READING FOR DISTANCE: FORM, MEMORY, AND SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS OF MIGRATION

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_Abstract

This essay proposes a reading 'posture' for fictions of migration that focuses on the concept of distance. By 'posture,' I mean an awareness of representations and uses of distance, in both form and content, through which the reader will gain a different perspective on socio-political and ethical questions emerging in fictions of migration. After an overview of approaches to the meanings of distance through philosophical, narratological, and mobility studies, I examine distance in contemporary novels of migration. This analysis considers representations of digital and surveillance technologies and reflects on their ability to "compress" distances. It also deals with distance as a temporal concept affecting memories. Two case studies are examined by paying attention to the role of distance in their formal and thematic characteristics. *Exit West* compresses the distance between countries and problematizes our understanding of borders and states through the literary device of the portals. The autodiegetic narrator in *Open City* explicitly and often lingers on distance and his understanding of it. As a character he chooses to put distance between himself and his home country, between his past and his present life. As a consequence, distance between the character-narrator and the reader is created and remains unresolved.

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Migration is one of the most defining issues of the 21st century. Indeed, mobility scholar Thomas Nail has defined the twenty-first century "the century of the migrant."[1] Contemporary fiction is also greatly invested in the exploration of the phenomenon, and when we read fictions of migration, we expect certain patterns and themes:[2] from hybridization and ambivalence, first-person and past-tense narratives, and a certain degree of autofiction, to the inclusion of magical realist elements.[3] Contemporary fiction of migration, however, attempts to overcome these expectations and to diversify the representation of migration.[4] And it does so by proposing formal innovations that foreground complexities brought about by fast-paced advancements in technologies and the globalized world. To observe and appreciate these innovations, I argue, we also need to change our viewpoint on migration itself.

In the introduction to his influential work *On The Move*, mobility scholar Tim Cresswell observes how "in classic migration theory, the movement is explained by the place that is being left and the place of arrival […] The line that connects A to B is explained by A and B, and their relative push and pull factors."[5] My proposal is to explain that line by looking at the space *between* A and B, rather than simply through A or B individually. In this article, I examine migration by focusing on distance—on

the space between A and B—and I ask what happens if, when we read fictions of migration, we keep a certain 'posture', a sort of conscious awareness towards the concept of distance? What does it do to our understanding of fictions of migration? I argue that paying particular attention to the ways in which distances are represented but also employed allows us to reconsider the phenomenon of migration altogether. Reading for distance means focusing on representations of geographical distance in the narrative (the journey and its spatiotemporal length); representations of cognitive and affective perceptions of distance in characters (e.g. feeling distant from a relative or friend; covering that distance through letters, emails, videocalls, texts); temporal distance between past events and present memories or lack thereof; occurrences of the word "distance" in the text; proximity as opposed to distance; and the compression of distance (through technology or literary devices).

After an overview of the meanings of distance, and of the concept's importance in fictions of migration, I will show how we can 'read for distance' two contemporary novels of migration, *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Open City* by Teju Cole. In the former, distance is employed to convey a sense of spatiotemporal compression, of the kind that Debjani Ganguly envisions as being proper in the global novel.[6] In the latter novel, focusing on distance helps us to read between the lines of an extremely elusive character-narrator and to embrace other characters' perspectives to question the narrator's viewpoint. Analyzing these two diverse case studies using the same approach reveals that distance can become a helpful tool in appreciating contemporary fictions of migration in light of their current formal and thematic transformations.

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The first definition of distance in the Oxford English Dictionary indicates it is "[a] dispute, a quarrel, a disagreement; a controversy; (later in weakened use) an estrangement," and describes this usage as obsolete.[7] The word's most frequent use, however, foregrounds its spatial meaning: "[t]he extent of space between two places or objects, and related senses."[8] Arguably, this is also the initial and most intuitive meaning we attribute to the term, when we think about it. For example: when we ask Google Maps to calculate the path between our home and our office, we are implicitly asking it to calculate the distance, the amount of space that exists between the two places. But distance can also be thought of in terms of time, as the interval between two events.

Closely connected to these two meanings are the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's reflections on the creation of the concept of distance itself. Relating distance to the prehistoric origins of humanity, Blumenberg claims that the capacity of human beings to stand erect and perform what he calls an *actio per distans* is an act of evolutionary progress. *Actio per distans* means acting over a distance: throwing a stone to defend oneself, for example, is an action through distance that grants the thrower a defense mechanism beyond a full-contact fight, placing space between oneself and the attacker.[9] Similarly, crafting and placing a trap for the enemy or the prey is likewise an *actio per distans*, which relies on temporal distance, namely the waiting time for an enemy or prey to fall into the trap. Extrapolating this further, Blumenberg and subsequently Kaspar Lysemose, with his essay "The Throwing Hand," suggests that "throwing is the anthropological origin of technology" and explains "humans' disposition as creatures of distance."[10] As Lysemose observes, throwing grants humans "the possibility of excluding their body from natural selection by means of the technical—initially by mere stones" (in German, "the principle of exclusion of the body" or "*Körperausschaltung*").[11] This close relationship between technology and distance is central to the analysis of *Exit West* and its approach to what are commonly known as Information and Communication Technologies (ITCs).[12]

Distance also comes very much into play in mobility studies debates and their focus on movement, an emphasis which goes hand in hand with my own conceptualization of distance. It is hardly possible to conceive of or even to calculate distance if one has not moved beforehand: indeed, movement is essential to our understanding of distance. As mentioned above, when we think about migration, we tend to position ourselves on either side of the line, observing the movement either from point A or point B, hence from a static position. We do so through what Cresswell identifies as a "sedentarist metaphysics" that understands movement from place, rootedness, spatial order and belonging.[13] Sedentarist metaphysics is a concept embedded in our ideas of space, one that Cresswell borrows from anthropologist Liisa Malkki, who highlights "a tendency to think of mobile people in ways that assume the moral and logical primacy of fixity in space and place."[14] Because this tendency causes us to think of identities in terms of rootedness and belonging to a place, phenomena such as homelessness and migration are conceived of as threatening stability and rationality. Consider for example the complementary words "immigration" and "emigration," which

presuppose a positioning of the speaking subject in the place of arrival (immigration) or in the place of departure (emigration). In either case, the movement is always observed from a fixed position, from either A or B. In short, the principles of a sedentarist metaphysics are that "things (including people) don't move if they can help it" and that "[s]patial arrangements exist to negate movement and are produced by the constant need to reduce distances over which movement occurs."[15]

However, Cresswell claims that it is possible to instead think of movement through a "nomadic metaphysics" that conceives of movement from a perspective of flow, flux, and dynamism, drawing on the recent diffusion of nomadic thought.[16] In other words, he encourages us to focus on the space between A and B, rather than either A or B itself: hence, to focus on distance. Cresswell's nomadic metaphysics is a productive concept through which to read novels of migration for distance, by focusing on the fluidity and dynamism that emerge in them. In this context, Cresswell also considers important those recent advancements in both communication and transportation technologies that allow for what David Harvey famously defined as 'space-time compression.'[17]

The main reason to read novels of migration for distance is that sedentarist metaphysics makes us look at people on the move with suspicion and misconceptions and I want to propose that looking at migration through distance helps reframe our angle of vision on the phenomenon. With the help of nomadic metaphysics, we can notice how distance allows for a more nuanced and complex vision of migration that does not rely on a single viewpoint of the phenomenon, but rather on the space that emerges through the act of mobility. This is also valid when we read and analyze fictions of migration: indeed, from a literary perspective, Lucy Bond makes a similar observation in her influential work *Writing Migration Through The Body*, where she states that "migration […] allows us to think about movement and mobility in terms of both distance and proximity, local and global, placing locations into a dialectical relation of near and far, here and there, which is not one-way, nor fixed on either a point of departure or of destination."[18] Thus, reading literature of migration without a fixed point of departure or arrival in mind, but rather reading by keeping in mind what occurs *within distances* should help us gain a different perspective on the story and on the experience of migration it is proposing.

Before turning to the case studies, however, it is important to examine the meanings of distance in the context of narratives. Indeed, distance is also a productive concept in textual analysis. And although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is impossible not to mention Franco Moretti's work on 'distant reading,' a methodology closely linked to the digital humanities analyzing big corpora, as opposed to 'close reading.'[19] In narratological terms, narrative distance can indicate "the extent to which the narrator plays a part in the story [...] the narrator's degree of involvement in the story she tells."[20] Further, distance can also point to the reader's degree of involvement in the story, how the narrative allows the reader to experience engagement with the characters. Narrative theorists have devoted significant attention to narrative strategies employed to obtain proximity to characters. For instance, in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*, Marie-Laure Ryan reflects on textual strategies used to drive immersion in the narrative world, to narrow the distance between the real world and the storyworld. The most simple but effective method, she suggests, is by using proper place names: "[T]hrough this ability to tap into reservoirs of ready-made pictures, place names offer compressed images and descriptive shortcuts that emulate the instantaneous character of immersion in the space of visual media."[21] In *Exit West*, as we are about to see, the use of place names is also effective in reducing the distance between locations within the storyworld.

Another way of thinking about readers and characters' distance is focusing on the affective strategies used to bring character and reader closer together. In his essay, "Ways of Being Close to Characters," Jens Eder delves into our frequent accounts of feeling closeness to or personal involvement with a fictional character, and examines possible causes for this phenomenon. The first distinctions he makes are: 1) being physically close to someone (spatiotemporal proximity), 2) being close in character, understanding someone well (mental closeness), 3) being intimate with someone, knowing someone personally and privately, being in a relationship. He further determines four requirements for experiencing closeness to a character, which include "attention and the degree of frequency and intensity of mental acts directed to the character," "authentication of the character" (presentation of the character as reliable or unreliable, for instance), "contexts and kind of *fictional world* they are shown to live in," and, finally the "perceived realism of the fictional world."[22] Then, Eder also distinguishes five ways in which we can be close to characters, among which he

names "general geographic and temporal proximity," "the character's emotions, values and goals […] necessary to feel similar to [the character]," and "social distance in terms of differences of age, class gender and ethnic background."[23]

In her essay "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," Vera Nünning describes other strategies of reducing distance between characters and readers as "perspective-taking strategies."[24] She claims: "[N]arratives are persuasive: they can induce listeners to change their values and opinions." Similarities between reader and character need not exist, nor must there be a "nearness of topics," an interest in the main themes explored in the story.[25] Rather, "nearness" to a character can be achieved through two factors, "namely the quality of the writing and the 'perceived realism' of the story."[26] In order to demonstrate a character's perspective, the most straightforward strategy is presenting the characters' thoughts and emotions "in a seemingly immediate way, such as via quoted thoughts, interior monologue, free indirect discourse, or psychonarration."[27] The comments of an external narrator are also essential to practices of perspective-taking as they can "explain a character's motives, underscore a lack of alternatives to a character's action (which might otherwise appear egotistic), emphasize a character's plight and suffering."[28] In this context, Nünning argues, "increasing the reader-character distance is of crucial importance for the process of perspective-taking."[29] Thus, for Nünning, a combination of nearing and distancing formal strategies are needed to achieve perspective-taking, and subsequently to allow for changes in the readers' perception of reality.[30]

The two novels proposed here as case studies are extremely diverse in their formal and thematic choices. *Exit West* offers a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator and frequent internal focalizations to tell the story of Saeed and Nadia, two refugees fleeing their war-torn country through mysterious portals that open up to distant locations all around the world. Reading for distance makes the reader aware of both the role of technology in the experience of migration, and how the narrative raises questions about national borders and freedom of movement. *Open City* is the account of its character-narrator's wandering around New York. Distance is pivotal for our understanding of his attitude toward his past, his home country, and his memories, which together make us question his reliability.

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Exit West is Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel. Published in 2017, it reads as a timely commentary on Brexit, Trump's extreme nationalism, and their consequences on border and migration policies. The story revolves around Saeed and Nadia, two lovers from an unnamed city who decide to leave their country together when violence and political oppression become part of their daily routine. And escape they do, though not through the usual and often tragic journeys that undocumented migrants endure, but through a mysterious portal, which takes people directly from their city to Mykonos, Greece. The omniscient narrator reports that "[r]umors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" and that "most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently."[31] These portals appear in various parts of the globe, allowing for an unprecedented flow of migrants which quickly becomes impossible to control, despite attempts by local governments to patrol or even shut these portals. Indeed, people do not simply land on random streets in different countries, but are deposited into private citizens' apartments, thereby occupying private properties in big groups, as the protagonists do when another portal in Mykonos transports them to a luxury flat in London.

As a literary device, the portals shrink geographical distances between places, and take compression to the extreme. The space-time compression of the portals is also mirrored formally, in the smooth transitions from the protagonists' adventures to sequences portraying other people's attempts to travel through the portals. This passage, for instance, reports that:

> [w]hile Nadia and Saeed were sharing their first spliff together, in the Tokyo district of Shinjuku […] a young man was nursing a drink for which he had not paid and yet to which he was entitled. His whiskey came from Ireland, a place he had never been to but evinced a mild fondness for, perhaps because Ireland was like the Shikoku of a parallel universe.[32]

Here, three faraway places—Saeed and Nadia's unnamed city, Tokyo, and Ireland—are joined together in the space of two sentences. They signal a lack of borders both formally but also through the portals (which will be mentioned shortly after this, when the man sees two women suddenly appear through a disused door), and through globalization, which allows Irish whiskey to be easily available so far away. Distances between places are compressed and simultaneity is achieved as these two

scenes happen at the same time, and even in the same sentence. Further, the naming of faraway geographical locations both compresses the spatiotemporal distance within the narrative, and increases proximity between the fictive characters and the novel's reader, as Ryan suggests.[33]

Another sequence achieves compression in the mention of the use of digital technologies when describing the simultaneous activities of the main characters and people in other locations: "[A]s Saeed's email was being downloaded from a server and read by his client, far away in Australia a pale-skinned woman was sleeping alone in the Sydney neighborhood of Surry Hills."[34] As Liliana M. Naydan observes, "the email exchanges, chargers, routers, and alarm systems of the scene invite readers to contemplate technological connections of different sorts."[35] Indeed, throughout the novel, the pervasive presence of digital media, and smartphones in particular, affects the perception of distances on multiple levels. In the first part of the novel, phones allow Nadia and Saeed to keep in touch when they cannot meet; in the second part, after their escape through the portals, phones provide them with information about their families and the situation in their country. While compressing spatial distance, smartphones also widen the distance between locations: as Nadia and Saeed become increasingly absorbed by the virtual distances their smartphones cover, they barely have the strength to reconnect in person at the end of the day. The narrator observes:

> Saeed and Nadia often fell asleep before it was fully dark, and before they fell asleep they often sat outside on the ground with their backs to the dormitory, on their phones, wandering far and wide but not together, even though they appeared to be together, and sometimes he or she would look up and feel on their face the wind blowing through the shattered fields all about them. They put their lack of conversation down to exhaustion, for by the end of the day they were usually so tired they could barely speak, and phones themselves have the innate power of distancing one from one's physical surroundings.[36]

Thus, while phones might shrink the feeling of distance from faraway places, at the same time, they increase distance among people in close physical proximity. In London, Nadia and Saeed find many other portal-crossers; here, technology increases proximity among refugees and local authorities, who seek control of the migrants by patrolling London's streets with "armored vehicles and communications arrays and robots that walked or crawled like animals […] drones overhead,"[37] all of which become part of that surveillance culture already hinted at in references to phones and ICTs.[38]

In *Exit West*, Hamid uses lack of distance as a device to problematize the concepts of borders and nation states: because people can move among countries without passing security and document checks, borders no longer can be controlled nor defined. This fluidity of borders and lack of distance is represented metaphorically through the photographs by Thierry Cohen that Saeed shows Nadia.[39] These pictures depict famous cities throughout the world, lit only by the light of the stars—unachievable with today's light pollution—an effect that Cohen achieves by superimposing a desert sky to the nightscape of the metropolis. Naydan suggests that the ekphrases of these pictures hint at the possibility of embracing uncertainties and viewing digital art favorably.[40] If we read this scene for distance, however, it is yet another example of space-time compression, and another hint at *Exit West*'s attempt to question the concept of borders, to foreground the image of portals.

Reading *Exit West* for distance also makes us appreciate the novel's portrayal of nomadic metaphysics present in its many sketches of other people on the move. This is best exemplified by the story of an old woman from Palo Alto who "had lived in the same house her entire life,"[41] the sketch of whose life story foregrounds her approach to the many migrations happening around her. All her life, she has observed people moving and relocating while herself keeping still:

> She had always had a carp in a mossy pond in the back of her house, carp that her granddaughter called goldfish, and she had known the names of almost everyone on her street, and most had been there a long time, they were old California, from families that were California families, but over the years, they had changed more and more rapidly, and now she knew none of them, and saw no reason to make the effort, for people bought and sold stocks, and every year someone was moving out and someone was moving in, and now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it.[42]

Her story, and this passage in particular, undermine the idea of sedentarist metaphysics, showing how to conceive of movement without seeing it as "threatening and negative."[43] In the sketch, the old woman is unsurprised to see the world around her in constant movement: unlike in sedentarist metaphysics, where people do not move unless they have to, here, people move precisely because they do not know how to live otherwise.[44] The old woman does not fear the distance between places or between

herself and the people she has witnessed moving away, but accepts it and embraces it as a fact of life. Reading this passage for distance also allows us to foreground the temporal distance that has occurred between the old woman's youth, in which everything and everyone was familiar to her, and the ongoing changes in her present neighborhood. Though her familiar surroundings slowly drift away, their gradual changes have allowed her to experience movement and distance even as she has remained still.

The fluidity of borders and the nomadic metaphysics permeating Nadia and Saeed's story are likewise stylistically present throughout the novel: like in the above passage, single sentences often flow into entire paragraphs, seeping through cities, houses, apartments, and rooms so far apart, assembling places and people, since "the whole planet [is] on the move."[45] Thus, *Exit West* relies on a complex web of extended, run-on sentences which often incorporate entire dialogues in indirect speech, or simultaneous events happening in different regions of the world. This tendency is not uncommon in Hamid's singular writing style, and becomes even more prominent in his latest novel, *The Last White Man*.[46] I read these run-on sentences as a literary execution of nomadic metaphysics, a way to render in written form the fluidity and flow of contemporary spatiotemporal perception exemplified by the phenomenon of migration, where the distance between places is compressed and the presence of borders fails to keep people at a distance. The paragraph length and lack of punctuation emphasize distance, rather than the fixed, marked viewpoints from which we observe and read the characters. The nomadic metaphysics of these one-sentence paragraphs reduces the readers' distance from the characters' perspectives, developing continuity between the characters' inner and outer worlds and recreating how we perceive the world around us.

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Open City is the account of a young man's wanderings and encounters in New York and Brussels. Julius, a Nigerian psychiatrist who migrated to New York to study and work, lives alone and sees few people. He starts taking long walks around the city to compensate for his demanding job, and decides to visit Brussels in search of his maternal grandmother. Julius's narrative is interspersed throughout with anecdotes, historical digressions, and memories of life in Nigeria, from his days at military school

to his father's death. These memories, however, always cause the narrator notable difficulty, both to recollect and to relate. Indeed, it seems as if one of Julius' main reasons for leaving Nigeria was to forget his past, to put space between himself and the places of those memories. *Open City* is told in the past tense by a character-narrator, meaning a character who is also in charge of the narrative. This is pivotal for our understanding of the overall structure of the novel, in that it allows for the constant reminder that Julius controls when and what he relates. The control he exerts over the narrative is one of distance between himself as a narrator and the reader, between himself as a character and the other characters he meets. Reading *Open City* for the distance with which the character narrator approaches both other characters and readers helps us to question his reliability even before a particular much-debated scene at the end of the novel. The book is symmetrically divided into two sections, comprising eleven chapters each. Every chapter is carefully and rhythmically punctuated by walks, historical anecdotes, Julius's memories, and the personal stories of those he meets, people who share with Julius their own memories of migration and displacement. These include Farouq, a Moroccan student who owns an internet café in Brussels; Said, a refugee in a detention center; and Professor Saito, a Japanese retired professor of English Literature and Julius' mentor during his university years. These characters represent the many intradiegetic narrators, who by telling their own embedded stories contribute to the novel's overall sense of fragmentation, and who are carefully placed by the author in a way that prevents the reader from acquiring a holistic view of Julius's own narrative or character. While providing us with unforgettable and engaging narratives of migration, which reiterate and signpost one of the main threads of the novel, the intradiegetic narrators prove especially effective in averting the reader's gaze from Julius's own narrative, which causes him manifest discomfort to invoke.

Reading this novel for distance allows us to see how Julius is committed to distancing the reader from his story on three levels: first, in his conception of migration and hence geographical distance as a tool to forget unwanted memories from his past; second, through his restlessness in the narrative (his walks and trip to Brussels); third, in terms of narrative structure, through the use of digressions, anecdotes, and intradiegetic narrators, which avert the reader's attention from the protagonist's past. In *Memory and Migration,* Creet and Kitzman include forgetting as a reason to migrate;

this intent is evident in *Open City* from the very first paragraph of the novel, which opens with the words "And so…," throwing readers into the middle of an account that has already started without them.[47]

The reader is immediately informed of Julius' habit of "aimless wandering;"[48] the word 'distance' also appears right away (and will occur another 34 times) to signal how these walks progressively take him further and further away "from home,"[49] such that he is forced to use the subway to get home late at night. Combined with the idea of distance, walking assumes significant purpose. By walking, Julius puts distance between himself and his home in New York; likewise, walking mirrors Julius's pattern in life of distancing himself from his country of origins and his past. Despoina Feleki notices how walking in *Open City* allows for "a mental landscape of the multiple concerns that overwhelm [the narrator]" and becomes the "space of enunciation."[50]

Pieter Vermeulen, on the other hand, describes Julius as a *fugueur*": one of a group of "'mad travelers' who unaccountably walked away from their lives and, when found, were unable to remember what had happened on these trips, let alone what had motivated them to set out on them in the first place."[51] Mentioning other critics' focus on Julius's detachment from his own and others' stories, Vermeulen recounts James Wood's description of Julius's narration and attitude as a "productive alienation."[52] This effort to background the main narrative is common in many postcolonial return journey narratives: upon return to one's home country, the protagonist's "narratorial self, while it remains tangible as an integrating consciousness, is at the same time also subject to decentering and to being relegated to the periphery" through the intervention of multiple intradiegetic narrators.[53] *Open City*, remarkably—despite many intradiegetic narrators and a manifest attempt to relegate the character narrator to the narrative's periphery—is everything *but* a return journey. Julius never goes back to Nigeria, nor does he want to: even the search for his grandmother in Brussels, which could be considered as a sort of return to his origins, is quickly abandoned. I see the presence of intradiegetic narrators in *Open City* as a further contribution to Julius's desire to put distance between his story and the reader.

Throughout, the character-narrator laments the pain of remembering, often comparing it to physical movement. Take, for instance, the beginning of chapter ten, where Julius is dreaming confused memories of himself and his sister in Lagos. The

unsettling confusion that overwhelms him when he awakens is described to the reader as an exercise of "slowly returning to [him]self from a distance,"[54] returning to himself and to his present search for his maternal grandmother in Brussels, a quest he will soon abandon. In his walks, both in New York and Brussels, Julius projects his ideas about migration onto the people he meets. Consider this passage: Julius enters a church and sees a black cleaning woman vacuuming the floors; reflecting on the woman's origin, Julius comments:

> she, too, might be here in Belgium as an act of forgetting. Her presence in the church might doubly be a means of escape: a refuge from the demands of family life and a hiding place from what she might have seen in the Cameroons or in the Congo, or maybe even in Rwanda. And perhaps her escape was not from anything she had done, but from what she had seen.[55]

Julius's idea of migration seems closely linked to the concept of distance, such that he assumes that this woman, whom he encountered only fleetingly, should likewise be trying to distance herself from unwanted memories. Shortly thereafter, in conversation with a woman he met on his flight to Brussels, Dr. Maillotte, Julius briefly opens up about his family background and his relationship to Nigeria, only to quickly shut down again. Maillotte comments:

> if you're too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer, too. There's a reason, she said, I had to leave Belgium and try to make my life in another country. I don't complain and, to be honest, I really have little patience for people who do. You're not a complainer, are you?[56]

Julius does not report his answer in the narrative, and we are not sure he ever gives one: is he so concentrated on his suffering, on his attempt to detach himself from his past, that he forgets other people suffer too, and that he himself may be the cause of other people's suffering. His silence in this episode foretells his final conversation with Moji, a female friend from Nigeria, in the penultimate chapter. The first mention of Moji is preceded by a thorough consideration of the idea of the past:

> We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations, which taken as a group, represented a secure version of the past that I had been reconstructing since 1992. But there was another, irruptive, sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself that I had relegated to childhood and to Africa.[57]

This passage is one of the most ambiguous in the novel, highlighting Julius' reticence about his past, and how he imagines it as an "empty space," an "empty space" that is *his* "secure version of the past," a version *he* has been reconstructing. When Moji re-appears in his life at the end of the novel, she shrinks the distance between the part of himself he had left in the past in a faraway place (his childhood in Africa) and his present self (in New York), and forces him to confront the person he had been.

One of the most debated aspects of the novel is Julius's meeting with Moji in New York, during which Moji tells Julius that, when they were young adults in Lagos, he forced himself on her. Julius refrains from reporting his reaction to Moji's accusation, commenting instead on the Hudson River in front of them, and narrating his departure from the apartment where the encounter took place.[58] Indeed, in no part of the novel does Julius address Moji's account of rape, which leads the reader to question his reliability. Julius's encounter with Moji is structured as "a monologue by Moji, rendered as free indirect speech, without giving the reader any indication of Julius's reaction."[59] The reader's lack of access to Julius' reaction to Moji's testimony has led to various interpretations as to whether or not Julius remembered raping Moji. While Paula Von Gleich hypothesizes Julius' "complicity with and perpetration of violence,"[60] Katherine Hallemeier, looking at the novel's overall structure, sustains that Julius has no memory of the rape.[61] Teju Cole, in turn, praises Alyssa Rosenberg's review of the novel, which interprets Julius' silence as proof that "he forgot assaulting Moji because he doesn't understand himself to have assaulted her in the first place."[62] Beyond the hermeneutical discussions that stemmed from this scene, the fact that the reader never receives any indication of Julius's position regarding Moji's words is further proof of Julius's emotional and narratorial distance and inaccessibility. In Eder's classification of the ways a reader can feel close to a character, Julius allows for very limited character authentication, which hinders character-reader proximity.[63]

Reading this scene for distance could allow yet another interpretation. The novel's pervasive distancing strategies, and frequent narrative digressions that create distance between Julius and the reader, could be seen as markers of unreliability. Not only is Julius unable or unwilling as a narrator to tell his story in full, but he is also unable as a character to face his responsibility for what he has done to Moji.[64] At the same time, this moment is pivotal for Julius's recognition that the spatial distance he put between himself and Nigeria is still insufficient to distance himself from his past. As Moji tells

him at the end of her speech, "[T]hings don't go away just because you choose to forget them."[65]

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This article offers an overview of methods by which we can read novels of migration, keeping in mind various meanings and uses of distance. Distance compression in *Exit West* mirrors the ways that technology and globalization affect our understanding of borders and movement, proposing a notion of distance that focuses on space and technology's effects on it. Distance in *Open City* uses migration to spatialize time, placing distance between oneself and one's country as a strategy for forgetting. Attending to distance when reflecting on form in narratives of migration can also be useful to appreciate how themes are further investigated, for instance by using the space of a sentence to shrink distances, or reflecting on readers' engagement with the characters. It can also help the reader be more aware of a first-person narrator's unreliability and omissions, and of how their disclosure, or lack thereof, affects readers' involvement in the text. Whether temporal or spatial, affective or narratological, reflecting on distance can contribute to the study of fictions of migration to conceive them in light of a 'nomadic metaphysics,' as bearers of the dynamism and fluidity that is proper to the phenomenon of migration itself.

_Endnotes

[1] Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

[2] In this article, the term migrant is used as a neutral, umbrella term to define people on the move—independently from the origin of their migration, forced or willing. Literary production dealing with migration refers to literature of migration, including that by non-migrant authors. Throughout, I also refer to 'literature of migration' and 'fictions of migration' embracing the fourth thesis of Soren Frank's "Four Thesis on Migration and Literature" in which he states that: "[M]igration literature refers to all literary works that are written in an age of migration or at least to those works that can be said to reflect on migration. The point is that whether we favor social contexts or literary content/form, the distinction between migrant and non-migrant writers becomes increasingly difficult to uphold. I therefore propose a shift in terminology from migrant literature to migration literature, that is, a move away from authorial biography as the decisive parameter, instead emphasizing intra-textual features such as theme and form as well as extra-textual forces such as social processes." See Søren Frank, "Four Theses on Migration and Literature," in *Migration and Literature in Contemporary Europe*, eds. Mirjam Gebauer and Pia Schwarz Lausten (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2010), 39–57, here: 52–53.

[3] See Fatemeh Pourjafari and Abdolali Vahidpour, "Migration Literature: A Theoretical Perspective," *The Dawn Journal* 3, no. 1 (2014): 679–692.

4   See Glenda Carpio, *Migrant Aesthetics*: *Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration and the Limits of Empathy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023).

5   Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 29.

6   Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

7   *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Distance, n., Sense I.1.a," July 2023. Doi: 10.1093/OED/ 2137722364.

8   *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Distance, n., Sense I.1.a."

9   Hans Blumenberg, "Theory of Nonconceptuality (circa 1975, Excerpt)," in *History, Metaphors, Fables: A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, eds. Hannes Bajohr, Florian Fuchs, and Joe Paul Kroll (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 259–298, here: 260. Doi: 10.1515/9781501748004-012.

10 Blumenberg, "Theory of Nonconceptuality," 260–261.

11 Kasper Lysemose, "The Throwing Hand: An Essay on Human Subjectivity," *SATS* 13, no. 1 (2012): 1–18, here: 12. Doi: 10.1515/sats-2012-0001.

12 ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) define all the technologies in use to communicate and access information in the 21st century, the most prominent examples of which are social media and smartphones. For more on ICTs see Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia* (London: Routledge, 2011).

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14 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 26.

15 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 29.

16 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 29.

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18 Emma Bond, *Writing Migration through the Body* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 25. Doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-97695-2.

19 See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London/New York: Verso, 2013).

20 H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67.

21 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 89.

22 Jens Eder, "Ways of Being Close to Characters," *Film Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 68–80, here: 69. Doi: 10.7227/FS.8.8.

23 Eder, "Ways of Being Close to Characters," 73–75.

24 Vera Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form: Persuasiveness and Perspective Taking from the Point of View of Cognitive Literary Studies," *Arcadia* 50, no. 1 (2015): 37–56, here: 37. Doi: 10.1515/arcadia-2015-0004.

25 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 37.

26 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 37–42.

27 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 44.

28 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 44.

29 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 45.

30 Nünning, "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form," 44.

31 Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 67.

32 Hamid, *Exit West*, 29.

33 Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 89.

34 Hamid, *Exit West*, 7.

35 Liliana M. Naydan, "Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*," *Studies in the Novel* 51, no. 3 (2019): 433–451, here: 443. Doi: 10.1353/sdn.2019.0048.

36 Hamid, *Exit West*, 185–186.

37 Hamid, *Exit West,* 154.

38 See David Lyon, "Exploring Surveillance Culture," *On Culture* 6 (2019). Doi: 10.22029/oc.2018.1151.

39 Hamid, *Exit West*, 56–57.

40 Naydan, "Digital Screens and National Divides," 445.

41 Hamid, *Exit West*, 207.

42 Hamid, *Exit West*, 208–209.

43 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 43.

44 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 29.

45 Hamid, *Exit West*, 169.

46 Mohsin Hamid, *The Last White Man* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2022).

47 Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann, eds., *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies* (Toronto/Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 20.

48 Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 3.

49 Cole, *Open City*, 3.

50 Despoina Feleki, "Space Narrative and Media in Teju Cole's Open City," *Ex-Centric: Narratives Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media,* 3 (2019): 258–274, here: 265.

51 Peter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 84.

52 Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature*, 83.

53 Martin Löschnigg, "No Center and No Margins: Narrativizing Return Journeys in Works by M. G. Vassanji, Michael Ondaatje, and Rohinton Mistry," in *Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives*, eds. Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Richard Walsh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018), 62–73, here: 65.

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56 Cole, *Open City*, 143.

57 Cole, *Open City*, 155–156.

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59 Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature*, 100.

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62   Alyssa Rosenberg, "Rape and Memory in Teju Cole's Open City," in *Thinkprogress*, March 28, 2012, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/rape-and-memory-in-teju-coles-open-city-371f904877e0/>.

63   Eder, "Ways of Being Close to Characters," 69.

64   In his work *Living to Tell About It* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), James Phelan classifies six types of unreliability, among which are "underreporting" and "underevaluating." It is difficult to classify Julius' unreliability with regards to Moji's rape in this sense: whether Julius chooses to omit his crime, has no memory of it, or deems it unimportant is one of the many ambiguities of the novel that the ending does not resolve.

65   Cole, *Open City*, 245.