simple answer conveys concrete knowledge of the terrain. Julius's response situates him and, at the same time, gives John an idea of what this man could offer him: knowledge of the land, gained through direct experience of it. John goes on to describe Julius as an extension of the landscape he has already surveyed. Moreover, in light of his earlier descriptions, his assessment of the former enslaved man as "apparently quite vigorous" (5) implies an instrumental view of the person in front of him. In an apparent attempt to dissuade John to purchase the old plantation, Julius proceeds to tell a tale. In this story, through the conjuring powers of Aunt Peggy, the life of Henry, an enslaved man, becomes intertwined with the plantation vines and their seasonal cycles, so that the plantation

owner, “Mars Dugal,” can profit simultaneously from both of them. However, when the vines become irreversibly damaged, their demise is followed by that of Henry, who “pined away, en pined away” (12), an expression that foreshadows Sandy transformation into a pine tree by his wife Tenie in “Po’ Sandy.”

“Po’ Sandy” begins with John asserting his ownership: “On the northeast corner of *my* vineyard in central North Carolina, and fronting on the Lumberton plank-road, there stood a small frame house, of the simplest construction” (Chesnutt 14; emphasis mine). His description of the extant structure once again combines images of structural decay with images of unrestrained natural growth, the effects of nature left to its own devices that incidentally covers the signs of previous development and offers newcomers a brand-new world for the taking, as if resetting the base terrain. According to John, the building’s “weather-beaten sides revealed a virgin innocence of paint,” its destruction “partially concealed by a creeping vine, which extended its slender branches hither and thither in an ambitious but futile attempt to cover the whole chimney” (Chesnutt 14). In passing, the Northerner mentions “the house erected by us, when we first came to live upon the vineyard” (Chesnutt 14). This is one of many examples in which he skews explicit references to the labor that sustains his way of life and industry in the South. Just like John and Annie probably did not deal directly with grape cultivation and winemaking, they did not erect their house either, although the completed residence abruptly appears in one piece, as if built out of view in the empty expanse between stories. In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” John once again uses language to obscure the actual instances of work taking place in his plantation. He tells Julius that he is “thinking of setting out scuppernong vines on that sand-hill where the three persimmon-trees are; and while I’m working there, I think I’ll plant watermelons between the vines” (23). Despite this way of speaking, it would be naïve to

assume that John will be directly engaged in any of the action items he is listing. In “A Deep Sleeper,” as if by magic, the watermelons have already been planted. In this story, John also offers a very different description that stresses his transition from “tourist” to landowner. In the closing frame, he describes how they “went by the well-kept grape-vines, heavy with the promise of an abundant harvest, through a narrow field of yellowing corn, and then picked our way through the watermelon-vines” (Chesnutt 50). Gone is the romance in this balanced description that assesses his management of the plantation, although the fields remain eerily devoid of the agricultural workers that must surely keep them in such orderly shape. Something similar, although on a different scale, takes place in “Lonesome Ben,” wherein John begins the frame tale by relaying the intention of “local capitalists” to build a cotton mill nearby, a project in which he has been asked to consider investing (50). Once again, labor is conspicuously absent from all considerations. This constitutive element of John’s articulations of the Southern landscape aligns him with “such antebellum writers as John Pendleton Kennedy, William Alexander Caruthers, William Gilmore Simms, and Caroline Lee Hentz, [who] describe[d] idealized landscapes worked by happy or absent slaves” (Wagner-McCoy 202-03).

In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” John refers to the story Julius is about to tell as “a plantation legend” (24), and Chesnutt’s conjure tales have been considered in fact a parody of plantation fiction, itself an offshoot of the pastoral narratives that can be traced all the way back to Virgil’s *Eclogues* (Grammer 58, 73). Significantly, as Grammer points out, dispossession is “the fear that has always haunted the pastoral imagination,” and “plantation novels are about the ownership of the land and about some threat to the proprietor’s quiet enjoyment of it” (Grammer 61, 58). This perspective helps contextualize Sarah Wanger-McCoy’s argument that “Chesnutt delivers a rereading of Virgil in which loss is the central experience of those who work the land”

(200). And once we begin thinking on this underlying anxiety associated with plantation fiction via its connection to the pastoral mode, the instances in which John verbally asserts his ownership over his acquired territory and everything on it seem less matter of fact than preemptive measures. “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” begins with a paragraph that emphasizes Julius’s “usefulness” to John and his wife. The whole section reads as an attempt to blend the formerly enslaved man with the background of the white couple’s property:

We found old Julius very useful when we moved to our new residence. He had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and the watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they could produce, and where the best hunting and fishing were to be had. He was a marvelous hand in the management of horses and dogs, with whose mental processes he manifested a greater familiarity than mere use would seem to account for, though it was doubtless due to the simplicity of a life that had kept him close to nature. Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees—he maintained a peculiar personal attitude, that might be called predial rather than proprietary. He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master’s death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance. We found him useful in many ways and entertaining in others, and my wife and I took quite a fancy to him. (90)

In describing Julius as useful and entertaining, John equates the former enslaved man to a means to his and his wife’s ends, one more among the available tools at their disposal in these new surroundings. In “Lonesome Ben,” John further explains that, as “Northern settlers,” they “often looked to Julius for information” (52). John zeroes in on Julius’s practical knowledge of the region and his ability to manage livestock, but he diminishes the import of Julius’s contributions by attributing the old man’s skills to an exceptional proximity to the natural world. It is at this point that John anxiously asserts his relatively new claim of ownership over the territory Julius knows so well: “Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees—he maintained a peculiar

personal attitude, that might be called predial rather than proprietary.” In this inventory, the possessive “my” is the most important word. One is surprised that John didn’t include the air or the sky in the list. In this formulation, Julius would seem to be *of* the landscape, to belong to the landscape. The flip side of such a statement would be, of course, that the landscape cannot belong to him. Moreover, John dismisses any potential claim Julius may have over his property—either moral or legal—by describing the older man’s attachment as “peculiar” and “predial rather than proprietary.” One of the meanings of “predial,” according to the OED, is “of a slave, serf, etc.: attached to the land; required to work on a state. Of a tenant, etc.: owing similar service to the landlord. Of slavery, bondage, obligation, etc.: deriving from the land” (“predial”). “Predial” is a telling word choice that combines pastoral and slaveholding connotations. Furthermore, John blames Julius’s intense attachment on the old man’s inability “to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime,” and removes himself from the equation by making the old plantation the focus of Julius’s “unhealthy” fixation. Through circuitous language, John avoids the logical conclusion that the land he bought was already Julius’s home. Instead, he blames whatever ascendancy he may have over the old man on the old man’s shortcomings and personal history. This paragraph is also the key to understand what it is exactly that John needs from Julius: the practical knowledge of the land that he does not have. Julius, it must be remembered, is not only a storyteller, but also John and Annie’s coachman, their guide in a new (for them) terrain. Poignantly, before the abolition of slavery, enslaved coachmen were members of the typical plantation’s house service, their role considered above that of the field hands (Harper 48).

According to Wonham, “[b]y maintaining the pretense of a “predial rather than proprietary” relation to John’s land . . . Julius asserts his claim to the property in terms that are

flattering to John” (23). But this does not mean that his claim becomes illegible. It is curious how in more than one occasion, when asked for advice, he prefaces his opinions with variations of “if I were you.” In “The Gophered Grapevine,” he tells John, “But ’f I ‘uz in yo’ place, I wouldn’ buy dis bimya’d” (Chesnutt 6). In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” while apparently trying to dissuade his boss from buying a mule, he offers, “Well, you may ‘low hit’s all foolis’ness, but ef I wuz in yo’ place, I wouldn’ buy no mule” (Chesnutt 24). These and other instances could be dismissed as inconsequential figures of speech, but the suggestion of equality they imply between the two men is loud and clear. Julius, moreover, is a savvy narrator, less an entertainer than a finely tuned persuader who uses the resources at his disposal to influence his audience. By tacitly accepting John’s attempts to classify him, he takes advantage of the Northerner’s inclination to think of him as an appurtenance. Partially camouflaged by John’s assumptions, Julius successfully blends into his surroundings in what amounts to a guerrilla tactic.

In “Dave’s Neckliss,” John similarly tries to conflate Julius with his environment by associating him, in this case, with the weather. According to John, natural conditions “were favorable to story-telling. There was an autumnal languor in the air, and a dreamy haze softened the dark green of the distant pines and the deep blue of the Southern sky” (Chesnutt 33). Seemingly, Julius’s storytelling appears to John as another element of a landscape described like a romantic painting. In this occasion, Julius tells the story of an enslaved man who loses his mind and eventually commits suicide after being grotesquely punished for a theft he did not commit. Once again, Julius’s story pushes back against John’s ideological designs and invalidates the Northerner’s attempt to envision the South as an idyllic setting. John’s attempt to catalogue Julius’s storytelling as another element of the Southern landscape comes to the foreground in “Hot-Foot Hannibal” as well, where he writes of how “the dark and solemn swamp around us;

the amber-colored stream flowing silently and sluggishly at our feet, like the waters of Lethe; the heavy, aromatic scent of the bays, faintly suggestive of funereal wreaths, –all made the place an ideal one for a ghost story” (Chesnutt 123). In this case, the romantic is enriched with gothic undertones, expectations to which Julius, a savvy narrator, adapts by beginning his tale in a “subdued tone” (Chesnutt 123).

John repeatedly tries to meld Julius and, by extension, the postbellum freedmen, into the natural background of the South. By making Julius of the landscape, rather than allowing him to exist on the landscape like Annie and himself do, John denies the formerly enslaved man full personhood and underestimates his subjectivity. However, Julius complies only strategically with this plan of erasure. We never see him “in action,” as it were. As readers, looking through John’s eyes, we never catch Julius in any self-incriminating act. John admits his difficulty when he concedes that, “I would not charge him [Julius] with duplicity unless I could prove it” (Chesnutt, “The Conjuror’s Revenge” 32). Not even as readers do we witness the terms of the transaction between Julius and Annie, as a result of which she ends up in possession of the old man’s rabbit foot, the one he would never be found without (“Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny” 111). Julius is never off his guard within John’s range of vision, with the probable exception of his first appearance in the tales, when the white couple’s interruption truncates his enjoyment of the dilapidated plantation’s grapes. Tellingly, John describes how he and Annie “approached him [Julius] at an angle from the rear, and were close to him before he perceived us” (5). It was an ambush. Nevertheless, after a first moment of self-adjustment, the freedman quickly rises up to the challenge and never again allows himself to be seen. After this first encounter, it is Julius who repeatedly walks in on John and Annie, not the other way around. This may not seem the case in “Dave’s Neckliss,” when Julius eats a piece of ham while John stares at him surreptitiously

through an open window (33). But Julius's calibrated display of emotion, including his shedding of a single tear that conveniently becomes the segue to yet another tale, could also be interpreted as a calculated performance whose goal is to elicit the Northerner's curiosity. Julius pauses "as if struck by a sudden thought" (33), and guess as we may, we cannot be sure if he is really taken by the memory of Dave, as he claims, or if he is trying to refine the idea that will allow him to enjoy the rest of the ham at home, with his own family.

It is also Julius who positions his tales as a fit complement to relaxation when he proposes John and Annie that, while they rest, he can tell them the story of how the vines came to be bewitched (Chesnutt 6). From then on, it is always the employers who directly ask him or implicitly expect him to tell a story. Julius only needed one time to train them. In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," however, John suggests that "it was not difficult to induce the old man to tell a story" (Chesnutt 82). On a closer inspection, this fiction of control over Julius's storytelling seems misguided. Julius pulls more strings than he lets on, at times manufacturing the communicative situation that would have John, Annie, or both, ask him to tell whichever story he already had in mind to tell. Moreover, one feels that John's medium, the written word, does not do justice to Julius's storytelling, which relies on nonverbal cues such as intonation and even silences for effect (Chesnutt, "Po' Sandy" 15; Chesnutt, "The Conjuror's Revenge" 24). There is much that escapes us in our inescapable positionality as readers, rather than listeners.

Within the explicit fabric of the stories, John tends to think of Julius in term of what the older man provides him with. Julius's stories are a source of entertainment for the Northerners and are potentially therapeutic for Annie's "difficulty" ("The Goophered Grapevine" 3), most likely a form of mental health affliction. Julius offers information about his personal life in passing, but he never dwells on the topic of himself beyond tangential references. Furthermore,

throughout the conjure stories, Julius never describes the landscape as self-consciously as John does. The rare moments when they both reference the same places are revealing because of their contrast. In “Hot Foot Cannibal,” for example, John describes his passage through the swamp thus: “Our route lay partly through a swamp, and on each side the dark, umbrageous foliage, unbroken by any clearing, lent to the road solemnity, and to the air refreshing coolness” (121-2). He is not only traversing the area, but defining it as he goes through, fixing in very specific ways not only the space but also his role in it. This example retains vestiges of his previous interpretation of the woods as a church-like expanse, with his foregrounding of solemnity and the absence of clearings—clearings that, given the least opportunity, he is more than willing to “create.” As a counterpoint, later on, in “Dave’s Neckliss,” Julius plainly states that the swamp is the plantation’s burying ground (42). Whereas John seems to be painting the South with a romantic palette, Julius is simply moving through it and, when necessary, signaling toward the relevant milestones.

There is one instance, however, where Julius approximates a romantic description of the landscape that proves highly deliberate and strategic. In the tale at the center of “Hot Foot Hannibal,” when Chloe realizes that Hannibal tricked her into causing her lover Jeff to be sold away, Julius declaims that, “De sun mought shine by day, de moon by night, de flowers mought bloom, en de mawkin’-birds mought sing, but po’ Jeff wuz done los’ ter her fereber en fereber” (Chesnutt 128). This very uncharacteristic stance only makes sense once we realize that the target audience of the tale is not John (in whom such flourishes would have been probably lost), but Annie and her sister Mabel, who has impulsively broken up her romantic relationship with Southerner Malcolm Murchison (Chesnutt 121). As we later learn, Julius had been probably advocating for young Murchison all along. His sudden sentimental awakening to the natural

world is best explained as evidence of rhetorical awareness and understanding of the strings he must pull to move his audience. This romanticized version of the landscape, after all, does not seem compatible with the experience of slavery as he depicts it in his other tales. This isolated occurrence makes us wonder why Julius refrains everywhere else from describing the landscape in other than signposting terms, as he is obviously capable of engaging self-reflexively with the natural world when his communicative intentions demand it.

Julius rhetorical shrewdness comes into display at various other times throughout the tales. Although he addresses John as “boss,” yet he still refers to other landowners in the narrative present as “mars[es]” (Chesnutt, “The Conjuror’s Revenge” 23). In addition to audience awareness, this detail demonstrates psychological insight, as Julius appears to have understood that John does not want to be associated with the planter class he is replacing. Ultimately, by giving sometimes the impression of being indistinguishable from his surroundings, Julius conforms to John’s expectations and renders himself nonthreatening. But is this really a strategy that works? “Po’ Sandy” complicates a tentative answer to this question. In this tale, the eponymous slave, after being transformed into a tree, literally becomes one with the landscape and disappears from his owner’s consciousness, who assumes that the slave has escaped (Chesnutt 18). One could say that Julius similarly tries to blend into his surroundings, diluting his motives within his stories. “Po’ Sandy,” however, is also a cautionary tale. First, Sandy-as-a-tree was cut for turpentine; then, he was sawed for lumber (18, 19). What does this mean for Julius, who may have also resorted to hiding his motives in plain sight? There is definitely a risk in purposeful self-effacement, but at the same time, for Sandy as well as for Julius, there are not many other alternatives.

Chesnutt's conjure tales are the site of the clash of the landscapes produced by John and Julius in their first-person narratives as they both lay their claims to the American South. In John's case, this process is straightforward because he does not see Julius as competition—at one point, he even tries to convince himself that Julius sees himself as an appurtenance of the plantation, which is as ideologically convoluted as its formulation makes it seem. He instrumentalizes not only the Southern landscape, but also Julius's mind, which he sees as an extension of the natural world that he (John) has charged himself with improving as a pioneering entrepreneur and capitalist. Julius's tales of transformation seemingly conform to John's ideas of slaves and former slaves as an extension of the landscape, but this is just a bait that masks what could be considered Julius's ideological project: to stress the continuities between antebellum and postbellum South that John doggedly resists. According to Henry B. Wonham, for Julius, "the key to maintaining some measure of authority in the uncertain postwar era lies in his imaginative reconstruction of the slave past" (11). To this accurate assessment one can add that John, on the other hand, seems deeply invested in the imaginative construction of the present. John's vision of the South as a place where labor happens out of sight is no less fantastic than Julius's conjure stories. The former slave demonstrates early on ambivalence toward John. "Is you de Norv'n gemman w'at's gwine ter buy de ole vimya'd?" he asks shortly after meeting him (Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine" 6). But the authenticity of his initial deference is undermined by the figure of the Yankee in the story he proceeds to tell. It is a Yankee described as a stranger, not a gentleman, who destroys McAdoo's vineyard (Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine" 12).

But if John's status as a neo-planter is never a subject in the frame tales, his efforts to turn his new surroundings into a legible landscape illustrate the system of values that surely

informs the rest of his practices, visible or not. John is trying to “landscape” the South, but in order to do so, he must contend with other landscapes vying over the same region and uphold the primacy of his own version. Trying to insert himself into the South as a Northerner after the Civil War, John can be thought of as becoming part of the larger imperial project of (re)absorbing the American South into the Union as a cultural landscape articulated to materialize and justify Northern ideologies. But if John tries to engineer his surroundings into a landscape to condone and justify his activities in the South, Julius, in his stories, astutely manipulates the signifiers of the natural world at the service of a rhetorical agenda to which, as readers, we only have speculative access. Whereas John’s instrumentalization of nature is expressive and self-affirming, Julius’s is poignantly rhetorical. John may not see Julius as his equal, but Julius has his eyes trained on John as he weaves his tales of conjure. If Chesnut’s use of a frame narrative told by a white man made the conjure tales palatable to white audiences, this same structure offered Julius the benefit of ambiguity. One can only guess at his motives without ever being sure.

Ultimately, a new consciousness crystallizes along the edges of Chesnut’s series, against the background of the white characters’ reflexive unwillingness to make space for it. This unwillingness can also be interpreted as historical blindness. John and Annie, after all, understand themselves in opposition to the landed, slaveholding gentry that they have come to replace. However, they also think of themselves as the ultimate possessors and gatekeepers of culture. In judging Julius’s stories based on their own preexisting criteria, they misread him and construct their own understanding instead. It is interesting how both John and Annie, to varying degrees, resist taking Julius’s tales literally. For the Southerners, the tales always stand in for something else, which, in a way, means that they are not sufficient in themselves. They require

Northern exegesis. John's dismissal of the figurative and his commitment to realism brings attention to the representational and, therefore, ideological nature of the "reality" he upholds. According to Lyotard, after all, the main function of realism is "to stabilize the referent," which is "the way the effects of reality, or if one prefers, the fantasies of reality, multiply" (74). As we eventually realize, however, John's reality is not less fantastic than Julius's, with a successful grape operation (Chesnutt, "The Gophered Grapevine" 13) carried on by seemingly invisible laborers whose presence never enters the text. The landscapes produced by both John and Julius are less a feature of the South than blueprints through which these fictional characters navigate a complex historical period. A more comprehensive image of the South in Chesnutt's conjure tales emerges from the analysis of their interactions.

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CHAPTER III: READING METAMODERN HOPE: MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*,

JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*, AND INTERTEXTUALITY AFTER

POSTMODERNISM

Faced with postmodernism's apparent inability to accurately describe the organizing logics of the new millennium, philosophers and critics have been busy trying to elucidate the constitutive features of what seem like new and rising sensibilities. In the resulting and ongoing conversations about cultural paradigm shifts, contemporary fiction has understandably become a focal point of analysis due to narrative's commitment to representation and world building. The body of work expanding of late at the intersection of postcolonial and world literature, in particular, is a case in point. Mohsin Hamid's international bestseller *Exit West*, my focus in what follows, was published in 2017 and is currently being adapted into a Netflix movie by Higher Ground Productions, a company owned by the Obamas. The novel is only superficially the story of how the Pakistani-British writer's main characters, Nadia and Saeed, fall in and out of love against a background of violence, surveillance, and migration. Set in a historically and politically recognizable world, the sudden and unexplained emergence of magical portals connecting distant geographical locations enables waves of unregulated migration and challenges geopolitical ontologies and worldviews. But just like *Exit West*'s portals threaten the concept of national borders, without which "nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role [those nations] had to play" (158), the novel, too, appears to question its own textual boundaries by flaunting its communication with other works, mainly with Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. *Exit West*'s extensive interaction with Conrad's foundational text sheds light on non-narrative paths for the articulation of meanings that ultimately do not reside in *either text* alone. This strategy

is meant to orient the reader throughout the book by promoting an interpretive back and forth that rejects postmodern notions of the self-sufficiency and self-containment of literary texts while parting company with earlier, equally postmodern modes and psychologies of reading. This essay attempts to explore *Exit West*'s rich textuality while modeling the type of reading the novel invites. I suggest that that type is metamodern and, in a similar vein, I maintain that Hamid's mobilization of the fairy tale genre and his sustained conversation with other texts, particularly Conrad's, affords a stance of measured hopefulness that, in moving away from postmodern despair and cynicism, breaks new, also metamodern literary ground.

Migrants, Intertexts, and Race

It has been insistently pointed out that *Exit West* “posits the migrant, and, more specifically, the refugee, as the quintessential figure of our times” (Mączyńska 1094), which firmly anchors the novel in the current historical moment with uncanny prescience, once we consider that it was actually written before both Brexit and the Trump administration. Hamid was determined to present the migrant as “the hero, [and] the protagonist . . . [with] all of the narrative sympathies that come with that role” (Hamid, “Love in the Time of Mass Migration”). By centering the migrant, the novel is also better positioned to challenge systemic assumptions about nationhood and race, alongside citizenship, nativity, gender, sexuality, and other identity formations, individual or collective. In *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, published the same year as *Exit West*, Ian Chambers writes that “contemporary migration—between and beyond the nation state—proposes a profound interrogation of the existing state forms, citizenship, government and their juridical pretensions and practices” (38-9). The figure of the migrant exposes cracks that, once revealed, cannot be brushed away with ease. In fact, the mere existence of refugees points to “a system of states that has failed properly to live up to its

responsibilities” (Maley 12) and draws attention to the categorical myths that uphold the existence of such system. For instance, after the novel’s ethnographic survey of the several “layers of nativity” in Marin, California, the narrator admits that being a native is “a relative matter,” which makes all territorial and cultural claims associated with nativism relative, too (Hamid, *Exit West* 197-8). Nevertheless, the singularity of Hamid’s approach resides in the productive combination of skepticism with positive action—a healthy skepticism that makes room for actionable hope. This dynamic combination, together with the focus on migration, situates *Exit West* within the perimeters of metamodernism as it has been defined by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen: “a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism” (5). Repurposing the coordinates used by Fredric Jameson to triangulate the postmodern in his 1991 *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, van den Akker and Vermeulen have been followed by many others in describing the metamodern as a qualified return of the categories of historicity, affect, and depth (van den Akker and Vermeulen 18). Securely attached to the globalized present, timely, and relevant, *Exit West* reacts to the sense of belatedness that has been frequently associated with postmodernism (Moraru, “Thirteen Ways” 3) and looks unapologetically into the future.

Nadia and Saeed’s story begins in an unnamed country that critics have recognized as either Syria, Pakistan, or Lebanon (Goyal 252; Sadaf 639; LeBlanc). Amid the violence of fundamentalism and civil war, the mysterious dark thresholds give the young couple their best shot at escaping civil war, violence, and death. The doors they cross throughout the book take them further and further west: first to Mykonos, then to London, and, finally, to California. This trajectory traces “the imagined genealogy of Western civilization: from its ancient Levantian

‘cradle’ to its greatest colonial metropolis to its present-day laboratory of techno-imperialism” (Mączyńska 1092). The book becomes “a palimpsest of all historical migrations, from slow colonial movements over the oceans to instantaneous digital connection through fiber-optic cables under the oceans, that have changed the way we understand human interaction in time and space” (Sadaf 645). Because the story skillfully integrates historical awareness into its textual and plot fabric, it does not exhibit the “weakening of historicity” that Jameson has associated with postmodernity (6). On the contrary, swaddled in simple, yet powerful language reminiscent of the fairy tale genre, *Exit West*’s historical self-consciousness comes across in a wide range of coiled allusions and intertextual references that seem to conjure a new kind of reader into being.

Ambitiously, the novel’s narrator reframes migration, or mobility, as a common human experience. One of the book’s climactic dicta is that “we are all migrants through time” (Hamid, *Exit West* 209). Some readers have understood this expression as a banalizing conflation that glosses over the specificities of modern displacement (Goyal 251), but the metaphor points to a common core at the center of contemporary human experience that has preoccupied Hamid for a while. The idea of migration as moving in time carries over from his introduction to the 2014 short essay collection *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, where he elaborates without the functional constraints of fiction: “On our globalizing planet, where the pace of change keeps accelerating, many of us are coming to feel at least a bit foreign, because all of us, whether we travel far afield or not, are migrants through time. Even if you are eighty and have never left your hometown, yours has become another country from that of your childhood” (Hamid, *Discontent* 9). *Exit West*’s dictum is, then, a self-referential intertext, like the tip of an iceberg whose hidden masses extend beyond the narrative and point to overarching relationships between bodies of work. Intertextuality used this way is not merely a surface adornment or a form of literary

collage that packs all references into a self-sufficient aesthetic, but an invitation to dive in. It may be even useful to think in terms of “reconstruction,” as noted by Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, who, within the context of metamodernism, call for “an exploration of the various ways in which a literary text . . . paradoxically writes back against its ineluctable depthlessness by performatively pricking, indenting or displacing the surface boundary that separates the text from its reader” (154). Incidentally, even the title *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, a direct reference to Freud’s 1929 influential book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, serves to frame Hamid’s approach to intertextuality as the constitution of new figures of meaning through the recombination of terms from its sources, so that the sources become receptive to renewed examination as well.

The magical portals in *Exit West* may help us articulate the terms of the novel’s intertextuality. The way in which portals materialize over existing doors, as if attracted to the idea of thresholds, becomes an appropriate metaphor for the porous textuality of Hamid’s novel: “A normal door . . . could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all, so that people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently” (Hamid, *Exit West* 72). In a similar way, words, phrases, and situations in *Exit West* become “special” without warning and reveal unexpected profundities. Mentions of the magical doors’ intrinsic darkness and depth recur throughout the novel. The narrator stresses, for instance, that they look “black even in dimness” (67), while one person who helps another emerge from one of the doors pulls “like a needle-jawed angler fish might, hunting in the inky depths” (68). During her first passage, Nadia notices the peculiar darkness and opacity that doesn’t reflect what is on her side and feels “equally like a beginning and an end” (103). Paradoxically, looking closer into these gateways reveals the key reference with which Hamid “formally” initiates his sustained conversation with

Heart of Darkness. *Exit West*'s first description of a person emerging from a magical door is set in Australia, in the bedroom of a sleeping white woman, a key scene to which I will return several times in this essay. A black man comes out of her closet doorway, which "was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness" (Hamid, *Exit West* 8-9). The phrase "heart of darkness," strategically singled out with a long dash, becomes a portal in its own right. The ostensibly descriptive remark becomes a figurative window through which readers obtain their first glimpse of one of *Exit West*'s most relevant source texts. And this initial clue invites similar, although less explicit moments of recognition that illuminate the process through which Hamid revisits Conrad's signifiers and reconstitutes them under a different organizing principle, suggesting a literary project that is concerned with representation as much as with sensibility.

Curiously, many of the fiction authors who stretch the boundaries of the postmodern worldview tend to reference earlier texts and literary forms but show a marked affinity for modernism as a referent (van den Akker and Vermeulen 9). From this point of view, Hamid's deliberate engagement with *Heart of Darkness* implies a metamodern sensibility that invites us to ponder why modernist literature constitutes such an attractive model to work through the particularities of the present. In general, literary modernism emphasizes impressionism and subjectivity, moves away from objectivity by rejecting "omniscient external narration, fixed narrative points of view, and clear-cut moral positions," blurs distinctions between genres as well, and favors fragmented forms and literary self-consciousness (Barry 84). In *Heart of Darkness*, these features coalesce into a critique of modernity and Western ideals of progress, even though the ideological shortcomings of Conrad's critique have been identified by postcolonial scholars like Chinua Achebe. Achebe's 1975 emphatic reassessment of Conrad's

novella finds the author complicit in helping define African people as the “other” against which white Europeans articulate themselves as superior. Achebe thought *Heart of Darkness* an “offensive and deplorable book” that called “the very humanity of black people . . . into question,” and famously labeled Conrad as “a thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe 23, 21). Frances B. Singh, another postcolonial critic, locates the text’s colonial bias in the conflation of Conrad’s interpretation of antiquated theories of the unconscious with his own skewed and poorly informed beliefs about Africans, expressed through the character of Marlow as the author’s mouthpiece (52). For Singh, Conrad undermines his critique due to this amalgamation, turning *Heart of Darkness* into a partial apology for the system it purports to attack (53). But despite its limitations, Conrad’s novella also reads as the author’s deliberate—if wanting—effort to look through some of the generalized Western assumptions of his time. For this reason, it may also be productive to approach a text like *Heart of Darkness* like a battlefield that “display[s] the power of the dominant discourse, the weakening effect of the contradictions that emerge as it is deployed, and the presence of important counter discourses” (McClure 42). Ultimately, the novella unwittingly showcases its contradictions in a display that stresses the difficulties of bringing to term a thorough analysis of colonialism and empire without disrupting foundational categories. Self-reflexively, in modernist fashion, Marlow appears to acknowledge his limitations when digressing on the impossibility “to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence” before ominously adding that, “We live, as we dream—alone” (Conrad 30). He goes on to imply a way around individual blind spots and solipsism when addressing his audience aboard the *Nellie*, the ship on which he relates the story of his experiences working for a Belgian company in the Congo: “Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know...” (Conrad 30). Ironically, his companions cannot really see him

because they are all submerged in literal darkness, and the value of this gesture of inviting new perspectives suffers from the cultural homogeneity—white, male, and European—of those invited in.

Postcolonial criticism, which tends to revisit “canonized” Western texts “in order to expose the biases operating in what is claimed to be universal humanism” (Cuddon 550-1), relies heavily on postmodern concepts and methods and does not venture far enough beyond the commonly accepted postmodern ethos of pessimism and resignation (Acheraïou 145-8). Hamid’s engagement with *Heart of Darkness* in *Exit West*, however, pushes against the postmodern’s outer barrier mainly through a change in ethos. Although he relies on postmodern techniques like intertextuality, he does so while aiming for new models of interconnection that draw from the collective experience of living in a globalized world. Globalization, after all, has been “replacing earlier key concepts in theories of the contemporary such as ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postcolonialism’” (Heise qtd. in Konstantinou 91-2). Hamid invites readers of *Exit West* to participate in the articulation of new totalities. The connection between *Exit West* and *Heart of Darkness*, which comes forth most clearly when reading alternately from both texts as interpretive imperatives arise, illustrates Hamid’s metamodern turn and calls for a different kind of reading. Hamid revisits a whole set of “places” of and references to darkness, blackness, race, and Africa in Conrad to work out a more refined, complex, and inclusive representation of community that remains aware of the complex historicities underpinning global migrations. At the same time, while engaging with the modernist elements that are present in *Heart of Darkness*, Hamid manages to escape the cycle of what Said identifies as “Conrad’s obsession with the past [which] kept him in a tighter orbit of past and present, one repeating the other

without respite” (Said, “Conrad and Nietzsche” 81). Ultimately, *Exit West* points to and looks toward the future.

A significant element that distinguishes *Exit West* from *Heart of Darkness* is the inversion in the direction of the movement that both texts enact. In the historical background of Conrad’s novella, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, European powers move rapaciously to reap Africa’s natural resources, part of the imperial project of conquering the earth that Marlow dryly defines as “taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves” (Conrad 10). In this context, Conrad does away with the human component when describing the unequal trade dynamics between North and South as the “stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire sent into the depths of darkness . . . in return [of which] came a precious trickle of ivory” (Conrad 21). In *Exit West*, it is human beings who move from the Global South to the Global North, an accurate reflection of contemporary developments.⁵ Additionally, Hamid includes in his narrative what seem like passing references to colonial commodities, like cotton, dark chocolate, and tea, with which he “reminds readers that the still rising tide of human and nonhuman species displacements began with imperial aggression” (Mączyńska 1098). The subtle integration of references to commodities to the linguistic texture of the novel stands as proof of the literary and historical awareness of the text. During the episode where the black man emerges from the magical door in Australia, for instance, he leaves the sleeping woman’s bedroom room by “dropping *silkiily* to the street below” (9; emphasis mine). The carefully chosen adverb, “*silkiily*,” stands out as

⁵ According to the United Nations’ International Migration Report from 2017, there were 258 million international migrants worldwide, from which 106 million were born in Asia, 61 million in Europe, 38 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 36 million in Africa (“International Migration Report”).

compressed historical flashback that superimposes imported commodities and twenty-first-century migrants. The word may also prompt readers to consider the qualitatively different receptions that more developed parts of the world afford to products and human beings coming from less developed areas. Ultimately, understanding contemporary migration requires understanding the collective colonial past, a stance that invites precisely the type of return to historicity that marks off the metamodern (Vermeulen 149). In this case, Hamid's strategy exposes the hypocrisy of a world-system where wealthy countries have had no issue with welcoming cheap manufactured goods from poorer locations but yell "major global crisis" (Hamid, *Exit West* 88) when it is human beings who attempt the crossing of the national borders that globalization renders increasingly nominal. *Exit West's* historical consciousness also materializes briefly in an object Saeed keeps in his room, which serves no narrative purpose whatsoever. There, above a telescope, rests "an intricate clipper ship that sailed inside a glass bottle on the sea of a triangular shelf" (Hamid 15). Clipper ships, American-invented vessels built for speed, revolutionized transatlantic trade during the first half of the nineteenth century (Worrall). In *Exit West*, Hamid's language and references work subtly to create a robust subtext whose meaning supersedes at times that of the narrative events themselves.

Nadia's and Saeed's arrivals to clearly identified cities through the magic portals sketch a journey that begins in a country without a name and progressively anchors itself into "the real," as if the novel were clawing its way out of fantasy, from blur to sharpness. This abstract movement also finds its counterpoint in *Heart of Darkness*. Hamid has justified his choice of not specifying the first setting for his story thus:

I wanted the world of the novel to be the world we all live in. But I wanted the starting point, the point from which Nadia and Saeed's exodus occurs, to be blurry, vague. A starting point that might belong to anyone, or at least to many people facing the prospect of violent unrest around them. So, with the exception

of the city where the story begins, everywhere else in the novel is in focus, clear, named. Real, so to speak. (Hamid, “This Week in Fiction”)
Whereas *Exit West* reifies, however, *Heart of Darkness* grows progressively out of focus.

In Conrad’s prose, realist gestures in the form of “eloquent specificity . . . coexist with an opacity that is already apparent in both the first narrator’s introduction and the beginning of Marlow’s tale, [and] intensifies as the novel moves spatially and psychologically away from familiar terrains” (Parry 40-41). Marlow’s story concludes in Brussels, the capital of King Leopold II’s empire, although the city itself is never named and is only described repeatedly as “sepulchral” (Conrad 27, 70). It is in Brussels that Marlow meets Kurtz’s Intended, with whom he uneasily enacts and perpetuates the myth of Kurtz as paragon of virtue (Conrad 75). While Kurtz’s Intended conveys her idealized version of her deceased fiancé, the room she and Marlow occupy becomes slowly engulfed by darkness. Gradually, as if an impossible door were opening, Marlow senses another presence coming through the Intended’s gestures—perhaps that of the African woman who had likely been Kurtz’s lover and who, back in Congo, with a movement of her arms sent “swift shadows [that] darted out of the earth, [and] swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace” (Conrad 60). Time and space break, just like they do within *Exit West*’s portals and, suddenly, *here* becomes *there*.

Magic Portals, Fairy Tales, and Relationality

The narrative device of the magical doors allows Hamid to explore migration and displacement, and the verb he uses in relation to the crossings is nothing if not deliberate. This verb conveys layers of meaning that further secure the novel in world history and offer additional opportunities for the kind of intertextual “hopping” that distinguishes *Exit West*’s reading experience. Out of the many available options—to cross, to traverse, to pass through, and so on—Hamid consistently lands on “emerge.” In Australia, the black man *emerges* from the

portal's darkness (8; emphasis mine). In Dubai, a family “*emerged* from the complete darkness of an interior service door” (90; emphasis mine). After Nadia crosses one of the doors for the first time, still shocked by an experience that feels simultaneously “like dying and like being born,” she crawls forward to make space for Saeed, who “was [also] *emerging*” (104; emphasis mine). One of the figurative meanings of emerge is “to rise into notice, come forth from obscurity; [and] also, to issue from a state of subjection, suffering, embarrassment, etc.” (“emerge, v.1.”). Going through the portals in *Exit West* is both to issue forth from a darkness and to free oneself from oppressive circumstances—even when we account for the hostility that usually awaits migrants at the western end of the portals. The doors undermine the ideological correlation between geography and destiny that naturalizes geopolitics.

There is one occurrence of the word “emerge” in Hamid’s novel, however, that although it does not refer to the magical portals per se, contributes an additional meaning to *Exit West*’s traversable darkness. In Marin, San Francisco, Nadia and Saeed’s last destination as a couple, the confluence of countless migrants suggests a future brimming with possibilities. Here, despite initial changes and challenges, “life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began *to emerge*, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief” (Hamid, *Exit West* 217; emphasis mine). The abstract image of emerging futures parallels the concrete images of refugees emerging through dark doors and centers them as heralds of progress, while the litotic formulation of imaginable futures expressed through successive negative formulations tempers down the risks of excessive optimism by suggesting a balanced hopefulness. Essentially, in this passage, darkness becomes an apposite metaphor for the present as a transitional space.

“Emerge” appears only once in *Heart of Darkness*, and its presence inspires closer scrutiny after its use in *Exit West*, one of the many possible examples in which *Heart of Darkness* becomes as much of a context for *Exit West* as *Exit West* becomes a context for *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad’s novella, when the Company’s entourage tries to abandon Kurtz’s station, they find themselves suddenly surrounded by natives. Sitting up on his stretcher and raising above his bearers’ shoulders as they carry him away, Kurtz’s cover falls of, “and his body *emerged* from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I [Marlow] could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze” (117; emphasis mine). Kurtz rises from his hoist as an image of death that, paradoxically, saves the group of men that carry him away by interceding with the natives and deterring their impending attack. His “emergence” marks him as a simultaneous signifier of life and death, very much like *Exit West*’s portals (Hamid 104). In this case, however, I am less interested in demonstrating an unambiguous cause-effect between the texts than in taking advantage of the interpretive possibilities that arise from thinking of them in tandem. Hamid’s intertextual mechanics end up opening unexpected roads that increase the range of what readers can imaginatively and serendipitously discover, so much so that, in a way, the text becomes a playground in which the reader can take charge.

The mobilization of the fairy tale mode reveals another profitable link between *Exit West* and *Heart of Darkness*. Hamid’s engagement with the genre goes beyond the portals and is also legible in his novel’s use of simple and general language. Several of Hamid’s sentences replicate the tone and indeterminacy that we often associate with fairy tales. A sentence beginning with “It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and being born,” for instance, in

which the passive and indeterminate voice stands out, is a case in point (Hamid 104).

Interestingly, *Heart of Darkness* has its own complicated relationship with fairy tales. For one, the cover page of the 1902 edition of Conrad's *Youth: A Narrative and two Other Stories*, which included *Heart of Darkness*, included an epigraph culled from "Rumpelstinskin," the classical Brothers Grimm's tale, perhaps a suggestion of "the novella's submerged generic affiliations," as Martine de la Rochère has pointed out (2). Additionally, as he tells his story to the Nellie's crew, Marlow offers a slew of fairy tale analogies that contrast with the crudeness of the relayed events. He will say, for instance, that "the approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (Conrad 44). Later, a group of naked natives, armed with bows and shields, appear "as if by enchantment" (59), and, afterwards, Marlow strives to "break the spell" and "the drone of weird incantations" with which wilderness and drums—conflated into a single entity—draw Kurtz to the edge of the forest during a failed escape attempt (65). These examples demonstrate what Kotzin has described as Conrad's investment in the enchantment motif, contextualized within a larger—late Victorian—literary tendency of invoking the fairy tale mode "to emphasize the pedestrian, harsh, unhappy conditions of life in the real world which the authors are portraying" (15). The generic interplay goes further, however, as *Heart of Darkness*, in modernist fashion, also questions the fairytale's "function as a carrier of a message or moral" (de la Rochère 2). Fairy tales, as a matter of fact, are popular intertexts in that engaging with them from other genres allows to question the "comfort of [the] dominant cultural norms" they seemingly codify (Makinen 153).

Standing on the other side of postmodernism, Hamid's revisits the fairy tale genre from an affirming perspective that coincides with a metamodern return of affect that emphasizes

relationality (Gibbons 86). Firstly, Hamid appears to be drawn to the genre's apparent plainness as a counterpoint to the novel's complex themes. The "simplicity and fairy-tale-like quality" of *Exit West* could point to Hamid's "chosen approach to addressing the difficult topic of the refugee crisis" (Kowal 30). As a narrative form, the fairy tale presents "plot developments, characters, and settings . . . in a formulaic and one-dimensional manner" and rarely explores the psychological lives of its protagonists (Teverson 61). This apparent deficiency, however, turns it "into a genre that is capable of addressing fundamental human experiences at a basic and 'universal' level" (Teverson 61). As Hamid mentioned in an interview, in *Exit West* he had set out to explore how to "speak to humanity as a whole," the best examples of which he found in children's stories, with their "significantly reduced name specificity" (Hamid, "Mohsin Hamid"). The paucity of proper names links both *Exit West* and *Heart of Darkness* to each other and to the fairy tale genre by means of this feature's connection with allegory. While in *Exit West* Nadia and Saeed are the only named characters, *Heart of Darkness* only names Marlow, Kurtz, and Fresleven, a Dane captain "killed in a scuffle with the natives" (Conrad 12) before the events narrated in the novella. Furthermore, the use of the fairy tale as an underlying mode in *Exit West* affords Hamid the opportunity to challenge the expectations of a traditionally "happy ending," as despite Nadia and Saeed eventually drifting away from each other, the novel arguably concludes in a hopeful note.

In any case, a surface reading of *Exit West* that focuses exclusively on Nadia and Saeed runs the risk of ignoring the novel's active world-building through the inclusion of interspersed vignettes of anonymous men and women crossing through the portals throughout the main narrative. Rather than interrupting the main thread, these side episodes decenter it and suggest a relational model for understanding the world that recalls Benedict Anderson's theorization about

imagined communities with his emphasis on “whole new ideas of simultaneity” (Anderson 37; Goyal 250), but also more recent theorizations keen on an emerging “poetics, thematics, and ethics of relatedness” that progressively overtakes what we think of as postmodern (Moraru, “Thirteen Ways” 4). Hamid grafts most of these scenes into the novel’s stem with markers that stress their temporal connection with the rest of the story. Time becomes the clay that binds. The introduction of one of such events, wherein two Filipina girls arrive in Tokyo, is representative of a strategy that recurs throughout: “*While* Nadia and Saeed were sharing their first spliff together, in the Tokyo district of Shinjuku . . .” (Hamid, *Exit West* 29; emphasis mine). If, for Anderson, the “development of print-as-commodity” facilitates a common experience of reading that unlocks a novel sense of shared time which, in turn, allows us to imagine community with people with whom we may never interact directly (37), in *Exit West* it is the common and synchronous experience of moving through the special doors that points to a new form of global community superimposed over antiquated notions of nationhood. This synchronicity is never acknowledged by the characters nor has a defined narratological purpose; therefore, it is not as much a feature of the story as of the story’s textual fabric, a cue to readers to look beyond discrete events and think in terms of relations or constellations.

The organizing principle behind these side episodes stands in opposition to the solipsism of *Heart of Darkness*. Even as Conrad exposes the imperial despoils of Africa, the novella exhibits a certain European “insularity.” Despite his attempt to manufacture distance between his narrators and the stories they tell by relying on a dizzying structure of nested narratives—as readers, we follow the story of an unnamed narrator who tells the story of Marlow telling his story to the maritime crew temporarily stuck outside a London port—Conrad ultimately remains trapped in a worldview that privileges European standards. Despite narrative acrobatics, Marlow

remains a stand-in for the author who, according to Singh, “as a man of his times . . . reflected the current anthropological position which held that primitive people were morally inferior to civilized ones” (280). Said reaches a similar conclusion when he recognizes that, “As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the [Congo] natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them” (Said, “Two Visions” 26). Suzanne Nalbantian has written that Conrad possessed “the most fully integrated of ‘Western eyes’” on account of his Polish origin, time in France, and British citizenship, which imbued his critique of imperialism with authority (96). Nevertheless, he remained partially bound by his own gaze. But whereas Conrad’s coordinates limit the scope of his vision, Hamid’s own multicultural upbringing positions him favorably to take the pulse of our moment.⁶ Conrad’s framing device, the “sophisticated narrative structure . . . [that] fractures the story’s chronology and logic through insertions and interruptions” (Kloos 132), contrasts with Hamid’s integration of side episodes into his main narrative arc, wherein the overall chronology is not fractured but enriched. While Conrad’s strategy casts the reader as a listener of successive nested tales in *Heart of Darkness*, Hamid’s prefigures a reader with more interpretive agency. From this point of view, Hamid belongs to a roster in contemporary literature that “imagine[s] and bring[s] into form a kind of authentic depth, which cannot be mapped in any objectively meaningful way but which is nevertheless delineated by the reader’s responsibility” (Huber and Funk 156). Taking the case of *Exit West* as an example, the return of depth that distinguishes the emerging metamodern structure of feeling (Vermeulen 149) may describe not only literary texts, but what is expected of the metamodern reader as well.

⁶ Hamid has lived in Pakistan, the United States, and the UK. While studying at Princeton in the early 1990s, he was a student of both Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates.

Hamid's expansive worldbuilding also recalls the general tendency of the literature that departs from the postmodern to engage in comprehensive ideations of the world that better reflect contemporary standards of global interconnection and environmental awareness.⁷ Although Mączyńska effectively demonstrates how the "meanwhile" effect that distinguishes the side episodes of portal crossing extends to the novel's occasional references to animal life (1092), I argue that the new totality championed by Hamid supersedes the biological and includes technology as well. Hamid accomplishes this sophisticated task with subtlety, partially by employing similes that weave together technology and nature. He writes, for instance, of helicopters that "filled the sky like birds startled by a gunshot, or by the blow of an axe at the base of their tree" (34-35). In this same vein, he takes advantage of seemingly inoffensive conjunctive constructions to create community between their internal clauses, as when he refers, in one sweeping sentence, to the "bright satellites [that] transited in the darkening sky and the last hawks [that] were returning to the rest of their nests" (230). Conrad's frame narrative, with its insistent fracturing, makes room for suspicion rather than totality, perhaps because of its dramatization of the "relativism of perception [and the] limitations of knowledge" (Watts qtd. in Shaffer 67). As evident in the discussions of nativity in his novel, however, Hamid does not gloss over relativism (*Exit West* 197-8) but finds a way out of the postmodern deconstructionist stasis that precedes him by introducing notions of totality informed by new technological,

⁷Discourses of planetarism, for instance, compel readers to look for "fictional spatializations of ethical rationality" (Moraru, *Reading for the Planet* 58). Additionally, Heise's definition of eco-cosmopolitanism as "an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (qtd. in Mączyńska 1093), may assist in further understanding Hamid's worldbuilding, whose "conception of planetary belonging transcends the national and the global (understood as a geopolitical formation) to seek a more basic, biotic common ground" (Mączyńska 1092).

political, and ideological developments. The magic portals may very well stand for the new ways of connecting and relating to each other in which we already operate. The novel, after all, compares mobile phones to magic wands and refers to them as “portals to each other [Nadia and Saeed] and to the world” (Hamid, *Exit West* 40, 57), which suggests that perhaps we already inhabit the fantastic reality it describes.

(Magic) Portals of Reading

A careful parsing of the first passage through a magic portal showcased in *Exit West* exposes the careful reading strategies that Hamid’s text encourages. The episode of the Black man emerging in Australia foregrounds constitutive features of the magical portals and extensively reconfigures elements from *Heart of Darkness*:

He [the emerging Black man] wriggled with great effort, his hands gripping either side of the doorway as though pulling himself up against gravity, or against the rush of a monstrous tide. His neck followed his head, tendons straining, and then his chest, his half-unbuttoned, sweaty, gray-and-brown shirt. Suddenly he paused in his exertions . . . He rallied himself again, fighting mightily to come in, but in desperate silence, the silence of a man struggling in an alley, on the ground, late at night, to free himself of hands clenched around his throat. But there were no hands around this man’s throat. He wished only not to be heard. (Hamid, *Exit West* 8-9)

This arresting description that equates passage with birth includes a strong volitional component. Moving through the doors is less a letting go than a relentless pushing forth against a force that feels like “the rush of a monstrous tide.” One of the archaic meanings of “tide,” of course, is time (“tide, n.”), but the word certainly does more than to anticipate *Exit West*’s dictum of migrating through time. The man who “exits west” in Australia battles against the historical flow of colonial currents. Looking at him closely as he arrives through what had been initially a regular closet door—with echoes of C. S. Lewis’ Narnia tales—, we see that “he too was dark [like the portals], with dark skin and dark, woolly hair,” a description that recalls those of African natives in *Heart of Darkness* (Hamid, *Exit West* 8). Upon arriving in Congo, for

instance, Marlow observes an agonizing man who, after crawling to drink from a nearby river, “let his *woolly* head fall on his breastbone” (Conrad 85; emphasis mine). Why would Hamid reuse what are clearly racist stereotypes? In her acute reading of the Australian scene in *Exit West*, Lagji zeroes in on the migrant’s eyes. Initially, Hamid describes them as rolling terribly, but he immediately corrects himself and questions his own assertion: “or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him” (Hamid 9). In this hesitation, Lagji finds an acknowledgement of Chinua Achebe’s critique (Lagji 224). Achebe had taken particular issue with Conrad’s descriptions of Africans as “just limbs or rolling eyes” (Achebe 17). Hamid’s historical awareness, then, extends to *Heart of Darkness*’s postcolonial criticism as well. Additionally, the fact that the man in Australia acts as if trying to relieve himself from suffocation casts his *exit* as an act of salvation, while “the blue tattoo of a small mythological bird” on the sleeping woman’s ankle, probably a phoenix, alerts readers that a rebirth is taking place (Hamid, *Exit West* 7).

Hamid’s language and setting in this episode also evoke a sense of danger that presents what amounts to a test of the readers’ stereotypes, part of the *sui generis* reading experience that *Exit West* creates. Hamid’s description of the sleeping woman is a trap, a deliberate setup for the reader. The woman appears to the crosser asleep and half naked, with “her right leg and right hip . . . bare” (7). Nonchalantly, the narrator mentions that she had forgotten to activate the house alarm (Hamid, *Exit West* 8). The casual enumeration of the contents of a bedside table adds to a sense of Chekhovian inevitability, with money, keys, and even a pair of handcuffs suggesting nefarious outcomes (Hamid, *Exit West* 8). The Australian bedroom becomes a tableau designed to encourage biased conclusions even before an action takes place in the fictional space. The Black man, however, who stands above the sleeping woman before *choosing* the window, upsets

stereotypical expectations about race and violence and places some of the responsibility for those expectations on the reader. Viewed through an intertextual lens, Hamid does away with the display of surprise that Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, is unable to contain when thinking through the reasons why the black members of his skipper's crew—purported cannibals—do not make a meal out of their white counterparts despite generalized hunger (Conrad 42-43). Marlow cannot grasp what he labels as their “restraint” because, in his opinion, the black men “had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple” (Conrad 43). Despite his preconceptions, however, the fact that nothing happens shakes his worldview, “the fact, dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma” (Conrad 43). Marlow is bewildered because his direct experience with the natives makes it difficult for him to keep accepting at face value the European standards that constrain them to nonhuman otherhood, standards that, up to that point, had been engrained in his worldview as dogma. As he admits, he would have expected as much restraint from “a hyena prowling among the corpses of a battlefield” (Conrad 43). As we read from one text to the other and collect our thoughts in the interstitial spaces between them, we cannot help but to notice how, in *Exit West*, Hamid does not shy away from likening humans to animals, although in his case these comparisons aim to delineate a new, more inclusive totality. The man in Australia, for instance, slides to the floor “like a newborn foal” upon entering the room (Hamid, *Exit West* 9). But rather than creating distance between him and the rest of humanity, Hamid gestures towards a comprehensive relational model that assigns the same level to the human and the nonhuman.

It may seem peculiar that the space between entering and exiting the portals remains conspicuously absent from all the reports of passing through them. Whereas entering the magic doors is compared with dying and exiting them with being born (Hamid, *Exit West* 104), the span

between one and the other—the liminal space between metaphorical death and metaphorical birth—remains submerged in darkness. But if we consider the portals in relation to Hamid’s intertextual strategy, the uncharted space makes room for readers’ interpretive agency as they hop between texts. As the medium through which migrants wade, however briefly, beyond the constraints of time and space, darkness in *Exit West* exists not only outside of history, but also out of reach of the novel’s featured technologies of surveillance. It is utterly private. As far as we know, no drones, security cameras, or cellphones record what takes place in transit, even if they keep track of everything that happens in the “outside” world. The portals, sites of absolute freedom in the highly surveilled world of Hamid’s fiction, are also a perfect location for interpretive freedom. Furthermore, images of doors in both *Exit West* and *Heart of Darkness* become points of entry and exit between works that, each in its own way, sets out to redefine darkness tropes.

Conrad describes darkness several times as “impenetrable” (108, 114, 124), while in *Exit West*, although one of the portals looks like “as though no light could penetrate inside” (30), darkness is essentially a medium of passage. In *Heart of Darkness*, darkness is not sempiternal but preceded by a void. As a young boy, Marlow recalls being fascinated by the blank spaces in maps, particularly by the one Africa occupied, which, at least then, was “the biggest, [and] the most blank” (Conrad 11). But as time goes by, Africa “ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery” and became instead filled with “rivers and lakes and names” (Conrad 11). Colonization’s activities of mapping, measuring, and naming challenge self-serving imperial civilizing discourses by suggesting that it was after such interventions that Africa became “a place of darkness” (Conrad 12). From this perspective, darkness is not inherent to any geographical location, but a social construction. Ultimately, for Conrad, darkness is always

hopeless, and perhaps the best way to describe it is to repeat Kurtz final words: “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 68).

As a counterpoint to the idea of impenetrability, however, *Heart of Darkness* does include literal and figurative doors of darkness that characters arguably cross. Before his trip to the Congo, Marlow travels to the Company’s headquarters in Brussels, where he shakes hands with “the great man himself,” the Company owner, who had “his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions” (14). At this office, Marlow meets two women who walk him through the bureaucracy of passage, and who many critics have identified as “avatars of the Fates (or at least two of that Triad)” (Fleishman 61). Marlow imagines them as “guarding the door of Darkness [the one that leads to the owner’s office, or, as Conrad writes, “the sanctuary”], knitting black wool as for a warm pall. . .” (Conrad 80). Later on, when his expectations of the African continent and of the much-mythologized Kurtz shatter against the realities of colonialism and Kurtz’s actions, he recalls one of the knitting women as “a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair” (Conrad 121). In this moment of reflection, Marlow seemingly finds himself in the space within dark thresholds, from where he is able to see the door of darkness from both of its ends. At another point, he describes the Company’s Manager in Congo as if guarding the doors to the darkness of his own psyche while sealing an “utterance with that smile of his as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping” (Conrad 25). Furthermore, Marlow’s return to London, distilled to a single sentence, reads as if he had been whisked away through one of *Exit West*’s magic doors: “No, they did not bury me, though there is a period of time which I remember mistily, with a shuddering wonder, like a passage through some unconceivable world that had no hope in it and no desire” (Conrad 70). In this case, interpretation benefits from thinking of *Exit West* as a context to *Heart of Darkness*, rather

than the other way around, an imaginative reading that finds justification for itself in the suspension of temporal and spatial rules within the portals. Liminal spaces, those between texts as much as those within the portals, offer unfettered possibilities for recombination.

Geographically, *Heart of Darkness* and *Exit West* significantly converge in London. Referring to the European city's patchy electrical grid, Hamid's narrator describes the contrast between bright and dark areas makes with a distinctly metamodern awareness of depth: "the city's dark swaths [were] . . . darker, more significant, the way that blackness in the ocean suggests not less light from above, but a sudden drop-off in the depths below" (146). Subsequently, he distinguishes between "light London" and "dark London," with the latter occupied by refugees who, presumably, like Nadia and Saeed, wonder "what life must be like" in the other side (146). The spatial confluence of darkness and light recalls Marlow's well-known exclamation while surveying the England shores: "And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 9). But whereas Conrad's remark is ominous, Hamid's figuration of London looks into the future with hope and challenges negative perceptions of darkness. In *Exit West's* London, the darkness that finds a way in prefigures the future and its connection with race is repeatedly stressed: the Black man in Australia is dark like the portals; a group of children playing in London are initially described as "dark bodies" (Hamid 8;138). Conrad, on the other hand, ties darkness to the primitive, the unrestrained, the wild, and the violent. Wilderness in particular becomes the source of the spell that, according to Marlow, draws Kurtz away from "civilization" and toward the gratification of his base instincts (Kotzin 23). In his sustained conversation with *Heart of Darkness*, Hamid rescues the idea of human wildness from negative connotations, most explicitly when Nadia remembers the sense of freedom she felt while riding a motorcycle in her hometown, embracing "the dust and the pollution and the little bugs" she

occasionally swallows, and grinning “with a wildness” (159). This exuberant “wildness” challenges Marlow’s definition of savagery as “all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men” (Conrad 9). Hamid allows his text to revel in the wilderness that stirs in the heart of Nadia, a wild woman, as he rescues and complicates Conradian darkness.

If Hamid’s strategy of dislocating Conradian references reaches an apex, however, it certainly does so in *Exit West*’s recombination of *Heart of Darkness*’s most jarring scene, that of “the grove of death” (Conrad 20). When Marlow unexpectedly finds a group of Africans slowly dying under a tree, he describes “[b]lack shapes [that] crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (Conrad 20). *Exit West*’s “response” to this scene takes place in London, where tensions are high due to the increasing volume of migrants who have reached the city through the magic doors. The brewing conflict coincides with the arrival of spring, and hanging from flowering cherry trees, “there were now dark bodies too, children who climbed and played among the boughs, like little monkeys, not because to be dark is to be monkey-like, though that has been and was being and will long be slurred, but because people are monkeys who have forgotten that they are monkeys” (Hamid 138-39). The rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*’s grove of death into a scene of hope populated by children, even amid the threat of violence in modern-day London, speaks to the measured optimism that characterizes *Exit West*’s outlook. Hamid’s London tree, anchored in a grove of life, illuminates the tempering down of both cynicism and hopefulness combined with historical awareness that distinguishes the novel’s approach from strands of postmodern cynicism. One of the main characters from Hamid’s latest novel, *The Last White Man*, published in 2022, experiences a

psychological state that may accurately describe what I am trying to pin down as metamodern hopefulness: “not hope exactly, something less than hope, or a precursor to hope, which is to say a possibility, a possibility of what she did not know, but a possibility that was not numbness, that cut through numbness, and suggested life” (97-8).

Section Twelve in *Exit West*, the last in the book, is an epilogue of sorts. Set fifty years after the novel’s main events, it narrates a chance encounter between Nadia and Saeed in their home country and demonstrates Hamid’s authorial commitment to imagining the future. In this epilogue, the future’s technological context appears hazy and difficult to grasp. The way things work is not explained beyond their being stated, so that they seem almost magical. We read that, while walking through her birth city, Nadia “was informed of the proximity of Saeed, and after standing motionless for a considerable moment she communicated with him, and they agreed to meet” (Hamid, *Exit West* 229). Informed by who, or what? We never know for certain, and although verbs like inform and communicate recall surveillance culture, in this case the ostensible technological resources from the future seem to work for individuals, not against them. We adumbrate other ways in which the world has evolved in Saeed’s invitation to take Nadia to the deserts of Chile if she has an afternoon free. The magical doors, unmentioned in the passage, appear to have melded into everyday reality. But most importantly, this future, though imprecise, is not idealized. As the narrator, focalized through Nadia, puts it, the city to which she returns “was not a heaven but it was not a hell” (Hamid, *Exit West* 229). Additionally, as already mentioned, the metamodern emphasis in new relational models comes into display in this section when the narrator’s attention moves to the satellites and the hawks above, elements of the same totality (Hamid, *Exit West* 230).

In *Heart of Darkness*, after Marlow concludes his own narration, the Nellie navigates a “tranquil waterway . . . [that] seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (Conrad 76). *Exit West*, in contrast, concludes with Nadia wondering if she will ever see the Atacama Desert alongside Saeed, a place where, as he had told her before, one can see the stars “slowly move. Because the earth is moving. And you feel like you are lying on a giant spinning ball in space” (25). Hamid seems invested in the experience of feeling one with our planet. In *The Last White Man*, for instance, he refers to a day “when the planet could be felt making its journey, tilted and spinning as it went” (55). Earlier in *Exit West*’s timeline, Saeed had shown Nadia “images by a French photographer of famous cities at night, lit only by the glow of stars,” an effect that the artist technically achieves by removing all artificial lightning (56). Mączyńska and Sadaf have both identified the reference with Thierry Cohen’s project *Darkened Cities* (Mączyńska 1096; Sadaf 644). Cohen describes his project as political, because the sky “is a representation of what earth should be—without borders and without war” (Mezaina). In *Exit West*, the ultimate vision of darkness is sprinkled with stars. Or is it a vision of stars sprinkled with darkness? Just like the inscrutable darkness of the magical doors, going through which feels simultaneously like dying and being born, the best answer is probably a “metamodern oscillation” between both (van den Akker and Vermeulen 6). In *Exit West*, portals doubling as sites of emergence and emergency exits represent a hopeful promise to those—both character and readers—who risk traversing their darkness.

Achebe's criticism of Conrad’s foundational novella *Heart of Darkness* opened the floodgates to a steady stream of postcolonial scholarship on this text that zeroed in on the Polish-British writer’s imperial and racial biases. Via *Exit West*, Hamid intervenes in the existing conversation with a story of forced migrations that moves toward an ideal of global communities

based on shared experiences of displacement, both geographical and temporal. Although for some critics such a conflation flattens refugee experiences, Hamid's poetic synthesis is complex and inclusive rather than reductive, as demonstrated by the novel's emphasis on building a comprehensive relational model of the world that includes the human and the nonhuman. In engaging with *Heart of Darkness* and looking steadily into the future with measured hope and optimism rather than modern earnestness or postmodern despondency, Hamid seems to write from the emerging structure of feeling contemporary philosophers and cultural critics have referred to as the metamodern. Reading these works side by side implies jumping incessantly from one to the other as they collectively spark insights within the interpretive, interstitial space between them. Hamid himself has conceded the centrality of "co-creation" to his fiction, and, more specifically, that "a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader" (Hamid *Civilization and its Discontents* 9). *Exit West* may constitute, then, a blueprint for readerly involvement and participation in a co-creative act. The author and the reader are alive together and at the same time. The coming of a new structure of feeling may also bring with it new restless ways of reading and rereading, with texts inviting us to exit them in order to follow meanings that in many cases are only hinted. The intertextual relationship between *Exit West* and *Heart of Darkness* makes room for the reader in the interstitial space between the novels, just like the space between the magic doors of Hamid's narrative models the liminal spaces available to the metamodern reader.

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