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Places in the making: the po/ethics of place in the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru

Maëlle Jeanniard Du Dot

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THÈSE

Pour obtenir le grade de

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La fabrique des lieux: po/éthique du lieu dans les romans et nouvelles de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru

Places in the making: the po/ethics of place in the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru

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Actual places, these are worlds worth fighting for (...)

Donna Haraway,
Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene

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List of abbreviations

1. Works by Mohsin Hamid

MS *Moth Smoke*

TRF *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

HTG *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

EW *Exit West*

LWM *The Last White Man*

2. Works by Hari Kunzru

TI *The Impressionist*

T *Transmission*

N *Noise*

MR *My Revolutions*

GWM *Gods Without Men*

MP *Memory Palace*

LNy *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*

WT *White Tears*

RP *Red Pill*

HK ITW Interview(s) with Hari Kunzru conducted in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (followed by the corresponding year for each of the three interviews)

Formatting style

The in-text references use an Author-Date system, including page numbers where necessary. The full references are listed at the end of the thesis, in the bibliography. Explanatory footnotes provide full references, also listed in the bibliography.

Unless specified otherwise, quotations in English from francophone authors (*e.g.*, Foucault, Latour) are extracted from the published translations.

Introduction

1. Proposed thesis and methodology

The object of this thesis is a comparative study of the fictions of writers Mohsin Hamid (b. 1971) and Hari Kunzru (b. 1969), and a joint examination of their writing of place. The aim is to analyse the figures and metaphors of place that inform their novels, and to a lesser extent their other writings, and to determine how these constitute a po/ethics of place. The portmanteau word wishes to indicate a concern with place that is at the same time aesthetic, thematic and ethically engaging, nurtured as it is by the political, economic and cultural effects of globalisation that have emerged together with the writers' lives and careers. Through their writing of place, these novels notably display a commitment to describe persisting forms of imperialisms, unequal global mobilities or the societal re-mappings fostered by digital technologies.

While being careful to avoid a strictly biographical reading, Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's transnational biographies must be taken into account when studying their works, written in English and marketed towards an anglophone audience by major publishing houses. One of the questions raised here is the location of this fiction among the different labels of contemporary anglophone fiction – as transnational, postcolonial or other. In this thesis I propose to analyse Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's novels and stories together with literary theory but also sources from the fields of philosophy and social sciences, as well as interviews conducted with Hari Kunzru. Because it proposes to read their fiction through the lens of place, this work enters a critical discussion with several anglophone geographers and philosophers of the "Spatial Turn" (Casey, Malpas, Massey, or Ingold),¹ based on the cornerstones of French theory about space and place (Foucault, de Certeau, Lefebvre). Theoretical engagements with the experience of place also include the works of sociologists of globalisation (Appadurai, Bauman, Castells) and proponents of Actor-Network Theory and New Materialisms (Latour, Haraway).

One of the key issues of this thesis is to examine to what extent how Hamid and Kunzru are particularly representative of a transnational shift in anglophone fiction since 2000 – and arguably since 9/11 –, which they spearheaded with notable critical acclaim and commercial

¹ The beginning of this turn to space and place in critical theory is often attributed to Edward Soja in *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London: Verso, 1989.

success. Both writers have approached head-on not only the symbolical, but also the material dimensions of globalisation, which tend to be side-lined in the realm of literary fiction. Both have confronted the changing relations to place engendered by global dynamics. Sharing a playful approach to genre and voice, as well as an enduring affection for the novel form and its codes, their works to this date have continuously attempted to (re)form narratives of place for contemporary times, and in doing so have highlighted the malleability and mutability of the very notion of place.

2. Situating Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru

Looking at the plethora of places that appear in their narratives – Lahore, Amsterdam, the Mojave Desert, New York, the South of France, spaceships, New Delhi, East Berlin punk squats, London refugee squats, suburban California, Mississippi, Scotland, to name but a few – it seems that place takes many different shapes for Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru. Their relation to their dwelling places also speaks for itself: Hari Kunzru was born and grew in Essex before moving to London later on, and he has been living in New York since the late 2000s, with yearly trips to Paris where he teaches a creative writing class for New York University. Growing up in the suburbs in the 1970s, Kunzru felt very conscious of the fact that his own identity relied on different places (*HK ITW* 2018; Romig 2012). The labels used in relation to his identity are perhaps best expressed in his own words: “Londoner, British (that one’s only crept in since I came to live in New York – to anyone in the UK, it’s weirdly meaningless), English, the son of an Indian father and an English mother, Kashmiri Pandit, rootless cosmopolitan” (Kumar 2012). Mohsin Hamid, as for him, divided his childhood between Lahore and the United States, where his father completed his doctorate. He returned to the US as a student, worked as an analyst, then moved to London where he was ultimately granted British citizenship. He moved back to Lahore in the early 2010s and has been writing from there ever since (Hamid and Wilkinson 2017).

The moment when both writers emerged on the literary scene is key to understanding why place is so central to their writing, but also why they deserve to be read comparatively. Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru both published their first novels at the turn of the twenty-first century. Mohsin Hamid released *Moth Smoke* in 2000. This modern-day story, framed by a narrative of the crumbling Mughal Empire, follows the demise of an outcast anti-hero in Lahore during the 1998 nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan. *Moth Smoke* received critical encouragement by writers like Anita Desai (Desai 2000), and notably won a Betty Trask

Award.² Kunzru's 2002 debut *The Impressionist* also received a Betty Trask Award, ranking first, and more famously earned him a 1.25-million-pound advance (Loh 2019: 346). Another event surrounded the media success of this novel: Hari Kunzru refused to accept the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, due to its being sponsored by the *Daily Mail* and the *Mail on Sunday* – a newspaper group that according to him “pursue an editorial policy of vilifying and demonising refugees and asylum-seekers.” He further noted: “[a]s the child of an immigrant, I am only too aware of the poisonous effect of the *Mail's* editorial line” (Kunzru 2003). Kunzru's novel is in itself a critical discussion of racial identity, through the coming-of-age story of a protagonist born from an English father and an Indian mother in the last decades of the British Raj.

On September 11, 2001, between the publications of *Moth Smoke* and *The Impressionist*, planes crashed into New York's World Trade Center. In parallel trajectories, both writers attuned their preoccupations with the self and the nation to the mediatised fears that, in the wake of the event, re-kindled dichotomies such as East *versus* West. Indeed, it is Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) which earned him a wider international recognition by being placed on the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize. Meanwhile, Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004) also responded to a post-9/11 preoccupation with political polarization, allegiance, but mostly, the narration of a global-scale event. Both writers explained extensively how 9/11 proved a turning point in their writing as well as their lives, as citizens of South Asian origin living in Western countries (Hamid and Simon 2022; Kunzru 2010a). Yet it seems that this world-changing event was only one step in their respective creative journeys, where questions of national, political and ethical positioning towards place– of being in, but also *with* (a) place(s)– have remained central since.

Besides the shared chronology of their writing careers and recognition, Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's social trajectories can be read as parallel in some respects. Mohsin Hamid studied international affairs, law and urban planning at Princeton and Harvard and worked for several years as a consultant at McKinsey, all the while learning creative writing and working on his first two novels (Khan 2018). Hari Kunzru studied at a British independent school before going to Oxford and Warwick University, where he graduated in philosophy. He worked as a freelance journalist in the late 1990s in the emerging milieu of digital culture, writing for

² This award has been granted to many famous writers over the years – it is dedicated to the first novel of writers from “Great Britain and Northern Ireland of the Commonwealth” and awards money to five or six new writers each year. See the website of the Society of Authors: <https://www2.societyofauthors.org/prizes/the-soa-awards/betty-trask-prize-awards/> (accessed 21-02-23).

magazines like *Wired* and *Wallpaper* and collaborating with musicians and artists. Kunzru recently wrote a piece inspired by this period for *Harper's Magazine*, analysing the roots of the working culture in the Silicon Valley (Kunzru 2023). I asked him about the recurring figure of the mobile corporate young man in his fiction, and he replied that he felt “close to those men, because I was supposed to be one, I think” (*HK ITW* 2018). Hamid, as for him, has explained how he considered his first career: “I always thought I was going to wind up in Pakistan (...) I was afraid that if I kept walking down the path at McKinsey, that I would (...) start earning a lot of money and price myself out of my own dream” (Khan 2018 *sic*). When analysing their spatial poetics, it thus matters to recall that Hamid and Kunzru have moved between worlds socially as well as geographically, and that while their works often provide critical insight into marginalised relations to place, their life journeys have also made it possible for them to discuss places of economic and cultural power with an insider's gaze.

Hamid and Kunzru draw from a large set of inspirations in their fiction, which also explains the generic malleability of their novels. In many ways, Kunzru's novels are inscribed within the legacy of British fiction. In their use of irony, social satire largely based on divisions of class, incongruous plot twists, or witty dialogues, his narratives partly acknowledge this legacy, and enter in conversation with contemporary figures like Iain Sinclair or Zadie Smith. Frequent sarcasm and unreliable narrators who resist systematic labelling also echo the writings of Hanif Kureishi.³ Behind a semblance of light comedy, Kunzru's writings often betray a concern with exclusion and violence, stemming in part from his adolescence during the Thatcher years. A different strand of influences can be found in Kunzru's acknowledged affection for speculative fiction— a notable figure in this respect is J.G. Ballard, whose name was borrowed for one of the characters in *Transmission*. Kunzru's novels thus continuously thread the fine line between contemporary realism and forays into the unknown, or, as he likes to term it, the “unknowable” (Romig 2012). This in turn can lead to complex plot-making and narrative overlay, reinforced by the characters' paranoia, and challenging the reader to find an escape route from a materialistic world paradoxically infused with spiritual longing. In these ambivalences and contradictions, one can also read the influence of postmodern American writers like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo – Kunzru often mentions the role DeLillo played

³ The parallel emergence of Kunzru's and Zadie Smith's novels in the early 2000s can be nuanced in this respect, for example in their different approaches to the legacy of E.M. Forster. See Peter Childs and James Green, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 62.

his writing, and once called himself “a recovering Pynchonite” (Piccarella 2019; *HK ITW* 2019).

American writers have also been pivotal for Mohsin Hamid – he began his writing career under the aegis of Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates who taught him creative writing (Khan 2018). Besides, he regularly states the influence of European writers like Camus, Calvino and the *Nouveau Roman*, notably on his formal endeavours with second-person narrators (*ibid.*). He also cites Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges as a tutelary figure in his writing of de-familiarizing passages often associated with magic realism (Khan 2021). Of course, Pakistani literary culture runs through Hamid’s narratives. They frequently refer to traditional motifs and to founding figures like novelist and playwright Saadat Hasan Manto – whose name is borrowed for a pen name by a character in *Moth Smoke* (*MS* 53) – or poets Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmad Faiz (*TRF* 43). The importance of poetry and symbolism can be recognised in the most lyrical parts of Hamid’s novels, where poetic flourishing alternates with his otherwise pragmatic evocations of globalisation, urban life and migration – Paul Jay calls his first novel *Moth Smoke* a “materialist analysis” of Pakistan’s interaction with global dynamics (Jay 2010: 107). Hamid’s novels are also resolutely urban, often inspired by the cities he has lived in, in particular New York, London and Lahore, his birthplace. In a 2018 interview, Hamid recognized that he was inspired to write about Lahore by Bapsi Sidhwa, whose 1988 novel *Cracking India* (initially named *Ice Candy Man*) made her a trail-blazer for the next generation of anglophone Pakistani novelists who emerged at the turn of twenty-first century, and to whom some say Hamid belongs (Khan 2018). As I will attempt to show throughout this thesis, Hamid articulates a desire he shares with that generation of writers – depicting the multifaceted reality of contemporary Pakistan – with an attention to human experiences that are shared on a transnational scale.

3. Corpus and state of the art

The corpus of this thesis includes all of Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s respective novels, amounting to eleven published books. The novels by Hamid are *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2011), and *Exit West* (2017). Hamid’s most recent novel *The Last White Man* (2022) is referred to sporadically but is not included per se in the analyses because of its very recent publication. Neither is Hari Kunzru’s *Blue Ruin*, which is to be released in 2023. The novels by Hari Kunzru thus include

The Impressionist (2002), *Transmission* (2004), *My Revolutions* (2007), *Gods Without Men* (2011), *White Tears* (2016) and *Red Pill* (2020).

Other selected productions are taken into account, including Hari Kunzru's published short story collection *Noise* (2005), his graphic story *Memory Palace* (2013), produced alongside an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, his hybrid e-book/audiobook *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York* (2014) and his podcast *Into the Zone* (2020). For both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, I also refer to a number of short stories published in various online and paper venues, listed in the bibliography, as well as to some nonfiction work published in newspapers and magazines, and to Mohsin Hamid's collection of essays *Discontent and Its Civilizations* (2015). Finally, this study is completed by three interviews which I personally conducted with Hari Kunzru in 2018, 2019 and 2020, which are reproduced as an annex to this work and quoted with the author's permission.

Both writers have been frequently acclaimed by readers in the English-speaking world, but also recognized through literary prizes and nominations. Kunzru's works have been translated into twenty-one languages, and Hamid's in more than thirty (Pushkin 2020; Vezzano 2013). Both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru are the subject of international academic attention and have been so since the onset of their literary careers. To this day, a few doctoral theses in the United Kingdom have included either Hamid or Kunzru, or both, within larger studies on contemporary fiction (Green 2007; O'Gorman 2014; Shaw 2016).⁴ Some French researchers have devoted publications to Mohsin Hamid (Waterman 2010; Moraru 2018; Veyret 2018, 2020; Cathelain 2021; Guignery 2022), yet Hari Kunzru's work has drawn surprisingly little attention. This could be attributed to frequent changes in French translators and publishing houses, or perhaps to a resistance to national categorisation – the latter issue might complexify attempts at publicising his works.⁵ Indeed, in published volumes in English, Hamid and Kunzru appear among a body of works labelled as postcolonial, diasporic, or as British or even American literature (Shaw 2021; Chambers 2011; Cilano 2013; Irr 2013). While their works have frequently been studied alongside that of other writers of the same generation, and their stories have featured with others in thematic collections (*Granta* 2010; 2015), this thesis proposes a comparative study featuring only Hamid's and Kunzru's works, reading together

⁴ In 2019 Syeda Sughra Naqvi defended a thesis on Pakistani literature that included Mohsin Hamid, at the Université de La Rochelle under the supervision of David Waterman. See the bibliography for the full reference.

⁵ To my knowledge the only French paper comparing the two writers was published by Cécile Girardin. "In the Heat of Combat: Insurrectional Moment and Political Time in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Hari Kunzru's *My Revolutions*," *L'Atelier*, n°4, 2012.

two anglophone writers with South Asian origins as well as attachments in Britain and the United States. The two writers share concerns with globalisation, migration and mobility, authenticity and purity, memory, community, the politics of events, all of which are channelled in their writing of place.

The question of national labels is one that keeps hovering over the two of them. Hari Kunzru's works have often been read along contemporary British writers such as Zadie Smith, or David Mitchell, whose themes resonate with Kunzru's (Nicol 2023; Green 2007; Childs and Green 2013).⁶ Yet his move to the United States in the early 2010s, the release of novels that were more largely focused on American issues (*Gods Without Men* in 2011, *White Tears* in 2016 and *Red Pill* in 2020) and his frequent participation to public debates in major venues (*Harper's Magazine* and *The New York Review of Books*, among others) have earned him the position of an "outsider looking in" on the American cultural scene. Kunzru is also regularly invited to major European and Indian literary events—a notable incident occurred at the Jaipur Literary Festival in 2012 when he attempted to read from *The Satanic Verses*, in reaction to a ban on Rushdie's presence at JLF.⁷ The writer has thus become an indispensable voice in the literary milieu, whose interventions occur, like his fiction, on a transnational scale. The promotion summary of the recent monograph dedicated to Hari Kunzru notes how the writer "has managed to shape a career in resistance of narrow labelling" (Shaw and Upstone 2023), which can apply to national affiliations, but also to questions of genre and form.

Mohsin Hamid is frequently pinned down as a member of a group of writers from Pakistan whose novels in English reached success in the 2000s and 2010s, comprehending Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam and Daniyal Mueenuddin among many others. While many common points can be found in their novels' approaches to the evolutions of Pakistani society, Hamid's writings are perhaps the most "globalised," in the sense that they quickly reached a vast international audience. Hamid has been lauded for his condensed, metafictional stories by literary circles in the United States and the United Kingdom, but he has also been recognised by the authorities in Pakistan, who gave him the "Star of Excellence," the *Sitara-i-Imtiaz*, for his services to literature. Perhaps because of this dual position, some have praised his realistic

⁶ James Green studied Kunzru's early novels alongside Mitchell and Lawrence Norfolk in his 2007 thesis titled *Flows, Routes and Networks: The Global Dynamics of Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell*.

⁷ Kunzru also read the opening of *The Satanic Verses* publicly at a PEN America event in New York one week after Rushdie's attack in August 2022, together with writers Colum McCann, Kiran Desai, Paul Auster and others.

representations of Pakistan (Desai 2000), while others have reproached him with an oversimplification of Islam and of Pakistani identity, accusing him of reducing it to fundamentalism and crime so as to fit the expectations of this international audience (Mian 2019). Some argue that Pakistani readers actually struggle to identify with transnational fiction like Hamid's (Sabri 2015). In critical volumes, a particular status is granted to his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which has been almost systematically included in American and transnational readings of post-9/11 fiction (Tolan, Morton *et.al.* 2012; Liao 2012). Since he acquired British citizenship, and since the release of *Exit West*, Hamid has also received renewed interest from British scholars who read *Exit West* as a post-Brexit novel (Shaw 2021; Day 2017). Besides, Hamid believes he belongs to a "post-postcolonial generation," which has not experienced the passage to independence firsthand and whose creative interests *and* political claims therefore differ from the landmarks of the postcolonial canon (qtd in Jay 2014: 106).

In the course of the analysis, the resistance to categorisation and the interpretative stakes of Hamid's and Kunzru's transnational stances will be addressed. Bearing in mind that nation- or identity-oriented labels can never be shed altogether – that literature is, after all, marketed, and still tends to be categorised geographically within English departments worldwide – the aim of this thesis is also to do justice to the multiple viewpoints Kunzru's and Hamid's works have allowed for in the past twenty years. I wish to take these labels into account while maintaining a critical discussion about their limitations, arguing that one can read these novels with a transnational perspective without ultimately restricting them to, or "solving" them into, a theoretical affiliation. The aim is to address how Hamid's and Kunzru's parallel resistance to the labels of the academia and the publishing world transpires in the themes and forms of their fictions, and is precisely part of what makes their literary production worth comparing. Besides, it is notably because of the moving nature of their affiliations between South Asia, the United States and the United Kingdom that the notion of place is so central to their respective creative projects.

4. A po/ethics of place: why, and how?

When questioned about one of the main characters in *Transmission*, a businessman who travels first-class around the globe, Hari Kunzru once explained that he was interested in members of a global class who "reject the idea of place," contending that "this has its dark side" and induces "a loss of contact with the local" (Cooke 2004). When I asked him in 2018 to

comment on this “rejection” of place, the terms of the debate seemed to have shifted. Kunzru explained how “the idea of place” could mean something different with a nationalist mindset instead of a global lifestyle. He notably expressed concern about the rhetoric of the “somewheres” and the “anywheres” theorized in post-Brexit Britain by thinker David Goodhart (*HK ITW* 2018; Goodhart 2017).

Herein lie the central questions articulated in much contemporary thought since the emergence of the theories of globalisation: not only “*what* is place?” but “*where* is place?” David Goodhart’s terminology is truly aimed at defining not only places, but people, along a dual line: a person is either *a* somewhere or *an* anywhere. Where the latter might be construed as a negative and negating definition of identity – a vacuous or dislocated identity – being a “somewhere” would on the contrary induce a sense of self-completion through place, and of knowing where one’s “true” place is. The relation between self and place has long been explored, from Heidegger’s *Dasein* to more recent thinkers of the “spatial turn” (Soja 1989). But this relationship has become a fundamental characteristic of transnational literary works attempting to approach contemporary modes of existence. Besides, these questions can also lead to look more closely at the material dimension of place, as material conditions of existence have also evolved together with globalisation. Is place an *any*-where that does not *matter*, in all senses of the term; or is it a *somewhere*, an incarnated or incarnating *something*?

In this interaction with the self and with the material world, the word “place,” “a word wrapped in common sense” (Cresswell 2004: 1), is thus often stretched almost to breaking point, threatening to become a mere *décor* or intermediary in complex definitions of belonging. The notions of placelessness, being out-of-place or *displaced* tend to be used as much as the noun “place” in itself. To philosopher Jeff Malpas, the word “can readily appear as ‘commonplace,’” which could explain why so many idioms and compounds are called upon in order to make sense of it (Malpas 2015: 2).

One should note that this thesis is written in English, which is not the norm for a doctorate enrolled in a French university. While this might seem to be a detail, it does induce that I am not writing about *lieux*, in French, but about “places,” in English. Discussing the contributions of Foucault and Lefebvre to the philosophy of space and place, Jeff Malpas points to a certain level of untranslatability surrounding these terms: “One cannot assume, for instance, that a term like *espace*, in French, can be unambiguously translated into the English ‘space’ nor *lieu* (or indeed *place*) into ‘place’” (Malpas 2015: 3). Malpas identifies the sociological and political implications of the terms in French, rather than the ontological dimension he associates

“place” and “space” with. One could further argue that the distinction between *espace* and *lieu* is sometimes less clear-cut in French criticism, for instance when Foucault, in “Des espaces autres,” describes “heterotopias” as “*ces espaces différents, ces autres lieux*” (2004: 15).⁸

By contrast, anglophone thinkers of the “spatial turn,” a critical trend identified by Edward Soja in *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (1989), have wrestled to date with the distinction between place and space. Tim Ingold for instance reads space as “non-world, as absence rather than co-presence” (2011: 142). In a landmark volume published in 1997, philosopher Edward Casey also re-examined the “fate of place,” with “the project of regaining recognition of the power of place” (2011: xi).⁹ This study does not intend to engage *per se* with these nuances and oppositions, and the preference given to the concept of place does not imply that space – or landscape, an equally fundamental concept for Malpas and Casey – will not be discussed. In *The Intelligence of Place*, Jeff Malpas explains that “[t]he difference between place and space is perhaps most succinctly expressed in terms of the idea of place as that which, through the boundary or limit that belongs to it, also opens up a space” (2015: 3). Yi-Fu Tuan similarly remarks that space and place often “require each other for definition” (1977: 6). Tuan contends as for him that “[s]pace” is more abstract than “place,” or that space evokes “openness, freedom and threat” while place conjures up “security and stability”; he observes that space “allows movement,” deducing that “place is pause” (*ibid.*) In *For Space*, Doreen Massey proposes to “refuse that distinction” and to “let go of those, by now almost intuitive, understandings” (2012: 6, 8).

The imaginaries proposed by Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru question precisely such associations and contentions – for instance, the notion of a “security and stability” of place cannot be taken for granted in a time of heightened surveillance and de-multiplied conflicts conducted on a global scale. The idea of place as “pause” is equally challenged by the contemporary championing of hyper-connectivity and speed. In their narratives, the writers underline the persistence, the mutability and the adaptability of a concept whose uncertain “fate” might partly transpire in the making of fiction.

In fact, the dynamics of economic and cultural globalisation, and the post-colonial re-mappings that have emerged at the same time, are sometimes taken to imply a certain placelessness – a nomadic detachment triggered by increased movement, or an annihilation of the *attachment* to place, as David Goodhart’s concept of the “anywheres” aims to show. Others

⁸ Initially a lecture Foucault gave in 1967.

⁹ Throughout this thesis, quotations from Edward Casey’s *The Fate of Place* are drawn from the 2011 edition.

have also pointed to the de-multiplication of spatial imaginaries entailed by the mass movement of people and ideas, as anyone can now “annex the global” (Appadurai 1998: 4). In *A Handbook of Material Culture* (2006), Barbara Bender warns that one should be wary of equating increased movements of population with either a standardized, or an absence of, relation with place:

Whilst there has been much work on the politics and economics of diasporic movement, there has been less attempt to “place” these movements. The trope of nomadology (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), whilst it hammers the privileged Western emphasis on roots and belonging, also threatens to flatten the huge diversity of experiences (...). We have to recognize that though people may be *dis*-placed or *dis*-located they are never no-where. They are always – somehow, and however desperately – in place. (qtd in Mianowski 2020 *n.p.*)

Where then does contemporary fiction stand with regard to “flatten[ing] the huge diversity of experiences”? How do novels and stories address the paradoxical attachments nurtured towards place in times of economic globalisation but also in the era of climate change, when movements to leave and reach places will keep increasing in number and strength? As Bender suggests, “placing” global mobility also means narrating these diverse experiences, and pushing forth the continued relevance of place as a prism for interpretation. Jeff Malpas similarly argues that place still holds “significance,” “even in the face of the seeming displacement that many also identify as a pervasive feature of modernity” (2015: 8).

It is because they take this “diversity of experiences” and this “significance” into account that Hamid’s and Kunzru’s literary representations of place can be read as a po/ethics. The portmanteau word “po/ethics,” used in works of criticism in the humanities and the arts (Adema 2018; Retallack 2004), is chosen here to represent a twofold objective.

First, the thesis proposes to study the *poetics* unravelling in these works. I wish to resituate the creative input of these fictional works, and to consider the writing of place not only as a representation of existing places, but as a craft which maintains a constant dialogue with the contemporary, and contributes to the making of the places we live in. In *Postcolonial Poetics: 21-st Century Readings*, Elleke Boehmer remarks that a lot of criticism about fiction from the postcolonial world has thus far tended to consider it only as a “representation” of a certain set of issues, where the focus on politics causes the reader to stand at “an unhelpful distance” from the text and its construction (2019: 21), and thus shedding poetics in the process. The latter word is defined by Boehmer by means of the Oxford English Dictionary. It is “the creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical

study of these; a theory of form” (2019: 20). In the present study I would like to be wary of the “unhelpful distance” Boehmer warns about – in fact, reading at the scale of place can prove essential to mitigate this distance. Analysing the “creative principles” allowed by the writing of place can help to reconsider, as Boehmer proposes, “the communicative and interpretative ‘how’ rather than the themed ‘what’ of postcolonial writing” (2019: 10).

This study also revolves around the second layer of the portmanteau word, the word *ethics*. As Boehmer’s definition demonstrates, the “social or cultural” never strays far from creation. From the onset of their literary careers, both Hamid and Kunzru have been vocal in public debates through different outlets. One could question whether this is entirely deliberate or the necessary fate of writers with South Asian origins writing in English, a condition partly indebted to literary marketing and media reception. Since discussing the scandal that surrounded his rejection of a prize from the *Mail on Sunday* at the beginning of his career, Kunzru has often been offered platforms in the media to express his opinions on current issues – of course, this is not completely disconnected from his first career as a journalist.

At the level of fiction, Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels have never ceased to engage with extremely contemporary issues, which very often revolve around uses and practices of place. Their writing of place is constantly infused with representations of the refugee condition, persisting imperialisms, climate change or digital technology. The reading of these works through the lens of ethics therefore also forms part of what Paul Veyret has called an “ethical (re-)turn” in the themes of recent postcolonial fiction – including Hamid’s *Exit West* – where “the representation of precariousness” conjures “moral and ethical obligations that call for the readers’ engagement” (2020: 111). Peter Boxall also observes “an ethical turn in the fiction of the new century” which responds to thematic concerns with the “contemporary global condition” (qtd in Shaw 2017: 1). As Christian Moraru suggests when analysing globalisation through a “planetary” reading, one can observe in such narratives a progressive “ethicization” of the economic and cultural dynamics of globalisation (2015: 73). Indeed, these fictions look at the cultural and economic implications of globalisation with an ethical stance, incorporating ultra-contemporary facts and events usually broached in journalism into the realm of fiction. While Hamid and Kunzru remain publicly outspoken, to them fiction is still the privileged means for broaching urgent issues that call for an ethical response, many of which lead to questioning contemporary relations with place.

In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière similarly argues that there is an “ethical turn” visible in contemporary times, not only in the political sphere but also in the arts (2010: 184). Rancière notably associates the return of ethics with the post-9/11 discourse on “good” and “evil” championed by George Bush’s policies (2010: 74-75). Going to the root of the term, he explains:

Before signifying a norm or morality, the word *ethos* signifies two things: both the dwelling and the way of being, or lifestyle, that corresponds to this dwelling. Ethics, then, is the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action. (2010: 184)

To Rancière, this “way of being” is not a rekindling of old forms of morality, and he specifies that “[t]he reign of ethics is not the reign of moral judgements over the operations of art or of political action” (*ibid.*). Neither can it be reduced to a shift from modernity to postmodernity (2010: 199). Rancière distinguishes two forms that this ethical turn can take in works of art: on the one hand, “artistic dispositifs that tend towards a function of social mediation, becoming the testimonies, or symbols, of participation in a non-descript community construed as the restoration of the social bond or the common world”; on the other hand, an art where “polemical violence tends to take on a new figure; it gets radicalized as a testimony to the unrepresentable, to endless evil and catastrophe” (2010: 194-195). As will be developed in this study, Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s novels participate in the writing of the “social bond” – including political action, hospitality, or even intimacy – but they also address, and sometimes subvert, the catastrophic streak that runs through many contemporary narratives.

In fact, the entanglement of Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writing of place with ethics can be read through its semantic origins as “dwelling,” or “environment,” as evoked by Rancière. For these writers, ethics involves the places associated with their identity, and the places towards which they want to direct readers’ attention. As Edward Casey remarks, “investigations of ethics and politics continue to be universalist in aspiration – to the detriment of place, considered merely parochial in scope” (2011: xii). Using the mechanisms of literary fiction, these novels question universalism and parochialism, and play on the scales imposed by the lingering oppositions of local and global, or even of place and space. In that sense, their writing enables to observe contemporary “ways of being.”

It is for instance significant that the two writers claim to create according to place. Mohsin Hamid, whose literary career has been shared between New York, London and Lahore, declared in an interview for the *Financial Times*: “I’m certain my books are different because

they were written in different places” (Hamid and Wilkinson 2017). Discussing the inception of *Gods Without Men*, Hari Kunzru explained how he had initially gone to New York to prepare “a book set in sixteenth-century India,” but ultimately could not: “it totally fell apart as soon as I got to New York. I just couldn’t concentrate on anything that wasn’t set in America” (Barron 2017). In *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, Bertrand Westphal articulates the mutual influences of place and writing, acknowledging the “temporal and spatial effects of the act of writing,” whereby “writing unveils its lability, the fragility of its spatio-temporal mooring” (2007: 37).¹⁰ Besides showing the “fragility” of this “mooring,” Hamid’s and Kunzru’s statements can also lead to questioning the very concept of place. Indeed, their acknowledgement of its defining influence echoes Tim Cresswell’s idea that “place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world” (2005: 11).

For writers like Hamid and Kunzru, ethics can thus translate as an attention to place – to one’s place on the world map, but also social place, and to other people’s places; to how places are formed, and form us in turn; and to a constant reassessment of the sense of place induced by writing in, and *with*, contemporary times. Echoing Rancière’s distinction between artistic “testimonies (...) of participation” and “a testimony to the unrepresentable,” their fictions of place can be seen to convey an art of witnessing, which plays with genre and realism but refuses the pitfalls of totalising or escapist narratives which relinquish the singularity of places. The practices of place, but also of reading, proposed in their works echo what Rita Felski calls a “critical ethos of attentiveness (...) shorn of any transcendental trappings” (2015: 740).

In *The Routledge Guide to the Environmental Humanities*, Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren also provide a definition of ethics, this time from an ecocritical viewpoint – they write that ethics is “an openness to others in the material reality of their own lives: noisy, fleshy, exuberant creatures with their multitude of interdependencies and precarities, their great range of calls, their care and their abundance along with their suffering and grief” (2017: 124). It is notably in light of this “material reality,” these “interdependencies and precarities,” that Hamid’s and Kunzru’s places can be read as “in the making.” Rather than understanding “making” only as related to the craft of writing, I propose here to analyse how the places found in these writers’ fiction are also represented, in the manner of Bruno Latour’s “agencies,” “with

¹⁰ My translation. In the original : “les effets temporels et spatiaux de l’acte d’écrire (...) l’écriture dévoile sa labilité, la fragilité de son ancrage spatio-temporel.” Bertrand Westphal, *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 2007, 37.

their *mode* of fabrication and their *stabilizing mechanisms* clearly visible” (2005: 120, my emphasis). Place, in short, is ceaselessly in the making – narratives of place allow to stage and understand such mechanisms and what place one might hold in it. Indeed, in this study I wish to demonstrate how Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru’s respective and shared narrative patterns seek to engage the reader in this po/ethics of place, using voice, gaze and complex narrative structures to portray the intricacies and paradoxes of place in today’s world. In the process, they also suggest how literary fiction, a genre whose upcoming death is frequently proclaimed and programmed (*HK ITW* 2018), can in fact prove resilient to the changes that are re-shaping our relations with others and with place, and even perhaps contribute to sustainable ways of being.

Because they keep interacting with hyper-contemporary events, writing their immediate interpretations of 9/11, Brexit, the “refugee crisis” or the election of Donald Trump, Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s narratives of place are also “in the making” from a temporal standpoint. This thesis itself has evolved as the writers were releasing new novels in the course of its writing. Critical reassessments of narratives about 9/11 will keep re-emerging with time, just like fictions that represent Brexit, or digital technologies. A notable instance is the case of Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*, published in 2004. As the writer admitted in our 2018 interview, this narrative is still strangely familiar to contemporary readers even though it discusses a relation to technology that is deliberately anchored in the late 1990s (*HK ITW* 2018). Without making assumptions about their future, these narratives undoubtedly speak to the immediate present and help making sense of place. Whether they represent the places that have undergone acts of terrorism, the immaterial places of the digital era, or places like Pakistan that are on the frontline of climate change, Kunzru’s and Hamid’s fictional places relentlessly question readers about where they stand today.

In the introduction to *The Fate of Place*, philosopher Edward Casey undertakes an examination of theories that show “place *at work*, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else” (2011: 286, emphasis in the original). Among examples of “something else,” Casey quotes “the course of history,” “the natural world,” “gender relations,” “the political realm,” “the productions of poetic imagination,” or “geographic experience and reality” (*ibid.*). This thesis follows a similar course of action and concurs with the premise that place is “something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else” – the analyses that follow propose to observe the formal and thematic implications of this dynamism in the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru.

5. Chapter summaries

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, conceived as a journey through what Casey terms “place(s) at work”: the influences that shape the imagined and material making of places, and the influence of the concept of place in the shaping of these contemporary narratives. In the first chapter, I propose a typology of the imaginaries of place present in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, assembled under the dichotomy opposing place as “here,” a familiar and/or visible place, and place as “there,” an imaginary elsewhere. Comparing examples from the two writers’ novels, I investigate the defining roles of authenticity, displacement and extension. These concepts also shed light on their relations to certain tropes and influences inherited from postcolonial representations of place. In the second chapter I focus on the interactions of place and memory, articulated in the narrative manifestation of traces. This leads to observing the writers’ approach to past and persisting forms of imperialism, as well as the function of architecture and sounds in Kunzru’s novels.

The third chapter is dedicated to the role of attachments. Delving into the literary depictions of ties in relations with place, I propose to observe themes such as place and the self, national and transnational attachments, and imaginaries of cosmopolitanism. This is followed by a fourth chapter exploring place as a condition for shared experience(s), or how Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives make manifest the contact zones (Pratt 1991), negotiations and reconfigurations which occur together with the inevitably common experience of place. The fifth chapter is dedicated to representations of the forms of control which emerge when place is perceived as a central stake of power, looking more particularly at the two writers’ forays into forms of monitoring, enclosure or inequality, and how they shape the sense of place.

Drawing from the many depictions of war, terror, and mass information found in the novels, the sixth chapter hinges on intersecting coordinates of space and time through the notion of event. What takes place, literally and metaphorically, can pose a number of challenges to the imagination. Hamid and Kunzru both approach the immediacy and unknowability of events by calling upon their fundamental interaction with place. This allows for a multifaceted reading of events, which challenges its singularisation into “*the event*” as well as the tropes of apocalyptic discourse. In the final chapter I suggest that Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels advocate a “cracking” of place, unveiling a double tendency that runs through their works: the simultaneous need to acknowledge the cracks and gaps that persist in experiences of place, and to strive against its interpretative stalemates. Observing the dynamics of drifting and hacking, I wish to examine the returns to place, the exchanges of places, or the metaphors of gaps found in their narratives, which are extended towards the reader in a po/ethical movement.

Chapter 1 **In search of place:** **forms of the “here” and “there”**

‘Forget that you’re Over Here!
Pretend that you’re Over There!’
(*Moth Smoke* 95)

Gaston Bachelard famously argued in *The Poetics of Space* that “here” and “there” are “the unfortunate adverbs of place,” which over time have been given “unsupervised powers of ontological determination” (1994: 212).¹¹ For writers like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, these “powers” are not taken for granted, but rather staged and unsettled through their writing of place. Questioning the scale, the shape and the familiarity attributed to place, these transnational writers reconsider such ontological views in light of phenomena such as globalisation or diasporic movement, suggesting that in contemporary fiction, narratives of “here” and “there” are constantly in the process of being reconfigured.

In his 1996 *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai explains that the two major phenomena of mass media and migration acted as an incentive on the imagination: “electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination” (1998: 4). Long before digital spaces and their practices had expanded drastically through social media, Appadurai intuited that changes in the way our imaginations work were to be a major component in the experience of modernity. The “work of the imagination,” in that sense, was to become a collective means of approaching and understanding the phenomena caused by globalisation. Appadurai considers that it is “neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (1998: 4). “Annexing the global,” understood as an appropriation process, could be seen as one of the main ways in which place is practiced today: watching or reading about other (real or fictional) places and trying to relate to them; moving to a different place and finding affinities or similarities with one’s previous place, in order to appropriate it and to find its materialisations at a local scale. But what is left of our experience of place in these “annexations,” and is the global annexed in the same way by all? In the two decades since Hari Kunzru and Mohsin Hamid started writing, imaginaries of place

¹¹ This date refers to the translated edition – *La Poétique de l’Espace* was first published in 1957.

and space have been confronted to the spread of digital technologies in all areas of life, to ideological wars, to the redefinition of borders in different parts of the world, including South Asia, the United States and the United Kingdom, or to drastic changes in migration patterns and in the material conditions of asylum. These collective evolutions undoubtedly transpire in the sense of place emanating from their novels, which portray the “annexation” of faraway places in everyday experience.

Recent developments in literary theory have striven to approach these phenomena and to incorporate their implications into the practice of analytical reading. This includes the proponents of “world literature,” who “treat ‘globalisation’ not directly but as an underlying determinant at a certain remove – as the sociological pretext or warrant for a fresh engagement with questions of comparative literary method” (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 5). Others like Paul Jay believe in a “transnational turn,” which began “when the study of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization” (2014: 2). For Christian Moraru, this “turn” is rather “planetary,” a term intended to display how representations of the global compel us to think also of the local. He contends that “the prevalent, nationalist-territorialist (nation-state bounded) methodologies do seem to be, throughout the humanities, out of time,” (2015: 3) but at the same time warns about limiting one’s interpretations to the global and its totalising “globe” mindset (2015: 29). These questions of terminology and scale are unquestionably part of the discussion of place in novels like Hamid’s and Kunzru’s – it matters to understand what the “here” and “there” of place carry along with them, and what perspectives and analyses they can allow for.

For biographical and creative reasons, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru stand at the crossroads of these phenomena and interpretations. Since the early 2000s, their writings have been documenting both the evolution of collective spatial imaginaries and the resistance of singular perspectives to the “time-space compression” that was the premise of globalisation theories (Massey 2001: 147). In his *New York Times* review of Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men*, Douglas Coupland defined Kunzru’s works as belonging to the genre of “translit,” defined as follows: “Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader’s mind” (2012). When I met Hari Kunzru in 2019 and asked him to comment on this newfound label, he answered:

I have (...) a problem with the idea of the collapsing of place, because I think that suggests a kind of globalisation or globalism that flattens everything into one system of relations. If anything, I am more interested in refusing that in

some way, and understanding how completely different the world seems from different places and perspectives. (HK ITW 2019)

Interestingly, when taking up Coupland's assertion, Kunzru shifted from the word "space" to "place," which reveals the importance the latter term holds in the writer's own imagination. This part will approach how, in similar and sometimes differing ways, Kunzru's and Hamid's fictions attempt to capture "how completely different the world seems from different places and perspectives." It will do so by exploring motifs and mechanisms used by both writers to convey the limits and the possibilities of familiar imaginaries of place. These motifs echo their transnational backgrounds but also display a consciousness of well-known postcolonial tropes, and a willingness to attune these tropes to the hyper-contemporary experience – to "annex" them into it.

In the first section, I intend to broach the cultural and literary implications of authenticity, or how place is paradoxically expected to look authentic in works of fiction. Each in their own way, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru have long voiced their resistance to the discourse of purity (Hamid 2018a) or authenticity (Kunzru and Peake-Tomkinson 2017), and I wish to examine how these notions translate in their writing of place. This also means looking at the notions of stereotype and marketing with regard to place, which I will do in a subsequent development. The second section of this chapter is devoted to displacement, focusing first on the notion of diaspora, a label often assigned to writers of South Asian origin, before examining imaginaries of the so-called "West" and their literary representations. Finally, I propose to discuss Mohsin Hamid's proclaimed poetics of transposable experience, and the limits and possibilities this implies for the writing of place. The last section of this chapter is centred around a writing pattern that the two writers have in common: the formal and thematic yearning for *extensions* of place. Examples from three of the writers' novels can help understand how Hamid's and Kunzru's fictional places seem to present a constant extension of place, from a "here" to a "there," an elsewhere or a "beyond."

1.1. "See how the land lies": place and authenticity

The passage that gives its title to this section can be found in Hari Kunzru's first novel, *The Impressionist* (2002). Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan, has changed identities several times and is now accompanying an Oxford anthropologist in his study of the Fotse, a fictional sub-Saharan tribe he has been fascinated with for years. Set at the end of the 1910s, this novel displays the fallacies and hypocrisy of a crumbling British Empire,

manifested strikingly in this exchange between Professor Chapel, the anthropologist, and his two assistants, about an area they are about to map out:

‘I thought,’ says Morgan, ‘that strictly Fotseland isn’t ours to survey.’ (...)
‘Of course it’s ours. We just don’t administer it directly. We rule through the local emirs, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make a map of the place.’
‘I thought there were some question of the French –’
‘Politics, politics,’ sighs Chapel. ‘Look, they’re just coming with us to take a look at things. See how the land lies. Politics has nothing to do with it.’
‘Very good, Professor (...). How the land lies. Very good.’ (TI 430)

In this parody of self-assured English banter, the land that “lies” evokes both the land that can be found there and the impossibility to *trust* the place. In a typical example of the map as a tool for power, which provides mastery over a territory, the characters paradoxically betray the uncertainty they feel towards this place – is it “ours”? Is it possessed and administered “through” others? The fictional place that is Fotseland, Kunzru’s parodic “heart of darkness,” is an example of how the writer mocks the vain desire to tame and to know a place entirely.

Yi-Fu Tuan contends that “[w]hen space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place. Kinesthetic and perceptual experience as well as the ability to form concepts are required for the change if the space is large” (1977: 73). Equating place with familiarity has determining implications for narratives of place – it might de facto restrict the writing of place to the description of realistic, recognisable settings. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels do not seem to abide by such an agenda. Their novels introduce place as mutable and dynamic rather than as something that can be tamed, by drawing a map or by recognising a ready-made representation.

In this section I propose to look at the notions of authenticity and purity, and how they play out in Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s ethics and poetics of place. While the first development investigates the forms taken by “authentic” or “inauthentic” relations to place in the contemporary material experience, the second focuses on the specific issue of literary stereotypes. I propose to discuss the expected representations of place weighing over writers like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, and how they frequently attempt to defuse and resist those expectations.

1.1.1. “No one place’s realer than another”: “unpicking” authenticity

In *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Edward Relph argues that modernity has given way to a relation with place that is often inauthentic. This relation, to him, amounts to

essentially no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities. It is

merely an attitude which is socially convenient and acceptable – an uncritically accepted stereotype, an intellectual of aesthetic fashion that can be adopted without real involvement (1976: 82)

While it could be read as cultural conservatism, Relph's position is in fact part of a conversation about cultural globalisation and the "annexation of the global" through mass media observed by Arjun Appadurai, mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. To Relph,

[a]n inauthentic attitude towards places is transmitted through a number of processes, or perhaps more accurately 'media,' which directly or indirectly encourage 'placelessness,' that is, a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike and feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience. (1976: 90)

To demonstrate this "inauthentic attitude towards places," Relph examines examples as varied as kitsch aesthetics or the production of places through planning. His belief that many places start to "look alike" and "offer the same (...) experience" is also an anticipation of what Marc Augé observed to be the "non-places" of modernity such as airports, ring roads or malls (1992).

Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru address this question and wrestle with it in their novels, demonstrating the fallacies and paradoxes of the discourse of authenticity by means of works of fiction – which, in themselves, obviously play with the truth and the sense of authenticity. In Hari Kunzru's narratives, authenticity is found in representations of the material aspects of consumer society and cultural globalisation, and in matters of identity and affiliation. He explains in an interview:

The joke I often repeat is that I'm the least authentic person I know, and a lot of my writing is about unpicking authenticity. I often like to follow arguments about how productive inauthenticity is because it leads us to understand how much of identity is constructed, it's about performance and it inoculates one against certain kinds of 'groupthink.' (Kunzru and Peake-Tomkinson 2017)

Kunzru's position echoes some of the ideas defended by Theodor Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, where the German philosopher exposed his criticism of the essentialist trend spearheaded by thinkers like Heidegger, particularly in the context of radio and live music performances. Adorno denounced what he saw as the language of authenticity – "a trademark of societalized chosenness, noble and homey at once – sub-language as superior language" (1973: 5-6). The figure of Adorno is not completely foreign to Kunzru, who dedicated a podcast episode to the philosopher.¹² While Adorno focused on music, Kunzru's writing of place and globalisation could also be read to debunk this "superior language" and the fallacies of any

¹² See Hari Kunzru, "It's Always Sunny in the Dialectic." *Into the Zone*, Pushkin Industries, episode 4, 2020.

claims to represent place authentically, but also the language that, in Relph's words, "directly or indirectly encourage[s] 'placelessness'" (1976: 90). Perhaps the most striking example of this is the novel *Transmission*, which portrays extreme relations to place through characters like Arjun Mehta, an Indian immigrant worker in the United States, who is physically limited because he does not own a car, and Guy Swift, a British marketing manager who constantly moves across the world in planes and prides himself in being able to go from place to place smoothly without ever rooting himself in one. One could read the materialistic character of Guy as the epitome of the inauthentic, fascinated by newness and wealth, which he finds in the cityscape of Dubai or in the London glass tower where he buys a condo (*T* 178; 118). Guy is designed as a flat character throughout the entire novel. Even after a final twist of fate that has had him mistaken for an asylum seeker and forcibly detained, Guy's attempt at making a more grounded life for himself is still characterised by a problematic authenticity. At the end of the novel, he is described living in a remote cottage and seeking "sincerity":

The earth is also behind Guy's post life-change career choice. The pots on the windowsill are his. One room of the cottage has been converted into a workshop, complete with a wheel and a small electric kiln. (...) They are sincere pots. The new Guy Swift is a sincere man. (*T* 277)

The passage shows the character's persisting inadequacy in time and space – he is "post" change, and the earth is "behind" his life, in all senses of the term. Guy's newfound dedication to earthenware still betrays superficial attachments, shown in the staged paraphernalia of pottery found in his cottage. Guy's "sincere pots" actually mock the desire to find authenticity through a return to the past. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan argues, in reference to museums, that "[t]he cult of the past calls for illusion rather than authenticity" (1977: 194). Kunzru debunks several avatars of this "cult of the past" in his depictions of contemporary places. Another instance can be found in *My Revolutions*, where the English cottage is once again the locus of this "cult." At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, who lives in the 1990s with his partner to whom he hides his past as a political activist, comments on her taste for the "quaint":

I've never found the low ceilings and narrow corridors of country cottages quaint, at least not straightforwardly. They're scaled to the small stature of poorly nourished people; an architecture of hardship and deprivation. Of course I've never said this to Miranda. Irregular walls and creaking floorboards please her. I think she'd like to forget she was born in an industrial society. I can't, at least not in the same way. (...) A country life, but with plumbing and telecoms and antibiotics. A rich person's fantasy. (*MR* 3)

The protagonist undermines the quest for authenticity, described as a mere “fantasy” that can never quite be achieved. This character’s political past means that he acknowledges the vaster social implications of having “plumbing and telecoms” in a house. By contrast, Miranda’s wish to return to a pre-industrial past – a 1990s version of the contemporary trend of “cottagecore” – manifests in a wish to scale down her home and give precedence to private comfort over public life.¹³ In a smaller place, one can wish to find a more authentic lifestyle, one that would not allow for consumerist accumulation and physical distancing between its inhabitants. Yet Miranda’s desire for authenticity actually leads to the frenzied piling up of supposedly authentic objects: “tribal, spiritual, hand-crafted little knick-knacks that are supposed to edge us nearer to Miranda’s wish-fulfilment future of agrarian harmony” (*ibid.*).

Attempting to find authenticity through the “spiritual” is also integral to the people and places described in *Gods Without Men*. In this multi-layered narrative, many subplots alternate, all taking place in the Mojave Desert in California. The novel plays with an age-old fascination that this place has always exerted over the collective imaginary. From a Spanish missionary in the 18th century to a child who disappears in 2008, the desert is the object of many quests and many unknowns, some of which are presented as a quest for something purer, and more intense, that the barren landscape of the desert might be able to provide. Kunzru’s many interests in subcultures and history transpire through each of these subplots. In one of them, a young woman from a desert town called Dawn starts joining a UFO cult, inspired by the real-life cult that took place there around the figure of George Van Tassel and the building he created to enter in contact with aliens, called the Integratron (Stringfellow 2018). As Dawn returns to see her friends after having spent time at this peculiar place, she tries to convince them to join the “Ashtar Galactic Command,” described as “[s]omething real” (*GWM* 162). In fact, the reader is made to understand that Dawn’s perception of “something real” is largely indebted to the consumption of substances, like many others in that community. Unconvinced by her words, her friends question this supposed authenticity: “‘What’s not real about here?’ asked Sheri. ‘No one place’s realer than another’” (*ibid.*). The gap that separates Dawn from her friends in the experience of place is contained within the girl’s disarming common sense, in an off-the-cuff answer which one could precisely read as *authentic*. Kunzru willingly explores the unknown in this novel, but is also careful to constantly unsettle any claims of authenticity or truth.

For Mohsin Hamid, the concern with authenticity translates in the notion of purity. In a 2018 piece for *The Guardian* titled “In the Land of the Pure, No One is Pure Enough,” he

¹³ For more on this see Ambar Parda, “What Is Cottagecore? Meet The Biggest Trend During Quarantine.” *HuffPost*, 28 April 2021. <https://rb.gy/1koiby> (last accessed 11-03-2023).

examines the rise of nationalisms worldwide, and of phenomena advocating purity, such as white supremacy in the United States. Returning to the etymological root of *Pak-i-stan* – the land of the pure –, Hamid defends the idea that fiction is particularly revealing of an impulse for impurity, rather than purity:

The very possibility of reading, the fact that it can occur, that a human being can experience this, the thoughts of another in the same physical place, that place so deep within, where the reader’s own thoughts reside – and furthermore that the reader is drawn to this experience, seeks for it, desires it – reminds us that the impure is fundamental to what we are (...). Literature is the practice of the impure. (2018a)

As will be developed later in this chapter, Hamid’s theoretical expression of a “practice of the impure” notably manifests in the willingness to constantly transpose the places which he discusses here – physical places as well as the “place deep within” his readers. Yet as one can observe, the transposition of place through fiction can always run the risk of representations travelling poorly. The questions of stereotype and exoticism are central in this regard.

1.1.2. Of mangoes and minarets: place and stereotype

In the 2010 *Granta* collection dedicated to Pakistan, Hari Kunzru introduced a collection of artworks called “High Noon” and discussed the expectations of the cultural market towards artists who have origins in South Asia. He explained:

Sometimes one feels the artists have internalized the categories of post-colonialism and are now doing what is expected of them as Pakistani artists, by reproducing them in the hope of critical approbation. Yet even the failure to represent oneself authentically, the impossibility of seeing oneself except as belated, constructed, supplicatory, is significant. (2010: 136)

The question of authenticity is therefore also one that impacts creation. In our 2018 interview, Kunzru further explained how this leads to the reproduction of stereotypes, and how writers themselves are more and more reluctant to participate in this reproduction (*HK ITW* 2018). It is particularly significant that Kunzru was invited to discuss this question in a volume about Pakistan, having no personal connections with the country himself – the essay is proof of the central position he holds in debates about authenticity that are becoming more and more central in the anglophone cultural market. Mohsin Hamid, as for him, took part in a text published on the online version of the same *Granta* volume, called “How to Write About Pakistan.” Co-authored with fellow fiction writers Mohammed Hanif, Kamila Shamsie, and Daniyal Mueenuddin, this humorous text echoes Mohsin Hamid’s own version of the “how-to” self-

help book, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. The first part of the text thus poses as a priority that a story about Pakistan “[m]ust have mangoes” – a particularly ironic proposition if one thinks of Mohammed Hanif’s novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008). The writers go on to explain how Pakistan has become subject to an unstable re-mapping, which places it somewhere between several stereotyped associations:

Pakistan is just like India, except when it’s just like Afghanistan. (...) It will become clear whether the Pakistan of our work is Indo-Pak or Af-Pak depending on whether the cover has paisley designs or bombs / minarets / menacing men in shalwar kameezes (there are no other kinds of men in shalwar kameezes). If women are on the cover, then the two possible Pakistans are expressed through choice of clothing: is it bridal wear or burkhas? (Hamid *et. al.* 2010 *n.p.*)

The writers also refer to the discourse of terrorism that surrounds Pakistan in worldwide media. Later on, they ironically ask readers to “bear in mind that Pakistan is a market-leader. The Most Dangerous Place in the World™” (*ibid.*). The stakes of such a text, and more widely, of the unspoken pressure exerted over South Asian writers for this presumed authenticity, largely have to do with matters of place and landscape. The question raised here is how cultural production, and particularly literary fiction, contributes to, or on the contrary, subverts, the marketing of place stereotypes across the globe. In a landmark article titled “South Asian Literature and Global Publishing,” Sarah Brouillette notes how the waves of popularity experienced by authors with South Asian connections who write in English, such as Amitav Ghosh or Jhumpa Lahiri, can lead some to perceive South Asian English-language literature as “the production from afar of works that seem to be about South Asia, but which, in not being produced from within it, are not sufficiently attentive to local realities” (2007: 34). Written in English, published by major houses like Scribner or Penguin, the novels of anglophone writers from Pakistan are marketed so that they can appeal to a western audience and echo their own existing perception of what a place like Pakistan is like.

As a British writer with Indian origins, Hari Kunzru has willingly attempted to blur such expectations and to discourage those who might have been chasing him for stereotypes about India. After his highly parodic, self-referential descriptions of the British Raj in *The Impressionist*, the writer moved on to novels like *Transmission* or *God Without Men* which unfold in several places across the world or in several time periods, and keep shifting narrators, as if to ensure that the narrative never fossilizes into one single authoritative perspective. Interrogated at the beginning of his career about the “postcolonial niche” in the publishing market, Kunzru explained that he wanted to try radically different things – he mentioned his

project with *My Revolutions*, a novel set entirely in 1970s Britain with no mention of ethnicity, and believed that it would be “the acid test” (Aldama 2008: 14). Since then, Kunzru’s writing took on a more American turn with *Gods Without Men* and *White Tears*, before returning to a middle ground with *Red Pill*, a novel set partly in Europe and partly in the US. While the places of the diegesis vary, the characters still seem to draw from his own experiences – Jaz, in *Gods Without Men*, talks about growing up in an immigrant family in the US. A particularly playful reference is operated with the narrator of *Red Pill*, a man whose father is Indian and mother is English, and who is told by the head of his writers’ residence: “I’m surprised you aren’t writing about Indian poetry. (...) [b]ecause it’s your culture” (*RP* 29). Thwarting and staging the expectations of readers and publishers, Kunzru’s fictional places have unquestionably stood the test of internalised exoticism, and contributed to enlarging the spectrum of themes and places that writers with South Asian origins can be expected to write about.

Mohsin Hamid’s own novels to this date have engaged with these stereotyped expectations, and have also contributed to re-shaping them. One key aspect of this is the de-referential strategies adopted in some of his novels, which will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. For instance, the narratives are set in “Rising Asia” (*HTG*) or in an unnamed Eastern city (*EW*) rather than explicitly placed in Pakistan, allowing the writer to write more freely about the characters’ experiences but also the landscapes and the places that appear in the narratives. In other novels, Hamid’s strategy is to be explicit about the contemporary material and social struggles of Pakistan, and to re-place them at the level of relatable characters who face daily struggles. This applies to his debut, *Moth Smoke* (2000), a novel which was immediately praised by writer Anita Desai for its successful overturning of stereotypes:

One could not really continue to write, or read about, the slow seasonal changes, the rural backwaters, gossipy courtyards, and traditional families in a world taken over by gun-running, drug-trafficking, large-scale industrialism, commercial entrepreneurship, tourism, new money, nightclubs, boutiques, politicians and civil servants noted for greed and corruption, and the constant threat of an explosion — of population, of crime, of the nuclear bomb, some kind of terrible explosion. (Desai 2000 *n.p.*)

The urban setting of *Moth Smoke* – in Lahore, Hamid’s birthplace – indeed precludes any picturesque evocations such as “gossipy courtyards” and “rural backwaters.” This does not mean that the novel suppresses any tokens of locality – mangoes are mentioned, for instance (*MS* 66) – but instead of trying to fit stereotypes that would meet the expectations of a non-Pakistani reader, Hamid’s representations of Lahore are unsettled by several events. These include the nuclear tests that take place during that summer – the plot is set in 1998, during

Pakistan's face-off with India – or the increasing heat that precedes the monsoon in the first half of the novel, and which confronts the reader to Pakistan's situation regarding climate change and resource planning. In one particular example, the narrator is careful to balance out the mention of “parrots,” which could appear as a simplistic stereotype, with the other realities of that Lahore summer:

The parrots the monsoon brought to my banyan tree have decided to stay awhile. (...) I can see them from my window, swimming in and out of the green reef of the canopy like tropical fish (...). Along with parrots, the rains have brought flooding to the Punjab and a crime wave to Lahore. Heists and holdups and the odd bombing compete with aerial food drops and humanitarian heroics for headline space on the front pages of the newspapers. (MS 258)

To the colourful evocation of the parrots, the “green reef” and “tropical fish,” the narrative suddenly juxtaposes a much darker picture of Lahore. In the same sentence, the narrator amalgamates the parrots to “flooding” and “a crime wave,” themselves associated in the image of water pouring in. The final sentence compiles a number of other issues in a series of hushed sounds (heists, holdups, humanitarian heroics, headline). These take place not only on the ground but also in the sky, and in international newspapers. The passage is particularly interesting for the movement it operates from the singularity of the parrots, to the Punjab and then Lahore, and ultimately to the mention of international geopolitics which keep impacting the representation of Pakistan. In passages such as this one, Hamid attempts to provide a multifaceted representation of Pakistan's social space and urban life, trying to resist certain stereotypes but also relying on gaze and scale to better display the complexity of the place.

In an interview, Hamid explained how his writing of the city and the expectation of bringing in “exotic” markers are connected to his perception of literary history:

I certainly think there is a post-post-colonial generation. I'm sure a lot of voices you're seeing coming out now are people who never had a colonial experience. We don't place a burden of guilt on someone who's no longer there. (...) Also, people are writing about the subcontinent with eyes that are not meant to be seeing for someone who doesn't live there, people who are not exoticizing where they come from. I try not to mention the minaret, because when I'm in Lahore, I don't notice it. The basic humanity is not different from place to place. (qtd in Jay 2014: 106)

Hamid's claim of writing in a “post-post-colonial” moment is central to understanding why he often dodges stereotyped representations of place – from the writer's perspective, there is no reason to either attempt to satisfy a colonial gaze, nor to practice self-censorship in the settings of his plots. At the same time, Hamid's novels have not escaped the “minarets” and “men in

shalwar kameezes” which he was precisely deriding in the essay “How to Write about Pakistan.” The Penguin paperback editions of his first three novels all present a man at the forefront, gazing in the distance from the vantage point of a Mughal arch that frames his figure. While writers might be careful to avoid “exoticizing where they come from,” it seems that others persist in doing it for them, or at least “framing” them within certain expectations.

Yet one should be wary of reducing this issue to a matter of publishing policies. In *Critical Branding: Postcolonial Studies and the Market*, Caroline Koegler reinstates the central role of academics, and postcolonial critics in particular, when it comes to the circulation and the labelling of texts on a global scale (2018). Such a responsibility had already been commented upon by Sarah Brouillette (2007) or by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, where he warned against a “cult of authenticity,” considered valuable in first-person narratives from the Global South (2002: 155). This constant over-determination might explain the reluctance expressed by writers like Hamid towards terms like “postcolonial.”

Another aspect that is implicit to the marketing of, and the criticism surrounding works like Hamid’s and Kunzru’s is the prevalence of the tropes of impurity and in-betweenness, and in particular hybridity, a concept postcolonial critics have long been turning to. Initially, the concept of hybridity was presented as a counter-narrative to the discourse of authenticity and purity. Bhabha explained how it could reveal the “deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (2004: 159). Hamid himself revisits this trope in his nonfiction, where he often claims to be a “mongrel” (2015: xvii). Enumerating the insults directed at those who have a mixed background, he explains in the introduction to his collection of essays that “[h]ybridity need not be the problem. It could be the solution” (*ibid.*).

While this forms part of Hamid’s personal conception of citizenship, from an aesthetic standpoint the interactions of hybridity and authenticity remain up for debate. In an article called “The Real Deal: Authenticity in Literature and Culture,” postcolonial scholar Claire Chambers quotes an essay by Salman Rushdie called “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does not Exist” (1983), where Rushdie debunked the term of “Commonwealth Literature” for its problematic equation with an “authentic” representation of a Commonwealth nation, leading to expectations of place and landscape idiosyncrasies. Chambers notes how Rushdie then preferred to abide by Bhabha’s proposed theory of hybridity, which to Rushdie, could prove more compelling and creative. Yet she also remarks that since then, “hybridity, pluralism, fragmentation, and uncertainty have been invested with a paradoxical authority.” The problem with this “authority,” she explains, is that “[f]or those who don’t have the cultural or material capital to take for themselves ‘a bit of this and a bit of that,’ just as for those brought up to take

religious purity seriously, hybridity may be seen as the preserve of (...) a transnational elite” (Chambers 2017 *n.p.*). This is perhaps where some of the criticism directed towards Hamid’s writing may be better understood. The writer is undoubtedly part of a “transnational elite,” and one might wonder with Chambers whether this might lead to claims of a new “authenticity,” one precisely based on a transnational lifestyle. On a national scale, Zahra Sabri remarks that Pakistani writers from a “relatively elite background” like Hamid can hardly be deemed representative of other social classes in Pakistan, which means that “the issue of authenticity arises” when assessing whether their fiction can truly speak to all Pakistanis, and whether they can relate to it (Sabri 2015 *n.p.*). In the end, Claire Chambers suggests that criticism about in/authenticity is in itself a very partial approach to literary fiction:

Rather than placing authors on a scale based on how authentic or synthetic they are perceived to be, it is surely more suggestive for critics to complicate the borderline, tracing how texts’ various layers have come together and critiquing thin characterization or under-researched plot points while celebrating rich description and attention to detail. (Chambers 2017 *n.p.*)

It matters indeed to reinstate the role readers and literary critics themselves might have when they claim to identify stereotypes of place. As Bertrand Westphal argues in *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, “stereotype is not circumscribed to the narrative one is reading; it also lurks in the commentator” (2007: 236). Westphal’s proposed solution to avoid the pitfalls of a stereotyped reading is to follow the text “*towards* the place one aspires to, but never *in* the place – the circumvention that unfolds is beneficial to the narrative” (2007: 240, emphasis in the original).¹⁴ In the case of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, another way to “circumvent” stereotype and to read *towards* place is to examine how their writing is intrinsically connected to displacement.

1.2. Exits, West and other: imaginaries of displacement

Whether it be social mobility, economic emigration, escaping war, embarking on spiritual quests or a displacement from rurality to the city, going from one place to another is a recurring issue in the fictional works of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru. Their novels focus

¹⁴ I have not had access to the translation of Westphal’s book, therefore these are my translations. The original text reads: “Le stéréotype n’est pas circonscrit au récit que l’on a sous les yeux ; il guette aussi le commentateur” (2007: 236) ; “*vers* le lieu auquel on aspire, mais jamais *dans* le lieu : dérobade qui survient au plus grand profit du récit, qui par sa nature est désir (*de-siderium*), attraction sidérale vers ce qui est au-delà” (2007: 240).

on arrivals as much as on departures, as well as journeys – Kunzru’s characters often spend time on boats and trains (*The Impressionist*), planes (*Transmission*), or cars (*My Revolutions*).

In *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, Tim Cresswell defines displacement as “the act of moving between locations,” (Cresswell 2006: 2). Using the word “location,” Cresswell relies on the definition of place he had previously borrowed from John Agnew in *Place: A Short Introduction*. Agnew introduces three different criteria that make place meaningful: “location” (“fixed co-ordinates on the Earth’s surface”); “locale” (“the material setting for social relations”); and the “sense of place” (“the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place”) (Cresswell 2004: 7). In *On the Move*, Cresswell talks about “displacement” to differentiate movement (“the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies, and social implications of that movement are considered”) from mobility, which refers to “socially produced movement” (Cresswell 2006: 3). Yet beyond the movement/mobility duality, the word displacement in itself calls for an examination. Three definitions of the verb “displace” appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “move from the proper or usual position”; “take the place, position, or role of”; “force (someone) to leave their home, typically because of war or persecution: *displaced persons*” (OED 2008). Only the first one refers to Cresswell’s “mov[ement] between locations.” To dis/place, therefore, means at once to *remove*, to *replace*, and to leave one’s place – and perhaps one’s *sense of place*, to echo Cresswell’s terminology.

This semantic plurality is reflected in the many ways in which Hamid and Kunzru tackle displacement. The following developments wish to address this plurality, first by clarifying the writers’ respective relations to the concept of diaspora. I then propose to analyse the signifier of the “West,” first with *The Impressionist*, a playful instance of counter-Orientalism, before moving on to its contemporary avatars in *Transmission*, *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The third analysis looks at several examples from Mohsin Hamid’s novels which illustrate his poetics of “universal” displacement – the inverted commas are of importance here, since the adjective requires a close investigation.

1.2.1. Spreading and scattering: diaspora and displacement

How does the multiplication of migration flows affect place? How does it shape our understanding of place, even as one decides to leave one place to reach another? In his theorisation of the “work of the imagination,” Arjun Appadurai contends that migration is more than ever triggered by access to mass-mediated imaginaries of movement, to the point of

becoming the most widely shared experience. This, to him, leads to three different types of diasporas worldwide: a diaspora of hope (manifested by “increased rates of migration at every level of social, national and global life”); a diaspora of terror, triggered by conflicts (in this diaspora, people “move and must drag their imagination for new ways of living along with them”); and a diaspora of despair, which is a “move in search of work, wealth and opportunity, often because (...) current circumstances are intolerable” (1998: 6).

Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru’s works largely document these different diasporas. Hamid’s first novel *Moth Smoke* addresses the “diaspora of hope,” with wealthy Lahori youth who complete an initiation journey to the United States before returning home. By following a couple who flee their birth city caught in civil war, *Exit West* is an instance of the “diaspora of terror,” while *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* shows a rural family’s move from extremely poor circumstances to the city, echoing Appadurai’s “diaspora of despair.” These sociological realities also pervade Kunzru’s stories, whether as the characters’ backstory (in *Gods Without Men*, the protagonist, a financial analyst living in the United States, negotiates his diasporic Indian identity), as the main plotline (in *Transmission*, which follows Arjun’s journey from New Delhi to New England) or as one of the steps in the character’s identity quest in *Red Pill*, where encountering Syrian refugees in Berlin leads to a deep epiphanic awakening.

The word “diaspora” in itself requires clarification. From a cultural standpoint, Appadurai’s use of the word in the late 1990s relied on the theorisation of a post-national order, leading to the creation of “diasporic public spheres” in a world “free from the constraints of the nation form” (1998: 22-23) – whether this has now been achieved is more than questionable. In the fields of academia and publishing, the term “diasporic” is often used as a follow-up to the adjective “postcolonial” and as a shorthand for *South Asian* diasporic writers, at times referring also to Black British writers, all of whom “should explicitly engage with issues related to displacement, migration and relocation and address the issues of imaginary geography or language” (Král 2009: 4). Françoise Král reminds us that the term is culturally equivocal:

Today one can still distinguish between two trends in critical literature dealing with issues related to diasporic populations, those which use the term diaspora in a strict sense and distinguish between migrants, expatriates, refugees (Cohen, 1971; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1991) and those who use the term diaspora as metaphor (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1990, 1994 and Hall, 1990). (Král 2009:12)

Writers like Hamid and Kunzru are often categorized as “diasporic” in critical works (Ahmed *et.al.* 2012; Král 2009; Liao 2012; Sell 2014). If taken literally, the term might not prove very representative of their entire body of works and their biographies. Hari Kunzru participated in

a roundtable called “Defining Diaspora” at the Jaipur Literary Festival in 2009, where he explained that “all he ever did by way of ‘leaving home’ was ‘to move to central London from the suburbs’” (Sampath 2013). As a metaphor, the term can indeed allow for original interpretations – Rachel Rochester reads Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* as an example of “speculative diaspora,” extending the term to the colonial and extraterrestrial subplots of the novel, while Adriano Elia, in *Metaphor and Diaspora*, analyses Hamid’s use of metaphor as representative of diasporic literature (Rochester in Illott *et al.* 2018; Elia, in Sell 2012). Borrowing several examples from *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Elia remarks: “This transformation of the role of metaphor from a specialized concern of rhetoricians and literary critics to a central concept in the understanding of the human condition is a crucial feature in Hamid’s fiction” (Elias in Sell 2012: 64).

The term diaspora comes from the Greek *diasperein*: to scatter about, or disperse. The word “place,” as for it, stems from the Greek *plateia*, meaning “a (broad) way;” the Indo-European root is *plat-*, which means “to spread” (*Etymonline*). In that sense, both place and diaspora evoke a possible expansion, the possibility to exist beyond the confines of one’s original dwelling place, yet by maintaining a relation to that original place. These parallel dynamics form part of the metaleptic devices which operate in novels like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru’s. Their novels, particularly Hamid’s, can be read in light of this sense of a shared diasporic condition and subjectivity, yet bearing in mind the cultural limitations of this term, and remembering how there can be many transversal grids of interpretation overlapping with that of the South Asian diaspora.

For instance, some works of cultural theory have developed a reflection around the notion of a Muslim diaspora, echoing the age-old concept of the transnational *ummah*. Most of these works incorporate Mohsin Hamid’s fiction in their analyses, although other critics believe Hamid’s representations of “Muslim existence” to be lacking (Mian 2019). In *Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion, Representations*, Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert lay the emphasis on “the fluid, ever-changing movement of the imagination and on the multiple and contingent cultural subjectivities and practices signaled by the word ‘Muslim’” (2014: 3). Such volumes notably address the issues of representation and islamophobia that have been reinforced in the two decades following 9/11, and what they imply for contemporary imaginaries and for Muslim people worldwide. In *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie*, Madeline Clements also refers to an aesthetics of scattering when she contends that the writers mentioned in her title use “globally disseminated literature to reframe Muslim’s potentials to connect with others” (2016:

2). As many of these critics suggest, this also implies forging and renewing narratives of Muslim identity, so that they transcend the context of post-9/11 relations. Priyamvada Gopal thus notes a somewhat voyeuristic taste of international readers and publishers for South Asian fiction that contains depictions of violence (2016: 21-22).

The interpretations of diaspora studies, whether they refer in this case to South Asian identity or to Muslim identity, often maintain a twofold approach. While displaying the many chasms created by human displacement, these interpretations also gesture towards a means for place to extend and to be reproduced in diasporic subjects' scattered trajectories. In this light, displacement is not only the physical severance from a given place, but a complex, continued negotiation with one's sense of place beyond geographical location. While it has its limitations, the diasporic lens can contribute to re-shaping the labels of literary theory, too often restricted to national affiliations, and allow to examine shared motifs and imaginaries of displacement – a notable example is the hopeful emigration towards a western nation which ultimately proves deceptive.

1.2.2. Going West? Deceptive displacements

Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) efficiently condenses in its very title the socio-economic reality of a majority of contemporary displacements. The novel was published in the aftermath of the summer of 2015 that saw thousands of refugees from Syria going West towards Germany, Italy or France. In Hamid's and Kunzru's novels, the so-called "West" is at once an object of yearning and a deceived dream that is ultimately questioned. Hamid's use of the term in his title stands in itself as a questioning of the "West": what "West" are we talking about? While Hamid's main characters flee towards wealthy Western European nations and the United States, other characters find an exit *from* the West, such as the depressed Londoner who finds a door to Namibia after a suicide attempt (*EW* 128). Yi-Fu Tuan explains that a goal one yearns for is, in fact, a type of place:

Goal is also a place in space, the promised land on the other side of the mountain. Months may lapse before the emigrants reach their destination; however, what seems daunting to them at the start of the trip is not the time but the space that has yet to be traversed. Goal is one of the three categories of place that can be distinguished when movement is in one direction, with no thought of return; the other two are home and camps or wayside stations. Home is the stable world to be transcended, goal is the stable world to be attained, and camps are the rest stops for the journey from one world to the other. (1977: 180)

In Hamid's *Exit West*, "home," "camps" and "wayside stations" are indeed evoked extensively, yet this "place-as-goal" is the main drive of the narrative. Hamid's and Kunzru's novels addressing displacement notably engage with the imaginary of the West, which stands as the ultimate place-as-goal. In doing so, the novels reveal the cracks of such an imagined place, and the bitter confrontation of this goal with experience. In his 1992 text "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," published in the volume *Formations of Modernity* co-edited with Bram Gieben, Stuart Hall defends the idea that "'the West' is as much an idea as a fact of geography" (2011: 276). Hall develops the ways in which the concept of the West determines contemporary geographies and "functions as an ideology:" it categorizes societies by determining who is "western" or "non-western;" it associates together different images and works by extension to form "a system of representation;" it becomes a point of reference for comparison; and it fosters negative or positive images, for instance the "desirable" or "undesirable" criteria that belong to either a Western or non-Western society (2011: 277). Fiction allows writers like Kunzru and Hamid, who write in the language of the West, to question all of these systems of representation, including desirability, comparison, and associations. Using the perspective of displaced characters, their writing questions how imaginaries of the West can either hinder or contribute to a meaningful sense of place.

1.2.2.1. The Impressionist: 'Ah, the Mystic Occident!'

As several of his British contemporaries were writing stories of postcolonial emigration to the West (Zadie Smith with *White Teeth*, Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*), and before he followed that path himself with *Transmission*, Kunzru's first novel chose to turn that narrative on its head by returning to the last decades of the British Raj. In fact, the main character's movement is an exceptional, under-cover Odyssey that seems to trump the dynamics of travel and migration in that era. The novel follows the coming-of-age adventures of Pran, a shape-shifting Anglo-Indian character, from 1918 Agra to an imaginary tribal village in Africa, *via* Bombay, London and Oxford. When he emigrates to England, Pran Nath Razdan has already changed identities twice over. After being banished by his high-caste father who discovered his mixed-blood origins, Pran spends time in a brothel, where he is held captive as Rukhsana, a *hijra*, who is then taken to a Nawab's palace in the Punjab. Escaping that place and reaching Bombay, he becomes "Pretty Bobby," or Robert, the foster son of a Scottish missionary and his over-zealous, benevolent wife. During one of his night-time *flâneries* on the streets of Bombay, he meets Jonathan Bridgeman, a young alcoholic Englishman on a visit. That night, Jonathan

Bridgeman is killed by a thug. Seizing this opportunity, Pran grabs his passport, a one-way steamer ticket to England and a solicitor's address in London. He becomes Jonathan Bridgeman and sets about becoming English.

Fascinated by the Anglo-Indian communities around him, the protagonist had been dreaming about England long before this event. Often mistaken for a member of the community in Bombay, he tries his luck with Miss Lily Parry, whom he has spotted at the races, but to no avail as the latter is repulsed by his mixed origins – she tries hard to make her own racial identity invisible. Pran “loiters in places where English people are to be found” (TI 245), hoping to create an opportunity for another reinvention of his identity. Yet at first, his imposter's act is betrayed by his faulty knowledge of Western places. As he stays within vicinity of the incoming steamers at the Apollo Bunder pier, pretending he has just arrived, he is outsmarted by a pretty English girl and her aunt:

‘Where did you say your family were from?’

It is the aunt, teacup poised between saucer and chin. He has not thought about this part of the story, and answers without thinking.

‘London.’

‘Oh really, which part?’

‘The – the east of the city.’

‘The East end? You surprise me. Whereabouts?’

‘Where?’

‘Yes, where?’

Bobby has heard of the East End. It is the opposite of the West End. But East End place names are beyond him.

‘Brighton’ he says uneasily. It is obviously the wrong answer. The two women look at him quizzically. (TI 247)

There is irony in the fact that Pran's improvised reaction sets his imaginary origins in East London, maintaining his relative positioning to the east of these English women. The character is a creator figure throughout the novel, and his verbal improvisation thrusts the reader in the fantasised geography he is building up. His knowledge of Brighton, we understand, relies upon the experience of colonial place-making. For months, he has been living in the fictional Fatehpur palace, which, as we are told earlier in the novel, is itself inspired by Brighton's Moghul-looking Royal Pavilion: “a structure that embodied an acceptably English species of Indianness” (TI 76). Following this intricate game of influences, Pran's toponymic confusion unsettles dominant forms of mappings and thus offers creative possibilities for the character's journey to come. In fact, he ends up going to the *West* End during a week-end escape from his boarding school (TI 325).

On board the ship to England, Pran – now called Jonathan Bridgeman – entertains this linguistic clutter. Dreaming about the place he is going to, he also reproduces the mental map of Europe he has been taught about until then:

the ship will carry Jonathan Bridgeman into the mouth of the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal and ease him out into the Mediterranean, so called because it is the centre of the world and around its shores civilization was born in a conjunction of war and law and democratic institutions and the disciplined observation of nature. Leaving the Mediterranean, the black and buff coloured ship will round Cape Finisterre, *finis terra*, the end of the earth, for beyond that, beyond the earth altogether, lies England.
Ah, the mystic Occident! Land of wool and cabbage and lecherous round-eyed girls! (TI 289)

In this example of a topsy-turvy exoticization of Europe – an “Occidentalism” of sorts – the protagonist’s faulty geography is conveyed by the accumulation of stereotypes learned from the character’s education, dispensed by an English major and by Scottish missionaries. England is “beyond the earth altogether,” but this extra-terrestrial quality is soon brought back to the mundane as Pran’s meditations result in an expression of his sexual desire. For the character in the midst of his *Bildung*, the round, soft desires of “wool, cabbage” and “round-eyed girls” echo the roundness of the globe he is now journeying on, in a seemingly never-ending revolution. Indeed, the passage is a prime example of Hari Kunzru’s treatment of place in *The Impressionist*. The protagonist travelling to different places provides an opportunity to turn the novel of Empire on its head, debunking Orientalist fascination and strategies of spatial control, and making the foreigner an explorer in turn, who travels from East to West and ultimately to the unknown South represented by Africa in a parody of Conradian exploration. The legacy of Kipling’s *Kim* is also very perceptible and acknowledged by the writer, who precisely aimed at a parody:

Kim is the fantasy of the white subject who can see the hidden easternness of things. I wanted to change that round, to make western whiteness the exotic thing. (...) I wanted to write in praise of the unformed and fluid. (Feay, 2002: 17)¹⁵

Presenting England in this foreign light to his global readership, Kunzru toys with the known and the unknown, with imaginaries of place, and with the meaning given to place. Arriving on English shores, Pran thus worries:

To the people around him this has meaning. Only now does he realize that though he has studied England obsessively, he has never really believed in it.

¹⁵ N.B. the article referenced here is not available online. Suzi Feay, “The Man Who Would Be Kim,” *Independent Sunday*, 31 March 2002, 17.

The place has always retained an abstract quality, like a philosophical hypothesis or a problem in geometry. (TI 292-293)

The idea of “believing in” a place calls to mind the evocative powers of fiction – after all, a reader expecting realistic descriptions faces this question, too. As readers of a novel in English, one is also driven to question how England is evoked in the English language, and how abstract or concrete it may be. But this idea of “believing” in a place is also suffused with colonial undertones, and as such it is reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s criteria of “desirability” ascribed to mental projections of the West.

The chapters detailing Pran’s experience in England progressively deconstruct the different aspects of the experience of place in a new land. These include differences between “The Country” and “The City” – the latter is “something (...) involving the controlled flow of capital, equity and lunch” (TI 302). He also takes note of the “*further demonstration of the significance of lawns*” (TI 307, emphasis in the original). Pran’s naive observations of place in his notebooks, manifested with italics, are, however, doomed to fail. Ultimately, he realises that a number of different places await him and that one place can never quite be grasped before another one is thrust upon him. As he experiences foreignness once again in Paris, before leaving for the African continent, place becomes a puzzle once again: “Even as Jonathan, he is foreign here. And beyond this country is another one, and another capital with a gallery and libraries and boulevards of high-roomed buildings. It is vertiginous, terrifying” (TI 406). The protagonist’s realization points to the limits of his shape-shifting strategy, but also to the impossibility of taming the entire world through textbook knowledge. Pran’s unsettling feelings indicate the beginning of the last part of the novel, where the geography of power is once again subverted. Indeed, the stay in Fotseland with his Professor, an anthropologist, operates yet another reversal in the perception of place. As Peter Child and James Green remark,

The passage to the metropolitan centre that occupies much of Kunzru’s novel – the homing-in of the colonized subject that consolidates the dream of Britain as a transcendental site of wholeness – is thus accompanied by a reverse trajectory, the recursive movement of the white man to the Empire’s periphery. (2013: 74)

From the “Mystic Occident” to an ironically distanced “Heart of Darkness,” Pran’s trajectory challenges traditional narratives of “homing-in,” homecoming and settling, and instead proposes a ceaseless, multi-directional re-mapping of the character’s subjectivity that refuses resolution and compromise. In that sense, Pran’s journey westwards is as deceptive as the more contemporary journeys described in Kunzru’s later narratives and in Mohsin Hamid’s.

1.2.2.2. “Amrikas” of the mind

This development draws its title from Salman Rushdie’s landmark essay “Imaginary Homelands,” in which he developed the notion that exiled writers are bound to adhere to a faulty, nostalgic image of their homeland – in his case, “Indias of the mind” (1992: 10). The risk, to Rushdie, was to see this homeland turn into biblical “pillars of salt” and trapping it into an alternative reality (*ibid.*). Some British, American and South Asian writers from the same generation as Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru have delved into the nostalgic dimension of exile and diaspora, among which one could think of Jhumpa Lahiri’s deeply introspective short stories evoking the characters’ diglossic conundrums and lingering out-of-placeness, found for instance in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

In the words of Françoise Král, contemporary diasporic writing often portrays “narratives of failed integration,” which “expose the disjunction and dissonance between Western discourse and the actual experience of the diasporic subject” (2009: 8). While parts of Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels display the gap between the migrating subject’s yearning for a place, and the reality they face upon arrival, nostalgia is not the dominant mode. In their novels, the aim is to displace the perspective and debunk the myth of free, frictionless movement for all in the age of globalisation, mostly by focusing on the place of arrival more than on the place that was left behind. Caren Irr explains that this subgroup of novels of migration, contrary to the nostalgic ones, are turned outwards rather than inwards, operating a form of re-routing of their experiences of emigration (2014: 28). Rather than systematically seeking a resolution by either settling in or returning home, the trajectories of Hamid’s and Kunzru’s protagonists are more ambivalent and multi-directional. Three of the two writers’ novels in particular address the deceptive emigration from South Asia to the United States, with different turns of events for the migrating subject.

In two of the novels, the US is referred to as “Amrika” or “Amreeka” (*MS 95, T 11*), indicating the Indian or Pakistani character’s perspective on the place through the spelling.¹⁶ In Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, “Amreeka” is discussed when the main character Daru attends parties among the wealthy youth of Lahore – parties at which he is not invited *per se*, being a

¹⁶ In the 2000s, several films and novels released in English-speaking countries included the term with a similar spelling, as a signifier of an idealized migrant’s dream. This spelling also appears in Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (53), or in Indra Sinha’s *Animal People* (66, 149, 247, 358), to name but a few. Besides, it was famously used by creators from Arabic countries – one thinks of American-Palestinian director Cherien Dabis’s *Amreeka* (2009). Alia Malek’s *A Country Called Amreeka: Arab Roots, American Stories* (2009) also documents the Arab-American viewpoint.

social outcast. The first occasion is when Daru delivers some drugs to Shuja, the spoilt son of a landowner, Daru observes them and presumes that they are “worried about the O levels and APs and SCs and SATs that stand between them and the States and Merry Old England, the only places they’d ever dream of going for an education” (MS 198). The enumeration of acronyms, together with the choice of culturally connotated toponyms, display fractured, impressionistic imaginaries, where the place is only evoked through words that are passed on and repeated. Later on, Daru again takes up his observations, when he enters his childhood friend Ozi’s party and comments on the guests’ behaviours in the manner of an anthropologist:

‘Forget that you’re Over Here! Pretend that you’re Over There!’
(*The utopian vision of Over There or Amreeka promises escape from the almost unbearable drudgery of the tribe’s struggle to subsist.*) (MS 95, italics in the original)

The passage uses capitalization to highlight the systematic use of the terms, “Over Here” and “Over There” having become evocative toponyms in their own right. The internal focalizer conveys Daru’s ironic social commentary, thus further emphasizing the distance between himself and others, between the apparent artificiality of their dreams and the reality of the “struggle to subsist” in Pakistan. Later on, the perspective changes and we read through Mumtaz’s memories – Mumtaz is Ozi’s wife, whom Daru starts an affair with. Mumtaz and Ozi have been to the United States and have just returned to Lahore. Reflecting back on her time “Over There,” Mumtaz remembers how she enjoyed New York at first, yet began very soon to feel disappointed:

I just didn’t feel any passion to write about the place. didn’t give a damn about local politics, I wasn’t moved by the issues. I missed home. And I was frustrated by people who actually thought the world had a center, and that center was here. ‘The world’s a sphere, everyone,’ I wanted to say. ‘The center of a sphere doesn’t lie on its surface. Look up the word “superficial,” when you have a chance.’ (MS 192)

Mumtaz is a writer figure in the novel: writing under the pen name of Zulfikar Manto – a portmanteau of the word “zulfikar,” meaning sword, and of writer Saadat Hasan Manto – she publishes articles and she ultimately documents the trial of Daru, who has been accused of a crime committed by Ozi. In this passage, Mumtaz’s indifference to New York as a writer is a means to de-center and defuse the power of attraction exerted by “Amreeka.” The ensuing reflection about superficiality and centre opens up a metafictional reflection on the “flat” representations provided by the map or the page, and how they fail to render a place fully. Ultimately, Mumtaz tells us, she and Ozi decided to go back to Lahore: they “took a deep breath and jumped and landed with a loud splash one summer in beautiful Lahore” (MS 193). As an

echo to the “superficial,” the metaphor of the “loud splash” suddenly makes Lahore a deeper place to explore.

Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*, published four years after *Moth Smoke*, also discusses emigration to the United States in search of better opportunities. Contrary to Mumtaz and Ozi, Kunzru’s character, Arjun, is not an upper-class citizen; studying at North Okhla Institute of Technology in New Delhi to become a programmer, he is hoping to go to the United States to find wealth in the tech industry, where “*the Americans have a skill shortage*,” (T 7) and he applies for a programme sending young graduates to a company called Databodies. *Transmission* presents an “Amrika of the mind” through the use of mass-mediated imaginaries and stereotype. In that sense, it responds to Appadurai’s analyses of modernity, where “electronic mediation and mass migration” are the two coordinates that “impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination” (1998: 4). The work of the imagination is first operated in discourse – when applying for the position, the firm’s human resources officer directs Arjun towards the American dream:

‘(...) I’m going to send you to America and start making you rich.’
Arjun could not believe it. ‘Just like that?’
‘Just like that, Arjun. When you’re a Databodies IT consultant, things happen. You start to become who you always dreamed of becoming. That’s our mission, Arjun. To help people become their dreams. That’s what we stand for.’ (T 10)

Arjun’s naivety, manifested in this passage, nurtures the narrative of failed emigration, which is also infused with a coming-of-age subtext. Moving to America means “becoming one’s dreams,” the company’s name Databodies further emphasizing a confusion between the material body and the immateriality of the American dream. Finally, the expression “stand for” hints at the metonymic displacement between the “Amrika” of Arjun’s dreams and the reality he will soon uncover. Arjun’s imaginary of the United States is in fact nurtured by examples of Appadurai’s “mass-mediated imaginaries.” An example of this is the stereotypical “mall” he imagines when thinking about this dream country:

Amrika! Becoming his dreams! More than any other memory of the meeting, even that of Sunny’s sunglasses, this phrase stuck in his mind. His current favourite daydream was set in a mall, a cavern of bright glass through which a near-future version of himself was travelling at speed up a broad black escalator. (T 11)

The passage echoes Yi-Fu Tuan’s analysis of place as a goal to be reached: “Months may lapse before the emigrants reach their destination; however, what seems daunting to them at the start of the trip is not the time but the space that has yet to be traversed” (1977: 180). Arjun has no

difficulty picturing a “near-future version of himself” in a futuristic place, moving “at speed.” The character’s habit of daydreaming constitutes mental places that will never actually materialize, but make the migrant character a writer of sorts, imagining a proleptic narrative for himself. When he ends up going to the airport to leave for the US, Arjun notices: “[w]ith their billboards promising denim and sports shoes, the clothing outlets on the approach road beckoned like a premonition of the American future” (T 31) Arjun’s dreamed “Amrika” is constituted on an impressionistic mode, by synecdochic touches, and the United States is once again imagined as a goal or a place-as-goal. Fragmented versions of the fantasised country announce the impossibility that it might fully materialise for Arjun.

Indeed, the rest of the novel unravels Arjun’s disillusionment, first as he remains for a long time on “the bench” in a shared house with other Indian IT geniuses, waiting to be called by companies (T 39), then as he enters a company called Virugenix but is dismissed soon after, and discovers that his American love interest already has a boyfriend. Arjun’s harsh experience of feeling temporary and disposable is reflected materially in space: “he discovered that anything can be mundane. Fire hydrants, billboards, even the enamelled blue sky: all had shelf lives. One by one they expired” (T 42). The “billboards” of New Delhi that had formed a poster dream for America become obsolete and meaningless.

Arjun’s initial dream is to reach “*Amrika*. Residence of the Non-Resident Indian” (T 8). The term “Non-Resident Indian,” often used as the acronym NRI, is frequently used to refer to taxation, but Marie C. Lall points out that “the terms ‘People of Indian Origin’ and ‘Non Resident Indians’ have been used interchangeably by the government of India (...) as well as by the Indian press” since the term appeared in 1984 (2001: 1). In the end Arjun is denied full residence, and lives with the threat of a shameful return to New Delhi due to his joblessness. Soon, he understands his status as a “non-driver” in California, an equally marginal position (T 39). Defined by negatives, neither a settled resident nor a nomadic driver, Arjun’s relation to place becomes almost ethereal, leading him to turn to the only space he is familiar with: the digital world. Unleashing a computer virus only he can counter, in the hope that his company will hire him back to solve the problem, Arjun triggers an international catastrophe and has to go in hiding, more placeless and directionless than ever.

Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shares with *Transmission* a disappointing trajectory of emigration, and a radical change in the protagonist’s social status after a world-scale event. The narrator-protagonist, Changez, narrates his life as a student at Princeton, followed by his prestigious position at a financial firm, Underwood Samson, his love entanglement with Erica, a fellow Princetonian, and his sense of comfort and ease as an

immigrant in New York. After the climactic event of the 9/11 attacks, the second part of the novel delves into Changez's progressive demise, his rejection from society, coming from his co-workers, his manager but also violent passers-by, and a growing sense of discomfort that leads him to return to Lahore. Contrary to the previous two novels, "Amrika" here is questioned from a twofold perspective: what it means for the immigrant subject *and* for Americans after 9/11, placing both perspectives in the long history of immigration that is constitutive of the United States. This is notably so due to the narrative construction, with the Pakistani protagonist conversing with – or rather, monologuing to – an American stranger in a Lahore café. In its exploration of a failed American dream after 9/11, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* questions what it means to be American as much as the immigrant's identity construction. The construction of a retrospective narration is also used to emphasise the gap between expectations and reality. From Changez's perspective, we progressively understand that it is not the United States but the city of New York which appears welcoming, the very "mother of exiles" described in Emma Lazarus's poem engraved on the Statue of Liberty. Changez describes at length the comfort he felt in New York, where he finds himself at home in many ways:

for me moving to New York felt – so unexpectedly – like coming home. But there were other reasons as well: the fact that Urdu was spoken by taxicab drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa-serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli; the coincidence of crossing fifth avenue during a parade and hearing, from loudspeakers mounted on the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Association float, a song to which I had danced at my cousin's wedding.

In a subway car, my skin would typically fall in the middle of the colour spectrum. On street corners, tourists would ask me for directions. I was, in four and a half years, never an American; I was *immediately* a New Yorker. (TRF 36-37)

Cultural elements are here adapted and reformulated, manifested in the globalised sense of place felt by the character: the "Pak-Punjab Deli" indifferently associates Pakistan and the Punjab, which today designates an Indian territory, thus reconfiguring South Asia from the perspective of New York; the moving "float" operates a displacement between music from Pakistan and questions of sexual identity that are shared on a global scale. Changez is but one of the pieces of this puzzle, falling "in the middle of the colour spectrum." The final statement confirms this relative mapping, and reveals that his adopted identity is that of the global citizen in New York, not the national identity of an American. The use of the substantive asserts this identity and denies the possibility that the story, told retrospectively, should take any other direction.

Ultimately, even New York reveals itself to be out of reach. Just like in *Transmission*, the immigrant's sense of recognition and familiarity only reveals the deceptive nature of spatial imaginaries derived from mass media. For instance, Changez recounts how his sense of familiarity in New York stems from its representation in film:

I emerged from the 6 train onto Seventy-Seventh Street, in the heart of the Upper East Side. The area – with its charming bistros, exclusive shops, and attractive women in short skirts walking tiny dogs – felt surprisingly familiar, although I had never been there before; I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that had used it as a setting. (*TRF* 55-56)

The oxymoronic expression “surprisingly familiar” translates the unsettled nature of Changez's relation with the place. The adjectives “charming” and “exclusive” re-create the artificiality of the city's welcome to an immigrant: it “charms” the immigrant, and “excludes” as much as it is “exclusive.” The place ultimately reveals itself to be a mere “setting,” a revived visual memory in two dimensions.

The novel also duplicates this trope of a deceptive longed-for place in its intertextual reference to *The Great Gatsby*. Changez is invited to a party at his manager's house in the Hamptons, “a magnificent property that made me think of *The Great Gatsby*” (*TRF* 48). Upon going outside at the party, he notices: “[t]he sun had set, and I could see the lights of other houses twinkling in the distance along the curve of the shore” (*TRF* 49). The “lights of other houses” are reminiscent of Fitzgerald's novel where a “green light” frequently returns. In *Gatsby*, this motif appears from the very first chapter: “Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (2007: 64).¹⁷ The light in question belongs to the house where Daisy, the narrator's cousin and Gatsby's love interest, resides, and which also crystallises fantasies of success and happiness. Later on in Hamid's novel, after 9/11, Changez is walking in the street with Erica. There, she sees a firefly appear: “‘Look! (...) It's trying to compete with the buildings.’ Indeed it was: a tiny greenish glow, visible up close but overwhelmed by the city's luminance when viewed from even a modest distance” (*TRF* 188). This time, the “green light” is used in relation with the skyscrapers of New York which initially impressed the immigrant character – the “tiny greenish glow” is made to participate in a game of perspectives, allowing the character to reconsider the glimmer of hope that the American Dream allowed for, while acknowledging how it can be “overwhelmed by the city's luminance” and thus misinterpreted. Using a well-known literary incarnation of the American dream to convey Changez's hope and

¹⁷ *The Great Gatsby* was originally published in 1925. This date refers to the edition listed in the bibliography.

disappointment as an immigrant, Hamid toys with representations of personal utopias and replaces the Pakistani immigrant's plea within the wider condition of the displaced, out-of-place subject.

Until the very end of the novel, the recurring signifier of the green light is used to redefine the character's mental geography and expectations. After he has appeared on television and talked explicitly about US imperialism, the protagonist comments: "I had, in my own manner, issued a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations" (*TRF* 207). To Adnan Mahmutovic, this last image can be read as a synecdoche, showing how "a singular political initiative, though seemingly as negligible as the glow of a firefly, has the potential to affect global political landscapes" (2018 *n.p.*). I would argue that it is not only a matter of landscape, but also of place. After his exclusion from American citizenship, Changez's redefinition of the "firefly's glow" leads to an inversion of Fitzgerald's motif. Rather than looking at the "green light" from a distance, he *becomes* this green light, drawing attention to the position of Muslim subjects who refuse to be assigned a place in post-9/11 geopolitical reconfigurations. Such reconfigurations and transpositions are in fact central to Hamid's wider poetics of displacement.

1.2.3. Mohsin Hamid: "universal" displacement(s) and referentiality

In a 2019 article published in *National Geographic*, Mohsin Hamid defends an idea that pervades much of his fictional work. According to him, "thinking of us all as migrants" would be a means to re-assess past and contemporary national and racial dissensions and to approach the era of digital technologies and climate change. In this article, Hamid defends this vision without reference to fiction or his writing, demonstrating how his ethical commitment towards movement and migration often stands on the border between his creation and his positions in mainstream media. In this text, Hamid challenges the widespread notion that one is "moored" to one's own birthland or that of one's ancestors', and puts forward the argument that the human species as a whole has always been moving, not only through space but also time – we are always already departing from the moments we are experiencing. The writer concludes thus: "A species of migrants at last comfortable being a species of migrants. That, for me, is a destination worth wandering to" (2019 *n.p.*).

In his novels, Hamid has largely been "wandering" towards this idea of a shared nomadic condition. This position resonates most strikingly in the frequently quoted aphorism that is at the heart of *Exit West*: "we are all migrants through time" (*EW* 209). Hamid's

ideological stance has indeed become part and parcel of his creative project and has been developed in different directions which will be analysed here.

What deserves examination in particular is the “universal” tonality of Hamid’s proposition, and how it is manifested in writing. As critics have pointed out, Hamid’s novels stray from traditional modes of referentiality, notably in their propensity to avoid specific place names and other proper names, maintaining a sense of vagueness and of transposability. Ulka Anjaria addresses the potential criticism this may foster. She acknowledges that Hamid’s writing – in particular *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West* – may be

pushing ‘universalism’ to its most extreme end, which is a denial of specificity altogether. This should not be read as a depoliticisation but as a rethinking of the very terminologies along which we imagine our political constructs: east vs west, universal vs particular, difference vs similarity. (in Kanwal and Aslam 2018: 55)

Anjaria does not qualify the choice of inverted commas for the term *universalism*. What is “universalism,” in particular when it comes to the displacement of people? While Hamid does propose a reconfiguration of our imaginaries, the concept itself should be questioned – is it something shared by the whole *universe*? Does it refer to tenets of Western philosophy such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? As she underlines, the word should also be confronted to its antonym: the particular. But does Hamid’s leaning towards universalism automatically entail renouncing specificity and particular experience?

In her article “‘We Are All Migrants’: The Refugee Novel and the Claims of Universalism,” Yogita Goyal analyses *Exit West* to argue that Hamid “naturalizes the act of migration in a way that evacuates the specific historical experience that generates it, rendering banal what must remain historical” (2020: 241). To further her point, she refers to Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile,” a text in which Said defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (Said 2000: 173). Goyal quotes Said’s approach to the question of humanism and perceptions of exile in cultural production. In the passage she quotes, Said warns against the tendency literature has had in the past to appropriate exile and to transpose it into a more generic humanism, hence running the risk of considering exile as overall positive:

exile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism. On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as “good for us.” (2000: 174)

When looking closely, mutilations, losses and the notion of an “unhealable rift” are in fact perceptible in Mohsin Hamid’s treatment of human displacement. They are indeed not described through the detail of the excruciating journeys refugees go through – *Exit West* willingly leaves this unaddressed as the characters are displaced instantly through mysterious “black doors.” But neither is the experience of exile shown as outright “good for us” nor “banalized.” In her article, Yogita Goyal wonders:

But does the focus on migration necessitate that the novel as a genre loses its connection to place? Do novels like *Exit West* portend a new kind of literature: novels of placelessness, mobility, displacement, and fracture? Or does it serve as a kind of globalized homogeneity free of distinctive cultural markers? (2020: 248)

Whether or not *Exit West* can be considered as a novel of placelessness is debatable. Goyal’s concern is revealing of approaches to spatial analysis in contemporary novels, where the absence of precise toponymy and the loss of referential bearings can be altogether equated with a loss of “connection to place.” Hamid’s novels – in particular *Exit West* – indeed delve in detail into questions of mobility, displacement and fracture, but these questions precisely testify to a deep-seated concern with the *experience* of place, even when lacking descriptions of particular places. As can be seen in the extracts that follow, experiences of grief, loss, disorientation, or social exclusion can all form part of a “connection to place.”

Understandably, as pointed out by fears of “globalized homogeneity,” the marketing of Hamid’s fiction towards a vastly Western readership leads one to cast a suspicious eye on his lack of specificity in toponymy and mappings of the East in particular. This is further emphasized by the media hype surrounding *Exit West*, manifested in its inclusion in American school curriculums or on Barack Obama’s 2017 reading list. Because of its publicity and its release in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis and of the Brexit vote, *Exit West* stood for a while at the forefront of refugee narratives and came to embody the genre, even as myriads of others, including real-life accounts written by refugees, were being published.

Yet deploring the absence of referentiality in Hamid’s works tends to overlook the fact that this is a central component of his poetics. From his first novel onwards, even as the latter was explicitly set in Pakistan, the writer has been resorting to unreliable narrators and composing impressionistic spatial descriptions, writing with very sparse touches of realism interspersed with myth and fantasy – this pattern reaches its apex in the fable subgenre underpinning *Exit West*. This, in turn, raises the question of the acceptability of writing about the refugee experience in forms and genres straying away from realism.

Hamid's own endeavour in chronicling human displacement consists in transposing its consequences (the "losses," "mutilations" evoked by Said) in other contexts, and relating them to other life experiences in order to show readers the potential similarity between their own lives and certain feelings inherent to the migrant subject's experience. The writer's avowed objective is to foster "a greater degree of compassion," "for ourselves" and "for others" (National Geographic 2019 *n.p.*). While the premise might seem to echo Said's fear of seeing exile as "beneficially humanistic," and could appear naïvely detached from the reality of the journeys of refugees, it might be precisely because they keep enlarging and transposing the refugees' plea in different times and places that Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* avoids the pitfall, evoked by Said, of "using" this plea and fetishizing their suffering.

These transpositions of loss are replicated in Hamid's other novels, albeit differently. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, two characters in particular mirror the main protagonist's sense of loss. Changez has been studying and working in the United States, and is discussing in a Lahore café with an unnamed American character inside the diegesis, reminiscing about his life in New York, and how he began to feel completely out-of-place, homesick and unwelcome after 9/11. Changez recalls his conversations with Jim, his employer at the financial company Underwood Samson. Early on in the novel, Changez remembers being at a party at Jim's house in the Hamptons, where the latter tells him: "'You're a watchful guy. You know where that comes from? (...) It comes from feeling out of place,' he said. 'Believe me. I know.'" (TRF 48) Jim observing and recognizing Changez's "watchfulness" creates a situation where the observer is being observed, emphasizing the sense of recognition and of mirrored experiences. Of course, the novel's narrative construction, where Changez reports these events to another character in Lahore, adds yet another layer of interpretation to the device. Later, during a business trip in Manila, Jim tells Changez that they have similar approaches to life, not because Jim is an immigrant, but because he grew up "dirt poor" (TRF 81) in the United States: "I grew up on the other side. For half my life, I was outside the candy store looking in, kid" (TRF 80). The material metaphor of the candy store is extended by Changez as he appropriates it:

I did not grow up in poverty. But I did grow up with a poor boy's sense of longing, in my case not for what my family had never had, but for what we had had and lost. Some of my relatives held onto imagined memories the way homeless people hold onto lottery tickets. *Nostalgia* was their crack cocaine, if you will, and my childhood was littered with the consequences of their addiction: unserviceable debts, squabbles over inheritances, the odd alcoholic or suicide. In this, Jim and I were indeed similar: he had grown up outside the candy store, and I had grown up on its threshold as the door was being shut. (TRF 81, emphasis in the original)

Longing, loss, nostalgia: the semantic field used to describe social status in Changez's family is indeed reminiscent of the experience of exile. The sense of a shared condition is amplified by the way Changez describes its spread over his entire family, yet with different consequences. The narrator casually evokes "the odd alcoholic or suicide," and the loss of wealth is thus duplicated into other losses such as grief. The passage is revealing of Hamid's theory of common experiences and how it might actually resist a naïve form of universalism. While pointing to the similar forms of social exclusion felt by the two characters, it does not amalgamate them entirely – growing up "outside" and seeing "the door (...) being shut" are two different experiences – and it highlights a class issue that is specific to the character's childhood in Pakistan. Indeed, earlier in the novel, Changez clarifies the fact that his family is "not rich," and has experienced an economic evolution where "those of us who once had substantial family estates have seen them divided and subdivided by each – larger – subsequent generation" (TRF 11). The nostalgia of this lost status is dismissed as a burdening excess by Changez – nostalgia leaves one to deal with waste ("littered") that is hard to dispose of.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, loss is also embodied by Erica, the woman Changez falls in love with. Erica's sense of loss is caused by her grief, as Chris, her first love, has passed away as a result of lung cancer. Erica herself voices the similarity between her own experience and that of being a foreigner in the United States. Observing that Changez might be missing home, she adds: "So I kind of miss home, too... Except my home was a guy with long, skinny fingers" (TRF 32). At first seduced by Changez, Erica progressively drifts away from him and painfully retreats back into her grief to the point of being admitted into a mental institution. On several occasions, Changez tries to tame this sense of loss, which is both a disorientation and a physical dissociation: he notices that "she had lost herself" (TRF 104) and she was "lost in a world of her own" (TRF 98). Despite his efforts, the narrative shows Erica "disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*, one from which she could choose whether or not to return" (TRF 129). As with the example of Jim, the word "nostalgia" is written in italics, as if to emphasize its meaning. Since etymologically, the word *nostos* means home, and more specifically the notion of returning home (*Etymonline*), the declination of the word to indicate the loss of a loved one, or of a social status, calls for a return to this initial sense, but also tends to extend it. The word "nostalgia" is echoed and the sense of loss once again displaced, one page further on: "it seemed to me that America, too, was increasingly giving itself over to a dangerous nostalgia at that time" (TRF 130). Moving from Erica to America, nostalgia is shown to be a contagious state.

In fact, many have pointed out Hamid's obvious play with acronyms and paronomasia, where the initials of Jim's company Underwood Samson stand for the United States, and Erica

for *Am-Erica* (Morey 2011: 140). Erica's deceased boyfriend Chris has even been read as Christopher Columbus, incarnating the colonial past of America (Hartnell 2010: 343). The avatars of loss channelled through these characters are used to highlight issues that are both transnational and specific to the United States – the paradoxes of poverty in a wealthy nation, the need to succeed financially to ensure one's safety – and are halfway between intimate experience and societal events, since Erica's psychological alienation worsens just as her country's post-9/11 nationalist sentiment.

Exit West, which is Hamid's second novel with a plot based on transnational displacement, prolongs this tension between sameness and difference in the experience of loss. Again, grief is used to illustrate this, when the character of Saeed, starting to stray away from Nadia as they attempt to find their place in London, realizes that he has left behind much more than his birthplace:

he was uncertain whether all his losses had not combined into a core of loss, and in this core, this centre, the death of his mother and the death of his father and the possible death of his ideal self who had loved this woman so well were like a single death that only hard work and prayer might allow him to withstand. (*EW* 188)

In this passage, loss becomes the axis around which the character's understanding of the present hinges. The "possible death of his ideal self" responds to Hamid's idea that the present is always already lost and therefore, "we are all migrants through time" (*EW* 209). The acknowledgement of these multifaceted losses is rendered through a long enumeration, where the narrative voice shows Saeed losing his breath as he recounts the loss of people and places. This dizzying whirlwind of loss leads to "a single death," and in this case the transposition and comparison of experiences of loss leads to their combination. The ontological "core of loss" experienced by Saeed is far from mundane, and the intensity of this syntactic whirlwind tends to challenge the assumption that Hamid banalizes refugees' experience.

But the novel also unravels the comparative mechanism through its very structure: in *Exit West*, the main narrative of Saeed and Nadia's journey west is constantly counterbalanced with the stories and experiences of other people worldwide who go through the black doors, or who witness the effects of these doors on their living place. The latter category of characters is particularly revealing insofar as it unveils the perspective of those who see migrants as unwelcome foreigners. Hamid's call for "compassion" is reflected in these viewpoints. Indeed, several instances of hostile reactions are reported in the novel. On one occasion, an old American man living near the border with Mexico is hovering around the border police, asking whether he can be of help in pushing back the immigrants. A police officer declines his help,

and the reader is made to understand that the man is disoriented, probably because of old age. In that passage, old age is yet another avatar of feeling exiled from oneself and from the past. The passage concludes thus: “The old man wondered where he should go, and thinking about it, realized he couldn’t come up with a single place” (*EW* 48). Wilfully vague, the sentence leaves interpretations open as to whether the old man has lost his memory of places, whether he sees no future and no future place for himself because of his age, or whether he ends up empathizing with the immigrants, thinking about “where he *would* go” in their situation, as much as “where he *should* go.”

The characters’ journey seems to end when Saeed and Nadia settle in Marin, California, where they encounter different types of inhabitants. Over three pages, the narrative voice retains a de-referential mode to describe the “layers” of population that constitute the United States. The term “layers” is employed to describe the relation of these groups to the land, together with the term “native” which is stretched and challenged. Without ever naming them, the narrative voice explains how some “natives” belong to a group that has mostly “died out or been exterminated long ago,” hinting at Native Americans. Hamid’s aesthetics of transposition operates here again. The past experience of this first group is linked to the present: “the tales of these natives felt appropriate to this time of migration, and gave listeners much-needed sustenance” (*EW* 196). A second and third “layer of nativeness” (*EW* 196) are described, corresponding to white Americans and to African Americans. In this process, the narrative voice embarks on a questioning of the term “native”:

(...) it was not quite true to say there were almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter, and many others considered themselves natives to this country, by which they meant that they or their parents or their grandparents had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern Pacific to the mid-northern Atlantic, that their existence here did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetimes. (*EW* 196)

The generations mentioned here echo the term “layer,” where piling up generations on the land accounts for a means to deserve the term “native.” Reducing the United States to a “strip of land” in between oceans contributes to questioning place in relation with the notion “nativeness.” Human transience and the idea of a shared “migration through time” defended by Mohsin Hamid are also echoed in the mention of “their lifetimes” and the adjective “physical,” alluding to the fact that many different types of migration – not just the physical kind – compose our experience of life on earth.

In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said concludes by calling upon Georg Lukács, quoting his theory that because of “the unreality of ambition and fantasy, [the novel] is *the* form

of ‘transcendental homelessness’” (2000: 181, emphasis in the original). Rather than being universalist in scope, one can contend that these illustrations of Hamid’s ethical stance on the human experience of displacement lean towards the transcendent, in the sense that to transcend is to “be or go beyond the range or limits of” (*OED*). The term “universal” often used to assess *Exit West* in particular tends to suggest cultural and historical homogenization. Showing loss as an experience that transcends – rather than homogenizes – national borders, history, age, or social class requires the de-referential process that is particularly visible in *Exit West*, the better for the reader to identify with characters that are always on the move. In fact, the above examples show that while the absence of some specifics might be unsettling for the reader, explicit referentiality is not always needed to engage with the experience of place. Quoting Hamid among writers whose stories might seem “*geographically weak*,”¹⁸ Christian Moraru warns that

‘weakness’ or lack of topographic specificity is actually a deliberate tactic, a paradoxical sign of profound and vastly critical interest in geography – in a geography produced rather than reproduced by the text, and by the same token a source of literary inventiveness and, indeed, strength. (2018: 2)

Paul Veyret also points to the inventiveness of such strategies when he argues that Hamid, like other Pakistani writers writing in English, practices a “deterritorialization” in the Deleuzian sense, where “lines of flight” extend to produce “new stratifications and proliferations” even where the practice of “erasure and unlabelling” prevails in his writing (2018: 2; 8). As he notices, this is notably produced by the playfulness of Hamid’s narrators (2018: 8), which is particularly salient in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. In the latter novel, Hamid’s theory that “we are all migrants through time” is taken up by the narrator, at the beginning of the last chapter. Written in the form of a self-help book, the novel follows the trials of a South Asian man from childhood to old age, as he manages to move from a rural village to a city and becomes a successful businessman, before experiencing bankruptcy. The ending of the novel offers a conclusion that renews Hamid’s hypothesis:

We are all refugees from our childhoods. And so we turn, among other things, to stories. To write a story, to read a story, is to be a refugee from the state of refugees. Writers and readers seek a solution to the problem that time passes, that those who have gone are gone and those who will go, which is to say every one of us, will go. (*HTG* 219-220)

Calling upon the term “refugee,” the narrator shifts its meaning away from the violence of forced transnational displacement and uses it as a signifier for loss. The term, Edward Said

¹⁸ Emphasis in the original text.

notes, “has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance” (2000: 181). Using this political term to poetic ends might be seen as emptying it of its meaning and an out-of-place appropriation. At the same time, the evocative power of the term, encompassing the reader with the “we” pronoun, is perhaps to be read as a provocation. The passage concludes a novel that has played out in the gaps between reader and writer, addressing the reader and the protagonist at the same time with a second-person narrative voice, giving unsolicited advice in a sarcastic tone, and depicting the dire reality of moving from poverty to wealth in an unnamed South Asian city. The narrator’s ironic twists transpose and displace but do not necessarily make experience uniform or invisible. They form a line of flight that can both transcend and extend the space of the narrative, and reach out to the reader.

This pattern of unlabelling has perhaps reached certain limits in Hamid’s latest novel *The Last White Man*, where a young couple in a suburban – probably American – town start to see all the white people around them, including themselves, become dark-skinned. Here the poetics of transposability is not exactly related to the experience of place and movement, but with a racism that is often undeniably situated historically and socially. This is why it is perhaps harder for readers to engage with the allegorical or fabulist form in this novel – a critic saw in it an “inclination to spare characters any serious trouble” and a “renunciation of the tension that powered his earlier novels” (Gates 2022). Hamid’s play with referentiality is perhaps more efficient when addressing the experience of migration, where it is found to provide semantic extensions and lines of flight more than “renunciation.”

1.3. “Feeling out territories”: patterns of extension

Hamid’s de-referentialising strategy makes for ambivalent readings of place. Conversely, Kunzru’s novels lean towards a hyper-referential mode, where the reader is overwhelmed with details and minutely documented references to the ebb and flow of popular culture, mass media and historical landmarks. While seemingly divergent if not opposed, both writing modes actively maintain gaps that make it possible for place to extend beyond the merely *geo-graphic* – the writing of physical places – and propose to encompass within the novel the unsaid, the imagined, and the unknown that also inform the experience of place.

Both Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writings of place thus manifest patterns of extension. In their narratives, place is stretched out to encompass three-dimensional, material and bodily experiences as well as experiences of the digital and financial spaces of a globalised economy,

or even places that escape the realm of the known, exemplified in the extra-terrestrial encounters of Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*. In doing so, the novels approach the conceptual challenges place is confronted to in the collective imagination today.

Place carries the notion of extension within its etymological roots – the Indo-European *plat-*, “to spread,” and the Latin *platea* meaning “broad way” or “open space” (Etymonline). As evoked at the onset of this chapter, Hari Kunzru's scepticism about critical interpretations of space and place “collapsing” in his writing confirms that a tangentially opposite dynamic is at stake (*HK ITW* 2018). In the same way that Hamid's de-referentializing does not annihilate experiences of place, place does not disappear because of Kunzru's rapidly shifting plotlines. Places are extended, stretched to display their creative potential. Essentialist understandings of place are put to the test through irony and fate, showing characters who have no choice but to expand their perspectives. Acknowledging the contemporary pressure exerted on visions of place as rooted and enclosed, but also the risk for singular experiences of place to be overruled in a globalised conception of place, novels like Hamid's and Kunzru's convey the need to conceive of larger places and/or other places, within and without what is already mapped. Formally, this endeavour is displayed through realism but also myth, speculation, and narrative constructs which twist the expected linearity of the novel.

Three novels in particular can be examined to illustrate this shared pattern of extension: *Gods Without Men* (2011), Kunzru's multi-layered desert saga; *Transmission* (2004), a novel exploring the extent of global digitalisation and terrorist fears; and Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), in which war and migration cause cities to extend.

1.3.1. Stretching the desert: reaching out and expanding in *Gods Without Men*

Gods Without Men was published in 2011. It was inspired by trips Kunzru made to the Californian desert as early as 2008, when he earned a fellowship in New York and started spending time in the United States. He described the desert as “an addictive place” (Silverman 2012). The novel is the first of a series that could be labelled Kunzru's “American period,” which has lasted up to this day, where the writer started to add US-specific thematic investigations to his existing interests in colonial and postcolonial Britain, and in European geography and history (European border policies in *Transmission*, or London's past protest movements in *My Revolutions*). This thematic shift includes the focus on racial injustice and cultural appropriation in *White Tears* (2017) and the rise of the American alt-right in *Red Pill* (2020). In itself, *Gods Without Men* thus represents the start of an extension of Kunzru's

geographies, yet without shedding his transversal concerns with authenticity, border-crossing, and the circulation of information.

Intertwining no less than ten different stories taking place in the Mojave Desert, spanning from 1775 to 2009, this novel has been compared to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* for the way the plot keeps leaping through different focalisers and periods of time (Coupland 2012). The main plotline centres around Jaz and Lisa, a New York couple who take their nonverbal autistic four-year-old, Raj, to the desert, hoping for a restful family holiday. Settling in a faded motel near a rock formation called the Pinnacles, Jaz and Lisa attempt to reconstruct their marriage while looking after Raj. One day, after the couple have had a night-long fallout, they go on a hike near the rocks and Raj mysteriously disappears, launching a nationwide media craze similar to that of the 2007 McCann case. Their paths intersect with Dawn, the motel owner, who was part of a 1970s cult gathered at the Pinnacles, who believed in salvation by superior alien beings; Nicky, an English rock star who has come to the desert to escape his dizziness with fame; and Laila, an Iraqi teenage girl whose uncle has taken her to work as a prop in a fake village, re-enacting the real war she has just escaped. Other plots focalize on Fray Garcés, a Spanish missionary priest sent to survey and subdue the area in the eighteenth century; a revenge plot taking place in 1920 with Deighton, an anthropologist, his wife Eliza and Willie Prince, a Native American man; a plot set in 1947 around Schmidt, a veteran, who decides to set up a rest stop for aircraft under a huge boulder near the Pinnacles, has an encounter with aliens and inspires the UFO cult Dawn later enters; and a return to 1871 that follows Nephi Parr, a Mormon who has a mystical experience while looking for gold.

The novel is a testament to Kunzru's lifelong interest in subcultures, more particularly in UFOs and associated beliefs. In an interview, he explained that the beliefs which arose in the 20th century find their roots in older movements such as theosophy, and stem from "the wish to believe that the universe is not just bigger than we understand it but more meaningful" (Romig 2012). This re-scaling of perspective by the acknowledgement of something bigger and deeper than what is visible is certainly rendered to full effect in *Gods Without Men*. Kunzru's affection for the spatial imaginaries of science fiction – in 2021, he prefaced a new edition of Frank Herbert's *Dune* – also means that his treatment of the question is neither merely parodic nor archival, but includes an element of uncertainty conveyed through the different focalisers. Discussing the vantage point of fiction in addressing this uncertainty, Kunzru voices it in spatial terms: "I think that's one of the good things about exploring these questions in a non-polemic, fictional way: you get to feel out territory rather than take positions" (Romig 2012). Constantly

stretching out to “feel out” these territories, *Gods Without Men* uses the desert as a starting point and the central crossroads from which all the plotlines extend.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb “to extend” is notably defined as follows: first, “make larger or longer in space or time”; second, “hold (something) out towards someone.” These two complementary movements actually echo the thematic developments in *Gods Without Men*. First, extension is an extension *towards*: on several occasions, the novel describes the extended reach held out from one discrete place to another. Moreover, extension can be understood in the sense of expansion, as a continuous movement from place *outwards*: place widens and expands, and in some cases, annexes other places.

Throughout the novel, extension from one place *towards* another is first conveyed in depictions of landscape. The most obvious is the Pinnacles, a landscape most likely inspired to Kunzru by the Trona Pinnacles, a geological oddity of natural spires made of calcium carbonate, which stand against the Mojave skyline. For Schmidt, the man who decides to live near the Pinnacles and later experiences a UFO apparition, the spires constitute the initial attraction to the place:

First time Schmidt saw the Pinnacles he knew it was the place. Three columns of rock shot up like the tentacles of some ancient creature, weathered feelers probing the sky. (...) No question, there was power here, running along the fault line and up through the rocks: a natural antenna. (...) There was more action up in the sky than down on earth, but you had to drag yourself out of the city to know it. All those damn verticals cluttering your sightline, all the steel pipes and cables and so forth under your feet, jamming you up, interrupting the flows. (*GWM* 5)

In this passage as in others, the desert seems to be at the crossroads of a horizontal movement and a vertical one (the “fault line” and the vertical rocks), the latter being extended towards the sky. The emptiness of the desert stands as a form of clarity, a blank page for Schmidt’s projects as opposed to the vertical and horizontal “cluttering” experienced in the city. Extension also operates at the level of time, since the rocks remind him of “some ancient creature.” The tentacles are all the more evocative of extension and reaching out to the sky. The seemingly oxymoronic association of the adjective “natural” with “antenna” is representative of the intermingling of natural landscape and human-made inventions throughout the novel, whether it is mining techniques, written records on the traditions of Native populations, or contemporary media trying to explain Raj’s abduction – all failed attempts at taming the unknown dimensions of the desert.

The landscape actually reveals the spiritual dimension of the desert. Indeed, it seems to extend to the sky and thus denote mysticism. For Fray Garcés, reporting his observations, the

Pinnacles are “a butte whose three-spired shape I considered auspicious as a representation of the Trinity” (*GWM* 383). In a game of echoes, several characters see the verticality of the Pinnacles as an extended hand: “three large shadow-fingers” (*GWM* 80), “fingers pointing up into space” (*GWM* 120), the “three-fingered hands of the Pinnacle rocks” (*GWM* 280-281) about to “start moving, sprout hands and fingers” (*GWM* 186). This extension is replicated in the cacti that surround them in the desert. Nicky, the English rock star, notices that “the cacti raised their arms up to heaven. He wondered about joining them, praying for forgiveness” (*GWM* 35). In addition to the obvious Biblical undertones of these descriptions, reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, the narrative calls upon Native American spiritual conceptions of the earth and the sky. Ike Prince, the child born from Deighton’s wife Eliza and Willie Prince in 1920, thus sees the Pinnacles as

three spires connecting earth and sky. When Ike saw them, fear landed on his shoulders and wrapped him like a cloak. He knew why he had avoided the rocks. And why they tugged at him, like a thread caught on a cactus spine (*GWM* 314)

The character is both “tugged at” by the narrative thread linking him to Deighton, the man he is about to encounter. Indeed, Deighton is his mother’s husband, who repudiated her after she had a sexual encounter with his Native American father. But the images of the thread and of being “wrapped” in his impressions of the landscape also evoke the pervasiveness and essential interaction with the living world in many Native American beliefs. As Jack D. Forbes explains, “ecos, from the indigenous point of view, *extends out to* the very boundaries of the great totality of existence, the Wemi Tali” (Forbes 2001: 290, my emphasis) which he translates as “the “All Where” in the Delaware-Lenápe language” (2001: 285).¹⁹ Extension, in that sense, is closer to an expansion, an acknowledgement of the natural vastness of human experience.

Kunzru also inserts this Native American perspective in a reference to a tale of the afterlife, common to several Native American mythologies but identified as Caddo in Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz’s *American Indian Myths and Legends* (1984). The story, titled “Coyote and the Origin of Death” in that anthology, revolves around the trickster figure of Coyote, who mistakenly closes the door between the living and the dead, thus making it impossible to move freely between the two worlds, and causing the spirits of the dead to wander aimlessly. Coyote is a key character in *Gods Without Men*, appearing in several of the plots and linking them, without being clearly identifiable – he is at times a meth addict, at other times a

¹⁹ Forbes reminds us that ecos (from the Greek *oikos*) means “the house we live in, our place of habitation.” Jack D. Forbes. ‘Indigenous Americans: Spirituality and Ecos.’ *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science*, Fall 2001, 290.

member of the 1970s UFO cult, but is also incarnated in a tale told by Mockingbird Runner, a member of the mission that the anthropologist Deighton is visiting in 1920. In the latter incarnation, Mockingbird Runner tells a version of the story he calls “the time Coyote traveled to the Land of the Dead” (*GWM* 126). The character’s account of this passage between two worlds provides another form of extension, life on earth being extended to the Land of the Dead. Coyote travels to and fro thanks to a basket-maker, a woman who “is weaving together this world and the Land of the dead” three times over (*GWM* 126). While Coyote is ultimately trapped in the Land of the Dead, the character’s story is followed by a return to the main diegesis, where a woman (another basket-maker) called Segunda sees Deighton’s wife Eliza lying next to Willie Prince, and presumes that “there would be a baby, and it would be Coyote’s baby, belonging half to this world and half to the Land of the Dead” (*GWM* 128). The passage thus connects spatial and spiritual extension to the question of miscegenation, a theme that also runs through Kunzru’s writing and provides an opening towards contemporary debates about American identity and history.

In these extension patterns, the desert thus appears as a crossroads of sorts, where all types of temporary encounters can occur. Incidentally, the Mojave Desert stands near the borders separating Nevada, Arizona and California, even if officially located in California. In the novel these extensions and encounters unfold in the stories from Native American lore, but also in the missionaries’ attempts to extend a – more or less brutal – hand towards native populations, or even in Jaz and Lisa’s attempts to reach out to their nonverbal son in the contemporary plot. But the central instance of extension is the one manifested in the characters’ efforts to reach towards the extra-terrestrial, as they believe in the existence of aliens. The UFO plot of the novel is inspired by real-life events surrounding the figure of George Van Tassel, an American citizen who worked in the aircraft industry in California and crossed paths with controversial billionaire Howard Hughes before he met Frank Critzer, a mine prospector who had decided to live underneath a boulder called Giant Rock, located South of the Trona Pinnacles. Van Tassel joined Critzer in the desert where he opened a café and aircraft stop – like the character of Schmidt in Kunzru’s novel – before he declared, in 1956, having been visited and temporarily abducted by an alien spaceship. From then on, Van Tassel created the “Giant Rock Interplanetary Spacecraft Convention,” which gathered hundreds of people in the desert, and he designed the “Integratron,” a building supposed to help with “rejuvenation, anti-gravity and time travel” (Stringfellow 2018). The building was also to serve as an antenna to receive “extraterrestrial communiqués” (Stringfellow 2018). Kunzru largely drew inspiration from these two men to create his characters Schmidt and Clark Davis, but he also imagined

members of their communities and the experience of living in a Californian desert cult in the 1970s, particularly as a woman. The journeys of three women intersect: Joannie, who progressively becomes one of the cult leaders; Judy, her daughter, who reappears after having been supposedly taken in by the aliens; and Dawn, a teenager from the local town who enters the cult out of boredom and a wish to escape.

Dawn's experience of extension manifests as an *expansion*: locked in her perverse uncle's general store, she is presented with a glimpse of a larger world when Judy and her friends from the cult push the door of the shop. She is fascinated by their commune located around an intriguing building but also by Wolf, a Mexican-looking man who spurs her desire for sexual initiation. Von Tassel's actual building named the "Integratron" is never explicitly named, but is hinted at when the characters recall that "the First Guide had gotten himself killed trying to *reintegrate* the Earth into the Confederation" (*GWM* 159, my emphasis). Dawn's integration into the commune is described as an experience of expansion – of one entity not only extending to, but being incorporated by another one: "It was as simple as that. Step by step, she walked away from the town and into the Command, which absorbed her into its structure like a big soap bubble incorporating a little one" (*GWM* 157). The character's "absorption" is similar to imaginaries of alien abduction. Her movement "step by step" into the cult in fact reveals the seductive mechanism of conversion she undergoes, coinciding with an expansion of her perspectives on space and place. Yet this remains a partial success, since the rest of the town people reject and antagonise the inhabitants of the "Command," sending spies and local sheriffs to trick them into illegality. Despite this hostility, Wolf convinces Dawn that attachment to places and free movement are soon to become obsolete:

Bubbles, said Wolf, were a good way to think about the future. Soon buildings would be more like them, soft and fluid, free to float away any time and attach themselves to another cluster. At a moment's notice you could change your mind about how you live. You could be part of a city, or a village, or stay on your own. Just untether yourself from your surroundings and go. That, he told her, was what freedom looked like.

Dawn didn't know much about freedom. All she knew was the life she wanted didn't include working at the store or grappling on the back seat of Frankie's Plymouth or her uncle running her over with his eyes all the time like she was something good to eat. (*GWM* 157)

The bubble metaphor, previously conveying absorption and annexation, now evokes freedom and detachment. The passage displays how Dawn's desire for an elsewhere is not so much inclusive as *exclusive*: extension, to her, means being able to get rid of men's gaze and invasive control. Of course, Kunzru's playful onomastics hint at Dawn's naivety: leaving one man who

sees her as appetising, she escapes by putting her head in another *Wolf's* mouth. The naïve teenager does not question these ideals of freedom at first, but the narrative goes on to narrate Dawn's entrapment in the cult, leading to prostitution and drug dealing. Ultimately, Dawn returns to a town life and opens a Motel where she lets in passing strangers, in a full-circle journey.

The semantic connotations of integration and annexation actually point to the role of the desert in the novel: its apparent emptiness makes it the ideal place for imaginaries to emerge, and for the most extreme events to unfold there. The desert extends and retracts according to one's wishes, and is thus moulded to accommodate the imagination. Kunzru's fascination for the unknowable makes the desert a creative playground where narrative threads can unravel indefinitely. But the cognitive and imaginary extensions provided by the desert are not escapist in substance. These re-mappings place the reader before their own uncertainties, their inner limits and pre-conceptions, and the novel thus leads to an extension of one's personal beliefs as much as spatial imaginaries. This is emphasized at the macro level by the narrative structure of the novel, where one story is always extended towards other stories and other times, providing what Douglas Coupland, in his review of the novel, called "narrative traction in the reader's mind" (Coupland 2012). A similar type of traction is exerted in Kunzru's earlier novel *Transmission*, where the motif of flows leads readers into the meanders of globalised movement.

1.3.2. *Transmission*: following the flows

Hari Kunzru had already experimented with the semantics of extension in his second novel *Transmission* (2004). As in *Gods Without Men*, the pattern is used both formally and thematically. But rather than the desert, it is the spatial imaginary of the early 2000s, articulated around financial and cultural globalisation, which informs the extension of place. In this novel, extension can evoke the extended cables of internet connectivity, as well as the ceaseless travels of the higher classes embodied by the character of Guy Swift, and the spread of mass media images like the films of Bollywood star Leela Zahir.

As critics have noted, *Transmission* engages with the philosophical assumptions of globalisation theory, such as the "assimilation of place" (Robinson 2008: 82) or the "integration of discrete territories into a single spatial totality" (Childs and Green 2013: 80). Peter Childs and James Green actually read *Transmission* together with Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, noting that Kunzru moves from the power systems of the British Empire addressed in *The*

Impressionist to the equally imperialist patterns of cultural expansion and “capitalist accumulation” inherent to globalisation (2013: 80).

Kunzru’s novel indeed questions the types of extension formed by globalised homogenisation and the merchandising of relations to place. *Transmission* faces a cultural given enumerated thus by sociologist Manuel Castells: “information networks” have overturned “other organizational forms,” since they are seen as a “most efficient form of organization” (2000: 17). Challenging the overused metaphor of the network, the novel ironically points to its glitches and paradoxes. Kunzru turns our attention to other patterns than the well-structured, supra-organized imaginary of the network seamlessly and neutrally connecting places and people to one another. This part wishes to address specifically the motif of flows, which leads to a perception of places forsaking the image of the network and proposing alternatives.

In terms of spatial imaginaries, what does the word “flow” represent? The term has become a cornerstone of globalisation theory, in particular since its appearance in the conceptual taxonomy of Manuel Castells. In his studies of the networked organization of society, Castells contends that a “space of flows” has come to compete with the “space of places.” The latter is usually characterised by human experience and moments shared in a given time and place. The “space of flows” operates differently:

The space of flows refers to the technological and organizational possibility of organizing the simultaneity of social practices without geographical contiguity. Most dominant functions in our societies (financial markets, transnational production networks, media systems etc.) are organized around the space of flows. (2000: 14)

In itself, the “space of flows” which runs parallel to the “space of places” constitutes an extension of spatial imaginaries. This “simultaneity” without “geographical contiguity” finds its formal equivalents in Kunzru’s *Transmission*, a novel which keeps shifting perspectives, notably when the different characters see the Leela virus appear all over the world. Yet Kunzru re-appropriates the metaphor of the flows to question the “dominant functions” enumerated by Castells, and proposes flows as a metaphor for creation and escape from technocratic control.

Thematically speaking, the flows described in *Transmission* echo those identified by Castells: they are flows of money and information, such as televised images – embodied by Leela Zahir and the Bollywood plot – and computer data, dealt with in Arjun’s firm *Databodies*. These flows are frequently subjected to control and competition, in what Castells terms “a social struggle to assign goals to the network” (2000: 16). From that standpoint, flows are not directionless: they must be guided at all costs. Throughout the novel, the narrative voice openly

mocks this wish for control, manifested most saliently in the character of Guy Swift, the English manager of a London branding company called *Tomorrow**:

We don't lose. (...)

Guy's 'we' was different from his father's, though it would be hard to specify who other than himself was included. He had been through a phase of reading popular-science paperbacks and thought of his success as the outcome of a process of natural selection. We were on top because we were better adapted to the environment of the global city. We took chances and made opportunities for ourselves. We knew how to network, how to manipulate the flows of money and information to produce **Results**.²⁰ (*T* 220)

The parody of a businessman incarnated by Guy Swift is looked at from a distance, and the alternate use of "He" and of Guy's exclusive "we" mirror the impression of zooming in and out. The vacuous catch-phrases constituting Guy's speech (taking chances, making opportunities) reach a climactic end with the singled-out word "results," a ready-made brand name transposable to any company and trade in the global economy. This emphasized use of the term "results" is even more parodic as it echoes a previous occurrence in the novel, when Guy describes the missions of *Tomorrow** (*T* 20). Results, in this case, are not the inevitable finish line of a series of causes and effects: they are anticipated, *produced* in advance and therefore resist chronology. They are hardly specific and identifiable, as the transposable use of the word indicates. Guy's attempts at controlling "flows of money and information" are associated with the verb "manipulate": they are an inefficient, unwanted intervention forming a pretence at action but failing at shaping even the very definition of his job. Interestingly, the emptiness of corporate lingo is replicated in *Gods Without Men*, where the "flows" in question are those of capital just before the 2008 economic crash. As the character of Raj is being recruited as an analyst, he is told that "Banks and hedge funds were hungry for specialists in so-called quantitative finance (...) who could tame the uncertainties of international capital flows. Xavier used words like *revolutionize* and *transformative*" (*GWM* 91). Again, in this passage, the goal is to "tame" flows of capital, all the while maintaining a paradoxical ambition of production and creation.

Guy Swift's use of words is also mocked earlier in the novel, when the reader learns that he wrote his own autobiography, titled *Guy Swift: The Mission*. In that opus, the intention of controlling flows is associated to his job in advertising: "his future lay in the science of 'deep-branding', the great quest to harness what in *GS:TM* he termed the 'emotional magma that wells

²⁰ In the novel, the word "Results" is singled out in a Sans typescript larger than the rest of the text, which I have imitated here in Arial 14 pt for an equivalent effect.

from the core of planet brand” (T 21). Once again, Guy’s intention is to control (to “harness”) the flows – of emotions, words, and ideas that emerge from the advertising world. Seemingly apparent through the metaphor of the volcano, and of addressing the “core,” depth is relinquished as the vacuous expression “deep-branding” once again makes evident the paradoxical superficiality of the character. The conjugation of vacuous words and a desire to control culminate in Guy’s offer of an advertising campaign for PEBA, the European border patrol. The flows that are controlled, in that case, are the human influx of immigrants. The last part of the novel discloses the very real, material experiences hidden behind discourse on immaterial flows.

Guy’s ambitions and his “swift” movement are ultimately challenged when he is himself mistaken for an asylum seeker and forcibly detained. Besides the irony used by Kunzru to unveil the fallacies of globalisation, this twist of fate also calls for a change in perspectives and a questioning of one’s privileges in the new world order of globalisation. Upon its release, *Transmission* was remarked for its straightforward engagement with the language of digital culture and the discourse of globalisation. As playful and tantalizing as this conversation is, and as prolific as it can prove for the creation of metaphors, the characters’ flaws and their unsuccessful travails around the earth also unveil the human flipside of these abstracted concepts. As James Green and Peter Childs remark, *Transmission* investigates “how these changing conceptions of proximity and distance are manifested on the terrain of affect” (2013: 82-83). This has been observed in critical appraisals of the novel as representative of Bauman’s “liquid fears” (Filipczak 2014) or as an echo to the HIV crisis and the fears of contagion through blood flows (Brock 2008).

This is perhaps where the “flows” of *Transmission* take on a deeper meaning, since the apparently intangible nature of flows is counterbalanced by their omnipresence in the characters’ bodies and minds. Flows are not just conceived, they are perceived; they are not just named and controlled by those in power, but felt and experienced. In his thesis, James Green explains how *Transmission* addresses not just the software and hardware of the digital era, but “the imbrication of the ‘wetware’ of the corporeal body with technologies of transport and communication,” underpinning a “new ontological fluidity” (Green 2007: 158). This can be exemplified by the many descriptions of the “Leela virus” unleashed by Arjun, often occurring at the onset of chapters, as if to re-locate the reader within the movement of these ongoing flows. In one of these descriptions, the bodily impacts of digital flows are explicitly mentioned: “Data streamed up to communication satellites, or was converted into radio waves to be spat out of transmitters, passing through people and buildings, travelling away into space” (T 115).

Not only do digital flows “pass through” people’s bodies and minds, but they extend “away into space,” indicating continuity. Given these physical encounters, one can question what the continuity of flows entails from a material standpoint. In *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011), anthropologist Tim Ingold insists on the way flows are intrinsically related to the formation of matter:

whenever we encounter matter, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, ‘it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation.’ And the consequence, they go on to assert, is that ‘this matter-flow can only be followed’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 451). What Deleuze and Guattari call ‘matter-flow’, I would call material. Accordingly, I recast the assertion as a simple rule of thumb: to follow the materials. To apply this rule is to intervene in a world that is continually ‘on the boil.’ (2011: 213)

Together with Ingold’s reappraisal of Deleuze and Guattari’s “matter-flow,” one can therefore conceive of flows as *mattering*, forming matter. The declinations of the motif throughout *Transmission* reveals this formative dimension of flows. The novel’s urgent tone and the accumulative effects, such as the constant return to the impacts of the virus, reflect the “boiling” effects identified by Ingold. Several passages in particular illustrate those effects, resorting to images such as “eddies”: “Eddies ran through the national grid, echoes of Leela’s voice. In parts of East Anglia, Wales and Western Scotland, there were momentary breaks in transmission” (*T* 199). Pervasive “eddies” intrude in particular places and modify their relation to the flow of information – their comparison to “echoes of Leela’s voice,” as if the virus were speaking, alludes to the power of flows as a language in itself. At different points in *Transmission*, this language of flows is weaved together with the language of the narrative. This subtext appears in particular as the language of code and information theory, something that Kunzru explores in his novels as an omnipresent yet overlooked discourse. The novel ends with a list of apocryphal assessments of “Greyday,” the moment when the virus deregulated all communication throughout the world. One of them refers to a Russian scientific journal which has been studying “multivariate Poisson flow,” a statistical tool which conveys “a vocabulary of imperfection, of error correction and density estimation, of signals with unknown appearance and disappearance times, of indefinite knowledge and losses due to entropy” (*T* 271). Language therefore displays the ruggedness inherent to the circulation of flows, the obstacles they face and the changes they undergo in the process.

Hence, the seemingly abstract nature of these flows is always brought back to their material manifestation: the flows lead to “following the materials.” A particularly striking instance is when Guy Swift travels to Dubai at the height of the virus crisis. The narrative voice

again starts the chapter with an assessment of the spread of the virus: “on the whole the effect was cumulative, an accretion of frustration, a furring of the global arteries” (T 176). The bodily metaphor displays what Tim Ingold calls the “boiling down” of flows, the way they clog or eddy under the effect of the virus. This effect is immediately echoed on the same page by the description of the artificial influx of water into the ground on a Dubai golf course:

From the ground came a regular thumping sound, the chug chug of 8,000 sprinklers irrigating 200 acres of dwarf Bermuda grass, a solid mat of vivid paintbox-green like a mould on the red skin of the desert. Beneath it, veins and arteries, ran miles of plastic tubing, connecting the green mat to a site down the coast where a vast desalination plant boiled Arabian Gulf seawater to a thousand degrees centigrade, filtered it and daily pumped two and a half million gallons of it here, for the grass and the golfers. (T 176)

In the passage, the “thumping sound” made by the sprinklers is evocative of the concept of noise developed in the novel – a disturbance, something which interrupts the flow. The metaphor of veins is again taken up in an echo to the virus, as if to emphasize the frailty of this irrigation system, which might one day “fur up” just like the information system. The reader is shown how an artificial system built exclusively around a set number of elements (“gallons,” “gass” and golfers”) runs the risk of ignoring external disturbances and their wide-ranging effects. Kunzru’s extension of this message to the ecological question of water use is an example of his ethical stance towards the experience of place. The writer underlines both the limits of human action over place, but also points to the persistence of physical place as an ideal despite a competing “space of flows.” The Dubai golf course is an idealized rendition of other golf courses, achieved through a fake landscape imitating British lawns, at the cost of other places like the Arabian Gulf seawater. The desire for foreign places and their imitation is another instance of place extending its evocative power.

Ultimately, Kunzru’s use of the metaphor of flows highlights the failings of the networked model of society. Where the network proposes flows as “static point-to-point connectors” where “place figures as a hub” (Ingold 2008: 98), Kunzru’s *Transmission* shows how flows do not simply connect places but continuously *make* them. Flows indeed form places and extend beyond them, in a seemingly infinite process of place-making which resonates with the creative journeys at work in *Transmission*. Philosopher Thomas Nail argues similarly when he contends that with flows, “nothing is done once and for all: a flow is only on its way to something else” (2016: 26). The novel’s introduction echoes this proposition, by resisting the reductive models of networked communication:

A chain of cause and effect? Nothing so simple in Leela’s summer. It was a time of topological curiosities, loops and knots, never-ending strips of action

and inside-out bottles of reaction so thoroughly confused that identifying a point of origin became almost impossible. (T 4)

From the opening of the novel, the reader is warned: there will be no beginning nor end to this account, but like the narrative itself, a series of knots for them to untangle. The novel itself is one such knot, formed by the reader's entanglement with the plot. The hermeneutic pact thus proposed is ironically directed towards "topological curiosities," requiring the reader to question the performative vacuousness at stake in the use of words like "networks" and "flows," and to reconsider their own place and ethics in the spatial entanglements of the modern age.

1.3.3. "Remodelling the earth itself": the "plasti-cities" of *Exit West*

Where the "topological curiosities" of Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* lead the reader into a creative journey of place-making, Mohsin Hamid similarly uses oddity and unfamiliarity to display the formation of places beyond usual imaginaries. In *Exit West* just like in *Transmission*, unexpected events and encounters force the characters into re-defining the extent of places.

The places Hamid focuses on in *Exit West* are mainly cities. The city is a recurrent feature of Hamid's novels, as all of them involve urban settings. Hamid himself has spent all his life in world cities – Lahore, New York and London. Cities are part of the way Hamid transcends spatial boundaries, yet maintaining a sense of place. Just like Lahore in *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* tends to incarnate Pakistan metonymically, the cities described in *Exit West* are made to represent a given time and place through symbolic hints more than extensive descriptions, emphasizing potentially transposable experiences while implicitly referring to contemporary realities. In an article titled "The mutations of the city in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" (2023), I contend that Hamid addresses the impact of crises such as war and mass migration on the very shape of the city, leading to narrative "plasti-cities". Here I propose to redirect some of the arguments of said article to explore examples of these "plasti-cities," and how the writer's use of this device extends perceptions of place.

The first part of the novel focuses on the city Saeed and Nadia live in, an unnamed city in the throes of armed invasion by "militants" (*EW* 152). As the protagonists see their own lives changed by the conflict, for instance when Saeed's mother dies from a stray bullet or Nadia has to leave her apartment, the narrative voice extends the effects of the conflict to include refugees who have had to move because of the war. In the passage describing them, the city is put to the test of the conflict and the shared use of space is radically modified. The narrative voice talks about refugees "pitching tents in the green belts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the

boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets” (EW 23). In this case, extension operates from within the city. The extension is multi-directional, with on the one hand the verticality of the pitched tents and the “lean-tos” and on the other the horizontal “pavements” on which the refugees sleep. At the same time, these forms of extension are contrasted by the stasis that characterizes the situation of refugee. In this description of uncontrolled refugee settlements within the city, the narrative emphasises the need for an expansion of collective imaginaries so as to accommodate the forced extensions which, one way or another, take place in the city.

By focusing on the question of settlement, Hamid’s novel also differs from other accounts of refugee crises, in which the journey seems to be the main issue at stake. He acknowledged it in several interviews, explaining that “in the novel, it was important to me to focus on what makes someone want to leave, which is all of their life before migration, and what happens to them in the new place, which is the life after migration” (Gross 2018). Introducing refugee settlements in Saeed and Nadia’s city, it also re-locates the status of refugees as one that can occur within the country of origin, not only in a foreign place. This passage foresees the challenges Saeed and Nadia later face, as they arrive in London and then Marin and attempt to make a place for themselves.

Mohsin Hamid’s descriptions of extending cities is also informed by his intellectual engagement with spatial organization and land use: studying international affairs at Princeton, he submitted a thesis on “Integrated Resource Planning in Pakistan” (1993). This theoretical background in planning undoubtedly influences Hamid’s fictional geographies, and in particular the possibilist streak that runs through his writing of London in *Exit West*. A staple of geography, possibilism was theorised in Europe in the early twentieth century and contends that “humans have the adaptive ability to modify their responses to the physical world,” as opposed to environmental determinism (Hanks 2011: 262). As the protagonists attempt to find a place and apprehend the places they land in, their adaptation is indeed the key focus of the narrative and contributes to extending the representation of cities.

When Saeed and Nadia reach London through a black door, they find themselves in an abandoned London hotel in which they end up staying with other groups of refugees. They soon become prey to anti-immigrant protesters and police forces surrounding the hotel, and their refuge becomes a claustrophobic place. From within the hotel, Saeed and Nadia first hear about undocumented refugees being sent to “great holding camps that had been built in the city’s green belt, and concentrating those who remained in pockets of shrinking size” (EW 134). In his *Theory of the Border*, Thomas Nail explains that borders are always characterized by two

interlinked dynamics: “expansion” and “expulsion” (2016: 21). In this example, the “green belt” constitutes an excluding border and suggests expansion; at the same time, the city itself does not expand so much as reduces the space taken up by the refugees. Yet later on in the novel, the city ends up expanding and expelling in a single movement, as Saeed and Nadia are involved in the planned construction of housing for immigrants on the periphery of the city. The previously hermetic borders of the “green belt” stretches to accommodate these houses:

In the formerly protected green belt around London a new ring of cities was being built, cities that would be able to accommodate more people again than London itself. This development was called the London Halo, one of innumerable human halos and satellites and constellations springing up in the country and in the world. (*EW* 167)

A reverse movement is operated as the refugees, previously circled by protesters in their London hotel, end up circling London in a “new ring of cities.” In a rescaling process, representative of Hamid’s writing, the narrator moves from the London Halo to several extended directions, whether temporal (with future cities “that would be able to accommodate more people”) or spatial, with the replicas of “halos” all over the world. Descriptions of the London Halo oscillate between utopian and dystopian, enhancing the difficulties faced by the refugees but also construction workers as they try to build the place from scratch. One the foremen thus reflects: “when he looked around him now at the almost unimaginable scale of what they were undertaking he felt they were remodelling the Earth itself” (*EW* 177). This cosmogony of sorts thus challenges the imagination, even as the refugees and builders are trying to give it form in space. The foreman building a road, manipulating the earth, is made to reconsider the extent of his actions at the scale of the Earth, with a capital letter, pointing to the constant interaction between material experience and our imaginaries of place and space.

The narrator develops in detail the structure of the London Halo, its requirements and the promise of a place to own for the refugees: “In exchange for their labour in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings (...), migrants were promised forty metres and a pipe: a home on forty square metres of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity” (*EW* 167-168). As critics have noted, the deal offered to the refugees is a direct reference to Atlantic slavery and the “forty acres and a mule” the freed slaves were promised by the Union during the American Civil War (Goyal 2020: 249). Far from anecdotal, the reference is also a means to extend the image of the London Halo and replace it within the longer history of human displacement and exploitation. It also announces the precariousness of what turns out to be a “pipe” dream – struggling to adapt to the intrusive drone surveillance and

harsh working conditions, Saeed and Nadia eventually leave the London Halo in search for a new place.

In *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*, John Clement Ball notices that the London of postcolonial novels tends to undergo a form of “descriptive downsizing”, where depictions make it smaller than it really is as a form of resistance to Empire (2004: 8). In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid echoes this re-scaling and enters in a conversation with a literary history of London descriptions. But rather than a “descriptive downsizing,” the novel zooms in and out of London, from the inside of a London hotel, the “cherry trees” Saeed and Nadia observe through the window upon arriving (*EW* 118), to the green outskirts of the city. Shrinking and extending London in turn from the perspective of refugees, it reveals the possible “plasti-city” of a place long enshrined in the collective imagination.

Finally, the extension of cities appears in evocations of Saeed and Nadia’s birth city which frame the novel. In these two descriptions, the extension of place relies on an investigation of time and its effects. The narrative voice demonstrates how places persist and extend despite the passing of time. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is told about the life journey of Saeed’s parents, and in particular about the place where they met:

The cinema where Saeed’s parents met was long gone by the time their son met Nadia, as were the bookshops they favoured and most of their beloved restaurants and cafés. It was not that cinemas and bookshops, restaurants and cafés had vanished from the city, just that many of those that had been there before were there no longer. The cinema they remembered so fondly had been replaced by a shopping arcade for computers and electronic peripherals. The building had taken the same name as the cinema that preceded it: both once had the same owner, and the cinema had become so famous as to have become a byword for that locality (*EW* 11-12).

The nostalgic tone is counterbalanced by a sense of continuity – even when some places disappear, new places are continuously made. The link with Saeed and Nadia’s own encounter reinforces this prolongation. The cinema, in this case, is not simply annihilated but transformed and adapted to new social habits, all the while maintaining its symbolical power for the inhabitants who call it the same. The place extends not only in time but in space, since it has become a synecdoche for the whole area.²¹ This multi-dimensional extension is echoed at the very end of the novel, when Saeed and Nadia return to their birth city after their journey west

²¹ Hamid might be implicitly referring here to the historical Regal Cinema in Lahore, located in Regal Chowk, an area famous today for its food court and mall.

in search for a better place. The narrator offers a proleptic view into the future of the city, at a time when the war is over, and describes it through Nadia's gaze:

Half a century later Nadia returned for the first time to the city of her birth, where the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar, and as she wandered about slowly, exploring, she was informed of the proximity of Saeed (*EW* 227)

This re-assessment of the city countervails the initial chronotope of the city at war and revisits it, in all senses of the term since Nadia starts "exploring" her own birth city. The narrator maintains until the end the anonymity of this city, contrary to all the other cities in the novel, as if to make it possible for that city to morph after the war. The dualities of heaven/hell and familiar/unfamiliar indicate a desacralization of the city, allowing for a place to reinvent itself, and for people to reinvent themselves, too, as Nadia's encounter with Saeed suggests. New forms of spatial experience are also hinted at: Nadia is likely "informed of the proximity of Saeed" through a digital device. In this final chapter, the city is an instance of the way places are formed by encounters at a given time, and can be constantly reinvented and moulded to the shape of our experience.

This chapter has attempted to approach the main stakes and the aesthetic implications of the writing of place in Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's novels, crystallised in the categories of authenticity, displacement and extension. While these categories display the intricacies of the duality between "here" and "there," this duality is also challenged by the mechanisms of extension found in the writer's themes and aesthetics, which suggest how places perceived as "here" can be expanded and stretched towards an elsewhere, whereas places perceived as "there" can be annexed and appropriated. Overall, the texts seem to converge in their representation of singular experiences of place, but also in their common willingness to address social phenomena such as globalised movement and diaspora. Having explored Hamid's and Kunzru's respective entanglements with the labels and expectations assigned to transnational writers, the chapter has attempted to provide a first overview of the specificities of their writing, and more particularly their imaginaries of place. The second chapter aims at displacing the focus slightly, moving from the strictly spatial implications of "here" and "there" to the writers' evocation of history, and of a memory that is either distant or perceptibly manifest in place.

Chapter 2

Traces of places: place and memory

“It is impossible to live without leaving a trace.”
(WT 282)

In *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, Bertrand Westphal observes the progressive spatialization of narratives. The study of narratives – in particular literary fictions – has moved from the precedence given to time and chronology, to include an interest in spatial structures, in an echo to the larger shift operated by the “spatial turn” in the humanities (2007: 37). Edward Casey observes the same evolution in the introduction to *The Fate of Place*, contending that despite a historical primacy of “temporocentrism,” “certain phenomena of this century bring with them (...) a revitalized sensitivity to place” (2011: xiii).

But where does memory stand amidst those critical evolutions of narrated space and time? In *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey contends that place is intrinsically memorable:

It is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place, finding in it features that favor and parallel its own activities. We might even say that memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported. (2009: 186-187)²²

The possibility for place to “stabilize” memory calls into question the role of place in the collective imagination. Is place “stable” because it is “stabilizing”? What does considering place as a “container” of the past entail? Casey’s statement goes so far as suggesting that memory is formed in the shape of place, following its dynamics and “features.” In French theoretical discourses, the association of place and memory is often traced back to historian Pierre Nora’s trilogy *Lieux de mémoire* (1984; 1986; 1992).²³ Nora described his *lieux de mémoire* as objects that can either be very concrete or very abstract, ranging from museums to dictionaries or even archives. Nora believed the *lieux de mémoire* stemmed from a shift, whereby postwar France had ceased abiding by the contextualized writing of history – as understood by the *Annales* school – and started nurturing a taste for collective memory, symbolised by these *lieux*.

²² Initially published in 1987.

²³ Translated in English as *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. University of Chicago Press, 2001. Trans. David P. Jordan.

In their fictions, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru engage with such questions. They address the materiality of memory, through the architectural, archeological or literary traces of the past, but also with memory *as it is being* constructed, proposing that the ongoing work of memory-making is essentially connected to the experience of place.

Being a material manifestation of the past, traces can indeed be thought to stand at the intersection of place and memory. Paul Ricoeur, in *Temps et Récit*, points out that traces refer both to a “here” and thus to spatial experience, and to a “now,” a present to be seized. Besides, traces are what he calls a “sign-effect”: resulting from the past and indicating a future investigation, they bear both causality and meaning (2007: 219).²⁴ Such a duality looms large in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works. The causal-signifying propensity of traces partakes of a writing where place is constantly being deciphered: crossed and transformed by world-changing events, by the flows of global movement and mass information, yet also requiring retrospective investigations under the influence of contemporary claims of purity and exclusionary politics. Many types of traces unfold in their writings: ruins, dust, footprints, echoes – all of which betray the materiality and malleability of experienced places. Those traces are both traces of people and events *in* places, and traces *of* places, pointing to places that once were.

Looking at place, memory and traces in Kunzru’s and Hamid’s novels, I first delve into their approach to the place-making (and unmaking) processes resulting from imperialism. This involves for instance the images of ruins after 9/11 in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the (re-)writing of colonial India in Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, and his unresolved archaeology of American identity in *Gods Without Men*. This memory is also literary, anchoring Hamid and Kunzru in the legacy of postcolonial literature and canonical works addressing imperialism.

The remainder of this chapter is entirely dedicated to Hari Kunzru’s fictions. While Mohsin Hamid’s work cannot be deemed to abstain from engaging with memory, it has previously been noted that Hamid’s novels adopt a de-referential mode that perhaps makes them difficult to reconcile with Casey’s proposition of a “stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences.” Besides, the second and third thematic directions taken in this part address creative strategies that are specific to, and to some extent, exclusively present in, Hari Kunzru’s body of work, for instance the use of multi-modal narrative formats straying away from the novel (*Memory Palace*, *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*). As such, they

²⁴ Ricoeur writes: “*La trace est un effet-signe*” (italics in the original). The English translation inverts the two nouns: “The trace is a sign-effect.” Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*. Translated by Katherine Blamey and David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press, 1990, 120.

are less likely to bear comparison with Hamid's novels and can be better apprehended within Kunzru's own poetics. Kunzru is also particularly interested in unpicking past periods and events, and often has a very documented approach to fiction – in an interview with Max Haiven, he explained: “[o]ne thing that has definitely changed for the writer, and more generally for our experience of the past, is the availability of archive” (2013: 18). As will be examined here, the interactions of place with the past in Kunzru's works manifest in palaces and their avatars – forts, mansions, skyscrapers – as repositories for collective memory and for the imagination. Secondly, Kunzru's engagement with the realm of sounds compels us to examine echoes, a fundamental type of traces that are visible, or perhaps audible, in his writing.

2.1. Traces of imperial power

In *Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-century readings*, Elleke Boehmer observes “two dominant inflections of the postcolonial: a globalized hybridizing inflection, and a ‘resistance’ inflection” (2019: 69). The former is composed of a class of writers who have been using mechanisms such as “subverting from within and ‘writing back’” – she designates Salman Rushdie as a representative – and the latter inflection encompasses writers who are “ceaselessly questioning and attacking colonial survivals, not least as expressed in globalization” (2019: 69). Boehmer goes on to contend that the two inflections are in fact “connected in their acknowledgement (...) of the still-lingering colonial past” (2019: 69).

Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's fictions embody both inflections. It is hard not to perceive Rushdie's legacy in Kunzru's subversive trickster figures and Hamid's unreliable narrators. Their novels also display frequent questionings of “colonial survivals,” whether it is through American imperialism abroad in the wake of 9/11 or the connection of British identity to Britain's imperial past, or even by looking at the present impacts of America's history of colonization. Besides, both writers' fictions mirror what Boehmer has elsewhere analysed, which is the need to encapsulate the causes and consequences of 9/11 within the scope of postcolonial studies, and in particular the defining role of terror (Boehmer and Morton 2010: 8).

W.J.T. Mitchell's analyses of imperial landscape in *Landscape and Power* – initially published in 1994, before 9/11 – provides insight on the spatial manifestation of imperialism, of the “colonial survivals” pointed out by Boehmer. He explains that imperialism is twofold, being “a process conducted simultaneously at concrete levels of violence, expropriation,

collaboration, and coercion, and at a variety of symbolical levels whose relation to the concrete is rarely mimetic or transparent.” (2002: 9). The double process whereby imperialism unfolds both as concrete and symbolical entails looking at landscape, space and place together. In Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works, there are material traces of imperial power in the depicted landscapes, but also symbolical traces in the mappings and the uses of place and space operated by their characters. In this section I wish to detail the different forms this imperial power takes and in particular its manifestation through traces read as metaphors.

2.1.1. “[W]e built the Lahore fort”: ruins and the location of history in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

In the course of writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid was forced to backtrack. Having produced a draft in the spring of 2001, he admitted in one of his essays that he had to change the plot as he felt compelled to include 9/11 in the novel – in fact, to make it central (2015: 69). Published in the wake of the world-changing event, this novel stands on an uncomfortable threshold between past and future, attempting to build up a new narrative while acknowledging the ruins – both physical and metaphorical – caused by the event. In December 2001, American writer Don DeLillo famously wrote an essay titled “In the Ruins of the Future,” published in *Harper’s Magazine* and republished in *The Guardian*. In his half-journalistic, half-fictional account, DeLillo pointed to the impact of 9/11 on collective memory and the deregulation of time it provoked, questions he then addressed through traumatized, amnesic characters in his 2007 *Falling Man*. The writer calls upon various spatial metaphors to express this deregulated chronology:

This was so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened. We could not catch up with it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one's soul, and there was the huge antenna falling out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backwards in time. (DeLillo 2001)

Strikingly, DeLillo’s metaphor of the arrow of time goes backwards by going downwards, in a deviated representation of chronology that verges on an archaeology. At the same time, the writer proposes to renounce America’s race for the future, faced with the impossibility to “catch up with” the event.

Published the same year as *Falling Man*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* engages with these spatio-temporal reconfigurations, but it does not take its cue from amnesic loss or trauma. The novel rather uses the ruins of 9/11 to deconstruct and relocate narratives of the so-called “East” and “West.” Hamid’s treatment of the memory of 9/11 in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

faces the complexity of a cultural and political hegemony held in check, as well as the consequences of the surging American imperialism caused by the event. The novel hinges on the notion of the “fundamentals” – the term is used to refer both to religious fundamentalism and to the corporate principles of his financial company (*TRF* 112; 132; 175) –, as if to question the foundations, the building blocks and cornerstones upon which newly rekindled geopolitical divisions rely. Addressing these shattered foundations and crumbling certainties together with the collapse of the towers, the narrative maintains ambivalence throughout: of course, through its dialogic form and suspenseful tone inspired by Camus’s *La Chute* (Hamid 2015: 78), but also in its approach to the recollection of history. Caren Irr observes “the novel’s refusal of the long temporality of historical trauma” (2013: 61), which extends to its ironic portrayal of the national nostalgia and myths rekindled by 9/11 in the United States (*TRF* 90). Rather, the novel resorts to descriptions of architecture and ruins to better analyse the foundations of both Pakistan and the United States. This in turn raises the questions of authenticity, ethical positioning and the place given to spatial descriptions of Pakistan in Hamid’s fictions.

One could argue that depictions of historical buildings and urban settings form part of a typically postcolonial re-mapping and re-scaling – a spatial reclaiming – of Pakistan which Hamid might have embarked on in the aftermath of 9/11 and the vilification of Muslim-majority countries by some media and political gatekeepers in western nations. However, the novel’s narrative construction leaves space for more nuance. In fact, descriptions of historical architecture in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* hinge on what Ulka Anjaria terms “the uneasy dialectic between Pakistan as a place, as a lived experience, and Pakistan as a node in a larger global discourse” – something which Hamid seems to negotiate in most of his fiction (Anjaria, 2013, *n.p.*). The novel uses Lahore as a frame, where the Pakistani narrator sits at a café with an American man and tells him his story of emigration to the United States. Upon first reading it, the novel seems to focus largely on New York, where the narrator lived, and two cities he travelled to for work: Manila and Valparaiso. Yet the onset of each chapter places the reader back in the Lahore café where the narration unfolds.

Like everything else in the novel, descriptions of buildings are conveyed to the reader in Changez’s voice, initially aimed at his mysterious American interlocutor within the diegesis, yet irremediably turned towards the reader, too. Hamid channels the “uneasiness” of setting the novel in Pakistan for a largely non-Pakistani readership by means of the dialogic suspense his narrator builds up. Indeed, as Changez’s account of his life and demise in New York progresses, he keeps teasing the American man, observing the potential risks surrounding them, up until the very end of the novel where he half-jokingly mentions the visible shape of a gun in the

man's jacket (*TRF* 209). As in any suspenseful narrative, the reader might come to question the narrator's mental state and reliability, as the latter seems to overload the conversation with a flow of details and outburst of emotions. In fact, Changez's invasive monologue nurtures the novel's theatrical dimension, supported by the unity of place formed by the Lahore café in the Old Anarkali quarter. This theatricality is referred to by the narrator himself:

It is remarkable how *theatrical* manmade light can be once sunlight has begun to fade, how it can affect us emotionally, even now, at the start of the twenty-first century, in cities as large and bright as this one (*TRF* 54, emphasis in the original).

Because spatial descriptions rely on this single authority, their credibility falters at times and they always seem to be about to fall apart like a paper décor. Descriptions of places and their architecture are therefore articulated as a stake of power, and form an integral part of the larger narrative stakes of the novel – is Changez a repented terrorist? Is the American man about to avenge his country? The tension building up to these questions is echoed in the uncertain narration of places. In her 2013 film adaptation of the novel, written together with Hamid, director Mira Nair hardly ever conveys this self-referential artificiality of places. Alternating Changez's voice with a more multi-modal perspective, and acting out the different places recalled by Changez, implies losing part of the narrative construct and its propensity for the theatrical. Besides, the film functions according to the codes of action movies and psychological thrillers, with a heightened three-dimensionality which further tends to annihilate the effects found in the novel.

In the novel, Changez's verbose depictions of places thus emphasize artificiality and seek to unveil possible deconstructions of history. The first instance appears at the very beginning of the novel, when Changez recalls arriving at Princeton to study for the first time:

What did I think of Princeton? Well, the answer to that question requires a story. When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings – younger, I later learned, than many of the mosques in this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stonemasonry to look older – and thought, *This is a dream come true*. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film in which I was the star and everything was possible. (*TRF* 3, emphasis in the original)

Changez warns the listener and the reader: his depiction of Princeton is part of “a story.” As often in the narrative, deconstructing the American historical building entails comparing it with Lahore's architecture – the narrator suggests that Princeton's status as “younger” than Lahore's mosques makes it less valuable. The fake historicity of Princeton makes it an ideal place for a reinvention of the self, yet it is not an entirely stable ground. Changez's prolonged film

metaphor entertains, from the onset of the novel, the notion that his “dream” will ultimately prove artificial and fall to pieces. This is further reinforced when Changez discovers New York, and feels familiar with the Upper East Side: “I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that had used it as a setting” (*TRF* 56).

Through these deceptive spatial descriptions, the narrator thus progressively debunks centres of power such as Princeton or the finance milieu in New York. These places are part of a larger system which crumbles in the aftermath of 9/11, first and foremost in the eyes of a character whose American dream has been robbed, but also from the perspective of history and geopolitics. Changez’s efforts to debunk these symbolical places are mirrored by his attempts to reclaim and promote his own national symbols. In these passages, the narrator keeps resorting to history and architectural value as tokens of power. When offered an interview at the financial firm Underwood Samson, Changez puts forth this heritage in an exchange with Jim, his soon-to-be manager:

I said I was from Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan, ancient capital of the Punjab, home to nearly as many people as New York, layered like a sedimentary plain with the accreted history of invaders from the Aryans to the Mongols to the British. He merely nodded. Then he said, “And are you on financial aid?” (*TRF* 8)

Changez’s Lahore logorrhea is abruptly interrupted – Jim’s assumption is that he is a third world citizen, who undoubtedly requires “financial aid”. The narrator changes geographical scales, from Pakistan to the Punjab, then the scale of world cities where Lahore can be compared to New York, finally calling upon history as a supposedly authoritative means of valuing Lahore. Referring to sediments and accretion, he adds up layers of pre-colonial and colonial history, only to see them erased by the only value that matters to his prospective employer: money. The competition between economic and historical value is continued throughout the narrative, for instance when Changez, attempting to describe their surroundings to the American man in the Lahore café, bursts into vindictive explanations about Lahore’s past:

For we were not always burdened by debt, dependent on foreign aid and handouts; in the stories we tell of ourselves we were not the crazed and destitute radicals you see on your television channels but rather saints and poets and – yes – conquering kings. *We* built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and *we* built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramp for our battle elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent. (*TRF* 115-116)

The collective re-writing of history through an anaphoric “we” is echoed in sounds by the “walls” and “wide ramp”, emphasizing the three-dimensional grandiosity of both the place and

its people. Here again, Changez asserts his position as a storyteller, one which is not just his but comes from a long-formed collective legacy. As much as forts and gardens themselves, stories told about the place and its people act as a repository for collective identity and for the reclaiming of what is deemed to be cultural sophistication. The large walls of the fort, the Shalimar Gardens and the Badshahi Mosque – all three architectural legacies from the Mughal era – indicate political, cultural and religious centrality, while the United States are retraced to their status as “colonies” and placed “at the edge” of the American continent.

Even though he reclaims history through these imposing buildings, Changez is also aware of the fissures and fractures in the fabric of his home country. Returning to Lahore after a long period of time in New York, he remembers “the Americanness of [his] own gaze” (*TRF* 140) and remembers seeing in the family house the “cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its wall” (*TRF* 141) before re-evaluating it as “rich with history” (142). Following these descriptions, the narrator goes on to recall his brother telling him about the political and military state of affairs in post-9/11 Pakistan, as if to echo once more the complexity of the nation’s position and geopolitics. These changes in scale and perspective, mediated through the architectural metaphors of imposing palaces and crumbling houses, convey what Cara Cilano calls “a carefully negotiated national identity, one premised on a valuing of cultural heritage and the power of pluralism rather than on a chest-thumping nuclear nationalism” (2013: 209). Echoing the faltering values and history of the United States after 9/11, the complex memory of Pakistan built up by Changez through architecture precludes a blind allegiance to his nation of birth.

Furthering his argument about the richness of Pakistani architecture, Changez invites the American man to watch their surroundings, in particular the more decrepit buildings. In *Obsolescence des Ruines*, French philosopher Bruce Bégout explains that there are two main criteria for ruins to be considered as such: they have been abandoned or unused for a lengthy duration, and the human gaze finds them worthy of observation (2022: 35). The importance of the subjective gaze is key to the construction of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as Changez attempts to direct not only the American man but also the reader towards his own perspective as a Pakistani citizen after 9/11. Changez regularly makes observations, and invites the man to “observe” (*TRF* 35) or “cast [their] gaze” (*TRF* 87). In the case of buildings, the ruins indicated by Changez continuously form an opportunity to reflect on the present, for instance when “guns and ammunition” appear on ancient façades:

I would ask you to direct your gaze instead to these lovely buildings – in varying states of disrepair – which date to the British era and function

geographically and architecturally as a link between the ancient and contemporary parts of our city. How delightful they are: a chemist, an optician, a purveyor of fine saris, a gentleman's tailor. Observe how often the words brothers and sons appear in their signage; these are family-run establishments, passed gently from generation to generation. No, not in the case of that retailer of guns and ammunition, as you correctly point out – but surely you must concede for the most part that they are charming and rather quaint. (TRF 193-194)

Playfully mimicking the tone of a tour guide, Changez weaves together the “ancient” and the “contemporary”, seamlessly including the traces of the British empire. Contrary to the other shops, “guns and ammunition” are a recent addition, a reminder of the recent history of Pakistan and in particular of the nuclear race with India and the post 9/11 tensions in the Af-Pak borderland. Again, the narrator's strategy entails directing the American man's gaze – as well as the reader's – towards the “charming and rather quaint” aspects of the city, deviating from the violent connotations of the present and turning instead to the past. Yet the artificially welcoming tone remains dubious, and ends up stressing these contradictions under pretense of hiding them.

The narrator's affection for ruins is nurtured elsewhere than Lahore. During a business trip to Valparaiso, a publisher called Juan Bautista encourages him to visit Neruda's house. Changez notes that “the home of Neruda did not feel as removed from Lahore as it actually was” (TRF 167), finding similarities between his birth city and the place he is visiting. Observing a “sense of melancholy” in the streets and buildings of Valparaiso, ruins are once again called upon: “In this – Valparaiso's former aspirations to Grandeur – I was reminded of Lahore and of that saying, so evocative in our language: *the ruins proclaim the building was beautiful*” (TRF 163). Ruins are linked to the narrator's native Urdu, a language which is in itself evocative of the past for Mohsin Hamid. The writer often evokes the linguistic to-and-fro between English and Urdu that he experienced as a child (Hamid 2015: 5) and proclaimed in a 2022 interview: “The me who could have written in Urdu ended when I was three” (Rashid and Hamid 2022). In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez's frequent claims of a poetic legacy, whether of his nation at large or through a great-uncle who was a poet, is another form of memory he tries to build upon (TRF 115; 161).

The motif of ruins ultimately appears to bear transformative potential and to constitute a form of history in the making that runs parallel to Changez's identity journey. Ruins play out Ricoeur's definition of traces as “sign-effect,” pointing to future investigations as much as consequences of the past (2007: 219). As Peter Morey notes, the trips conducted by the narrator in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* contribute to the evolution of his character. Morey takes into

account New York, Lahore and Valparaiso, as a “triangle [that] comes to form the psychological as well as the physical space within which Changez’s transformation takes place” (2011: 141). One could further contend that this space includes Changez’s student trip to Rhodes – which constitutes an attractive pull towards Western history and culture, yet a warning, through ancient ruins, about the impermanence of cultural hegemonies – and his business trip to Manila – where Changez witnesses 9/11 on television, and has a moment of reckoning about his national allegiance (*TRF* 83).

The Reluctant Fundamentalist therefore highlights the historical specificity of Lahore through Mughal architecture and colonial influence, yet always strives to relocate this specificity in comparison to other places and their ruins, not least the physical and metaphorical ruins caused by 9/11. In an interview, Hamid explained that he didn’t want to abide by “the ingrained view (...) that South Asia is an exotic place, a peculiar place and a central place – [that] is a colonial mindset” (qtd in Kanwal and Aslam 2018: 54). The places described in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* bear many paradoxes: they are fake and theatrical, yet drawn upon to reclaim historical depth and cultural specificity; decrepit yet inspiring transformation. Shaped by the perspective of an unreliable narrator, they are as inconstant and subjective as the construction of memory can be. The novel suggests that coming to terms with the ruins of 9/11 might require relocating them within a host of other deconstructions and reconstructions, thus converging with Hamid’s guiding interest for a geography of experience that transcends physical borders.

2.1.2. *The Impressionist*: the dust of Empire

The Impressionist is also informed by successive examples of deconstruction, but the novel is more reluctant to offer perspectives for reconstruction. Set in the 1910s in India, England and a fictional location in sub-Saharan Africa, the shape-shifting protagonist’s journey displays the progressive crumbling of the British Empire, manifested both through his own identity – as a product of said Empire – and through his experience of a variety of places. In his review of the novel, writer Amit Chaudhuri wrote that *The Impressionist* is a

novel of ‘Englishness’ from the vantage-point of displacement; not from a post-colonial point of view – the impressionist, we are told, has no ‘point of view’ – but from a point of no return which, it becomes increasingly apparent, is how the narrator thinks of the post-colonial’s place in history” (2002, *n.p.*).

From this “point of no return,” the novel is therefore hinged on destruction. Rather than a positive perception of traces as a possible site of reconstruction, *The Impressionist* seems to conceive of traces as a testament to disintegration. This disintegration is that of an imaginary place: the British Empire, with all its glory and might, is crumbling, and the narrative is intent on echoing this demise with motifs such as dust and physical dissolution. Starting with the dissolution of identity that is inherent to the character of Pran, I will explore the extension of this motif to the description of physical places but also the Empire’s symbolical sites of power.

Before looking at the implementation of these motifs, it is essential to remember that *The Impressionist* is built as a palimpsest, and therefore addresses not only the traces of the Empire, but the traces of preceding *narratives* of Empire. Playing with the genre of the Anglo-Indian novel, Kunzru seams the legacy of writers such as Kipling, Forster but also Conrad within the fabric of his novel, fully acknowledging “[t]he overcoded, ‘already-read’ quality of the British Indian relationship” (Childs and Green 2013: 63). In many respects, the main character resembles Kipling’s shape-shifting character Kim, the novel explicitly using *Kim* as an epigraph.²⁵ The descriptions of the Anglo-Indian community in Agra (TI 45-49) or the opening and ending of the novel both involving a cave (TI 12-16; 478) echo Forster’s *A Passage to India*, and the character’s arrival into Fotseland in a steamer is a parodic re-writing of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (TI 434-437). With these specific re-writings and through the characters and situations depicted, Kunzru’s novel refers to recurring imaginaries of place, *topoi* reminiscent of Said’s developments about the Orient as an inherited discourse:

In the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone’s work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these. (1979: 177)²⁶

The Impressionist engages with the *topos* of the Orient as well as with other ideological and cultural imaginaries of place derived from the imperial project, the better to display their progressive dissolution at the beginning of the twentieth century.

²⁵ The epigraph from *Kim* is presented as follows:

‘Remember, I can change swiftly. It will all be as it was when I first spoke to thee under Zam-Zammah the great gun –’

‘As a boy in the dress of white men – when I first went to the Wonder House. And a second time thou wast a Hindu. What shall the third incarnation be?’

²⁶ In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said uses the term “traces” to evoke the critical investigation he undertakes: “In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory *the traces upon me*, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals” Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York : Vintage Books, 1979, 25 (my emphasis).

First, the main protagonist Pran Nath Razdan himself is characterised by dust and disintegration. Pran is born from the chance meeting of Forrester, a British land surveyor, and Amrita, a young maid travelling to Agra in a palanquin to be wedded. The father's name is itself a mischievous reference to the literary heritage mentioned above – one is of course tempted to read “Forrester,” who dies early on in the novel, as a reference to E.M. Forster. In his mappings of a hostile land, Forrester himself is concerned with dust and disintegration: “dust is his specialty. Or rather, his specialty is fighting dust” (TI 3). A sudden flood leads to Forrester and Amrita's sexual encounter in a cave, the chaos leaving behind waste and a pregnant Amrita. Pran, a living trace of this encounter, is constantly confronted to the uncertainty of his roots and is made to repeat this initial inception.

Through each change of identity, Pran is described as a phoenix turning into ashes before he reinvents himself anew, the final instance of this occurring when he is “pulled apart” (TI 477) by the African Fotse tribe in a transcendental experience and emerges as an unnamed nomadic figure in a desert landscape, yet with “no thoughts of arriving anywhere” (TI 481)–Pran's reconstructions always seem to contain his next demise. Such metaphors pepper the narrative, first when Pran is locked up in an Agra brothel and faces being turned into a eunuch. Pran is forced to drink a drug-filled *lassi* and remains in a hallucinatory state for days. The text evokes Pran's disintegration in these terms: “Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance event to put it back together in a new order” (TI 65). However, this change again entails disintegration, which is repeated soon after, at Fatehpur palace, where the Khwaja-sara – who rules over the eunuchs' quarter – tells the protagonist: “You may think you are incapable of change. But we are all as mutable as the air! Release yourself, release your body and you can be a myriad! An army!” (TI 82). In this case, Pran's dissolution is an atomisation. The character's exclamations echo Engels and Marx's contention that “all that is solid melts into air,” a phrase describing what they deemed a dissolution of social life caused by the rules of the bourgeois market (1992: 6). The extension of Pran's identity to a collective condition – the idea that we are “all” mutable – is used to convey the wider social changes at work in *The Impressionist*. Indeed, Pran is but the symbol of a larger collapse of beliefs and systems of powers. Even when taught about seemingly “solid” staples of Britishness by Major Privett-Clampe at Fatehpur Palace, these end up evoking a fading hegemony – a particularly striking instance is Pran learning Felicia Dorothea Hemans's famous 1826 poem “Casabianca” evoking a shipwreck, the character eagerly reciting the first lines: “The boy stood on the burning deck/Whence all but he had fled” (TI 110). Like the boy in the poem, Pran is the last one standing in several ways. He is the last one longing for Empire: eager to learn how to become

an English boy, he later realizes that British identity itself is being put to the test of modernity – not least when his beloved Astarte reproaches him with being “so *English*” (TI 407) and rejects him, preferring an African American man. The narrative also shows Pran being quite literally the last man standing, since the story closes with the party of anthropologists being killed by the Fotse tribe, who let Pran survive and reinvent himself again.

The image of the burning ship is a particularly telling metaphor for the collapse of Empire. A pattern is repeated through the novel, where each time Pran leaves a place, it seems to explode into dust or burst into flames. As Lucienne Loh remarks, “[t]he novel ... suggests British colonialism as a *dissipated* mission and corrupt enterprise” (2019: 348, my emphasis). This occurs when Pran leaves Bombay: after having changed his identity to that of Jonathan Bridgeman – a young Englishman beaten unconscious on the streets – he is about to board a ship to England when he passes by the house of the two Scottish missionaries he was previously staying with. Suddenly, Pran stops: “The Mission is on fire” (TI 285). The character “tries to force his way forward, suddenly horrified at the loss of this place” (*ibid.*). The Mission, where the imperial project manifested itself by the Reverend’s wish to convert Pran and by his lingering fascination for phrenology, frequently measuring Pran’s skull, is now crumbling to pieces. A symbol of the religious underpinnings of Empire, the place is now gone together with the character’s previous identity. An ominous link with this religious background is made just before Pran sees the fire, as he reflects:

He can smell kerosene on the air. Bridgeman, the actual physical Jonathan Bridgeman, is already fading. (...) He marvels at the existence of people who can know themselves by kneeling down and picking up a handful of soil. Man was created out of dust, says the Reverend. But if men and women are made of dust, then he is not one of them. (...) Man out of earth, says the Reverend. Earth out of man, say the Vedas, like the sun and the moon and all other creation, born out of the body of the Primal Man. But he feels he has nothing of the earth in him at all. When he moves across it, his feet do not touch the surface. (TI 285)

Smelling kerosene, Pran is first reminded of the man whose identity he just stole, a memory slowly turning to ashes. Pran’s reasoning evokes the several connotations of dust in both the Bible and the Vedas, and its role as a trace, as Ricoeur’s “sign-effect”: dust suggests both the past and the future. In *Génie du Non-Lieu*, Georges Didi-Huberman contends that dust is what “allows us to conceive the world” (2001: 67), remarking that the “biblical echo” of dust is evocative of “dust as the material of humiliation and the humiliation of matter (...) a material

which invites us to despise matter” (2001: 66).²⁷ Here, Pran’s constant reconfigurations lead him to progressively despise the idea of matter. At first relishing with the disappearance of the “actual physical” Bridgeman, his own physicality is then questioned. Unable as he is to root himself in place, he finds no traces of himself in any given location and no consolation in the religious foundations of dust, whether they stem from Christian or Hindu cosmogonies.²⁸ Ultimately, there is no foundation for the place Pran stems from, which is the constructed *topos* of the British Empire.

Besides the religious symbolism of the burning Presbyterian Mission, the novel also displays the progressive crumbling of British military power over India, in particular through a chapter where Pran explores Amritsar in the wake of the 1919 massacre, after he has left the Fatehpur palace and before he settles in Bombay. Again, Pran’s passage through places seems to indicate their decay. The character witnesses a desolated city where many symbolic places of power have been destroyed:

Pran is left standing by a charred heap of rubble, the ruined shell of the Alliance Bank.

Terrible things happened here. Horrors. The place bears its memories near the surface, memories of heavy wooden bank furniture dragged out onto the street and doused in kerosene. (...)

All around the city, memories. Burning and looting. After the banks, the post office. The police station. The English shops in the Hall bazaar. White men beaten to death. (...) Pran does not walk down the side-alley into the Jallianwala Bagh. He feels the weight of absence hanging over the place and hurries past. (*TI* 181-182)

Pran arrives in the aftermath of the killings which occurred on April 13, 1919, when a crowd gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh, a garden in Amritsar, to protest a martial law implemented by British authorities following a period of civil unrest – the protesters were cornered and a mass execution unfolded in the garden under the orders of Colonel Dyer. The novel consciously inscribes the memory of this historical event, deemed to be a cornerstone of the road to independence, within Pran’s journey. Through Pran’s gaze, the crumbling of imperial power is made visible and observable, whereas he “hurries past” the place where Indian protesters were

²⁷ My translations. The author writes : “[l]a poussière permet de penser le monde (...) la poussière comme matière de l’humiliation et humiliation de la matière (...) matière qui nous enjoint de mépriser la matière” Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Génie du non-lieu : air, poussière, empreinte, hantise*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2000, 66-67.

²⁸ The biblical reference can be found in Ecclesiastes 3:20: “All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return” or in Genesis 3:19 when God tells Adam: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” The reference to the Vedas comes from the Upanishads, where the Primal Man Puruṣa is divided into the wind, the moon, the sun, Heaven and Earth and all the other elements. David Leeming details this cosmogony together with its variants in *A Dictionary of Asian Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

killed. The centrality of the bank, police station, of furniture “dragged onto the street” is contrasted with the “side-alley” Pran refuses to take. Materiality – furniture, shops – is also contrasted with a more immaterial “weight” felt in the air. The syntax goes on to suggest that the “burning and looting” applies to memories as much as to people and places: the fires of the riots and of the massacre convey their own erasure, leading to memories that are “near the surface” yet require the active observation of traces in order to be excavated.

Places of imperial domination keep collapsing throughout Pran’s journey. Upon leaving Oxford, a place where he aimed to become fully English, Pran realizes that it has lost its symbolic power for him. After his last exams, he hurries to the station and reflects that “Oxford seems temporary and fragile” with “buildings as insubstantial as a stage set” (TI 402). This occurs just after Pran visits the Empire Exhibition at Wembley, a place he perceives as “a fantasy land of poured concrete” (TI 380). Seeing for the first time the Fotse - the (fictional) tribal population Pran heard about through his anthropology professor – in the pavilion they are assigned, the protagonist is disturbed by the display of a blackness he was so keen on rejecting in himself. As Shane Graham proposes by analysing novelistic accounts of the Empire Exhibition, the staging of Empire through the presence of real, living people, who might behave differently than expected – as opposed to the unmoving artefacts of museums – ironically feeds the growing unease of imperial power (2013). In Kunzru’s novel, the spectacle of imperial power is also described as decaying because of its reception: the “Pageant of Empire” is “poorly attended,” with “[s]mall clusters of people,” a “scattered applause” and “a vast empty curve of concrete separating [Pran] from the nearest other person.” (TI 381). The jingoistic imperial memory informed by the objectification of men and women is made vacuous and pathetic, a desperate attempt at staging the dissolving remnants of colonialism.

In passages such as the Empire Exhibition episode, Kunzru’s subtle defusing of Empire unfolds in humorous touches, and through gaze-shifting mechanisms. By having the exhibition watched from the perspective of a character himself troubled by a hybrid identity born from Empire, the narrative offers a confrontation between official discourse and experience. As often, and as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the writer’s aim is to debunk claims of authenticity – which often rely on history – and to ridicule attempts at fossilizing some versions of collective memory to the detriment of others. This is to suggest that *The Impressionist* presents Kunzru’s own version of the historical novel. While being acutely documented, it does not use history as an archival backdrop making the novel more “authentic” so much as the material for de-multiplying perspectives on the past and on the present. When asked about the historical novel in a 2019 interview, Kunzru argued that he wanted to avoid using history “as

an aesthetic, or to be decorative,” but rather find other ways to write historical scenes (*HK ITW* 2019). Pran’s observations of the Empire Exhibition make for a writing of history that purposely stages its intricacies and thus avoids being “decorative.”

The novel’s final episodes in Fotseland suggest that the writing of history can in itself be problematic if not destructive. The Fotse have been living with a conception of time and space which differs radically from the European conceptualization of experience. Earlier in the novel, Professor Chapel explains how theirs is a time characterized by “promises” and “speculation” (*TI* 366) rather than past, present and future. The recording of their traditions by the team of anthropologists is therefore a disturbance to their existing lifestyle. In the novel’s final chapter, after the anthropologists have ended up massacred by the Fotse, the narrative voice shifts to account for the Fotse’s perspective:

Though the European spirits have been banished to the outer lands and once again the ancestors come out to ride the women in the dance, it seems that the wound in time has not healed, and there are still the old times and the new. (...) Perhaps time is something which, once broken, cannot be put back together again. (*TI* 479)

The cryptic tone suggests that even once they have left, the Englishmen have irremediably impacted the present and the future of the Fotse. The “wound” thus caused once again evokes destruction, not only of space and place but of time itself, now “broken.” The quizzical reflection is placed at the end of the novel, as if to invite the reader to operate their own piecing back of time and place in the act of reading.

2.1.3. Tracking American memory in *Gods Without Men*

Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* is also a novel that calls for a re-reading of history. Whereas *The Impressionist* questions the memory of Empire as a constructed place, *Gods Without Men* uses the Mojave Desert as its overarching *topos*. In the process of exploring the desert, the novel also goes back in time to track down some traces of American collective memory. Whether it is through the voice of a Spanish missionary, through Native American lore or through the figures of a Mormon miner or even drug addicts, the novel presents characters searching the desert for the matter composing the American experience.

The desert is often taken to be a representation of emptiness. In *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, Catrin Gersdorf notes that most dictionary definitions are united by the idea of a “lack – lack of water, lack of vegetation, lack of animal life” (2009: 16). Eurocentric perceptions of the American desert in particular have integrated the desert into the settler ideology of the

“*terra nullius*” – an uninhabited place available to conquer and tame. As Gersdorf notes, this Eurocentric perspective on the desert has also informed the settler project, when the settlers’ journey West towards the desertic land that became California meant understanding that “contrary to earlier assumptions, not all of the continent held the promise of cornucopian abundance” (2009: 14). While this pre-conceived emptiness is problematic in many ways – not least because it both overlooked the presence, and justified the eradication of Native American desert populations and their cultures – it also tends to nurture a certain cultural fascination for the American West and the enthusiastic promise of reinvention it might hold. Baudrillard, who dedicates a large part of his *America* to the desert, defines it as “an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance” (1989: 5).

Disappearance and emptiness are indeed addressed in *Gods Without Men* – the novel’s very title and the central plot involving the disappearance of a young boy are a testament to it. But the narrative maintains a tension with these motifs of absence, whereby the presence of remaining tracks and traces is just as fundamental as the overall sense of emptiness hovering over the desert. In her study of the myth of emptiness in American literature, Wendy Harding wishes to unveil the limitations of this myth, and analyses contemporary writers such as Rick Bass or Rebecca Solnit under the label of “new literature of place,” where “emptiness is not represented as an objective quality found in the land, but as a subjective projection imposed on it” (2014: 127), leading to what she calls “an aesthetic of complexity” (196). While Hari Kunzru is not included in her study – and he is not, strictly speaking, an American writer – *Gods Without Men* undoubtedly implements such an aesthetic and proposes to track down the desert’s ambivalent memory.

In a 2017 interview for BBC Radio 4’s “Bookclub,” Kunzru recalled his various trips to the Mojave Desert and how they provided the material for *Gods Without Men*. He notably evoked the question of methamphetamine addiction today in desert communities:

There are many reasons people go into the Mojave, many of them to do with being alone, and you don’t have to stay very long in those small depressed communities that are out there before you encounter the traces of meth, either on the faces of the people or in the places where you might be walking and see evidence that people have used it. (Naughtie 2017)

In the novel, drug addiction is addressed through the figure of Coyote, who opens the novel “cooking” meth and hurts himself while doing it (*GWM* 1). The writer drew on the traces seen on either people or places, and replicated them in the different episodes that compose the novel’s large canvas. As the narrative goes to and fro between several different plotlines, spanning from the 18th century to the early 21st, the recurring references to traces or their

absence allows for a wide-ranging archaeology of the desert, and unveils its intricate role in the writing of American history.

There is an echo of contemporary drug addicts' scarred faces in the character of Deighton, an anthropologist who comes to the desert in the 1920s wishing to investigate the lives of Native populations. Deighton, we are told, has been disfigured during World War I in France. Among the Native American populations of the Mojave Desert, "the People called him Skin-Peeled-Open, on account of his burned face" (*GWM* 121). We later learn that he bears the traces of war not only on his face but also in his psyche, having recurring nightmares about his time on the battlefield at the Bois de Belleau (*GWM* 221). First and foremost, Deighton is a man who has left memories in another place, like all the "men who'd left the best part of themselves in France" (*GWM* 217).

It is perhaps not coincidental to find in this novel another anthropologist figure, echoing Professor Chapel, the anthropologist in *The Impressionist*. Whereas the latter is a somewhat flat character infused with colonial ideology and a well-wishing naivety about "exotic" populations, Deighton's background makes for a more contrasted figure. He is undoubtedly reluctant to consider the people he studies as his equals—the motif of the fear of miscegenation appears here again when Deighton's young wife has a sexual encounter with a Native man. Yet he also sets in motion a complex machinery of tracking and man hunting that soon troubles him and exceeds his understanding. Kunzru's interest in anthropologist figures undoubtedly forms part of his investigations on the experience of place. The circulation of accounts about distant lands and populations operated through the gaze of educated white men inevitably questions the perceptions formed in Europe and in the emerging United States about these places and their inhabitants. In fact, the character of Deighton bears similarities with Georges Devereux, a French-American-Hungarian anthropologist who is known for being a pioneering figure of ethnopschoanalysis, or the study of ethnologic research through the lens of psychoanalysis. Devereux notably spent time with Mojave populations in the 1930s, resulting in his *Ethnopsychiatrie des Indiens Mohaves*, and is also famous for having made a case study from his use of psychoanalysis with a Blackfoot man called Jimmy Picard.

The character of Deighton is not a psychoanalyst, but is intent on recording language and its different uses in songs and philosophy. The archives he keeps at his hotel are indeed described as "notes on the group of Uto-Aztecan languages he'd been studying, a card for each word or word-stem, each distinct element of grammar. Others dealt with the People's material culture, their philosophy, the fragments they still remembered of their old songs" (*GWM* 219). The narrative voice describes the detailed traces compiled by Deighton, which are however

partial and evocative of a fading memory— of songs that are “still remembered,” but have already been partially lost in the process of time and colonisation. His eagerness to record in writing the traces of their lives, habits and beliefs is intertwined with his reading of previous traces, records from a long-gone past which bear the subjective mark of colonisation. Indeed, the main two chapters which narrate Deighton’s investigations are connected to another one of the novel’s plotlines: the story of Fray Garcés, a Spanish missionary who wrote a record of his incursions in the desert in 1775. The pastiche of this fictional record is placed as the last chapter of the novel, the writer playing formally with the different voices that compose his history of the desert. Deighton once again refers to the partial and situated nature of traces, as he opens “the *Itinerary* of the Spanish friar Garcés, the first white man to travel through the high desert, or at least the first to write an account of his journey” (*GWM* 221). Deighton’s fascination suggests that the account of a “white man” is the most valuable existing trace for him. In a metafictional turn, the novel reflects on the role of narratives as a defective kind of trace, or at least one which does not always provide answers about the present:

There were strange gaps in the narrative, periods of days or even weeks with no entry. One in particular bothered him. He suspected Garcés had been at the spring at Kairo, and from there had traveled back toward the river. But the *Itinerary* was silent, and [the translator] had provided no elucidation. All the country with which Deighton was the most familiar was missing from the narrative. It was as if Garcés had just vanished and reappeared in another place. (*GWM* 221)

Unable to match the friar’s experience of place with his own, Deighton suspects that something is missing, unwilling to admit that a place which he found of interest may not have been so for the friar. The passage also evokes the experience of time, with a toponymic reference to the Greek *Kairos* – the opportunity to be seized in the moment that passes by. The character’s sense that Garcés “had just vanished and reappeared in another place” offers a playful intertextuality with the rest of the novel, where Garcés does “reappears in another place” within the space of the novel through the direct rendition of his “daily record” (*GWM* 382). Later on, Deighton faces this lack of trace in the landscape itself and has to admit the impossibility to put it in words: the anthropologist is “awed, as he often was in the desert, by the sheer absence of human markers, of any kind of recognizable scale. (...) This was the silent space, the land of Garcés’s missing days” (*GWM* 237). Kunzru pushes the metafictional device to its limit by ending Friar Garcés’s account – and the entire novel – with an exegetical note: “*Here ends the redacted passage.*” (*GWM* 384). The experience of place thus always continues to exist beyond both archives and fictional narratives.

Deighton's interest in traces takes an unexpected turn as he embarks on a man hunt targeting a Native American man called Willie Prince – the latter is, in fact, the man his young wife Eliza eloped with years before. Only half-aware of the consequences, Deighton tells the local sheriff of a white child he has seen roaming the desert with a man, soon to become identified – or, more precisely, chosen – to be Willie Prince. A search party is organized, several men including Deighton “trying to pick up the Indian's tracks” (*GWM* 234). They progressively find traces which require intense observation: “[t]o Deighton it was barely visible, an insignificant oval displacement of sand” (*GWM* 234). One of the men, Lobo, helps him interpret it by explaining how some Native men learn how to run just for running's sake, which makes them not only excellent runners but also causes their footsteps to be particularly spaced and ultimately invisible (*GWM* 236). In the end, a man is found and shot from a distance, but Deighton cannot be sure that it is Willie Prince: “Deighton looked down at the body, its clawed hands, bare feet. It was impossible to tell who it was. The face was blown clean off” (*GWM* 241). In a disturbing role reversal, Deighton, whose own face was blown off in the war in France, has now caused a similar trace to occur on someone else, yet the mark also makes it impossible to *retrace* the man's identity. Never clearly named throughout the man hunt – only as “the Indian” – Willie Prince comes to embody the disappearance of Native populations and the erasure of their collective memory. Later in the novel, the story of Willie Prince comes to be known as “the last real manhunt of the Old Frontier” (*GWM* 313). This parody of historiographic phrasing completely eludes the Native American man's identity but only relocates his death within a glorious narrative of the United States as a conquered land, built up through exploration and the expansion of the “Frontier.”

Yet the last episode of Deighton's story provides an interesting opening on this notion of erasure. Twenty years later, the son of Willie Prince and Eliza, Ike Prince, has become a local marshal and is sent to inquire after Deighton, who has started using radio transmission in an underground den and is suspected of being a German spy (*GWM* 311). Ike confronts Deighton and tells him who he is, accusing him of having killed his father. Deighton refuses to leave his den and is ultimately gassed by the sheriff's team. Ike Prince is sent down to explore: “Ike ended up being the one to go down and scrape up the pieces. Splintered furniture, a lot of charred papers covered in Deighton's cramped, tiny handwriting. Of the man, he couldn't find anything much at all. Just a few fragments of bone” (*GWM* 318). While Deighton's body has left no traces but bones, his paper notes have remained. Kunzru does not extend this narrative thread by having other characters pick up Deighton's notes: they are left to the reader's imagination. Their “charred” state is a reminder of their status as traces, indicating both decay

and the possibility for future interpretation of the “tiny, cramped handwriting.” In the end, the mixed-race Ike Prince is the one left to “scrape up the pieces,” the one who has to deal with the white man’s recording of his father’s culture, trying to face this built-up memory.

Gods Without Men also tracks down the traces of spirituality, a staple in the construction of American memory and identity. As Catrin Gersdorf points out, the desert is often taken to be a place of “religious confrontation, repentance and moral challenge” (2009: 171). The importance of this *topos* is of course manifested in the novel’s title. Kunzru revisited Balzac’s phrase “*le désert, c’est Dieu sans les hommes*” by choosing the plural form – the desert is an encounter with several spiritualities, several gods, leaving space for Native American beliefs to expand on the page but also the more esoteric beliefs of the UFO cult which develops at the Trona Pinnacles. One of the characters in particular has a transformative experience, reminiscent of the forty days of trial spent by Jesus in the desert. A single chapter titled “1870” is devoted to Nephi Parr, a Mormon who has come to the desert in order to extract gold (*GWM* 194). Nephi’s name is a direct reference to the Book of Mormon, where Nephi is the son of the prophet Lehi and a founder of the Nephites, one of the groups which peopled the Americas in the sixth century BC according to Mormon scriptures. Nephi Parr has come to the desert after having killed a man out of a desire to avenge the “Prophet” – the narrative refers implicitly to the events surrounding the death of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, assassinated by a mob in 1844. The character’s experience of mining gold is also a reference to Mormon history: in the late nineteenth century, a Mormon man named John Hyrum Koyle had a dream about a mine in the Utah mountains which would enable the Mormon Church to subsist. The place, one of several where Mormons started to extract gold, was called the “Dream Mine,” and is still nurtured by different legends and interpretations (Barber 2009: 439).

Here, the chapter explores the desert through Nephi’s gaze, offering an interpretative rewriting of the connection between American geology and some of its religious foundations. Nephi’s spiritual experience of the desert is grounded in the presence of minerals: he senses that “the metals in the rocks sang to him in their high glittering voices” (*GWM* 191) and the “coming amalgamation” (*GWM* 193) of the gold seems to echo a fusion between the land and his spirituality. The connection is also referred to as Nephi collects the gold in the mud, and feels he is “drawing the comely light of the Lord out of the base nigger darkness of matter” (*GWM* 194). The use of the adjective “nigger” is not coincidental, as the narrative voice has earlier conveyed Nephi’s deep-seated hatred of Black people, resulting in him murdering a Black minister (*GWM* 192). This internal reference thus draws even further the complex

entanglements of religion, memory and topography in the collective unconscious. Nephi seeks salvation in the act of unearthing gold, a metaphor once again repeated in what is described as “the last purification” of the gold (*GWM* 198). Before dying, Nephi looks at the sky through a spyglass, yet he soon shifts from admiring the celestial heaven to looking at the land that surrounds him. Turning the instrument to the desert, he now sees “the true meaning of the place” (*GWM* 195), a meaning which is left as a cipher for the reader to consider.

The contemporary subplot of the novel, set in 2008 and 2009, provides openings on the evolutive interaction between the desert and memory. This is particularly visible through the story of Laila, a young girl acting the role of an Iraqi child in a mock desert village used by the American army (*GWM* 275-309). The transformation of the desert into a stage set, one that can be used to replicate another desert, reveals the malleability of the place. A discussion between Judy and Dawn, two former members of the UFO cult, also evokes the collective museification of places. Talking about the place where the cult used to be, they observe:

‘They made that part of the National Monument, so I heard.’

‘With a trail and signposts and everything. They even put a barrier round the Indian marks. (...)’ (*GWM* 354)

It is not clear what “marks” are being discussed here – is it the remnants of a Native American burial site? The traces left by the character of Willie Prince as he tried to escape death? The passage conveys the difficulty – and perhaps, the artificiality – of grounding memory physically in the desert, even though it remains filled with traces. The nature of these traces is best described by Yi-Fu Tuan in a text called “The Desert and I: A Study in Affinity” (2001). Drawing on his experience as a student in Arizona, Tuan compares the experience of history in cities with the passage of time in the desert:

Living in the midst of buildings, tagged age-wise by degree of wear and architectural style, is bound to stretch a people's temporal dimension. By contrast, the desert denies both community and continuity. Its message is timelessness—or eternity—rather than long duration, things sustaining and renewing themselves through time. Even in the bleakest desert, flowers may bloom after spring showers. But they quickly disappear, as though to dramatize the ephemerality of life. In the desert, ruins last longer than they do in humid regions. In this sense, they endure. But they endure as ruins. The desert, so rich in mementoes of discontinuity, is consoling to people who, like me, are good for just one season. (2001 *n.p.*)

As Tuan points out, the desert precludes a sense of “community,” which makes it a challenge to anchor national or regional history in such a place – yet the traces “endure.” Through its detailed historical episodes opening on inexplicable events and experiences, *Gods Without Men* addresses this memorial ambivalence. The novel is a testament to the desert’s “mementoes of

discontinuity,” replicated in the formal fragmentation and the partial recollections which compose the narrative. In the desert, absence is just as evocative as presence. Traces do not evolve or transform: they vanish and (re)appear in turn, making it a fundamentally unpredictable place.

2.2. Palaces constructing places

The lack of constructed space in the desert of *Gods Without Men* can be contrasted with the recurrence and role of buildings in most of Hari Kunzru’s other works. One can observe in particular the role of palaces and other imposing buildings loaded with symbolism. The role of these constructed places as a repository for memory, whether it is individual or collective, is examined frequently in Kunzru’s novels, but also in the more experimental formats he has been using. The word “palace” notably comes from the Middle English *pales* or *palis*, meaning fence or enclosure wall (*Etymonline*). As a vertical manifestation in space, the palace seeks to contain memory within its walls, and in particular the memory of a given place. Indeed, depictions of palaces in Kunzru’s narratives often manifest attempts at enclosing meaning and memory. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur contends that narratives and physical buildings are characterized by a similar approach to the creation of memory:

Between “narrated” time and “constructed” space there are many analogies and overlappings. (...) [Constructed space] as a lived place superimposes itself upon and is interwoven with its geometrical properties in the same way that narrated time weaves together cosmic and phenomenological time. Whether it be fixed space or space for dwelling, or space to be traversed, constructed space consists in a system of sites for the major interactions of life. Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the endurance of time, the other in the enduringness of materials. (2010: 150)

In the original text, Ricoeur talks about the duality *durée/dureté*, translated here as endurance/enduringness (2003: 187). In this part I propose to look at how Kunzru’s writing of palaces questions *dureté* as a form of toughness inscribed in place – the toughness of violent history, of material traces of the past, of the manifestation of power and social inequality through place. Often, this material toughness is made malleable and reconfigured in writing. I first look at how this is rendered both intra-diegetically and extra-diegetically in *Memory Palace*, a work which is both a narrative and a compilation of visual art, before moving on to examining the role of the Agra and Fatehpur palaces in *The Impressionist*, looking at both their evocative power and the sense of fake memory they convey. The novel *Transmission* contains

modern-day avatars of palaces, questioning the inscription of capital in space and the role of skyscrapers as urban palaces in the era of globalisation. I finally look at the historical Wannsee Conference House and the fictional Deuter Center in *Red Pill*, where old mansions enable a critical reassessment of mediated memory in postwar Europe.

2.2.1. *Memory Palace: making room for memory*

Memory Palace is an atypical artefact, resulting from a cooperation between Hari Kunzru and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013. Curators Laurie Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar commissioned Kunzru to write a story, from which they derived an exhibition composed of visual and plastic art as well as extracts from the story. Twenty artists (graphic designers, typographers and illustrators) from different countries were invited to contribute and propose their interpretation of Kunzru's narrative. The exhibition took place between 18 June and 10 October 2013, and a book was simultaneously published, including the story itself together with printed adaptations and replica of the artworks. The goal, according to the curators, was to offer "an exhibition that can be *read*" (MP 85). The literary artefact could be considered a novella, consisting of 72 pages, among which the exhibition's artworks are interspersed.

The story's engagement with memory revolves around the question of where and how we collect knowledge and information. In a dystopian future, a digital storm called "the Magnetization" (MP 20) has caused all stored knowledge to disappear. Humans now live in "the Withering" (MP 15), a period of decadence under an authoritarian regime ("the Thing," MP 45) which proclaims the need to get rid of memory altogether. The period of intense collecting which preceded the digital storm was called "*Blooming or Booming*" (MP 29) and the future to come will give way to "the Wilding" (MP 76), a moment of pure reconnection with nature without the hindrance caused by memory and its traces. The story of these changes is narrated by an unnamed prisoner who speaks from his cell; he is part of a group who call themselves "Memorialists" (MP 16) and has been imprisoned because of his attempts to retrieve and entertain traces of past memory. This narrator recalls the events that led to this post-apocalyptic world, interspersed with memories from his childhood, but also the successive interrogations he has to undergo while being imprisoned. Produced in 2013, *Memory Palace* can be read as the continuation of a hypothesis Kunzru had started forming in a story from the 2005 collection *Noise*, called "Memories of the Decadence," and in which an internal narrator recalls a period when the "cult of learning" gave way to multiple excesses (N 33).

Kunzru plays not only with form but also with genre, and *Memory Palace* is his most directly dystopian story. Written mostly in the past, it is hardly ever anchored in historical or geographical landmarks the way his other narratives are. The story's post-apocalyptic underpinnings blend references to the digital age, to climate change but also to our relation with capital and its circulation. In a 2013 interview for BBC Radio 4, Kunzru explained: "In a disguised way, this is a book about the financial crisis, I suppose: we're thinking about the ruins and what it might be like living after something, after a peak of civilization" (Freedland and Kunzru 2013). Metaphors of ruins and traces of this civilisation are thus central to the construction of *Memory Palace*.

The story is partly based on the memory palace technique or "method of loci," a mnemonic technique dating back to Greek and Roman philosophers, which uses the visualization of places. In this method one locates memories in visualized places in the manner of objects in a room, in order to retrieve them more easily. The story opens as an address to the reader: "Here is how to remember. First you must choose a place" (*MP* 9). This initial address invites the reader to enter the story as well as the character's memory palace, which he then describes at length:

I began to move my memories, to place them round the cell, in the cracks of the floor, on the rusty handle of the slop bucket. (...) It was like pushing the walls outwards with my hands. Now it has expanded to the horizon. To me, it is as grand as a power station. (*MP* 9)

The narrator progressively turns his cell into a palace of sorts, but not any kind of palace: a power station, which can produce new energies. The palace is not just a vessel but a producing force, not only turned inwards to enclose memories but also turned outwards to expand. The choice of the adjective "grand" – rather than big – is a reminder of the evocative power of the palace: it is, first and foremost, a building that imposes itself in the landscape. This motif of the memory palace conveys a metatextual reflection on the power of individuals to create their own narratives in the act of reading. Through the spatialization of memory, it also stresses the importance of our memory *of places*. This is hinted at through the story's ending, where the protagonist is about to be sentenced to death. Before undergoing this penalty, he has to "download" his memories onto a woman sent secretly by the Memorialists. For his last memory, the one which is his most personal and will be "cherish[ed]" by other Memorialists, he chooses a memory involving a picturesque landscape in the open, with a "green field" and "the brow of a hill" (*MP* 80), as a sort of antidote to the enclosure of the prison cell.

The motif of the memory palace and the depiction of places end up being intertwined. Most places come to be called "palaces," even though their architecture does not exactly match

the usual form of a palace. The narrator thus explains: “When I learned the art of memory, I was living in an old palace in Great Poor Land Street. Before the Withering it had been a library, every room filled with pewter and sign” (MP 9). What the palace now stands for remains unsure, but its former status as a library makes it a place of knowledge, and therefore a banned place in the era of the Withering. The word “palace” is also used to describe another place of knowledge, the museum. This description is one of many definitions which pepper the narrative, as if to scatter on the page the different memories that the narrator holds on to:

Museum

A palace where the Lawlords went to muse. Museums were filled with treasures kept for musing on or *amusement*.

These palaces were silent and heavily guarded, because even in the Booming, amusement was precious and rare. (MP 48)

Like the other definitions throughout the narrative, the narrator plays with the etymology of word “museum,” turning on its head the usual trope of the museum as a sacred, silent place to make it an amusement park. It also hints at the inspirational Muse and the creation of new words. The paragraph proposes a twofold metaphor of enclosure: in the same way that the palace – in this case, the museum – circumscribes within its walls, the act of defining is a means of enclosing meaning within a certain set of words. In an era which precludes knowledge, definition is in fact an act of resistance. Indeed, under the authority of “the Thing,” relishing in sophisticated words is no longer allowed. Sentences must use “humble words” and “not simper,” they should aim not to “leave a trace in the air” (MP 33). This deviated relation to language gives way to an alternate version of reality and of spatial depictions in particular, creating a disturbing experience of semi-recognition in the reader. The story is set in London, yet toponyms are modified: Notting Hill is turned into “Notting Hell” and Liverpool Street into “Liverpoor Street” (MP 25).

In the story, hospitals are called “palaces” and are viewed as a place from the past. The narrator recalls: “Once there were great palaces called hospitals. The tradition of hospitality was revered across the land. It meant helping customers, healing them and seeing to their needs. (...) The doctors performed great feats of surgery and roamed the cities, looking for the sick (...)” (MP 18). Once again, the narrator plays on semantics, making hospitality a practice connected to hospitals rather than the general principle of welcoming someone in one’s home. In the *Memory Palace* exhibition, the artefact representing the hospital is a strange moving vehicle, half-caravan half-sledge, driven by a carnivalesque NHS nurse and led by a herd of foxes. The sculpture, evocative of the famous celestial palaces of illustrator Hayao Miyazaki,

is the work of a London-based collective called Le Gun.²⁹ It is reproduced as an illustration in the book version (*MP* 18-19). In this example, the palace has become a moving object in addition to being a moving signifier. There is irony in considering hospitality as moving: rather than welcoming the sick within a precisely located home, the doctors “roam the cities” looking for them. Hospitality is thus relative to space rather than strictly place-bound, unsettling both the relation to place and the definition of others or strangers.

The story ultimately questions our relation to knowledge and to matter, positing as excessive both the worshipping of information and its utter rejection in favour of a presumably more authentic turn to matter and earthly experience. In so doing, it invites us to look at memorial traces as somewhere in between these excesses, requiring us to observe and decide what traces of the past call for our attention for the future to remain sustainable. In his manifesto *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique*, translated as *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime*, Bruno Latour takes the example of Poe's sailor character in his 1841 story “A Descent into the Maelström.” The character recalls how he managed to be the only survivor of a terrible event. Caught in an all-powerful storm and drawn into a mysterious vortex, he managed to haul himself onto a barrel. Latour explains that the sailor's reaction is a wise example to follow for the age of climate change, inviting us to

keep paying close attention to all the wreckage as it drifts: such attention may make it possible to understand suddenly why some of the debris is sucked toward the bottom while other objects, because of their form, can serve as life preservers (2018: 45).³⁰

The act of creation proposed by *Memory Palace* is an interesting instance of attention paid to traces, to debris – it is literally so in one of the exhibited works, where artist Erik Kessels created a three-dimensional palace with recycled paper advertising.³¹ The multi-faceted project proposed with this book/exhibition, which Driscoll, Pressman and Wurth call a “demediation of writing” (2018: 211), suggests that dystopian fiction and the book format might in themselves be useful, Latourian “life preservers” in the face of climate change and political crises.

²⁹ Photographs of this sculpture and of the other artworks can be found on the Victoria and Albert Museum website as well as on Ligaya Salaza's website (she is one of the two curators of the exhibition). <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-sky-arts-ignition-memory-palace/> <https://www.ligayasalazar.com/work/memory-palace-victoria-albert-museum-2013> (accessed 02-09-2022).

³⁰ “Il faut être aussi astucieux que ce vieux marin : ne pas croire qu'on va s'en tirer ; ne pas cesser de noter attentivement la dérive de toutes les épaves ; ce qui permettra peut-être, en un éclair, de déceler pourquoi certains débris sont aspirés vers le fond, alors que d'autres, à cause de leur forme, pourraient servir de bouées de secours” Latour, Bruno. *Où Atterrir ? Comment s'orienter En Politique*. Paris: La Découverte, 2017, 61.

³¹ This work is also visible on the Victoria and Albert Museum website cited above.

2.2.2. Built-up mirages: palaces faking memory in *The Impressionist*

Long before *Memory Palace*, Kunzru had experimented with the motif of the palace in his debut novel *The Impressionist*. In this novel, this motif serves the larger thematic argument of an Empire in the unmaking, as analyzed previously here. But it also operates as a means to contain within a single building the complex co-existence of historical traces in colonial India. Two palaces shall be looked at more closely: the Taj Mahal in Agra, and the fictional Fatehpur Palace, where the protagonist resides during several chapters.

At the onset of the novel, the external narrator introduces the city of Agra, which is about to be hit by the Spanish flu in 1918. The narrative voice remarks how death is already present in the urban landscape:

For such a lively city, Agra is heavily marked by death. This is largely the fault of the Mughals, who, in contrast to the current mechanically minded set of masters, thought hard about the next life and the things which get lost in the transition from this one. Everywhere they have left cavernous mosques, chilly monuments to absence. Round the curve of the river from the Fort is the Taj Mahal. (...) The Emperor Shah Jahan loved Mumtaz-i-Mahal. Now the pain of his loss rises up at the edge of town, clothed in the work of countless hands, surrounded by a formal garden still used as a meeting place by steam-age lovers. Despite all this effort love still refuses to conquer, and the trysting couples have a subdued, pensive look about them. (TI 18)

The ontological dimension of traces unfolds differently for the Mughals and the British. The latter's utilitarian, materialistic streak is mockingly echoed in the ternary alliteration (they are a "mechanically minded set of masters"). A different relation to matter is evoked in the toughness of Mughals "thinking *hard*" about "*things* getting lost." Theirs is a spiritual perception of traces, which the symbolism of architecture reflects but does not define. Centuries after its creation, the Taj Mahal continues to exude the aura of a mirage, of something that will always already be lost: nostalgia is inscribed in a place which seems to resist the work of memory. The "cavernous mosques" that surround it only reverberate this sense of loss. The narrator also hints at the subjective writing of memory through the image of the "countless hands" which have likely given their lives for the making of the Taj Mahal – the invisibilisation of these "hands" is alluded to through the image of the "cloth" surrounding the palace. Ultimately, this historical absence is joined together with modern materialism through the "steam-age lovers," an image which entertains the visual blur conveyed by the place.

The Fatehpur Palace, where the protagonist Pran Nath Razdan is made to stay for several chapters, is another instance of a mirage-like palace. Rather than death and loss, the mirage-

like dimension appears through an aesthetics of artificiality which verges on the kitsch, and reveals the conflicting influences of early twentieth century modernity as it unravels in colonial India. The entirety of the part set at Fatehpur is openly satirical, and “self-consciously deploys orientalist images” (Loh 2019: 348). Fatehpur, in itself, is a cryptic fictional place. “Pur” is a frequent Sanskrit oikonym meaning village, town, state, or country but also fortress, while “fateh” is an Urdu and Arabic word meaning conquest or victory.³² There are several towns and district of this name in contemporary South Asia, yet it is unclear where exactly Kunzru places his Fatehpur. The reader is made to locate it broadly in the North West of the subcontinent, as Fatehpur is “on [the] way to Peshawar” (*TI* 95) and he has Pran travelling there from Agra on a train headed to Lahore via several Punjabi cities (Rajpura, Ludhiana, Jalandhar) (*TI* 73). In fact, the writer is probably referring to Fatehpur-Sikri, a former capital of the Mughal Empire, and thus hinting at the remnants of an Empire within an equally crumbling British Empire. The chapters set at Fatehpur Palace are an exploration of a particular hierarchical system in colonial India, whereby Nawabs, who were the emperor’s regional deputies under Mughal rule, were allowed to retain their title under British rule yet became part of the machinery of the British Raj. The British “formed partnerships” with Nawabs in certain areas (Jackson 2013: 19) and interfered with the honorific duties owed to Nawabs. Kunzru depicts the progressive debasing of the Nawab’s rule: “Although Nawab Murad is still ruler, he cannot tie his shoelaces without the agreement of the Crown’s Representative, Major Privett-Clampe” (*TI* 97). The Nawab, we are told, is failing to produce an heir, which makes the continuation of his title even more uncertain.

The palace of Fatehpur thus incarnates this double loss of power, both of the local ruler and of the British who partly occupy the place, yet face increasing threats to their political power. From the moment Pran arrives at the palace, its puzzling appearance, filled with eccentricities, is used to convey the idea of conflicting presences. The description of the palace reveals the Nawab’s attempts at countering this loss of power through an excessive architecture and a pretense of cosmopolitan taste. Indeed, it is described as

a vast mass, a disturbing mirage of spikes and pinkness. As the Hispano-Suiza growls its way closer, the pinkness is broken up by contrasting shades, whites and blues, the occasional flash of other colours, here a lozenge of emerald green, there a bright red stripe. Two or three bulbous central domes (it is hard to tell exactly how many) rise over a complicated arrangement of walls, liberally sprinkled with battlements, crenellations, flying buttresses,

³² The narrator explains this etymology on page 96: “Ala-u-din Khan had the pir’s hut razed, proclaimed the site Fateh-pur (‘city of victory’) and made himself its Nawab.”

decorative rails, urns and other architectural features whose purpose is not immediately clear. (TI 74)

The palace's colourful domes and spikes are reminiscent of a muscovite church and of Mughal architecture all at once. At the same time, its "battlements" and "crenellations" evoke European medieval castles, and its "flying buttresses" draw inspiration from Gothic cathedrals. The sensory overload caused by this patchworked vision is only matched by its size (a "vast mass"), emphasized by the movement of the car coming closer. The palace's many irregularities make it hard to decipher, as its calls upon many different architectural traditions and is a challenge to visual memory. A contrast between surface and depth unfolds in this description: on the one hand, the rough materiality of the façade's many architectural features is echoed through the repeated /k/ sound of the "spikes," "pinkness," "colours" and "contrasting shades." On the other, the palace is a place which has no apparent purpose: its eccentricities are purely superfluous.

Chapter 10, which follows, is entirely dedicated to the history of the palace's construction. This comedic account begins with a supposed extract from "The Eighth Lamp," a study of Indian architecture by one G.H. Dalrymple. The text is not officially quoted and suggests that this is yet another one of Kunzru's playful parodies. The title borrows from Victorian art theorist John Ruskin's *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) – Dalrymple is "a disciple of Ruskin" (TI 76) – where he posited seven principles defining what good architecture is. Ruskin's principles include sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, obedience, and memory. About the latter, Ruskin writes:

Memory may truly be said to be the Sixth Lamp of Architecture; for it is in becoming memorial or monumental that a true perfection is attained by civil and domestic buildings; and this partly as they are, with such a view, built in a more stable manner, and partly as their decorations are consequently animated by a metaphorical or historical meaning. (2011: 170)

The Fatehpur palace does not lack "metaphorical or historical meaning," but this meaning is a puzzle to the viewer. The reader is told that Dalrymple's visit to Fatehpur, as a guest of the Nawab, caused him to lament over its very construction, and to report that he had "no inclination to pry' into the history of the building which upset him so much" (TI 76). Dalrymple's rejection of the place's history is ironically followed by a detailed account of the three different architects who intervened in the building's construction.

The narrator first brushes over the rapidly rejected project of a "subcontinental Balmoral" proposed by a Scottish architect (TI 76). The apparently novel association of these

two places is soon replaced by a more familiar blend, as the Nawab asks for a palace similar to Brighton's Royal Pavilion. To him, the Pavilion is "a suitable model, a structure that embodied an acceptably English species of Indianness. It did not look like anything in the real India, but this in itself was a benefit" (TI 76). The Nawab's aim thus stems from a complex play of to-and-fro: he wants to re-import a British palace itself inspired by Mughal architecture. In fact, the factitious enterprise serves the Nawab's political aspirations. He wants his palace to look "generically Oriental rather than Indian in design, and above all the kind of thing that English people would appreciate if invited to the kingdom to ride or shoot. This brief was set down in writing, for the sake of clarity" (TI 77). The narrator ironically points out the "clarity" needed to make sense of the Nawab's conflicting queries and vague aspirations. While writing down the brief is supposed to make it clearer, the narration plays with the puzzling complexity of the building's different layers. The Nawab, we are told, does not want "to appear derivative. One way around the problem was, he suggested, to make everything bigger" (TI 76). This potential re-scaling only enhances further the artificiality of the Nawab's project. The term "derivative" is polysemic: its first meaning is "unoriginal," but it also suggests the Nawab's continuous derivations and deviations from foreign architectures. In his 1943 *Geist und Zeitgeist*, one of the first thinkers of the kitsch, Austrian novelist Hermann Broch, wrote:

that which is past and proven appears over and over in kitsch; in other words (...), kitsch is always subject to the dogmatic influence of the past – it will never take its vocabulary of reality from the world directly, but will apply pre-used vocabularies, which in its hands rigidify into cliché (2002: 33-34)

Here, the Nawab's "pre-used vocabularies" are manifested in his confused queries. The "rigidification" inherent to the kitsch appears in the final images used to describe the palace: the last architect, an exuberant Italian called Tacchini, turns the palace into a "large pink iced cake" (TI 78) which metaphorically freezes the palace into an over-coded place. As the character enters this strange building, the reader is given the bizarre sense of a palace from a tale, from which he might not escape: "Pran is ushered inside a gâteau, a meringue, a three-dimensional projection of a crumbling mind, a game of Chinese whispers frozen and richly rendered in expensive imported stone" (TI 78). Built up from scratch by the layers of language used between the Nawab and his architects – a "game of Chinese whispers" – the place has uncertain foundations, which forebode the final demise of both the Nawab and the British officials in an equally comedic staging, during an organized tiger hunt. In its blend of fetishized Orientalism and European inspirations, the Fatehpur Palace fails to be anything else than a

fantastic eccentricity. Its kitsch aesthetics, frozen in the past, betrays the ideological failings of an Empire which, just like the Nawab's mind, is "crumbling."

2.2.3. *Transmission* and the palaces of global capital

After *The Impressionist*, Kunzru prolonged his investigation of systems of power through issues such as the contemporary circulation of capital in his novel *Transmission*. While the palaces of *The Impressionist* attempt to capture legacies of the past, the imposing buildings described in *Transmission* are turned towards the future, which is the obsession of the character of Guy Swift and his company "Tomorrow*."

Guy Swift is the embodiment of a certain economic class: as the head of a London marketing company working for international markets such as pharmaceutical brands, he moves "swiftly" across world cities. The novel ridicules this character and ironically deconstructs Guy's ease of movement— he ends up sent to Albania, mistaken with an asylum seeker sent back home by PEBA, the Pan European Border Authority (source). His relation to places is notably characterized by a taste for grandiose architecture, which mirrors his own ambitions. In the case of Guy Swift, the fascination for massive buildings partakes of a discussion on the exclusionary dynamic of economic globalisation: enclosed in his ideals of grandeurs, the character is for instance oblivious to the "Dickensian narrowness and squalor" nearing his company's building in London's Shoreditch area (*T* 135).

A striking example of Guy Swift's taste for palaces is his dwelling place, a London skyscraper called "In Vitro." The toponym is particularly evocative of enclosure. Alan Robinson notes that "Kunzru is probably parodying Montevetro, a development designed by Sir Richard Rogers (...) which was built in Battersea on the site of an early twentieth-century flour mill" (2008: 83). Guy has bought an apartment in that building as a symbol of his wealth, and as a pedestal of sorts from which he can look down at others. The character indeed reflects: "though he loved the view, he found himself thinking how much better it would be from higher up" (*T* 119). The entire building is glass-clad, the better to manifest the symbolical boundary between its inhabitants and the rest of the world. Metaphors of visibility and surface abound in the description of the building, which is

a blue-glass ziggurat, twenty storeys high at its peak, curved along a shallow arc on the south side of the Thames. Each of its 324 luxury apartments has a balcony, screened in such a way as to give the illusion of complete solitude. 'The effect,' said Sir Nigel in an interview with *Archon* magazine, 'is one of

absolute calm, a heavenly sense of floating free of the cares of the world. (*T* 116)

The reference to the ziggurat, a temple in ancient Mesopotamia, posits the quasi-religious intention behind a building like *In Vitro*: the skyscraper is a temple dedicated to luxury and wealth, intended to signify to passers-by the powerful hold of these values on society. With its “shallow arc” and “screening” balconies producing “illusion,” the building relies on a game of hide and seek, securing the luxury of privacy while manifesting wealth to the exterior world. The narrative voice parodies the architect’s careless stance, underlined by his focus on “effect” rather than the practical materiality of the building.

Guy’s taste for the building is merely opportunistic, and his way of designing his living space echoes the question of influence discussed above through the character of the Nawab in *The Impressionist*. His pre-conceptions about decorating his apartment disclose an impersonal relation to home-making:

Guy had known even before he moved in that this was a living space which would require something extraordinary. Feeling both time- and knowledge-challenged, he had (...) employed an agency to help him buy furniture. That way, he reasoned, he could be certain everything about his personal environment was in the best possible taste. (*T* 119)

The character’s indecision is counterbalanced by a unique certainty: the idea of looking “extraordinary.” Again, the palace – in this case, the Englishman’s “castle” – is characterized by a vacuous yearning for pomposity and the meaningless reproduction of existing places. The adjective “extraordinary” immediately loses its impact with the trivial evocation of home furnishing as one service among others, and the parodic extent of the passage culminates with Guy’s wish to control the place to the point of buying himself good taste. Through his *In Vitro* apartment, Guy does not only buy external signs of wealth: he hopes that the interior dynamics of the place will also provide opportunities. Upon buying it, Guy had conceived of the place

as a networking opportunity. Surely in the corridors of such an exclusive place, he would bump into all sorts of potential clients. To his disappointment he found when he moved in that the complex was eerily deserted. (*T* 117)

The vacuousness of Guy Swift’s wish to own his personal palace is mirrored by the cavernous absence of other inhabitants, who are mainly “foreign nationals” (*T* 117). The character’s obsession with impersonal dynamics such as “networking” and “bumping” into people leads him to an obvious loneliness, evoking the *topos* of the wealthy magnate alone in his glass tower.

Guy's fascination for modern glass towers is repeated during a business trip to Dubai, as he is touring the city in a taxi. Here, the skyscrapers are in the making, and made all the more impressive:

In the distance a city skyline was approaching and soon half-built skyscrapers started to appear at the roadside, their skeletons criss-crossed by plastic lines hung with the drying dhotis of Indian labourers. Construction was taking place all over the city, and the architectural thrust appeared to be towards the creation of some kind of Islamic Las Vegas. There were huge bank towers incorporating pointed arches and minarets (...). The whole insane mess rose out of the sand like a mirage, and even once he was among it Guy had a lingering sense of disbelief. Here was the future, arriving at mouse-click velocity, CAD/CAM sketches cloaking themselves in concrete and steel before his eyes. (*T* 178)

The narrator adopts an anthropomorphic gaze on the Dubai cityscape, perhaps to better emphasize the objectification of the Indian indentured workers who have come to form part of the landscape.³³ Here as in *The Impressionist*, the image of the mirage suggests not only impermanence but the sense of unreality evoked by the motif of the exuberant palace, which here causes a “lingering sense of disbelief.” Both the In Vitro building in London and the Dubai buildings incarnate the palace as a simulacrum, in Baudrillard's sense: they are places endlessly imitating other places, to the point that the original seems to have disappeared. These buildings, conceived virtually through computer assisted design, use “concrete and steel” as a “cloak” hiding their factitious nature. The description of Dubai as an “Islamic Las Vegas” in particular calls to mind Baudrillard's definition of “the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real” (1994: 23). Drawing inspiration from the artificiality of Las Vegas buildings, the Dubai towers are a mere transposition where only a touch of local colour is added, and thus avoid the elucidation of the place's original meaning or intrinsic memory.

2.2.4. Wannsee mansions and mediated memory in *Red Pill*

In *Red Pill*, Kunzru's latest novel, the central p(a)laces are first the fictional Deuter Center, where the narrator is staying for a writing residency, and which was inspired to Kunzru by his own stay in 2016 at the American Academy in Berlin. Near the Deuter Center, on the lakeside, also stands the actual house that held the Wannsee Conference, a symbol of the area's

³³ The relation to time and the temporary felt by foreign construction workers in Dubai is addressed in Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2017), a work of fiction composed of several interconnected stories.

Nazi past. The two houses contain traces of the past, but negotiate them differently. Through an intra-diegetic narrator, the writer develops a reflection on the mediation of historical traces, and the choices made to hide or show such traces present in places.

As in the case of the Fatehpur Palace in *The Impressionist* and of the skyscrapers in *Transmission*, the narrator describes the aesthetics and external architecture of imposing dwellings, notably when he walks around the lake and looks at the different mansions that surround it. He explains that he “caught glimpses of imposing houses in various styles: a white modernist villa, a fantastical gothic castle, just as tasteless as it must have been when it was built, the pride of some Wilhelmine brewer or mill owner” (RP 30). The variety of architectural styles composing the lakeside turns the Wannsee district into a museum of past personal fancies, in which bad taste evokes a sense of timeless familiarity. Yet we are reminded that these landscapes are constructed, first because they correspond to past aesthetic trends – modernism, the gothic – but also through their location near the lake, which acts as a magnifying glass: “On the side of the street facing the water, the buildings were immense. On the other, denied the lake view, they were more modest” (RP 30).

The traps and failings of perception are particularly central to the evocation of the Wannsee House and of the Deuter Center. A tension is maintained throughout the first half of the novel, in which the protagonist is strangely aware of the nearby presence of the Wannsee Conference house – making the reader equally aware of it – yet delays his actual visit to the place. The presence of the house is repeatedly reminded to him, for instance when he engages in conversation with a waiter at the Deuter Center:

“And of course,” he said, lowering his voice as if someone were there to overhear us in that big empty dining room, “the gray villa next to the tall white building, the one half-hidden by trees, is the venue of the Wannsee Conference.” I nodded and said I had heard of it, but he felt the need to complete his explanation. “Where the final solution to the Jewish Question was planned in 1942.” Politely I looked in the direction he indicated. The house was too far away to see clearly. (RP 25)

Here, the waiter’s redundant explanations betray the semantic overdetermination of the place—it cannot be simply viewed or described without this memorial subtitle of sorts. But the portrayal remains incomplete. The sense of secrecy conveyed by the man’s hushed tones doubles up in the fact that the villa is “gray,” “half-hidden,” and “too far away to see clearly.” The narrator has “heard of it” and can now barely see it, building a partial perception of the house. Walking by the lake later on, he looks towards the house and ponders: “There wasn’t much to see. A few lights on the other side of the lake, near the Wannsee Conference house”

(*RP* 35). The House is thus uninteresting at first glance, part of a landscape that is taken for granted, but a certain light is always cast on it, whether through actual physical lighting or through the words used to describe it.

The protagonist's visit to the Wannsee Conference House occurs just after a climactic scene involving several characters. During his stay at the Deuter Center, the protagonist has been watching a violent cop show carrying a eugenic subtext. Disturbed by this show, he meets its screenwriter by chance in Berlin. Anton is in fact a leader of an alt-right movement inspired by national socialist ideology. At once fascinated and appalled, the protagonist engages in a dangerous game with Anton and his friends, trying to prove them wrong at all costs and to debunk their rhetoric. At this stage in the novel, Anton and one of his followers named Karl have followed the narrator back to the Deuter Center, and pretend they are historians to ask Dr Weber, the director, for a guided tour of the house. Their hidden purpose is to prove that the place is still inhabited by traces of a national socialist past, despite the repeated rejections of this past by the house staff. They want to unearth the presence of the "Institut für Nordforschung," founded in 1936, which intended to analyse a "concept of North" as a "shared destiny among Northern Europeans" (*RP* 181). Dismissing this entity as "no more than propaganda" (*RP* 181), the director chooses to show them the work of the subsequent occupant and founder of the Deuter Center – an institution created after the war. Herr Deuter chose to paint all the walls a bright shade of white:

Weber led the way down a flight of stairs to an extraordinary space, like something from a dream. Our footsteps echoed as we walked across a huge, completely empty room, with concrete walls, floor and ceiling. A featureless box, the air cold and damp. What made it so strange was its brightness. Every surface was painted white. Strip lights lined the ceiling, many more than necessary. Dazzled, we all squinted, shielding our eyes.

"Deuter white," explained Dr. Weber. "It was his specific instruction."

"Why?"

Anton scoffed. "Because he was afraid of shadows." (*RP* 182)

The passage reverts the motif of the dark, cavernous basement room by making it bright to the point of blinding its users. A sense of utter emptiness is conveyed, although the "damp" air suggests the age of the building and the persistence of its past. Deuter, the Center's founder, was an industrial who in the postwar period developed titanium dioxide, a material which was then "prized for its opacity" (*RP* 23). Here, the current director hints to this "Deuter white," the brightness and emptiness of which is made to seem worrying. The past is hidden actively – "more than necessary," the narrator tells us –, in a counterproductive strategy which makes Anton, the alt-right figure, use it as an ironical argument, proving the relevance of even the

worst “shadows” of history. He goes on to add: “Underneath, these enlightened liberals enjoy all the same dark age shit as the people they condemn. All the obscene shit. (...) They’re better at hiding it. That’s the only difference” (RP 185). Anton re-appropriates the categories of “enlightenment” and “dark age” to replace them in the present, in a house where these moral semantics of “light” and “dark” are fighting visually.

Being *ob-scene*, literally going towards the mud and dirt, the ugly traces, is what the narrator of *Red Pill* ends up doing. Disgusted by these interactions at the Deuter Center and by what he found there – a spear pointing North, which was left by the *Institut für Nordforschung* – he hopes to find a cathartic confirmation of his beliefs by visiting the museum located within the Wannsee Conference House, but the visit is anticlimactic:

I paid an entrance fee and went inside. To my dismay I found an empty shell, completely without character. I knew at once that I would find nothing to help me. There was little or no furniture, and in the absence of any meaningful connection with the past, the freshly painted rooms had been filled with images and wall texts narrating the events that led up to the conference (...) (RP 187)

Like the Deuter Center, the place is characterized by emptiness and a work done on its surface, with “freshly painted rooms.” A metatextual reflection unfolds on the writing of history: the narrated events on the wall prove insufficient to the narrator, who “needed the house to do something immediate, something primal” (RP 188). Reading historical facts inscribed in the building’s walls does not equal experiencing the presence of actual traces of the past. Emptied of signifiers, the place has become a memorial site more than a meaningful place. In that sense, it echoes what Pierre Nora describes in a 1989 text called “Between Memory and History: les Lieux de Mémoire”: “There are *lieux de mémoires*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” (1989: 7). The avatars of palaces in *Red Pill* show how in their mediated organization of traces, places such as museums and institutions resist the formation of memory as much as they curate it, and that the past is hard to contain within the walls of a given p(a)lace.

2.3. Echoes of place: sonic traces in Hari Kunzru’s New York

The question of sound is another way Hari Kunzru grapples with this complex balance between the materiality of traces and the inconstancy of memory. Kunzru’s wide-ranging interest in sound takes many different forms. First, he regularly delves into the history of popular musical genres, like he does with *White Tears* but also in an episode of his podcast

“Into the Zone” called “That Ain’t Country,” in which he investigates the boundaries between genres and their origins (Kunzru 2020, 2).³⁴ In Kunzru’s writing, music is a manifestation of cultural interactions and dissensions, as well as a means of recording and returning to the past. *White Tears* is a prime example with its characters who are record collectors; the young Iraqi girl Laila in *Gods Without Men* also collects old vinyl records from a decrepit shop in the desert. Musicians are of course recurring figures, if we take for instance Nick Capaldi in that same novel, as well as Monika, in *Red Pill*, who used to play in an East Berlin punk band. Kunzru is not just interested in sound but also in noise: he is intent on revealing the disturbances and interferences of the era of mass information, extensively portrayed in *Transmission*. His approach to noise will be looked at in more detail in a later development on the motifs of transmission and circulation, while this part looks at the most predominantly *sound*-focused of his works.

As a journalist in the 1990s, Kunzru explored artistic subcultures and the emerging trends of the digital era. For instance, he interviewed the researcher and sound artist Joe Banks, who had set up installation art using industrial and transport noise as well as lightning sounds (Kunzru and Banks, Sky TV, 1999). Navigating these trends led the writer to nurture a curiosity for the creation of sounds, one which had already been present throughout his childhood. Indeed, in his audiobook *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*, Kunzru discloses an important biographical piece of information – he grew up with a blind brother. He explains: “This is one of the major dynamics in my life. His blindness, my sight. I can only imagine how it would feel to negotiate this city as a blind person” (*LNY n.p.*).

The interaction between sound and place therefore unfolds at the level of orientation, both in time and in space: being able to recognize sounds known either instinctively or from past memory, and being able to move through space and place according to the sounds one hears. To Yi-Fu Tuan, feeling space through sounds depends on the subconscious. He contends that “sounds greatly enrich the human feeling for space. (...) People are subconsciously aware of the sources of noise, and from such awareness they construe auditory space” (1977: 14). Awareness is indeed key to the way Kunzru conceives of sounds in space. In a personal interview, he explained: “I am interested in attention, and the quality of attention that we are able to give things in a distracted world” (*HK ITW 2018*). He also used the same term as Tuan to explain the way sounds form part of our sense of space, contending that “there are positive

³⁴ Because several episodes of Kunzru’s podcast are quoted in this work, and since all the episodes were released in 2020, I wish to clarify by indicating the episode number after a comma for each citation.

things about being able to control your auditory environment (...) to be able in some way to overlay your physical space with an auditory space” (HK ITW 2018).

Kunzru’s writings propose examples of these interactions with one’s auditory environment. They document attempts at “paying attention,” sometimes to the point of trying to “control” this environment. They look at what Tuan call the “sources of noise”: the places from which sounds emerge. Yet these sources might resist control and choice. In *Being Alive*, Tim Ingold develops reasons why he does not find the concept of soundscape to be relevant. His last objection is to the emphasis on surface and fixity conveyed by the suffix *-scape*. To him, this is not compatible with the dynamics of sound:

if sound is like the wind, then it will not stay put, nor does it put persons or things in their place. Sound flows, as wind blows, along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by a circular movement around rather than a fixed location within. To follow sound, that is to listen, is to wander the same paths. Attentive listening, as opposed to passive hearing, surely entails the very opposite of emplacement. (...) the sweep of sound continually endeavours to tear listeners away, causing them to surrender to its movement. It requires an effort to stay in place. And this effort pulls against sound rather than harmonising with it. Place confinement, in short, is a form of deafness. (2011: 139)

Paying attention to sounds would therefore entail moving through places, “wandering” and “surrendering” to movement. Examples of this can be seen in the novel *White Tears*, Kunzru’s psychological thriller about the origins and appropriation of blues music, and the digital, autobiographical story called *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*. The latter, a hybrid object (part-audiobook, part-e-book), was published by the digital publishing house Atavist in 2014, but is no longer in circulation today.³⁵ Both *White Tears* and *Twice Upon a Time* take place in New York, and in these stories Kunzru proposes to look at the experience of sound in one of the noisiest cities in the world.

2.3.1. Cacophonous explorations in *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*

Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York is at first glance a personal diary documenting Kunzru’s peregrinations through the streets of New York. He started working on it soon after he arrived there, and the text thus shows his changing gaze on the city. The text is

³⁵ The book is no longer published because Atavist Books, which intended to promote “highly innovative enhanced full length literary e-books,” closed down a few months after Kunzru had published his work (Publishers Weekly 2014). Hari Kunzru himself provided me with a copy of a PDF version of the words, without the sounds. There is no pagination in that version.

not a traditional narrative: it is constructed as a collection of impressions, memories and facts about the experience of listening in the city. The rhythm of these recollections changes along the text: the traces are first separated by weeks, then six months and finally years – the last page indicates the dates “June – September 2008” and on the following line “September – December 2013” (*LNY n.p.*). In itself, the book is an anthology of echoes, sounds that the writer started perceiving upon arriving in New York but have kept haunting him regularly.

Described by a critic as a “three-dimensional tone poem of city life” (Ulin 2014), the text is built as a collage, mixing together regular narrative paragraphs, photographs of New York street art and posters, with words and sentences that sometimes take up a whole page, in different typescripts expected to convey the sounds the reader hears. Indeed, the book was conceived initially as part-book, part-audiobook, so that one would hear sounds recorded by Kunzru at the same time as they read – the audio was synchronised with the turning of each page. There were also visual effects, such as the screen turning to black after the evocation of blindness (Ulin 2014). The writer used earphones to record the sounds of New York in a manner that encapsulates the movements of the body – he explains his technique in a video published by the *Wall Street Journal* called “Listening Closely to the Sounds of New York.”³⁶

The story begins with the writer’s account of his difficulty to adjust to the constant noise of the city. Rather than leaving or letting it take its toll, he declares in the middle of an otherwise blank page: “I have to go out.” Trying to tame these multiple sounds, he sets out to inventory them and observes New Yorkers’ relations to sounds:

The sounds: sirens, HVAC systems, 18-wheelers, car alarms, Mr. Softee Ice Cream trucks, bass woofers, the subterranean rumble of the trains passing under the sidewalk, ... and shouting – not exclusive to midtown but an important topic for anyone researching the acoustic ecology of Manhattan. A whole book could be devoted to the reasons New Yorkers shout in the street – to assert their control over their environment, to express joy or pain or rage or intoxication, to hail a cab, to abuse an acquaintance, to abuse a stranger, to abuse an authority figure, to abuse authority in the abstract, to apostrophize the buildings or the cars, to conduct one half of a conversation with an invisible interlocutor – or simply to express the intense feeling of vertigo generated by this particular world city (...) (*LNY n.p.*)

In this passage, the enumeration moves from the sound of machines to that of human beings: the “acoustic ecology” is only made complete by looking at all the components of this environment. The writer seems to turn anthropologist but soon replaces the serious hypothesis of “control over their environment” with the more mundane observation of “abuse,” repeated

³⁶ Directed by Andrew Kelly, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/video/listening-closely-to-the-sounds-of-new-york/E1CDB0B0-EE94-4D6A-91D6-BDA14DB9CA7C.html>. Accessed 08-09-2022.

anaphorically in an amused tone. In the end, the “feeling of vertigo” mentioned here suggests that even for New Yorkers, urban space can never become fully familiar and requires the performative use of sounds to either hide this silent vertigo, control it, or perhaps name it.

The book is also an occasion for Kunzru to put his theoretical interests to the test of experience. Towards the middle of his reflections and recollections, he develops Alain Corbin’s notion of “auditory territory,” which Corbin discussed in *Village Bells: The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (1998). Corbin explains the central role church bells played to define the extent of a territory in nineteenth-century rural France. Here, Kunzru compares this to the conflicting possibilities for auditory territories enabled by digital devices: one can either amplify sound immensely, but also immerse themselves privately in the sound conveyed by their earphones. Kunzru concludes: “You could see it as a land grab, a radical privatization of public space” (*LNY n.p.*). The writer’s is a mapping of contemporary topographies, in which he uses sounds as the directional map to determine what places we live in today. In a personal interview conducted in 2018, he thus explained that through sound, he was interested in “what kind of cities, what kind of territories there are” (*HK ITW 2018*).

Hari Kunzru’s own experience is intertwined with the story of Moondog or Louis Hardin, an American composer and sound artist who was himself blind, and roamed Manhattan in the late 1940s and 1950s in an eccentric attire, playing instruments that he had invented. As he walks the city streets, the writer is haunted by this unusual figure. He starts by enumerating facts from his biography, sometimes placing them in a way that mirrors the musicality of the man’s life journey. For instance, he spreads out in a diagonal the words “the oo / the utsu / the uni / the trimbas,” which are percussive instruments invented by Hardin (*LNY n.p.*). He then proceeds by first putting Hardin’s music in his earphones, and then going to explore street corners where Hardin was known to go. Attracted by this tutelary figure, he attempts to understand the influences of an artist who was misunderstood during his lifetime. However, this investigation ends with an opening onto another place, far from the city, a line of flight indicating the impossibility to cope with the city’s noise during one’s entire life: “Moondog buys land upstate, a refuge” (*LNY n.p.*).

Kunzru’s exploration finally leads him to reflect not only on sounds – emanating from places – but on the roots of places themselves. Towards the end of the book, he writes:

When was New York last truly quiet? Some time before September 1609, when Henry Hudson sailed up the river to the isle of Manna-hatta. There’s a project to reconstruct the ecology of the island as it was then. A world without Billie Jean. Imagine – it’s easy if you try (*LNY n.p.*).

The writer re-visits pre-colonial New York by calling upon its natural landscape, suggesting that in an urban environment, quiet can never quite be reached. Connecting this landscape with the intertext of two popular songs, Kunzru finally proves through words that even when we try to “imagine” quiet, our mind is always pervaded by cultural echoes, whether they are street noises or John Lennon’s lyrics. There is no such thing as an absence of sounds in the contemporary experience.

Mixing his journalistic enterprise with the creative possibilities of an innovative format, Kunzru reinvents the writer as digital *flâneur*. As he explores urban space through its sonic environments, he also takes into account New York’s past, and the role of said past in what can be heard today. These explorations of space and time are constitutive of what Tim Ingold calls “eddies, formed by a circular movement around rather than a fixed location within” – *Listening to New York* is a study of place in the shape of a sound wave.

2.3.2. Re-sounding echoes in *White Tears*

Circularity is also significant to the dynamics at work in *White Tears*. The 2016 novel is a haunting thriller in which the narrator Seth is led through the depths of American memory. Starting with a passion for collecting and recording sounds, he once hears blues lyrics on the streets of New York and has to circle back to the memory of slavery, caught up by the ghost of Charlie Shaw, the man who first conceived these lyrics.

White Tears is undoubtedly informed by Kunzru’s previous urban explorations of sound. To some extent, it can be read as a novelistic prolongation of what he had started with *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*. The novel’s title is first and foremost a reference to a popular expression, designating the emotional reactions of some white people in the United States when witnessing situations that undermine established racial privilege – the expression has been widely used in light of Robin DiAngelo’s concept of “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2011). Yet as a novel title, it is also reminiscent of Don DeLillo’s 1985 *White Noise*, which bears similarities with Kunzru’s novel, for instance in its paranoid streak and its satire of consumer culture— DeLillo is admittedly one of Kunzru’s main inspirations (*HK ITW* 2019).

Cultural and literary echoes thus compose the backdrop of this novel, which is, at heart, another investigation of the way we pay attention: to others, to the past, and to our senses. The narrator, who is constantly *re-sounding* echoes – listening to what he has recorded, trying to repeat and imitate sounds – fails at first to notice the *resounding* echo of slavery and the Jim Crow laws, and their resonance in today’s America.

Seth is an amateur sound collector. As a student, he roams his campus, and then the streets of New York, with a device of his own making which is supposed to capture sounds as authentically as possible. Interestingly, Seth recalls these experimentations retrospectively. He reminisces about the context of his recordings, which are in themselves a means of looking towards the past. In his reminiscing, places are central and they are the source of his sonic explorations. The role of places is visible from the beginning of the novel, when Seth explains he was recording “people and places”:

That summer I would ride my bike over the bridge, lock it up in front of one of the bars on Orchard Street and drift through the city on foot, recording. People and places. Sidewalk smokers, lovers’ quarrels, drug deals. I wanted to store the world and play it back just as I’d found it, without change or addition. (...) There were always phenomena I hadn’t registered, pockets of sound I’d moved through without knowing. (*WT* 3)

From the start, Seth acknowledges how inseparable his enterprise is from walking. Being a pedestrian allows him to “move through” sound, which is organized in “pockets” – these are similar to what Tim Ingold calls “eddies,” discussed in the previous section, in that they form an outside environment one can walk through rather than “a fixed location within” (Ingold 2011: 139). While the life vignettes he passes by seem to be well-contained entities, conveyed by harmonious sound couplets (“sidewalk smokers, lover’s quarrels, drug deals”), he acknowledges that these are only partial traces of a larger sound environment. Seth’s recollections of sounds occur at several times in the novel, notably the recollection of the particular song created by Charlie Shaw, which he once heard on a street corner. The character regularly roams the city in search of the man who sung that song. In a 2018 personal interview, Kunzru explains how this device of returning to places has both to do with the ghost subplot that underpins the narrative but also with a reflection on changing urban landscapes:

with the New York in *White Tears*, it was to do with this idea of being haunted, and haunting as a collapse of linear time: not feeling that you’re moving forward into the future, not being just dragged back into the past, but the past is not gone. So, as he walks through New York sometimes it’s one year, sometimes it’s another year. He goes to the same block and sometimes there are some shops there and sometimes it’s a different version of itself. That is of course a way of talking about gentrification and the changes in the city that are taking place very rapidly. (*HK ITW* 2018)

The writer thus uses these repetitions as a means of shaping place, or more precisely, showing place being shaped. This in turn raises the question of materiality: the material changes occurring through these blocks and streets, but also the material dimension of sound production. Indeed, the narrator is fascinated with the technicality of sound. Recording those sonic traces

is, to him, a means of contributing to a form of archeology and to a knowledge of the past. He takes his cue from the inventor of the radio, Marconi, and his theory of sound:

Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of radio, believed that sound waves never completely die away, that they persist, fainter and fainter, masked by the day-to-day noise of the world. Marconi thought that if he could only invent a microphone powerful enough, he would be able to listen to the sound of ancient times. The Sermon on the Mount, the footfalls of Roman soldiers marching down the Appian way. (*WT* 53)

The reflection moves from the pragmatic technicality of sound waves to a more mystic interpretation of hearing and listening, where Roman history is mixed with the Biblical Sermon on the Mount. Yet the reference to the sound of military “footfalls” also hints more pragmatically at Marconi’s contentious association with fascist ideology.³⁷ The narrator’s seemingly naïve reference to Marconi’s ideas about the radio forms a complex web of links between history, listening and beliefs: our perception of sonic traces is perhaps always pre-determined by personal knowledge and by a set of values.

At the other end of that reflection are the implications of leaving a trace: what experience of place does it entail? The narrative notably raises this question through passages where the protagonist feels there are no traces, which triggers in him a sense of panic. These moments pull the narrative towards the genres of the ghost story and the psychological thriller, where the absence of traces is made to feel uncanny. Embarked on a quest through time and space to find Charlie Shaw, the author of the song he heard on a New York street, Seth is about to go to Key and Gate, a music producer whose name he found on a flyer. Just before finding this flyer, Seth is desperate and reflects on the meaning of traces:

It is impossible to catch up with Charlie Shaw and now I am falling fast. It is impossible to live without leaving a trace. Hit the resonant frequencies of those long-distance waiting rooms and you understand soon enough. The thick dark muttering. The residue. Every complaint and every argument, every day of every year, happening simultaneously. A roaring in the consciousness. (*WT* 282)

Caught in his mental turmoil, the narrator develops a relation to sound that becomes multi-dimensional: it is “thick,” becoming “residue” that can almost be touched, and is also characterized by its duration – “resonance” and “roaring” imply continuous sounds. The narrator’s fascination for sounds has made him open a Pandora’s box of “simultaneous” sounds which interfere with his experience of the world. Yet these are formed only in his

³⁷ Marconi joined the National Fascist Party in 1923 and was a member of the Grand Council of Fascism. See <https://blog.oup.com/2016/08/15-facts-guglielmo-marconi/> Accessed 11-09-2022.

consciousness, making his peremptory statement about traces a doubtful one – if traces are inherent to one’s individual subjectivity, can they be considered as such? Later on, as he enters the offices of Key and Gate, we understand that his has become an experience of ghostly presence, a confused hallucination leading him to imagined situations and encounters. The place’s toponymy is also revealing: Seth has found the *key* to an alternate universe built up in his mind. In that universe, traces do not stick or “resonate” – quite the opposite: “In fact, as I realized with a chill, the whole office was acoustically dead. (...) Warily the secretary cupped the receiver and suggested I take a seat. Her voice fell without leaving a trace” (*WT* 288). There are no echoes in this place, no traces to confirm Seth’s intuitions about Charlie Shaw. As the “cupped receiver” suggests, echoes are prevented from entering the place, and it is this forced silence that is made to be haunting.

Through the form of the ghost story, Kunzru attempts to unsettle the illusion of being able to capture culture. The novel revolves around white men who believe that they can encapsulate the sounds of the past within collected records or recorded sounds. The possibility of enclosing blues music within the networks of consumer culture is put to the test, and the naivety of the characters is pointed to on several occasions, for instance when Seth and Carter turn to Carter’s brother, Cornelius, to invest in their recording business:

- And you think New York isn’t a mature market?
We both shrugged, at a loss.
- It’s like, too mature, said Carter. It’s decadent. People want to get back to the source. The old school. They want things they can touch. (*WT* 55)

Carter’s answer discloses the vacuousness of the music collectors’ project: their vocabulary for the past is characterized by vagueness – the determiner “the” gives the impression of a shared knowledge of music connoisseurs, but the overused terms “source” or “old school” make their project unclear. Carter and Seth believe that vinyl records, as opposed to digital formats, are a means of “touching” music from the past. The novel shows how they are soon overwhelmed by this kinesthetic relation to music, and for Carter, “touching” means approaching danger from too close – he ends up beaten unconscious while getting records from a mysterious collector. It also means moving to different places to look for traces. The place that ends up connecting Seth to Charlie Shaw’s story is the road to the South, where he goes with Leonie, Carter’s sister, hoping to untangle both Carter’s attack and the mystery surrounding the name of Charlie Shaw. This connection is enacted in the repetition of a sentence at the end of an analeptic chapter about Charlie Shaw, told by record collector JumpJim, and at the beginning of a present-time chapter about Seth and Leonie: “We *drove* out of the city, heading south” / “We *drive* out of the city,

heading south (...)” (*WT* 172-173, my emphasis). Here the narrative turns to the trope of the American road, which allows for escape but does not bear any traces. Sleeping in motels, eating in diners, Seth and Leonie perform the choreography of the road trip yet do not find anything there – Seth’s quest for meaning cannot be reconciled with the role of the aimless American driver, who is not an investigator figure but rather seeks sensory discoveries and new territories (Bégout 2009: 95). Here, instead of providing traces, the road operates as an unending loop on which the characters embark, blending past and present in a confused jumble of narrative voices and settings.

This is where the narrative progressively deviates, leaving *traces* aside and preferring the semantics of *tracks*, which stand for both the musical track and the tracking of Charlie Shaw’s story. Before things take a turn for the worse for Seth, accused of having killed Leonie, he ponders: “Everything has already happened. I am merely a man, sitting in a chair, listening to a recording made long ago. The needle is traveling in a predetermined track” (*WT* 191). This “predetermined track” has paradoxically left no trace – “everything has already happened” yet can hardly be seen or heard. By regularly repeating similar statements, the narrative points to the silencing of African American history as well as to the fatalistic repetition of violence in the African American narrative, like a broken record repeating itself. Only by getting up from this metaphorical “chair” and stepping into Charlie Shaw’s story, being in his *place* – which he virtually ends up doing in a disturbing episode of body exchange – can Seth ever hope to find the traces he was looking for.

Throughout *White Tears*, the reader finds several formal renditions of this problematic repetition. Kunzru has scattered parts of the song by Charlie Shaw which Seth believes to have recorded on the streets. The song, which starts with the lyrics “*Believe I buy a graveyard of my own*” (*WT* 17), turns out to be a lament about the cruelty of a man called “Captain Jack” whom we understand to be a foreman at the levee where Charlie Shaw worked. When asked in an interview for *The White Review* how he had conceived this song, Kunzru explained:

So what I decided was that every blues line would be a sort of collage of real blues lines. I tried many different ways to simulate a blues lyric, but it always seemed to work better when using actual blues lyrics. It seemed kind of wrong to invent a lyric when there is a corpus of work that exists and has history. All those couplets are ones that turn up in a lot of other places. (Barron 2017)

Kunzru’s craft thus threads the fine line between a homage and a pastiche, considering that the latter is “not always (...) associated with the intention to forge, or to hoax” (Rose 1993: 72). The writer constructed his own quotation work, transposing oral culture into a written piece of fiction. The collage method produces in the reader an effect of *déjà vu*, whereby the traces of

African American music form a recurring echo on the page, further emphasized by the blues patterns of repetition and rhyme. While the repeated image of the graveyard obviously informs the subplot of the ghost story, it also proves to be a metaphorical unearthing of a past whose traces tend to be buried deep within the consciousness of American history. This unconscious presence culminates with Charlie Shaw's resounding laugh, an ironic bellow of laughter ("ha ha ha ha") which manifests over four pages in the first before last chapter, echoing into the distance and haunting readers' minds long after they close the book (*WT* 326-330).

Echoes, traces, dust, all constitute the matter of memory in Hamid's and Kunzru's works. Whether they manifest in a square in Lahore, a mansion, a mirage, a deserted city or an actual desert, traces of the past allow for a writing of place that is fragmented yet dynamic, as the characters and narrators guide readers through the meanders of past places. With these places, the past is in turn (re-)captured, commemorated, felt or heard – much like place itself, it is always conceived of as a process more than a result, requiring the reader to actively track meaning and piece it together. According to Paul Ricoeur when he discusses Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, the "memorial function" of place occurs "at the intersection point of landscape and geography" (2010: 43). In Hamid's and Kunzru's narratives, this "intersection point" can be found in the carefully crafted balance between on the one hand the already-coded, appropriated and connoted uses of places that have formed in the course of history, and on the other hand, the phenomenology of experience the characters are shown moving through, which is also replicated in a playful approach to reading and interpreting.

With this hermeneutic writing of place and memory, Hamid and Kunzru invite readers to watch and listen carefully for traces and echoes that are hidden from view in hegemonic narratives, leading them onto the track they intend to unfold. Observing architectural history from the perspective of a Muslim narrator in post 9/11 Pakistan, or listening to contemporary New York through the voice of an African American bluesman, leads to the evocation of alternative places, where knowledge can be reconsidered and re-situated by shifts in perspective. It is in that sense that place-oriented narratives can act as a prism through which the totalizing discourse of imperialism(s) and violence can be questioned and ironically subverted.

In the end, the synecdochic writing of place entailed by the motif of traces is twofold: first, the writing of traces points to the writers' refusal of the totalizing narratives of place found in imperialist discourse and reinforced by the homogenising dynamics of globalisation. At the same time, the trace manifests something else, an elsewhere to which it belongs or used to

belong; it enhances the inevitable externality which place always reminds us of, and returns us to. This is best summarized by Cy Bachman, a financial analyst working with Jaz, the protagonist of Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*. Cy talks about "Walter," their company's groundbreaking data software, while at the same time referring to the Holocaust – he talks about redemption and reparation in relation to the software, just after he has evoked Jewish communities in World War II Vienna:

‘(...) There's a tradition that says the whole world has shattered, that what was once whole and beautiful is now just scattered fragments. Much is irreparable, but a few of these fragments contain faint traces of the former state of things, and if you find them and uncover the sparks hidden inside, perhaps at last you'll piece together the fallen world. This is just a glass case of wreckage. But it has presence. It's redemptive. It is part of something larger than itself.’ (*GWM* 138)

The passage obviously bears metafictional undertones – “piec[ing] together” the world is what the self-contained form of the novel often attempts to do. But the final recognition also testifies to another key dimension of the trace: it is always “part of something larger than itself,” a signifier of something else that it is somehow always attached to even if not physically. This leads us to examine another dimension of place that is integral to both Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's writings: the recognition that the experience of place always entails the complex entanglements we form with it, as well as with other places, and others who practice and inhabit the same place(s). The next chapter intends to look more closely at these interactions, more precisely by reading them as *attachments* constituted and implied by place.

Chapter 3

Writing ties, thinking place with attachment(s)

“[T]ry as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be.”
(TRF 197)

In 1998, Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman wrote an article called “On Glocalization: or Globalization for some, Localization for some Others,” where he developed the concept of “glocalization.” Bauman observed the differences in relations to time and space caused by economic globalisation, taking the examples of two women whose life journeys differ radically— a businesswoman who travels freely by plane across the world, and a young adult forced to return to her parents’ home with two children of her own after she has tried to follow the dreams nurtured by globalized imaginaries (1998: 46). To Bauman,

‘Globalization’ and ‘localization’ may be inseparable sides of the same coin, but the two parts of the world population seem to be living on different sides, facing one side only, much like the people of the Earth scan only one hemisphere of the moon. Some inhabit the globe; *others are chained to place*. (1998: 45, my emphasis)

Kunzru’s 2004 *Transmission* in particular documents precisely the frictionless mobility of a certain corporate class, and compares it to the obstacles faced by other citizens looking for an escape. Yet this dichotomy and the idea of being “chained to place” are of particular interest when considering how conceptions of place and movement have evolved in the twenty-first century. Bauman’s phrase makes attachment to place a hindrance— but is it always so?

In this chapter I wish to address how the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru display various modes of attachment with place, by looking at these works together with the philosophy of place and with theories of materialism. The choice of “with” rather than “to” in this case stems from a particular caution not to consider place as a form of mooring, as an inert point or surface to which things or people would be attached and inevitably return. In the works of these writers, attachments are far from restricted to images such as “chains” or even the oft-used metaphor of “roots,” which might fail to represent accurately the contemporary realities of attachment. Mohsin Hamid himself adapted the image of roots into a thought-provoking metaphor in his essay “A Home for Water Lilies”:

My friend, a Lahore-born nomad like myself, had a theory about us. We spoke Urdu, cooked mutter keema, danced the bhangra, regularly overslept; we had

roots. And yet we drifted. So he called us water lilies, after a plant rooted not in dry earth but in ponds and streams. It was a rather unmacho sobriquet (...) but accurate nonetheless. (2015: 27)

Here I wish to conceive the many representations of attachment *with* place, which means taking place into account in the forms of attachment represented in these stories. The objective is to observe how Hamid's and Kunzru's writings strive to address the transnational subject's sense of fragmentation and the promises of escape borne by economic and cultural globalisation, while at the same time highlighting "the ubiquity and inescapability of ties" (Felski 2020: 3).

The question of attachment can operate here on different levels. First, the questions of attachment and detachment are central to Hamid's and Kunzru's works, both formally and from an intradiegetic standpoint. Their writings testify to a changing relation with material but also symbolical attachments. The value of attachment to one's homeland, for instance, or equating detachment with being well-travelled, are put under scrutiny in their narratives. It is in that sense that Hamid's and Kunzru's writings can be read through the lens of Actor-Network Theory. In a 1999 text called "Factures/fractures: from the concept of network to the concept of attachment," Bruno Latour rectifies the misleading notion of network associated to his thought, and re-directs it towards the key notion of attachment. Latour advocates for a cultural and philosophical shift in the dichotomy between attachment and detachment:

The question to be addressed is not whether we should be free or bound but *whether we are well or poorly bound*. The traditional question construed the subject's freedom and autonomy as the highest good (...). The new question does not refer back to the subject, to his autonomy, to his ideal of freedom, nor does it link back to the objectification or reification by which we would lose our autonomy. Instead, it obliges us to consider the precise nature of what *makes us be*. If it is no longer a question of opposing attachment and detachment, but instead of good and poor attachments, then there is only one way of deciding the quality of these ties: to inquire of what they consist, what they do, how one is affected by them. (1999: 22)

Narratives like Hamid's and Kunzru's seem to represent this changing focus. More importantly, their respective works, published since the beginning of the twenty-first century, provide a compelling typology of the attachments inherent to the contemporary experience of place.

A certain *praxis* of attachment can also be taken into consideration in the methodology used to approach this corpus. As Rita Felski defends in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, there is usually a resistance in criticism, notably literary, to acknowledge attachment, whether it is people's subjective attachments to popular works of art, or the complex attachment of

academics in particular to the works they study (2020: 2).³⁸ This translates in the language used to describe said works, a language which often gives precedence to “dislocating, disorienting, demystifying.” She adds that this comes from a fear of “stickiness,” which amounts to “the fear of being stuck in place, of having one’s freedom constrained and one’s mobility impeded” (2020: 3). One could add that this is particularly so in the case of literary works whose writers have origins in former colonized nations, and/or whose works question the idea of nation. Indeed, the temptation looms of championing nomadic detachment as a mode of self-reinvention and a miraculous antidote to the allegiances forced on colonial and postcolonial subjects.

Resisting this temptation and taking attachment(s) into account in analyses of place has two implications. First, it means resisting the negative and positive inflections sometimes too easily associated with geographical attachment in times of globalisation, whereby staying attached to – or in Bauman’s words, “chained to” – place would be either a manifestation of nationalism, of dangerous nostalgia, or a failure to move, whereas moving would be a positive, transformative and perhaps even necessary condition of modernity.³⁹ Hari Kunzru’s and Mohsin Hamid’s narratives actually adopt a critical stance towards such reductive or pre-determined associations of values, advocating instead for more complex readings of attachments. Secondly, it entails paying attention to the way narrative fiction can relate even the most seemingly abstract of concepts – globalisation, the nation, or identity to name but a few – with material experience and the sense of place. With an effort for the approach to be descriptive more than prescriptive, one can do justice to the multiple forms of attachment involved in the relation with place(s), and the literary strategies adopted to depict them.

In Hari Kunzru’s and Mohsin Hamid’s novels, questions of voice, gaze, humour and irony, or even the character’s trajectories can convey in novel form the complexity of these attachments. Of course, the study of this question needs to include – but not limit itself to – the writers’ own trajectories. Mohsin Hamid in particular is vocal about his multifaceted bonds with his birth country, Pakistan (Johnson 2013; Jacob 2014; Hamid 2017). In the works of both writers, the attachments tying people and places keep surfacing. These ties, visible seams and

³⁸ The limits of promoting distance in approaching works of art are also addressed in Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). In *Hooked*, she acknowledges more directly how the shift from distance to attachment is influenced by Bruno Latour’s thought.

³⁹ The persistence of conflicting values surrounding attachment can be echoed in the distinction made by British thinker David Goodhart between the “somewheres” and the “anywheres,” discussed in the introduction of the thesis – Kunzru made a reference to Goodhart during an interview (*HK ITW* 2018; Goodhart 2017).

knots in the narrative fabric, can shed light on rejections of place, wishes to escape, but also affection, admiration, and even evolving attachments, which span all of these in turn. Detachment can be forced on the subject, as Hamid attempts to show by writing about the lives of refugees who are “unmoored, adrift” (*EW* 188). Willful detachment can also be read as a frequent token of modernity and postmodernity, looked at ironically by Kunzru with his figures of the *flâneur*, the early-century cosmopolitan, the cynical academic, or the travelling businessman. In both cases, the writing of attachment and detachment reflects an *ethos*, a mode of being with place. In the end, reading and writing about places notably means making sense of such ties. It means following Donna Haraway’s contention that

[i]t matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (2016: 12)

As suggested by Haraway’s characteristic use of the word “matter,” these ties act in a twofold manner, particularly in literary works. They first matter in the sense that they are worthy of observation, but also because stories have creative influence and act as an incentive on the formation of experience. For the characters in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, the imaginaries offered by nations, empires, or even by globalisation and the totalising perspective associated with it are often counterbalanced by the ties formed at other levels. Rather than taking them for granted, the novels observe the nature and variety of these attachments.

In this chapter I first propose to look at the ties connecting place and the self. I willingly take up this term for its connections with the philosophy of place but also for its presence in both Hamid’s and Kunzru’s semantics. Varied cultural frames, such as the *Bildungsroman*, are called upon in these novels to describe quests towards the self. A subsequent development articulates place with the critical frame of the transnational, to which both writers are often ascribed. Changing forms of attachment can be explored particularly in the passages describing nations – in particular those broaching Brexit and the Indo-Pak conflict – and cities, where attachments can be observed in the practice of place. Lastly, this chapter delves into the problems posed by the cultural championing of detachment. It looks at the representation of consumption in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, and in particular the commodification of place, before delving into the concept of cosmopolitanism, observing how the two writers’ approach to place can renew narratives about citizenship, class and culture.

3.1. “The self! Where is it?” Place, attachment and the self

“So is it a little golden chap, sitting at the controls of that big mechanical body?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The self! Where is it? Where is it located?”

“Well, obviously, when it comes to lyric poetry, it’s in the field of the poem. On the page.” (RP 45)

Edgar, the neuroscience professor who stays at the Deuter Center at the same time as the narrator of *Red Pill*, hammers his distaste of the word “self,” and of the liberal arts at large. He attempts to discredit the narrator’s project to write about the “Lyric I” in German poetry (RP 45). The narrator is then plunged into a conundrum leading him to enumerate, over a whole page, a series of compounds formed with “self” (RP 56). As ironical, metafictional and self-deprecating these exposés appear to the academic reader of literature, the question of locating the self within “the field of the text” does have a particular echo when reading Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works.

Using the word “self” rather than “identity” is a deliberate choice, which can help address the writing of place more comprehensively. In the study of postcolonial and diasporic fictions, the term “identity,” as Françoise Král notes, “still occupies pride of place while being on shaky ground” (2009: 2). Whereas questions of ethnic and national identification are indeed present in the works of a Pakistani-British writer who lived in the United States and a British writer who grew up with an Indian father and an English mother, it can prove limiting to label them as literature *about* or *informed by* identity, if only because they reveal individual and social preoccupations that are vaster in scope, and because the term harks back to the issue of stereotypes, as discussed in the first chapter of this work. In the 2010 Granta collection about Pakistan, Hari Kunzru explained:

We hear a lot— perhaps too much— about ‘identity’ in relation South Asian art. Whether it’s national or personal, this elusive quality is often seen as the primary concern of South Asian writers and visual artists, to the exclusion of all other aesthetic categories. (2010: 134).

I asked Kunzru in 2018 to develop on this assertion, and he explained that even though he consciously played with identity in *The Impressionist*, restricting some writers to a concern with identity could, in the long run, lead to a “commodification” which would reproduce old ideological patterns, but also to an “impatience with some of the limitations of the forms that

were imposed on [writers]” (HK ITW 2018). In a 2019 interview with Stephen Piccarella, he explained how some writers are allowed to aim towards “universal” subjects, while others are expected to write differently: “the rest of us have to inevitably think about our identities, these bloody millstones around our necks that we’ve always got to go, *Oh, I’ve got to write about my identity. I’ve got to think about my identity*” (Piccarella 2019 sic).

The term “self,” on the opposite, is claimed frequently by both writers, whether it is humorously in *Red Pill*, as discussed previously, or in Hamid’s parody of self-help, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. Their novels notably question the attachment of one’s sense of self with a birthplace or a dwelling place, the motifs of roots and identity no longer being taken for granted. Broaching the self allows for a reflection which articulates finding oneself— through introspection, education, migration or travel, or even unexpected events— with finding a place, which sometimes equates finding one’s *own* place in hostile environments. In that sense, the philosophical undertones of these narratives oscillate between on the one hand, anthropocentric and constructivist approaches where place is constituted by human intervention and the social uses of places (Massey 2012); and on the other hand, a more essentialist line of thinking whereby being is always being *with* a perceived place. Among recent thinkers of place, philosophers Jeff Malpas and Edward Casey refute the idea that place is formed by the subject (Malpas 1999; Casey 2001). Malpas claims however that individual subjectivity is formed by place:

Place is instead that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established— place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place. (1999: 35)

What is really meant by “the structure of place,” however, deserves to be questioned. In narratives of imperialism and globalisation, where places undergo crucial redefinitions, what subjectivities – what selves – can result from “the structure of place”? In the introduction to his collection of essays *Discontent and its Civilizations*, Mohsin Hamid considers the creative possibilities offered by such reconfigurations:

Globalization is a brutal phenomenon. It brings us mass displacement, wars, terrorism, unchecked financial capitalism, inequality, xenophobia, climate change. But if globalization is capable of holding out any fundamental promise to us, any temptation to go along with its havoc, then surely that promise ought to be this: we will be more free to invent ourselves. (2015: xi)

In this part I set out to determine the forms and figures of the self which transpire in Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's writings of place, and what types of ties connect place and the self. First, I will look at their rewritings of the *Bildungsroman*, and the role of attachments as the characters evolve and move from one place to another. In a second part, I propose to concentrate on the motif of the "split self" in both writers' works, or how dilemmas about allegiance and authenticity ultimately reveal a common fragility of place and the self.

3.1.1. *Bildungsromane* and their attachments: coming of age, "passing" through place?

In his landmark assessment of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre, Jerome H. Buckley provides a sequential model for the outline of coming-of-age stories. A child character must be living in "the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination" (1974: 17). These constraints are exerted by an oppressive father figure and a frustrating education, both of which lead the protagonist "to make his way independently in the city," where "his real 'education'" begins, including love affairs and a "soul-searching" process which ultimately leads the character to an "accommodation" to modern existence (1974: 17-18).

As Buckley shows, place is central to the construction of the coming-of-age narrative, since the movement from one place to another often acts as a trigger and a driving force in the plotline. The flourishing of the genre in nineteenth-century Europe has since given way to a host of adaptations, challenging its Western-based, male-centered original structure. In her inquiries into what she calls the "postcolonial *Bildungsroman*," Ericka Hoagland demonstrates how the transformative journey of a youth has been and still is re-shaped by contemporary novelists, so that it becomes "a reimagining and reinvention, a process of becoming through the act of unmaking its predecessor and unmasking the *Bildungsroman*'s ideological flaws" (2019: 225). This shift also impacts the role of place, if only because Buckley's categories of "city" and "provincial town" are undoubtedly questioned in the context of postcolonial forms of "unmaking."

As already discussed in chapter one, Kunzru's and Hamid's affiliations to the postcolonial always ask for caution and contextualization. But their novels *The Impressionist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* echo the generic metamorphoses underlined by Ericka Hoagland and further demonstrate the intrinsic connections of the coming-of-age narrative to spatial themes generally speaking, and to representations of place in particular. The novels resort to a plotline of social mobility but it is never quite successfully achieved and is

undermined by obstacles related to conflict or racism, but also, in the case of Hamid's novel, to climate change or to the downsides of the neoliberal economy. Faced to such obstacles, the characters develop adaptative strategies which imply "passing" through place. This can mean passing off as someone else, moving quickly and swiftly for the sake of their survival, finding a place for themselves in unwelcoming settings and thus developing a relation with place that is more ambivalent and multi-directional than the canonical onwards movement towards success.

The term "passing" used here is borrowed from Peter Childs and James Green's analysis of Kunzru's *The Impressionist*. It is also resorted to in Deepika Bahri's study called "Shibboleth: Hybridity, Diaspora, and Passing in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*" (2017). Childs and Green contend that the novel

works on the overlap between 'passing' and 'parsing'—Pran's attempts to become the perfect Englishman are themselves based on textually transmitted, circumscribed and practised versions of Englishness. (2013: 68)

The authors here implicitly refer to the notion of racial passing, used mainly in the North American context, whereby people from a given ethnic group attempt to convince others that they belong to another (Bosa *et. al.* 2019). In the case of Pran Nath Razdan, the protagonist in Kunzru's debut novel, "passing" indeed entails having a "textbook knowledge" of Englishness, education being of course key to the *Bildungsroman* structure, but it also means developing a capacity for swift, unnoticed movement from one place to another and therefore a heightened awareness of one's environment. In his study of *The Impressionist* assuming an "ethical" reading, Jason D. Price refutes the use of the word, which to him "takes part in the maintenance of binaries" and "would maintain dominant thinking" by suggesting that the character is unfaithful to one or the other of his ethnic origins (2014: 28). While one can question the use of the term from the standpoint of postcolonial theory, it is worth remembering that *The Impressionist* is a highly self-reflexive novel, which keeps rewriting and subverting the canon.⁴⁰ In this respect, the references to "passing" which unfold in the novel are perhaps not to be taken at face value, but rather as one of Kunzru's numerous parodic tricks, in a novel that plays with readers' expectations towards the subgenre of the Anglo-Indian novel.

Pran's use of disguised identities is thus comedic and vital all at once. Indeed, succeeding to adapt and knowing when to move are the only ways he can hope to get *into*

⁴⁰ See chapter 2, where I explain the various intertextual references found in this novel. In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama, Kunzru declared: "*The Impressionist* was certainly a book about books. It's as much to do with playing with the idea of English literature as a canon of works as anything else" Aldama, Fredrick Luis. 'Hari Kunzru in Conversation.' 2005. *Wasafiri* 20, no. 45 (2008), 13.

places. His initial “constraint,” to take up Buckley’s coming-of-age terminology, is precisely learning about his mixed identity. Thrown out onto the street, Pran has no choice but to pass off as either English or Indian if he wants to avoid homelessness. The protagonist’s initial reckoning is in fact described in a tableau opposing stasis and movement:

Hungry and worn out, he tries to parse the problem. (...) He does not think of England as his home. Home is here, on the other side of the blue door. He begins to cry, and eventually falls into a troubled, shivery sleep. The city carries on around him. The pariah dogs carry on snuffling about in rubbish heaps and gutters. Policemen, thieves, revellers, carriers of nightsoil, tongawallahs, station porters and other darkside people go about their business through streets which in places are almost as busy as by day. (*TI* 52)

The character’s re-assessment of “home” is operated while in a state of in-betweenness, as he is cast away from his supposed Indian roots and looking for the route towards his Englishness. The narrative voice enlarges the perspective on the situation, zooming out so as to display the moving world in which Pran now finds himself. He, the adopted son of a Pandit obsessed with purity, is now one of the “darkside” people, thrust in a carnivalesque environment with a less stable social order – involving thieves – a pre-eminence of the bodily – in the form of “nightsoil” – and where “pariahs” like him take the shape of stray dogs. Outside the Pandit’s walled house, Pran’s attachments are re-configured entirely.

From then on, the character’s coming-of-age journey is characterized by careful movement, attempting to make “his upward trajectory an assured and perfect arc” (*TI* 318). His “passing” strategy makes him a chameleon-like figure, able to blend against every backdrop along the way. For instance, when the hunting party in the forest near Fatehpur Palace ends in havoc, he makes a narrow escape by treading cautiously: “He takes a single, dream-like pace backwards. No reaction. No one will notice. No one will care. He turns, takes another, then another. Slowly, steadily, he begins to walk away through the forest” (*TI* 175). Pran’s social mobility is therefore often accompanied by physical agility. Leaving the clearing and escaping through the forest enables the protagonist to reinvent himself again, the wilderness standing for a threshold towards another place.

Once in an English independent school under the name of Jonathan Bridgeman, Pran’s strategy of “parsing/passing” through places is replicated. Both dimensions – learning and blending – merge in the spatial metaphors used to describe Pran’s efforts to get into Oxford:

This is the English way: linear and progressive, rolling forward on castors of tradition and good manners. Follow hints, and you will glide on indefinitely, blessed by a kind of social perpetual motion. Ignore them and you will crash into the walls. (*TI* 323)

Here, the movement forward is paradoxically enacted thanks to a vehicle carrying “tradition”—knowing the past is key in the process of “passing.” The metaphor of “glid[ing] on” suggests that this “perpetual motion” is always superficial, yet the alternative is brutally three-dimensional, as exemplified by Pran’s friend at school, one Paul Gertler, who fails to “pass.” In his case, this first means a failure to pass the entrance exam to Cambridge. The narrative hints regularly at the antisemitic attitude of the education system towards Paul, for instance after a bullying episode, when Paul is told that his attitude is “somehow *unchristian*” (TI 327, italics in the original). The character’s failure to “pass”—to move one step further towards Cambridge, to pass the exams, to pass off as a Church of England boy—is used to counterbalance Pran-Jonathan’s own successful passing. As Paul is about to leave the school, metaphors of movement are once more called upon:

They are travelling in opposite directions, he and Paul: one breaking out, the other tunnelling in. (...)
‘Goodbye,’ says Gertler.
‘Look, Paul,’ starts Jonathan. He wants to tell him about himself, to give him something true to go away with. But it is too complex even to begin. (TI 329-330)

In this friendship dilemma, Pran-Jonathan is forced to recognize the ties formed in the course of his coming-of-age journey. Having composed his fake identity from scraps, giving in to the truth would imply the risk of disintegrating again. On the contrary, the character’s education operates by accretion. Passing through places, he loots them to compose himself in a form of parodic postcolonial revenge. This looting is often mirrored by the crumbling of symbolical places, as discussed in the second chapter of this work. Yet the character’s movement of “tunnelling in” is deceptive. Indeed, his ultimate re-invention has him emerging from that “tunnel,” symbolized at the end by the Fotse tribe’s cave. As he emerges, the coming-of-age trajectory seems endless and unresolved: “For now the journey is everything. He has no thoughts of arriving anywhere. Tonight he will sleep under the enormous bowl of the sky. Tomorrow he will travel on” (TI 481). Refusing to accommodate like a classical *Bildungsroman* character, Pran is doomed to keep travelling indefinitely. With this ambiguous coda, the narrative also refuses to see its mixed-race protagonist come of age in a form of conciliatory hybridity. With “no thoughts of arriving anywhere,” the ending questions the very relevance of the coming-of-age plotline. Where does the journey really end? Is social mobility and blending in the only desirable form of movement? After having made opportunities for himself repeatedly, the character now seems willing to let chance and invisible circumstances operate.

The image of the “enormous bowl of the sky” suggests that there are more ontological modes of relations with places than elbowing one’s way through them so as to move upwards socially.

The same suggestion can be read in Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2011), his third novel. What is at stake here is again the protagonist’s survival, not so much in a (post)colonial social order as in the trappings of unchecked capitalism, as he tries to make his way up the social ladder of “Rising Asia.” In the same pattern as Hamid’s other works, the apparent lack of specificity conveyed by this title is not to be taken for granted – Christian Moraru notably comments on its “tongue-in-cheek” tonality conveying the “non-Asian perspective” of “the Bloomberg TV experts who have been trading in the ‘rising Asia’ stock phrase” (2018: 7). In fact, for readers familiar with Hamid’s novels, it is hard not to read the urban setting of the novel as Lahore, the city where *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* were located.

It becomes apparent that in this novel, the social “constraints” typically found in the *Bildungsroman* structure are the same as those Hamid tackled in *Moth Smoke*, his debut novel focused on Pakistan. The novel broaches the question of corruption, the persisting hold of the military, uneven economic development, religious fundamentalism and ecological stalemates—in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, this latter question appears with the issue of access to drinking water. In that light, the novel could be read to some extent as the *Bildungsroman* of a place. The methodology proposed in its title questions whether the goal is to rise *together with* a so-called “Rising Asia,” a place which is itself undergoing a certain type of economic growth. The protagonist’s journey is indeed intertwined with this complex process.

As in Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, the protagonist in this novel enacts forms of adaptive passing, albeit not racial or cultural. The narrative voice proceeds by using the second person—a form Hamid particularly affects—and replicating the structure of a self-help book with a series of chapters titled after pieces of advice, each of them matching a key step in the character’s individual construction. The “you” form also maintains an ambiguity by regularly addressing the reader, before returning to the protagonist, also referred to as “you.” This mischievous double address has led critics to compare the novel with Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), another rags-to-riches story set in a hazardous “Rising Asia” and told by an unreliable narrator (Gui 2013; Lau 2014). In Hamid’s and Adiga’s novels, the protagonists’ cunning stands in sharp contrast with the naïve young *Bildungsroman* character whose “sorrows” are reported by a sympathetic narrator. Social mobility entails twisting one’s moral compass, and the process of “passing” from one milieu to another requires close observation as much as cynical distance.

Whereas Kunzru's novel uses the image of "gliding on" as a means of accessing a level of quintessential Englishness, here, the narrator warns us from the onset that movement towards success will entail chance and accidents, despite the prescriptive format of the self-help book. We are told that those books "can be useful indeed. But (...) the idea of self in the land of self-help is a slippery one. And slippery can be good. Slippery can be pleasurable" (*HTG* 3-4). From the opening of the novel and with a provocative sexual innuendo, the reader is made aware that all the signifiers previously announced are more mobile than it seems, starting with the very notion of "self," but also its meaning in a given place. It is unclear whether the "land of self-help" refers to the publishing industry, or to a place – "Rising Asia," Pakistan – where fending for oneself is a prerequisite. Besides, the adjective "pleasurable" announces Hamid's playful format, guiding the reader into a "Choose Your Own Adventure" story. This playfulness opens up space for a third level of the *Bildungsroman* plot – not just that of a character and of a place, but one where the reader themselves are invited to look for their self and their place in a globalized economy made of both unequal circumstances and shared experiences. Christian Moraru notes:

In embarking on this topo-existential adventure, we watch our radars and screen the world for a narrative pattern that geolocates one way or the other, placing something– a desire's object, an objective, target, or some kind of occurrence or goal– somewhere in the world so we can relate to that place and whatever is placed in it, and by the same token constitute ourselves, be. (2018: 8)

As the critic points out, the identification process between reader and character here gives way to a form of "constitution," a "relation" which is channeled by the felt sense of place. Looking for cues of shared "goals" or "desires" in this narrative means finding forms of attachment which go beyond a mere location *via* place names. It means not only recognizing the ties which constitute the places depicted, but also the ties relating these places with the reader's own life.

Through this device of collaborative storytelling, together with the unreliable narrator and the deceptive title, the novel revisits the rags-to-riches story the better to depict contemporary South Asian life trajectories, which are more winding than a straightforward journey up the social ladder. More importantly, the character's evolution displays how one is always tied to external circumstances and to the existence of others.

Several tropes of the *Bildungsroman* are thus revisited. The movement from village to city is the first step of the character's journey, followed by "get[ting] an education" (*HTG* 17). But the narrator is intent on embedding this journey within the myriad of factors and interconnections that make it possible. Thus, instead of showing an individual leaving a poor

family behind to make his way towards the city, the narrator develops a reflection on the rural exodus of families, once extended and now “nuclear.” The protagonist’s arrival in the city is notably reflected in his sister’s eyes:

Moving to the city is the first step to getting filthy rich in rising Asia. And you have now taken it. Congratulations. Your sister turns to look at you. (...) She smiles and you smile in return, your faces small ovals of the familiar in an otherwise unrecognizable world (*HTG* 15).

The constitution of the self in the new places happens thanks to mirrors of familiarity, and is at times precluded by unfamiliarity. The same pattern is repeated a few pages later, when the protagonist’s walk to school is compared to the lives of less lucky children: “(...) most children in your area do in fact manage to go to school. Most, but by no means all. A boy your height is working shirtless in the tire-repair stall. He watches you now as you pass” (*HTG* 21).

The protagonist’s “passing” is therefore always compared to external circumstances, tokens of failure or reminders of his own luck– the freedom of his gender, compared to his sister’s; his place as the last-born child, who doesn’t have to provide (*HTG* 32). The comparative device even extends to his love interest, the “pretty girl” he meets as a teenager and whose parallel life trajectory is returned to regularly.

We are told that our character survived hepatitis as a child (*HTG* 10-11), and his trajectory seems to be a constant repetition of this survival. Death keeps looming, his relatives falling ill and/or dying one after the other. Where the novel provides a singular extension of the coming-of-age story as a genre is by extending it to *old* age, stretching the life journey to a full arc all the way to the ultimate form of “passing.” Again, as the character is in the hospital, the importance of ties and relations is called upon:

To be a man whose life requires being plugged into machines, multiple machines, in your case interfaces electrical, gaseous, and liquid, is to experience the shock of an unseen network suddenly made physical, as a fly experiences a cobweb. (*HTG* 185)

The character is once more reminded of his place in the larger scheme of events. Thrust back to his physical vulnerability, his once-expanding self is now caught in a metaphorical “cobweb”– the promise of individual emancipation offered by the self-help book is rendered irrelevant if not downright impossible. The material combination of gas, liquid and electricity show that there is no escaping the physical world and that any individual life is always caught within these complex networks.

The narrative is thus one of deceptive success and looming obstacles that are never quite overcome. Metaphors of impeded movement keep recurring, such as when the narrator reflects

that “the currents leading to wealth can manage to pull you along regardless of whether you kick and paddle in the opposite direction” (*HTG* 54), or that it is illusory to hope evolving into “business nebulas as remote as possible from the state’s imperial economic grip” (*HTG* 141). The protagonist’s journey consists in acknowledging these obstacles and making do with them as he moves forward. But the novel hints at the impossibility for some to adapt in “Rising Asia”— a striking instance is the protagonist’s son, who has preferred leaving that place to pursue the American dream (*HTG* 193).

By revealing the inescapable ties which constitute any journey of social mobility, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* adapts the coming-of-age story to the hyper-connected reality of life in a contemporary South Asian metropolis. Like Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, it shows that moving from one place to another is always done at the expense of, or thanks to, people, things and systems whose agency can be a blind spot in the traditional rags-to-riches narrative. The association of the coming-of-age story with modernity often means shedding the past, seen as “surpassed” more than as a meaningful “passage” (Latour 2018: 88).⁴¹ Understanding and renewing this narrative thus means re-connecting it with the experience of place. Ultimately, these novels are less about learning how to “accommodate” (as the canonical *Bildungsroman* proposes) than they are about a character acknowledging their attachments. As the above examples suggest, the various attachments which compose the character’s experience of place need not be anthropocentric (ties can be formed with a forest, or hospital equipment). They might even be formed with a book, as shown in Mohsin Hamid’s novel where ties operate extra-diegetically, by involving the reader within the development of the plot. It is also because these attachments are acknowledged that forms of fragility in the relation with place can be made more visible.

3.1.2. “Split selves and split worlds”: conflicting attachments and the fragility of place

The awareness of one’s attachments is equally developed in the motif of the “split self” which appears in both writers’ works. One could easily read this motif only along the lines of the two writers’ national origins, but it also needs to be situated in the larger context of post-terror politics, nationalist sentiment and by forms of postmodern angst which in many respects preceded them and were rekindled at the turn of the twenty-first century, by 9/11 most notably.

⁴¹ In French, Latour talks about opposed visions of the past as “*passéiste*” and as “*passage*.” Latour, *op.cit.*, 2017, 112.

Kunzru and Hamid approach this context of uncertainty and fragmentation differently, yet with a similar concern for the role of place in representing self-fragmentation.

In his essay “My Reluctant Fundamentalist,” where he explains the context that led to the almost-eponymous novel, Mohsin Hamid explains the confusion he felt after having published *Moth Smoke*. He then wondered whether he should start writing full time, and whether to stay in New York or return to Lahore. The writer’s questioning found an answer in writing: “As I had once done before, I turned to my writing to understand my split self and my split world” (2015: 67). For Hamid, the “split self” and the “split world” are two sides of the same coin. The writer’s novels are a mutual exploration of these two “splits,” both thematically and in his formal experimentations with the second person or his de-referential writing mode. Two distinct types of ties can in fact characterize Hamid’s and Kunzru’s respective approaches to place and the self. Hamid’s novels address the problematic *allegiance* to a given place, whereas Kunzru’s articulate place with a quest for *authenticity*. Both convey the ethical streak that runs through their writings, and in showing the “splits” in place and the self, emphasize the fragility of both. Playing with genre, voice and setting, the writers tackle the postmodern assumption of a dissolved self and the postcolonial premise of identities requiring negotiation, and show how these hypotheses are always embedded with the sense of place. They question what Anthony Giddens calls “ontological security”: “the confidence that most humans have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of surrounding social and material environments of action” (1991: 92). In these narratives, place is not merely “surrounding”—it is utterly tied with the sense of self – and does not always allow for “constancy.”

Hamid’s novels present characters who have moments of reckoning about their allegiances, their sense of being in the *right* place– or not– and of feeling committed to a given place. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid’s best-known novel, operates around a narrative “split” between on the one hand the time and place of narration, and on the other, the period which is recounted. This also unfolds in the duality between the internal narrator and his address to an American interlocutor within the diegesis– an address which can easily be appropriated by the reader. The duality of the self in this case is framed by a form of narrative duplicity, with an unreliable, unsettled narrator who keeps joking and subtly threatening his interlocutor– this was admittedly inspired to Hamid by Camus’s 1956 *La Chute*. Because of recurring biographical elements– studies at Princeton, work as a financial analyst–, readers tend to identify the narrator Changez with the writer. Hamid nuances this interpretation by once again resorting to the image of the split self:

People often ask me if I am the book's Pakistani protagonist. I wonder why they never ask if I am his American listener. After all, a novel can often be a divided man's conversation with himself. (2015: 70)

Throughout the novel, the duality of the self is thematized through Changez's difficulty to define his allegiance to the United States, as a Pakistani immigrant. Passages referring to this difficulty always give way to reconfigurations in positions, whereby Changez's conundrums about *who* he might be are echoed by *where* he might stand spatially and politically. This occurs most strikingly after the 9/11 attacks, which Changez witnesses on a television screen in a hotel in Manila. After being searched and questioned at airport checkouts upon returning to New York, Changez has to face a series of Islamophobic events, whether they are reported secondhand— people being beaten up violently, or fired from their jobs— or directly, such as when men go for his tires in a parking lot (*TRF* 134; 109). Changez also hears about the rekindled conflict between India and Pakistan and the possible consequences of 9/11 in his homeland. The “split” opens up in the troubled character, who starts behaving unusually at work. When his manager Jim talks to him, he enunciates a form of connection between the “split self” and the “split world”:

“If I had to guess, I'd say it's your Pakistani side. You're worried about what's going on in the world.” “No, no,” I said, shaking my head to dismiss any possibility that my loyalties could be so divided, “things are home are a little unsettled, but it will pass.” (*TRF* 136)

In this exchange, the vagueness of Jim's vocabulary mirrors his vague understanding of Changez's attachments. He has a Pakistani “side”— rather than national identity— and the specific events affecting Pakistan become “what's going on in the world,” in a sort of unconcerned dismissal of the local effects of international geopolitics. Changez's reply conjures up a similarly vague euphemism, notably in terms of attachments— he resorts to the phrase “at home,” which usually designates “home” in opposition to the workplace, to hint at the unstable political situation of his nation at large. The character has failed to make New York his own “home” but rather pins it down as a temporary workplace.

The image of the “Pakistani side” of the character is in fact prolonged when Changez discusses his internal conflicts with Juan Bautista, a publisher whose business he was sent to evaluate in Valparaiso, Chile. The latter questions Changez about his work consisting in “disrupting the lives of others”— Changez is notably in charge of telling companies whether they are financially viable (*TRF* 171). He goes on to tell Changez about the janissaries, “Christian boys (...) captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army (...) they had fought to erase their own civilizations, so they had nothing else to turn to” (*TRF* 172).

Hearing this, Changez has an epiphany: “I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine (...). Of course I was struggling! Of course I felt torn!” (TRF 173). The character’s two-faceted self thus finds its echo in the figure of Janus, the Roman god of thresholds, with one face turned towards the past and the other towards the future. At first troubled by this revelation, the character then re-assesses his janissary status when returning to New York after a visit to his family in Lahore:

I resolved to look about me with an ex-janissary’s gaze– with, that is to say, the analytical eyes of a product of Princeton and Underwood Samson, but unconstrained by the academic’s and the professional’s various compulsions to focus primarily on parts, and free therefore to consider also the *whole* of your society– upon my return to New York. (TRF 177-178)

Changez reconsiders his various attachments and their scales: by “focus[ing] primarily on parts” of American society, he had misinterpreted his place of immigration and his relations to it. Acknowledging his constructed self as a “product” of symbolical places of knowledge and power, he is able to map out anew his various entanglements with the United States. In that sense, the “split self” offers an opportunity for a larger, diffracted perception of one’s own place and of the places one is tied with– of the “parts” which constitute the whole. In doing so, it also makes visible the fault lines and the constructedness of the United States as a place of political and cultural hegemony.

The “split self” in this novel also illustrates the plea of Erica, Changez’s love interest, who is torn between the present and past memories after having lost her boyfriend Chris to cancer. Besides its evident parallel with the growing nostalgia experienced by her country, the character’s progressive downfall and mental isolation mirror Changez’s recognition of his dual self. His inability to make the relationship function is here again connected to his problematic sense of place: “I lacked a stable *core*. I was not certain where I belonged– in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither– and for this reason, when she reached out to me for help, I had nothing of substance to give her” (TRF 168). The metaphors of “core” and “substance” make the immigrant subject an ethereal figure, one who is emptied of the matter composing his self. Belonging to a place is made a pre-requisite for forming relationships with others, suggesting that relations with place are the most *fundamental*– both crucial and foundational. The parallel fragility of Changez’s sense of self and his sense of place appears again in his final assessment of this failed relationship:

Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one’s boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship: try as we might, we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us

is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us (...) I do not mean to say that we are all *one*, and indeed— as will soon become evident to you— I am not opposed to the building of walls to shield oneself from harm (...) (*TRF* 197)

The passage hinges on the double scope of the “relationship”: Changez’s reflection can equally apply to his love story and to his relationship with the United States. The passage progressively moves from the narrated story to the intradiegetic context of the two men discussing in a Lahore café. Their exchange unfolds in Old Anarkali square, a public place which is itself gated and thus makes the evocation of “shield[ing] oneself from harm” even more ominous. Changez’s aphorisms about boundaries and self-constitution therefore merge with this setting, and with the innuendo of political and religious allegiances (“I do not mean to say that we are all *one*”), the text making it clear as the plot progresses that Changez is believed to be a dangerous radical by the American man. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* plays out on these different levels of instability, where evocations of a fragile allegiance to places are mirrored by the uncertain context of the main narrative.

The question of allegiance continues to appear in *Exit West*, where the migrating characters constantly question their relations with the place they have left and the different places they encounter, and undergo a forced self-redefinition along the way. As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid duplicates duality. Indeed, the “split” between the lost homeland and the new place is paralleled most evidently in the main characters, a couple who progressively drift apart precisely because they respond differently to exile. As soon as they leave their unnamed city at war, the external narrator informs the reader of the differences to come: “Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger” (*EW* 90). Nadia’s feelings are as distressing as Saeed’s longing for his homeland, but she rather fears attachment, for its evocations of servitude: “she was haunted by worries too, revolving around dependence, worries that in going abroad and leaving their country she and Saeed and Saeed’s father might be at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin” (*EW* 90). Is it preferable to leave one’s homeland if it means having one’s hands tied and relinquishing other freedoms? The shifting understanding of attachments is called upon frequently in the novel. Here, it ranges from food and shelter dependence to entrapment. Later, as they are in London, it is again the character of Nadia who has to stretch out language and examine the semantic limits of attachment. In the squat where they are staying,

Saeed has met a group of immigrants from their country and tries to convince Nadia to go and settle with them:

‘They’re from our country.’
‘From the country we used to be from.’
‘Yes.’ Saeed tried not to sound annoyed.
‘We’ve left that place.’ (EW 149)

Nadia rectifies all at once Saeed’s sense of place and his sense of self, but Saeed’s elliptic reply betrays his different perception of that nuance. Described in metaphorical terms, his attachment to their homeland actually requires effort: “the further they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone” (EW 187). Trying to heal the forced “split” with his homeland, Saeed is unravelling a thread that is described as unnatural, going against the grain. Playing on paronomasia, the narrative voice describes this enterprise as poetically nostalgic yet unfeasible, since attaching something so ethereal as the “air of an era” seems doomed to fail.

Saeed forcibly maintains his sense of self attached to their birth city. By contrast, Nadia’s wish to cut off ties with the homeland morphs into various forms of fragmentation, leading her to completely re-organize her mental geography, which in turn deeply unsettles her sense of self. The narrator notably expresses Nadia’s discomfort in an episode where she has a near-*Doppelgänger* experience, seeing her “split self” in front of her as she looks at her smartphone screen:

once as Nadia sat on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone across the street from a detachment of troops and a tank she thought she saw online a photograph of herself sitting on the steps of a building reading the news on her phone across the street from a detachment of troops and a tank, and she was startled, and wondered how this could be, how she could both read this news and be this news, and how the newspaper could have published the image of her instantaneously, and she looked about for a photographer, (...) and she almost felt that if she got up and walked home at this moment there would be two Nadias, that she would split into two Nadias, and one would stay on the steps reading and one would walk home, and two different lives would unfold for these two different selves, and she thought she was losing her balance, or possibly her mind, and then she zoomed in on the image and saw that the woman in the black robe reading the news on her phone was actually not her at all. (EW 154-155)

As often in *Exit West*, the narrator uses a prolonged parataxis imitating free indirect speech to convey the inner dilemmas faced by the characters. In this case, the repetitive syntax aimed at duplicating Nadia’s position makes the scene highly oppressive. The character’s experience of

being “split into two Nadias” is represented as a materialization of her subconscious, the split migrant being torn physically by being in two places at once. Interestingly, Nadia’s experience of dissociation has her noticing a “*detachment* of troops,” mirroring her own detachment from herself– or, as Freud defines the *Doppelgänger*, the experience of “substitut[ing] the other’s self for his own” (2003: 141). Hamid resorts to this fantastic device to sustain the immigrant subject’s sense of dissociation, discomfort and disorientation.

Both the subjective gaze of Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the empathetic foray into the precarious lives of Nadia and Saeed can be read through the prism of Jeff Malpas’s developments on place, emotion and orientation. Using the terminology of German phenomenologists and of Heidegger in particular, Malpas comments on his descriptions of emotions with the German term “*Befindlichkeit*– how one finds oneself” (2018: 5). He observes how the language Heidegger uses to describe emotions is often “strongly topological (...) it connects to and invokes ideas and images of place and situation” (2018: 7). This connection of emotion and place can in turn articulate our very subjectivities: “emotion refers us to a basic feature of subjectivity, namely, to the way subjectivity is always oriented in relation to its environment and the objects around it” (2018: 6). Hamid’s fictional agenda, as presented in his two novels of emigration, precisely emphasizes the characters’ conflicting emotions so as to better display their complex relation with place. The mechanisms used to render these emotions in their full form– parataxis, dialogue, repetitions or Changez’s excessive exclamations– provide a gateway for the reader into the characters’ sense of a “split self” and a “split world.”

Contrary to Mohsin Hamid who explicitly acknowledges his own “split self,” Hari Kunzru explained in our 2020 interview that he didn’t perceive himself as “split in any way” with regard to his English and Indian origins (*HK ITW 2020*). Since the Anglo-Indian character he built up in *The Impressionist*, Kunzru’s novels have tended to open the question of the self to the larger context of contemporary politics, whether these are the racial politics of modern and contemporary North America (in *White Tears*), Chris Carver’s past as a revolutionary in the 1970s (in *My Revolutions*), or the interactions between the alt- right and liberal-left ideals as discussed in *Red Pill*. In Kunzru’s novels, the sense of orientation described by Jeff Malpas is extended towards the questions of ethics and decision-making, since being in a “split world” requires a careful examination of one’s own orientations. For Malpas, if we are to be oriented, it implies *staying* with our sense of place rather than dismissing it. Whereas philosophers have often advocated against emotion and in favour of reason, Malpas overrules this opposition,

explaining that while emotions might be misleading, “we do not rectify such mis-orientation by looking to remove ourselves from the very possibility of being oriented or being placed” (2018: 10). Kunzru’s novels advocate similarly, with their characters “following” their emotions into soul-searching quests which can take on the form of an analeptic narrative, a ghost story or a mock psychological thriller. In all these formal developments, the characters seek to find authenticity in place and to find their true self in the process. The novels’ ironic plot twists however reveal that such an undertaking is often deceptive. As observed in the first chapter of this work, Kunzru’s contention is that authenticity is in itself a faulty notion. This in turn gives way a chasm, a split of sorts, between the characters’ expectations and the reality of what can be found in place.

In *White Tears*, several quests for authenticity unfold in parallel. First, we follow Seth, the narrator, as he roams the streets to record sounds. His goal is summarized in the opening: “to store the world and play it back just as I’d found it” (*WT* 3). This is then echoed by Carter, Seth’s friend, who seeks to find authenticity in 1930s records which he collects. Seth’s and Carter’s quests cross paths with JumpJim, a man who went to the South in the postwar period with his friend Chester Bly in order to collect– or more precisely, grab forcibly– recordings owned by black musicians’ families.

For the narrator Seth, these jumbled quests progressively have him question his sense of self, so much so that he becomes the very “other” whom he was objectifying through blues music. As he investigates the life of Charlie Shaw, whose song he heard on a street corner, Seth traces back his story to the very point that he becomes possessed by the man. After JumpJim’s evocation of minstrelsy– white men taking the appearance of black musicians–, Charlie’s voice slowly takes over Seth’s in the narrative; then, the change becomes physical. Seth is brutalized, held by detectives and called “nigger,” before he starts realizing: “I can’t tell. I look at my stomach but I can’t tell what color it is. I can’t tell what color I am” (*WT* 255). Incidentally, this realization is at the heart of Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Last White Man* (2022), where the protagonist Anders “woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown” (*LWM* 3). In fact, Hamid’s opening is recognizably a rewriting of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. In both Hamid’s and Kunzru’s texts, uncanny metamorphoses provide insight into the positioning of the self, and the reconfiguration of one’s place in society when the boundaries of skin colour are put to the test. In the case of *White Tears*, Seth’s experience is accompanied by a sense of losing one’s place, of getting lost in a different time and space: “I had disappeared. No one knew where I was. No one knew and no one would come to get me” (*WT* 255). On the opposite, the ghost of Charlie Shaw creeps back into place by invading Seth’s body. Later on, as he has fully blended

with Seth's body and his voice has started to overpower Seth's, Charlie Shaw is relieved, exclaiming: "I have found a way back up into the world" (WT 319).⁴² Kunzru's novel uses genre devices such as devilish reincarnations and haunting voices to reflect on the role of now unknown African American musicians in forging the much-liked repertoire of today's popular culture. In that sense, the literary motif of the "split self" also raises questions about the erasure of identities and the appropriation of cultures over time, which he explored with a journalistic lens in his podcast episode "That Ain't Country" (2020, 2).

The sense of a "split self" undergone by Seth doubles up formally in the repetitions which pervade the novel, whether they are words or entire phrases. On one occasion, the character's sense of being lost in the meanders of memory is mirrored in his experience of urban space:

That was the summer I drifted through the city. Did I already say that? Everything I saw had a subtle but unmistakable doubleness. Each pace was reminiscent of some previous pace, not just because I knew the streets well and had walked them before, though this was true, but because I'd already taken that particular pace. (WT 140)

Seth reveals his role as unreliable narrator, a figure of confusion and loss. Thrust back in time by kinetic memory, the character's sense of place is hijacked by traces of the past, to the point of creating an uncanny impression of running around in circles. The character attempts to use movement as a means to find his bearings and find a place, ultimately trying to orient himself in a world which is no longer familiar. The same device is used in Kunzru's *My Revolutions*, with a character who either walks or drives on a ring road as he strives to reminisce who he was when he was part of a revolutionary group in his youth. As will be examined further on with the latter novel, the verb "drifting" which appears in this particular extract from *White Tears* plays a fundamental role in Kunzru's writing of place, and also testifies to a vision of the self as creatively contributing to the making of place.

Another avatar of the "split self" in *White Tears* is the conflicting stances of white Americans towards the past. The narrative addresses the memory of racial segregation and the ways in which it has endured in less visible forms in today's society. This is embodied by Carter's family, the Wallaces, whose ancestors were plantation owners and have now become construction magnates dabbling into the profitable flipside of the prison system. The Wallace men encourage the perpetuation of separated places in a split society. On the other end of that

⁴² The metaphors of the devil which surround the figure of Charlie Shaw are a hint at the story of Robert Johnson, the bluesman who famously claimed he had made an alliance with the devil so he could become an outstanding guitar player. This figure will be explored in more detail in chapter 7.

insidious and brutal perception of social space is the character of Leonie Wallace, Carter's sister, who struggles to own up to her family's past and present. In a discussion with Seth, long before he uncovers the Wallaces' venture, Leonie reveals her inner conflicts about roots and family attachments:

You can't choose where you're born, she says, as if she expects me to disagree. You can't choose your family. When you say someone's *from* something, some place or group or category. When you say that, what does it even mean? (*WT* 188)

Leonie's statement is conveyed in free speech in the middle of Seth's narration, blending it with the narrator's own confusion. Struggling to face up the guilt she has inherited, the character intends to shed attachments altogether, in an equally conflicted proposition. On the one hand, belonging to a place or group is mandatory; on the other hand, it is meaningless. The italicized preposition opens up onto a renewal of this meaning, questioning the nature of attachments and suggesting that the paradigm of roots, of origin and departure, calls for a re-evaluation. In the end, it is perhaps *from the self* that all attachments can be understood. Reaching the final step of his journey to Mississippi in search of Charlie Shaw, and as he discovers the history of the Wallace family, Seth reflects: "An invisible thread connected Carter and Leonie to Charlie Shaw. I thought of the buildings I had lived in, the expensive things I had handled and consumed. Whose work had paid for them?" (*WT* 306). Starting with the historical thread connecting the characters, Seth returns to the image of construction work—the Wallaces's business—to *deconstruct* the environments he has been evolving in. The character questions his own place in the world with the metaphor of attachments, asking what chains of relations have enabled his existence to unfold as it has. With these conclusive questions, the narrative aptly provides a twofold unravelling, since the narrative thread is untangled at the same time as the questions of orientation and situatedness which underpin the entire novel.

A similar unravelling occurs in *Red Pill*, where the narrator has embarked on a theoretical quest about the self, with his academic book about the "Lyric I" in German poetry. At the beginning of the novel, this quest is ironically jeered at. After a long description of his theoretical goals, the narrator admits that he undertook this research at the Deuter Center because he wanted "in short, to take a break" (*RP* 16). His intellectual quest for a form of "higher self" hides a mundane, selfish desire for isolation, which is first and foremost spatial: "I needed to remove myself— from the domestic field of battle, from the world" (*RP* 17). Yet the character's self-centered goals are put to the test of his having to work in a shared open plan

office, his shock when understanding the alt-right subtext of the TV show *Blue Lives*, or a chance encounter with a refugee and his daughter who live in a nearby camp. Progressively, everything brings him back to his attachments and connections with the wider world. In the final stages of the plot, as he has followed the traces of Anton, the alt-right figure he was chasing, all the way from Germany to Scotland, the narrator has to redefine not only his self, his writing project, but also his entire perception of the world he lives in. In a moment of strange epiphany, he frantically writes pages that he later leaves on the Scottish island:

My project was an Apocalypse, a revelation of last things, an ancient genre that seemed right for a man who'd crawled away to a desert place to meditate. I wrote about a paradox, how the earth is in flames but we still find it cold and difficult to touch. How we are not at home. How despite – or perhaps because of – our distance, our inability to experience ourselves as nature, we are in crisis. This “we” of course, was really just an “I,” a universalization of my own panic, but I knew I was not alone in my thoughts, even if the conclusions I came to might be unacceptable, even unintelligible to others. (RP 226)

In a metafictional twist, the narrator has moved from the seemingly pure individuality of the Romantic “self” to a reflection that is not only more collective, but highly intertextual, since he blends the biblical apocalypse with a more contemporary ecocritical reflection on the Anthropocene. The influence of place is acknowledged, because it is the narrator’s initial wish for isolation which has paradoxically thrust him back into an awareness of his interactions with the world. The allegorical and mystical tone of the writing (“we are not at home,” “the earth is in flames”) merges with the more sociologically connoted terms of “crisis” or a societal “inability.” As in *White Tears*, the character’s mental instability (“I was not alone in my thoughts”) is used to convey tangible social realities and in particular an evolving sense of place— in this case, the changing relation to the earth in a time of climate change.

Kunzru’s novel thus presents characters who learn about their self by acknowledging their place in the larger scheme of things. As in Hamid’s novels, this entails recognizing the existence of attachments, “invisible threads” which relate one’s existence to other forms of agency. The ideas of the “split self” and the “split world” emerge when recognizing the fragility of these attachments, which can be temporary and impact our sense of place. Jeff Malpas contends that “the fragility of (...) places is indicative of a corresponding fragility in our own lives and identities” (1999: 190). By engaging places in their representations of unstable identities and ontological quests, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru display this double fragility. In *Être à sa Place*, French philosopher Claire Marin points out that wishing for a place that would ideally fit our self “reveals several insecurities: the destabilizing power of wandering,

the indeterminacy of our existence, the fundamental indecision of our being” (2022: 213). Satisfying such a desire, Marin explains, could lie in noticing the traces of one’s attachments:

The place which would say something about my identity could be one which would retain the traces of its making, of the geographical, social and affective displacements, whether visible or hidden, which have led me here (2022: 223).⁴³

Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions show how the novel can constitute a journey toward such traces, where characters and readers alike attempt to find themselves, and in the process reveal the “making” of the places they find themselves in. Such a process once again calls for new forms of attention, and for a questioning of attachments sometimes taken for granted. As we will address next, questioning the nation as a central and foundational place is a case in point.

3.2. “Places of enormous size”: attachment and detachment in the transnational paradigm

“It is characteristic of the symbol-making human species that its members can become *passionately attached* to places of enormous size, such as a nation-state, of which they can have only limited direct experience” (Tuan 1977: 18, my emphasis). The paradox thus enunciated by Yi-Fu Tuan addresses at once humans’ attachment to the nation and the particular status held by nations when categorized as a type of place. It has previously been noted here that a sense of familiarity, orientation or memory can form part of the sense of place. These are all channelled through experience, but what experience of place can be called upon with the nation? What attachment(s) are formed considering that the concrete experience of the nation is *de facto* “limited”?

Thematically, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru’s works approach not only the complexity of national attachments, but their evolution under the influence of decolonization, terror, globalized capital, mass consumption and mass media. Among published readings of Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s works, other imaginaries seem to have complemented if not superseded the nation as a theoretical prism: Kunzru’s *Transmission* has been analysed in terms

⁴³ My translations— Claire Marin’s *Être à sa place* has not been translated into English to this day. It is worth noting that Marin oscillates between “*lieu*” and “*place*” in French, a distinction which English amalgamates into “place.”

“Le rêve d’une place, d’un lieu défini qui nous correspondrait et nous exprimerait tout à la fois trahit plusieurs inquiétudes : l’errance qui nous fragilise, l’indétermination de notre existence, l’indécision fondamentale de notre être” Marin, Claire. *Être à sa place*. Paris : Éditions de l’Observatoire, 2022, 213.

“La place qui dirait quelque chose de mon identité serait alors celle qui garderait les traces de son élaboration, des déplacements géographiques, sociaux et affectifs, visibles ou secrets, qui m’ont conduit jusqu’ici” *ibid.*, 223.

of “globalization” (Brock 2008), “global risk society” (Tüzün 2019) or “global noise” (Childs and Green 2013); *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be read, according to Mahmutovic, as a novel of “global citizenship” (2016).

Mohsin Hamid’s works in particular are often included within the emergence of a body of fiction directed towards a worldwide English-speaking audience, yet still evocative of Pakistan and its national identity. Paul Veyret addressed this paradox in terms of “fractured territories” (2018). Ciara Cilano dedicated a monograph to contemporary Pakistani fiction in English subtitled “Idea, Nation, State,” but warns from the onset that “this book concludes with an argument advocating the end of national identities” (2013:1). In the *Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing* (Aslam and Kanwal 2019), Nazir, Holm and Worthington aptly termed this paradox in a chapter titled “‘Brand Pakistan’: Global Imaginings and National Concerns in Pakistani anglophone literature”: even where globalisation might have pervaded imaginaries so as to become a staple thematically and formally in anglophone fictions by Pakistani writers, “national concerns” still pervade the bulk of these novels.

These ambivalences further complexify Yi-Fu Tuan’s premise. What attachment(s) might emerge when other “places of enormous size”—the globe, the world, the planet—have come to compete with imaginaries of the nation? Granted, national sentiment is far from waning in parts of the world, including India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States—the places where Hamid and Kunzru still live and have formed ties. As Hari Kunzru noted in an interview, this can go hand in hand with a reclaiming of place: “with the resurgence of nationalisms, there is a reassertion of place as a desirable commodity in a way” (*HK ITW* 2018).

Reading Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works as transnational fictions might help encapsulate the persisting presence of the nation in contemporary imaginaries, even as we acknowledge the evolution of its symbolical power. Reading the nation as both a *type* of place, and as an abstract concept challenged by the experience of place, reveals the variety of places involved in today’s narratives of allegiance and attachment.

In *A Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani explains that transnational literature can define “cultural works that cross national borders, whether stylistically, topographically, intellectually, or otherwise” (2009: 2). The critic however admits that “there are no perfect terms” and that terms like “transnational” but also “global” require contextualized approaches (2009: 2). I will attempt to provide such context in the analyses that follow. Here, I would primarily like to draw on Ramazani’s threefold definition to understand how the writing of place and attachment changes under the influence of the transnational. A “stylistic” component implies looking at the language used to convey the transnational experience and render in narrative form a sense of

place which transcends the nation. The “topographic” dimension of a transnational poetics is also fundamental in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works. For Hamid, de-referential topographies favour experience over the identification of real places, and in that sense, allow for transnational experiences to unfold. In Kunzru’s works, places are identifiable but de-multiplied, emphasizing the contemporary speed of movement and the expansion of imaginaries. Finally, what Jahan Ramazani qualifies as an “intellectual” crossing of national borders is found in the way novels propose mental geographies which move across national frames. The historical co-dependence of nation and narration, as identified in Benedict Anderson’s and Homi Bhabha’s landmark theories (1983; 1990), can at times be put to the test by the creative territories opened in transnational fictions.

The transnational can therefore be understood not as a denial of national attachment, but as “multiple attachments rather than none” (Ramazani 2009: 17). In this part I will observe the forms such attachments take in the novels of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, and how they impact their writing of place. I first propose to look at how the nation is *re*-placed in writing, focusing particularly on the representations of two defining events: first the partition and its legacy, and then Brexit and the refugee crisis that preceded it in 2015. Looking at alternative attachments across national borders will lead me to consider cities, or how Hamid’s and Kunzru’s resolutely urban novels convey a meaningful sense of place and possible attachments with the globalized metropolis.

3.2.1. Between “atomized lands” and “illusory nations”: re-placing the nation

The two phrases quoted above stem respectively from Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* (265) and *Exit West* (155).⁴⁴ The first one is used in the text as a reference to South Asia and in particular Pakistan, and the second alludes to the perception of the nation in the context of the 2015 migration crisis in Western Europe, and of Brexit. These thematic engagements provide insight into the evolving imaginary of the nation, the challenges it faces— being “atomized” or “illusory”— and its particular status as a place. Is it understood as physical, bound by the “land,” or an intangible concept, a mirage-like “illusion”?

Both “illusion” and “atomization” are nothing new in theories of the nation. Both seem to be at the heart of the constructivist and poststructuralist concepts that emerged at the end of the

⁴⁴The exact quotation is: “Without borders nations appeared to become somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play” (*EW* 155).

twentieth century. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* insisted on the constructedness of the nation and how national sentiment had historically been sustained by narratives *via* the novel and the newspaper (2006: 25). Homi Bhabha, taking up Anderson's theories, warned against the risks that such an "imagined community" should sustain a "'totalization' of national culture," but instead pointed to how this imaginary component could in fact reveal the "wide dissemination" that is also constitutive of the nation (1990: 3).

Thus, neither the "dissemination" nor the "atomization" of the nation precludes its existence and its persistence in the imaginary. Faced to an increasingly transnational literary production, by writers whose national identities are plural, critics have talked about reading fiction *beyond* the nation (Ashcroft 2014) or *outside* the nation (Seyhan 2001), the semantics showing the nation as a limited and limiting place whose boundaries call for interpretative crossing. Despite these limits, the nation seems to endure as a place of reference from which interpretations are articulated. This is to suggest that the nation, rather than *replaced* by other hegemonic imaginaries, can benefit from being *re-placed*, both historically and spatially, as one of several ties which compose the contemporary subject's relations with place. Recognizing the persistence of a "necessary nation" (Jusdanis 2011) seems to be a condition for describing not only the challenges the nation faces and the role it holds today, but the necessary attachments of the subject with regard to the place they live in.

By displacing the narrative gaze and regularly re-scaling topographies, contemporary fictions like Hamid's and Kunzru's emphasize both recent and older cracks in the narrative fabric of the nation, while also pointing to its persisting hold on the imaginary and its role in contemporary events. This includes the reception of mass immigration in Europe, or the reconfiguration of the postcolonial subject's attachments within the post-9/11 geopolitical order.

Re-placing the nation can also mean looking at the presence of the nation in the everyday experience of place. How does it manifest itself from a material standpoint? What sense of place does its evocation bring about? How is the sense of a "land"—a word used in Hamid's *Moth Smoke*—felt by a national subject?

In this development I propose to observe how Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions enact this twofold re-placing process. This will be done by focusing on the representations of partition, and more largely of the India-Pakistan relationship in Mohsin Hamid's novels *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Moth Smoke*, as well as Hari Kunzru's references to this question. Both writers have also addressed a more recent re-mapping, Brexit, in their respective novels *Exit*

West and Red Pill. I will look at how the descriptions of these ruptures can paradoxically prove revealing of attachments with place, in and out of the national imaginary.

3.2.1.1. “A million partitions”: fragmented places in the Indo-Pak imaginary

In his 1983 novel *Shame*, a narrative articulated metaphorically around the creation of Pakistan, Salman Rushdie’s narrator depicts Pakistan as a “palimpsest” born from a “double secession” (2007: 87). Discussing Pakistan as an artistic vision that its proponents failed to render fully on a metaphorical canvas, the narrator goes on to propose that “perhaps the place was just *insufficiently imagined*, a picture full of irreconcilable elements” (87, emphasis in the original). Here, Rushdie tweaks Anderson’s “imagined communities” so that it applies not to Pakistan as a nation, but as a place. Fixating the image of such a place on a canvas, through a recognizable landscape or an evocative allegory, is thus a problematic endeavour. This in turn reflects the challenge of linking national ideals to experienced place in the case of Pakistan.

Metaphors of this “double secession” and division have long pervaded the imaginaries of anglophone writers from India and Pakistan, where images of borders and boundaries abound (Guignery 2009). Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa’s landmark novel *Ice Candy Man* (1988), set before and after the events of 1947, was thus renamed *Cracking India*, in a telling image of fragmentation. The most recent generation of Pakistani writers in English have perpetuated these images and the evocation of both the 1947 and the 1971 partitions— Sidhwa is admittedly one of Hamid’s first inspirations (Khan 2015). The memory of partition and civil war might be key to a certain sense of national attachment, but the writers show how it can also lead to moral divisions— separating “us and them” or “good and evil”— used to justify the perpetuation of hostility. In the same pattern as Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*, writers often have their characters’ personal trajectories reflect the political realities of partition. Friends caught up in violence or separating couples are a staple, as exemplified by Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2002), where the two protagonists’ mirrored lives share the dark legacy of the 1971 civil war.

Mohsin Hamid’s first novel *Moth Smoke* takes up this pattern, through the characters of Ozi and Daru, childhood friends who are connected by their fathers, both soldiers in 1971. Daru’s father died during the war, and Ozi’s, whom Daru calls “Khurram Uncle,” has acted as a substitute father, sending gifts as a compensation for Daru’s poorer circumstances (MS 88-89). The plot climaxes with an event that redefines Daru and Ozi’s friendship. After a car accident where the latter is responsible for running over a young boy, he lets Daru take the blame. This is set against the tension of the 1998 nuclear race and the mounting tension between

India and Pakistan, and the lingering violence and rejection of responsibility between the two countries is made to mirror the two characters' growing hostility towards each other.

Hamid takes this division further by weaving it within his writing of place, space and landscape. First, divisions are replicated in terms of social space. The text keeps referring to the inner boundaries of Lahore, the gated properties of the wealthier class, to which Daru does not have access. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, we follow Daru as he faces “a big gate in a high wall that surrounds what I think is Ozi's place. His new place, that is” (*MS* 9). The novel exposes how the initial “crack” which led to the formation of Pakistan in turn formed seismic replica in the social fabric of the nation, notably through the question of corruption. This is even mirrored in the fragmented narration, which alternates Daru's voice with the voices of other characters who testify as witnesses at Daru's trial, following the car accident. When Ozi testifies, he explains why his father started getting involved in corrupted affairs:

Why do you think my father got into it? He was a soldier. He served in '71. He saw what was going on. And he decided that he wasn't going to wait around to get shot in the back while people divided up the country. He wanted his piece. And I want mine. (*MS* 230)

The fragmentation of the nation is thus more than two- or even threefold, as shown by the metaphor of the cake being cut in pieces. Ozi's short, direct sentences reproduce this divisive mapping, and suggest very different outcomes depending on one's position on the social scale. For Daru's father on the other hand, who “died of gangrene in a prisoner-of-war camp near Chittagong,” the fragmentation of the 1971 civil war meant decay and loss (*MS* 88).

The novel thus displays how land grabbing is echoed in individual attempts at seizing one's chance and making a place for oneself. More than finding a place socially, this is also reflected in the landscape and the climate. All through the narrative, the characters eagerly await the monsoon in the scorching heat, the tense waiting mirroring the impending nuclear tests. In the final stages of the plot, the external narrator explains that “the city waits for thunder's echo, for a wall of heat that burns Lahore with the energy of a thousand summers, a million partitions, a billion atomic souls split in half” (*MS* 265). Here, the incremental enumeration suggests that fragmentation is far from being a thing of the past, and will keep reproducing itself in the climate, in political life and in the very “souls” of the people. Interestingly, the setting is not Pakistan at large but Lahore, Hamid's own city. The novelist focuses this passage about “partitions” and atomization on a metonymic city – which, additionally, is not the capital – standing for the nation's divisions. Perhaps this again suggests that the writing of the nation can only occur through changes in scale, and is always already mediated by other, more direct

experiences. Yi-Fu Tuan thus argues that “[t]o be a modern nation, local attachments based on direct experience and intimate knowledge have to be overcome” (1977: 176-177). As an advocate of sharing experiences through writing, Hamid can never fully relinquish “direct experience and intimate knowledge,” and evokes the nation in indirect ways, the better to emphasize the “local attachments” of people and places. As Paul Jay underlines, *Moth Smoke* is also intent not to situate the legacy of 1971 within the postcolonial frame of the British Raj. Drawing from Hamid’s claim that he belongs to a “post-postcolonial” generation, Jay notices that he chooses to frame his plot with the story of the last Mughal Emperors rather than read Pakistan’s contemporary troubles along the lines of British presence (Jay 2014: 109; 106). In fact, Hamid operates a connection between the demise of the Mughal Empire and the contemporary fractures of Pakistan, as the novel ends with an external narrator who refers to the “atomized, atomic lands once Aurangzeb’s empire” (MS 309).

Attachments are also central to the evocation of the India-Pakistan relationship in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In that novel, the divisions opposing the two nations are re-situated within the context of the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, and the global reconfiguration of allegiances which followed the event. The discussion about the nation is primarily visible through the United States’ renewed national pride and imperialist stance, mirrored in a number of allegories.⁴⁵ But Changez, the trickster narrator, also worries about the rekindled conflict between his home country and its neighbour. The events Hamid alludes to here are notably the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001, followed by ten months of extreme tension with troops standing all along the Indo-Pak border (Jacob 2012: 92).⁴⁶ Throughout Changez’s account, the tensions between India and Pakistan are often re-placed in relation to the United States, once again by playing on scale and historical reference. Discussing the military standoff, Changez thus tells his American interlocutor: “It will perhaps be odd for you – coming, as you do, from a country that has not fought a war on its own soil in living memory, the rare sneak attack or terrorist outrage excepted” (TRF 145). Provocatively reducing the United States’ experience to a “rare sneak attack or terrorist outrage,” Changez resorts to the notion of “soil,” hinting to the physical experience of war in

⁴⁵ The onomastics and allegories referring to the United States in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have been discussed in chapter 2 (part 1.2.3.)

⁴⁶ The Parliament attack was also discussed in an op-ed by writer Arundhati Roy in *Outlook Magazine*, titled “‘And His Life Should Become Extinct’: The Very Strange Story of the Attack on the Indian Parliament” (30 October 2006, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/and-his-life-should-become-extinct/232979> accessed 17-10-2022). Roy discusses the many theories and media frenzy which followed the event, in particular the blurry circumstances surrounding the motives of the attack and who was behind it.

one's own country. The geological connotations of the term also present the nation as a breeding ground for patriotic excesses and political positions.

But the conflict at the Indo-Pak border also provides another opportunity for the writing to replace the abstraction of national allegiance with intimate experience and the felt sense of place. Changez goes on to narrate how his knowledge of the situation moved from the US, where he was “online, reading about the ongoing deterioration of affairs between India and Pakistan” (*TRF* 149) to a more direct relation to the stand-off. Returning to Pakistan for a visit, Changez sees the conflict coming closer and closer, for instance when his brother welcomes him at the airport:

“How are things?” I asked him. He shrugged. “There is an artillery battery dug in at the country house of a friend of mine, half an hour from here, and a colonel billeted in his spare bedroom,” he replied, “so things are not good.” (*TRF* 125-126)

With the zooming in on a “country house” and then a “bedroom,” the character's relation to his nation's conflict is thus made more and more intimate, which progressively clarifies his own position— as a Pakistani émigré in the United States, his allegiances are with his birth country. Changez's brother displays the proximity of conflict in terms of physical mapping (“half an hour from here”) to convey a sense of urgency. Later as Changez is eating with his family, the conflict is even invited at the dinner table:

Already, the Indian army was mobilizing, and Pakistan had begun to respond: convoys of trucks, I was told, were passing through the city, bearing supplies to our troops on the border; as we ate, we could hear the sounds of military helicopters flying low overhead; a rumour circulated that soon traffic would be halted on the motorway so that our fighter planes could practice landing on it (...) (*TRF* 144-145)

The conflict occupies space in a variety of ways: trucks, helicopters, cars pervade space three-dimensionally. For Changez's family, the oppressive perception of helicopters flying overhead acts as an ill omen, replicated in the “rumour” which appears soon after. The character's sources of information have moved from the internet to hearing things firsthand (“I was told”). Interestingly, the narrator also shifts from talking about “India and Pakistan” (149) to designating the Pakistani military as “our troops,” or “our fighter planes.” Changez's movement from the United States back to Lahore forces an acknowledgement of his attachments, a re-creation of a forgotten tie with his birthplace.

Mohsin Hamid is also vocal about nationalism and the India-Pakistan relationship in his nonfiction work. In his collection of essays *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, several essays are specifically dedicated to Pakistan's inception and the lingering tensions between India and

Pakistan. In an essay titled “To Fight India, We Fought Ourselves,” he deplors that “India and Pakistan share a lengthy land border, but they might as well be on separate continents” (2015: 161), and advocates for new trade partnerships and cultural exchange. As a complement to the ambivalent, metaphorical tone used in his novels, Hamid’s urgent voicing of concerns about Pakistan and India in his nonfiction leaves little room for interpretation. His essay collection is named after a pun on Freud’s *Civilizations and its Discontents*, but it also opens up a space for reflection on Samuel Huntington’s well-known 1992 hypothesis of a developing “clash of civilizations” in the world at large, which would notably oppose Western and non-Western religions and cultures—Huntington’s proposition gained renewed interest in public debate in the aftermath of 9/11. The subtitle of Hamid’s collection, “Dispatches from Lahore, New York and London,” is ultimately revealing of the writer’s desire to give precedence to other, transnational places over the nation in the forming of individual attachments. Whereas the notions of “civilization” and “nation” can prove problematic, cities and particularly metropolises can prove relevant in the forging of attachments—urban descriptions are a staple of his fiction and will be discussed in the following part. Approaching the problematic object that is the nation from a variety of angles, Hamid’s fiction *and* nonfiction propose alternative attachments which begin with a closer look at the experience of place.

Hari Kunzru also alludes to the India-Pakistan relationship in *Transmission*, but turns it on its head in a parodic manner. As in Hamid’s novels, the evocation of the conflict shows how fragmentation and division pervade spatial imaginaries even unconsciously. In this case, it is Arjun, the Indian character, who includes the conflict with Pakistan within his daily daydreaming fantasies. The imaginary of the conflict is in fact triggered by Arjun’s arrival at the gates of “Virugenix” for the first time, after he has just been hired by this important digital company:

The security controls seemed to underscore his elite status, to confirm that his daily routine had drama and importance. He sometimes imagined film plots in which he (played by Shah Rukh Khan) worked against the clock to outwit evil Pakistani virus writers who were holding Leela Zahir hostage. *If... I... can... just... figure... this... encryption... algorithm... out...* But mostly he was too busy for daydreaming. (T 54)

Qualifying the Indo-Pak conflict with the “drama and importance” of a spy movie defuses the actual tragedy to emphasize the apparent absurdity of this lingering violence and the normalized legacy of hostility. For Arjun, inserting the word “Pakistani” among the group “evil virus writers” is but a formality; he is automatically biased against the nationality without even ascribing sense to this word. The passage shows how experienced space can echo internalized

imaginaries of the nation— in this case, security gates are a reminder of the divisive border and of the dichotomy between good and evil as presented in some Bollywood films, where Pakistan is the evil party. Dismissing Arjun’s daydreaming at the end, the narrator leaves the conflict with Pakistan enclosed within the Indian subject’s imagination, further underlining the primary role of the imaginary in the forging of national identification. In more recent novels, both Hamid and Kunzru similarly point to absurd situations created by border redefinitions and national preference, and in particular the collective uncertainty and ethical conundrums caused by Brexit.

3.2.1.2. *Fractured unions: Red Pill, Exit West and the post-Brexit novel*

In October 2016, Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, then about to be released, was termed the “first post-Brexit novel” (Freeman 2016). Whether or not it was the first to deserve the label, many successful novels published in the two years following the Brexit vote addressed the climate surrounding the event, starting with Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) with which *Exit West* shared the Man Booker Prize shortlist, or Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018) starring a Eurosceptic, Enoch Powell-endorsing character and another who is the leader of a right-wing nationalist movement.

Literary criticism followed through with the coining of the term “BrexLit,” theorized by Kristian Shaw extensively in *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (2021).⁴⁷ Examining at length the representation of Brexit, Shaw argues that BrexLit encapsulates more works of fiction than post-Brexit literature chronologically speaking, in that he wishes to include those pre-2016 works depicting the economic and societal fractures in modern Britain which progressively led to the Brexit campaign and vote— these can go all the way back to World War II, according to Shaw (2021: 4). In a similar aim to place Brexit within the long history of modern Britain, the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* dedicated a special issue to Brexit and literature, reading the Brexit outcome along the lines of postcolonial theory (Koegler *et al.*, 2020). The editors perceive in Brexit a legacy of the Empire’s agenda through issues such as governance or trade, rekindled by Brexit advocates’ reclaiming of national pride. They observe that there has been a proleptic tendency among postcolonial writers to write about “the residual ideologies of imperialism in the lead up to and after the Brexit campaign” (*ibid.*, 589).

⁴⁷ In the acknowledgements of his book, Shaw explains that he had started using the term in academic contexts as early as 2016 but that it was taken up by others in their publications – it is for example the case of John Day in *The Financial Times* with his article “Brexlit: the new landscape of British fiction” (28 July 2017).

It thus comes as no surprise that writers like Hari Kunzru and Mohsin Hamid should have included representations of pre- and post-Brexit debates within their works of fiction. Both writers share strong attachments with Britain. For Hamid, who obtained British nationality after several years of residence, London is a place that “can coax a water lily to tie its roots to land” (2015: 30). Having been born and raised in England, Kunzru shared in an opinion piece in *The Observer* in June 2016 his concerns about the referendum outcome, trying to imagine alternatives to returning there – he was, and still is, living in New York – and stating: “If Brexit does go ahead, I’ll try, insofar as I’m able, to be a voice for another kind of England” (*The Observer*, 2016). Incidentally, it is *England* and not Britain which Kunzru proposed to represent, pointing to the already complex relation between parts of the United Kingdom.

Questions of national imaginary as well as feelings of attachment and detachment towards the nation are thus central in the case of Brexit narratives. Brexit had (and still has) a seismic impact on the “imagined community” formed by the European Union. The recognizable nationalist rhetoric surrounding Brexit can prove, in John McLeod’s terms, “both a triumph and a failure of the imagination” (2020: 611). In transnational writings such as Hamid’s and Kunzru’s, representing Brexit and its associated imaginaries means observing together the powerful, persisting role of the nation as symbol *and* the side effects of nationalist agendas such as social exclusion. In both writers’ post-Brexit novels, particularly *Exit West* (2017) and *Red Pill* (2020), this is manifested with characters who struggle to make sense of their place both in the world and within the nation where they live, and voice ontological preoccupations regarding the individual’s attachments with abstract spatial entities.⁴⁸ As in the case of the Indo-Pak conflict, the imaginary re-mappings surrounding Brexit testify to the fragmentation and fragility of place, yet lines of flights emerge, in the form of alternative attachments and differently scaled places.

Kunzru’s post-Brexit reckoning first materialized in “Into the Zone,” defined as “a podcast about opposites, and how borders are never as clear as we think” (Pushkin 2020). In the aftermath of Brexit, Kunzru was intent on questioning the borders of Britishness and went to Stonehenge for the first episode of his podcast, trying to find in that ancient place a sense of his own place in Britain as the child of an Indian father and an English mother. Kunzru grew up in Essex, and notes with dismay that a wide majority of voters in that county voted “Leave”

⁴⁸ Kunzru’s *White Tears* was published in early 2017 but its thematic engagements with racial politics in the United States and the question of cultural appropriation represent interests the writer had been developing prior to the Brexit debate and vote.

(2020,1). Arriving at Stonehenge, he starts by asking “Do the stones belong to me?” before he investigates recent Harvard-led DNA research which unsettles the association of racial purity with belonging to a place.

At first glance, *Red Pill* appears to be a post-Trump novel more than an account of Brexit. The plot unfolds in the months preceding the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States – the novel ends with a chapter describing the election night. The title is a reference to the moral dilemma of the red and blue pills stemming from the 1999 movie *Matrix*, where an alternative reality can be revealed by choosing the red pill. That alternative reality, in *Red Pill*, opens onto the post-truth rhetoric of American alt-right groups, and the colour red comes to evoke in parallel the “MAGA hats” of Trump supporters (*RP* 282). Kunzru’s upcoming novel is set out to be titled *Blue Ruin*, which, after *Red Pill* and *White Tears*, seems to reveal the formation of an American trilogy assembled under the colours of the national flag (Nandini 2020).⁴⁹ Yet these are also the colours of the Union Jack, and Kunzru’s outsider perspective on the United States can betray concerns which equally have to do with British identity. Looked at more closely, the novel turns out to reflect about a changing world order with a transatlantic scope.

The setting of *Red Pill* in 2015 and 2016 is not coincidental in this regard. The protagonist and internal focaliser leaves New York seeking to work in isolation in Berlin on a book about German poetry. Like the writer, he has an English mother and an Indian father, and is asked by the Deuter Center’s director about why he didn’t choose Indian poetry, to which he replies saying he distrusts “the idea of national literature” (*RP* 29). In Wannsee, he is confronted urgently to a nearby settlement, at a time when Western Europe and in particular Germany and France had to adapt to an unusually important flow of refugees, notably Syrian families fleeing war. Kunzru himself was staying at the American Academy in Berlin at that time, and visited a refugee community (*HK ITW* 2020). In the build-up to the referendum about leaving the European Union, these events which were soon called a “migrant crisis” were largely commented upon by proponents of Brexit, as proof of the European Union’s malfunctions.⁵⁰ In *Red Pill*, the narrator is first struck by a man emerging from a dumpster truck, trying to feed his young daughter. Contextualizing this encounter, he recalls:

It was the year they all came, more than a million refugees crossing Europe, massing at fences, drowning in the Mediterranean, hunted by vigilantes in the

⁴⁹ *Blue Ruin* will use the visual arts as a narrative lead, while *White Tears* and *Red Pill* respectively focused on music and literature.

⁵⁰ “Migrant crisis: Farage says EU ‘mad’ to accept so many,” *Anon.*, BBC News, 9 September 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34197707> (accessed 15-10-2022).

Bulgarian woods. (...) On lampposts around the lakeside colony were stickers with English slogans: *Refugees Welcome. No Borders*. Other stickers asked *Wieviel ist zuviel?* “How many is too many?” Around the station, I’d seen some antifa kids wearing shirts saying *Kein Mensch ist Illegal – No one is illegal* – and *FCK AFD*, an insult directed at the new right-wing party whose supporters had spray-painted *Mut zu Deutschland – Courage for Germany* – on the side wall of the Chinese restaurant. (RP 155-156)

With collage and juxtaposition, the narrator reevaluates the rhetoric that surrounded the summer of 2015, or “the year they all came” – the solemnity of the phrase testifies to the inscription of these events into a historical timeline. But it is mostly an inscription of opposing discourses into space which transpires in this passage, with stickers which turn into a violent visual dialogue made of conflicting references to German politics, to transnational refugee charities, and to older organized movements.⁵¹ In the context of a 2020 conference on the subject of hostility and hospitality, I asked Kunzru about hate speech, and where fiction could stand with regard to its proliferation, notably online:

[i]n fiction, what you can do is stage this. You can actually spend quite a lot of time trying to feel out the textures of these debates, and the rhetorical ways that people behave rather than just looking at the content and saying “this idea is right” and “this idea is wrong,” and you can understand all the kind of non-denotative ways in which this kind of politics functions. (HK ITW 2020)

Red Pill proposes to “feel out the textures” of the debates that circulated in Europe in 2015 and 2016, and notably does so by inscribing them in the social space experienced by its protagonist. The “non-denotative” representation of these debates can be seen in the choice to represent a visual, spatial confrontation, mirroring the plethora of divided opinions which surrounded the refugee crisis but also the wish for secession from Europe which was then campaigned for in the UK. The realization of these divisions both in discourse and in space triggers the urge for a quest in *Red Pill*’s liberal-left protagonist, leading him to track down an alt-right leader all across Europe on a whim, as if to ward off the forced stasis of the refugee camp. In Paris, the spatial descriptions also display divisive boundaries. He recalls feeling trapped in his hotel:

Sometimes the walls closed in and I had to walk the streets for real, looking in the windows of bookstores, examining the permutations of the city, its vast potential for meaning. There was a synagogue nearby, with armed police standing guard outside. Throughout the *quartier*, on walls and doorways, someone had written a phrase, perhaps a political slogan, in black marker. *Europe en danger*. These things were clues, signs of the new dispensation. (RP 203)

⁵¹The movement “*Kein Mensch ist Illegal*” was founded in 1997.

At first glance, the evocations of “walls” and “doorways” as well as police “standing guard”—a reference to the measures that followed the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris—make for a highly claustrophobic environment, with divisions and enclosure defining the experience of urban space. The description of an anti-refugee slogan in public space is once more called upon but the passage maintains a way out of a so-called “Europe at risk” and of religious communities under threat, by proposing the city as an alternative to larger social and political entities, and one that can in fact be liberating— a wide canvas with “vast potential for meaning.”

Reading *Red Pill* together with *Transmission* can provide insight into the evolution of Kunzru’s concern with Europe and the meaning of European identity. The first novel examined the authoritarian excesses of a European border control agency called PEBA, which the character of Guy Swift has to advertise for. Guy has to promote the idea of a “Fortress Europe” which lets no foreigners in and develops a number of devices and systems to ensure it, but the novel ends in a form of “poetic justice” (Shaw 2021: 161). Indeed, Guy himself is mistaken for an Albanian asylum seeker following the infestation of PEBA’s system by the *Leela* virus. In 2004, *Transmission* focused on state biopower, the myth of free movement in the era of globalisation and the backstage workings of the European Union’s inclusive stance. In 2020, *Red Pill* continued this reflection all the way to the irremediable fissuring of the European project.

Interestingly, both novels propose escape routes involving Scotland, a country which has a particular place in the debates surrounding Europe and Brexit.⁵² In *Transmission*, it is Leela Zahir, the Bollywood star, who has to shoot a film on location in a picturesque fake castle chosen for its sense of quintessential Scottishness (*T* 239). Soon, Leela is joined by Gabriella Caro, Guy Swift’s girlfriend, sent there as a public relations manager. The two women find comfort in each other as they hide away from forms of control— for Leela, her controlling mother, and for Gabriella, her ready-made life as the girlfriend of a wealthy executive. It is from this place that Leela disappears never to be found with Gabriella’s help, the latter looking through the window at “the castle, floating like a mirage over the lake” (*T* 248). In *Red Pill*, Scotland is the last place the protagonist reaches in his pursuit of Anton, the alt-right screenwriter, after having searched the internet for the landscape featured in one of Anton’s films, “most likely somewhere in Europe” (*RP* 219). Alone on an island at the extreme north

⁵² I am referring here to the matter of Scotland’s independence from the United Kingdom as advocated by political leaders and movements and proposed to the vote *via* a referendum in 2014. The question of independence was rekindled by the UK’s exit from the European Union, since Scottish citizens had voted predominantly in favour of remaining in the EU.

of Scotland, the narrator finds himself plunged in a deep paranoia about Anton's nationalist idea of "the North," stays there for days in a hut, writing frantically, and ends up cornered by the police and committed to a psychiatric ward. It is in Scotland that the narrator's quest both culminates and ends, and the last part of the novel focuses on his return to New York. There is of course irony in his temporary isolation in a Scottish "locked ward" (RP 243), the character having yearned for isolation from the onset of the novel.

At the end of *Red Pill*, other escape routes are considered, as alternative havens providing respite from stifling and/or dysfunctional nations. After the protagonist and his wife react with shock and surprise to the election of Donald Trump, he ponders over the meaning of community in the intimacy of their bedroom:

Homme seul est viande à loups, as the medieval French proverb has it. Alone, we are food for the wolves. That's how they want us. Isolated. Prey. So we must find each other. We must remember that we do not exist alone. Rei rolls over in bed to face me. If it gets bad, she asks, where will we go? Together we say the names of cities. Together we talk, holding each other, imagining escape routes. Sometime during the night, Nina crawls into bed and joins us. Outside the wide world is howling and scratching at the window. Tomorrow morning we will have no choice but to let it in. (RP 283-284)

Unable to find shelter in the communities formed by national representation, the characters find comfort in the reconstitution of their family unit, their bed metaphorically representing an isolated island. The signifier "we" moves from being generic to referring to the family, back to a final "we" which might encapsulate the reader, inviting them to "let in" and acknowledge the inevitable reality of this new political order. This ending also hints at the role of language, since it is the characters' "talk[ing]" and "imagining" of other places which provides an escape. In particular, and as remarked in the passage previously examined, it is "the name of cities" which seems to offer alternatives for existence but also attachment and meaning.

Similar re-mappings can be found in Hamid's *Exit West*, another novel inspired by the 2015 refugee crisis. Even though Hamid's narrative of refugees' journey contains less contextual specificities than Kunzru's novel, it is equally representative of the anxieties surrounding Brexit and Europe. Like *Red Pill*, it attempts to untangle the language of these anxieties and their impact on perceptions of place. This occurs mostly when the main characters, Nadia and Saeed, are in London and have to face hostile reactions to their presence in a migrant squat. Focusing at first on the riots spurred by "nativist mobs" in London, the narrative re-places these events within a larger— perhaps European— context of violence and division:

The news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to become somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play. Many were arguing that smaller units made more sense, but others argued that smaller units could not defend themselves. (*EW* 155)

The passage exposes the paradox of a simultaneous emergence, where nativist attachments to land occur at the same time as detachment, with dynamics of “pulling away” and “moving apart.” “Fracturing” does not entail the construction of new clear-cut limits, since the narrator remarks the disappearance of borders, and consequently, of the nation itself. Rather, the detachment of places from others (regions, cities, nations, hinterlands) is evoked as a form of atomization, with a redefinition of space and place on a blank page making “more sense”— as in Kunzru’s evocations of the nation, it is the very meaning of these symbolic places which fiction allows to question. Hamid’s use of generic categories (“everyone,” “people,” “many” or “others”) also hints at the collective definition through language of these places, a definition which can constantly be renewed and displaced geographically.

The text goes on to zoom in on the nation as a particularly threatened entity, all the more so when the nation is Britain:

Reading the news at that time one was tempted to conclude that the nation was like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration, and that this person with multiple personalities was furthermore a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving. Even Britain was not immune from this phenomenon, in fact some said Britain had already split, like a man whose head had been chopped off and yet still stood, and others said Britain was an island, and islands endure, even if the people who come to them change, and so it had been for millenia, and so it would be for millenia more. (*EW* 155-156)

The “people” of the previous paragraph are reinvested in the definition of the nation, its “multiple personalities” stemming from the multiplicity of voices which compose it. In both passages, “the news” is the main channel echoing these voices, which in turn might suggest the prevalent role of media outlet in the period surrounding Brexit and the 2015 refugee crisis. The latter passage tries to portray the nation through allegory, a traditional mechanism, yet this immediately fails, the constructed statue seeing its skin “dissolving.” Like the nation itself, its traditional narratives and modes of representation seem to crumble. Specific cornerstones of the British nation are then questioned. First, reference is made to the nation’s history of racial prejudice and the definition of national identity by exclusion— the evocation of “skins,” being

“immune” and “[swimming] in a soup full of other people” rings like a rewriting of Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech.⁵³ Then it is the monarchy itself, a symbol of the nation, which transpires in the image of a head being “chopped off,” and the semantic field of “endur[ing]” and resisting change can be read as an ironical evocation of the British monarchy’s oft-renewed discourse of persistence. This discourse is in fact undermined by the Brexit vote, where a once-formed allegiance with rulers was rejected. Through irony and by turning metaphors upside down, the novel can challenge these seemingly embedded narratives of permanence and point to the constant reconfiguration of attachments and detachments. In that sense, it echoes Ali Smith’s narrator in the opening of her post-Brexit novel *Autumn*: “That’s the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it’s in their nature” (Smith 2016: 3).

The setting of part of *Exit West* in London is particularly revealing of these symbolic reconfigurations. The narrative presents a dual relation to cities, which can be both an alternative form of attachment – as will be discussed in the next part – and a highly divided and divisive environment. In the context of Brexit and the refugee crisis, Hamid’s violent depictions of London, often represented a multicultural, cosmopolitan refuge, are revealing of the impact these events had and still have on the experience of space and place. Zadie Smith, who portrayed London’s ethnic and cultural diversity in her own novels, published a text in August 2016 titled “Fences: A Brexit Diary.” Starting from an anecdote about noticing an increasing number of fences and railings set up in schools in North West London, including her daughter’s, she goes on to comment on how the climate of Brexit has led to physical as well as more symbolical fences being raised all across a city many used to perceive as open (Smith 2016 *n.p.*).⁵⁴ In *Exit West*, this is visible for instance with “a tightening cordon being put in place, a cordon moving through those of London’s boroughs with fewer doors” (*EW* 129). Either trapped or prevented from entering, the refugees have no choice but to go on the outskirts of the city, and build from scratch a new area called the “London Halo” (*EW* 167). In the narrative, the situation in London is always replaced within the context of debates about the nation: “between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were a minority (...) with local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation” (*EW* 126). Again, the narrator re-

⁵³ Enoch Powell was a Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South West, who in 1968 made a passionate speech to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham, where he deplored and feared the settlement in British cities of immigrants from the Commonwealth, ahead of the passing of the Race Relations Bill (a Labour bill which was to make different forms of discriminations illegal). Powell’s demonstration largely evoked skin colour.

⁵⁴ Zadie Smith republished this essay in her collection *Feel Free* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018). Also quoted in Shaw, Kristian. *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 179.

uses— perhaps ironically— a commonplace nation-based *topos*, with the phrase “fabric of the nation,” to describe the influence of the refugee crisis on the perception of space and place.

The novel also suggests how such changes ran through other European cities in the months that surrounded Brexit, notably through Hamid’s metaleptic device of the “black doors,” allowing the narrative to move instantly from one setting to the next. With that device, the moral issue of welcoming refugees is constantly displaced and re-contextualized. In Vienna, for instance, the narrator displaces the gaze to that of a migrant supporter, a young woman who has gone to oppose an anti-migrant protest in the city center, ready to “join a human cordon to separate the two sides, or rather to shield the migrants from the anti-migrants” (*EW* 104-105). Again, the narrative summons the imagery of fracture at a societal level, but as the woman is being bullied in public transport by men with opposed views, we are told that they are “men who looked like her brother and her cousins and her father and her uncles (...) staring at her and at her badges with undisguised hostility, and the rancour of perceived betrayal” (*EW* 105). Thus, the novel approaches another type of “hole in the fabric”: the intimate, family-level splits caused by differing views on hospitality in Western European countries. In that respect, *Exit West* shows not only how mass migration changes the lives of migrating people themselves, but also how it re-shapes the sense of community and kinship within members of the host country.

In one of the final passages of the London episode, the narrative operates another form of comparison and transposition. The economic arguments behind Brexit are conjured up through a dialogue between Saeed and Nadia:

‘I can understand it,’ she said. ‘Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.’
‘Millions arrived in our country,’ Saeed replied. ‘When there were wars nearby.’
‘That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose.’ (*EW* 162)

Hamid uses a dialectic dialogue to unveil the discourse of the Brexit campaign about migrants as scroungers and a threat to the economy. The novel operates a telling movement, from Saeed and Nadia’s city at war, to a London which turns into a war zone because of their very presence. The exchange between Saeed and Nadia here also points to the fragility of place, highlighted by the sense that some have a lot to lose when others gain a given place. The image of communicating vessels, where one has to relinquish a place because others have arrived in it, points to the difficult matter of sharing place, and making room for others to settle, against the traditional principles of territorial defence or the accumulation of resources.

Incidentally, the three events around which *Red Pill* and *Exit West* revolve – the election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the refugee crisis – are the three pivotal moments around which Bruno Latour articulates his notion of “soil,” at the heart of *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime*. For Latour, “these three phenomena are simply different aspects of one and the same metamorphosis: the very notion of soil is changing. The soil of globalization’s dreams is beginning to slip away” (2018: 4). Hamid’s and Kunzru’s post-Brexit novels show that the relation to “imagined communities” formed long ago, be they the European community or the (British) nation, have been radically altered by these events. Perceptions but also individual attachments formed together with these places are still undergoing reconfigurations, in discourse *and* in experience. The works of fiction offered by these writers in the aftermath of Brexit lie at the intersection of discourse and experience. They attempt to create new meaning in the seismic fractures which impacted the “soil of globalization’s dreams,” and propose to find alternative attachments in the experience of place – the city can play a particular role in this respect.

3.2.2. Alternative attachments in “the era of cities”

In a landmark text called “Cities and Citizenship,” Arjun Appadurai and James Holston defined cities as “the place where the business of modern society gets done, including that of transnationalization” (1996: 189). They contended that cities can prove to be “more salient sites for citizenship” than the nation, noting that in cities, “citizens are producing new (in some cases expansive, in some restrictive) notions of membership and solidarity” (*ibid*). The city is then viewed as a place of possibilities, a “site” which can be inhabited and appropriated more easily than the nation for the transnational subject. They further commented on the specificity of the city in postcolonial societies, where it has allowed “to create urban cultures severed from the colonial memories and nationalist fictions on which independence and subsequent rule were founded” (*ibid*). Looking at literature in particular, Azade Seyhan similarly remarks that the city can become “a point of *affiliation*” as well as a “resistance to national myths and narratives” for the diasporic writer (2014: 230, my emphasis). John Clement Ball, as for him talks about the city as “the privileged microcosm of (...) new transnational and transcultural nations” (2004: 26), thus proposing the city as a smaller version of the nation.

The city undeniably holds pride of place in Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s narratives. But more than being reducible to an identifiable size or scale, the cities described in these novels are characterized by their propensity to connect and intertwine, forming encounters

and being shaped by them in turn. Under the influence of new channels for connectivity or when traditional forms of allegiance are being put to the test, the hierarchy of places, from micro to macro, from the local to the global, can be re-evaluated through the prism of attachments. The novels show how the city can indeed be a privileged site for this re-evaluation.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour describes this rearrangement of previous hierarchies:

it is the entire topography of the social world that is being modified. Macro no longer describes a wider or a larger site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally micro place, which is connected to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces. No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections with many more places than others. (2005: 176)

According to Latour, places can therefore be characterized by means of the “connections” they allow. The urban narratives proposed in transnational novels echo this proposition, and in particular the importance of “safer connections.” As previously noted, the city can appear as a refuge from a national frame that oppresses the postcolonial subject; the role of cities is also increasingly central in the welcoming of refugees, or to form collective connections opposing the power of the nation-state – Kunzru’s and Hamid’s novels address all these evolutions and their limits. In light of Latour’s proposition, Yi-Fu Tuan’s reflection on “places of enormous size,” quoted at the onset of this part, can also be read anew: the question is not so much whether a place is too big physically or figuratively for attachments to unfold, but whether it is tangible, accessible, and durable, creating “safer connections.”

In Mohsin Hamid’s novels, three approaches to the city can illustrate the need for “safer connections.” First, the city is shown as a place capable of adaptation and resilience. As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, this can be illustrated in *Exit West* with mutability in space— with the construction of the “London Halo,” a new neighbourhood stretching the city— and persistence through time— with the last chapter where Saeed and Nadia return to their birth city, finding it “familiar but also unfamiliar,” and the narrator comments on the “persistent” and “cyclical” existence of cities (*EW* 227). In *Exit West*, the city’s resistance and adaptation to change mirrors the adaptability of the refugees themselves as they endure precarious living conditions. This capacity for adaptation is also referred to in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, which begins with the narrator’s movement from rurality to a gigantic, unnamed South Asian city. In one particular passage, the second-person narrative voice describes extensively that city, which has to adapt under the influence of a huge number of arrivals, perhaps as a

consequence of rural exodus— like the protagonist’s own journey— or because foreign immigrants reach that specific city. Mutation, creation and resilience are once more key, but the place is furthermore characterized by its connections:

Your city is enormous, home to more people than half the countries in the world, to whom every few weeks is added the population equivalent to that of a small, sandy-beached, tropical island republic, a population that arrives, however, not by outrigger canoe or lateen-sailed dhow but by foot and bicycle and scooter and bus. A limited-access ring road is under construction around the place, forming a belt past which its urban belly is already beginning to bulge, and from which ramps soar and arc off in every direction. Your bus barrels along in the shadow of these monuments, dusty new arteries feeding this city, which despite its immensity is only one among many such organs quivering in the torso of rising Asia. (*HTG* 82)

Writing the city as a jumble of metaphoric bodily parts enables the narrator to display further its organic connections and interrelations. Yet these connections are only part of a body, that of “rising Asia,” an entity which is left intentionally vague throughout the novel. The city is also compared with “half the countries in the world,” thus disrupting a pre-conceived hierarchy between nation and city in size and population. The city is described negatively, as what it is *not*, through the narrator’s disproportionate comparisons, including the incongruous evocation of a “sandy-beached, tropical island republic.” The emphasis on connections is reinforced by the attention paid to mobility. Indeed, the suggestion of ancient, adventurous forms of travel by sea (the “outrigger canoe” and “lateen-sailed dhow”) is replaced by the more mundane means of road transportation, reinforcing Hamid’s underlying argument that displacement is a widely shared practice. Finally, the image of the “belt,” which also appears in the London of *Exit West* is deceptive (*EW* 135). Even when it seems to bind the city together into an impermeable entity, it can stretch out and “bulge (...) in every direction.”

Hamid’s urban depictions in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* aim at re-placing the South Asian city within the imaginary of his readers, and through the city, evoke the organization of society at large— this begins with demography, the mention of “more people than half the countries in the world” reminding the reader of Pakistan’s rank as the fifth most populated country worldwide. Challenging the imaginary of centre and periphery, the narrator explains from the onset: “Your city is not laid out as a single-celled organism, with a wealthy nucleus surrounded by an ooze of slums. (...) Accordingly, the poor live near the rich” (*HTG* 19-20). From the organ to the body to the metaphor of the cell, these biological depictions aim at highlighting the complexity and adaptability of the city, which cannot be frozen into a pre-conceived diagnosis. In an interview with Claire Chambers, Mohsin Hamid explains how the

interpenetration of different spaces is a staple of social organization in Pakistan, making the very notion of urban space somewhat irrelevant:

I think the rural/urban split is blurring, because all along Pakistan's many major roads, there's an urbanization taking place. If you drive around the GT Road, or any other large road in Punjab, little towns and shops have grown up around it. People live along those roads, have electricity, televisions, satellite dishes, and mobile phone coverage, and they watch the cars passing through. They are traders, selling things in their shops, and paying for services. They are not like the farmers. This network cuts across all of Punjab now, so it isn't as though there's an urban core and then periphery, but a tracery of urbanization that penetrates the periphery. (Chambers 2011: 182-183)

The character's movement from a rural village to a large city in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* thus betrays a displacement on two fronts: the character's social mobility—illustrated by the coming-of-age plot—*as well as* the morphing map of rurality and urbanity. This is where Hamid's second approach to the city transpires. Besides showing the city's resilience and adaptation to change, writing urban organization allows the writer to describe more vividly and tangibly the changes impacting other entities, whether they are regions defined economically, historically, geologically—such as Punjab— or entire countries, or even continents and subcontinents. But rather than turning the city into a synecdoche for the nation or a “microcosm” of sorts, the city is on par with other places in the contemporary reconfigurations of space and place occurring all over the planet.

This in turn leads to a third dimension of Hamid's writing of the city: the use of “zooming-out” effects whereby cities are shown as inherently networked and connected to each other. This is of course operated in the diegetic frame of *Exit West*, where the doors can transport the characters instantly from one city to the next. But the semantic field of connection also appears regularly within the narratives to refer to cities. In these descriptions, it appears that cities can provide what Latour calls “safe connections” to the transnational subject; they are endowed with a sense of place and meaningful attachment precisely because they form connections beyond national borders.

In Hamid's writing, these connections are described as an ongoing phenomenon, and one that will keep rising with the digital age and the surge in mass migration. The narrator thus refers to the “London Halo” being built on the outskirts of the city it as “one of innumerable human halos and satellites and constellations springing up in the country and in the world” (*EW* 167). Whether it is “in the country” or “in the world,” what matters is the proliferation of connections, and being able to name them— with the evocation of “halos,” “satellites” or

“constellations,” the narrator suggests that the nature of these connections still requires careful observation. The nation, however, seems to prevent the formation of new connections – the narrator of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* thus notices: “States tug at us. States bend us. And, tirelessly, states seek to determine our orbits” (*HTG* 140).

Playing with this notion of connections, *Exit West* seeks to remove them superficially so as to see more clearly what is at stake. As Saeed and Nadia look at their phones late at night during their journey towards the West, they watch photographs identifiable as the series *Darkened Cities* by Thierry Cohen, where he artificially removed the light from cityscapes.⁵⁵ Nadia reflects: “They were achingly beautiful, these ghostly cities – New York, Rio, Shanghai, Paris – under their stains of stars, images as though from an epoch before electricity, but with the buildings of today” (*EW* 54). Looking at the city from a different perspective can thus allow to form new connections, not only with distant places, but with the past experience of these places. The “ghostly” feeling triggered by the photographs suggests that there is at once something lost and something familiar about these connections.

Through feats of engineering and the overwhelming presence of technological innovation, cities are also suggestive of connections to come, of emerging forms of modernity that require citizens to renegotiate their sense of place. Hamid’s cities are undoubtedly, to quote Holston and Appadurai again, “the place where the business of modern society gets done” (1996: 189)– but whether this is always deemed positive or not is left for the reader to decide. At the end of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the ageing character reflects:

you are pricked by a lingering optimism, and you marvel at the resilience and potential of those around you, particularly the youth of this city, in this, the era of cities, bound by its airport and fiber-optic cables to every great metropolis, collectively forming, even if tenuously, a change-scented urban archipelago spanning not just rising Asia but the entire planet. (*HTG* 224)

Even if it might seem to suggest a detached, globalized view of space and place, the novel’s hovering between village, city, “rising Asia” all the way to “the entire planet” entertains a strong sense of belonging, not to one specific place, but to a plethora of different places. In a time of heightened connectivity, pretense at detachment from place is but an illusion. Yet the adverb “tenuously,” cautiously inserted in the sentence, is a reminder that these connections remain fragile even if they are visible and generalized. The extensive description of an “urban archipelago” hides the initial observation– it is the city’s “youth” who form the link, and who prove resilient. The connections enabled by cities are first and foremost owed to citizens and

⁵⁵ “What Cities Would Look Like if Lit Only by the Stars,” Pete Brook, *Wired*, 13 November 2014. <https://www.wired.com/2014/11/thierry-cohen-darkened-cities/> (accessed 25-10-2022)

what they make of place. As in much of Hamid's writing, a humanist subtext pervades the writing of place and its evolutions.

In Hari Kunzru's novels, one can also find hints at increased connections between cities, as well as the connections people form within the city. In *Transmission*, movement between huge metropolises is taken to be the prerogative of the corporate class, and feeds into the imaginaries of those who struggle to move. The novel also uses city names as the coordinates of a globalized map of the world, and of the relation to time and speed. At the beginning of the novel, the main character Arjun is waiting to be interviewed for a position at an IT company in New Delhi:

Behind the front desk sat a receptionist. Above her a row of clocks, relic of the optimistic 1960s, displayed the time in key world cities. New Delhi seemed to be only two hours ahead of New York, and one behind Tokyo. Automatically Arjun found himself calculating the shrinkage in the world implied by this error, but, lacking even a best estimate for certain of the variables, his thoughts trailed away. For a moment or two the image hung around ominously in his brain— the globe contracting like a deflating beach ball. (*T* 6)

In this passage, the connections between places are anything but safe, with the very globe possibly “deflating” because of a misrepresented distance and time. Arjun's calculations hinge on a parallel with information technology and his intellectual abilities as an IT genius, yet the mocking tone ridicules his attempts at forging rational estimations. Time-space compression becomes irrelevant since the parallel between cities cannot be made tangible, not even by their materialization into clocks. The “optimistic 1960s,” or the dream of connecting cities throughout the world thanks to globalisation, is thus called into question. Kunzru's narrators tend to cast a critical glance at the discourse about cities and “time-space compression” (Massey 1994: 150), and the enumeration of metropolis toponyms as a byword for modernity is often parodied to reveal the tautological dimension of globalization discourse.

In sharp contrast with these generalizations, experiencing the city from up close is central to Kunzru's writings. As discussed in chapter one regarding the New York described in *Twice Upon a Time* and *White Tears*, and as perceptible in the Paris and Berlin described in *Red Pill*, walking the city streets leads the narrators to observe their surroundings more acutely and find themselves confronted to the oddities of human existence. This can allow incursions into the uncanny, the thriller mode, create claustrophobic effects or epiphanies. In a personal interview, Kunzru explained that he felt “this heritage from *The Painter of Modern Life*, “The

Man of the Crowd...” It’s a way of looking at cities that is very important to me, the city as a phantasmagoria, as a hallucination, and I walk around cities and feel that” (HK ITW 2018).

These figures of the *flâneur* initially channel an individual experience of the city, one that attempts to be detached from society the better to observe it. Yet a sense of community and coexistence sometimes emerges from these observations. For instance, in the nonfiction book *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*, the reader is told about the importance of local radios in New York. On the page, a series of radio extracts is reproduced with various colours and fonts, before the narrative voice returns:

All this in twenty minutes. Many simultaneous cities. NPR City, College Radio City, R’n’B City, above all the Latino City running parallel to the Anglo one. Add to that the internet streams and you have a sort of infinite parallelism – Armenian City, Punjabi City, Ethiopian City, Mandarin City, New Age City, Ambient City, Faery City, Evangelical City, Adult Contemporary City, Singles City, Sports City, Pet City ... (LNY n.p.)

Condensed within the substantive “city” yet designated with multiple adjectives, the virtual and “simultaneous” places formed by these radio stations reveal the variety of attachments which coexist in the city: these can be religious, national, regional, or even communities formed around imaginaries – the “faery” world –, hobbies, or even trends stemming from the past – the “New Age” is a striking example.

One of Kunzru's novels in particular presents the experience of the city as an acutely collective one, proposing a portrayal of urban life as one of connections and attachments. In *My Revolutions*, the protagonist Mike/Chris’s reminiscing about his time in a political group in London in the 1960s and 1970s offers many descriptions of the city as *polis*. The relation with the city, in Greek thought, was akin in some respects to that held with nations in the modern age– the term is often translated as “state” or “city-state” (Casey 2011: xiv). In terms of attachments, the *polis* is often understood as the centre of collective, public life, and therefore the place where one forms relations with others. Playing on etymology, Jacobs and Malpas remark how the city can reveal a twofold form of attachment, as central pole and as collective *polis*: “the city is the pole (*polos* in the Greek) around which human life revolves, but also inasmuch as the city is the place (*polis* and *chora*) in which the real essence of human life as collective (...) is founded” (2019: xiv).

As the privileged site for both resistance and collective creation, the London in *My Revolutions* is where the paradoxes of revolutionary action appear: the characters are found “drifting,” in the manner of the Situationist movement, seemingly detached as they keep

moving from place to place, yet they are constantly looking to expand their political groups, occupy public places visibly and connect with other resistance movements.⁵⁶ Through the first-person narrator, the language of the novel is infused with the ideological discourse of groups such as the Red Army Faction (the Baader-Meinhof Gang) or the Angry Brigade, which Kunzru acknowledges as his main inspirations. In the buildup to the group's radicalization, the narrator recalls sentences which reflected their positions, or even pamphlets they either read or distributed. He notably remembers: "Atomized workers were convenient for capital, free of attachments to each other, to place, even to time" (*MR* 87). Their denunciation of a lack of attachments is directed towards the individualist consumer lifestyle, represented most clearly through the suburban life led by the protagonist's parents, and which the militants oppose with creative forms of connections with each other and with place in the inner city of London, such as squats or demonstrations on Trafalgar Square.

Each of the collective actions and meetings described in the novel give way to a re-writing of London. Resisting the fossilization of the city, the activists "were waiting for something to happen, poking the city's corpse a little to see if it moved," in a London characterized by its "skeletal Victorian gas towers" (*MR* 141). The metaphor of the city as body, also used in Hamid's novels, is called upon here to display the death of the city in the absence of collective movement and public activity. Frozen into a Victorian ideal of industrial toil and order, blinded by the economic comfort of the postwar boom, the city is challenged by the political group, who turn it from the past towards future ideals. The retrospective narration also allows the novel to pinpoint the role of collective action in the evolution of a city, as for instance in Notting Hill where a building block nicknamed "Free Pictures" is used by some activists:

The area around Notting Hill was a crappy part of town in those days, a couple of square miles of rotten ghetto housing cut through by a half-built flyover, but it supported a ramshackle counter-culture made up of hundreds of cliques and groups and communes, little magazines, support groups, co-ops, bands. By finding my way to Free Pictures I'd fallen straight into the middle of a place with its own geography, an anti-city of bed-sitters and bookshops, rehearsal rooms and cramped offices. (*MR* 109)

The failed connections evoked by the "half-built flyover" are soon replaced by "cliques and groups and communes," binding the gaps and holes of the city into a coherent collective. The place is defined by negatives— it is an "anti-city" promoting "counter-culture"— but harmony seems to result from this new geography, as suggested by the sound couplets of "bed-sitters

⁵⁶ The importance of "drifting" as a cultural reference and as a narrative strategy will be discussed in chapter seven.

and bookshops,” as well as “rehearsal rooms.” These occupations revive the city pacifically, but the novel climaxes with the narrator’s attempt, with co-activist Anna, to bomb the Post Office Tower, “the tallest building in Britain” (*MR* 194). The event is inspired by the bombing of that same building, also called British Telecommunications Tower, in October 1971, an attack for which the Angry Brigade claimed responsibility after speculation about the IRA. In the novel, this scene operates a shift. Whereas they previously shaped places in the city through occupation and community action, the group start getting involved in a series of bombings, destroying places more than (re-)creating them.

In parallel, the protagonist’s feeling of being part of a collective fades away as the aims of this collective become less and less clear and tangible. After a protest against the Vietnam War, he reflects: “I looked around at Anna and Sean and the others and I felt I was part of something, that perhaps together we could make a difference” (*MR* 132). At first, this feeling testifies to an awareness of his meaningful role in larger connections. The expression is re-used later to express the character’s loss of bearings in a movement that has started exceeding him: “we were now part of something much larger than ourselves, an international network with nodes in Frankfurt, Milan, Beirut, Bilbao. They talked about targets in London, people and places that had no connection with anything I cared about” (*MR* 230). The collective of which he is part remains designated throughout as an unidentified “something,” whose contours are hard to grasp. The narrative shows how the expansion of the political movement from London to a larger network makes the characters lose grasp of their initial aims, hinting at the need for political action to be anchored in a place if it is to remain clear and visible. The character indeed loses himself here onwards, travelling to East Asia to escape the consequences of his actions and then hiding in the English countryside, from where he starts moving again— to France, or by driving in circles on the motorway— every time the past chronotope of this political London comes back to haunt him.

Returning to Appadurai and Holston’s contention that cities are “the place where the business of modern society gets done,” one can read the London of *My Revolutions* as one such place. In that novel, memory and history depend on the city, on what happened there at a pivotal movement and on the attachments once formed there. The connections formed in the political struggle are hard to grasp and rationalize, yet can never quite be shed, as the plot shows by having the protagonist Mike/Chris blackmailed by a former political ally.

My Revolutions is perhaps the least material-oriented of Kunzru’s novels, focused as it is on the construction of ideology. Yet, most of Kunzru’s works as well as Hamid’s allow for a reading of attachment and place along the lines of material culture, and of the consumer society

that is precisely denounced in *My Revolutions*. This in turn requires examining the long-standing ideals of detachment towards places and objects, and how it is addressed in the novels.

3.3. Paradoxes of detachment

Different values are attached to being physically distanced from the place of one's origins. Its associations with freedom of movement and risk-taking can be counterbalanced by the loss and pain of exile. But distance and proximity are not the only parameters to consider in attitudes of attachment and detachment towards place. The advent of modern transport has notably entailed a different relation to the practice of place, as noted by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who notices

[the] detachment of persons from the ground that runs (...) like a leitmotif through the recent history of western societies. It appears that people, in their daily lives, merely skim the surface of a world that has been previously mapped out and constructed for them to occupy, rather than contributing through their movements to its ongoing formation. (2011: 44)

Insisting more specifically on the declining value of walking from the eighteenth century onwards, Ingold further remarks that the “groundlessness of modern society” has “spilled over into mainstream thinking in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology and biology” (*ibid*). Imaginaries of place are undoubtedly affected by this championing of “groundlessness.” As Ingold argues, it is the very formation of places that is at stake. Conceiving of them as ready-made entities is bound to inspire a more detached stance than when perceiving oneself as a part of place, acting towards place-making.

Many historical and cultural elements can account for the value endowed to detachment in modern western thought. In this part I wish to explore particularly the role of economic and cultural globalisation since the second part of the twentieth century, the material changes of early-twentieth century modernity and the changing value of detachment in light of contemporary phenomena of mass migration. These are all represented in the narratives of place proposed by Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru. First, I will propose to observe a common trait of the writers' narratives: a metonymic writing of place where objects and services come to embody places and allow for place to be a part of consumer habits anywhere, anytime. With these passages, the novels cast a satirical gaze over the mechanisms of globalized consumption and question the authenticity of one's relations with place when only experienced through these seemingly floating, detached objects. I will then look at the notion of cosmopolitanism and its influence on Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru's writings of place. The historical representation

of the cosmopolitan as a detached, independent spirit representing modernity is revisited, with ironical depictions in Kunzru's novels and with new forms of citizenship in Hamid's.

3.3.1. Textures of the global: place, consumption and metonymy

Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru are undoubtedly concerned with contemporary modes of consumption, expressed in their writing of digital technology (in *Transmission* or *Exit West*), of finance (in *Gods Without Men* or *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), but also culture (in *White Tears* with music or *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, with cinema). Through the recurring mention of these subjects, the novels bring about a strong sense of contemporary lifestyles, in the plural. Indeed, they display the circulation of goods, information, culture and capital with a differentiated outlook, including the unequal access and claim to all of these depending on one's place, on the planet as a whole or in a given society. Commenting on *Moth Smoke*, Paul Jay notes that "Hamid's sustained focus on the effects of economic globalization distinguishes his novel from many South Asian English language novels popular with readers and academics in the West," the latter preferring to describe "an increasingly hybridized postcolonial world" (2014:106). Besides, the attention to detail in the writing of these themes generates a sense of familiarity in the reader. Observing the recurring use of smartphones and the internet in *Exit West*, Rita Felski argues that it allows the reader to feel "the textures of [the characters'] everyday lives" (2020:107), in a manner that is both transnationally recognizable and highly intimate.

While Hamid's and Kunzru's writings display modes of consumption *in* place and according to places, they also suggest the increasing tendency to consume *place itself*. The novels depict a commodification of place fostered by the imaginaries of cultural globalisation and worldwide travel, which both writers convey with a metonymic writing where objects, habits and cultural artefacts come to stand for place. Admitting that the notion of "commodity" is hard to define in itself because anything can become a commodity, Arjun Appadurai prefers the notion of "commodity situation," in which a thing's "*exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature*" (1988: 13, emphasis in the original). Metonymic writing comes to echo the central role of "exchangeability" in social life and in the contemporary relation with place. Detached from their original context, what meaning is given to the place-specific objects and habits that circulate throughout the world? In the novels, the omnipresence of commodification is at times mocked for its intimations of superficiality, but it also seems to allow for creative encounters. Talking about the commodities appearing in

Kunzru's *Transmission*, Robinson describes them as "free-floating cultural signifiers" (2008: 85). But are they really floating free of all attachments? More than just the objects allowing it, it is also the "commodity situation" that is looked at in writing— the contexts and ties contributing to these exchanges.

An example present in both writers' novels is that of food and restaurants, with the emergence of so-called "world foods" or "fusion restaurants" in large-scale metropolises. Towards the end of Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the protagonist meets by chance the woman he fell in love with as a youth, and they decide to sit together at a café.

Near the pharmacy is a coffee shop, evidently part of a chain, and possessed of a franchise's artificial quiriness, its seemingly mismatched sofas and chairs and tables corresponding to a precise and determined scheme set forth in the experience section of a corporate brand guidelines binder. Its furniture and fittings evoke decades gone by. Its music, its menu, and, saliently, its prices are utterly contemporary. For affluent younger customers, the effect might be pleasant, transporting them from this street in this neighborhood to a virtual realm inhabited by people very much like themselves across rising Asia, or even across the planet. (*HTG* 209).

The passage questions the reproducibility and transposability of made-up places. The place has connections with others in the world (as part of a "chain"), yet these form a "virtual realm" in the imaginary. It constructs a heterogeneous vision through objects and design, yet this vision is very much contained, as the "binder" suggests together with the repeated sounds ("furniture and fittings," the associated "music" and "menu"). Here, the narrator steps away from the mischievous second-person format addressing the protagonist, but retains a touch of cynicism in the evocation of prices being "utterly contemporary" and an effect which "might be pleasant," but certainly is not for everyone. The construction of place through ambience is here de-constructed, together with marketing strategies which are themselves transposable. Indeed, the passage never reveals what particular mood and place are reproduced here, as if to better emphasize the banality and meaninglessness of the experience. As often, Hari Kunzru chooses an opposite strategy of hyper-referentiality, yet with the same goal, which is to pinpoint and parody the careless consumption habits of a certain class of consumers. This is most visible in *Transmission*, where we follow Guy Swift, the marketing executive, in a number of notable metropolises. In a restaurant in London's Mayfair area, he and his girlfriend have a dinner of "Japanese-Lebanese fusion food," offering "trendsetting collisions of taste and presentation" (*T* 71). International connections between places here again come off as mismatched, a clumsy "collision" producing an absurd, almost kitsch cultural object that is hard to identify. Later, Guy is in Dubai and unearths a seemingly endless mine of such "collisions":

With a choice of seventeen restaurants (Lebanese, Argentinian, the Viennese Café, the Dhow and Anchor British Pub...) he somehow ended up eating at the Main Street USA Bar and Grill, where it was New Orleans week. The space was hung with bunting, and in the centre of the room was a two-thirds scale model of a Mississippi riverboat. He sat down at a little table and *Carey-Ann*, who was maybe Chinese and was dressed as a pink Norman Rockwell soda jerk, gave him a menu. He chose the gumbo and looked around. A group of elderly men in Hawaiian shirts were crammed with their instruments on to a corner stage, playing light jazz funk. Above them a sign read *Retail this Way*, which for a brief moment he mistook for the name of the band. (*T* 179)

The metonymic dimension of places is here conveyed by a diminution in size, with a “two-thirds scale model” of a traditional feature from Mississippi, but also with the evocation of time. Indeed, “New Orleans week” can only ever represent the place partially, since it is encapsulated in a limited time span. Artificiality reaches its peak when Guy mistakes people for figures from a Rockwell painting. On the whole, the accumulation of visual cues almost becomes oppressive, from the heavy-sounding “hung bunting” to the colourful Hawaiian shirts. In this profusion of clues, the placard, which is supposed to be the most obvious and orienting of signifiers, becomes itself confused and misleading.

Kunzru’s narratives display a playful pleasure in forming these highly ironic cumulative passages, which can also be found in *Gods Without Men*, when Nicky Capaldi, a British rock star who has gone to the Californian Desert in search of peace and inspiration, finds himself in a second-hand shop in the middle of nowhere. Strikingly, the desert appears as a repository for the – literally and figuratively – *consumed* objects of contemporary culture. Nicky observes a series of objects in various states of disrepair – “Barbie Dolls, VHS tapes, dusty framed posters of cars and airbrushed coke cans” – before he casts his eye on one in particular: “A rack of clothes, mostly desert fatigues, had a marine’s dress uniform at one end. Nicky slipped on the jacket. Nice. Team it with some glitter and it’d look fierce on Brick Lane” (*GWM* 200-201). Through the careless gaze of the rock singer, the narrative transports the reader instantly from the emptiness of the Californian desert to the teeming, colourful London area, all thanks to a seemingly meaningless object. The passage can also be read as a reflection on fashion and the differences in the value of objects in both space and time.

From transposability to collision and expiration, the reproduction of places in the material realm is thus ambivalent. Commodified objects can also operate as a prism through which places are imagined, allowing one to expand their mental map of the world. In *Exit West*, a Japanese man who has just watched two immigrant girls emerge from a “black door” thus develops a longing for Ireland, via a bottle of whisky:

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, not dissimilar in shape, and likewise slung on the ocean-ward side of a larger island at one end of the vast Eurasian landmass, or perhaps because of an Irish gangster film he had gone to see repeatedly in his still impressionable youth. (*EW* 26)

Here, the character's analysis of his attachment for Ireland is deceptive. At first, it develops as a geographical reflection on the objective similarities of places across the world, but ends with the more mundane evocation of a "gangster film," inducing that the power of culture and influence is just as important as the intuitive attachments developed about a place. The mirrored image of two islands on each side of Eurasia does not hold, but the images conveyed through mass culture do, forming an attachment akin to what Appadurai called "mass-mediated sodalities" (1996: 8).

In that sense, Hamid's and Kunzru's novels also reflect on the creation and circulation of place imaginaries at a time of increased connectivity. These can eventually include literary fiction itself, raising the question of the writers' own contribution in the consumption of places. As Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman reflect, it matters "to think not just about how globalization is reflected thematically in fiction, for example, but also about literature's role in the narrative construction of the numerous discourses or 'fictions' of globalization" (O'Brien and Szeman, 2001: 604). The commodification of places is one such discourse, and it matters to observe what role novels have to play in the process. Mohsin Hamid's narrator actually provides a metafictional questioning of this issue at the onset of the second chapter in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*:

It's remarkable how many books fall into the category of self-help. Why, for example, do you persist in reading that much-praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel, slogging through page after page after please-make-it-stop page of tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit, if not out of an impulse to understand distant lands that because of globalization are increasingly affecting life in your own? What is this impulse of yours, at its core, if not a desire for self-help? (*HTG* 19)

In the narrator's sarcastic tone, the formation of the "foreign novel" as a commodity occurs through the use of compound adjectives, which reduce the book to a self-contained, recognizable object similar to many others. The experience of reading is described as a mechanical, condescending movement towards "distant lands," which, though described in the language of affects, are also reduced to one single category. Self-help as a concept is mocked throughout the novel, the protagonist's need for help in "Rising Asia" often being far more urgent and vital than the needs felt by self-help books' usual readers, who lead comfortable

lives in economically favourable countries. Strikingly, the passage hints here again at the inescapability of ties and attachments. Whether or not one cares to admit it, the phenomena inherent to globalisation “affect” lives beyond national borders and cause unexpected attachments involving places and people. Hamid’s metafictional diversions open up space for a reflection on evolving trends in literary fiction and particularly the marketing of novels in English written by Pakistani authors. As Paul Jay points out,

One of the central points of globalization studies in the humanities is that cultural forms (literary narrative, cinema, television, live performance, etc.) are commodities, a position that counters older notions of the literary as purely aesthetic and somehow beyond the world of commodities, economies, and even history. (2014: 55-56)

It seems dubious that novels were previously read without the input of history or economics, but observing novels as a commodity among others in the circuits of globalisation might indeed seem uncomfortable if not debasing for the academic. Yet singling out the many side effects of a globalised economy, including commodification but also patterns of exclusion and inclusion, or communication networks, could allow to understand more acutely the changing relation to place as represented *in* novels, as well as the place given *to* certain novels on the literary scene. In the case of novelists such as Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, these two dimensions echo each other, because their intradiegetic explorations of these phenomena partly explain the successful circulation of their novels in the world and the sense of contemporary recognition they have fostered. As noted previously in this chapter, criticism of their works featuring the word “global” has flourished. This thesis would like however to remain cautious with this word. Christian Moraru notes that using the term excessively might lead to “further *globalizing* the world (...) rather than remaking it anew and allowing for its change” (2015: 25, emphasis in the original). On the opposite, reading the effects of globalisation at the scale of place could preserve some space for change and reinvention in critical reading, including when examining long-standing cultural categories such as cosmopolitanism.

3.3.2. “That overused word”: detachment and cosmopolitanism

When discussing his personal politics in interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020, Hari Kunzru recurringly resorted to the word “cosmopolitan” and its derivations. He described the literary landscape of New York as representative of a “cultural cosmopolitanism” (*HK ITW* 2019); he talked about it as something he wanted to defend, against contemporary nationalist semantics reminiscent of the “rootless cosmopolitan,” an infamous early-twentieth-century

antisemitic insult (*HK ITW* 2018); yet he also recognized that there is “a kind of inauthentic, cosmopolitan positioning” that can be hazardous (*HK ITW* 2019). These exchanges testify to both an intricate negotiation with the term, and how necessary it has become when talking about citizenship, belonging and attachment today.

For cosmopolitanism is indeed first and foremost a matter of attachment. In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Appadurai summarizes it as follows:

Most definitions of cosmopolitanism, either directly or indirectly, assume that it is a certain cultivated knowledge of the world beyond one’s immediate horizons and is the product of deliberate activities associated with literacy, the freedom to travel, and the luxury of expanding the boundaries of one’s own self by expanding its experiences. For this reason, cosmopolitanism is usually contrasted with various forms of rootedness and provincialism—the latter being associated with *attachment* to one’s own friends, one’s own group, one’s own language, one’s own country, and even one’s own class, and a certain lack of interest in crossing these boundaries. (2013: 197, my emphasis)

As discussed in the arguments developed all along this chapter, the question of “rootedness” to place and the values associated with it have become less and less self-evident, which would explain why a concept relying on such binaries can seem so unstable today. Yet the adjective “cosmopolitan” and the associated substantive have kept reappearing in various guises in critical debates since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with critics frequently attempting to reinvest it. Postcolonial theory, globalisation studies and literary studies at large, to name but a few, have wrestled with the concept in the aim of renewing it. From sociologist Ulrich Beck’s efforts to bring back cosmopolitanism in contemporary debate (2006), Appadurai’s own “cosmopolitanism from below” (2013), or Anthony Kwame Appiah’s promise of cosmopolitanism as “ethics in a world of strangers,” (2006) many have attempted to reinstate what is, etymologically, a “world citizenship.” Despite and through these arguments, many definitions of cosmopolitanism still provide a limited scope on questions of class and gender, and, most strikingly, on place—Christian Moraru notes that cosmopolitanism is often accused of “utopianism” or even “a-topianism” (2015: 42).

Cosmopolitanism is indeed often perceived by critics as an ideal, to the point that it can turn into a normative invocation. Novels like Hamid’s and Kunzru’s engage thematically with figures of the cosmopolitan, yet attempt to contextualize the concept culturally and to adapt it to the realities of contemporary experience. By doing so, they can allow the reader to untangle both the limits and the possibilities of cosmopolitanism, in particular when looking at place together with the ideas of attachment and detachment. In the following examples drawn from

their novels, I wish to pay attention to both the past and the possible futures of the concept of cosmopolitanism. First, Hari Kunzru's narratives play with archetypal images of the cosmopolitan, whether it is the early twentieth-century cosmopolitan in *The Impressionist*, or contemporary elite circles in the New York of *White Tears*. As often, the writer uses social satire to draw attention to discourse about authenticity and belonging. Mohsin Hamid's novels extend this critical conversation, for instance in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* where the cosmopolitan ideal is shaken by 9/11 in New York. A novel like *Exit West*, however, hypothesizes alternative forms of world citizenship in the era of mass migration.

Critics have read Hari Kunzru's novels along the lines of cosmopolitanism, albeit with differing angles. For instance, in "A Cosmopolitan Conceptualisation of Place and New Topographies of Identity in Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*," Carmen Zamorano Llena uses Ulrich Beck's theories of cosmopolitanism to argue that the novel "contests the national outlook and suggests the need for a redefinition of individual and collective identities from a cosmopolitan perspective" (2016: 3).

A certain type of cosmopolitanism is also addressed in Hari Kunzru's first novel *The Impressionist*, but mostly to deconstruct archetypal enactments of this ideal. The concept is not to be taken at face value as representative of the novel's aesthetics, but can instead be found in discrete encounters and descriptions— if anything, *The Impressionist* tends to depict world citizenship as utterly problematic. Through the comedic characters that pepper the novel, the novel addresses upfront the traits quoted above by Arjun Appadurai (2013: 197): a culture of the world reaching far beyond one's original living place, a knowledge of art, fashion and literature, all drawn from travelling experience and good company. In *The Impressionist*, which takes place in the late 1910s, the direct implication of cosmopolitan yearning is the desire for modernity. Frequent mentions of railway travel, changes in music or dress, and the value of international connections come to portray the cultural excitement of the period.

The main character, Pran Nath Razdan, is a somewhat reluctant cosmopolitan. After a maid revealed to his Indian father that Pran was in fact the result of an encounter between his mother and an English land surveyor, he is cast away and has no choice but to travel and develop a culture other than that of his origins if he is to blend in and survive. One of the characters, however, shows a more directly visible desire for cosmopolitanism: Prince Firoz, the brother of the Nawab of Fatehpur, who tries to plot his way into ousting his brother. Contrary to the Nawab, Firoz is intent on looking modern, notably in an effort to coax the British, who also have legal power over Fatehpur. In that seduction process, looking cosmopolitan is of prime

importance— the narrator thus tells us: “The British prefer Firoz because he wears a tie and has promised to let them build factories” (*TI* 106). Being a cosmopolitan, in the case of imperial negotiations, is indeed articulated around the relation to place:

For all the Nawab’s cars, songs and uniforms, he remains a Mughlai prince, the type of traditional monarch who takes little interest in irrigation, land survey or the rational distribution of agricultural resources. It is obvious to the British report-writers that the Nawab is happier eating from the metal thali set on the floor than the fine Meissen table-setting which is brought out when they dine at the palace. (...) Firoz, on the other hand, has a mania for novelty. Though it alarms British sensibilities attuned more to past than future, it is (they feel) in keeping with the progressive spirit of the times. Nothing embodies the Prince’s modernity more completely than the private cinema he has installed in the smaller of his two ballrooms. (*TI* 114)

Three relations to place emerge from the comparison: the Mughal rootedness in tradition, the British’s technocratic approach to place, and the escapist fantasies of Firoz, who uses the space granted to him in the palace to watch movies about other places and cultures. The Nawab’s relation to his land, on the opposite, is deeply grounded, as the evocation of dining on the floor suggests. The narrator here voices the tone of official imperial ideology, conveyed with the parentheses and the complacent embracing of “the progressive spirit of the times.” Through their fascination for the private cinema, the passage mocks the British’s naïve, materialistic approach to culture. Firoz also champions internationalism as a means of being a cosmopolitan, as the narrator tells us later on that he welcomes “Brazilian gamblers and American actresses” (*TI* 114). For Firoz, knowing about other places is key. Soon after, the focaliser switches to his perspective: “Firoz peers through the darkness and reassures himself that he is no cringing native, ignorant of the ways of the world” (*TI* 115). As often in the novel, metaphors of light and dark are used to expose the complexity of imperial discourse and colonial ideology.

Through the character of Firoz, Kunzru draws attention to the situatedness of the cosmopolitan. Turning Orientalism on its head, he has an Indian character fascinated by the West to the point of fetishism. Being a cosmopolitan, for Firoz, is to prove one is Westernized, and as such, more civilized than his Muslim Indian brother. The narrator simultaneously plays with the trope of the British official’s wife in the throes of her sexual desire for the Oriental Other, with the affair between Minty Braddock and the Nawab (*TI* 162; 174). With the grotesque, satirical streak that runs throughout the part set at Fatehpur Palace, the novel stages a comedy of cultural exchange and appropriation, where the pretense of cosmopolitanism is used to signal the instability of the imperial model.

In *White Tears*, cosmopolitanism is primarily a matter of social class. Set in contemporary New York, the novel follows Seth, a first-person narrator, in his growing friendship with Carter Wallace, the son of a construction magnate. As with Arjun in *Transmission*, Seth's journey is one of failed social mobility, where the character remains on the outside looking in. After meeting Carter at university, he is thrust into a world of wealth in which he has no place—Carter's brother Cornelius reminds him scathingly of his "importance in the scheme of things" (*WT* 95). In one particular scene, Seth finds himself at a party with Carter's sister Leonie and her artist friends: "All Leonie's friends seemed to be from somewhere else, some other city in some other country. It was the first thing they talked about, their geographical otherness." (*WT* 42) The formation of "geographical otherness" as a concept betrays the superficiality of their outlook and is of course sharply cynical, since theirs is an acceptable form of otherness, in contrast with the social exclusion experienced by Seth or the racial discrimination described elsewhere in the novel. The bourgeois superficiality of the artist's cosmopolitanism is further debunked in an exchange between Leonie and one of the other artists:

- You show your mother your work?
- No, of course not. What would she say? She likes the Impressionists. She carries around a little bag she bought at Giverny. (...)
- You probably went there, right? To see the waterlilies.
- Yeah, so? I went to Giverny with my mom.
- She probably took you to Florence too, and the Parthenon and Basel and Venice for the Biennale.
- You want to see my passport?
- No, I don't have to. I'm saying that, you know, everyone has a role. A position. Maybe you should bow into the inevitable and get into collecting. (*WT* 43)

The artist's inquiry into Leonie's travelling habits creates a sense of discomfort and unsettles certainties about the characters' relations with place. The upper-class habit of bringing souvenirs from an art museum is humorously mirrored by the mention of the Impressionists – both suggest a re-creation of places by touches. Trying to appear detached, the character is pinned down for being part of a certain network in the circulation of art. Here again, the debate revolves around authenticity and the access to a "true" experience – the Impressionists are implicitly opposed to a less mainstream form of art, collecting is opposed to making, visiting is opposed to knowing.⁵⁷ As in the discussion about music on which the main plotline is based, the interaction of place and culture is made central by Kunzru. The archetypal characteristic of

⁵⁷ See chapter 1 concerning the role of authenticity in Kunzru's work.

the cosmopolitan which Appadurai designates as a “cultivated knowledge of the world beyond one’s immediate horizons” is put to the test by forms of aesthetic experience which are more difficult to “cultivate”— culture being, in that case, a mere reproduction of the known by those occupying a privileged position.

In Mohsin Hamid’s novels, cosmopolitanism is articulated with the questions of migration and citizenship. The migrant subject’s separation from their home country triggers a re-evaluation of citizenship and a re-assessment of the cosmopolitan model, for better or for worse. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the Pakistani protagonist Changez witnesses an evolution in his own relation to his adopted city, New York. Indeed, he first feels surprisingly comfortable in a place that is foreign to him, before 9/11 happens and the city becomes completely hostile for a man of his complexion. At first, the image of a “cosmopolitan” city is called upon to depict New York as a welcoming place. As he remembers wearing a kurta with his jeans, Changez reflects:

It was a testament to the open-mindedness and – that overused word – *cosmopolitan* nature of New York in those days that I felt completely comfortable in the subway in this attire. Indeed, no one seemed to take much notice of me at all, save for a gay gentleman who politely offered me an invitational smile. I emerged from the 6 train onto Seventy-Seventh Street, in the heart of the Upper East Side. The area – with its charming bistros, exclusive shops, and attractive women in short skirts walking tiny dogs – felt surprisingly familiar, although I had never been there before; I realized later that I owed my sense of familiarity to the many films that had used it as a setting. (*TRF* 55-56, emphasis in the original)

The anaphoric effect of the phrase “*completely comfortable*” underlines the image of a perfect union, a honeymoon of sorts uniting the character and the city, further perfected by “Seventy-Seventh Street.” At the same time, the duplicity of the place is hinted at by the retrospective narration, with the oxymoron “surprisingly familiar” and the “exclusive shops” which foretell the social exclusion Changez will undergo. New York provides only an ephemeral welcome, one that is just as temporary and superficial as the film sets which make it familiar to Changez. With this passage, the “overused” aspect of the word cosmopolitan also betrays this sense of the temporary. Looking at this situation in retrospect, Changez reflects that the word “cosmopolitan” had probably been ill-assigned, as it often is, given his subsequent experience of New York as an exclusionary place pervaded by xenophobic discourse. The passage also points to the difficult reinvestment of cosmopolitanism by a non-white citizen, the figure of the detached cosmopolitan pleasantly walking the streets remaining a culturally predetermined trope. As Adnan Mahmutovic remarks, the hypothesis of a “world citizenship” in *The Reluctant*

Fundamentalist has many ramifications; it is also manifested, for instance, in a critical gaze on the sense of belonging and allegiance across national borders fostered by corporations and finance (2016:7). These ties do not resist the pull of the event either, and Changez feels forced to resign from his company after his beard causes discomfort among his colleagues.

While in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the terrorist event reconfigures the character's hopes of being a "world citizen," *Exit West* focuses on the reconfigurations entailed by mass migration and the formation of refugee communities. Constructed as a utopian fable, the novel suggests that the stateless migrants end up re-creating forms of belonging and attachment that do not rely on one's birthplace or roots. Far from the privileged position of the free-roaming, urban, Western cosmopolitan, the characters of *Exit West* have no choice but to reinvent their attachments. This is what Simon Gikandi underlines when he explains that refugees are excluded from the discourse of cosmopolitanism, arguing that "[t]he refugee is the Other of the cosmopolitan; rootless by compulsion, this figure is forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows" (2010: 26). Throughout *Exit West*, several hypotheses for new citizenships are discussed, for instance by Saeed and his friends at the London squat, who propose "a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation" (*EW* 152). This particular transnational citizenship evocative of the Muslim *ummah* however remains unsatisfactory for Nadia, who progressively distances herself from religion.

In this quest for new citizenships, *Exit West* echoes Appadurai when he proposes to reconsider cosmopolitanism "from below," through "the politics of hope and the promise of democracy as a space of dignity as well as of equality." To Appadurai, such a practice of cosmopolitanism is "driven by the exigencies of exclusion rather than by the privileges (and ennui) of inclusion" (2013: 198). The last part of *Exit West*, set in California, provides a glimpse into such a form of cosmopolitanism through community organization and grassroots movements. For instance, the daughter of a local preacher, whom Saeed starts falling in love with, puts forth the idea of a voting right outside the national frame:

The preacher's daughter was among the local campaign leaders of the plebiscite movement, which sought a ballot on the question of the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where they came from. How this assembly would coexist with other pre-existing bodies of government was as yet undecided. (*EW* 219)

Returning to a Latin root with the phrase “plebiscite movement,” the passage proposes a political reinvention along the lines of a philosophical legacy, that of ancient utopias. This new entity rescales the relation between place and citizenship. The vote is “regional,” calling upon a small-scale practice of citizenship but also one that is less strictly defined, as implied by the word “region” and its connotations of vagueness.⁵⁸ The last sentence points to fundamental notions establishing citizenship and community, that is “co-existence” (in a shared place) and “pre-existence” (in time). Set next to each other, these terms insist on the centrality of attachments in the experience of politics. The novel offers no epilogue to this project, perhaps because it seeks to stage the making of citizenship as a constant work in progress.

By carefully examining the situated experiences of the contemporary migrant subject, Hamid’s novel draws the reader’s attention towards already existing attachments which escape traditional frames, and which require urgent examination. The novel resorts to the fable and to utopian imaginings to question what to make of these rearrangements and re-mappings of everyday existence, for which cosmopolitanism might prove a relevant frame. As Kristian Shaw points out in *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, “fiction is a unique medium through which to imagine cosmopolitan reconfigurations not yet conceivable or accessible in the contemporary moment” (2017: 4). Hamid repeated this process with his latest novel *The Last White Man*, in which he imagines a city where white people see their skin darken one after the other and have to renegotiate their identities.

Looking at cosmopolitanism from the perspective of attachments rather than the detached stance of the archetypal modern cosmopolitan can also contribute to a renewed understanding of the term, and of its interactions with place. In his reading of the concept together with Actor-Network-Theory, Hiro Saito proposes no less than to “turn the entire intellectual history of cosmopolitanism upside down,” arguing that “[i]t is not detachments but attachments – their multiplication, intensification, and concatenation – that make cosmopolitanism possible” (2011: 144).

This chapter has striven to observe the literary representations of such processes. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels unveil the “multiplication, intensification and concatenation” of attachments, and how they penetrate and inform the experience of place. Their narratives demonstrate a particular attention to the reconfigurations of attachments fostered by the

⁵⁸ Edward Casey, for instance, notes that Plato’s “chora” is translated by Cornford as “region.” Plato’s chora in itself has been subjected to many interpretations, but Casey notably notes “the openness and vagueness” which characterize this understanding as “region” (Casey 2011: 34-35).

postcolonial re-mappings of national imaginaries and the cultural and economic tenets of globalisation. These reconfigurations take into account not only the past, the present but also the future of collective and individual relations with place, as proposed by the utopian dimension of a fiction like *Exit West*. Through their ethical take on place, both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru maintain a writing that is descriptive more than prescriptive. Looking past the dichotomy of deeply-anchored roots *versus* detachment from place, their novels choose to observe the nature of attachments, and suggest how this can lead to a cultural, social and historical awareness of one's place. Insofar as they direct the reader towards the value and creative possibilities of attachments with place, these novels echo the conscious forms of citizenship and belonging proposed by Bruno Latour in *Down to Earth*: "understanding whether you are managing to register, to maintain, to cherish a maximum number of alternative ways of belonging to the world" (2018: 15-16).

Chapter 4 Common places and modes of sharing

“This is a compulsion, right?
Compulsive boundary-transgression syndrome.”
(T 151)

In Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*, the narrator Mike Frame leaves home panicked after he has been caught up by a troubled past life led under the name of Chris Carver. On a ferry crossing the Channel to France, he slips into an interior monologue intended to his stepdaughter Sam, about her lack of interest in politics:

You’re lucky that politics feels optional, something it’s safe to ignore. Most people in the world have it forced on them. To be fair, I suppose you’re just a child of your time. Thatcher’s gone, the Berlin wall’s down, and unless you’re in Bosnia, the most pressing issue of the nineties appears to be interior design. It’s supposed to be the triumph of capitalism – the end of history and the glorious beginning of the age of shopping. But politics is still here, Sam, even in 1998. It may be in abeyance, at least in your world. But it’s lurking round the edges. It’ll be back. (MR 47)

The loss of contact with politics thus enunciated by Mike/Chris finds its source in a re-mapping of social space in early 1990s Europe, including an increased interest in personal comfort, but also the end of Cold War binaries. In *Being Singular Plural*, first published in 1996, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy referred to the conflict in Bosnia, as well as to the many ongoing wars worldwide, pointing to “the sheer number and proliferation of these various poles of attraction and repulsion” (2000: xiii). For Nancy, one could clearly observe as Kunzru’s narrator does that “politics is still *here*”, thrust upon some who have no choice but to confront their place in the world, while cast aside by others. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy defined politics as “a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing” (qtd. in Massey 2012: 154). Geographer Doreen Massey draws from this definition and from Nancy’s concept of an ontological plurality, a “being together,” to argue that “[p]lace’ here could stand for the general *condition* of our being together” because it is “an arena where negotiation is forced upon us” (2012: 154, my emphasis).

Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s novels present place as a condition for an inevitably common existence. In their works, this forced negotiation appears as forms of friction, where the proximity or distance felt with others and the resulting adaptations are inextricably linked

to the experience of place. When questioning the forms of contact thus represented, one is led to observe where they occur, issues of limits, border-crossing and the overlapping of different places being central in this respect. As previously analysed, the writing of migration is prevalent in both Hamid's and Kunzru's novels, and is a prime example of a negotiation *in* and *with* place, where reactions of hospitality or hostility might reconfigure the sharing of place(s). The narratives also suggest how migrants themselves react to the forms of community they find – or not – in a new place.

Sharing places involves the collective imaginary. The choice of places to share with a readership, and how to share them, is central for writers like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, as both face the expectations sometimes imposed on transnational anglophone writers when depicting places and modes of existence to an international audience. The previous chapters have evoked how Hamid and Kunzru voice their concerns about such expectations (Kunzru 2010: 134; *HK ITW* 2018; Khan 2018), questioning notions such as exoticism and stereotype, which can engage the very value and categorization of a literary work. To Bertrand Westphal, a geocritical approach to literary places means considering place as a dynamic “*tópos átopos*,” a “creative atopia,” which helps identify the moving and mutable nature of places, and avoid, on the contrary, forms of analysis resulting in transposable stereotypes, or “*tópos koinos*” – the commonplace (2007: 236-237).

The opportunity for a constantly renewed “creative atopia” can be found in the reading experience, as these novels frequently resort to interactive narrative strategies. As will be developed in this chapter, devices such as Hamid's playful narrators, the forms of “co-creation” for which he is a staunch advocate (Hamid 2015: xviii), or Kunzru's formal rendition of the motif of contagion, can all give way to destabilizing encounters between readers and writers – and/or narrators. These encounters testify to a conception of the novel as an alternative mode of sharing and a possible common ground, if not a common place.

In the end, the understanding of place itself comes under scrutiny through processes of sharing. The uses of place, notions such as public and private space, property, or even the development of alternative places on the internet are questioned in Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions, unravelling the double necessity of being with others and sharing place. In their representations of these complex negotiations, these novels give shape to Edward Relph's proposition that “[o]ur relationships with places are as necessary, varied, and sometimes perhaps just as unpleasant as our relationships with other people” (1976: 141). Kunzru echoed

this statement when he explained in a personal interview that “the heart of any book is (...) to do with the relationship between people and place” (HK ITW 2018). This chapter examines the manifestations of this relationship and its formal implications in the narratives.

I wish to focus first on the role of the body in negotiations between “people and place,” looking at the body as a universally shared medium to access place but also, in some respects, a place in itself. Representations of comfort and discomfort, fitting and adaptability pervade the narratives and posit the central function of the body in human encounters with place. This function is further reinforced by the novelists’ use of anthropomorphism to describe physical places. The analysis then moves on to intimacy and proximity. Kunzru’s *Transmission* displays a paradoxical preoccupation with touch, in a novel that explores the dematerialization of human connections. *My Revolutions* underlines similar paradoxes in the articulation of political action and personal interactions. Mohsin Hamid’s writing of intimacy also tackles its contemporary evolutions, yet is tinged with more ancient Sufi intimations of spiritual connection. I suggest that this inspiration is a cornerstone of his narratives and opens up unique forms of sharing with his readers.

A third part is dedicated to limits, considering their problematic role in the shaping of place, and the way borders or boundaries can either preclude or allow for modes of sharing. In Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, these motifs are infused with a postcolonial awareness of racial politics and fears of contamination, which extends to modern fears surrounding information technology. A second development looks at the notion of personal space in both writers’ works, and how the formation of symbolical boundaries around oneself questions the sharing of place. The final section centres around narrations of hospitality, or how the novels engage with the ambivalent sharing of place when a stranger seeks entry. The intricacies of hospitality can be observed through a disturbing narrative strategy in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where guest and host take on the role of a predator in turn. This also includes Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writing of the refugee condition and asylum policies visible in works like *Exit West*, *Transmission* or *Red Pill*, which all engage with the aporia posed by hospitality.

4.1. A “pitiless place”? Sharing place with the body

In a 1966 radio programme later published as “Le Corps Utopique,” Michel Foucault identified two seemingly conflicting yet essential characteristics of the body. First, one can never be anywhere else than in and with their own body, which Foucault terms “*tópos*,” or

place: “*Mon corps, topie impitoyable*” (Foucault 2009: 9).⁵⁹ The body, therefore, would be a place in itself which engages with other places in the course of experience. Besides, Foucault proposes that the body is what allows for utopias, for the projection and imagination of the body in other places (*ibid.*: 17). In the following development I would like to examine the implications of a necessary relation between bodies and places, and how some representations come to consider the body as a place in itself.

In Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s fictions, the body is often “pitiless,” as Foucault suggests, imposing forced negotiations and reminding the subject of its undeniable presence. The protagonist in Mohsin Hamid’s recent *The Last White Man*, waking up “a deep and undeniable brown” (*LWM* 3, my emphasis) is a case in point. Rewriting the opening of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Hamid replaces the estrangement felt by Gregor Samsa in his insect body with that of changing skin colour, suggesting that other people’s appearance can be considered an utterly unfamiliar place. The narrative goes on to investigate the feelings generated by this unavoidable confrontation: “there was no escaping Anders, for Anders, that day. The discomfort only followed” (*LWM* 7).

Indeed, comfort, familiarity, or the ability to fit in a given place, are all predicated on a concordance between place and the body. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives upend this premise as they point to the trials faced by contemporary subjects when trying to make a place for themselves, despite material obstacles and despite the presence of others. For sharing place with the body also means sharing place with *other* bodies, as can be observed in the precarious habitats described in *Exit West*, in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* or in Hari Kunzru’s portrayals of contemporary transportation. The place ascribed to the body is also central when considering how writers like Hamid and Kunzru discuss the history and the persistence of imperialism, examined in the second chapter of this thesis. According to Sara Upstone, postcolonial representations of the body interact with place in that the body is “the site of greatest colonization,” which “becomes a resource facilitating the most powerful statements of resistance” (2009: 147).

Ultimately, the interaction between body and place influences the understanding of place itself. In his reading of Kant’s analyses of “the bond between body and place” (2011: 205), Edward Casey remarks that it is precisely the intricate and necessary relation between

⁵⁹ Foucault’s play on paronomasia can be found translated as “pitiless place” by Lucia Allais, Caroline A. Jones and Arnold Davidson in *Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press and MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006: 229).

place and the body which defines a place as such, rather than as a “disembodied,” two-dimensional “site”:

Sites may be bodiless – it entails a disembodied overview, a survey – but there can be no being-in-place except by being in a densely qualified place in concrete embodiment. Indeed, how can one be *in* a place except *through* one’s own body? (2011: 204, emphasis in the original)

In the novels of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, descriptions of bodies contribute to a “densely qualified” *writing* of place. Places are characterized by singular bodily experiences, just as much as bodies constitute experiences of place. I will first examine how this reciprocal relationship is manifested in their fiction, with, on the one hand, placed bodies – bodies which sometimes suffer at the hands of displacement and forced placement – and on the other hand, embodied places – places which are at times permeated by the mechanisms of the body and represented anthropomorphically. I then look at the mutations of bodies in the age of hyper-communication, particularly in Hari Kunzru’s fiction, and how the body-place nexus can be mediated by technology, for better or for worse.

4.1.1. Placed bodies: narratives of discomfort

A large number of critical contributions devoted to Mohsin Hamid’s novels focus on characters who have to position themselves politically and geographically, whether as migrants, as potential terrorists or as social outcasts (Mahmutovic 2016; Morey 2011; Balfour 2017). But as Paul Jay points out, Hamid’s novels are largely infused with an attention to the material dimensions of globalization as much as its cultural aspects (2014: 106-107). This material dimension can easily be overlooked when reading his novels only for their contribution to extradiegetic debates, yet it can reveal essential aspects of his fiction, including the roles assigned to bodies. The situation and evolution of the characters’ bodies can in turn provide renewed readings of place, as suggested by Christian Moraru. To him, novelists like Hamid write with:

[a] counter-cartographic perception whose prime meridian no longer runs through the Greenwich Royal Observatory but bends around a planetary positioning ‘sensibility’ more closely attuned to a world-system in which the sensuous materiality of natural bodies—of people, plants, birds, insects, elements, weather phenomena, foodstuff, etc.—supplies the major reference points. (2018: 9)

This “counter-cartographic” mode is essential to the writing of *Exit West*, which, as already observed here, unsettles geographical markers and willingly sheds toponymy, preferring to

situate the characters through their subjective experience rather than through objective coordinates. In this novel of emigration, it seems that the characters are constantly placed, in the sense that they are physically relegated to certain places. From Nadia's strategy of wearing a black robe to avoid the intruding gaze of men (*EW* 16), to Saeed and Nadia's successive locations and relocations, including the political decision to "accommodate" them in a new place outside London (*EW* 167), the protagonists of this novel constantly see their bodies placed according to external expectations.

Recent research has emphasized this turn to migrants' bodily experience, and to the "corporeality" of people who are on the move (Chemmachery and Jain 2021). Fiction like Deepak Unnikrishnan's 2017 *Temporary People*, depicting the lives and deaths of migrant workers in the Emirates, or Sunjeev Sahota's 2015 *The Year of the Runaways*, where one of the characters, Avtar, has to sell a kidney to afford his student visa, testify to a desire to renew narratives of migration and thematise the dire impacts of a displaced, precarious existence on the body. Critical response to such narratives has provided readings of vulnerability, with, for instance, studies of Hamid's *Exit West* along the lines of Judith Butler's 2006 *Precarious Life* (Popescu and Jamahah 2020; Veyret 2020). Butler notably exposes the stakes of asserting individuals' rights towards their bodies in political struggle, arguing that "[i]t is essential to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own*" (2006: 25, emphasis in the original).

This is what the character of Nadia does in one particular passage from *Exit West*, which illustrates strikingly the consequences of forced displacement and re-locations on the bodies of refugees. As Saeed and Nadia have just arrived in the London hotel through one of the mysterious black doors, Nadia notices a bathroom and feels an urge to wash, after a long time spent in a refugee camp in Greece:

Nadia wanted to take a shower more than anything, more even than she wanted food. Saeed stood watch outside, while she went in and stripped, and observed her own body, leaner than she had ever seen it, (...) and she thought her body looked like the body of an animal, a savage. (*EW* 120-121)

A dialectic movement operates here. While Saeed watches outside the room for other people, Nadia closes in on herself to watch her own body. Whereas Saeed remains acutely aware of the external pressures exerted over their bodies, Nadia attempts to re-appropriate hers in the intimacy of the bathroom. She acknowledges the transformative impact of migration over her body, looking at "her bones, chilled from months of outdoor cold" (*EW* 121). Watching the mirror, Nadia is confronted to the physical reality of her body, as opposed to the utopian hopes nurturing migration. In Foucault's terms, the mirror contributes to "assigning a space" to

previous utopias.⁶⁰ Even though Hamid followed the utopian mode in his choice to replace the migrants' journey by the instant crossing of magic doors, the novel never glosses over the physical outcomes of such a journey. As often in Hamid's novels and particularly *Exit West*, the diverging reactions of the two lovers are used to convey contrasted experiences and render the migrant's experience in its full complexity, including subjective dimensions connected to gender or personal beliefs. As Nadia comes out of the bathroom covered in fresh towels, relishing in the comfort she has just experienced, Saeed comments on her use of space:

But he said, looking at her, 'You can't stand here like that.'
'Don't tell me what I can do.' (EW 123)

Again, Saeed retains a strong awareness of their bodies' illicit presence in the place, and reacts to Nadia's re-appropriation of her own body. As in this example, Saeed and Nadia's bodies are often placed in relation to each other, whether to emphasize similarity or differing uses of space. Further on in this chapter I will look in more detail at the articulation of Hamid's narratives around the dual structure of the couple, in particular in his writing of intimacy.

In Mohsin Hamid's novels, it is not only the migrant's experience which provides readings of the body, but more largely his observation of struggling characters. In fact, I would like to argue that Mohsin Hamid's novels converge in their engagement with the discomforts of place. Focusing on the bodily sensations and perceptions of characters who are precariously placed, excluded, marginalized or estranged, these narratives seek to cause discomfort in the reader, and foster an imaginary of place that is fully *incarnated*, made flesh, the better to confront the aches and hardships felt by certain bodies in the experience of place. In that sense, they speak to both the unequal realities of the global age, and to the universally shared experience of bodily functions and mundane discomfort.

In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, for instance, the story begins through the gaze of a young boy suffering from hepatitis, who observes the world that surrounds him from his small house in a village compound, in a metaphorical "Rising Asia." Besides the boy's own sufferings – which are rendered more acutely via the use of the second person –, the reader is led to observe with him the bodies of his entire community. As often in his fiction, Hamid uses

⁶⁰ My translation. The original reads: "C'est le miroir et c'est le cadavre qui assignent un espace à l'expérience profondément et originairement utopique du corps; c'est le miroir et c'est le cadavre qui font taire et apaisent et ferment sur une clôture – qui est maintenant pour nous scellée – cette grande rage utopique qui délabre et volatilise à chaque instant notre corps. C'est grâce à eux, c'est grâce au miroir et au cadavre que notre corps n'est pas pure et simple utopie." Michel Foucault. *Le corps utopique suivi de Les hétérotopies*. Fécamp: Nouvelles éd. Lignes, 2009, 19.

an encyclopedic tone, verging on generalization, to convey the specific experience of his characters, such as when the protagonist watches his mother toil in a squatting position:

Squatting is energy efficient, better for the back and hence ergonomic, and it is not painful. But done for hours and days and weeks and years its mild discomfort echoes in the mind like muffled screams from a subterranean torture chamber. It can be borne endlessly, provided it is never acknowledged. (HTG 9)

The passage hinges on an unexpected comedic shift from the objective tone of a mock physiotherapist to a poetically hyperbolic depiction of suffering. Here, the discomfort caused by a bodily position is metaphorically replicated in an imaginary place, located in the mind. The articulation of body and mind operates as a form of torture, as the body constantly reminds its existence to the subject in the form of “muffled screams,” suggesting that the body communicates with its own language.

Hamid’s first novel *Moth Smoke* also carries a subtext of discomfort, represented the characters’ experience of heat. In this tense narrative, the anxieties surrounding the 1998 nuclear tests opposing India and Pakistan are replicated in two metaphors of veiling and blurring: the scorching weather, and the image of smoke which surfaces up regularly in the form of hash joints, burning moths or candles. In the chapters where the main character Daru is also the first-person narrator, the descriptions of him sweating keep recurring, each time requiring the protagonist to acknowledge his body but also his place. Sweat adds a physical and metaphorical layer of confusion to the character’s placement in the world – he is a social outcast who just lost his job, betrayed a friend and is accused of a crime he did not commit. Daru narrates the events that happen to him in the present tense, thus making his bodily sensations all the more tangible to the reader, and his constant evocation of sweat contributes to create a somewhat oppressive effect. On many occasions he describes himself as “soaked” (MS 20), “covered in sweat” (MS 226), “sweaty” (MS 137), “sweating in the heat” (MS 179) or “sweating hard” (MS 223). Early on in the novel, both drugs and sweating are connected to his movements from one place to another, in Lahore: “Rolling while rolling, solo, and baking while baking in the heat. It helps kill time on long afternoons, and I haven’t traveled very far, but I know that no place has afternoons longer than this place, Lahore, especially in the summertime” (MS 9). The meaning of “baking” shifts swiftly from the baking of a joint to the discomfort of his body baking in the heat. Stuck in a place that seems to be stretching and melting, the character’s experience of space and time is restricted to the coordinates of “baking” and “rolling,” the latter term also conveying the image of a man stuck in a time loop.

Hamid's narratives of discomfort merge with Kunzru's in their depictions of fitting, or more precisely, of the struggle for characters to fit in certain places both socially and physically. Both writers portray characters who are disabled (Raj, the autistic child, in *Gods Without Men*), ill (the protagonist's illness but also his mother's are described at length in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*), or who cannot make their bodies fit places as society expects them to. A particularly interesting example can be found in both writers' works with the mention of fatness. In Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*, the depiction of fatness as an obstacle to fitting place participates in the novel's overall discussion of the contemporary rule of speed, which will be tackled in the next chapter of this work. In a business meeting with Yves Ballard, his manager, the character of Guy Swift is confronted to this perception of fatness:

'Maybe,' Guy moved tentatively, 'we should do this over lunch?'
'No,' said Yves. 'No lunch. That would make us fat.'
'I'm sorry?'
'We don't want to get fat. Fat people move slowly. Fat companies too. Things are very bad now, Guy. It is not a time for self-indulgence. (...)'
(T 125-126)

Guy's attempt to soften his exchange with Yves through the social convention of lunch falls flat. In Yves Ballard's view, eating lunch to fulfill bodily needs is considered dispensable. The dialogue offers a scathing comment on the absurdity of social expectations on individual bodies, but also on the loss of conviviality brought about by changing relations to food.

Similar observations are made in Hamid's *Moth Smoke* with the character of Murad Badshah, a rickshaw entrepreneur and drug dealer, and Daru's foil, who incites him into crime. Murad is a comedic figure, characterized by his cunning and his ability to take advantage of the worst situations. Facing the jury at Daru's trial, Murad begs his audience to let him "begin at the outside and move in" (MS 70). The "outside," it turns out, is his bodily appearance. Murad starts by discoursing on the notion of fatness to describe the way people perceive him:

'Fat' is a small word which belies its size in the girth of its connotations. Fat implies a certain ungainliness, an inefficiency, a sense of immobility, a lack of industry, an unpleasant, unaesthetic quality; unmotivated, unloved, unnatural, unusual, uninspired, unhappy, unlikely to go places or to fit, under the ground with a heart attack at fifty-five. In short, fat somewhat paradoxically involves the lack of many attributes which, you must concede, are generally held to be good. (MS 70)

Murad's linguistic agility allows him to develop his point extensively, and in the process extend the external boundaries of his body. The semantic play on repeated negatives highlights the paradoxical invisibility of fat bodies in the eyes of society, considered as taking too much space physically while at the same time refused a place socially. It is in this sense that the character

operates a pun with the idiom “go places,” showing the equation of uneasy movement with a difficult social mobility. Yet Murad reappropriates this constrained relation between places and bodies, by using bodily functions as a linguistic paradigm and cause discomfort in others. This notably entails anthropomorphic descriptions, or a symbolic embodiment of places, which will be examined hereafter.

4.1.2. Embodied places

In both Kunzru’s and Hamid’s novels, the use of anthropomorphism in spatial descriptions contributes to underlining the commonality of bodies and places. The device is a staple of literary fiction, but it is here tweaked with references to the fantastic or the grotesque, which render place at once familiar and defamiliarizing. These embodied places speak to the symbolical power of place and further demonstrate the necessary negotiations which unfold between place and the body.

It is again in Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, in the words of Murad Badshah, that examples of embodied places can be found. Murad frequently refers to bodily functions in his speech, for instance when discussing Pakistan’s nuclear tests as “our bloody nuclear fart” (*MS* 166). Murad’s narrative voice is an instance of Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque as found in Rabelais: a writing which is “predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization” and notably involves “[e]ating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (1984: 317). Describing the context of Daru’s crime at his trial, Murad thus explains:

It was a summer of great rumblings in the belly of the earth, of atomic flatulence and geopolitical indigestion, consequences of the consumption of sectarian chickpeas by our famished and increasingly incontinent subcontinent. Clenched beneath the tightened sphincters of tests sites and silos, the pressure of superheated gases was registering in spasms on the Richter scale.

Lahore was uneasy, and Imodium in short supply. (*MS* 75-76)

Murad’s use of the grotesque is reinforced by a bathos effect, as the lofty tone announcing epic storytelling (“it was a summer...”) is soon counterbalanced by evocations of bowel movements. His attempts at pomposity also appear in his use of couplets (the “**con**sequences of the **con**sumption” and “incontinent subcontinent”). One cannot but notice that the depiction moves from “the belly of the earth” to the “subcontinent” – referring to India and Pakistan all at once – to the city of Lahore. These uncertain shifts in geographical marking mirror the “uneasiness” of the place, which is referred to again later in the novel in the words of Daru, who evokes the

monsoon (“The entire city is uneasy,” *MS* 265). Blending places together, and blending these places with the body, is also characteristic of the grotesque, which “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon” (1984: 318). In light of Bakhtin’s definition, the use of the grotesque in *Moth Smoke* allows for an organic writing of place, where any subject is led to question the role they have to play in the healthy development of a nation, a city or a subcontinent.

Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* also presents occurrences of the grotesque, particularly in the chapters where the protagonist Pran Nath Razdan is led into a brothel, or when he is taken to a British Major to be abused sexually in the context of a plot against the latter. Indeed, “copulation” is also one of the features of the grotesque, according to Bakhtin (1984: 317). In one particular instance, where Pran is about to be raped by the Major, the external narrator operates a mischievous embodiment of place, by having place *replace* the body. Avoiding the crudeness of the rape, the narrator prefers to elicit it with a three-page-long description of the location where it occurs, Fatehpur, starting with its geological characteristics:

Delicacy suggests that this juncture might be suitable for a short survey of the history and geography of the principality of Fatehpur, a fascinating subject which has largely escaped the attentions of scholars of the Punjab. Physically, it is a narrow strip two hundred miles long and about sixty wide, consisting mostly of farmland, though to the east this shades into broken, rocky plain. (*TI* 94)

With this tongue-in-cheek act of censorship, the narrator operates a deviation, re-orienting lowly bodily concerns towards a seemingly inoffensive description of place. Place becomes a hyperbolically “fascinating” subject, aiming to hide and replace the crude description of what the Major is doing to Pran. However, the mention of a “juncture” evoking a body joint, and the adjective “physically,” connote the overbearing presence of what is being forcefully hidden. Tracing the history of the place all the way to the political plot Pran is now caught in, and which targets the British official, the narrator operates the “juncture” back to the time of narration with a barely veiled innuendo: “The Major is a very powerful man indeed” (*TI* 97).

The explanations about the place thus *replace* the body by providing a timely ellipsis, but they also *re-situate* Pran’s suffering body within the larger context of the Empire’s powerful hold on the subcontinent. Talking about the ending of *The Impressionist*, where Pran is seen walking with the Fotse accompanied by a camel, Jason D. Price considers it a comment by Kunzru about a character “in solidarity with animals and native people,” arguing that this is an example of what Rosi Braidotti calls “bio-centred egalitarianism”: “a materialist, secular,

precise and unsentimental response to a transversal, trans-species structural connection of those whose bodies are ‘disposable’ in the logic of advanced capitalism” (qtd. in Price 2014: 30). The above example also suggests such a perspective. In the replacement of Pran’s rape by a place, the “materialist, secular” description of place points to the oppression of places and living bodies alike. The reader’s gaze is not directed towards the “how” of colonial subjection, nor does the narrator seek to foster empathy for Pran – the latter remains a rather flat character throughout, one devoid of moral depth. Instead, a diversion is made towards the conditions – including spatial conditions – which have contributed to such an event.

Returning to the rape scene, the narrator again plays on bodily innuendos, commenting that “[i]t is, after all, Pran’s first direct contact with the machinery of imperial government” (*TI* 98). In fact, the embodiment of place in the narrative ellipsis is paralleled by the embodiment of India and the Empire, which the two men’s bodies conspicuously stand for. Such replacements at the narrative level can also be read with regard to the colonial project and the ideology of assimilation and erasure – Major Privett-Clampe goes on to teach Pran how to become a textbook English boy after he has raped him repeatedly. While highly metaphorical, the passage also avoids a strictly moralizing stance, by vastly ridiculing the Major, who is “weak of heart and chronically short of breath” (*TI* 98), and by referring to irony and “cosmic justice” (*TI* 98) to describe Pran’s situation, after he has himself attempted to rape a girl at the beginning of the novel. The “bio-centred egalitarianism,” here, thus consists in displaying with a parodic distance the wide-ranging “machinery,” “cosmic justice” or karma which sometimes take part in the interactions of places and bodies.

Karma, cosmic justice and the difficulty to explain certain phenomena on rational terms form part of Kunzru’s writing at large, and are omnipresent in *Gods Without Men*. Infused with myth and spiritual belief, the novel undoubtedly draws from such perceptions in its anthropomorphic depictions of the desert. Using the characters’ perception with internal focalization to describe the challenging, inhospitable place that is the desert, Kunzru operates re-shuffling effects where the human characters no longer stand as the central source of all agency. Again, this manifests in descriptions of place as embodied or mirroring the body.

On several occasions, the desert is evoked as inhaling and exhaling, as if having a life of its own, about to burst out from the sands. These evocations contribute to a sense of the uncanny found in the entire novel with thematic dimensions such as UFO beliefs or the unexplained disappearance of Raj, the main characters’ son. Such representations call upon classic characteristics of the fantastic genre, since the characters’ senses are involved in the perception of a living desert. While these characters are not the first-person narrators usually

found in fantastic narratives, their perceptions are troubled, either by the use of substances or by their physical exhaustion, so that it remains unsure whether their senses can be relied on.

This occurs notably to the Matharus, the couple whose child has disappeared. Progressively losing their minds and the integrity of their couple over the search for Raj, Lisa and Jaz perceive the desert as a disorienting place, one where a child can disappear without leaving so much as a trace. After they have finally found Raj, Lisa and Jaz feel the need to return to the desert to understand what happened – this return provides the ending of the novel’s main plot. Once there, Lisa is troubled: “The vast emptiness all around them seemed pregnant with something, some possibility she wanted to see made flesh” (*GWM* 378). The mother identifies with a “pregnant” earth, which is about to give birth to something. As they get very close to the Pinnacles, where Raj initially disappeared, Lisa becomes one with an anthropomorphic desert: “She could feel the heat exhaled from the earth. She no longer cared what happened to her. The world had reduced itself to the slippery gravel beneath her feet, her ragged breathing” (*GWM* 380). The syntax here leaves an ambiguous possibility for the “breathing” to be the earth’s as much as Lisa’s. Reshuffling her mental geography and her mental map of “the world,” the embodiment of the place leads the character to an acute awareness of her co-presence with the place and its shared existence with her body. A similar reconfiguration happens with Nicky Capaldi, a British rock star who has ended up in the desert after he has fled from unsuccessful recording time with his band. Drunk and confused at night in the desert, Nicky has left his car and is now wandering the desert. Noticing that “the ground is breathing,” the character is thrust back to his own animality: he observes that he feels like “just a little wounded animal” standing on the immense earth, and has to reconsider his role and position in light of the other forms of agency expressed all around him (*GWM* 34).

Such ecocritical incursions and evocations of the desert as moving sands obviously call to mind Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, which Kunzru recently prefaced in a re-edition, and about which he wrote a long piece for *The Guardian* (Herbert 2021; Kunzru 2015). There are hints at science fiction in the novel’s themes, but it never entirely abides by its codes and retains a largely realistic backdrop. A second ecocritical subtext can be found in the novel’s reference to Balzac’s story “Une passion dans le désert,” which concludes with the sentence that gives Kunzru’s novel its title. In that story, a French soldier has to coexist with a cheetah for several days, trying to survive alone in a cave in the desert. The man mistakenly kills the cheetah, towards whom he had been developing a certain affection. In the same way as in Balzac’s story, the desert leads Kunzru’s characters to a paradoxical moment of reckoning about their co-existence with others, including other species and the earth itself. The desert reconfigures the

anthropocentric relation to place, and questions the position of mankind in the use of space. Depicted as barren yet alive, the desert in Kunzru's novel is a place that can hardly be used – in the sense of resource use – but demonstrates a life of its own, illustrating how the relation between places and humankind operates beyond and despite anthropocentric claims. The debunking of anthropocentrism is also put to effect in Kunzru's descriptions of cyborg-like bodies.

4.1.3. The body is the message: moving “Databodies” and morphing cyborgs

Kunzru's fiction also demonstrates how the body's inescapable relation with place can lead to forms of adaptation and transformative strategies. I wish here to pay particular attention to the morphing bodies and the dynamics of accretion found in the novel *Transmission* as well as in some of Kunzru's short stories. In these narratives, the apparent standardization and detachment fostered by the global mobility of people, capital and technologies – or what Childs and Green call “the spectacle of unlimited contact and exchange” (2013:80) – are counterbalanced by the potential for mutation ultimately demonstrated through some of the characters. Indeed, Kunzru's globalized subjects use these phenomena to re-create their identities, in what Alan Robinson calls a form of “self-fashioning” (2008: 77), and in fact, “fashion” their bodies in the process. The relation between places and bodies, and *between* bodies *in* places, largely informs these creative reinventions.

From the beginning of *Transmission*, the body of the globalized subject is put to the test. The novel introduces the figure of Sunny Srinivasan, a manager for “Databodies,” the company where the main character Arjun applies in New Delhi's tech quarter, NOIDA. Sunny and his aptly named company stand for the global commodification of workers, conceiving of them as “data” that can be sent anywhere worldwide. Like Arjun's sister, whose voice is used by an Australian call center (*T* 24-25), the Databodies company seeks to make a profitable use of bodies, and expresses it metonymically. The narrative plays with this mindset by having Sunny voice it in terms of “butts”: “What I care about is butts, good properly qualified desi butts sitting on good American office chairs, earning good consultancy dollars for Databodies and for me. Understand?” (*T* 10). Here the atomization is twofold: not only does he consider workers as mere “butts,” but Sunny also resorts to the term “desi” in reference to the worldwide South Asian diaspora. The bodies sent to the United States are thus already perceived as mobile and scattered, as if by essence. Sunny Srinivasan himself is described as:

a man who appeared to be less a human being than a communications medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages. From his gelled hair to his lightly burnished penny loafers, every particular of his appearance carried a set of aspirational associations (...) (T 8)

Sunny thus uses his body as a repository, with several layers of interpretations to be found in his layers of attire. The passage however points to an uneasy constructedness, with the echoing sounds of “apppearance” and “associations,” which despite the character’s efforts are visibly “aspirational.” The metaphor of the body as a message and/or a medium, tweaking Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, is continued over the entire novel.⁶¹ Guy Swift, the marketing expert, is first introduced to the reader as flying first class with “a sense of angelic contentment. Here he was, existent, airborne, bringing the message of himself from one point of the earth’s surface to another” (T 13). All the stalemates of Guy’s relations with places are contained within the sentence: he is “existent” rather than living, “airborne” rather than moving his own body himself, and considers places as “points on the earth’s surface” rather than a three-dimensional experience.

While characters like Sunny Srinivasan or Guy Swift benefit at first from using their body as a vehicle, this purely utilitarian, superficial use of place comes to be challenged. It is Guy’s lack of meaningful interaction with places and people which precisely leads to his getting lost in the system, with a misunderstanding whereby he is mistaken for an Albanian asylum seeker and struggles to prove his identity. On the opposite, characters who seemed stuck in place for reasons of class or gender develop modes of awareness enabling for transformation and adaptation, conducted notably thanks to their bodies. The novel has Arjun and Leela flee together in a mysterious open ending, where apocryphal interpretations of the two characters’ fate are enumerated over several pages. Arjun, who was initially constrained by his status as a foreign worker and a perceived terrorist after unleashing the *Leela* virus, is thus reimagined by others through various conspiracies, whereas Leela, the Bollywood actress whose mother forced her into acting – and into selling her body, as the narrator suggests – finds an escape route thanks to the computer virus named after her. One of the conspiracies provides a particularly playful instance of body transformation:

He has got enormously fat. She has been surgically altered to look like a European. One persistent report, mostly from Pacific Rim countries, has a young man fitting Mehta’s description accompanied by a South Asian woman of similar age, ‘tomboyishly’ or ‘punkily’ dressed. (T 296)

⁶¹ McLuhan’s expression “the medium is the message” appeared in his book *Understanding Media*, first published in 1964. McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 1st ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994, 7.

With the mention of “Pacific Rim countries,” the narrator alludes to the way reinvention can stem from a geographical displacement. For Leela, the passage from the status of hypersexualized pop icon to a “tomboyishly” dressed figure allows for a reinvention of gender identity. In fact, Leela seems to incarnate the cyborg as defined by Donna Haraway. In her “Cyborg Manifesto,” the philosopher defends that “[c]ommunications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies,” considering that these tools “embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide” (1991:164). In Kunzru’s novel, the character is even recrafted in the narrative fabric. While the narrative voice first distinguishes Leela Zahir from the virus *Leela*, which is either italicized or designated by its variants such as *Leela01*, the last pages of the novel no longer operate this difference – Leela and *Leela* have fully blended. The narrator thus explains that “Leela’s noise passed effortlessly out of the networks into the world of things” (T 272). Contrary to the staged adaptability of the businessmen evoked in the first part of the novel, Leela’s “effortless” mutations as she moves through places promises forms of emancipation with and despite global technology.

In 1997, as a journalist for the cultural magazine *Wired*, Hari Kunzru interviewed Donna Haraway. The piece, titled “You Are Cyborg,” tells of Kunzru’s meeting with Haraway at her California home and foretells the influence of her ideas on narratives like *Transmission*, published in 2004.⁶² More particularly, it shows the impact of Haraway’s *language* on Hari Kunzru’s fiction. In the article, he explains how discussing with Haraway led him to recognize that “[e]ven while we mistake ourselves for humans, the way we talk shows that we know we’re really cyborgs” (1997 *n.p.*). Upon its release, *Transmission* showed particular originality in its efforts to incorporate within the novel the language of contemporary technology-mediated experiences, and particularly the experience of place. It presented itself as a novel about travel, yet one without any picturesque landscape but instead focused on new modes of circulation and on what the desire for movement does to people and their bodies. Relishing the playfulness of this new language, Kunzru’s narrator causes a discomfort in the reader by means of realistic situational comedy and by exposing the unexplained glitches that come with the overwhelming presence of digital technologies in the twenty-first century.

As observed by Bettina Jansen (2018), investigations of the figure of the cyborg can also be found in Kunzru’s short fiction, including pieces dating back to the same period. I

⁶² Kunzru added in a personal interview that he had also read Haraway as a student of philosophy (HK ITW 2019).

propose to discuss here two stories in particular which can shed light on the place/body nexus: “Bodywork,” published in the 2005 collection *Noise*, and the story “Drone,” published ten years later in the Granta collection dedicated to India.

In “Bodywork,” a man starts by exposing an unconventional shopping list for the “Superstore” (N 1) before he visits a friend, a repairman who “fixes things” (N 2). Progressively, the reader is led to understand that he is fixing himself: his hands are replaced with implants, before he starts making changes to his chest. While going about the process of fixing these body parts, he complains about his wife Cheryl, whom he first finds lazy and then unclean, noticing her “smell” and her “droplets of sweat” (N 11; N 9). The character betrays an excessive concern for hygiene and order, a wish for everything to be *in place*, including his own body. He wishes to distance himself from anything biological, including in his own house: “The place is a breeding ground for disease, but as I say, since last week, none of that digestive stuff is my concern” (N 11). In this story, controlling obsessions about forming the body and defining its contours are equated with a fear of the outside and the unknown.

“Drone” is a darker yet equally disturbing story. Included in the Granta collection about India, it can be read as a dystopian social commentary on the Indian government’s extensive use of military drones. The story exposes a world regimented by “the Seth,” an autocratic ruler, in a dystopian future where India’s resources are exploited by means of physically augmented minors, living in a specific place: a camp neighbouring a mine. The place and the inhabitants’ bodies share a similar fate: “The encampment’s street plan, its architecture, the very bodies of its inhabitants – all are mutating at a pace that is frequently visible even to the unaugmented eye” (“Drone” 24). The story indeed portrays a decaying land, a place undergoing man’s relentless overuse of resources, including the human body. In this story, place and the human body are assembled under their common biological nature, their existence as “biomass”: “Formations can appear overnight, capturing raw materials and biomass, then disappear just as quickly, overcome by some counter-process, some alternate will-to-form” (“Drone” 24-25). It is precisely a “will to form” which drives a young man, Jai, to add a mechanical arm to his body, hoping to be more economically efficient in the mine. Jai is one of the last people there to have a fully biological body, which makes him “untouched by this place. It’s as if the mud refuses to stick to him” (“Drone” 25). Frustrated by its dysfunctions, Jai finally ejects his newly acquired arm, but he then starts undergoing the same decay as the mining site. The story concludes on Jai’s last moments, yielding to what is called “a hybrid fever – digital and biological” (“Drone” 30).

In stories like “Bodywork” and “Drone,” cyborgs are therefore less emancipatory than the playful digital reinventions at work in *Transmission*. In these stories Kunzru explores fictional territories where technology is misused and destructive to the point that it can annihilate humans and places all at once. Both the novel and the stories testify to ambivalent uses of technology, and to its deeply embedded interactions with both places and bodies – technology stands as a meeting ground between the two, where fundamental negotiations take place. These narratives also describe bodies through the lens of authority and power, which will be looked at more closely in the next chapter.

Incidentally, one of Mohsin Hamid’s best-known stories, published in the Granta volume dedicated to Pakistan, also focuses on a character’s body. In his very short narrative “A Beheading” (2010), Hamid adopts the perspective of a man who is about to be executed by terrorists, all the way to the observation of his own beheading. The focus on bodily sensations in the short story can easily be traced back to its original association with the fantastic genre, but there is a notable attention paid to specific body parts – an arm, a head – in these short forms, as if such synecdochic depictions betrayed their use of the short story as a magnifying glass for otherwise unseizable experiences. These plays on scale can also be found in Kunzru’s and Hamid’s respective approaches to proximity, and to the evolution of intimacy in contemporary societies.

4.2. Difficult proximities: place and intimacy

In *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman claims that in times of globalization, “[p]roximity no longer requires physical closeness; but physical closeness no longer determines proximity” (2003: 62). Such a premise is bound to affect the relations of human beings *with* and *in* places: if physical closeness is no longer a condition for the experience of affective proximity, where then does such proximity manifest itself? What places, other than physical, are called upon? The second part of Bauman’s statement also questions the evolution of modes of being with others. Indeed, what does it entail if physically close beings do not feel proximity towards one another?

Bauman’s position is to be understood in the context of increased technological connectivity, which enables a *sense* of proximity despite physical distance. This in turn comes to question the role of place in the determination of proximity – Yi-Fu Tuan points out that “[d]istance is a meaningless spatial concept apart from the idea of goal or place” (1977: 136). Mohsin Hamid for instance engages with these changing manifestations of proximity in *Exit*

West. The novel notably ends with Nadia being “informed of the proximity of Saeed” as she wanders the streets of her birth city (*EW* 227), implying yet never naming the links and encounters which can occur via smartphones, social media and GPS technology.

In his definition Bauman understands proximity primarily as a quality of interpersonal relations, and contrasts it with “closeness” in space. In Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, proximity appears not only along the lines of physical proximity, but together with the affective implications of intimacy, understood as “close familiarity or friendship” (*OED* 2008). However, place never strays far from the equation, whether it is the location where intimacy is shared, or whether distance between places precludes intimacy. There can even be forms of intimacy *with* one’s environment, as defended by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*. Bachelard argues for the defining importance of the dichotomy between inside and outside, which constantly pervades literary creation. In his analyses, he notably explains that there is a paradoxical intimacy to be found in one’s relation with the outside world, an “intimate immensity” characterising poets’ expression of experience (1994: 183).⁶³ He further argues that poetic expression can convey a sense of intimacy with the material world: “Poets will help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space” (1994: 199). Bachelard emphasizes the mutable nature of space, which works of the imagination help to expand and render intimate all at once.

The writing of intimacy in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works indeed plays out in these mirror effects between an interior, subjective space and the outside world, but focuses more specifically on the role of human relationships in articulating the two. In particular, their works show how the forging of intimacies with others is co-dependent with the sense of proximity and familiarity which place can either allow for or preclude. In the following demonstration, I shall examine how the depictions of apartments, bedrooms, cities at war, communes or migrant squats are used by Hamid and Kunzru to render the difficult dynamics of intimacy. Touch, verbal communication, privacy, romantic osmosis or unrequited intimacy are all examined in light of the places – whether physical or imagined – where the characters find themselves.

In this part I would also like to examine how the tools of fiction contribute to the formation of intimacy. The links formed with fictional characters, for instance, can foster a sense of distance or proximity, as examined by Rita Felski who considers them “part of an *Umwelt*,” noting that characters “matter to *us* and yet are not simply ‘in our minds’; they come

⁶³ Bachelard’s *La poétique de l’espace* was initially published in 1957. I am quoting from a later, translated edition.

to us as if from elsewhere” (2020: 89, emphasis in the original).⁶⁴ In the writings of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, modes of proximity appear in the relations between characters, reader and writer, which can give way to the creation of common grounds in the experience of reading.

This part is divided into three sections. The first two are dedicated to examples from Hari Kunzru’s novels *Transmission* and *My Revolutions*. In the former, intimacy operates in the novel’s entanglement with digital flows and the dematerialization of relations – I focus more specifically on the motif of touch. In the latter, intimacy appears in the novel’s investigation of politics, by questioning how political movements can – or fail to – accommodate personal aspirations for intimacy. A third part delves into Mohsin Hamid’s own writing of intimacy, drawing examples from several novels and looking at two tenets of his poetics, namely Sufism and his aim of “co-creating” the story with the reader (Hamid 2015: xviii).

4.2.1. *Transmission*: looking for touch in the digital

What is left of touch in a world that is altogether dematerialised? That is one of the questions which transpires through Kunzru’s foray into digital technologies in his 2004 novel *Transmission*. The novel was published before social media and before the global surge of the main hegemonic tech companies, yet it still bears relevance to contemporary experiences of the digital, as discussed with the writer in an interview (*HK ITW* 2018). The main plotline involving the spread of a computer virus is also tinged with a post-9/11 sentiment of fear and threat, focalized on the figure of the foreigner that is Arjun. *Transmission* shows how the shift to dematerialized lifestyles is a double-edged sword, since the digital world is seen as both a practical outlet enabling more communication, and an unseizable downward spiral pushing people apart. The notion of the unseizable deserves particular attention, as it gestures towards the semantics of touch pervading the narrative and specifically the characters’ relation to place. In *Transmission*, the term “digital” evokes at once the turn to numeric information systems, and the challenge of physical and emotional contact. As they struggle to access a sense of intimacy, the characters’ behaviours illustrate Zygmunt Bauman’s distinction between “physical closeness” and “proximity” in contemporary times (2003: 62).

⁶⁴ The term “Umwelt” is generally attributed to German philosopher Jakob von Uexküll, and designates the living conditions of a given species. For an extensive analysis of the concept, see Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011, 79-80.

In her article “Cosmopolitan Love: The One and the World in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*,” Ashley T. Sheldon articulates the novel with the philosophy of cosmopolitanism. Sheldon looks at the novel's treatment of figures such as “the neighbor” or “the other” (2012: 355) and contends that the narrative structure of *Transmission* “destroys bonds in the process of forging them” (2012: 349). While converging with this analysis, here I would like to redirect this question of bonds and observe it at the level of intimacy and touch, emphasizing how both depend on the subject's relations with place.

A prime example of this is to be found in the relation between the characters of Guy Swift and Gabriella Caro. Ironically, both characters hold positions in the communication sector – Guy manages a marketing company, while Gabriella, his girlfriend, works in public relations. Throughout the novel, the two characters are shown wrestling with their relationship, frustrated by each other and finding it impossible to be truly intimate. In fact, the narrative shows how this difficulty is articulated around each character's problematic sense of place. Gabriella is described as follows in Guy's eyes:

When people were looking for a comparison for Gabriella, they usually went for Audrey Hepburn. She had the same high cheekbones and air of aristocratic startledness, of having been marooned wherever you encountered her, a refugee from a better, gentler place. But, unlike Hepburn, there was a rough edge, a raggedness of chewed nails and cigarette smoke which gave her an air of potential promiscuity that Guy (among many others) found irresistible. (T 72)

In Guy's idealized vision of Gabriella's femininity, being stranded or “marooned” is made into a positive feature. Guy's vision of place throughout the novel is actually nurtured by such escapist fantasies. Gabriella is considered in terms of spatial boundaries, through her “rough edge” and “ruggedness,” yet these edges are not welcoming – chewed nails and smoke form an irregular, blurry entry point towards her, and announce the difficult creation of intimacy. Guy's own mistake is to consider Gabriella in terms of “promiscuity” – evoking a sexual encounter – rather than proximity, which would extend the range of possible relations. Guy Swift's relations to place and people are always either too close or too distant, seemingly missing the mark for meaningful interactions.

The external narrator regularly shifts the focus between the characters. Later on, it is Gabriella who watches Guy and uncovers his superficial relation to place, in a moment when the connection between the characters has once again failed, each contemplating their own thoughts in the quiet of the bedroom:

They lay for a while in the dark. Guy thought about pitches. Gaby thought about Guy, about his absurd sense of his own importance, about the way nothing bad had ever happened to him. If there was a buffet table in a room, he walked straight up and began to eat. If there was one chair, he sat down. Thailand or Mauritius or Zanzibar or Cancún or Sharm el-Sheikh or Tunisia or Bali or the Gold Coast or Papeete or Gran Cayman or Malibu. So many places for Guy. All the same. (*T* 134)

Guy's relation to place is once again articulated with his relation to other people. Gabriella notices an unconscious selfishness and the impossibility for him to share places, whether they are "a buffet table in a room," a chair, or even sharing his experience of foreign places, all amalgamated in her weary enumeration. The passage underlines how the meaning ascribed to places is co-dependent with the relation to others, both being fostered by an ethos of attention which Guy sorely lacks.

The difficult contact between the two characters is also referred to in physical terms. As they are sitting in a restaurant, Guy "wanted to touch her, but it felt unwise. Gaby could do this, generate invisible armor for herself" (*T* 71). With this passage, the narrator engages with the pitfalls of intimacy, including the complexity of body language. In so doing, it points to the fact that contact is never to be taken for granted, and is always subject to a negotiation. In *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy evokes this question by highlighting the paradoxical role that separation can play in the sense of proximity:

From one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up. All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other. (...) If "to come into contact" is to begin to make sense of one another, then this "coming" penetrates nothing; there is no intermediate and mediating "milieu." Meaning is not a milieu in which we are immersed. There is no *mi-lieu* [between place]. (Nancy *et. al.* 2000: 5, emphasis and translation in the original)

Nancy's understanding of contact between two "singular[s]" prevents a mediation through a physical place. Place might be what allows for "separation" – the singularity of two bodies – to appear saliently. But contact, for Nancy, happens without involving a "*mi-lieu*" as a third party. This idea partakes of Nancy's argument advocating the fundamental plurality of existence, and can shed light on the excessive individualism and the superficial relation to place represented in *Transmission*. The illusion that proximity and touch operate via a *mi-lieu* is particularly striking in the case of Guy Swift, who believes that he can prove his intimacy with Gabriella through physical objects. He thus sends a "collar" to Gabriella in the mail, a symbolical link materialized in an expensive object (*T* 247). Guy also believes that objects can make an

apartment “their place” and thus foster a sense of intimacy: “Guy had put the picture up. It was evidence: that they were together and this was their place, that because of shared memories as demonstrated in Exhibit A they also had a future” (*T* 73). The character’s superficial understanding of relationships operates in a twofold manner: not only in the use of an object as a substitute for meaningful interactions, but also in the constructed spectacle of intimacy provided by a framed picture.

Describing all the prerogatives Guy enjoys as a member of a wealthy global class, the narrator tells us: “You would have thought he was untouchable” (*T* 12). While the term bears a positive connotation here – Guy is free to move, he is not hindered in any way – his “swift” mobility ends up posing a challenge to the development of intimacy, but also to his identity, as shown by the novel’s ironic plot twist where he is mistaken for an asylum seeker. Of course, the term “untouchable” also has a particular resonance with regard to the novel’s other two central characters, who come from India.

For Arjun Mehta’s own trajectory is equally characterized by a struggle to experience touch. As an immigrant in the United States, Arjun suffers from extreme social isolation, manifested in his practice of space and place: he is isolated from his family, he entertains a problematic status as a pedestrian (*T* 38), and he is left on “the bench,” a term standing for the shared suburban house where he and other Desi workers are waiting for job opportunities (*T* 40). But beyond the socially situated experiences of Arjun, his character points towards a transnational, transclass experience of emotional and physical isolation. In his fascination for the Bollywood actress Leela Zahir, the character of Arjun is constructed a caricatural figure of the lonely tech geek, entertaining fantasies about a woman he can only ever reach by creating a computer virus named after her. Arjun’s only actual experience of touch with Chris, a co-worker, is depicted as a problem for which she might have helped him find the solution: “the uncomputable problem of finding another person to touch and be touched in return” (*T* 90). For Arjun, the question of intimacy hinges on his mathematical perception of the world. Just like information systems, intimacy responds to forms of logic and automated response, but also contains an element of chance. In a long passage where he thinks about the symbolical extent of computer viruses, Arjun reflects that he is not interested in their science fictional component: “For him it was all Romance. Pyaar” (*T* 109). Arjun’s thoughts about love lead him to question its origins, wondering whether “the rise of Love has something to do with cinema, or independence from the British, or globalization” (*T* 110). Following this attempt at locating it, love is then approached along the lines of the dichotomy between inside and outside:

[Love] kept knocking on his bedroom door like an irritating kid sister. Will you come out and play? He would have paid no attention to it (what could be vaguer and less logical?) but sickeningly all its absurd rituals and intricacies led back to something he wanted, something he had started to crave with a longing bordering on panic.

Touch.

Love was the price of touch. Love was the maze through which you had to find your way. In the May heat, when the heavy air was like a hand on his body as he lay awake at night, he could feel the need for another person as a hard ache inside, an alien presence which had formed in his chest like a tumour. (*T* 110)

The stalemate faced by Arjun manifests in the choice of spatial metaphors: a knock on a door and a labyrinth. In the first part of the passage, Arjun's anxiety is made more salient with a personification of love, which mirrors his realization that he must take other people into account if he is to obtain touch in any form. The image of the "maze" then finds a sonic echo in the "May heat," slowly blending metaphor with the felt sensations of the body. Love and the longing for touch are finally conjoined in the uncanny image of the "alien," used to describe Arjun's beating heart. By (literal) extension, the "alien presence" forming in his body refers to Arjun himself, an alien presence on American territory, soon to be hunted down for his cyber-crime. In that sense, Arjun's long reflections on the estranging character of love and the intrusion of touch are but one dimension on the novel's engagement with otherness and the sharing of places.

By interweaving the semantics of computer technology with a reflection on love and intimacy, Kunzru's novel resorts to the notion of touch not only as a thematic stake, but also because it aims to connect with the reader with the world they live in. In an interview with James Naughtie for BBC Radio 4, the writer once explained that he liked to "take the things we love about science fiction," but also "try to make that work with more humanistic kinds of writing" (Naughtie 2017). Blending the comically "touching" kitsch aesthetics of Arjun's Bollywood-infused dreams with the depictions of "untouchable" computer viruses, the novel abides by Jean-Luc Nancy's articulation of writing with touching. In *Corpus*, Nancy explains:

if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of 'sense.' And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of meaning a touch (2008: 11, emphasis in the original).

"Making the incorporeal touching" is an agenda that could define many of Kunzru's novels, whether they discuss the "incorporeal" aspects of information technology, of spirituality (as in

Gods Without Men), of music and culture (as in *White Tears*) or even the unseizable extent of political beliefs, which are explored at length in *My Revolutions*.

4.2.2. *My Revolutions*: the personal, the political and the places in between

In *My Revolutions*, the duality between proximity and distance is equated by the protagonist's difficult navigations of the personal and the political. In a constant to-and-fro between past and present, the narrative has first-person narrator Mike (formerly Chris) ponder over the benefits of his present, sharing a comfortable place with partner Miranda in the 1990s, in sharp contrast with his past in the early 1970s, when the personal was sacrificed for the sake of the political cause. Critic Peter D. Mathews argues that this is Kunzru's "most directly political novel" (Mathews 2020: 4). While it is true that the novel dives headfirst into historically situated modes of political action, and gestures towards the legacy of the New Left in Britain, it also suggests a more universal understanding of politics – a constant negotiation of one's existence with others and with place.

The central negotiation of the novel is articulated in the character of Miles, a photographer who has found his way to Mike/Chris (hereon Mike) despite the latter's efforts to live in hiding, and is now threatening to reveal his past actions. Trying to convince Mike to give in to his blackmail, he starts intruding physically in his daily life, revealing fragments of the past to his new family and forcing his presence onto the protagonist. The irruption of Miles first impacts the intimacy between Mike and his partner Miranda. In the comfort of her renovated cottage, Miranda has no idea that her partner used to live in communes and plan revolutionary actions against places of power. In the opening of the novel, Mike makes it clear that his entire mental geography has been unsettled by this return of his past: "The study has been transmuted by Miles's visit. It's as if, by coming here, he's put the room in brackets" (*MR* 1). Mike's comfortable present life suddenly becomes suspended in the air. Reflecting on the possible outcomes for his couple with Miranda, he ponders: "maybe she'll find a way to feel we did have a connection" (*MR* 5). The character's inauthentic life has led to a fake proximity, which he now seeks to reevaluate and map out anew.

Towards the end of the novel, as he has once again come to blackmail him, Miles tells Mike: "Once upon a time I wasn't so far away from you, politically" (*MR* 257). The spatial metaphor of the political spectrum is constantly renegotiated throughout the novel, since Mike tries to find a place for his past within his present life, but also because he struggles to re-situate

his politics clearly. The political plot in which Mike is trapped in the present of the narrative involves Pat Ellis, a former ally of Mike's revolutionary group who has now become an official in the Blair government. As Miles takes Mike to see Pat speak at a press conference, the latter reflects on the kind of hiatus that can result from personal relationships:

Seeing Pat Ellis had taken me back into our own private grey area. Of course there was one: in every situation involving two or more people, there's always a grey area, a few half-tone specks at the border of the black and the white (MR 208).

The border, a motif which is central to Kunzru's works, functions here as an uncomfortable place, a "grey area" which is reinforced by the character's blurry memories. The evocation of "the black and the white" is indeed reminiscent of old photographs. Even in the analeptic episodes, the protagonist remembers this sense of blurriness and the difficulty of finding a compass for social relations and moral decisions. Remembering an exchange he had with Miles at the time, about consciousness in cinema, he recalls that consciousness "lay in that grey area between the personal and the political where I found a lot of things got jumbled up with one another. (MR 41) Again, the character's memories are discussed in spatial terms, the motif of the "grey area" this time applying to ethics. The phrase "the personal and the political" refers to late 1960s feminist thought, and to an essay written by American activist Carol Hanisch in 1969 and regularly republished since, which spurred the famous feminist motto "the personal is political" (Hanisch 2006). The intertextual reference points here to the progressive loss of meaning of these oft-repeated mottos for the narrator. Mike finds it hard to map out his past experience, because it was already "jumbled up" in hyper-referential political language.

What the novel displays is a character trying to return to a certain *milieu*, trying to access the texture and substance of what he experienced, but finding only "grey areas" in the meanders of his grey matter. It shows how Mike's quest for a pristine locus of experience is always bound to fail – what he finds, instead, are relationships, contacts in border zones, "uncomfortable" shared moments. In that sense, Mike's narrative testifies to Jean-Luc Nancy's contention that "[m]eaning is not a milieu in which we are immersed." There might be no "milieu" that would both contain and mediate relations, but rather a constant experience of contact that confirms the essentially plural nature of human existence (2000: 5). Matthew Hart points out that Mike's last name, Frame, functions as a pun considering that the time of the diegesis "frames" the character's incursions into his past (2009: 1065). I have argued elsewhere that this "framing" occurs on the surface, whereas Mike's former last name is Chris *Carver*, a name conveying

more potential for creation and self-reinvention (Jeanniard du Dot 2023a: 67). In fact, this can extend to the political activists' relation to language, and in particular the language of place.

Indeed, the ambition of Mike's former revolutionary group entails a transformative re-shaping of collective existence, which begins with *carving it out* in language. In his *Guardian* review of the novel, Andy Beckett noted that "[t]he hard, glassy sentences are good reflectors of the geometry of relationships, of shifts in emotional weather" (Beckett 2007). Through internal focalization, pamphlets placed on the page, and an extensive presence of dialogue, Kunzru has his activist characters use language as a weapon, wishing to disrupt the established living spaces of consumer society. In the revolutionary groups Mike evolves in during the 1960s and 1970s, "the geometry of relationships" actually aims towards a destruction of material comfort, considered not only superfluous but complicit with the capitalist system. The writing of proximity here is twofold: it is manifested in a redefinition of the use of places, and in the rejection of intimate relationships.

This is exemplified in the characters of Sean and Anna, Mike's mentors. Privacy in physical space is rejected by Anna ("She'd become the advocate of a policy of absolute openness (...) privacy was just another name for isolation," *MR* 171) and ends up impacting the characters' relations to the places they live in. In one of the first communes they share in London, Sean in turn advocates "blitzkrieg household disruption," moving objects around constantly in order "to unsettle everyone as much as possible" (*MR* 111). Sean ends up taking doors off their hinges: "There was to be no privacy" (*ibid*). The characters' carving of collective experience through language thus finds a counterpart in physical space, where they build up an aggressive architecture of shared space. For the reader, Mike's memories of these experiences are highly unsettling, and find their counterpart formally in the pamphlets which pepper the narrative. In one of them, Mike remembers having written with Anna:

CONFRONTATION! CONFRONTATION! CONFRONTATION! (*MR* 44)⁶⁵

The initial ternary call is followed by a series of anaphoric sentences, starting with the word "confrontation" and explaining why it must be a guiding principle. Such pamphlets regularly spread out on the page are as parodic as they are disturbing, showing the powerful hold that words can have on a radical in the making. The ethos of "confrontation" thus promoted partakes

⁶⁵ The typescript used here is Courier, which is close to the one used in the Penguin paperback edition of *My Revolutions*.

of an excessive opening up of places, an erasure of privacy and boundaries forcing each and every one to confront others, with nowhere to hide.

Interestingly, the final chapter of *My Revolutions* opens up on the question of love, discussed above in the passages from *Transmission*. In the same manner as in *Transmission*, love is called upon for the character to assess their place among events and relationships, acknowledging the persistence of a need for human connection and the impossibility to escape entirely. At the end of the novel, Mike tries to drive away in order to escape the revelation of his identity to his partner Miranda. He realizes that he has no choice but “confrontation,” the very principle he advocated as a young activist. The novel ends with a somewhat cryptic internal monologue:

(...) just round the corner an insect world is waiting, and so saying we must love one another or die isn't enough, not by a long way, because there'll come a time when any amount of love will be too late. But it's something, love, not nothing, and that's why I pull over and find a callbox in a lay-by and punch a number into the phone. (MR 277)

With this ending, the protagonist seems to reconcile the beliefs of the revolutionary struggle with his present life. Being aware of politics and of wider connections with the world – contained in the metaphor of the “insect world” – is still at the core of his train of thought. But the materialistic life led with Miranda actually becomes substantial, “not nothing,” not worthy of a nihilistic rejection of love, and the telephone line becomes another form of connection. The “revolutions” thus announced in the title of the novel end in a deceptively mundane reconnection over the phone rather than a spectacular event. This open-ended revolution converges with what psychoanalyst and philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle develops in the final chapter of *Power of Gentleness*, titled “A Gentle Revolution”:

Gentleness is a return to self that invents a future in the image of the spiral. An open revolution. It is a “repetition” in the sense intended by Kierkegaard: reviving the past with a view to a possible opening to the unexpected. (2018: 103-104)

In his articulation of political action with what Dufourmantelle also calls an “intimate revolution,” Kunzru leaves a certain number of gaps open towards “the unexpected,” but also towards the reader and their own subjective ethics. With Mike's faulty first-person recollections and the mock-memoir title, this narrative seeks to *confront* the reader to their own contradictions and conundrums. In the end, both character and reader are led to see how

intimacy opens up pathways (or “spirals”) that are just as intricate as the demands of communal living or the spectacular occupation of places in revolutionary action.

“Intimate revolutions” also run through Mohsin Hamid’s novels, which similarly feature the conflation of political events with personal relationships. With Hamid, too, evoking intimacy and proximity in the writing of place can allow for a certain proximity with the reader, suggesting common grounds where reader and writer meet.

4.2.3. Intimacy, Sufism and creative connection in Mohsin Hamid’s novels

Proximity transpires thematically in Mohsin Hamid’s fiction, but also forms part of the writer’s perception of literary creation. In this part I would first like to observe intimacy as a theme, underpinned by the writer’s systematic use of romantic couples in his plots. This will lead me to observe to the influence of Sufism on his writing, a writing which ultimately advocates for a practice of storytelling that is common to reader and writer and results in a conception of the novel as a place that can be shared creatively. Hamid displays not only the sharing of physical places but also more immaterial forms of relating which can result from the writing of intimacy.

Intimacy is particularly perceptible in *Exit West*, a novel where the characters are made to reevaluate their proximity towards others – whether strangers or loved ones – in light of the war they exêro,ce and the emigration that ensues. In the process, the main characters Saeed and Nadia also have to reconsider their intimacy as a couple suffering the pressures inherent to forced migration. Effects of distance and proximity are thus revealed together with changing environments, showing how the trials of leaving one’s homeland also imply challenges on an intimate level. Here again, the absence of geographical markers and the use of the “black doors” to move between places can be misleading. Paula Brauer argues that because of the novel’s magical realist strategies, “the category of distance is disintegrated” (2019: 299). I would rather argue that the sense of proximity and distance are maintained throughout the novel, yet redistributed towards and attuned to the characters’ experiences, rather than established by a hegemonic narrator. As previously noted in this thesis, Hamid’s emphasis is on experience, both as a subjective marker and as a means of relating with others across categories of gender, nation, or age. This writing through experience can indeed destabilize usual patterns of description and setting, and proposes an approach that makes place not so much visualised as felt. In that sense, it converges with Yi-Fu Tuan’s argument that

[m]any places, profoundly significant to particular individuals and groups, have little visual prominence. They are known viscerally, as it were, and not through the discerning eye or mind. A function of literary art is to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place. (1977: 162)

Hamid gives “visibility” to intimacy in and with place, for instance through his use of synecdoche, which allows to zoom in and out of particular experiences and builds up by touches the reality of the migrating subject. This can lead to unexpected associations, such as the description of a war zone as “intimate”:

War in Saeed and Nadia's city revealed itself to be an intimate experience, combatants pressed close together, front lines defined at the level of the street one took to work, the school one's sister attended, the house of one's aunt's best friend, the shop where one bought cigarettes. (*EW* 65)

The “front lines” extend into lines that sketch out a new experience of the city. Hamid’s use of the indefinite pronoun “one” paradoxically produces a sense of proximity, by suggesting that anyone can be impacted by the situation, while the combatants “pressed close together” evoke the collision of bodies in the experience of conflict. Progressively, questions of intimacy apply to the relationship between Saeed and Nadia, regularly evoked in terms of distance and proximity. In the final stages of the novel, after they have moved to Greece, England and California, the narrator comments on “the distance that had opened between them” and Nadia “putting barriers between her and him” (*EW* 193-194). The characters end up “drifting apart,” nurturing different aspirations for themselves (*EW* 203). The term evokes an unwilling distancing which occurs without one noticing. Incidentally, this is a term that appears a lot in Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*, and will be contextualized in a subsequent chapter. With the detail granted to forms of movement, Hamid and Kunzru both attempt to render the experience of place comprehensively, including dynamics which result from the complexity of human relationships. In the end, Saeed and Nadia are both forced to acknowledge

the end of the world they had built together, a world of shared experiences in which no one else would share, and a shared intimate language that was unique to them, and a sense that what they might break was special and likely irreplaceable. (*EW* 203)

The characters’ shared journey has led them to construct an intimate place in and through language, as suggested by the metaphor of “breaking” their relationship. Now fully settled in California, Saeed and Nadia no longer need to take refuge in each other and the knowledge of their “shared experiences,” and end up making a place for themselves individually. As often in Hamid’s writing, the passage is rendered in an incremental writing style structured by commas and conjunctions. This use of parataxis and accumulation also produces a form of intimacy,

with a very dense and tight effect on the page which ends up fully surrounding the reader with the characters' situation.

Having a couple stand as the central protagonist, with two characters of equal importance in the advancement of the plot, is a singular feature of *Exit West*. Yet couples are a staple of Hamid's novels. Every single one of his novels articulates the main plot with a love entanglement, whether it concerns the characters of Daru and Mumtaz in *Moth Smoke*, Changez and Erica in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the unnamed protagonist and the "pretty girl" in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West*, or more recently Oona and Anders in *The Last White Man*. The relationship can be allegorical – as with Changez and his girlfriend Erica, the latter being identified by critics as *Am/Erica* (Hartnell 2010: 337) – or allow for the comparison of experiences – as in *Exit West* and *The Last White Man* – or even give way to shifts in the focalisation of the narrative – as in *Moth Smoke*, where Mumtaz ends up being the author of Daru's story. In all these cases, the dual structure of the couple contributes to Mohsin Hamid's aesthetics of permanent displacement examined in the first chapter of this work, as if the negotiations inherent to an intimate relationship enabled shifts in perspective which Hamid is intent on maintaining.

Besides, a metaphorical play on proximity and distance keeps recurring in these couples, whereby intimacy is made to mirror the larger spatial imagery of the novels. Adnan Mahmutovic analyses how the romantic "osmosis" (*TRF* 160) that Changez yearns for in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a reflection of his desire to incorporate Americanness in his own identity (2016: 13). Changez indeed ends the tale of his love story with Erica in spatial terms, by claiming that "it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have been blurred and made permeable by a relationship" (*TRF* 196). In *Moth Smoke*, the motif of the moth getting too close to the flame is a metaphor for both Daru and Mumtaz's affair, and for the dangerous teasing simultaneously played out at the Indo-Pak border. This trope of love as a danger can give way to reconfigurations of physical space, as when Mumtaz and Daru recreate intimacy after a fight: "We talk, but we're talking about nothing, just reestablishing a comfortable space, and although our first fight hasn't been erased, I think it's safe to say we've survived" (*MS* 163). Just like for the characters in *Exit West*, language proves pivotal to form shared places of intimacy.

The metaphors surrounding Mumtaz and Daru's love affair, such as the moth and the flame, or the peacock, refer to the ghazals of nineteenth-century poet Ghalib (Faruqi and

Pritchett 1994: 98; Farooqi 2015).⁶⁶ For instance, the fight between Mumtaz and Daru takes place in “the peacock area” of Lahore’s Jallo Park (*MS* 161). Resorting to this popular legacy, Mohsin Hamid situates his writing of intimacy within a long tradition found in Urdu love poetry, whereby the connection between two lovers opens up to more mystical planes of interpretation. The use of such motifs in contemporary novels has been examined by Claire Chambers in “A comparative approach to Pakistani fiction in English,” where she studies the extent of the category “Muslim” in said fiction:

At stake in the return to figures of Muslim art, such as Faiz, Chughtai and Ghalib, is a desire to think through moments of crisis in Muslim subjectivity formation (...) the writers seek to highlight the centrality of Muslim art to global canons, and to situate their own fictions within a long history of Muslim artistic identity. (...) The intertextual referencing of a long history of Muslim artistic work refigures the category “Muslim” as a springboard rather than a constricting box. (2011: 132)

Hamid has been criticised by some for his attempts to appeal to an English-speaking audience to the detriment of his representations of contemporary Pakistan and Islam. Observing Hamid’s depictions of Changez’s beard in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, or the rather two-dimensional “fundos” of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Zain R. Mian thus argues that “[e]xploring the many worlds of Mohsin Hamid’s fiction, the reader finds little room for a nuanced Muslim subjectivity” (Mian 2019 *n.p.*). It is perhaps because of a discomfort with the representation of contemporary Islam in novels aimed towards an Anglophone readership that Hamid resorts to more ancient *topoi* within the shared literary heritage of ghazals, and their lofty imagery of love. As Claire Chambers suggests, it could also stem from a desire to find a “springboard,” a creative escape from representations of contemporary Islam which can seem over-coded with political significance.

Mohsin Hamid’s very own “springboard” relies more specifically on his claims of Sufi inspirations. When reading such inspirations caution must be taken with regard to a fetishizing, Orientalizing gaze – Sufism being easily misunderstood and idealized in the West (Chambers 2012: 125-126). Critics have pointed out how in the post-9/11 West, the perceived values of Sufism have been put forth by politicians in their “search for the ‘moderate Muslim’” (Hartnell 2012: 144). This in turn could raise questions about the reasons for Hamid’s popularity in the US and the UK. I choose here to restrict the demonstration to Hamid’s reclaiming of Sufism in his own words, observing how it connects to his writing of intimacy. In an interview about *How*

⁶⁶ The peacock is also likely to refer to the “peacock throne” of seventeenth-century Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, whose story actually frames the main narrative of *Moth Smoke*. The extremely ornate throne is still subject to a number of historical investigations but also myths.

to *Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, which ends with a poetic second-person monologue about love, Hamid explains that “[t]he Sufi poem ... is Islamic mysticism where love is used as the prism for relating to the universe.” The writer pinpoints that it often appears “in the form of love poems, which are second-person addresses” (Johnson 2013 *n.p.*). From the “springboard” to the “prism,” Hamid’s Sufi intertext partakes of his writing of intimacy by proposing that the outside/inside dichotomy can be better illustrated through this particular lyrical motif and the second-person address. In a 2022 interview with Paul Veyret, Hamid further explained:

in a sort of Sufi tradition, (...) there are two different paths to enlightenment: one is you look inside yourself and you see the universe reflected within you. And to me, that is something more like what writing fiction and reading fiction is like. This is a kind of universe that opens up within. (Hamid and Veyret 2022 *n.p.*)

The image of a “kind of universe that opens up within” is particularly revealing of the writer’s poetics, where images of place, boundaries and openness are used to convey possible convergences and encounters, including with oneself. In fact, this particular image transpires in Hamid’s fiction, for instance in *Exit West* when Saeed and Nadia have mushrooms together and Saeed sees “worlds” through her: “surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this, and then he regarded Nadia and saw that she was regarding him and her eyes were like worlds” (*EW* 44). In *Moth Smoke*, the loved one also provides a gateway towards the world, during a moment of intimacy between Daru and Mumtaz. Sufism is referred to directly:

That’s the secret. (...)
What Sufis veil in verse.
I turn her around and look into her eyes and see the wonder in them that must be in mine as well, the wonder I first saw on our night of ecstasy, and I feel myself explode, expand, fill the universe, then collapse, implode like a detonation under water, become tiny, disappear. (*MS* 256)

In both examples, the image of the loved one as a prism through which one’s mental geography expands is conflated with the more mundane mention of drugs – mushrooms or ecstasy – as if to maintain a practical “veil” of uncertainty over the character’s perceptions. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrator Changez also explains didactically that “in our poetry and folk songs *intoxication* occupies a recurring role as a facilitator of love and spiritual enlightenment” (*TRF* 62, emphasis in the original). Intoxication can also be a metaphor for the act of reading, with the writer trying to foster such “spiritual enlightenment.” Hamid’s narratives create inexplicable, ephemeral intimacies on the page, and in doing so, emphasize the shared vulnerability of human experiences as well as the fragile connection between reader and writer.

The writer also opens up these fragile spaces through the use of the second person, which, as mentioned above, gestures towards a Sufi legacy.⁶⁷ His novels written partly or entirely in the second person (*Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*) are at the same time reminiscent of writers like Camus and Calvino, who are admittedly important to Hamid (Khan 2015; Hamid 2015: 78). Blending these influences, he re-purposes the second person towards his principle of “co-creation,” a principle which to him “has been central to [his] fiction, the notion that a novel is made jointly by a writer and a reader” (Hamid 2015: xviii). The writer puts forth this principle in a very didactic manner, even within the narratives where the reader is sometimes reminded with authority of the active stance they are expected to hold: “Like all books, this self-help book is a co-creative project. (...) It's in being read that a book becomes a book” (*HTG* 97). In fact, the second person is an integral part of the effects of distance and proximity found in Hamid’s fiction. As Sandrine Sorlin argues,

[t]he second-person pronoun ensures that the other (author) affects the self (reader) while keeping the other separate from the self in an essential distance. The externalizing force of ‘you’ makes it the perfect form for an ethical encounter between two selves desiring to meet each other and to meet themselves. (Sorlin 2022: 78)

In its concerns with the experiences of the migrant or the social outcast, Hamid’s use of the second person undoubtedly responds to this double function of the “other (author),” or the *author-as-other*, maintaining “an essential distance” inherent to the genre of fiction while creating effects of proximity which aim towards recognition and identification. Sandrine Sorlin further remarks that “you” is “the relating pronoun by excellence, linking one human to another as interdependent beings and as such it has an ethical dimension” (2022: 24). With his second-person pronouns, Hamid constantly questions the willingness of his readers to relate with others, intertwining the tacit social contracts of empathy and identification with the unsettling literary pacts offered by his narrators. Changez, the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, voices this contract at the end of his long monologue addressed both to the reader and to an unknown American character: “you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy” (*TRF* 209). Closing up the novel, the reader feels they are now “bound” within the intimate, metaphorical place Hamid has co-created with them.

⁶⁷ Delphine Munos proposed a study of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* through the double lens of the second-person and Sufism in a 2019 conference in Montpellier (“Self-help, Sufi Style: Double Deixis in Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*,” fully referenced in the bibliography). Unfortunately, I have not managed to access the content of this analysis which I have not found published in article form.

This image of a “binding” intimacy leads to examining the fundamental role of limits – boundaries and other – in the sharing of places, and how Kunzru and Hamid render the dynamics of sharing within and through the limits of place.

4.3. Meeting grounds and the limits of place

In Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*, the character of Guy Swift presents his marketing strategy to PEBA, the European border control authority, in the following terms:

Anyway, like we say in one of our slides, “The border is everywhere.” “The border,” and this is key, “is in your mind.” Obviously from a marketing point of view a mental border is a plus, because a mental border is a value and a value is something we can promote. (T 252-253)

This parody of vacuous marketing language actually hides the writer’s own interest in the notion of the border. When making his 2020 podcast “Into the Zone,” he chose to define it as “a podcast about opposites, and how borders are never as clear as we think” (Pushkin 2020). Guy Swift’s supposedly transformational reinvestment of national borders into “mental borders” points to the powerful symbolism of borders, which in the novel seem to pervade every character’s experience, despite the semblance of a borderless world proposed by globalization.

In this part I will address borders as well as other types of *limits* in relation to place. Kunzru’s writing of a border that is “everywhere” shows how questioning limits means considering one’s very sense of place and conception of space. As Massimo Cacciari observes, “the limit defines a place, even if problematically” (2015: 14). Cacciari proposes that limits are not impervious or even external to place: “The limit does not (...) delimit the place from outside, as something that contains the entities (like a container, a vessel), instead, the limit constitutes the place. Place *persists-consists in its limits*” (15, my emphasis). This notion of “persistence” suggests once again that place is in constant evolution, and that limits participate in this dynamism. Jeff Malpas argues similarly in favour of a co-dependence between place and its limits, and strives to defend the openness of place *despite* and *through* boundaries. He summarizes this apparent paradox by defining place as a “dynamic and bounded openness” (2011: 237). This very “openness” allows for encounters to occur, and critical negotiations to unfold. A novel like Hamid’s *Exit West*, for instance, points to the openness of place through the device of the “black doors” accessible from within private bedrooms, while emphasising

the persistence of limits when there are hostile demonstrations all around the characters' migrant squats.

Looking at the limits of place thus allows me to further sketch out the geographies of the common that have thus far been examined in Hamid's and Kunzru's narratives. The word "limits" is chosen because it can actually encompass various terms and their specific applications – the OED refers to the etymology of "limit" as "*limes, limit* – boundary, frontier" (OED 2008). Terms such as boundary, limit, frontier or border all appear frequently in Hamid's and Kunzru's works, but distinctions will be made in the course of the analysis to clarify the different readings of place they enable. Looking at these limits can shed light on the possible meeting grounds which take shape, even temporarily, when people leave or enter places *with* and *through* its limits.

In this part I first observe how Hamid's and Kunzru's novels display the fears associated with such forms of contact, articulating old obsessions – fears of miscegenation, or world-scale viruses – with the more recent invasions of digital technology. In the novels, these fears often reveal the darker implications of contact, displaying the suspicions entertained towards what (or who) comes from beyond the limits of place. In this part I will also analyse the motif of "personal space," claimed as a right or a need in contemporary societies, and the different dynamics of contact and confrontation this unveils in each writer's works.

4.3.1. Fearful transmissions: place and the hazards of contact

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses the fears associated with contact and hybridization. Commenting more specifically on the questions of touch and contagion inherent to the 1857 Mutiny, he explains: "The margin of hybridity, where cultural differences 'contingently' and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience" (Bhabha 2004: 296).⁶⁸ In Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's fictions, such "moments of panic" not only reveal the existence of limits – including borders – but, in doing so, also shed light on differentiated experiences of place. In a famous 1991 text called "Arts of the Contact Zone," postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt defined the concept of "contact zone" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their

⁶⁸ The causes of the 1857 Mutiny in India are multiple but Bhabha's comments on touch and contagion can be read as referring to the use of pork and beef fat as grease for the weapons among Muslim and Hindu troops, which partly triggered the rebellion.

aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991: 34). This part will examine the novels’ descriptions of defense mechanisms and fears caused by moments of contact at the limits of place. Fears of digital transmission obviously run through Kunzru’s eponymous novel, but these fears can also be read in light of genetics, biology, and in the legacy or the reproduction of the “asymmetrical relations” evoked by Pratt. For it is not only the processes of transmission which are at stake, but also the reception of these processes, and the challenges they pose to the collective imagination, especially in light of heightened polarisations and scapegoating such as can be found in post-9/11 discourse. This is what Iwona Filipczak observes when qualifying these fears as “liquid,” articulating *Transmission* with Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity” (2014: 68). Hari Kunzru, and to a lesser extent Mohsin Hamid, conflate all these dynamics in metaphors of contagion and border-crossing which never occur in *only one* or the other of these fields. Biological transmission is always extended towards the material or the cultural, and vice-versa, calling for a “supplementary understanding” of the “biomaterial aspects” of modernity (Bahri 2017: 76).

Tim Ingold’s re-assessment of the metaphor of transmission can provide a point of entry into the aesthetics and politics of transmission in these novels. In *Being Alive* and *Lines: A Brief History*, the anthropologist revisits the notion of transmission “by which we so readily describe the twin processes of biological and cultural reproduction” (2011: 157). In both cases, transmission is often conceived as information passed on in order to live life, and follow a “way of life” transmitted according to a genealogical model (2011: 162, inverted commas in the original). In his analysis of the dynamics and movements which shape human life, Ingold questions this model and proposes that life is led along lines of “wayfaring,” rather than through transmission: “The task of the wayfarer (...) is not to act out a script received from predecessors but literally to negotiate a path through the world” (*ibid*). He further argues that “wayfaring is a movement of self-renewal or becoming rather than the transport of already constituted beings from one location to another” (2008: 116). This is where Ingold’s proposition can provide insight into the role of contact, in and with place: instead of moving from one point to another unchanged and barely noticed, such information – cultural, biological or other – is still in the process of *becoming*, subjected to change, and to a “negotiation” with the places through which it carves a path.

Kunzru’s novels in particular underline the impossibility for transmission to occur in a linear fashion, without disturbances of any kind. This materializes in his motif of “noise” clogging the channels of transmission, which gives its title to a short story collection (2005)

and to the last chapter of *Transmission*. The writer also tends to mock overtly the fears of contagion stemming from xenophobic discourse, and to question their tendency to be rooted in biological reasoning. In these novels, the possibilities for “self-renewal or becoming” proposed by Tim Ingold find their representation in unexpected twists and nonsensical situations. Of course, this also operates on a formal level as failed messages and glitches are transmitted in an overloaded narrative structure, proposing that the mutations entailed by transmission keep occurring *ad infinitum* in literary form.

A notable amount of critical attention has been devoted to Kunzru’s *Transmission* with respect to metaphors of contagion in particular. Indeed, the *Leela* virus unleashed by the protagonist Arjun, “passing through people and buildings” (T 115), makes the entire world drastically aware of the new hazards of a hyper-connected world, and consequently their perception of limits. Destroying infrastructures, causing political mayhem, the virus reconfigures the limits of places and the very shape of digital space in the imaginary. Richard Brock’s 2008 analysis extends Kunzru’s metaphor of contagion by reading the novel as a reflection of the AIDS epidemic, contending that HIV is similar to globalization flows in “its intimate connection with the dissolution of borders and boundaries” (2008: 380). Whether or not borders and boundaries are “dissolved” in the novel is debatable, but they are undoubtedly challenged by the virus, which stretches the perceived bounds of computer systems and reaches unexpected places. The fears described in *Transmission* also reflect the immediate post-9/11 context during which it was published. As a foreigner on American soil, Arjun unwittingly becomes the ideal scapegoat embodying the terrorist who is trying to break into and threaten the integrity of the American state. Thus, the metaphor of contagion articulates not only technology and the body, but also the body politic, as suggested by Liao Pei-Chen (2013: 53-84).

The relatively recent addition of the digital world to fears of intrusion and contagion are also evoked in Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, where the witty second-person narrator describes the progressive invasion of a computer belonging to the protagonist’s love interest, a woman “who, like many, perhaps most, computer users has never concerned herself overmuch with such matters as firewalls, system updates, or anti-malware utilities” (HTG 169). Without the immaterial limits of “firewalls,” the laptop is suddenly “teeming with digital fauna, much in the same manner as its keyboard is teeming with unseen bacteria and microorganisms” (*ibid*). Here again, the digital, the material and the biological blend in metaphors of contagion which underline the simultaneous persistence and transgression of limits in the contemporary world.

Far from being concentrated in Kunzru's second novel, the motif of contagion actually pervades his works. *The Impressionist* revisits the classic issue of miscegenation in colonial contact, starting with an encounter in a liminal zone, the cave where the protagonist's genitors meet by chance during a storm. Pran Nath Razdan is born from an encounter between an English land surveyor and an Indian mother, yet is believed by all to be the son of the Pandit Amar Nath Razdan, an influential court official in Agra. The particular question of transmission as a metaphor for colonial contact is extended in various contexts over the entire novel, for instance when Pran is taught English poetry by the British major at Fatehpur Palace (*TI* 132). I wish here to pay attention to the first section of the novel, which plays on dramatic irony by insisting on the Pandit's obsession with purity and cleanliness, but also by mirroring the impending revelation of Pran's identity in the ongoing flu epidemic. The Spanish flu quickly makes its way through 1916 Agra and ultimately takes its toll on the Pandit himself. In that novel, limits are therefore connected to the body and its integrity. Pran's fair skin is one such limit: "Pran Nath's skin is a source of pride to everyone. (...) It is proof, cluck the aunties, of the family's superior blood" (*TI* 20). The Kashmiri Pandit character is in fact a defender of caste, being from "one of the highest and most exclusive castes in all Hindustan" (*TI* 20).⁶⁹ Caste is yet another symbolical limit that is hinted at with these fears. Unaware of Pran's "mixed blood," everyone around him, especially the Pandit, praise the importance of limiting their own sphere of existence and limiting contact with others:

He is terrified of pollution. It is his main enemy, an adversary he battles daily through every aspect of his life. The maintenance of impermeable boundaries between himself and the world's filth has gradually come to take up most of his energy, time and love. (*TI* 31)

The Pandit replicates these "impermeable boundaries" in many aspects of his life, for instance by keeping the doctor on the threshold of his "locked bedroom" when he is eventually sick (*T* 35). Consuming his "energy" but also, ultimately, his body, boundaries simultaneously define the Pandit and collapse his interior life. Discussing the limits of place, Massimo Cacciari observes: "To close a place off does not, in fact, safeguard or defend it, but rather erases it – it violates the nature and the authentic meaning of the place, rather than aiding it" (2015: 16). Otherness is indeed still present all around the Pandit's life, even if he personifies it as an "enemy" and "adversary." He has written and defended publicly a treaty about hygiene, "his

⁶⁹ Kunzru's own ancestors are Kashmiri Pandits, including his great grand uncle Hridya Nath Kunzru, a key figure of Indian independence. See the episode "The Guru of Ojai" from Kunzru's podcast "Into the Zone" (episode 3). <https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/into-the-zone/the-guru-of-ojai> (last accessed 15-12-2022).

seminal ‘Next to Cleanliness and Godliness Third Let Us put Correct Circulation of the Blood’” (TI 32). The parodic title, with its peremptory principles, still betrays forms of uncontrolled contact, through the mention of “circulating blood” – what is the character of Pran if not the fortuitous encounter of “circulating bloods”? – and the adjective “seminal,” which reminds the reader of the dramatic irony playing out against the Pandit.

The narrative extends this irony by progressively having the Spanish flu reach the Pandit’s house. As often in his narratives, Kunzru casts the micro-event of Pran’s family circumstances against macro-events occurring on a global scale. In the end, a narrative contagion of sorts takes place. Pran’s story conflates with the trajectory of the influenza, in a dramatic speech by Anjali, the maid who reveals the truth about Pran’s English father: “Impurities, blendings, pollutions, smearings and mucking-ups of all kinds are bound to flow from such a blend of blood, which offends against every tenet of orthodox religion. Small wonder the city of Agra is suffering a plague.” (TI 39) The maid’s comedic anger is conveyed in the alliteration of “**b**ound,” “**b**lend” and “**b**lood.” The passage also emphasizes the irony of what Pran represents: he himself is “bound to flow,” destined towards movement – he starts his long journey of wandering after this passage – and at the same time “bound” by his problematic body, limited by this skin which makes him appear as an Englishman or an Indian in turn, and sometimes turns against him.

Kunzru’s following novels maintain this evocation of contact as contagion, and the forms of rejection and fear that ensue. In *Gods Without Men*, the fear of the unknown is often refocused around the figure of Raj, the autistic child of Lisa and Jaz. The latter was raised in the United States by a Punjabi family, and the question of limits reappears when Jaz’s family consider Raj’s autism:

If the older generation had its way, the kid would be locked up in an attic somewhere, away from prying Punjabi eyes and wagging Punjabi tongues, all those aunties and uncles who knew in their heart of hearts that no good could come of what Jaz had done, the stain he’d put on the family izzat by marrying a white woman. (GWM 52)

Here again, it is miscegenation that is considered as a dangerous form of contagion, leading to a reassessment of limits – the reference to the trope of the “mad woman in the attic” crystallizes the spatial exclusion that results from superstition and fear. Contagion leads to social stigma, the formation of a visible “stain” on the family’s honour. The question of limits and the division of space keeps reappearing whenever Jaz’s family is mentioned. Concerning Jaz and Lisa’s mixed marriage, the internal focaliser comments on “the vast territories he had to straddle to

keep both her and his family in his life” (*GWM* 52). In the building of his own family, Jaz has to live across limits and lead a “compartmentalized life” (*GWM* 59), contrary to his parents. As first-generation immigrants, their relation to boundaries is not a “straddling” but rather the active maintenance of limits, notably in public space:

Jaz could never understand why his mom and dad were so scared. (...) He’d go to the park with his family and the big world would parade before them, (...) sharing the open space. Meanwhile his mom and dad would be delineating their boundaries by laying down blankets, huddling with the children over tiffin-carriers and Tupperware containers of food, too timid even to bring a radio. (*GWM* 54)

The fear of what lurks beyond limits is here re-placed within the immigrant family’s difficult sense of place, with a discomfort which leads them to live permanently at the limits of place. More precisely, their strategy of place-making through visible boundaries – blankets, food – enacts Cacciari’s claim that “the limit constitutes the place” (2015: 15). However, their reluctance to produce even sound waves, or have their children play outside of said boundaries, manifests the impossibility for them to reach out beyond these limits.

Finally, the cultural dimensions of transmission and contagion find their most evocative example in Kunzru’s *White Tears*, a novel about cultural appropriation and the thin line that separates musical inspiration from downright theft. At the end of the novel, after the white main character Seth has suffered a series of misunderstandings and become strangely inhabited by the ghost of the black bluesman Charlie Shaw, he then finds himself in prison and reflects:

Living things (...) possess a boundary of some kind, a membrane or a skin; a metabolism; the ability to react to the world. And to make copies. To pass something on. That’s all Charlie Shaw wanted, to reach forward, to obey the urge of life. I have made no copies. I am a punctum, an end. A point, not a line. (...) The irony, of course, is that in here skin is everything. The color line is absolute. You may not believe in race, but in prison it believes in you. I am supposed to stand with the white man and I have not done that. (*WT* 333-334)

The passage enhances how the transmission of Charlie Shaw’s music has strayed from the traditional channels of transmission. Seth himself has deviated from the information he was supposed to receive and replicate, which entailed “standing with the white man” – in that sense, he has relinquished what Tim Ingold calls “a script received from predecessors,” even if that means ending a long line of transmission (2011: 162). Seth’s considerations end the novel with a metafictional twist by claiming that he is a “point” – a full stop – rather than an ongoing line. At the same time, this ending suggests the new ethical limits to which Seth has now been

confronted, not least the “color line,” which has led the character to reconsider his own place and the boundaries defining his relation to others.

Characters awakening to the place they hold both physically and from a social standpoint pervade the bulk of Kunzru’s writings. In both Kunzru’s and Hamid’s novels, the mapping of personal boundaries is also key to the delimitation of personal space, a notion which takes several shapes in the narratives and reveals a desire to limit and control one’s experiences of the common.

4.3.2. Finding a place by defining personal space

The now commonly held notion of “personal space” is partly indebted to the work of American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who used it in his 1966 *The Hidden Dimension*, where he developed the research field of proxemics – “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture” (1990: 1). Hall compared the use of space in different cultural contexts, and also compared man’s spatial behaviours with that of other animals. He thus observed that the use of space is related to specific *needs*, claiming that “there are great individual and cultural differences in spatial needs” (1990: 54). In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan similarly asserts the culturally situated nature of those needs, contending that “the question of how much space a man needs to live comfortably has no simple answer. Space as resource is a cultural appraisal” (1977: 57).

In this section I seek to look at representations of individual needs for space in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. The increasingly central role of “personal space” in particular is attuned to social evolutions and cultural specificities which the novels allude to frequently. Intricately connected to changing habits regarding property or comfort, claims of “personal space” sometimes pose challenges to contemporary experiences of the common, and impact the meanings endowed to place. This “personal space” is also connected to a sense of having enough room, an amount of space available for an existence deemed comfortable and valuable (Tuan 1977: 51). In the novels, socially significant places such as the workplace or the home are examined in light of this notion and again reveal the limits of place together with the limits of sharing it.

In Mohsin Hamid’s novels, the notion of personal space draws on a representation of space as a commodity that is not accessible to all. Hamid’s poetics of displacement, evoked previously in this work, manifests here again in the recognisable nature of experiences that

engage personal space. One such experience is aging, discussed in *Exit West*. As the main characters Saeed and Nadia have settled in Marin County, California, the narrative focus shifts slightly towards a house in Palo Alto and its inhabitant, an old woman. This woman's story is one of the many contrapuntal stories of anonymous characters which are interspersed in the main narrative. This woman, we are told, "had lived in the same house her entire life. (...) she had never moved, travelled, yes, but never moved, and yet it seemed the world had moved, and she barely recognized the town that existed outside her property" (*EW* 208). The woman's house is designated in terms of "property," indicating the importance of private ownership in her own conception of limits. Her house is a testament to stability, as opposed to what goes on beyond the limits of the place. The reader is told that the woman now lives alone, having undergone the departure of her children, divorce, and grief. The departure of others re-configures the need she may have for space together with the perceived *value* of that place: "The old woman had become a rich woman on paper, the house now worth a fortune, and her children were always pestering her to sell it, saying she didn't need all that space" (*ibid*). For the woman, resisting pressure from the outside means not only resisting change but also maintaining ownership of her place. The inhabitant's very own value and right to personal space is questioned – her status as "a rich woman on paper" suggests that she has become two-dimensional, shrinking to the status of a paper identity and objectified in the eyes of her family.

Hamid's vast narrative scope leads him to alternate between the privileged experiences of those who own property to the management of personal space in contexts of poverty. In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the narrator begins the journey of the protagonist in the rural village where he lives, reporting his perceptions in the second person. The character's extended family live together in a compound, and the notion of personal space materializes very differently from the old woman's attachment to her house in *Exit West*. The character's parents struggle to find privacy in their house: "Intercourse in the village is a private act only when it takes place in the fields. Indoors, no couple has a room to themselves. Your parents share theirs with all three of their surviving children. But it is dark, so little is visible" (*HTG* 12). Alternatives to personal space at home have to be found out either outdoors, in boundless space, or within the imagined limits enabled by darkness. The passage questions the very meaning of home as a personal space. The evocation of the house, here, does not convey anything homely but instead points to the precarious, forced dimensions of sharing space, as suggested by the "surviving" children – the house is where they survive, rather than live and share space willingly. In fact, the character's entire trajectory throughout the novel betrays a wish for personal space. Moving to the city in an "overloaded bus" (*HTG* 13), he is then described

“shar[ing] a cot” with his brother (*HTG* 34), before making both his and his father’s living conditions more spacious: “the pair of you have moved to slightly larger accommodations” (*HTG* 92). Wishing to access property, the unnamed protagonist has to settle for a “resident’s bond,” an agreement to live rent-free for a period of time, the narrator commenting: “you have begun to recognize your dream of a home of your own for what it is, an illusion, unless financed by cold, hard cash” (*HTG* 115). In the end, the protagonist is able to better his condition only provided that he either worsens that of others through his crooked bottled water business, or relies on the space granted by others – he dies in the house of his long-lost childhood love, who has invited him to settle there in old age. This conditional access reveals a parallel struggle: as much as clean water, personal space is a resource and a stake of desire, causing ethical dilemmas and fostering difficult interactions with others.

As for them, Hari Kunzru’s novels display characters who voice their need for personal space, more particularly in the context of the workplace. With these representations, the writer passes comment on the organisation of public and private space in contemporary everyday life, and the evolution of ethics when it comes to sharing the workplace, particularly in the era of freelance workers and tech companies.

In *Red Pill*, for instance, the novel begins with a protagonist who has received a grant for a stay at the Deuter Center near Berlin, yet “refuses to participate in the life of this place” (*HK ITW* 2019). Having hoped to be alone to work, the character is confronted to a room described as “a glass box supported by a metal frame” (*RP* 18) and filled with open-plan office space, where the residents of the Center have to work not only in close proximity to one another but also in plain view, examined from all angles. The character’s dismay at the thought of having to work there gives way to a semantic exploration of shared space and commonality:

I’d pictured – if I’m honest, possibly only because of the word *center* in the title – the Deuter Center for Social and Cultural Research as being somewhat like a meditation retreat: a “Center” as opposed to an “Institute” or an “Academy,” or, God forbid, a “Community.” (*RP* 13)

The narrator’s perception of the word “center,” therefore, is not the gathering of different people in a central place, but rather the opportunity for recentering, refocusing on oneself and abstaining from external gaze. The angry narrator offers another parodic analysis of the common, as he compares the brochure of the Center, which defined it as “a microcosm of the wider public sphere,” with his current experience: “I did not understand why my participation in the public sphere, microcosmic or otherwise, had to take place in that awful open-plan office”

(RP 23-24). The expression “taking place” here conveys how the sharing of a place is first and foremost an event, a moment relying on many coordinates. From the “center” to the “public sphere” and the “microcosm,” metaphorical idioms used unthinkingly to describe modes of the common are re-examined with respect to the physical discomfort he is now experiencing.

These mistaken interpretations of the place trigger a semblance of deep introspection, commingling with his project of studying the “Lyric I” in poetry. Rejecting the idea of community, he goes on to enumerate ideally impenetrable places while at the same time acknowledging the absurdity of this ideal: “I don’t know what I’d expected – an oak-paneled carrel, an airy biomorphic pod – but the one constant to all my fantasies about my working life at the Deuter Center had been privacy. Seclusion and a lockable door” (RP 18). These passages point to two parallel confrontations: the confrontation to others, and the confrontation of imagined places to actual experience. Calling upon two radically opposed images, one evoking traditional library space and the other modern art, the narrator’s idealised places have metaphorically locked him up in pre-conceived *topoi* from which he now struggles to extract himself. These pre-conceptions move from architecture to his philosophical culture, as he then refers to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, quoting it in a passionate internal monologue: “I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me” (RP 20). The Sartrean subtext about the consciousness of the gaze of others introduces the narrator as a troubled yet parodic figure, an intellectual whose relation with others is always mediated by his background of high culture. “Hell is other people,” the narrator seems to claim, yet barely any other character has been introduced so far. For the reader, this fear of other people’s gaze is all the more ironic as they are themselves following and watching this anxious narrator, and wondering how he is about to negotiate the use of space with others. The plot reverts these anxieties midway, when the narrator, secluded in his bedroom at the Deuter Center, realises via a nihilistic far-right television show that he needs to reassert his sense of the common.

Transmission moves away from the conundrums of introverted liberal arts intellectuals to examine the workplace in emerging tech companies such as those of the Silicon Valley at the onset of the twenty-first century. Arjun, the protagonist, has spent a long time on “the bench,” a suburban house shared with other Indian tech workers, before he is finally hired at Virugenix, a promising digital company. Here again, the workplace is defined as a place of visual and spatial contradictions, where one struggles to make out the difference between the public and private spheres. Arjun is indeed given “a standard six-by-six grey cubicle,” “part of a cluster abutting an area walled off from the rest of the office by clear Plexiglas panels” (T 54-

55). The physical boundaries of the place are therefore “grey” or “clear” in turn, blurring signals regarding the right to gaze into or even enter other people’s space.

Arjun decorates the place with “a mixture of family and film pictures. Priti grinning at her college graduation. Hritnik Roshan in a tight t-shirt” (T 54). In the case of a migrant worker, this personal space bears heightened significance. Geographer Geraldine Pratt observes about the decoration of bedroom walls by Filipina workers in Canada: a practice of “[m]arking boundaries, insisting on the materiality and persistence of differences” which she finds a more relevant angle of social analysis than “blurring them in notions of mobility, hybridity and thirdspace” (qtd. in Cresswell 2004: 83). *Transmission* does not discard these notions altogether – it focuses extensively on mobility – but in the novel, the marking of boundaries is indeed central to representations of contemporary subjectivities, and displays the persisting inequalities and individual journeys that can be overlooked in homogenising discourse on global flows.

The description of the Virugenix premises also comments on the blending of personal and professional life, as Arjun learns about “the workaholic Virugenix ethos (unofficial company motto: ‘*Sometimes it is noble to sleep in the crawlspace of your desk*’)” (T 57). The relation to space manifests through an antinomy: the “crawlspace” is far from “noble,” evoking rather the technical, material aspects of one’s workplace. This supposed “ethos” betrays a confused, unhealthy relation to work, suggested by the equally unhealthy, suffocating “crawlspace.” This general confusion and inversion of values is also rendered in the way employees communicate, or rather refuse to communicate:

Everyone left their phones on voicemail and most wore headsets while they worked, creating a private sonic space that was, according to custom, violated only in an emergency. Interaction was via email, even if the participants occupied neighbouring cubicles. This made sense to Arjun. Personal space is valuable. The ability to prioritize one’s communications is valuable. (T 56-57)

In this passage, proximity is re-defined along the lines of a digital space that has become the new shared space much more than the physical space of the office. The “private sonic space” also provides another imagined alternative to the reality of social encounters. Moving from the implicit “custom” of office life to Arjun’s own “values,” this description forms part of the larger reflection of *Transmission* about the changing ethics of a globalizing world. The experience of place is examined in light of such reasserted values, as exemplified previously in this chapter with the character of Guy Swift who proclaims that “a mental border is a value” (T 253). Here,

the passage alternates between the creation of new values, for instance choosing when and how to communicate with others, while at the same time underlining the persistence of implicit social values such as the respect of other people's privacy. *Transmission* also highlights how such new values can provide an excuse for the maintenance of hierarchical boundaries and for avoiding empathy. At first seduced by the possibilities of personal space at Virugenix, Arjun finds it to be a two-edged sword when he confronts his boss Darryl after being fired:

'Darryl, you must sit down and listen to me.'

'I must do nothing of the kind. This is my space, Mehta. My space. It is clearly demarcated. There is a sign.'

'I think you've treated me very unfairly.'

'You did this yesterday too, this walking in. Do you – I don't know – have a problem with boundaries? Do you maybe have a condition? This is a compulsion, right? Compulsive boundary-transgression syndrome.' (T 151)

The dialogue playfully mocks the nonsensical situations resulting from changing social codes. Darryl's paranoid protection of *his* space testifies to a territorial fear that remains ambiguous for the reader, uncertain whether Darryl is only obsessed about his personal workspace, or also exhibiting a latent xenophobia. Darryl ends up objectifying and othering Arjun's behaviour, placing him outside the boundaries of his understanding by pontificating over an irremediable "condition," "compulsion" or "syndrome." Here again, Kunzru plays with the linguistic fashions of the early 2000s, unveiling a tendency for taxonomy that aims at making sense of the new forms of contact caused by global flows. Darryl's authoritative diagnosis, contained within a newly formed compound, conveys a need for order and the creation of categories despite illusions of openness. The irony culminates with an e-mail, a form of communication previously praised by Arjun, but which turns against him as a hard boundary in digital form:

To: arjunm@virugenix.com

From: darrylg@virugenix.com

Subject: Boundaries (T 152)⁷⁰

Reasserting his personal boundaries in digital space, Darryl also makes boundaries central: they become the very subject of his e-mail rather than a collateral dimension of his exchange with Arjun. In fact, no exchange will have taken place other than the obstinate reassertion of these boundaries. On the opposite, Kunzru's play with intermediality by having e-mail language inserted on the page betrays the permeability of fiction. When asked about the use of such forms in the novel, he explained that he liked the possibility to "incorporate all these other kinds of

⁷⁰ The "Calibri" typescript is used here to imitate the one used for this passage in the Penguin paperback edition.

language” and “point it in all sorts of directions” – an aesthetics that precisely relies on the crossing of boundaries (*HK ITW* 2018).

Crossing is also at stake in the writing of hospitality in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. Welcoming or unwelcoming reactions towards strangers are frequently evoked and reveal how an ethos of sharing place also relies on ambivalent reactions towards new arrivals, intrusions, and the settlements – both literal and metaphorical – that ensue.

4.4. (Un)welcoming places, (un)settling hospitalities

In a 2020 interview, Hari Kunzru explained that the notion of hospitality raises fundamental questions, notably “to whom we owe duties and how far out the circle of our community should go” (*HK ITW* 2020). If one is to think about the shared uses of place, and the conception of place as common, then attention should be paid to the metaphorical extent of that “circle,” but also to hospitality conceived as a “duty.” Panu Minkkinen thus quotes Kant’s positions on hospitality, which is defined as a tolerance towards the stranger “so long as he peacefully occupies his place” (qtd. in Minkkinen 2007: 53). Yet as will be discussed hereon, such a principle does not always stand the test of experience.

In this part I explore how novels by Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru which discuss migration, asylum and the lives of refugees expose the way hospitality – or lack thereof – inherently implies the sharing of place. These novels show how place is often modified drastically or even closed off when its inhabitants are confronted to the arrival of strangers. This in turn emphasizes the tensions inherent to hospitality, including the latent possibilities for hostility, contracted by Derrida in the concept of *hostpitality* (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 45).⁷¹ Such tensions might put forth issues of attachment to place or claims of authenticity, which were raised earlier in this work. Is the use of a place reserved to those who were *originally* in that place, even when said origins are relative and fragile? This part also wishes to question the functions of different places in practices of hospitality – a novel like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* for instance is articulated around its setting in a Lahore café. In what place(s) does hospitality take place, and how does it shape said place(s) in turn?

As Mireille Rosello points out, hospitality can encompass “at the same time an ancient classical tradition, a philosophical value, an ethical imperative, a political issue, and also a

⁷¹ This specific occurrence in the English translation presents the concept as *hostpitality*, whereas in other contexts, notably in French, an “i” is added – *hostipitality*.

polymorphous individual practice” (2001: 6). It might therefore seem more accurate to talk about *hospitalities*, in the plural. The multiple and subjective meanings of hospitality are mirrored in the many forms it takes in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. With the narration of hospitality, the confrontation of different values and personal ethics again prove to be central to their writings. For example, the protagonist’s cynical nemesis in Kunzru’s *Red Pill* states peremptorily that “hospitality is the greatest sin and the essence of human relations is either subjection or domination” (*RP* 283). This part notably sets out to examine how the novels engage with politically situated understandings of hospitality, the articulation of the public and private spheres, and the negotiations that unfold in the practice of hospitality, including the conditions sometimes set by the host for the guest to be allowed in. In that sense, hospitality catalyses a tension between *settling* – settling physically into place, settling the problematic encounter – and the *unsettling* dimensions of hospitality, visible in the confrontations and attunements taking place in the guest/host relationship.

I will first focus on the notion of consumption, and how the trope of a devouring, consuming stranger can be read along the lines of place, particularly in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In this reading, place can be hospitable thanks to its resources, but it is also a threatening environment where host and guest have to prey on each other. A second part is dedicated to the metaphorical delimitations of place that are operated with and through processes of hospitality, drawing from examples from *Transmission*, *Red Pill* and *Exit West*. This manifests in forms of *selective* hospitality, practiced individually or collectively, and in the fundamental stalemates presented by hospitality.

4.4.1. “Predatory delicacies”: hospitality as consuming (in) place

A particularly striking engagement with hospitality is to be found in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the narrative is framed by a shared dinner in a Lahore café. Because it is one of Hamid’s second-person narratives, hospitality in this novel takes place in a twofold manner – it is extended both towards the reader and towards an unnamed American man within the diegesis. Changez, the narrator-protagonist, performs acts of hospitality towards the American man during the entire novel, but these are however tinged with ambivalent behaviours betraying hostility. Indeed, the reader is made to understand that this man has probably come to threaten Changez and/or investigate his life, because of television footage where he denounced US violence abroad after 9/11 (*TRF* 207). At the same time, Changez tells the man about his own experience as a guest in a foreign country. He narrates his life as a young

Pakistani graduate in the United States, and his progressive rejection by the host country after 9/11 due to violent prejudice. In *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*, Mireille Rosello contends that “the vision of the immigrant as guest is a metaphor that has forgotten that it is a metaphor” (2001: 3). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* unravels that metaphor by making the immigrant both a former guest and a present host, and by re-orienting that metaphor towards the material and spatial dimensions of hospitality.

Panu Minkkinen reminds us in his article “Hostility and Hospitality” that

the etymologies of the words ‘hostility’ and ‘hospitality’ share a common root which has to do with food. The root of the word *hostis* is the Sanskrit *ghas* meaning ‘to eat’, ‘to consume’, or even ‘to destroy.’ And even though it is unclear as to who eats and what, a *hostis* is a stranger and a foreigner. Only later did it come to mean the object of hostility, an ‘enemy.’ (Minkkinen 2007: 53)

With its location in a café at night, the narration of hospitality in Hamid’s novel undoubtedly draws from this ancient etymology, as well as from the many traditions where offering food is considered a gesture of hospitality. Reading hospitality as an act entailing consumption can shed light on the stakes of sharing place and welcoming the stranger into place. Consumption entails not only eating but also going beyond the limits of hospitality: the guest overstaying their welcome can also appear as a parasite, consuming the resources of a given place beyond what has been offered as a gesture of hospitality. In that case, the welcome guest can become a threat to the host, who might intend to “devour” or “destroy” them in turn. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* does rely on a subtext of consumption and predation, which can be read together with the Sanskrit root of *hostis* pointed out by Minkkinen. Yet in Hamid’s novel just as in this etymology, it remains uncertain whether it is the host or the guest who consumes the other.

The predatory dynamics is asserted by the narrator Changez from the very beginning of the novel, as he associates the offering of tea to the American man with an allusion to their surroundings: “Surely, at this time of day, only one thing could have brought you to the district of Old Anarkali – named, as you may be aware, after a courtesan immured for loving a prince – and that is the quest for the perfect cup of tea” (*TRF* 2). The narrator metaphorically encloses his interlocutor within Old Anarkali square, named after a dancer who was herself trapped to death.⁷² Later on in the novel, the claustrophobic entrapment of the American man is reinforced

⁷² As discussed earlier in this work, Hamid’s resorting to Mughal history also serves the particular purpose of inscribing his novels within the long history of Pakistan and the Punjab, arguably “hosting” his transnational anglophone readership by means of selected cultural markers.

as the “gates” of the square are closed, “transforming Old Anarkali into a pedestrian-only piazza” (TRF 35) with gaps “too narrow for anything wider than a man” (TRF 36). Claude Raffestin contends that hospitality in the West is historically connected to the urban plaza, the central public area, which allowed for direct encounters and therefore hospitality (1997: 175). Hamid plays with this trope by having Changez comment on the closure of the square and making it somewhat inhospitable, pointing for instance to its “ominous edge” once it is empty (TRF 176), or to the bats flying over their heads (TRF 72). When observing the bats, he actually replicates the tense mood of his exchanges with the American man: “no matter how close they come to these buildings, they are never involved in a collision” (*ibid*). In this ambivalent moment of hospitality, the very stake of the two men’s cautious behaviour is precisely that: closeness without collision.

In this hazardous closeness, the mention of food operates as a mediation, the currency for their exchanges and a reminder of the bodily realities entailed by their shared dinner. Eating manners and guest etiquette provide an opportunity for another metaphor of predation:

I am certain, sir, that a fork can be found for you, but allow me to suggest that the time has now come for us to dirty our hands. (...) There is great satisfaction to be had in touching one’s prey; indeed, millennia of evolution ensure that manipulating our meals with our skin heightens our sense of taste – and our appetite, for that matter! I see you need no further convincing; your fingers are tearing the flesh of that kebab with considerable determination. (TRF 140)

Changez’s verbose explanations veil the violent insinuations of “dirtying their hands” and “touching one’s prey.” While the two men never actually touch, the narrator plays a game of mirrors, observing with horror what could become of him should his guest reveal his darker intentions. The mention of “evolution” also suggests a survival of the fittest, also visible in the American man’s show of adaptability to his new surroundings. Food is hence used in view of *testing* as much as *tasting*, as a “manipulation” that is both physical and part of the narrator’s mind game. Besides, food is also used to allude to his perception of national borders. As the reader is made to understand, Changez has become suspiciously defiant of the United States, and the American man might have come to inquire about his intentions. It is with this in mind that one can read Changez’s “inordinate pride” in Pakistani food, pointing to his interlocutor:

These, sir, are *predatory* delicacies, delicacies imbued with a hint of luxury, of wanton abandon. Not for us the vegetarian recipes one finds across the border to the east, nor the sanitized, sterilized, processed meats so common in your homeland! (TRF 115, emphasis in the original)

The protagonist's railing against "sanitized, sterilized, processed meats" betrays claims of authenticity and primacy, visible elsewhere in the novel when he discusses the history or architecture of Lahore. Changez defines the limits of his own place by reminding the American man of what separates them, but also what separates Pakistan from India, "across the border to the east." Here, the character's "predatory" behaviour turns territorial, while simultaneously luring his interlocutor into "abandon," attempting to make him cross the threshold into his trap. Changez's linguistic cajoling, visible in repetitive adjectives and the preciousness of his syntax, end up filling up the space as much as the text, weaving a web all around the trapped American man.

In what Lindsay Anne Balfour calls "a battle of hospitality" (2017: 218), the stake for Changez is to maintain a thread between him and his guest, much like Scheherazade whose life is hanging by the thread of storytelling. That thread is of course manifested in the narrative thread which Changez strives to entertain until the very end, but also in reactions that exceed language – body language, gaze or touch. At the very end of the novel, as Changez again extends a thread by proposing "to shake [him] by the hand," the American man does not reach towards him but into his jacket, and Changez perceives "a glint of metal" (*TRF* 209). The reader is led to believe that the host will be entirely consumed – devoured, or destroyed – by his guest in the fatal outcome.

The intricate power dynamics of the novel in fact reveals Changez's unsettled relation to place. Rejected by the United States, dejected by other people's perception of his national identity, the character could be speaking about himself when ascribing to the American man "the behavior of an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey!" (*TRF* 35). It is indeed left to the reader to decide whether Changez is trying to be a predator towards America or has merely been a prey trying to survive and find shelter. With this lingering uncertainty, Changez's narrative could illustrate Derrida's theories on the host's relation to place:

To offer hospitality, (...) is it necessary to start from the certain existence of a dwelling, or is it rather only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up? Perhaps only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 56)

To Anne Dufourmantelle who discusses Derrida's words, the pivotal question here is "Where?" and this "puts the question of the beginning, or rather of the impossibility of the beginning, of an uncontested first origin where the *logos* would be inscribed" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 56-58). Because his ideal of America has collapsed, the very place where Changez now stands

and offers hospitality is uncertain territory, re-shuffled by post-9/11 geopolitics and by his own experience of migration, and built up through an anxious narrative. The character's ambivalent performance of predation betrays the impossible "place of origin" which is at stake in hospitality. As observed earlier in this study, the questioning of a "place of origin" manifests throughout Hamid's works, in a reluctance towards the language of purity, and in the desire for co-creation with the reader (2015: xvii-xviii). Yet Hamid's and Kunzru's novels show that such language continues to pervade contemporary perceptions of hospitality, which means that hospitality is still conditioned by the semantics of limits.

4.4.2. "The world's VIP room": limited hospilities

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida underlines the contextual differences between ancient traditions of hospitality and the reality of today's complex societies:

Nowadays, a reflection on hospitality presupposes, among other things, the possibility of a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and the nonforeign, the citizen and the non-citizen, but first of all between the private and the public, private and public law, etc. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 47-49)

As Hamid's and Kunzru's novels show, "thresholds or frontiers" permeate contemporary perceptions of space and place, and inform the dynamics crossing them, such as hospitality. Discussions of hospitality found in these narratives display how the principles and values of hospitality are always put to the test of these realities, including the "rigorous delimitation" to which place is subjected when some seek to enter it. In that sense, the narratives also confront the irreconcilable "antinomy" between what Derrida identifies as on the one hand the *law* of hospitality, manifested in an absolute hospitality – welcoming the stranger without any condition, without even asking their name – and on the other hand the *laws*, in the plural, established to regulate hospitality, which manifest as a conditional hospitality dependent on a historical and geographical context (*op. cit.* 77). The two inevitably influence each other as they constantly renew the semantic boundaries of hospitality, and question *where* it should take place – in the private or public sphere? In the immediacy of an encounter, or within pre-established conditions? I propose to explore here four different figures of limits in Hamid's and Kunzru's novels which engage with such questions.

First, the novels provide examples of unspoken limits, that is to say tacit understandings of hospitality. *Exit West* shows for instance how hospitality relies on communication, when Nadia and Saeed arrive in Marin County in California. Nadia works at a food cooperative, and

after Saeed and her have decided to break up, she learns about an opportunity for accommodation on site. Yet this hospitality is conditional: “These rooms had cots, and workers in good standing at the cooperative could use them, stay there, seemingly indefinitely, provided one’s colleagues thought the need to stay was valid” (*EW* 213). Not knowing “how the policy worked,” Nadia one day faces an attempted robbery and remains calm in the face of danger. After what can be read as an unwilling rite of passage, she is finally offered hospitality:

Whether it was because they were impressed by her mettle in the face of danger or because they recalibrated their sense of who was threat and who was threatened or because they now simply had something to talk about, several people on her shifts began chatting with her a lot more after that. She felt she was beginning to belong, and when one told her about the option of living at the cooperative, (...) the possibility struck Nadia with a shock of recognition, as though a door was opening up, a door in this case shaped like a room. (*EW* 214)

Nadia unlocks the entrance into the place but at the same time finds a gateway into communication. Sharing stories, having “something to talk about” seems to be the ultimate condition for hospitality. The passage also shows how Nadia’s own reaction to a hostile stranger has triggered a “recalibration,” a re-mapping of the mental geography of relationships. Strikingly, Nadia’s own feeling as a guest is not one of discovery but of “recognition,” a familiarity with the hospitable place. Perhaps because the place is offered rather than forcibly occupied, here the signifier of the doors finds a definite shape at the end of a novel where it has kept morphing along with the characters’ journey.

Whereas the unspoken conditions of hospitality can give way to negotiations and change, the novels also show stricter limits through the *institutional* boundaries of hospitality. These present a radically different relation to language, which becomes the tool for the establishment of an authoritative discourse about hospitality. In Kunzru’s *Transmission*, Guy Swift, the communications expert, is hired by the European Border Agency, PEBA, to provide precisely such discourse and to indicate clearly what the limits of hospitality can be. The goal is to verbalise the control exerted over people and over place, or the *nomos*, the law understood as a social imperative (Minkinen 2007: 56). The law in this context corresponds to Derrida’s conditional *laws* (in the plural), yet without balancing it with the absolute law of hospitality and its implications of a moral duty. In Kunzru’s novel, the discussion of hospitality by European officials is indeed completely exempt of moral dilemmas, and relies on “information handling” (*T* 255). Bocca, the representative for Italy, conveys this dematerialized perception of migrants’ lives. He thus explains his forthcoming project to Guy:

‘A sweep,’ he said, reinforcing the image with his hands. ‘A coordinated sweep, aimed at taking 5,000 *sans papiers* off the streets by tomorrow morning. (...)’

‘Wow,’ said Guy. It seemed to be the right response. (T 254-255)

The limit here is a moving one, enacting a forced expulsion which words fail to describe – the character’s use of an “image with his hands” and Guy Swift’s speechlessness both betray the inexplicable, unspeakable reality entailed by this institutional hostility. It is in fact Guy’s role, as a communications consultant, to find words for such a policy. The character sets out to present his project to the European officials through what becomes a parody of a marketing pitch, constantly resorting to spatial imagery in order to make selective immigration appear laudable. Thus, Guy proposes to see Europe through what he calls the “metaphorics of leisure,” as “a continent that wants people, but only the best. An *exclusive* continent” or even as “Club Europa – the world’s VIP room” (T 256, emphasis in the original). The narrative here takes up the trope of Europe as a selective club, not only at the level of individuals but also as a group of nations which grants entry into the EU only to some preferred nations (Latour 2018: 101). The spectacle of selection is further enacted in a double-sided card with “EU blue and gold on one side and the words *Platinum Member* embossed on the other,” crystallizing in an object the duplicitous, hypocritical stance of PEBA’s hospitality policy (T 257). In the final stages of his speech, Swift’s ambivalence manifests his superficial understanding of the stakes of hospitality:

‘Of course you’re familiar with club culture, so you know that being on the right side of the velvet rope makes all the difference to young opinion formers both within the EU and outside. (...) It’s a question of conveying the message that you should only try to get past our doormen if you’re wearing the right kind of clothes, so to speak. (...)’ (T 256)

Struggling to find the right words, Guy fills up the conversation with implicit clues and references. The threshold which is at the heart of any act of hospitality is evoked in turn as a “velvet rope” and through the “doormen.” The interaction of host and guest is here made completely unreadable, notably as the concerned parties resist identification – who are the “doormen,” the “opinion formers” but also this vague “*our*”? Guy’s “metaphorics of leisure” absurdly projects consumer culture onto the vital stakes of the refugees’ motives. In that sense, his speech also displays the limits that stand between the discourse of policy makers and the existence of those who actually experience the threshold.

PEBA’s discourse of selection, conceiving the immigrant as a “VIP,” mirrors equally superficial approaches to hospitality on an individual level. Not only are there (cynical) limits to hospitality in institutional conceptions of it, but the narratives also unpick the limits of

hospitality when claimed as a personal stance. Kunzru's *Red Pill* notably questions the spectacle of hospitality, or how the promotion of hospitality as a philosophical banner can become wishful thinking, a misleading and limiting stance with regard to the urgency of the refugees' plea. As the protagonist from *Red Pill* faces refugees in Berlin and finds himself compelled to act in a hospitable manner, he is also confronted to his own principles and to the sincerity of his intentions. The novel questions contemporary attitudes towards hospitality while at the same time questioning the discourse surrounding them. In a particularly obscene passage, the narrator is taken by Finlay, another intellectual residing in Wannsee, to attend a charity event in the "Konzerthaus" in Berlin, which is "incongruously covered in orange life jackets." Finlay explains to the narrator "that the life jackets had been used by refugees, and the famous artist Ai Weiwei had recovered them from beaches on the Greek island of Lesbos" (*RP* 153). Placing material memories of the refugees' life-threatening journey onto the old façade, the charity organizers and artists display a conception of hospitality as a currency for their political positioning, something that needs to be exposed and represented rather than felt or practiced. This lack of contact with reality is what Anton, the protagonist's arch enemy and a figure of the alt-right, uses to destabilize him. He states ironically:

I'm a racist because I want to be with my own kind and you're a saint because you have a sentimental wish to help other people far away, nice abstract refugees who save you from having to commit to anybody or anything real.
(*RP* 176)

Anton's verbal attack asserts the limits he perceives between a certain "here" and a "there" – "here," his own place, is defined by the kinship he feels with other people, while foreignness is characterized by distance and a certain vagueness ("far away"). Through these accusations of "abstraction," the narrative also opens up a metafictional debate about reality and representation: does the novel itself allow for hospitality simply by representing these negotiations? In fact, the concrete practice of hospitality is represented as equally problematic. In the novel, the protagonist does end up acting like a "saint," giving his coat to a refugee he has followed all the way to his temporary lodgings in a collective tent. This enactment of what he believes to be a hospitable behaviour falls flat. Not only does it appear as superficial to him, "like a pop singer in a charity video, passing fashionably through a crowd of the global poor," but he also ends up being gravely misunderstood, the man thinking that he is trying to bribe him in exchange for his daughter (*RP* 191-192). Kunzru's novel attaches itself to mapping out all the aporias of hospitality, never renouncing to address them even when left unsolved.

For while hospitality remains problematic throughout, it converges with the protagonist's existential quest about the self and the "Lyric I," and allows to sketch out a fourth kind of limit: the limits that bind humans into a shared condition.⁷³ The character's confusion is humorously displayed in the several conversations he has with his wife over the phone, asking her in a panic to solve his deepest conundrums. His wife is in fact a human rights lawyer, incarnating a seemingly less subjective position towards these questions. On one occasion, he asks her about these rights:

"Human rights. Why you believe humans have special rights."
"I really have no idea. Why are we even talking about this?"
"Please."
"It's what I do. I practice human rights law. It's my job." (...)
"But why are people important? Why are we more important than, I don't know, an eagle? Or a coral reef?" (RP 199)

Uncertain where to place the limits of her values, the character's wife refers to her practice: her beliefs stem directly from her job, hence her alignment of personal ethics with what she practices on a daily basis. Contrary to the narrator, a literary critic, she is more concerned with reality than with representation. The character's apparently absurd final question testifies to an anxiety of limits: in order to define human rights, he feels obliged to exclude other species, the better to ensure the inclusion of all humanity within the sphere of hospitality. In the end, a more comprehensive mapping appears. Once returned to New York, in the middle of Donald Trump's election, the character suddenly makes sense of his place in the world: "It's not much, but I can say that the most precious part of me isn't my individuality, my luxurious personhood, but the web of reciprocity in which I live my life" (RP 283). The image of the "web" is particularly revealing: rather than a network or a connection, the character is caught in a web, that is to say a place continuously being made and re-made. In this dynamic pattern, "reciprocity" becomes not only a desire or a projection but a necessity lest the web should be torn apart, for human co-dependence relies on a fragile balance. *Exit West* similarly presents what could be called epiphanies of hospitality, in this case when previously hostile or individualistic characters realize the inevitability of sharing. In London, after the protesters have spent weeks circling the refugees' squat, they finally relinquish their hostility:

Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye

⁷³ See chapter 3 for the discussion of the self in *Red Pill*.

(...). Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one. (*EW* 164)

The passage shows that what is at stake in hospitality is no less than the existence of others – not only their safety or the improvement of material conditions, but the possibility for them to exist in the eyes of the host. Through the fantastic device of an instant crossing of boundaries, the utopian construction of *Exit West* questions the evolution of hospitality in the contemporary world with respect to “the sheer number of places.” These places are not only the physical places reached by an immigrant, but also their representations, the mobilities they entail, as well as the alternative places that have appeared with the digital world. The hostile protesters in *Exit West* are forced to face their own relation to strangers and to place all at once; they have no choice but to proceed to the “rigorous delimitation” called for by Derrida (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000: 47).

Because hospitality is an “ancient classical tradition” (Rosello 2001: 6), it always carries symbolical power as much as practical intentions. As the narratives show, acts of hospitality or hostility *matter* – they are meaningful but also determine crucially the shape of an encounter. During our 2020 interview, Hari Kunzru noted that “we produce community out of those [acts of hospitality]” (*HK ITW* 2020). By imagining the best and the worst possible experiences surrounding the stake of hospitality, by representing how sharing in/with place can map out the paradoxes of coexistence, one could contend that we also produce *place* in the process.

Through the re-mappings entailed by hospitality, the novels demonstrate defining mutations in conceptions of space and place. Panu Minkkinen points out that Kant’s understanding of hospitality initially relied on “an original partnership of men where all had equal rights to existence within a particular space, namely on the surface of a limited globe” (2007: 59). But with the claims made on specific lands, “space has finally run out and the ‘land of another’ has come to border mine” (*ibid*). The idea that space is “running out” pervades the writings of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru in more than one way. When discussing hospitality and migration, both writers also connect them to the upheavals implied by climate change (*HK ITW* 2018). The narrator of *Exit West* notes that “[a]ll over the world people were slipping away from where they had been, from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal waves, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields” (*EW* 211). In this context, hospitality is not only a “tradition” but an urgent stake imposing itself on any inhabitant of such a world. The question of sharing one’s own place with others not only calls for a re-assessment of deeply set imagined places like Europe or the home, but it also discloses

a “universal lack of shareable space and inhabitable land” (Latour 2018: 9), and calls for new literary common places to confront this drastic evolution.

In their writings, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru also show that the dilemmas of hospitality can hardly be subsumed into narratives of cultural blending or the reconciliation of differences, especially in the context of perilous border crossings and unequal policies in the host countries. While writing from the vantage point of the literary nomad who is granted the right to settle in different world cities, Hamid and Kunzru do not gloss over the reality of unsuccessful or life-threatening migration endeavours and the hostile discourse surrounding the question. This concern not only transpires in their fiction and in their essays, but also in their public life, as demonstrated in Kunzru’s rejection of the *Daily Mail*’s John Llewelyn Rhys prize for *The Impressionist* on the grounds of “the extraordinary media hostility towards refugees,” leading him to work later on with the Refugee Council (Kunzru 2003). Because they engage with unsettled hostilities towards immigrants of all statuses, Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels call for adaptations in the theoretical tropes used to read them, as phrased most strikingly by Simon Gikandi:

since stories about dead Africans in cargo holds of European planes cannot be read as stories of hybridity, diaspora, or métissage, they demand a rethinking of the tropes that have dominated the discourse of postcolonial theory in relation to both global culture and nationalism. (2001: 640)

Rather than resulting in a *métissage*, Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writings of the common and of sharing place gesture towards a political understanding of place. Returning to Kunzru’s narrator in *My Revolutions*, who reminds his daughter that “politics is still here” (*MR* 47), one can reassert that politics is still *in place*, at least in the sense of “political” defined by Bruno Latour:

There are only questions of dwelling places inhabited with or defended against other terrestrials that share the same stakes. The adjective “political” ought to suffice from now on to designate these terrestrials, once the meaning of *polis*, which has for too long restrained the term “political,” has been expanded. (2018: 90)

This chapter has endeavoured to analyse the many stakes shared by “terrestrials” in their relation to place. Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s novels examine evolving forms of commonality through the prism of place, and thus propose narratives which participate to reshaping the meaning of the common. They show how seemingly individual experiences such as those felt by the body, in intimate relations, when travelling or being homeless, are in fact shared by many through and because of the experience of place. They also display how the sharing of place is directly challenged by contemporary lifestyles, for instance with the pitfalls

of consumer society (shown in *My Revolutions*, *Transmission* or *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*) or work environments (found in *Transmission* or *Red Pill*). At the same time, they discuss more timeless connotations of the common such as contagion, a fear manifested both in the colonial encounter and in representations of digital space.

Each writer develops these motifs while playing with them formally, in strategies which form meeting grounds with the reader. Hamid's novels operate this notably with the second person, with the blending of magic and realistic social issues, or in his representations of (dis)comfort, whereas Kunzru's novels resort to gaze-shifting and the intertextual overlapping of different discourses to render more vividly the ineluctable complexity of human encounters in/with place, as well as his resistance to "totalising narratives of the global" (Zamorano Llena 2016: 1). Finally, a recurring issue such as hospitality shows that thinking place as common can imply power struggles and social (in)justice. Representations and stakes of interactions between place and power will be studied in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 “Power geometry” and the control of place(s)

“You’ll still be here.
But in a secure, walled-off, impeccably-maintained, lit-up-all-night,
noise-controlled, perfectly regulated version of here.” (*HTG* 164)

One of the subplots in Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* follows the character of Guy Swift, a marketing expert, as he attempts to sell a publicity package to the European Union’s border authority named PEBA. As Guy approaches the PEBA headquarters, the reader is made to observe the external appearance of power exerted by the buildings of the European Union:

In the EU quarter of Brussels, like all areas devoted to government and administration, the physical has been ruthlessly subordinated to the immaterial, to the exigencies of language. It is a zone of discreet office spaces and muted parks, of affluence without ostentation, expenditure without visible waste. Diplomats from 160 embassies mingle with representatives of 120 governmental organizations and 1,400 different NGOs, all seeking to perfect the most modern of European arts: the exercise of control without the display of power. (*T* 249)

Published in 2004, long before the Brexit vote, *Transmission* anticipates the anxieties that led to Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, as demonstrated by Kristian Shaw in *BrexLit* (2021: 160). In this particular passage, the extradiegetic narrator introduces a place that “speaks for itself,” as it traduces into physical space the discourse of authority associated with the institution. With the condensed phrasing of “the exercise of control without the display of power,” this passage demonstrates an essential dimension of the places depicted in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels: their entanglement with power, and the questions of (in)justice and social division that “the exercise of control” may entail.

In a text called “A Global Sense of Place,” geographer Doreen Massey details what she calls a form of “power geometry” in the age of globalisation, which designates “power in relation to the flows and the movement” of globalisation (2001: 149, emphasis in the original). Observing the divisions drawn out by this “power geometry,” Massey argues that there are four different categories in contemporary societies: first, “those who are both doing the moving and the communicating and who are in some way in a position of control in relation to it”; then, “groups who are also doing a lot of physical moving, but who are not ‘in charge’ of the process in the same way at all,” and in which she notably includes refugee populations; third, “those who are (...) on the receiving end of time-space compression,” for instance people who hear

about other places on television, while never actually moving beyond the limits of a certain place; and lastly, those who contribute to global cultural flows – she evokes Brazilian musicians from the *favelas* – but who are spatially “imprisoned” and cannot move (2001: 149-150).

Massey’s classification aims at reminding whoever reflects about place in global times that globalisation has never induced the disappearance divisions of class and power, despite the dynamics of homogenisation that it implies in other respects. Rather, these distinctions operate along the lines of place – of the right to *move* between places, to escape, or to *access* certain places – and ultimately, reveal who is “in a position of control.” From the standpoint of cultural representations, the discourse of globalisation often runs the risk of “leaving power struggle out altogether, as if the world had become one big fairyland of international exchanges,” as Françoise Král remarks (2009: 18). In their novels, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru depict the cracks shattering the illusion of one such “fairyland,” showing not only how the relation with place(s) has historically been and still is highly unequal, but also how place is largely informed by competing desires, and by the power struggles that ensue. Sociologist Michel Lussault talks about a movement towards a “pseudo-liberal regime of places” in contemporary societies – using the French “*places*,” not “*lieux*” – which to him, favours “individual strategies of access to places” and where “any place is worth taking,” because in a global era, other places than one’s own are made widely visible (2009: 141).⁷⁴ In that sense, the stakes of power surrounding place also entail securing a *valuable* place for oneself, where place is considered a commodity in the global dynamics of exchange. In Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels, this changing perception of upward social mobility is notably revisited along the lines of physical movement. Indeed, mobility and movement never stray far from each other in these stories, where freedom of movement is frequently represented as problematic and an unfinished struggle. The notion of speed in particular, as a prevalent manifestation of global dynamics, informs the themes of the narratives as well as their structure.

As the work of Michel Foucault has largely demonstrated, places have long been used to control, observe, assess and regulate individuals. Places in that sense may function as a *placement*, since “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space” (1995:

⁷⁴ My translation. In the original : “le régime pseudo-libéral des places (...) se fonde sur la prégnance de l’individualité et donne de ce fait un rôle essentiel aux stratégies individuelles d’accès aux places. (...) Dans la mesure où l’idéologie dominante actuelle de la mondialisation tend à affirmer que toutes les places sont bonnes à prendre, les rivalités individuelles s’expriment de plus en plus librement, et, du coup, les chocs normatifs entre concurrents s’intensifient (...)” Michel Lussault, *De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places*, Paris : Grasset, 2009, 141.

141).⁷⁵ Kunzru's and Hamid's narratives engage with the symbolically charged places where this "distribution" occurs, and in the process highlight the particular role of such places within imperial systems (as in *The Impressionist*), supremacist thought (as in *White Tears*), or gendered public space. To some extent, this notion of placement – of being assigned a place – has been absorbed into imaginaries of place, as much as forms of resistance to it. Hamid's and Kunzru's novels introduce characters who have to face social exclusion and limitations, but they also show how alternative places emerge to counter these exclusionary practices. A notable example is Arjun Mehta, the protagonist of *Transmission*, who creates a computer virus and opens up an entirely new digital space, after having been fired and excluded from the American dream. In their approach to motifs such as viruses, or smoke and heat, water scarcity and the struggle for a physically safe place, these novels also suggest that controlling *through* place, and controlling *place itself* can no longer be taken for granted in the Anthropocene. Attempts at mastering the resources of a place, or closing off the borders of one's home to avoid the arrival of those whose own place has collapsed, are shown as vain if not destructive.

In this chapter I examine the two writers' representations of place as a stake of power, underpinned, on the one hand by the desirable imaginaries certain places catalyse, and on the other by persisting, as well as emerging, forms of control exerted over people in and through place(s). The first section focuses on the notion of enclosure, investigating motifs such as gates, walls and gentrified areas in Hamid's novels, the suburban areas in Kunzru's novels, but also the depictions of prisons and areas bound by gender norms in both writers' novels. In the second section, I wish to untangle the narrative and thematic roles of watching and monitoring, conjured up in contemporary avatars of panopticism, and in the drone, which appears in both writers' stories as a challenge to imaginaries of place. The last development is dedicated to the power narrative, or how the desirability of power can impact places. Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions question this desirability, notably through two issues: the rule of speed or dromocracy (Virilio 1977), and the question of environmental resources and sustainability, evoked at length in Hamid's novels.

⁷⁵ *Surveiller et Punir* was originally published in 1975. Subsequent mentions refer to this 1995 (translated) edition.

5.1. Enclosed places, divided space: the shapes of control

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru represent various forms of borders and zones of contact, questioning the approach to otherness and the negotiations that ensue. I wish here to develop more specifically how these negotiations can result in a control exerted over a subject's free movement, which sometimes forms or modifies the shape of place. In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault notes:

Discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space. To achieve this end, it employs several techniques. Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. (1995: 141)

While there are many types of “place[s] heterogeneous to all others,” Foucault notably examines prisons and their role in the regulation of social life. This section examines representations of prisons among other forms of “distribution” and enclosure depicted in Hamid's and Kunzru's novels. As the narratives show, such divisions, whether they are visibly manifest or more implicit, do not necessarily imply a fixation in space. In *Theory of the Border*, Thomas Nail remarks that “[d]ivision is not simple blockage – it is redirection” (2016: 8). This redirection can be forced upon the subject, as in processes of expulsion which Nail also comments upon (2016: 34-35). But redirection can also unfold in the resistance to secluded places, as proposed by Peter D. Mathews, who contends that Hari Kunzru's characters often try to “escape into a zone that lies outside the totalitarian system” (2020: 6). In Hamid's works, there are also forms of resistance to the control over bodies and movement, for example when it is exerted along the lines of gender. Both writers' fictions question paradigms such as enclosure, the centre/periphery duality, or private and public space, to emphasise the forms – more or less visible – that control takes in the contemporary experience of place.

In the first development of this section, I focus on the representations of social exclusion in Mohsin Hamid's urban settings, observing how these have progressively moved from the specificity of Lahore to more transnational concerns with the division of urban space. A second part is devoted to the motif of suburbs, which keeps recurring in Hari Kunzru's novels. This motif articulates central stakes of representation that are inherent to the British and British Asian cultural production, but also provides a reflection on what Henri Lefebvre famously called a “right to the city” or the exclusion of certain groups from the centrality of public life. The analysis moves on to the historical and material implications of prison in both writers'

novels, before enlarging the perspective towards gendered space, or how the novelists engage with the division of social space along the lines of gender.

5.1.1. Gated sociabilities: enclosure and exclusion in Mohsin Hamid's cities

At the beginning of Hamid's first novel *Moth Smoke*, the reader is introduced to protagonist Daru, who temporarily takes charge of the narrative, as he is about to join his friend Ozi, newly returned to Lahore from the United States. Ozi's house is protected by a "big gate in a high wall" and by "security guards" (MS 9). Later on, as Daru goes home, he notices that the neighbouring houses are "hunched over shoulder-high boundary walls" (MS 19) and starts comparing them to "his place":

My place is plain, unlike some of the pink-painted, column-sporting mini-monstrosities nearby. A gray cement block, more or less, with rectangular windows, a couple of balconies too narrow to use, and the best bloody tree in the neighborhood: a banyan that's been around forever and covers most of the dust patch I call my front lawn. (MS 19)

The beginning of *Moth Smoke* thus plunges the reader into a highly divided city. Clad in walls, security systems or even coats of paint, the houses of Lahore are shown as defined by their relation to the exterior, evocative of gated communities found in North America and increasingly in other parts of the world (Porcu 2013). In this unwelcoming urban geography, the reader is led to understand that Daru is a social outcast of sorts, excluded from places that exhibit signs of wealth. His "gray" house and the "dust patch" that surrounds it – evocative of the novel's motif of "smoke" – betray how Daru inhabits a gray zone between, on the one hand the habits of scraping by which he observes in his drug dealers and in Murad Badshah, his rickshaw driver friend, and on the other hand wealthy friends like Ozi, who are born with privilege. Daru is fatherless, his father having died in the 1971 war – his connection with Ozi and Ozi's father, "Khurram uncle," is indebted to the friendship between Khurram and Daru's father when they were in the military. While Daru's own, plain house is located between trendy houses, his praise of the banyan tree, a tree which forms roots from the tip of its branches, suggests how Daru attempts to root himself within a social class that he is not part of by birth.

The novel is indeed peppered with physical and symbolical manifestations of Daru's social exclusion, and how persisting forms of control in Pakistani society ensure that the social ladder cannot be climbed. Standing on an uncomfortable threshold, Daru finds himself on one occasion at Ozi's place and realises that he has come to "a full-fledged invitational dinner only semi-invited" (MS 92). Divisions in space extend to mobility and means of transport. As Daru

drives to fancy parties, he is ashamed to park his Suzuki next to his former classmates' Parejos and Land Rovers (*MS* 27; 98; 218; 231). This also extends to older forms of power that are hinted at in *Moth Smoke*, through the zamindari system or feudal system which persists in Pakistani society, whereby landlords not only have power over their land, but also retain an influence on political and social life while exerting their power over lower-class individuals. This is mentioned when Daru is fired from his banking job, having failed to satisfy Malik Jiwan, a powerful landlord whose "pastimes include fighting the spread of primary education and stalling the census" (*MS* 20). Later on, Daru is almost beaten to death after providing drugs to Shuja, the son of another landlord (*MS* 226). The zamindari system is also hinted at in Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, which begins in a rural village where "[m]eeting the gaze of a landlord has been a risky business (...) for centuries" (*HTG* 8). Contemporary writer Daniyal Mueenuddin extensively describes the *zamindari* system in his short story collection *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), with stories mainly located in rural areas. Even though Hamid's own narratives are mostly urban, he chooses to depict how this symbolical power extends to urban life and to the regulation of individual lives. Commenting on these fictional representations, Cara Cilano notes how the zamindari system is representative of the complex affiliations inherent to Pakistani identity, including the notions of centre and exclusion:

The zamindar's dominance refracts even what appear to be the types of differences, especially between the rural and the urban, that would otherwise challenge the unity of collective identification. (...) In the end, the zamindari system serves as the center that holds for the characters involved, even as that center alternately marginalizes and includes. (Cilano 2013: 170)

A "center" which "alternately marginalizes and includes" is also perceptible in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Marginalisation evidently appears in the ostracization of the Muslim immigrant character in post-9/11 New York, but it is also conjured through a well-known literary motif, the "houses twinkling in the distance" that Changez perceives in his manager's house in the Hamptons, and which are reminiscent of the "green light" in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (*TRF* 48-49).⁷⁶

Indeed, since his Pakistan-based *Moth Smoke*, Hamid's writing of social exclusion and division has therefore progressively taken on a more global perspective, which follows his aesthetics of displacement and the belief in transnationally shared planes of experience. In *Exit West*, the question of mass migration in Europe allows the narrative to broach forms of enclosure and control which now appear in the entire globe, in the way refugees and immigrants

⁷⁶ This reference has been examined in chapter 1, as an example of the desirable imaginaries of the West conveyed in the novel.

are contained within certain places. The novel shows a clear instance of control in the creation of the “London Halo,” where the refugees are offered to build their own dwellings in a zone “bounded by a perimeter fence” (*EW* 168). Hamid’s novel focuses particularly on places that have become integral to some refugees’ journeys in recent years, like Greek islands – Saeed and Nadia stay for a time in Mykonos – or major European cities like London or Vienna.

Yet, in the process, the novel also offers a commentary on other transposable phenomena of social and spatial division, that are not necessarily connected to the arrival of refugees. There is a striking instance early on in the novel, in one of the episodes that alternate with the main narrative thread, and show other journeys running parallel to Saeed and Nadia’s. In the first of these passages, the narrator observes an Australian woman in Sydney, sound asleep while a user of the magic “black doors” enters Sydney via the door of her closet. The narrator comments:

Her home was alarmed, but the alarm was not active. It had been installed by previous occupants, by others who had once called this place home, before the phenomenon referred to as the gentrification of this neighbourhood had run as far as it had now run. (*EW* 5-6)

Through the mention of the alarm and of gentrification, the passage points to two different kinds of control exerted over the place: first, the direct control over private property, aimed at excluding intruders, which was installed by the “previous occupants”; then, it refers to the more progressive and intangible enclosure (and exclusion) operated by the process of gentrification. This process is referred to as ongoing, “running” over the neighbourhood. The reference to gentrification here contrasts sharply with the man stepping in through the door. The narrative suggests that no matter how exclusive an area might become, the existence of these uncanny “black doors” challenges the existence of, and the control over, socially divided urban space.

From the walled houses in Lahore, to the exclusive villas of the Hamptons and gentrified areas of Sydney, Mohsin Hamid frequently depicts the desire to create fences and gates in order to control and to exclude. While these experiences might have similar effects throughout the world, Hamid’s sparse writing does refer to place-specific issues of power and control, such as the references to the zamindari system or to places of exclusion that have entered the American collective imaginary. Echoing the forms of enclosure described in Mohsin Hamid’s cities, Hari Kunzru’s descriptions of the suburbs also convey the idea of a control exerted over place, and a maintenance of social divisions through space.

5.1.2. Suburbia and the “right to the city” in Hari Kunzru’s novels

In an interview conducted in 2018, I asked Hari Kunzru to develop on the recurring representation of the suburbs in his fiction. The writer explained:

I grew up in the suburbs and hated them with passion. The city was a place of possibility for me. I had the social relation to the suburbs, where everybody has their own space behind a wall and the idea of shared public space is actively avoided. It’s what you go there to avoid. What I always wanted was a kind of democratic public space, where people of all kinds could look each other in the eye. That is still my ideal. (HK ITW 2018)

Kunzru’s perception of the city as a “public space” allowing for encounters and confrontation, which the subject would be deprived of in the restrictive, individualistic mindset of the suburbs, is evocative of Henri Lefebvre’s famous formulation of a “right to the city”:

The *right to the city* cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*. It does not matter whether the urban fabric encloses the countryside (...), as long as the ‘urban,’ place of encounter, priority of use value, inscription in space of a time promoted to the rank of a supreme resource among all resources, finds its morphological base and its practico-material realization. (Lefebvre 1996: 158, emphasis in the original)

Kunzru’s representations of the suburbs often hinge on characters who struggle to access the city, and who sometimes exert a “simple visiting right,” as demonstrated strikingly in *My Revolutions* or *Red Pill*. In these two novels as well as in *Transmission*, writing the suburbs allows Kunzru to describe dynamics of power and control in specific times and places, whether it is the boredom and stasis it denotes in postwar England, or in East Berlin in the case of *Red Pill*. In *Transmission*, the suburban exclusion of Arjun Mehta in California, stuck in a home with other IT workers waiting on “the bench” (T 39), also conjures up forms of social invisibility crystallized around ethnicity, and the way immigrant workers are perceived as disposable and rendered powerless.

One cannot read Hari Kunzru’s evocations of the suburbs without acknowledging the legacy of a novel like *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), where Hanif Kureishi’s witty narrator starts by introducing himself through the suburbs:

Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. Anyway, why search the inner room when it’s enough to say that I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement (...). (1990: 3)

As the opening of Kureishi's landmark novel suggests, the suburbs trigger a need for movement, which is exerted not only thematically but as a narrative device, sustained in this case by the *Bildungsroman* structure and the journey of self-discovery the narrator embarks on in his "inner room." Kunzru's writing of the suburbs and the centre/periphery paradigm also indicates the role of a British Asian writer like Kureishi for a younger writer like him. In a 2010 review of Kureishi's *Collected Stories*, Kunzru noted how "Kureishi has underlined that he's no longer a brown-skinned suburban striver, an outsider or an exile or a visitor to the symposium bringing news of life in the post-colonial ghetto. He's inside, using the facilities" (Kunzru 2010b).

Reporting from the periphery, telling stories of what lurks beyond mainstream narratives of spatiality, is also what has been done by writer Iain Sinclair, whose *London Orbital* (2002) took the reader beyond the confines of the city centre and into London's periphery via the M25. Kunzru's *My Revolutions* undoubtedly echoes Sinclair's circular writing of the periphery, with a protagonist who ends up going "round and round" (MR 74) on the Paris *périphérique* while reminiscing about his past. As I have argued elsewhere, the motif of circularity informs the entirety of the novel, which intertwines the sense of place and the cyclical return to the characters' past experiences (Jeanniard du Dot 2023a). The writing of the suburbs is no exception to this pattern. The protagonist Mike (formerly Chris) remembers Ruislip, the suburb "in the commuter belt of west London" (MR 29), where he used to live as a teenager in the 1950s. In this passage, the suburbs are represented as a bounded place, and a mismatched landscape:

As I got older, I roamed around on my bike, discovering a world with no obvious centre, an unfocused sprawl of 1930s houses that gave way in surprising places to open fields where cows grazed or football goals stood waiting for Saturday league matches. The boundaries of this world were main roads. You'd come up hard against them, screaming with traffic, intimidating, uncrossable. The planes took off and landed. Sometimes I got up at night and opened kitchen cupboards to see if my mum was stockpiling enough canned food. (MR 50)

Evocations of enclosure include the "boundaries" that the roads represent, but also the canned food and football goals, all encapsulating the boy's material reality within the well-defined contours of the falsely reassuring postwar suburbs. Yet the outside world is worrying – it is a world where food is scarce and traffic "screams." Just like a blurry picture from the past, the "unfocused" landscape of the suburbs becomes highly disorienting – the "open fields" are contrasted with the strict boundaries of the surrounding roads; the planes take off and land, yet are not seen flying; the character "roams around," an action mirrored by the wheels of his bike,

yet there is no centre to reach. For the protagonist of *My Revolutions*, the only way out of the suburbs is to join political activism, going to the centre of London for protests and meetings about the Vietnam War and the use of nuclear weapons. In an article called “The Politics of the State in Contemporary Literary Studies,” Matthew Hart contends that this protagonist is “a typically English product of ‘red bricks and high green hedges’ and ‘endless garden walls’” who “undertakes a journey into adulthood in which the experience of alienation from – and ultimate reconciliation with – the dominant social order is a crucial factor (2009: 1065). The novel indeed unravels at first the classic pattern of upward social mobility undertaken by a suburban ironmonger’s son who secures a place at the London School of Economics (*MR* 29) – yet this journey is short-lived as Chris soon deviates towards direct political action. For someone like Chris, what matters is not so much moving upwards as it is getting to the centre, as formulated when he discusses the actions of his group: “[s]omething was happening in the world, and, whatever it was, we were going to be in the middle of it” (*MR* 103). Leaving the secluded space of the peripheral suburbs is the first step of this centripetal movement.

What *My Revolutions* suggests, in fact, is that the “high green hedges” and “garden walls” of the English coming-of-age imaginary can last long into adulthood, if only as a mechanism to frame a form of awareness. In the opening of the novel, an adult Chris – now called Mike *Frame* –, lives with partner Miranda in her cottage and is comparing ongoing party preparations with “a scene from one of those early-evening dramas where well-heeled suburbanites experience a little formulaic frisson in their lives; romance or murder-mystery” (*MR* 2). The character has indeed returned to a form of suburban existence, yet keeps detaching himself from the scenery and the scene, commenting on it through a window and comparing it to a television show. In so doing, it also frames the narrative itself and invites the reader to acknowledge their own individual paradoxes.

The suburbs are also looked at retrospectively in *Red Pill*, as a limit experienced in the past, which fosters a number of transgressions. Monika, a cleaner at the Deuter Center in Wannsee where the main plot unfolds, starts telling the narrator about her experience of being watched, after the latter has complained about fears for his privacy. In a specific chapter, called “*Zersetzung* (Undermining),” Monika tells him about how she joined a punk band in the East Berlin underground as a teenager and started receiving threats from the Stasi. The beginning of Monika’s story takes place in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn. In a pattern similar to that of *My Revolutions*, where the character’s childhood in the suburbs triggers an impatience with political change and a questioning of authority, Monika comments that “it was shitty to live in

a country where everything was run by old men. A whole country, reeking of piss and schnapps and cabbage soup” (RP 110). The atmosphere of the place, rendered in this unpleasant series of smells, is echoed again as she evokes another suburban town where she went to live by herself, and where “[t]he boredom was like acid” (RP 114). For Monika just like for Chris in *My Revolutions*, the only escape is offered by suburban trains which can take her to the city centre, and where she sees punks for the first time. Here again, the dichotomy between enclosing suburbs and liberating city pervades the descriptions:

The entire district was a building site, a showcase for the socialist future. Her father had put them on the list for a new car. She reckoned she had about five more years before she turned into one of the horrible sows who gave her the evil eye from behind their net curtains when she walked past with her friends. Five years of life. At weekends she’d take the train to Alexanderplatz and hang around with other teenagers. Sooner or later they were always chased away by the police. She hated the ride home. (RP 114)

The oppressive environment of the suburbs is rendered with limits in space but also in time, as Monika ponders over an irreducible five-year limit before she ends up “behind (...) net curtains.” These curtains epitomize the paradoxes of the suburbs, a place where private comfort can be achieved, yet where privacy is filtered through a “net,” in which each and every one ends up being caught. Monika’s escape to the city is always restrained by forms of authority – just like Chris and his fellow activists in *My Revolutions*, the police contains and limits her “right to the city.” In this conflictual choreography, “hanging around” equates being “chased away,” the stasis of leisurely youth being considered an unfit use of place. Michel Lussault notes how stasis in central or busy places is considered undesirable and suspicious in contemporary societies, and leads to a form of role-playing between those who can stay immobile somewhere and those who cannot. He remarks that “the entire game consists in avoiding certain positions, but holding on to others” (2009: 22).⁷⁷ Kunzru’s narratives show how the replication of these social roles often stems from an excess of control, which can be traced and found even in the apparent quiet of the suburban lifestyle.

In *Transmission*, the suburbs are first used as a place where migrant workers are placed despite themselves, on “the bench” (T 39), the name given to a house where they have to wait for an IT company to find them a job. In this “suburban California” (T 38), the nearby presence of the road reminds Arjun – like Chris in *My Revolutions* – that he is confined to the suburbs while others can move: “[i]n his bedroom the drone of traffic from Highway 101 was a constant

⁷⁷ My translation. In the original : “le jeu consiste à éviter certaines positions, à en tenir d’autres” Michel Lussault, *De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, 22.

presence” (T 42). While at first this suburb is that of a “low-income area” (*ibid.*), Arjun soon expands his mental geography of what suburbs might represent in this new country. After he has been hired by a company called Virugenix which has helped him find accommodation, the reader is told that “[h]ome was now a third-floor studio in Berry Acres, a new development enclosed by high decorative ironwork gates that opened in response to a magnetic swipe card” (T 51). For Arjun, the appeal of this gated experience of the suburbs slowly transforms into an uncanny experience of virtuality:

It looked like one of the trees that you could make appear with a mouse click and a little noise when playing SimCity. In fact, if he was honest, most of the Puget Sound area looked like that: perfect, glossily pleasing, somehow *placed*. Then he put on the cleanest of his t-shirts and took the bus downtown, past the Sim marina and the Sim park and the mall full of Sims shopping at the drugstore and drinking tea at the British Pantry. Redmond was a town with nice graphics and an intuitive user interface. (T 52)

For a character whose interior world is intricately connected to the virtual, the artificial construction constituted by the upper-class suburban landscape seems more relevant than any other environment. Its “placed” quality – echoed by the adjectives “**p**erfect” and “**p**leasing” – is indebted not to its being an actual *place*, but to the strict control of its limits, whether they are gates or neat angles that please the eye. For Arjun, a character who struggles with social interactions throughout the novel, the suburbs provide a helpful “user interface” – one where human encounters are carefully planned and restricted.

In Kunzru’s novels, the representation of the suburbs questions not only the “right to the city” as a persisting issue, where categories of class, gender or nationality imply a relegation to the outskirts, but it also leads to examining the very shape of (sub)urban dwelling, where the “place of encounter” wished for by Lefebvre has been relinquished in order to fulfil individual desires. These depictions of the suburbs as a physical limit are thus mirrored in the limits of a collective imaginary which considers place as a closed-off commodity, where personal safety prevails, yet no meaningful encounter can ever take place. In these novels, challenging the limits of the suburbs is the starting point of a journey: the characters’ attempts to escape, to be “from the suburbs and going somewhere” like Hanif Kureishi’s narrator, lead them to re-evaluate their sense of place and to reconsider the suburbs from an external viewpoint. As will be developed next, the deceptive discourse of safety and seclusion which these characters challenge also finds its echo in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writing of the prison cell.

5.1.3. “Neither exterior nor gap?” Prison and control

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault observes that “the prison has neither exterior nor gap; it cannot be interrupted, except when its task is totally completed; its action on the individual must be uninterrupted: an unceasing discipline” (1995: 236). Because they are completely impermeable places, prisons enact several forms of power exerted over the relation with place. These involve the freedom of movement, but also the right to privacy or personal space. As Foucault suggests, the prison is initially a place defined by totalities – no grey zone is allowed in the experience of imprisonment. In their representations of imprisonment, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru explore how this narrative of totality – considered as a condition for the return into society, to “restore to the state the subject it had lost” (Foucault 1995: 123) – is confronted to the inherently nuanced and multifaceted relations between subject and place.

In fact, the prison cell often functions as a metonymic depiction of a complex psyche, and narratives often resort to that image so as to mirror a mental state. This is explored in Hari Kunzru’s novella/exhibition *Memory Palace*, where the protagonist strives to remember everything he knows and form a “memory palace” in his mind, even as he has been imprisoned for being a “membership of an internet,” or what he calls being a “Memorialist,” in a time when the collection of knowledge has become unlawful (*MP* 12; 16). A similar metaphor unfolds in the first chapter of Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, where the staunch boundaries of the prison walls are unsettled by the protagonist’s perception:

My cell is full of shadows. Hanging naked from a wire in the hall outside, a bulb casts light cut by rusted bars into thin strips that snake along the concrete floor and up the back wall. People like stains dissolve into the grayness. (*MS* 3)

This strange opening makes for a disturbing entrance into the plot. As he welcomes the reader into an enclosed space, this first-person narrator is presumably guilty of something, and it remains unclear whether the “people” he talks about are physically there or the people concerned by his deed. The prison cell is here disturbed by mentions of “shadows” and “grayness” which nuance the strict walls of the place, and the “rusted bars” seem to provide a glimpse into an unstable narrative. The prison cell actually encapsulates the novel itself, given that the only two scenes where Daru is in his cell circle the narrative in the first and last chapters. Throughout the retrospective narration of the events that led him there, and the trial the reader is invited to in order to judge him, the reader knows that Daru is ultimately imprisoned no matter what, which adds a layer of claustrophobia to the already stifling evocation of drug

addiction, nuclear doom and excessive heat. In the final chapter, Daru contemplates an envelope received from Mumtaz, his lover, containing his version of the events. This time, the character re-defines the boundaries around him by refusing to go anywhere else mentally: “I’d rather not remember, a smell like burning flesh, a hazy world seen through smoke. (...) Places I will not let my mind go” (MS 308). From the seclusion of his cell, the prisoner thus exerts control over his mental boundaries, and also enacts the moral ambiguities that have led him to this place – looking at “the story of [his] innocence,” he reflects that it is “[a] half-story” (MS 308).

While in these examples, the totalising aims of imprisonment are undermined by the subject’s imagination or by an epiphany, in other novels, representations of prisons are used to broach larger, enduring systems of power, showing how the singular cell actually depends on vaster organisms controlling individual lives. Even when it is intended to have “no exterior nor gap,” the prison cell is always placed within a certain social space. In Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*, the protagonist Chris is sentenced to prison after the police repressed one of the actions of his political group. As he is driving “round and round” on the Paris *périphérique*, he suddenly remembers walking in circles at Pentonville prison:

My revolutions: a hundred of us walking, two abreast, inner ring clockwise, outer ring counter-clockwise. Back in the days when Pentonville was the gateway to transportation, the builders constructed an endless double path of flagstones, two snakes eating their own tails, set into the black tar. (...) I never found out why I came to be sent to HMP Pentonville. It was the recidivists’ prison. (MR 70)

The movement of “revolution” which prevails and unfolds in different manners throughout this novel is here used to evoke the circular movements of the prisoners. To Michel Foucault, the prison is part of what he considers heterotopias, that is “other places” (1984: 4), or “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1984: 3). The prison belongs to a certain category of heterotopias, which he calls “heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (1984: 5). Here, the “clockwise” and “counter-clockwise” movements of the prisoners within the “two snakes” formed in the ground are conceived as a remedy against deviation. Circular movement is here to ensure that the socially deviant subject gets back into line rather than “deviates” from the norm and from the place society expects them to hold. The narrator evokes Pentonville’s past as “the gateway to transportation,” referring to penal colonies which enabled a de facto exclusion of prisoners by sending them far away. For lack of this

solution, the prison now seems to enact this distancing through physical movement within its walls. The idea of an eternal return, where meaning is undermined by repetition, is not only evoked with the figure of the ouroboros – the “two snakes” – but it also culminates with the mention of the “recidivists’ prison.” Considered as a deviant subject, the protagonist seems to be stuck in a never-ending loop of control to which there is no entry nor exit.

Forms of control in *My Revolutions* actually extend to other places than prisons. As mentioned in the previous section, places like the suburbs are described as bounded and restrictive. But this sensation also comes back to Chris (now living as Mike) in the most unexpected places. In the present of the diegesis, Mike/Chris is staying in a hotel with Miles Bridgeman, the photographer who is blackmailing him about his past, and is reminded of “British state institutions” and the forms of control they have exerted on him over time:

Contemplating the hospital corners on the bedsheets, the small cake of soap and the paper-wrapped tooth-mug on the basin, I was filled with foreboding. All British state institutions, whatever their purpose, share an atmosphere. When I was growing up they used to share a smell too, an alkaline reek that united school and hospital and prison and dole office, and always triggered in me a kind of cellular-level panic, a fight-or-flight reflex. The smell has gone, abolished along with so many of the visible signs of power (in dark moments I think it’s all my generation achieved, killing that smell), but even without it the atmosphere remains (...). (MR 178)

What would initially appear as signs of physical comfort – hygiene, and a clean bed – appears to the protagonist as a control exerted over his body. The imposed use of space they induce exudes a three-dimensional discomfort which pervades all the senses durably and figure the subject as a hunted animal with post-traumatic reactions. In this passage, the “institution” betrays its etymological origins, as that which *installs* or *puts in place* (Etymonline). The control exerted over place and body is contained within the image of “cellular-level panic” – the cell is at once the cell of the body, suggesting an organic reaction, but the phrase also points to the panic of being enclosed within a cell or within other avatars of the prison cell. In his analysis of what he calls “the society of control” in Hari Kunzru’s works, Peter D. Mathews assembles the different fears of protagonist Chris Carver under the label of “neoliberal society,” most visible in the ending where Chris returns to “the bourgeois lifestyle [represented] as the last remaining social institution.” To Mathews, “[n]eoliberal society is a totalizing machine that tolerates no outside, so that no matter where Carver runs he feels that he can never escape it” (2020: 5). This leads him to read the ending of *My Revolutions* as a “sardonic farce” (*ibid.*) I would further suggest that this uncomfortable ending is directed towards the reader’s own discomforts. Rather than the liberatory possibilities of the “revolution,” the novel’s association

of the term with a personal pronoun (*My Revolutions*) suggests that personal ethics are often underpinned by forms of individual or collective control, and the ending extends these paradoxes towards readers' own politics.

This discomfort is further developed in *White Tears*, Kunzru's thriller-inspired novel about Seth, a young music collector who ends up caught in the meanders of America's racial history. Throughout the novel, which combines several time periods and narrative voices, the white characters often voice their unease with, and ignorance of, racial injustice – it is the case for Leonie Wallace, the sister of Seth's friend Carter, when she dismisses what she calls “Black lives matter or whatever” (*WT* 189).⁷⁸ In some cases, this ignorance is expressed through the mention of place, as in the narrative of JumpJim, another record collector, who remembers going to the houses of blues singers in the South, decades before: “I had never been inside houses like that. Little shacks patched together with sheet metal and crating. (...) I had not thought such places existed, not in America. Honestly, I hadn't known” (*WT* 182). The novel indeed displays the simultaneous evolution of different social groups within entirely different physical places, and how it involves silencing the existence of certain places. In its representations of the carceral system in the United States, and its intricate connections with the legacy of slavery but also with the economy, *White Tears* displays how prison has become “the place where undesirable populations are managed” (Agier 2010: 267).⁷⁹

For contemporary character Seth, unveiling this management means understanding how places are hidden from view, and the complex interactions of prison with surveillance. Seth is mistakenly being held for the murder of Leonie, and brutalized by the police. As the reader is made to understand, Seth is progressively merging with the ghost of Charlie Shaw, a mysterious dead bluesman he has been looking for. The police use racist abuse during the interrogation, until Seth is shown the blurry picture of a black man and is told that this man is the accused. Now freed from the police investigation, Seth attempts to understand who that man was:

The suspect was taken to a special unit, a place which did not participate in the usual police booking formalities. I tell him I don't understand. Participate? I thought it was the law. He tells me the place is an exception, a black site. It is exempt from scrutiny. (*WT* 279)

⁷⁸ There are no capital letters for the phrase in the text of the novel.

⁷⁹ In French: “l'espace de gestion des populations indésirables” – Since Michel Agier's text concerns heterotopias, I chose to translate “*espace*” as “place” here, in accordance with the definition of Foucault's heterotopias as “other places” (see the preceding development). Michel Agier, “Le biopouvoir à l'épreuve de ses formes sensibles. Brève introduction à un projet d'ethnographie des hétérotopies contemporaines.” *Chimères* 74 :3, 2010, 267.

Seth's informer uses bureaucratic language to describe a place that has been removed from society. Compared to the heterotopia of the prison, which is an "other place" yet exists within the confines of the social space, the "black site" holds no position in society. Contrary to the heterotopia, it does not "represent" anything (Foucault 1984: 3) – it is not even within sight, "exempt from scrutiny," and as we understand, also exempted from any moral or social contracts.

Advancing further his inquiries, the protagonist, now half-Seth / half-Charlie Shaw, ends up at "The 33d Annual Congress of the American Federation of Incarceration Service Providers" (WT 319) and is given a paper by a passerby. In a nightmarish, nonsensical scene, the protagonist explains how he is supposed to be, at the same time, at the record company, significantly called "Key and Gate," where Charlie Shaw was supposed to go before he was killed. As the two places seem to blend into one, Seth/Charlie reads the leaflet he has been given: "*Walxr (part of the Wallace Magnolia Group) is a leading provider of detention, correctional and community reentry services with 58 facilities, approximately 25,500 beds (...) around the globe*" (WT 321). The wealthy Wallace family, around whom Seth has been gravitating throughout the plot, is revealed to be at the heart of an economy of detention, using the prison to continue racial segregation and to serve their personal interests.⁸⁰ The use of vacuous marketing language also appears in the enumeration of their missions:

Our goal is to assist our clients in serving those assigned to their care through provision of high-quality cost-effective solutions, including design, construction and financing of state and federal prisons, detention centers and community reentry facilities as well as the provision of community supervision services, using advanced networked monitoring technologies.
(WT 321, italics in the original)

While the self-contained concepts of the compound adjectives seem to mirror the drastic ready-made solutions of "Walxr," the commercial language hides the reality of prison behind a plethora of synonyms – "centers," "facilities" or "services" replace the reality of the place to make it more socially acceptable. The profusion of adjectives before the word "technologies" is equally manipulative: it is unclear what "advanced networked monitoring" refers to, if not an intrusive surveillance system. The passage displays how language is the first and central locus of power, which can hide as much as reveal drastic desires of control.

Indeed, in *White Tears* the wish to maintain a hold over the Black community within the American judiciary system gives way to a spatial conflict, one which could perhaps be

⁸⁰ The name "Wallace" itself might be read as nudging towards Governor George Wallace, a segregationist politician who famously stood in front of Alabama schools to prevent desegregation in the 1960s.

illustrated by Michel de Certeau's distinction between *strategies* and *tactics* in the use of space. First, the “*correctional and community reentry services*” managed by the Wallace family can be seen to form part of a long-standing strategy, a term which de Certeau defines as

the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (...) can be managed. (1984: 35-36)

While the Wallaces have developed a seclusive “place” where “targets or threats can be managed,” the narrative presents a dissident voice in its rewriting of the ghost story. The ethereal presence of the bluesman Charlie Shaw in the narrative, where his voice first appears in a haunting song and then slowly takes over Seth's, seems to perform what de Certeau calls a tactic, that is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. (...) The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (1984: 37). The reader understands that Charlie Shaw has been killed by Jack Wallace, otherwise called “Captain Jack” in Charlie's haunting song, and who was a foreman at the levee where Charlie was forced to work. Once denied his rightful place in society, now dead and trying to get back into place, the Black bluesman is “playing on” with the “terrain” of oppression and restriction that has been imposed on him. When Charlie takes over the narrative, he explains: “The record I never got to make is out there, at least sometimes, for those that have ears to hear. I put it there. I kept pushing it out. And now I have found a horse to ride. (...) I have found a way back up into the world” (*WT* 319). Pushing open the boundaries of Seth's body, the ghostly figure invokes “ears to here” – read through paronomasia, the phrase also calls for “ears to *here*,” to the place from which Charlie Shaw has been speaking and singing. In the end, the text suggests that “walls have ears”: despite the will to control and exclude through imprisonment or death, the ghosts of American consciousness are still there, in place, listening and passing on messages.

In a final hallucinatory scene of reckoning, Seth/Charlie is surrounded by all the Wallaces that have been mentioned throughout the plot: Carter and Leonie's father who manages the incarceration company, but also a judge, and Jack Wallace. “Captain Jack” starts explaining to the protagonist his belief that the contemporary prison is a logical replacement for the enslavement and exploitation of African American people:

– It's a post-racial America now. The only thing we care about is supervision. He wags an instructing finger.
– You don't have to work'em anymore. You don't have to walk a line with a rifle. All you got to do is get them into the system. Don't matter how you do

it. Speeding ticket. Public nuisance. Once they're in, your boot is on their neck. Fines, tickets, court fees. And if they can't pay, well. Days or dollars, one or the other. Either way, we get ours and they stay in their rightful place. Same as it ever was. (*WT* 325)

Here again, ambiguous signifiers come to replace the reality of incarceration, designated as “supervision” within a “system.” The insidiousness of said system relies on a well-oiled economic strategy, starting with the “fines” and “fees” that are used as a motive for imprisonment. The couplet scheme is repeated with the mention of “days or dollars,” a phrase which encapsulates the metaphor of a debt that has to be paid to society. Foucault indeed notes how the prison “*metes out* punishment in days, months and years and draws up quantitative equivalences between offences and durations” (1995: 232-233, my emphasis). This measurement in time translates here into the capitalist economy of the neoliberal paradigm, yet there is no exchange at stake but rather the maintenance of power. This “meting out” is what ultimately allows for the measurement and delimitation of places of control, or what the character paradoxically names “their rightful place.” The pattern of the ghost story ultimately represents how the denial of a right *to* place, to exist freely outside the walls of a physical or metaphorical prison, has led to unexpected tactics of exit and entrance, starting with language and the haunting voice of a history that keeps repeating itself.

All these depictions of prisons form part of a writing of state power and the complex apparatuses that develop together with it, whether they are exposed or away from the public gaze. While the prison evokes the intricacies of law and history at a macro level, representations of the prison through place also function as a synecdochic representation of “the state’s functions on-the-ground” (Cilano 2013: 6), thus operating a to-and-fro between external control and its impacts on the subject’s personal sense of place. Even if the prison symbolically has “neither exterior nor gap,” the narratives show how the prison is in fact part of larger, “exterior” schemes of control, and how it induces “gaps,” moral and ethical cracks in the individual and the collective consciousness. The role of place as an interface between personal experience and unspoken forms of control is also depicted in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s approaches to gender.

5.1.4. “A room of her own”: gender in place / gendering place

In *Gendered Mobilities*, Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell note how certain dynamics have become central to the analysis of how “gender is spatially produced,” such as “the binary of public and private” or “the dialectics of fixity and flow – of place and mobility”

(2012: 2). These binaries and dialectics also reflect the way gender is spatially controlled and maintained within certain places – Cresswell and Uteng’s phrasing suggests that place, in that sense, often equates stasis – or how, on the opposite, having access to other places can provide escape from unwanted external control.

Mohsin Hamid’s novels articulate and revisit these dialectics through characters and/or narrators that seem to resist the imposition of gender norms on their freedom of movement and their personal space. This is demonstrated in *Exit West*, a novel which regularly shifts focalization between the two protagonists, Saeed and Nadia. Gender differences in the relation to place are made salient and questioned through the differing perspectives of two refugees on the move, who constantly have to re-evaluate their needs for space and their hopes for a safe place. In fact, these differences are examined even before they begin to move, as the narrative voice describes Nadia’s lifestyle choices in their unnamed Eastern city “not yet openly at war” (*EW* 1). Taking the risk of being estranged by her family, Nadia has indeed decided to live by herself, in what is called “a room of her own”:

She secured a room of her own atop the house of a widow, a record player and small collection of vinyl, a circle of acquaintances among the city’s free spirits, and a connection to a discreet and non-judgemental female gynaecologist. She learned how to dress for self-protection, how best to deal with aggressive men and with the police, and with aggressive men who were the police, and always to trust her instincts about situations to avoid or to exit immediately. (*EW* 19)

Here, the Woolfian trope of the “room of one’s own” is revisited in circular terms, from “vinyls” to a “circle of acquaintances.” The safety of these places that she makes for herself is contrasted with the more angular hazards of public space, where mobility implies acute awareness and focus, contrary to the *flâneur* daydreaming in the streets. Public space is characterized by duplicity, where the police can turn into a threat at any moment, and where the woman character has to hide her corporeal appearance. For Nadia, “dressing for self-protection” takes the form of a black robe, which is mentioned several times in the novel. The narrator makes it clear from the opening of the novel that the robe is a deliberate choice: “Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear (...), within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something” (*EW* 1). Throughout the novel, the robe does not only mean “talismanic protection from unwanted male attention,” as Muneeza Shamsie points out (2017 *n.p.*), but it operates more generally as a shield from exteriority – as Nadia puts it on in London after taking a shower, she feels “ready to resist the claims and expectations of the world” (*EW* 45). The role of clothing is also evoked in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising*

Asia, where the unnamed protagonist of the story (designated by “you”) sees his young wife “unsettled by the attention she receives” by younger men, and in reaction, “starts to dress more modestly, and even to cover her hair when she leaves the house, establishing thereby a barrier between her and the covetousness around her, and a degree of inner calm” (*HTG* 136). In these examples, clothing is located at the intersection of women’s public and private lives, the clothes used for exterior appearance leading to an “inner calm.” Both characters reflect Hamid’s concern with the controlling power of the “male gaze,” a term coined by Laura Mulvey to describe the objectification of women in visual culture and its many implications (1975).

In comparison with these individual forms of self-protection from an exterior gaze, Hamid’s novels also discuss the organization of common places along the lines of gender. For instance, the protagonist’s young wife in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* starts organizing meetings at her house with other women, a “group of religiously-minded activists,” after her husband rejects her (*HTG* 149). In *Exit West*, this appears in the way Saeed begins to feel close to a “gathering of men” (*EW* 152) in London, who come from the same place as Nadia and him. Saeed nurtures ambiguous feelings towards this group, which reminds him of home and at the same time of the “militants” from their city (*EW* 152). As Saeed offers Nadia to join these people in a different occupied house, Nadia remains unconvinced, on the grounds that it would mean living in “a pair of separated spaces, with a barrier between them” (*EW* 150).

The last section of *Exit West*, in California, shows Nadia falling in love with a woman, a cook who lives nearby. The love story unfolds in passages that emphasise not only tenderness but also visibility – upon seeing her by chance, Nadia “nod[s] in recognition” (*EW* 216). The narrator goes on to comment that “Nadia felt a thrill being seen by her, and seeing her in turn” (*EW* 217). These passages hark back to Hamid’s writing of love and intimacy as the possible opening of new spaces, as evoked in the fourth chapter of this work. Here, gazing takes on a protective function – Nadia’s “feeling seen” operates as if in response to the hazards of men’s gaze in public space evoked in the first part of the novel. In contrast, her encounter with this woman seems to form a sense of safety, an invisible space infused with its own dynamics: “her watching hit you like a physical force” (*EW* 217).

Moth Smoke, Hamid’s first novel, presents a particularly striking example of a place where gender is defining: the Heera Mandi quarter of Lahore, historically reserved to prostitution. The protagonist Daru is taken there by Mumtaz, his best friend’s wife, whose journalistic work leads her to investigate the life of a brothel Madam called Dilaram. Mumtaz

seeks Daru's help in order to get to Heera Mandi, as she fears getting lost. Once there, the encounter between the two women is understood to be done within the safety of a locked room, and Mumtaz has to negotiate for Daru, a male presence, to join: "'You can come,' she says. 'But only if you promise not to do anything macho'" (MS 56). During the encounter, where Dilaram tells the story of a lifetime of abuse and violence, Daru witnesses a bond being formed, while being completely excluded from the conversation – he notices how "[t]he women are completely focused on each other" (MS 59). To Claire Chambers, Hamid's choice to feature Heera Mandi in his writing of Lahore is particularly significant, and she compares it to its role in Pakistani writer Bhapsi Sidhwa's novels, including the trailblazing *Cracking India* (1988). Talking about how it contributes to "gendering the city," Chambers explains how in these fictions Heera Mandi, a central area of the Walled City of Lahore, "can be read a microcosm of the city as a whole, and therefore of the Punjab more broadly, just as Lahore may in some ways be read as the nation in miniature" (2014: 149-150). Located near the historical Bhadshahi Mosque, Heera Mandi is a place of contradictions which many choose not to see even though it is centrally located. Chambers argues that because of the many different communities that converge in the Mosque and in Heera Mandi itself, the place conjures up the "metropole/hinterland dynamic" (2014: 150). She notes how Hamid also displays this dynamic through the story of Dilaram, a village girl taken from her home to Lahore and who has ended up trapped there, unable to return for fear she might be killed by her family (MS 59).

Through the example of Mumtaz's investigation of Heera Mandi, it ultimately appears that women in Mohsin Hamid's novels find alternative escape routes, and perhaps comfortable places, in writing. The character's name itself refers to the Moghol reference that frames the narrative – she incarnates a contemporary double of Mumtâz-i Mahal, the wife of Emperor Shah Jahan. While the emperor's wife is famous for the palace named after her, this contemporary Mumtaz finds that domestic life is too tight for her and escapes her marriage by writing and by starting an affair with Daru, her husband's best friend. With this character, Hamid also broaches the taboo of unfulfilling motherhood, Mumtaz frequently stating the discomfort she feels towards her own son. Mumtaz begins to write newspaper articles under the pen name of Zulfikar Manto, explaining to Daru that it is a reference to short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto – the word "Zulfikar," meaning "sword" in Urdu, is used in reference to his literary combativity in the face of censorship ("Manto's pen was his sword," MS 53).⁸¹ In

⁸¹ This might equally be read as a reference to the more contemporary Pakistani-American writer and poet Zulfikar Ghose.

Moth Smoke, Mumtaz regularly takes over the narrative, explaining her side of the story but also writing down Daru's story, which she puts forth during his trial and eventually sends him in an envelope when he is imprisoned (MS 308). After taking Daru to the Heera Mandi quarter of Lahore, she explains:

'Manto often wrote about prostitutes.'
'But why the fascination with Manto's subject matter?' (...)
'A few years of marriage and motherhood, I suppose. Finding I don't quite fit into what's expected. I'm interested in things women do that aren't spoken about. Manto's stories let me breathe. They make me feel like less of a monster. (MS 208)

Mumtaz's relation to writing stems for a struggle to "fit," and she finds more breathing space in the narratives provided by these fictional stories than in the narrative of motherhood and marriage imposed on her. The character's turn to Manto's writing, and to her own, thus opens up new places, stretching the boundaries of what she had been confined to. Her turn to writing is also associated to her *re*-turn to Lahore, after a period of emigration to the United States with her husband. Returning to Lahore, and to Manto's narratives of Lahore, she finds a new sense of adequation and completion. She explains to the reader: "And the more I wrote, the more I loved home. I was back, I was finding myself again, and I was being honest about things I cared for passionately" (MS 208). Mumtaz equates being home with self-completion – the sense of place runs parallel to finding one's own place. This manner of drawing the contours of one's life through writing is also embodied by Erica, Changez's love interest in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Erica is a ghostly figure, haunted by the loss of her boyfriend to illness, and she is often taken by critics to embody the unsettled psyche of post-9/11 *Am*-Erica (Hartnell 2010: 337). Shortly after meeting Changez, she explains that she has written a piece of fiction and describes it in these terms: "'It's more of a novella than a novel,' she said. 'It leaves space for your thoughts to echo'" (TRF 58). Here again, the "novella" is described in spatial terms – like Manto's stories allow Mumtaz to "breathe," fiction stretches Erica's mental space and provides creative perspectives in the form of "echoes." With these images of space opening up, Hamid here again resorts to a self-referential poetic writing, which hints at the powers of fiction to create alternative places of affinity and identification.

Hari Kunzru's novels also display women for whom motherhood is constraining, for instance Lisa, in *Gods Without Men*, who is targeted by public criticism after the disappearance of her child. *Transmission* also shows the limits imposed on Leela, the young Bollywood star, objectified and marketed by her manipulative mother. But the exploration of gender boundaries

and imposed control can be seen most strikingly in *The Impressionist*, through the protagonist Pran Nath Razdan, a shape-shifting character who embarks on an eventful coming-of-age journey. An entire section of the novel is dedicated to Pran's incarnation as Rukhsana, an almost-*hijra*, after he has been made captive at a brothel in Agra. This section takes up more than a hundred pages in the novel, where gender is shown as one facet of Pran's multiple self-reinventions and shifting identity, and is often described in terms of boundaries and enclosure. Indeed, Pran's perception changes as soon as he is forced to wear new clothes: "The clothes. A rustle of silk. A heavy veil hung over his face. The world seen, new and extraordinary, through a cotton grille sewn into the veil. These are purdah clothes. Women's clothes" (TI 66). Places take on new limits in his perception, echoing the new delineations of his gender identity. As soon as he is noticed for his fair skin, it is decided that he should leave Agra and go to Fatehpur by train in order to fulfil a conspiracy against a British major. On the train, "purdah," – the separation of women from men and from their gaze – is maintained, "even on the move:"

they view the world through tightly woven cotton grilles, and, tit for tat, absent themselves from the general gaze. (...) Windows are clicked shut against the cold. A man comes to take orders for food, shouting through the closed door, then returning with metal tiffin-boxes of dal and chapatis which he leaves outside in the corridor. Purdah, complete and airtight, even on the move. (TI 70)

Pran's experience of enclosure behind the cotton grilles is echoed by clicked windows, in a multiplicity of enclosures that seem to keep maintaining him in a claustrophobic position. At the same time, the moving train and his position as observer hint at his continued evolution: Pran's next feats consist in a series of revelations and door openings, which, every time, seem to echo the character's liberation from the identity assigned to him. The protagonist's relation to exposure is ambivalent: at Fatehpur, Pran is seemingly locked in the *zenana* – the part of the palace devolved to the women, the Nawab's wives and by the hijras – but at the same time, he is constantly threatened by exposure: the conspiracy he is part of despite himself consists in taking a picture of him being raped by Major Privett-Clampe, in order to ensure that the Nawab's brother gets the title. Contrary to the women-only spaces described in Mohsin Hamid's narratives of contemporary urban life, here the *zenana* is a worrying space of ambiguities which allows to keep certain subjects under tight control and observe them at all times. The notion of observation is indeed central in the control of place(s) and people. In their narratives, Mohsin Hamid and Kunzru show that surveillance has become integral to representations and experiences of place, as will be examined next.

5.2. Watching and monitoring: place under surveillance

In the introduction to a volume of *Contemporary Literature* dedicated to the State in literary fiction, Jim Hansen and Matthew Hart explain:

Contemporary literary production surely involves the crossing and confounding of national borders – if not in practice, then in imagination. But those borders – in practice, if not in imagination – are also policed by states with access to ever more panoptical forms of protection and control. (2008: 506)

Confronted with this apparent paradox, novelists like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru represent both facets of this interaction between “real” and “imagined” borders. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, a turning point in the advent of mass surveillance, these two writers have incorporated the questions of privacy and controlled safety in their writing of place. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions suggest that “borders” are far from “confounded,” and on the opposite, surface up in the most unexpected places as tools for the regulation of individual lives.

In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman notices a shift in the exertion of power at the turn of the twenty-first century. While enclosure was one of the principal means of controlling people in the past,

[t]he prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building, order-maintenance and the responsibility for the consequences of it all as well as of the necessity to bear their costs. (2000: 11)

This movement from “territorial confinement” to “escape, slippage, elision and avoidance” inevitably engages the relation between power and place, and modifies the very nature of places of power. Where, then, is this power exerted? Questions of visibility are inherent to this “slippage,” since the people on whom power is exerted are no longer observed directly in a physical place.

As a theme, surveillance seems to pervade Hamid’s and Kunzru’s writing of place, leading their narratives to portray a paranoid sense of place humorously, but also gesturing towards a dystopian future (and present) where no movement or action in space can go unnoticed. As they portray invasive surveillance systems such as drones or CCTV, the narratives also hint at more willingly accepted forms of surveillance like mobile phones, which have entered the most private if not intimate places. The narratives show how “escape, slippage, elision and avoidance” characterise contemporary forms of surveillance and at times resist a

containment within place, while in other cases, the motif of the panopticon – “a segmented, immobile, frozen space” (Foucault 1995: 195) – resurfaces in contemporary avatars. Immobility and displacement find their formal equivalent in the narratives, where the mobile surveillance devices described seem to resist a fixed elucidation, while fixed panopticons are described on a hyper-referential mode. The first section of this development is dedicated to the latter places, while the second focuses on the specific question of drones, described in both writers’ fictions.

5.2.1. “Braced for exposure”: panoptic places

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault famously analysed Bentham’s panopticon, a model of carceral architecture which was created, to him, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1995: 201). Philosopher Edward Casey, in *The Fate of Place*, wonders if the panopticon is “less (...) a scene for what Foucault likes to call “knowledge/power” than (...) a built *place*. Does such a building count as a genuine place, for example (...)?” (2011: 185). Looking at how eighteenth-century philosophers like Bentham often conceived of place as a utilitarian *site* rather than a practiced place, Casey wonders: “Is a place with no hiding space still a place?” (*ibid.*)

Hari Kunzru’s novels raise the same question in their representation of contemporary panopticons. In the contemporary avatars represented in his fiction, the figure of the panopticon is used not only for prison systems, but seems to be replicated in the workplace or in dwelling places. These places of transparency give way to a discomfort in the characters who experience them, unsettling their sense of familiarity but also their sense of place itself – for instance, one is led to question the role of boundaries when everything in the surrounding space becomes visible. A case in point is the In Vitro building in *Transmission*, where Guy Swift, the hyper-connected, hyper-mobile marketing manager, decides to settle. In this immense glass tower located in London near the Thames, Guy Swift incarnates the age-old expansionist desire to control and master space, a desire attuned to the neoliberal mindset he represents.⁸² Yet the building soon reveals its uncomfortable reality:

Inside the atrium a pair of crew-cut men sat on swivel chairs watching a bank of video monitors. The security post was ‘dramatized,’ as the Pelham Partnership put it, by being located inside a giant glass oval, reminiscent of

⁸² As noted in chapter 2, Alan Robinson points out that “Kunzru is probably parodying Montevetro, a development designed by Sir Richard Rogers (...) which was built in Battersea on the site of an early twentieth-century flour mill.” Robinson, Alan. ‘Faking It: Simulation and Self-Fashioning in Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*.’ In *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*, edited by Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim, 77–96. Amherst; New York: Cambria Press, 2008, 83.

an eye, suspended at the mezzanine level over the front desk. (...) Landings, stairwells, gardens, riverside – everything was covered. The oval was intended to be reassuring, a symbol of safety, but lately Guy had found the bored men and their constantly shifting panoptical views were having the opposite effect. (T 118)

In Vitro is a place of paradoxes. Its Latin name is echoed in the evocation of an “atrium,” supposed to convey a past grandeur in a place which champions modernity. The evocation of “covering” space through monitoring devices bears invasive tones – from objects “suspended” to other zones being “covered,” this place is rendered through a three-dimensional tension which comes to overwhelm the character. While these devices are meant to monitor a hypothetical Other, they ironically turn towards the sender, the patron of the security industry. The spectacle of observation – with a “dramatized” device – thus hides the many layers lurking behind the appearance of safety. Through these horizontal layers and vertical partitions and “suspensions,” In Vitro corresponds to what Michel de Certeau calls “a mastery of place through sight,” enacted in a “*panoptic practice* proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus control and ‘include’ them within its scope of vision” (1984: 36). In Kunzru’s representations of surveillance, “objects that can be observed and measured” also betray the economic and cultural purposes of an increasing homogenisation of places. Indeed, a building like In Vitro displays what Peter Childs and James Green call “flattening the heterogeneity of terrestrial space,” in order to make it “a uniform, readable plane where social relations are rendered fully visible to the panoptic gaze of instrumental power and may be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment and exchange” (2013: 90). The “Pelham Partnership” and the other actors responsible for In Vitro’s inception are regularly referred to, showing how this privileged vantage point of observation was, first and foremost, a product that needed selling.

The reflection on contemporary surveillance in/through places is continued in Kunzru’s *Red Pill*. While an external narrator casts an ironic gaze on Guy Swift’s glass tower in *Transmission*, here it is a paranoid first-person narrator that evokes surveillance. Hoping to find privacy in his writing retreat at the Deuter Center near Berlin (“the one constant to all my fantasies (...) had been privacy,” *RP* 18), the narrator, an academically-inclined freelance writer, enters a place where this ideal is shattered. The narrative at first plays with physical intrusions on his privacy, in a thriller-like setting – the character is concerned about the butler of the house, and notices there are “surveillance image of the house and grounds” (*RP* 14). On a walk along the other villas surrounding the lake, the experience is repeated: “Security cameras

poked over hedges, watching me as I loitered” (RP 30). In the evening, while eating dinner alone, he continues to feel observed:

I noticed a camera, mounted high on the wall near Herr Deuter’s portrait. There was also a motion sensor, which blinked red each time the waiter crossed the room back to the kitchen. Despite myself I became slightly self-conscious about the way I was eating. I dabbed at my lips with a napkin. I found myself sweeping away breadcrumbs from the table cloth, making sure my soup spoon was aligned correctly in the empty bowl. (RP 34)

This unwelcoming mansion seems inhabited by the ghost of its founder, Herr Deuter. In a parody of a Gothic castle, the character is made to face uncomfortably the portrait of this ghost, yet instead of an uncanny movement on the canvas, it is CCTV and motion sensors which give him the impression of a creeping cybernetic horror. The passage is also highly parodic as the character starts tidying self-consciously. With this overzealous behaviour, the narrator changes his attitude and uses of space, trying to achieve geometric perfection with his spoon in order to create a perfect image on camera. Yet readers might also feel uncomfortably familiar with this narrator – the experience of noticing CCTV presence has become a strangely mundane one in the twenty-first century, one likely to alter the sense of place and one’s attitudes in a place that is known to be filmed.

The parody of horror is prolonged when the narrator describes the open-plan office, feeling a “creeping horror” at the thought of being “visible from every angle,” and recalling how “the thought of human interaction was horrifying” (RP 19-20; 39). While this unreliable narrator is made to speak in exaggerated terms, others around him assert the benefits of the Plexiglas open-plan office for the working life at the Deuter Center. Soon, the question of privacy is not only a physical experience but also a subject of debate among the residents of the Center. If the narrator feels “irrationally afraid” (RP 47-48), privacy then becomes a very rational matter, or at least, one *rationalised* in the dialectic fight opposing many of the residents to Edgar, a neuroscience specialist. The latter claims that privacy is a Western invention, holding little value: “The right to privacy was no more or less than the right to lie, he said. To misrepresent yourself to the world. It incubated fraud and corruption, and despite what liberals claimed it was not some sacred universal that all humans needed in order to survive” (RP 98). Edgar’s emphatic academic language attempts to debunk entirely the conception of privacy as an innate right, yet resorts to morality himself in the evocation of a “lie.” Further asserting his point, Edgar explains: ““Society has a lot of interests. Preventing crime and terrorism, freedom of expression, and so on. Privacy conflicts with them all, every last one. Our patron, Herr Deuter, understood that”” (RP 101). The ambiguity over the figure of Herr Deuter and his

beliefs is maintained throughout the narrative, and Edgar's syntax is equally ambiguous – in his turn of phrase, it is unclear whether “freedom of expression” must be “prevented” in the same way as crime and terrorism.

Ultimately, the narrator's obsession with privacy takes an almost mystical turn. After he has become obsessed with an alt-right thinker and followed him all the way to a Scottish island, the narrator slowly becomes delusional. He finds a bothy and starts occupying it, believing that it is Anton's. In a long monologue, he develops ideas that he starts writing down in the form of an apocalyptic revelation. Among these is the following observation: “Privacy is the exclusive property of the gods. They see us, but we can never see them. We are like spies, always braced for exposure, while they remain a mystery” (*RP* 230). From his initial desire for privacy to the cynical observation that humankind is “braced for exposure,” the character's journey entails coming to terms with surveillance, yet adding to it a demiurgic dimension that retains the possibility for cognitive “mystery.”

Through satirical characters, exuberant skyscrapers and parodic Gothic rewritings, Kunzru's novels rely on absurdity and exaggeration to better display the very real developments of surveillance in the places of everyday experience. While panoptic places remain present in the contemporary imaginary, taking the shape of an open-plan office or a glass tower, the evocation of cameras also points to what Bauman terms a “post-Panoptical” reality, where those in charge of controlling can easily “escape beyond reach – into sheer inaccessibility” (2000: 11). This is particularly visible with the use of drones, described at length in both Hamid's and Kunzru's works.

5.2.2. “Drones don't help”: power from above

In a 2013 piece for *The New York Review of Books* titled “Why Drones Don't Help,” republished in his 2015 collection of essays, Mohsin Hamid examines the contentious issue of US drone strikes in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, also called FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). Hamid notably explains that US drones “have reportedly killed between 2,541 and 3,586 people in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas” since 2004 (2015: 165). Mohsin Hamid discusses the accusations of imperialism associated with drone warfare, and how it has only contributed to defiance towards the US, with many Pakistanis being acutely aware that “flying robots from an alien power regularly strike down from the skies and kill Pakistani citizens” (2015: 172). To Hamid, US drones are thus counter-productive in their claimed ambition to fight terrorism. Ten years after this piece was published, the use of

drone warfare by the US has decreased (Savage and Schmitt 2021), but their overwhelming presence in this region has undoubtedly impacted the collective imaginary, participating in what geographer Derek Gregory has called a movement from a “forever war” – which designates zones of enduring conflict – to an “everywhere war,” a “multi-scalar, multi-dimensional” evolution of the battlefield (2011: 238).

Both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru have represented drones in their fiction, showing their increasing symbolical power but also their material implications in the experience of place. Hari Kunzru wrote a short story called “Drone” for the 2015 *Granta* collection on India. In this story, drones form part of a dystopian India where resource exploitation is combined with a disturbing transformation of humans into cyborgs. Mohsin Hamid includes drones in *Exit West*, as well as in two fantastic short stories published in newspapers, “Alien Invasion in the G.L.A.C.” (in *The Financial Times*) and “Terminator: Attack of the Drones” (in *The Guardian*). In all these narratives, the drone’s relentless presence is at times made disturbing and worrying; at other times, but with a similarly uncanny effect for the reader, it seems to have become integral to the landscape. I wish to examine how the drone invades the contemporary imaginary in these narratives, and in particular how it shapes places in the process of controlling and monitoring them.

In *Théorie du Drone*, French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou examines precisely the changing paradigms induced by the extensive and increased use of drone warfare in the twenty-first century, particularly by the United States. Talking about a “verticalization of power,” Chamayou explains how drones challenge and countervail the long-established understanding of what warfare actually is and *where* it should take place. War has long been understood to be a “*geographically circumscribed object*,” but the proponents of drone warfare have kept blurring the lines and going against the codes of this “*implicit ontological geography*.” By extension, drone warfare induces that “the question ‘what is a place?’ becomes a matter of life and death” (2013: 88-90, emphases in the original).⁸³

This “matter of life and death” is best exemplified in Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, where the external narrator describes a drone flying over a burial scene, implicitly connecting the potential cause of death of the deceased with drone warfare. The text operates a contrast between the humane reaction of an elderly man who sobs and “looks up to

⁸³ Grégoire Chamayou’s work has been translated in English but I have not had access to the translation, hence these personal translations. The terms are as follows (in italics in the original): “verticalisation du pouvoir” (81), “un objet géographiquement délimité” (88); “une ontologie géographique implicite” (89); “La question ‘qu’est-ce qu’un lieu ?’ devient une question de vie ou de mort” (89-90). Chamayou, Grégoire. *Théorie du drone*. Paris : la Fabrique, 2013.

the heavens” – whether to pray or to observe the drone remains unclear – and the drone, whose “eyes” cannot shed a tear on the scene: “The drone circles a few times, its high-powered eyes unblinking, and flies observantly on” (*HTG* 175). In this passage, the evocation of drones has no direct connection to the plot, but it forms part of the novel’s aesthetics of constant connection, linking the characters’ journeys (in this case, the commercial flight of the protagonist’s love interest, the “pretty girl”) with the wider ecosystem of “Rising Asia,” a place of extremes and contradictions.

The two writers also engage with the description of drones in their short stories. In Hamid’s story “Alien invasion in the G.L.A.C.,” the presence of an unknown alien force that threatens the protagonists of the story is accompanied by the threatening presence of drones. In this science fiction story, Hamid invents a semi-realistic place, the “Greater Lahore Amritsar Conurbation,” a huge macro city where the narrator, a young girl, goes off into the night to fight aliens. The story is pervaded by a sense of unease manifested in sounds, among which the sound of drones constantly surveilling her actions. The girl thus notices: “I’ve picked up microdrone chatter nearby. Unusual in this part of town.” As she returns home, the “microdrone” is replaced by “*macrodrones*”:

Under the shantytown it’s quiet. Just the odd vibration passing through the G.L.A.C.’s innards, set off by huge things, things at the scale of the city. Mass transits, maybe, or burrowing macrodrones, or the foundations of soaring towers being strummed by the wind. I’m relatively safe down here. (2013 *n.p.*)

The permanent buzzing of the drones seems to blur all expression and meaning, as the girl leaves the reader with no other description than “huge things” – this imprecision can also be interpreted as a code sent towards the reader for something the spying drone might record. In this huge city that is the G.L.A.C., personified with “innards,” drones seem to have adapted and mutated at different scales, some micro, others macro, but the passage shows how they have undoubtedly integrated the ecosystem of the city. The uncanny familiarity of drone presence in an otherwise dystopian setting is repeated in Hamid’s “Terminator: Attack of the Drones,” a story where two children are also hiding from a threat that lurks outside their home. The young narrator depicts how the drones have pervaded the landscape and soundscape through their everyday presence: “You can’t see ‘em at night. Sometimes you can’t see ‘em in the day neither. But you hear ‘em all the time, huntin.’ They’ll go away for days. Sometimes weeks’ll go by and you ain’t heard ‘em once” (2011 *n.p.*). With the metaphor of “huntin’” and of a barely visible

presence, the mention of the drones introduces them as an almost-biological species, with its own habits (“go away for days”) and motivations.

The relation of drones with all five senses also appears in Hari Kunzru’s short story “Drone,” where the protagonist Jai, a mine worker who exchanges his biological arm for an augmented one, is mysteriously being followed by a swarm of drones, which have “optics and sometimes haptics”:

They have optics and sometimes haptics, but there may not be anyone watching or feeling. There are many more eyes than people in the world; everyone knows that even in their most intimate moments, there’s a chance that they’re being observed, if not by another human, then by some algorithm trained to sift through the feeds for porn or lulz or evidence or crime. Jai, like everyone else, carries on his shoulder an invisible They, a formless little gremlin composed of the combined potential attention of an unknown number of people and machines. (2015: 25-26)

While being intensely oppressive, the drones expand the subject’s mental geography through their in-built interaction with “an unknown number of people and machines,” and potentially, of places. As if by contamination, the observation performed by the drones is imitated by humans, “people and machines” having seemingly commingled in their habits and abilities. As in Hamid’s stories, drones are evoked as a disturbingly natural presence in the world; there are “many more eyes than people,” the drones being only part of these many “eyes.” The external narrator further prolongs this synecdochic image of the eyes: “[a]round the world, people set eyes off on journeys. Go find something to look at. Not that, this. Not this, that” (2015: 26). The drone is here again animalised, implicitly compared to a hunting dog sent on a “journey” where its “senses” are put to good use.

All three of these stories insert drones in dystopian settings, where they are indeed at the centre of a “matter of life or death,” as Grégoire Chamayou points out. Even if they have seemingly become part of a sensible ecosystem, this normalisation occurs within otherwise unsettling places described with the tools of science fiction. At the same time, the writers’ use of these genres is not innocent – it gestures towards an increasing mutual permeation of reality and the imagination, as the technological deviations once considered dystopian begin to form part of mainstream experience. In that sense, they echo what Amitav Ghosh explains about the representation of the “improbable,” as he discusses the “improbable” yet very real events occurring with climate change. Noticing how such events have been excluded from the realist novel, Ghosh designates “the irony of the ‘realist’ novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real” (2017: 23). Instead, Hamid’s and

Kunzru's science fictional representations of a drone-infested near future confront its probability, and explore the need to reconfigure the sense of place and sensory experiences at large.

Hamid's *Exit West* willingly straddles the divide between realist fiction and unfamiliar settings, for instance by connecting drones to the more widespread, relatable surveillance operated by mobile phones. After they have spent some time under siege in a London hotel, the refugees' desire to leave towards another place is intermingled with the overwhelming presence of both their phones and the surrounding drones: "she suggested one day, out of the blue, under the drone-crossed sky and in the invisible network of surveillance that radiated out from their phones, recording and capturing and logging everything, that they abandon this place (...)" (*EW* 188-189). Placed so in the winding syntax that is characteristic of this novel, the drones and phones cut in two Nadia's proposition, interrupting the sentence as if to reflect their inevitable, non-negotiable presence all around Saeed and Nadia's exchanges. Their "abandon [of] this place" is counterbalanced by the persisting weight of this "invisible network," which appears all around them wherever they go.

In another scene set in London, the drones form part of a three-dimensional trap in which the refugees find themselves, stuck in the hotel they occupy with others: "around this zone were soldiers and armoured vehicles, and above it were drones and helicopters, and inside it were Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run, and so were waiting, waiting like so many others" (*EW* 129). Here the presence of the drones allows the narrative voice to progressively zoom in on the refugees' situation, and emphasises the "verticalization of power" theorised by Grégoire Chamayou. While it is not directly called thus, the apparatus that organises around the refugees through the "soldiers and armoured vehicles," and the "drones and helicopters" evokes a war zone. As they are trapped and surrounded like frightened animals, the deprivation of space translates in the characters' turn towards time – "waiting, waiting," rather than attempting to move.

Where the image of the drone is particularly pervasive in *Exit West* is by appearing all through the novel – it follows Saeed and Nadia, from their unnamed Eastern city at war with "drones and aircraft that bombed from the heavens" (*EW* 81) all the way to Marin County, in California, their final stop. Drones seem to be hunting the refugees everywhere they go, even as they cross continents and even in places seemingly at peace. Yet in the quiet of the San

San Francisco Bay, where the refugees finally seem free to settle, this oppressive presence seems to be warded off through a symbolical act:

One night one of the drones that kept a watch on their district, part of a swarm, and not larger than a hummingbird, crashed into the transparent plastic flap that served as both door and window of their shanty, and Saeed gathered its motionless iridescent body and showed it to Nadia, and she smiled and said they ought to give it a burial, and they dug a small hole right there, in the hilly soil where it had fallen, using a spade, and then covered this grave again, pressed it flat (...). (*EW* 204-205)

This strangely poetic scene returns to the image of the drone as an animal figure, yet the reference to the hummingbird suggests that the drone has a role to play, like the hummingbird carrying drops of water onto a fire. As if punished for its lust in wanting to watch behind their “transparent plastic flap,” the fable of this particular bird ends in a parodic twist. Ultimately, the challenge of assigning a shape and function to the object is reflected by the characters’ confused approach – first smiling, they dig a “hole” in a “hilly” zone, indicating the space it might take up, before “pressing flat” the earth that covers it, thus perhaps reducing it back to the status of a dismantled object and warding off into the ground its capacity for aerial action.

Depictions of drone surveillance thus shed light on the paradoxes and threats of the control and power enforced over certain places, where military control attempts to function in the same manner as other forms of global communication and connection. As Grégoire Chamayou observes by quoting a military report on drone surveillance, drones aim at “*projecting power without projecting vulnerability*” (2013: 22, emphasis in the original),⁸⁴ enforcing a relation with place that unfolds on a deferred and distanced mode – power is pro/jected, thrown ahead of one’s body which is thus disengaged, rather than directly involved. In his essay about the use of drones in Pakistan, Mohsin Hamid underlines this de-humanised mode of action and the symbolical gap that it widens between different places. He notes that while a “consensus” must be reached within Pakistan concerning the eradication of terrorist groups, this consensus “cannot be dispatched on the back of a Hellfire missile fired by a robot aircraft piloted by an operator sitting halfway around the world in Nevada” (2013: 177). As will be developed next, the apparent absurdity of such experiences can indeed reveal how power itself requires to be reconsidered and re-evaluated, notably in its imaginary associations with progress and fulfilment.

⁸⁴ My translation. In French, page 22: “*projeter du pouvoir sans projeter de vulnérabilité*” (emphasis in the original).

5.3. From wanderlust to the lust for power: questioning the power narrative

As already discussed in this work, both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru demonstrate an interest in debunking the language of globalisation, for instance the championing of fast travel or digital communication as the apex of progress. In unpicking this language, they shed light on the logics and interests lurking behind narratives of global modernity. Weishin Gui notes for instance how Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* provides "an elucidation and critique of neoliberal rationality," which helps "reconfigure and tease a different sensibility out of the language of Rising Asia discourse" (2013: 188; 173).

This section seeks to examine more particularly the two writers' representations of the desirability of power, and how it is entangled with place. The narratives indeed question the paradigm of power and whether it still offers a desirable aim in the contemporary era. Controlling a place often involves mastering it, exerting power over it but also exploiting its power – in the sense of a *potential*. Hamid's and Kunzru's narratives sometimes refer to the imperialist model of expansion and control, mostly perceptible in Kunzru's *The Impressionist* – which represents the crumbling of this model, as analysed in chapter two. In its description of the station in Agra in 1916, the narrator of the novel indeed comments in passing on "the grand project of the railway, the dream of unification its imperial designers have engineered into reality" (TI 18). Expansionism also appears in the descriptions of American drones, analysed earlier in this chapter, or in the mentions of post-9/11 imperialism, which will be explored at length in the next chapter. Yet in the Anthropocene, defined as "the extent to which human activity has affected Earth systems since the invention of the steam engine and the advent of the industrial age" (Sinclair and Posthumus 2017: 372), imperialism is not the only type of power exerted over places. The environmental humanities have seen concepts emerge to re-examine the limits of a pervasive discourse of power, for instance through "the conceptual dyad of hubris and humility" (Niemann 2017: 247).

Free-flowing movement between different places, for instance, is often represented as a form of power, while immobility is seen as the plight of the powerless. Doreen Massey's notion of "power geometry" discussed at the onset of this chapter refers specifically to how these unequal mobilities manifest on a global scale (2001: 149). This is examined in Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions, more specifically in Hari Kunzru's writing of differential speed or what Paul Virilio calls the dromocracy – the rule of speed (Virilio 1977). I propose to examine how

Kunzru's writing of the rule of speed finds its formal rendition in the pace of his writing and in forms of narrative superposition. In the second development I wish to explore how power is exerted *over* place but also *extracted from* place in Mohsin Hamid's novels, which examine the sustainability of life in Pakistan, and the future of a place that is at the forefront of climate change. In his narratives, Hamid frequently engages with the stakes of power surrounding resources, and weaves this power struggle within the novels' narrative constructions.

5.3.1. "Powered motion": navigating the dromocracy

What does a walking man dream of?
Ok, now turn the wheel. That's right – no – other direction, you were OK the first time. There you go. Check for traffic. Mirror. Signal. Now move off slowly ...
He dreams of powered motion. (T 50)

In this chapter opening in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*, the protagonist Arjun Mehta starts taking driving lessons with Chris, a colleague, after having spent a year acknowledging the reality of "[t]he California of the non-driver" (T 39). For Arjun, the "walking man," the dream of driving is a matter of survival, of social visibility, but also an integral part of the way he experiences and perceives the place. In this opening, "powered motion" is a desirable imaginary, encapsulated within the italicised, automatised language of driving mechanisms.

In this part, the rule of speed, which French urbanist and philosopher Paul Virilio called the *dromocracy*, will be examined, more specifically in passages from *Transmission* and *Exit West*. I wish to suggest that the *dromocracy* – where *dromos* means race (1977: 53) – is represented and ironically challenged in these novels. In 1977, Virilio published *Vitesse et Politique: Essai de Dromologie*, a book where he pinpoints the supremacy of speed in modern societies. Focusing first on its role in military power, where speed is valued from a strategic and material standpoint, Virilio extends it to economic, social and political manifestations, showing how speed has become a central value and a measure for progress (1977: 131). To Virilio, the *dromocracy* that ensues contributes to maintaining inequalities in contemporary societies (1977: 53). The urbanist further argues that the rule of speed impacts our relation to reality and the physical world, which cannot unfold in the same manner if experienced despite and against the passing of time (1977: 133).⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Virilio theorised several other consequences of the rule of speed. See also Paul Virilio, *Esthétique de la disparition*. 1980. Paris: Galilée, 1989, 58; Paul Virilio and Gaiario Daghini, "Dromologie: logique de la course," *Futur Antérieur*, vol. 5, Printemps 1991.

In Kunzru's fiction, the physical world includes the experience and the perception of place, directly impacted by the championing of speed. For Arjun, the protagonist of *Transmission* who is on the unfortunate end of the dromocracy, the rule of speed forms part of a blurring of reality and imagination that is also connected to his American dream. I have argued elsewhere that the dromocracy, in the case of this character, forms part of a “dreamocracy” – the narrative denounces the false hopes willingly nurtured by the New Delhi IT company that sends young professionals to the United States “[t]o help people become their dreams” (T 10) (Jeanniard du Dot 2020). Arjun's confrontations with reality are made even more drastic by his tendency to daydream, as he frequently remembers and re-imagines Bollywood scenes involving Leela Zahir, the actress after whom he names his computer virus. After months spent waiting for a job in a shared house, Arjun realises how constraining it is not to drive in a place like this:

It was July, and Arjun had been in the States for a year, a year of repeating this walk, or walks like it. (...)

At first it had been because he did not feel confident, settled enough. Then it was because he was never in one place. More recently, now that he was desperate, now that the sense of being diminished by this environment had become a suspicion of *actual physical shrinkage*, it was because he no longer had the money for driving lessons.

Living his dreams was proving hard. (T 39, emphasis in the original)

While the modern philosophical tradition contends that walking in the city bears creative and imaginary potential, de Certeau famously noting that “the walker actualizes (...) these possibilities” (1984: 98), for Arjun, in the suburbs, walking only alienates him from the experience he expected from this place. Without driving – and driving lessons –, it is impossible for the subject to reconcile his American dream with the experience of place. Arjun's struggle to fit is here manifested in an excess of movement, through the impossibility to “settle” or to “be in one place,” and then by its opposite, leading to his own “shrinkage.” Struggling to find the adequate *pace*, Arjun cannot find his *place* – in fact, the place and the landscape (his “environment”) seem to exert power over him. The notion of power is also manifested in the evocation of cars passing him by at great speed, challenging his entire perspective on time and space coordinates:

If the soccer moms zipping by in their SUVs registered him at all, it was as a blur of dark skin, a minor danger signal flashing past on their periphery. To the walking man, the soccer moms were more cosmological than human, gleaming projectiles that dopplered past him in a rush of noise and dioxins, as alien and indifferent as stars. (T 38)

The passage enacts a mutual objectification. Whereas Arjun appears to these “soccer moms” as a synecdochic and peripheral “blur of dark skin,” a potential “danger” signalled by an internalised xenophobia, Arjun in turn considers them as “projectiles.” Here, the evocation of speed involves the mention of physics with the Doppler effect, placing human co-existence at a scientific distance the better to observe it. Again, “alienation” seems to be the result of these differentiated powers over mobility. Not only is it a social alienation, but for both the women and Arjun, it also implies a difficulty to encapsulate others within one’s reality. In that sense, *Transmission* echoes Paul Virilio’s reflections on speed and reality – the urbanist notes that “saving time, today, means losing the world, the real space of the entire world” (1991 *n.p.*).⁸⁶ Edward Casey echoes this when explaining that “dromocentrism” is progressively “rendering the planet a ‘global village’ not in a positive sense but as a placeless place indeed” (2011: xiii). By representing these mechanisms within the confines of literary fiction, Kunzru hints at the need to re-form narratives of speed, and how this entails describing the three-dimensional experiences of co-existence in space, and retrieving the places seemingly lost in the process.

Regularly moving between the subplots and perspectives of Arjun Mehta, of Guy Swift, the marketing manager, and Leela Zahir, the Bollywood actress, the narrative overlaps their simultaneous realities while at the same time emphasising their different relations to speed. At the beginning of the novel, as Arjun is going back home by bus after his job interview in New Delhi’s NOIDA area, the narrator operates a zooming out effect to compare his situation with that of Guy Swift, who is up in the air: “High in the sky overhead was the vapour trail of a jet, a commercial flight across Indian airspace en route to Singapore. In its first-class compartment sat another traveller, rather more comfortably than Arjun” (*T* 11-12). The “vapour trail” evokes the physical manifestation of technological power in space, and the comparison of comfort allows to highlight the radical gaps between these experiences. Of course, the novel keeps ironizing on Guy Swift’s semblance of power – this initial hierarchy between the two characters is inverted by the plot twist where Guy is made powerless by drugs during a night out in Brussels, and ends up being deported and mistaken for an asylum seeker, while Arjun freely escapes the “system” and disappears. Guy’s quest for speed ultimately has to be warded off by its opposite. At the end of the novel, the character moves to a remote location and starts living an exaggeratedly moderate and slow lifestyle. In the conjunction of epilogues that constitutes

⁸⁶ My translation. In the original : “Gagner du temps, aujourd’hui, signifie perdre le monde, l’espace réel du monde entier.” Paul Virilio and Giario Daghini, “Dromologie: logique de la course,” *Futur Antérieur*, vol. 5, Printemps 1991, *n.p.*

the last section, Guy is reported to explain how he used to live “under a great deal of geopathic stress” (T 277), pointing to his almost pathological desire for speed.

Throughout the novel, Guy Swift is jeered at for his constant desire for movement. In fact, Guy and his French business partner Yves Ballard are the epitome of the “dromomaniacs” discussed by Paul Virilio (*dromomanes*). The latter explains how the word initially designated soldiers in the *Ancien Régime* who had experienced a traumatic event, and would be wandering in space ceaselessly. The urbanist takes up the term and applies it to those of his contemporaries who desperately seek to arrive first in a race towards the future (1977: 15; 68). For Guy, whose company is called *Tomorrow**, arriving first in line is of the essence: the reader is told that “[h]e didn’t want to change the world, just to be in the lead as it moved forward on its preordained path” (T 132). The same goes for Mrs Zahir, the mother and manager of Bollywood star Leela, who observes with satisfaction how “Leila-Leela’s marvellous career had taken her on an upward path of almost unprecedented rapidity” (T 143). The clichéd phrase “unprecedented rapidity” condenses the paradoxes of this mindset, since rapidity is relative and depends on a precedent.

Indeed, the narrative functions according to these effects of comparison and relative hierarchies, which are at the same time structural – the different subplots constantly overlapping each other – and spatial, with characters who compare their experience of space with that of others. For Arjun, “the walking man,” this comparison translates in an extreme awareness of horizontal layers of space, from “the ground” to the sky:

So see the walking man, going to the store again. (...) He knows what lies above him, the sublime mobility of those who travel without ever touching the ground. He has glimpsed what lies below, the other mobility, the forced motion of the shopping-cart pushers, the collectors of cardboard boxes. At least in India the street people can lie down for a while before being moved on. (T 47)

Here, speed and mobility are related to haptics – being able to move swiftly (in the manner of *Guy Swift*) implies a right not to touch anything, whereas others are forced to “touch the ground,” and “push” shopping carts. Mobility, on the other hand, is offered as a spectacle of the “sublime,” something to be desired and longed for but is not tangible. Arjun’s final comparison with India opens up another layer of complexity in the global dromocracy. While there are differential mobilities in a given place, these differences operate differently in another country. The final pun on the expression “moved on” reveals the intricacies of speedy movement from the perspective of “street people.” They are “moved on” temporally – barely

noticed and easily forgotten – as well as spatially, as the flow of passersby and cars seems to trample over them.

Homelessness is also discussed in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, where refugees in Saeed and Nadia's city of origin "occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the green belts between roads (...) sleeping rough on pavements and in the margins of streets" (*EW* 23). Rather than the journeys of refugees, the novel focuses on the tense moments of waiting once they have arrived in certain places. The importance of waiting as a motif and guiding pace in the narrative has been analysed by scholars such as Amanda Lagji who suggests a form of "[w]aiting in motion" (2019), while Beatriz Pérez Zapata discusses the intermingling of "transience and waiting" in the novel (2021). This is also emphasised through the notion of precariousness of characters who have to do without any physical or emotional stability (Veyret 2020). Indeed, the novel depicts the powerlessness of refugees, whose relation to movement and time is imposed by their circumstances. The narrator comments on how the refugees in Saeed and Nadia's city "seemed to be trying to recreate the rhythms of a normal life," yet are paralysed almost to the point of dying: "Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying" (*ibid.*). In this novel just like in *Transmission*, those who live on the ground are "moved on": "Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg" (*ibid.*). Instead of waiting with them, Saeed and Nadia decide to move to a different place, but end up in a similar stasis when their London squat is surrounded by police forces. The narrative voice translates their complex relation to urgency and waiting in the description of this scene, where Saeed and Nadia "were waiting, waiting like so many others" (*EW* 129) – the passage shows how urgent events ultimately lead to a disjointed experience of time and space, alternating hurried displacement with stasis.

Exit West has been commented upon precisely for its elision of the painful journeys of refugees on the move, which are replaced with an instant crossing via magical black doors. In fact, the magic realist conceit of the "black doors" used by refugees can be deemed to upend and reappropriate the idea of fast, frictionless movement often represented and made desirable by those who can resort to plane travel. The seemingly antinomic association of refugees with fast movement allows the narrative to lay the emphasis on other aspects of exile. The narrative of exile is indeed redirected from painful, perilous travel across borders and across the sea, to the relation with time and speed when one is unwanted in the place they have reached. Hamid has repeatedly explained how he wanted to focus on "life before migration" and "life after

migration” rather than the journey alone, drawing attention to the durable challenges of those who migrate (Gross and Hamid 2018).

In *Being Alive*, anthropologist Tim Ingold explains how “[m]uch of the history of transport has been taken up with attempts to attenuate these liminal, in-between periods, by devising ever-faster mechanical means” (2011: 101). To Ingold, as contemporary modes of transport become more powerful, they seek to make travellers forget about the influence of place on their journeys. He explains:

The possibility of pure transport is, in short, an illusion. We cannot get from location to location by leap-frogging the world, nor can the traveller ever be quite the same on arrival at a place as when he set out. It is precisely because perfect transport is impossible – because all travel is movement in real time – that places do not just have locations but histories. (2011: 101)

Through irony and defamiliarization, novels like *Transmission* and *Exit West* comment on this “illusion” of “leap-frogging,” and underline the power dynamics and the hierarchies that inform the desire for “powered motion.” In the process, they show the impact of speed – and its extreme opposite, stasis – on the physical experience of place and on imaginaries of place, which they propose to re-build within the time frame of the novel. Echoing the idea that “places do not just have locations but histories,” they also suggest that each place has *stories* which deserve telling. The reinstalment of time within contemporary narratives of place also finds an echo in Mohsin Hamid’s narration of sustainability, which will be examined hereafter.

5.3.2. “An air-conditioned heaven”: control, power and sustainability in Mohsin Hamid’s fiction

The desirability of power in relation to place finds a particularly striking development in Mohsin Hamid’s writing of sustainability. His narratives suggest how in the case of Pakistan, a place that is on the front line of climate change, power means both political power – with its intricate machinery – and the access to electric power and other resources. It can even take on a larger meaning in *Moth Smoke*, where the military use of nuclear power is added to the equation – Munazza Yaqoob notes that “Hamid builds up a significant link between atomic bomb testing and the economic and environmental crisis of the country” (2010: 100-101). I propose to examine how in these representations, the association of power with progress seems to countervail a sustainable relation with place, and with the Earth’s resources at large.

In many respects, Hamid’s novels can in fact be read as a fictional counterpart to the thesis in urban planning that he submitted at Princeton as a graduate student, called “Sustainable

Power: Integrated Resource Planning in Pakistan” (1993). In a 2017 article called “Life Support: Energy, Environment and Infrastructure in the Novels of Mohsin Hamid,” Michael Rubenstein provides a thorough analysis of his first three novels, which according to him “function as national allegories focalized around national infrastructure” (*n.p.*). As will be discussed here, Hamid’s 2017 *Exit West* can also be included within these fictions of sustainability, yet opens the question to a more transnational interpretation. Rubenstein explains how the notion of infrastructure can apply whether on an extradiegetic level, with Hamid’s representations of “electrical distribution and water supply,” but also as “a discursive thing (...) that indexes, defines and invents the material forms that such structures and networks have taken in the past and the possible forms they might take in the future” (*ibid.*).

Indeed, imagining future infrastructure seems to be urgent. As these words are being written, Pakistan has again experienced the drastic consequences of climate change, in the spectacular floodings of 2022. The country also faces a shortage of water, with data from 2014 indicating that only 56% of the total population had access to drinking water (Nabeela *et.al.* 2014). With rising temperatures, Pakistan’s vast glacier mass – a crucial source of water – is now disappearing (Ahmed 2022). At the same time, the lack of international concern and of stability in national policies means that often, the structural issues of resource management are deemed an abstract, unsolvable problem, an “energy problem,” as one Minister termed it, which becomes almost too multi-factorial to solve (Rubenstein 2017 *n.p.*). This in turn leads to downward spirals such as the one Hamid described in an interview about *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, as “the marketization of water, the sort of application of a kind of uber-capitalism that you see really all over the world and certainly in Pakistan” (Hamid and Gross 2013). This issue is indeed prevalent in that novel, where the protagonist – designated as “you” – ends up creating and managing a crooked bottled water business, making profit over the water shortage. In *Moth Smoke*, the main question is that of heat: in the scorching weather of Lahore, the characters are confronted to a dependence on electrical air conditioning, which ends up being central to their relations and to the plot. Electricity and power shortage are also discussed, albeit more sporadically, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*.

In Hamid’s writing of sustainability, the question of control over place is thus woven into the narration. In these novels, observing forms of control means asking whose agency and responsibility are involved in energy use and climate change – whether it concerns structures but also individual subjects – and what power one has over the future of a place. This issue can be seen in the semantics underpinning the novels, for example with a protagonist “going to the source” for business information (*HTG* 141) or, as Michael Rubenstein analyses, the metaphor

of “pulling the plug” which represents the dependence on complex energy systems, best epitomized at the end of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* when the protagonist has to relinquish machine-mediated medical assistance (Rubenstein 2017 *n.p.*). Another double meaning can be read in the notion of “load-shedding,” discussed in *Moth Smoke* (MS 86) but also in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (TRF 54). The expression, which refers to the selective cutting off of electric power, can also be understood in reference to those who “shed the load,” the responsibility of sustainability, onto others. In his article about energy and infrastructure in Hamid’s novels, Michael Rubenstein explains that this term can in fact be twofold – it is at once a shared experience, and a “failure” of the collective, since it technically results from the individualistic overuse of some (Rubenstein 2017 *n.p.*).

In *Moth Smoke*, the question of responsibility is in fact embedded in the narrative structure, as the reader is invited to the trial of Daru, the protagonist, following a car accident for which his friend Ozi is in fact responsible. The narrative moves from Daru’s retrospective narration of the events that preceded the accident, to the accounts made by Ozi, his wife and Daru’s lover Mumtaz, Daru’s friend Murad Badshah or his university professor Julius Superb. All these characters provide their viewpoint, not only as character witnesses but also on the context of that Lahore summer when the event took place. Towards the middle of the novel, the judge starts to notice a report on air-conditioning brought to his attention, and recognises that “the importance of air-conditioning to the events which constitute the substance of this case cannot be overestimated” (MS 124). What unfolds is a section of the novel where the use of air-conditioning by each character is developed, as if it engaged their overall integrity in the case. Ozi (Aurangzeb) for instance demonstrates a lust for air-conditioning:

Aurangzeb loved ACs with a passion unrivaled by his love for any other species of inanimate object. (...) He was never happier than when his bedroom was so cold that he needed a heavy blanket to avoid shivering in the middle of summer. Conversely, he liked it to be so warm in winter that he could comfortably sleep naked without so much as a sheet. Aurangzeb, more than most men, sought to master his environment. (MS 129)

Ozi’s relation to place is defined by absurd extremes, but also utter inadequacy, revealed in the flurry of intensifiers and comparatives. Besides, the character’s sense of the living world seems to be dysfunctional – he thinks of “inanimate objects” as a “species” of their own, discarding the differences between the natural and the artificial. Here, air-conditioning is connected to a wish to “master his environment” – the use of electric power responds to a wider desire for power and control. In fact, this lust for power is immediately contrasted with the opinion of Mumtaz, his wife, on air-conditioning. Since a fit of pneumonia that she once caught because

of it, Mumtaz “hate[s] ACs” (MS 129), and confronts Ozi about his own use. With this confrontation and the concrete impact of air-conditioning on Mumtaz’s body, Hamid subtly hints at ecofeminism, a philosophy which “emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (or male-centred) society” (Britannica). Mumtaz thus reminds Ozi of the power his behaviour has on others:

‘The entire country suffers because of the wastefulness of a privileged few.’
‘I couldn’t care less about the country,’ Aurangzeb would reply. ‘Besides, you have a delusional and obsessive fear of pneumonia.’ (MS 130)

Moving from the “privileged few” of Pakistan to the “country,” the question of who holds power over environmental resources ultimately seems to be turned towards readers’ own agency in the Anthropocene. In the seemingly absurd entanglement of “air-conditioning” with “the events which constitute the substance” of the narrative, the narrator’s irony points to the difficulty of reconciling everyday habits with a responsibility to make places sustainable.

Besides their reading of agency and responsibility over place, Hamid’s narratives also seem to point towards a power divide that is maintained and experienced in social space. In the same manner as the narratives of speed discussed in the previous development, these fictions of sustainability give way to a contrapuntal writing, where binary divides and shifting focalisers are resorted to in order to highlight the differential realities of groups and individuals who live in the same place. On many occasions, Hamid questions this differentiated power with the tools of satire, with dramatic irony and comically duplicitous characters – it is the case of Murad Badshah, the rickshaw driver in *Moth Smoke*, or the figures of businessmen in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. Some characters also refer to the picaresque, their thirst for power being materialised in their use of resources. I propose to analyse here three different dichotomies which illustrate the social divisions at stake with energy and climate change: the “cooled” and the “uncooled”; the inside opposed to the outside; and the divide between dark and light. In the description of these divides, the narration often refers to the different places in which they unravel.

In *Moth Smoke*, university professor Julius Superb analyses and conceptualises social divides for the reader. In a speech at Daru’s trial, he starts explaining his theory that “[t]here are two social classes in Pakistan (...). The distinction between members of these two groups is made on the basis of control of an important resource: air-conditioning” (MS 125-126). Julius Superb notably explains how those who benefit from air-conditioning live in completely different places than those who have to do without it:

They wake up in air-conditioned houses, drive air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned offices, grab lunch in air-conditioned restaurants (rights of admission reserved), and at the end of the day go home to an air-conditioned lounges to relax in front of their wide-screen TVs. And if they should think about the rest of the people, the great uncooled, and become uneasy as they lie under their blankets in the middle of the summer, there is always prayer, five times a day, which they hope will gain them admittance to an air-conditioned heaven, or at the very least, a long, cool drink during a fiery day in hell. (*MS* 126)

The passage denounces the hypocritical geography of the wealthy, which runs from the places of everyday life – restaurants, offices and houses – to the more abstract conception of an “air-conditioned heaven.” As in Ozi’s perception of air-conditioning, the blanket represents the denial and seclusion of the upper classes from the rest of society. The final comedic mention of a “long, cool drink” in hell reveals what is at stake: making the most of even the worst situations, and finding oneself in a privileged situation with regard to others, no matter the circumstances. Designating the masses as “the great uncooled,” Julius Superb redirects Marxist thought towards the climate, suggesting that social divisions and increasingly unequal access to bodily comfort and resources are one and the same thing.

These radically different experiences of place actually form part of a larger dichotomy between inside and outside that runs through Hamid’s writing of sustainability. For example, Manucci, Daru’s servant in *Moth Smoke*, is comically described as misunderstanding completely what A/C is. As he used to live on the streets, Manucci would perceive A/C devices from the sidewalk – feeling the hot air that they release outside, he deduces that air-conditioning produces hot air. After several unsuccessful conversations about the role of A/C, he starts forming his own logic: “Manucci knew they would call him crazy if he said this air was hot, so he always said it was cold. And when they shook their heads at him he shook his head right back” (*MS* 135). While the inside/outside dichotomy is here used for situational comedy, it becomes more dramatic when Daru loses his mother because of a lack of air-conditioning. As the house is subjected to load-shedding, on a night when “neighbourhoods baked in the still heat,” Daru and his mother go to sleep on the rooftop for more comfort (*MS* 132). During the night, bullets are fired nearby for an unknown reason, and Daru wakes up to find his mother dead from a stray bullet. This experience goes on to shape his relation to electric power altogether, and to its role in personal safety:

He knew that his mother would not have died if the AC had been cooling her room that night, and when he lost his job and had his power disconnected, he felt more than just the discomfort of the heat in his house. He felt an insecurity, a disease that gnawed at him day and night. (*MS* 134)

With this episode, Hamid revisits the motif of the rooftop frequently used in South Asian fiction, to suggest that it can be a heterotopia of sorts – a “counter-site” or “other place” existing simultaneously but less visibly than other places (Foucault 1984: 3-4).⁸⁷ Here the rooftop becomes an uncertain place, which comes to contaminate the interior of the house as well – it is no longer a safe home but a place of “discomfort” and “insecurity” breeding like a disease, and directly impacting the inhabitant’s bodies.

In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the distinction between inside and outside is manifested in the use of groundwater from aquifers, but also in the model of dwelling that this concerted exploitation leads to. In his lust for power, the protagonist (“you”) meets an official from his city to discuss exclusive housing projects which might require his services for the provision of water. In this critical exchange, the official talks about “phase ten” in his project, a moment when there will be “[n]o blackouts” in those houses, but also

“Water. In ten, when you turn out the tap, you’ll be able to drink what comes out of it. Everywhere. In your garden. In your kitchen. In your bathroom. Drinkable water. When you enter phase ten, it’ll be like you’ve entered another country. Another continent. Like you’ve gone to Europe. Or North America.”

“Without leaving home,” your brother-in-law says.

“Exactly. Without leaving home. You’ll still be here. But in a secure, walled-off, impeccably-maintained, lit-up-all-night, noise-controlled, perfectly regulated version of here. An inspiration for the entire country, and for our countrymen abroad too. (...) World class. (*HTG* 163-164)

In these new forms of gated communities, the stake seems to be food security more than security from intrusion. The access to water reconfigures entirely the relation to place, as demonstrated in the enumeration of garden, kitchen and bathroom, but also in the uncanny comparison of one’s home with “another country” or “continent.” This enclave of resources is presented ironically as a factitious place built up from scratch and completely cut off from the reality of its surroundings – this is emphasized by the compound adjectives which try to encapsulate this newly built place within a host of ready-made concepts. Overall, the passage displays a confusion of scales – country, continent, diaspora (“our countrymen abroad”) – which further unravels the expansionist mindset underpinning this lust for power, paradoxically resulting in seclusion with these “walled-off” houses.

⁸⁷ One can think for example of Anita Desai’s story “From the Rooftops,” describing alternate forms of habitat on the rooftops of Delhi, and where according to Elsa Lorphelin, “lives on the rooftops seem to obey a parallel code of conduct, completely disconnected from that of the people living below.” Elsa Lorphelin, “Fairy Tale, Tragedy, Fantastic: Three Generic Exceptions in the Short Stories of Anita Desai.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 43:1, 2020, n.p.

In all these novels, the ultimate boundary between inside and outside is that represented by the body, and its position in wider ecosystems. From Mumtaz's pneumonia in *Moth Smoke*, discussed above, to the "poisonous chemicals" of the aquifer in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (HTG 165), the body seems to stand at the intersection of the Earth's resources and man's lust for power. Incidentally, this dimension also appears in a short story which Hari Kunzru wrote for Oxfam, in a volume of the series called "Ox-Tales" dedicated to water. In "Kaltes klares Wasser," a narrator who works for a nonprofit gives his perspective on malaria, not only as an issue to be controlled by his organization, but as something he has experienced himself and that seems to change his entire perception of his environment (Kunzru 2009).

Finally, the struggle for power found in Hamid's fictions is illustrated in *Exit West* with the depictions of electricity. Throughout the novel, the refugees seek electricity for their basic needs, but also in order to stay in touch with their homeland via their smartphones. The narrative once again resorts to a contrapuntal pattern, whereby the characters compare their ability to find electricity in different places. Saeed and Nadia remember that "Mykonos had not been well lit, but electricity had reached everywhere there were wires," whereas in their birth city, "when the electricity had gone, it had gone for all" (EW 141). It is not the case in London, which gives way to a description that relies on the semantics of light and dark, opposing "dark London" and "light London":

From dark London, Saeed and Nadia wondered what life must be like in light London, where they imagined people dined in elegant restaurants and rode in shiny black cabs, or at least went to work in offices and shops and were free to journey about as they pleased. In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed. The trains kept running, skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia but felt as a rumble beneath their feet and heard at a low, powerful frequency, almost subsonic, like thunder or the detonation of a massive, distant bomb. (EW 142)

Once again, power is equated with mobility, and the refugees are condemned to stasis while the inhabitants of "light London" can move about lightly. Yet the power of moving vehicles is made worrying, compared to a bomb that resonates in space but also resonates with the war that the refugees have fled. The trains "skipping stops" with a "subsonic" sound denote the secrecy of a life that is made unattainable to them, and can only ever be perceived through echoes and glimpses.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Exit West* also alludes to sustainability in the mention of climate refugees, people who "were slipping away (...) from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal waves, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields" (EW 211). In his fictional mentions of sustainability, and in

his belief that migration is a universally shared condition of humankind (Hamid 2019), Mohsin Hamid echoes the comparisons between mass migration and climate change made by Bruno Latour. For Latour, “[t]he new universality consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way,” which echoes the refugees “slipping away” from their homelands in *Exit West* (2018: 9). In this context, the narrative of power and control over place seems to be doomed to fail, or will only ever take place to the detriment of all. This means forging new narratives of place and of the resources it offers. Hamid’s writing shows places like Pakistan that are subjected to drastic changes, which all require collective and individual adaptation. Showing failures to adapt, or dysfunctional societies where power is misused, his satirical writing allows to display the larger stakes of the power paradigm that is associated with modernity and progress. In the end, it shows the problematic distinction between a world – and sometimes a place – that we “live in” and a world we “live from,” as Latour explains in a 2020 book called *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*:

[People] live off a land that *they don’t inhabit*. At least, they live in between two worlds: one is where they have their habits, the protection of law, their deeds of property, the support of their State, what we could call the world *they live in*; and then, in addition, a second world, a ghostly one, often far remote in time and space, that benefits from no legal protection, no clear delineation of properties, and no State to defend its rights: let’s call it the world *they live from*. (2020: 4, emphasis in the original)

Latour’s reference to resource exploitation, or a world people “live from,” echoes the many absurd situations described in Hamid’s fiction, characterised by either contempt for, or a lack of awareness towards the finiteness of these resources. Hamid also shows the confrontation that takes place between the powers coming from institutions such as the State, and the more silent world that people “live from.” Indeed, in their descriptions of illness, heat and other consequences of climate change over singular bodies and places, these fictions show how, in Latour’s words, “the Earth has started to react” to the exertion of power:

What gives the present tragedy its particular violence is that, because of the way the Earth has started to react to human actions, the two territories can no longer be kept quietly apart. Suddenly, modernizers find themselves cantilevered over an abyss: the world *they live from* irrupts in the midst of the world *they live in*. (*ibid.*)

Hamid’s novels stage this confrontation, and also suggest pathways for negotiation between these two worlds. At the end of *Exit West*, in California, Saeed, Nadia and the other refugees around them start to think of “plausible desirable futures” (*EW* 216), which seem to emerge in Saeed’s interest in a new form of political census, or Nadia’s work at a sustainable food

cooperative. The ending suggests how in these quietly mundane utopias, the places we live from might ultimately merge with the places we live in.

Reading Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's poetics of place through the prism of power and control can help perceive the ethical functions of place in their writing – more than a backdrop or setting, it is always integral to societal changes, and a contested object of desire. From places that seek “the exercise of control without the display of power,” as in the description of EU headquarters discussed at the beginning of this chapter (*T* 249), to depictions of the “room of one's own” where women try to find their place, the two writers show how questions of control and power function at the crossroads of public and private space. By portraying excess as much as escape, these narratives allow for the making of complex imaginaries of place. Control and power shape contemporary places, but also suggest possible futures, which can be “desirable” (*EW* 216) or utterly dystopian, as in the case of drone surveillance. Both writers resort to humour and derision to depict the insidious presence of control in the contemporary experience, directing their readers towards the absurd situations it can lead to. This also questions readers' own position towards place, whether it entails the control over resources, the exclusion of others, or differences of access to certain places.

In their respective and shared writing patterns such as the play on voice, parataxis, diegetic overlapping, or even in the use of speculation and horror, Hamid and Kunzru also suggest resistance to control within the self-contained, authoritative form of the novel. These formal deviations allow to display the entanglement of structures and systems such as the State, the prison, or economic globalisation with the experience of place at a more immediate level. Their writing of place, in that sense, responds to Fredric Jameson's proposition for an aesthetic of “cognitive mapping” in the contemporary era, where social space does not always require utopian imagining but can also include “a narrative of defeat” – Jameson ultimately argues that “totalizing thought is totalitarian thought” (1988: 347; 352; 354). By wrestling with the contemporary realities of surveillance or climate change and incorporating them in their imaginaries of place, these novels thus resist a totalizing writing of place. Their writing of speed and sustainability in particular shows how despite the culture of immediacy, imagining place cannot be done without its interactions with time – journeys and changes constantly re-shape the sense of place. This is what the next chapter proposes to examine, by looking more closely at Hamid's and Kunzru's writing of events.

Chapter 6

“At the boundaries of any complex event”: stories taking place

‘But what happened to him? What do you think happened?’
‘Does it matter?’ (*GWM* 362)

In his landmark *Writing for an Endangered World*, American critic Lawrence Buell argues for the role of place in literary analysis, contending that “[t]here never was an *it* without a *where*” (2001: 55, my emphasis). This condensed turn of phrase encapsulates one of the main stakes of place, and of *imaginaries* of place more particularly: its relations with the concept of event. Edward Casey also observes the intricate connection of place and event in *The Fate of Place* when arguing that place is “eventmental, something in process, something unconfined to a thing. Or to a simple location” (2011: 337). He further explains:

The primacy of place is not that of *the* place, much less of *this* place or *a* place (not even a very special place) – all these locutions imply place-as-simple presence – but that of being an event capable of implacing things in many complex manners and to many complex effects. It is an issue of being in place differently, experiencing its eventfulness otherwise. Otherwise than traditional physicists or metaphysicians, cosmologists or ethicists, would have foretold in ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Western history. But not otherwise than certain native peoples, many artists, and some postmodern thinkers know and have attempted to set forth. (*ibid.*, emphasis in the original)

In other words, place can be read as infused with and even characterized by the dynamics of events. As often in his analyses, Casey argues for the role of experience in the understanding of place, and the “eventfulness” of place requires attuning one’s gaze to experience. As I have argued thus far in this thesis, the places shown in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions are often places in the making, whether this making unfolds through human relations, sensory explorations, reconfigurations of attachments or through the work of memory. In their relation with the event, one could further define them as places *in the taking*, caught in constantly renewed processes of *taking place*. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions indeed display the “many complex manners” and “many complex effects” entailed by the mechanisms of events, often manifested in forms of “emplacing.”

This is what the narrator of *Transmission* proposes when defining the event of a world-spanning digital virus in terms of “boundaries”: “At the boundaries of any complex event, unity starts to break down. Recollections differ. Fact shades irretrievably into interpretation” (*T* 156). Kunzru’s narrator conjugates the work of interpretation with a form of mapping – the event

needs to be “recollected,” pieced together almost physically. Of course, the question of interpreting an event should also be approached together with the philosophy of the event, which often points to the fragile materialisation and containment of the event in language (Badiou 1988; Lecercle 2005; Derrida 2007). Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s novels are no exception to this notion, and render formally the hermeneutic challenges that can result from place-defining events such as bombings, terrorist attacks, civil unrest or demonstrations. Events also have an inherently evident connection with the novel form – a plot might rely on their appearance, or the succession of *peripeteia*.

From an extradiegetic standpoint, one should also remember that Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru both emerged in the literary landscape at a time when global geopolitics were being reshaped by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Novels like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *Transmission* (2004) addressed upfront the climate of fear and suspicion which fissured any existing hopes of multicultural co-existence in the United States and the United Kingdom after this event. In many respects, their writing of this particular event is connected to a relation with place – with one’s social situation and place of origin. To this day, Mohsin Hamid still refers to the unique impact 9/11 has had on his work – it re-oriented the initial plot of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hamid 2015: 69) – and his life, as a brown immigrant from a Muslim country living in the United States in the aftermath of the attacks. Discussing his most recent *The Last White Man* (2022), a novel about the perception of skin colour, he said it was inspired by 9/11 and the backlash he felt in his experience of public places: “I was being pulled out of the line in airports, and people would be uncomfortable if I got into a train or bus with a big backpack, particularly if I hadn’t shaved” (Hamid and Simon 2022).

Hamid’s and Kunzru’s respective relations to 9/11 however require a nuanced approach. While many Anglophone novelists tried to address the philosophical underpinnings of this trauma for the American consciousness,⁸⁸ writers like Hamid and Kunzru, who at the time had been hastily classified by the publishing world as South Asian or diasporic writers, occupied a particularly pivotal position. Like Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), these novels allowed for shifts in perspectives on this particular event, re-placing it in the wider context of postcolonial relations, where the questions of terror and migration were already and still are ubiquitous, far exceeding in scope the context of September 11 alone. Pei-Chen Liao goes as far as suggesting that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Transmission* are “post-9/11” novels in the sense that they write “‘against’ the uniqueness of

⁸⁸ One can think of Jonathan Safran Foer or Colum McCann, among many others.

9/11” (2012: 1). Besides, other highly mediatised events such as the 2015 “refugee crisis” in Europe or the election of Donald Trump in the United States have kept informing Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. The writers’ biographies, including Hari Kunzru’s first career as a journalist, can also account for an interest in the narration of events, their enunciative stalemates and the manipulation of information. Indeed, while both writers still regularly offer nonfictional commentary on world events in the form of editorials in American and British outlets, their fictions, on the other hand, engage with and also challenge a certain fascination with spectacular events, which Megha Anwer calls “modernity’s ‘event fetishism’” (2014: 2). Because these novels tend to resist totalising narratives of national identity but also of modernity and unfettered economic globalisation, their approach to the event often relies on a careful balance of scale and gaze which the writing of place precisely allows to maintain – the event is always attuned to, and co-dependent with, a certain subjective experience of a certain place. In that sense, it would perhaps be more apt to talk here about a writing of *events*, in the plural, rather than to canonise it in the singular form often used by Western philosophers (Anwer 2014: 4). An event can be understood here as “something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere” (Žižek 2014: 2). These narratives however engage with the preconception that it happens “out of *nowhere*,” as they articulate the representation of events with a continued focus on place.

In this chapter, I therefore set out to look more closely at the representations of place in and through impactful events. Bearing in mind the symbolical possibilities associated with the phrase “to take place,” I wish to examine how Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s narratives of place frequently unfold together with events, where place can be seen before, after, and through events; as their centre, as a frame, as the converging site of several events, or as a dynamic process of becoming, which significant events might contribute to shape.

In the first section of this chapter, the analysis focuses on the landscapes of events, or the mechanisms of appearance and perception that are at stake with the narration of events. The question of staging and perceiving is preeminent in Hamid’s descriptions of cities at war, where place is forcefully shaped by violent events, but also in Kunzru’s description of an American “theatre of war” in *Gods Without Men*. With both novelists, the landscape is also the *media* landscape, where events come to be replicated and visualised through a plethora of lenses.

A second section is dedicated to the notion of getting “into the zone,” used by Hari Kunzru in his eponymous podcast. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels indeed show a cautious

approach to the places and the hazardous “zones” shaped by particular events. I first propose to observe the role of speculative fiction and its uncanny events in both writers’ works, as they play with generic codes and nurture their writing of place with incursions in the fantastic and futuristic. The notion of a zone of danger is also echoed in their writing of terror, where the characters’ reactions can imply leaving places or, on the contrary, a negotiation with place.

An event taking place can also be an event that *begins* or *ends* with place. In the third section, the notions of cosmogonies and eschatologies are examined through Hamid’s and Kunzru’s stories of symbolical re-births, the fear of a nuclear annihilation of place, or the sense of an impending catastrophe manifested in sometimes-ironic references to contemporary signs of decadence.

In the last section I suggest that Hamid and Kunzru emphasise the many agencies at stake in the formation of events. This include addressing the trope of simultaneity, examining the – sometimes problematic – sense of global connectedness which these fictions narrate. The role of rumours is also fundamental and keeps appearing in both writers’ novels, acting as a diffuse shaping force, a guiding storyline that can also prove misleading.

6.1. The landscapes of events

This phrase is borrowed from Paul Virilio’s almost-eponymous book, where he contends that the sense of history is being replaced with a “landscape of events,” or more precisely:

A landscape of time in which events suddenly take the place of relief, of vegetation; in which the past and the future loom up together in all their obvious simultaneity; a place where nothing follows on from anything else any more and yet where nothing ever ends, the lack of duration of the perpetual present circumscribing the cycle of history and its repetitions. (2000: ix)

The sense of a “perpetual present” fostered by the de-multiplication of mediatised events is one that pervades twentieth- and twenty-first century thought about history and events. Virilio’s proposition implies that this omnipresence of events changes the relation not only to time, but also to place, and its manifestations through landscape. The urbanist refuses to condone the supremacy of spectacular events (which he calls the “big events”) but instead proposes to read events *as* landscapes, precisely because “[a] landscape has no fixed meaning, no privileged vantage point. It is oriented only by the itinerary of the passerby” (2000: x). This shift in perspective can in turn allow to “step back, get our distance to avoid the contemporary myopia of the media age” (2000: xi). Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives of events allow for such a

reading of events as landscapes. The examination of political events – whether they are wars, bombings, demonstrations – leads the writers to play with perception. Proposing an approach to events that differs from both the modernist aporia of unspeakable trauma and the postmodern tropes of hyper-referentiality, they offer situated experiences of events, and capture the landscape these events might form in the gaze of their characters. As they depict the perception of places in the context of political events, they hint at contemporary subjects' *agency* in such events – are they witness to the event taking place, or do they form part of it? Because they acknowledge place to be central in the experience of events, these novels actually reflect the shifting landscape that Bruno Latour describes metaphorically when warning about climate change: “Today, the decor, the wings, the background, the whole building have come on stage and are competing with the actors for the principal role. This changes all the scripts, suggests other endings” (2018: 43).

Going against pre- “scripted” narratives of events, the novels indeed play on effects of framing and unframing, proximity and distance, underscoring differences between the staging of events and the realities of experience. The form of the novel is also used as a repository for the multiplicity of landscapes – whether physical or discursive – where contemporary hyper-mediated events can be examined. Therefore, these narratives follow W.J.T. Mitchell's proposition that “landscapes can be deciphered as textual systems” (2002: 1). The first part of this analysis is dedicated to the “theatres of war” described in Hamid's and Kunzru's novels, best exemplified in the writing of cities in Hamid's novels, and in a troubling staging of the war in Iraq in Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*. In the second part I broach upon the representations of the media landscape, and how mediated effects of mirroring and repetition replicate major events in a variety of fictional places.

6.1.1. Theatres of war

Hamid's and Kunzru's novels frequently engage with contemporary conflict. Fiction indeed allows them to read conflicts like the American “War on Terror” in Iraq, terror and riots in a South Asian city, or the conflicts that trigger emigration from one's home in *Exit West*, and to re-situate them through their characters' gaze, thus questioning the geopolitical discourse found in news reports and giving precedence, as often in these works, to situated experience. In fact, Hamid's and Kunzru's narratives of conflict infuse place with a visible “dramatization,” in the meaning proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan:

Places can be made visible by a number of means: rivalry of conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials and rites. Human places become vividly real through dramatization. (1977: 178)

Paradoxically, it is “dramatization” which makes place “vividly real.” It is precisely this paradox which unfolds in the novels and deserves examination here. In the dictionary entry for the word “theatre,” the idiom “theatre of war” is used as an example to designate “the area in which something happens” (*OED* 2008), yet the expression also entails a form of staging, a fictionalisation of the events unfolding in a battlefield. Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives of conflict resort to the devices of staging and a “dramatization” of place the better to unravel the mundane realities experienced when undergoing war in one’s dwelling place.

In his novels, Mohsin Hamid more specifically describes cities caught in the theatre of war, pointing to the de-familiarizing effects of violence and how they constantly interact with the landscape as well as the characters’ sense of place. In *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid addresses the impacts of war on place, in all sense of the word “impact” – whether visual, symbolical, or physical. Indeed, the urban landscapes described in these novels display the permeation of daily life in a given place by violent events. To emphasise the tangible reality of the war, the narrators in both novels play on dichotomies of inside and outside, here and there, creating paradoxical effects of staging while at the same time breaking the “fourth wall” often formed by accounts of war in the media. Violence is shown as slowly approaching, before it intrudes in the quiet daily lives of the characters. From the beginning of *Exit West*, located in a city “not yet openly at war” (*EW* 1), the narrator seems to warn the characters and the readers at the same time, when commenting on the location of the apartment owned by the family of the protagonist Saeed:

It was the sort of view that might command a slight premium during gentler, more prosperous times, but would be most undesirable in times of conflict, when it would be squarely in the path of heavy machine-gun and rocket fire (...): a view like staring down the barrel of a rifle. Location, location, location, the estate agents say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians. (*EW* 9)

The passage lays bare a central feature of the unexpected event: its occurrence at the intersection of space (“location”) and time (“destiny”). By placing the window – without naming it – as the interface between the characters and the ongoing war, the narrator installs a precarious landscape, one which seems always already shattered by the possibility of gunfire. The encounter with violence is made even more unsettling by the role reversal suggested with the inhabitants “staring down the barrel of a rifle,” which would normally be the view held by the

shooter. Throughout this first section of the novel, windows come to manifest a changing relation to place and to landscape, as the comfort of a “room with a view” is slowly replaced by the manifold dangers implied by the ongoing conflict. Not only can windows be destroyed, but they can themselves become destructive through shards of glass:

One's relationships to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come. Windows could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition (...) Moreover the pane of a window could itself become shrapnel so easily, shattered by a nearby blast, and everyone had heard of someone or other who had bled out after being lacerated by shards of flying glass. (*EW* 68)

The passage hinges on a willingly mundane tone, evoking the tragic deaths of inhabitants as a familiar situation, something that touches “someone or other.” This is further reinforced by the hushed tones conveyed in “shrapnel,” “shattered” glass and “shards.” The narrator also maps out the new territories formed in the wartime city, with a plethoric de-multiplication of borders, including at the micro-level of houses and their windows. Whereas other borders might seem less tangible for the locals, this type of border makes the experience of death “possibly most likely to come” and the trope of the window also signifies a change in perception. The scale of these borders becomes even smaller and more intimate when Saeed’s mother is killed by “a stray heavy-calibre round passing through the window of her family’s car” (*EW* 72). The novel frequently produces these to-and-fros between familiarity and estrangement, focusing not only on the visibility of violent events but on war as something that penetrates daily life. One passage in particular displays an entire reconfiguration of the urban landscape in a city in the throes of war:

War in Saeed and Nadia’s city revealed itself to be an intimate experience, combatants pressed close together, front lines defined at the level of the street one took to work, the school one’s sister attended, the house of one’s aunt’s best friend, the shop where one bought cigarettes. (*EW* 65)

As often in Hamid’s novels, the use of metonymy is here put to use in order to convey transposable experience and reach towards the reader. The motif of the window is here replaced by the “front lines,” which stand for the limits delineating a new landscape, but also the “lines” of the narrative, which keep advancing further to the “front” of events. By refusing to ascribe these events only to Nadia and Saeed, but rather extending them to an unnamed “one,” the narrator here operates a connection between fictional violence and the realities of war, calling upon the reader to look further than their first glance at a distant event.

Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* also plays out against a backdrop of violence. While *Exit West* addresses the sudden invasion of an unnamed Eastern city by "militants" (*EW* 40), this earlier novel – where the city is similarly unnamed – evokes a more diffuse form of violence, in the forms of riots and bombings, the cause of which is never explicitly identified. Through the coming-of-age and then demise of an unnamed protagonist, addressed in the second person, the reader is led into an "enormous" South Asian city (*HTG* 82) where corruption and unregulated economic development rule master. Again, the narration of events offers a reflection on the spectacular and unexpected nature often associated with violence. The narrator indeed inserts the mention of "petrol bombs" (*HTG* 120) and "bomb blasts" (*HTG* 183) in self-contained paragraphs, interspersed with the development of the plot. Like *Exit West*, this novel uses windows and the inside/outside dichotomy to convey the complex relation of inhabitants with violent events:

A blast at a nearby bungalow, purportedly utilized to hold and interrogate suspects by an intelligence service in the past, shatters your windows, and you use the money to have them replaced.

The city beyond is an increasingly mythological place. It intrudes in the form of power and gas outages, traffic noises, and airborne particulates that cause you to wake wheezing in your bed. It can be glimpsed around curtains and through iron grilles. Television and radio also bring in some news of it, usually frightening, but then that has always been the case. (*HTG* 223)

Here again, the condensed writing style depicts a bomb blast in the space of a single sentence, holding together the description of the place, of the event, and of its consequences, and thus emphasising the normalisation of violence. However, the perception of the city ends up changing under the influence of violence, and becomes "mythological," infused with a narrative aura, itself fostered by material and discursive clues. There ensues a three-dimensional sense of "intrusion," where all the senses – smelling, hearing, seeing – come to experience the war. While the mention of these traces of war is made to be oppressive, it is once again normalised at the end, where mediatised fears are re-placed within a long history of violence. As will be analysed in the next section, the presence of modern media in Hamid's and Kunzru's fiction is also part of the way they negotiate the representation of events in their writing.

The choice of keeping these cities anonymous can also partake of Hamid's approach to the representation of place and events. While the writer is intent on displaying the transposability of experience, and shifts the scale by writing about intimate and sensory relations to landscape and place, he chooses not to place these cities too narrowly, by not naming them. Given this component of Hamid's poetics, which is to say the toponymic blurring

he often operates and which critics sometimes hold against his writing, the representation of violent events is shaped by paradoxes.⁸⁹ Indeed, the writer's representations of the "theatre of war" through devices of gaze-shifting and border-crossing might betray the temptation to maintain violent events in the realm of fiction, as much as to show their potential transposability. When interviewed about his relation to real-life places and the choice of places he made for *Exit West*, Hamid indeed explained:

for the city where they begin, Saeed and Nadia's unnamed city, I used Lahore as my mental image of that city. Then I subjected that city to a kind of de-specification; I took away details so it could be really any city or many different cities, and also I subjected it to events that, thank goodness, have not happened in Lahore. (Ramzan 2022: 9)

While he tries to depict how violence can happen anywhere, Hamid's reluctance to ascribe it to Lahore also marks a strict boundary between on the one hand his own experience of, and attachment to, his birthplace; and on the other, the places where his fiction unravels. Because they remain unnamed, these fictional cities might allow to expand contemporary imaginaries of war, but also to mitigate the tendency to reduce a place to the violence it undergoes.

Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* also addresses this question of misconceptions and the reductive association of places with events, through a section of the novel devoted to the invasion of Iraq after 9/11. The novel's wide-spanning exploration of the Mojave Desert of California through the ages zooms in at that stage on the contemporary story of Laila, an Iraqi teenager who has come to live in the United States with her uncle Hafiz after her father has been killed. Resenting the war, unsure whether her father was killed by American troops or insurgents, Laila is taken by her America-loving uncle to act as a prop in the fake village of Wadi al-Hamam, in the midst of the Mojave Desert, "to help American troops understand what it would be like when they deployed to Iraq" (*GWM* 289). Inspired by the existing mock Afghan and Iraqi villages scattered over the Californian desert, which *The New York Times* described as "a marriage of military technology and Hollywood fakery" (Burns and Filkins 2006), this section of the novel tackles the trope of the "theatre of war" through the uncanny discomfort of this young girl, caught in the reproduction of a war she actually experienced, on different terms, at home.

The fake Iraqi village forms part of Hari Kunzru's interest in the contemporary drive for made-up places, already evoked in this work when discussing the descriptions of Dubai in

⁸⁹ This aspect of Hamid's poetics has been discussed previously, notably in chapter 1, section 1.2.3. "Universal" displacement and referentiality."

Transmission.⁹⁰ In another desert, *Gods Without Men* thus shows a different form of Baudrillardian simulacrum, one mediated by the performance of war, but equally characterised by an overdetermined, exuberant “production and reproduction of the real” (1994: 23). The gaps between reality and representation are constantly unsettled here through the perception of Laila, who is made to re-live the very events that she has fled. The narration frequently operates these effects of fear and estrangement in the descriptions of the place, moving from the semantics of the battlefield and of strategy, to that of lived space and familiarity. Thus, when the soldiers operate mock raids, Laila’s relation to reality is reconfigured: “The villagers had to assemble in various locations, which were supposed to represent their houses. Even though this wasn’t where she actually slept, it was too close to reality to feel like a game” (*GWM* 293). Moving through “locations” rather than places, Laila is forced to map out anew not only the place she is in, but her entire knowledge and memory of her home, now brought to her consideration *via* the gaze of hostile foreigners.

During another type of scripted event, the character ends up reconsidering the different experiences of place that exist *within* her home country. As the fake villagers are told to form a demonstration, shouting parodic slogans against Bush and America, Laila “felt ridiculous, pretending to be angry about something that hadn’t actually happened” (*GWM* 294). Looking at the place around her, she then realizes that the demonstrations she had seen in the city were perhaps completely different events from those supposedly re-enacted here: “(...) she supposed Wadi al-Hamam was supposed to be a country place, so perhaps it was realistic enough” (*ibid.*). Beyond Laila’s uncertainty about realism, the passage leaves some gaps open for the reader to consider: what is the village realistic enough *for*? Can realism alone justify the painfully real perpetuation of violence, including against civilians?

Confused by the version of Iraq she is presented in the base and through the lens of the battlefield, Laila is also forced to revisit her place of origin through the pitfalls of post-9/11 discourse in American society. When approached by classmates about her origins, she cannot escape the place she comes from, or rather, the *event* that has *taken the place of* her home:

Most kids thought she lived in a tent and rode camels. She couldn’t believe the Americans were making a war in a place they didn’t seem to know a thing about. When she tried to explain, even the clever ones just wanted to talk about suicide bombers and their stupid 9/11, as if the people in New York were the only ones who’d ever died in the whole world. (*GWM* 298)

⁹⁰ See chapter 2, “Traces of Places: Place and Memory.”

As the passage hints, the “theatre of war” reproduced in the fake Iraqi village testifies to a highly partial understanding of the place – despite resorting to military intelligence for information, and realistic décor for tactical knowledge of the terrain, there remains no actual knowledge of Iraq itself beyond the motivations for the war. Through the perspective of an angsty teen who just lost her father to the events in Iraq, the narrator gives a relatable voice to the debunking of American exceptionalism and the restrictive mental geographies it entails. Laila also re-places the event in “New York” rather than the United States, as if to further emphasise that the city is one among many on the world map to have suffered violent deaths. In a sense, the passage displays how the event has shrunk time and space all at once, in what critic Megha Anwer, in “Resisting the Event: Aesthetics of the Non-Event in the Contemporary South Asian Novel,” calls a “sheer foundationalism” surrounding majority discourse about 9/11.

A particularly engaging shift in perspective is operated as Laila starts to make friends with one of the soldiers in the fake village, a young black man named Ty. When asking for Laila’s perspective as an Iraqi girl having to play pretend when she has actually suffered the war, Ty is caught unawares by Laila’s wit:

‘Must be kind of weird for you, all this.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Playing war.’
‘Isn’t it strange for you too?’ (*GWM* 304)

The subtext of Laila’s comeback draws attention to the impossibility of normalising war, whether for the attackers or the attacked, for civilians or for soldiers. The events occurring in wartime are bound to remain strange, unfamiliar and confusing, whoever they impact and wherever they occur. In a final representation of this unfamiliarity, Ty takes Laila to the virtual reality room used by the soldiers to visualise the war zones. There, the girl enacts the metaphorical distance with her home country, while completely deconstructing the war and its motives: “The darkness was alive with motion. So this was what Iraq looked to them; this was how her house looked when they flew overhead in their helicopters. (...) Suddenly all of it felt very distant, just a boy’s game. Cowboys and Indians. Kick the can” (*GWM* 307). The “virtual reality” room, where things paradoxically look “alive with motion,” finally reveals the power of reproduced and faked violence. As the text suggests, it is *because* the soldiers are trained in the form of child’s play and play-acting in a mock village that the events of the war ultimately become real – it is *because* events are reproduced and de-multiplied plethorically in different places that the violent event in itself bears less and less moral significance.

As will be observed next, the potential loss of meaning that events undergo in their repetition and reproduction is also approached through Hamid's and Kunzru's writing of media discourse, where the novel is used to contrast and nuance mediated takes on certain events.

6.1.2. Making it happen: the media landscape

In these novels, the *specular* dimensions of the place-event nexus are in fact often articulated with the *spectacular* representation of events in the media. Entering a conversation with these other narrative forms, Hamid's and Kunzru's novels parody them but also question the consequences of the mass media age on our experience of place and events. In what Paul Virilio calls "the contemporary myopia of the media age" (2000: xi), the meaning of represented events is as uncertain and multiple as the shapes that they take – Slavoj Žižek thus explains that "[a]n 'Event' can refer to a devastating natural disaster or to the latest celebrity scandal, the triumph of the people or a brutal political change" (Žižek 2014: 1). In a talk titled "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement," given after 9/11, Jacques Derrida insists on the performative dimension of these representations – events are *made* to happen by being enunciated in media form: "highly sophisticated techniques of picture-taking, projection, and filtering enable instantaneous interpretation, framing, and selection so that what is shown to us live is already, not a saying or showing of the event, but its production" (Derrida 2007: 447). The ability to produce and reproduce an event through the media is also what makes it inherently iterative, always already repeated in one form or another (Derrida 2007: 446). The philosopher notably insists on the "huge news-making and news-appropriating machines of the TV stations," which are "concentrated in places that we have to learn to analyze, and even contest or transform" (*ibid.*). It is precisely these places which Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions examine, through the characters' perceptions of a "media landscape" which makes them question their own position towards events. One can first observe a common trend in the depiction of characters who are on the move and end up being caught in events that are themselves constantly displaced by the media. Secondly, Kunzru's *My Revolutions*, a novel about "making noise" and the social recognition of spectacular political actions, proposes a reflection on Guy Debord's "spectacle society" and the role of mass media as the place where events unfold.

Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* intertwine the motif of mediated events with the perspective of displaced

characters, thus proposing a critical approach of events through the lens of migration. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Transmission* are particularly concerned with the role of television in the aftermath of 9/11, and the use of information to nurture a certain form of moral crisis and scapegoating. In the former novel, television is used to describe the instant of the World Trade Center attacks, witnessed by the protagonist Changez on television during a business trip in Manila. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* demonstrates a willingness to focus on the context and consequences of September 11 on a world scale, rather than be limited to the event itself. The scene of the televised event is in fact the only passage in the novel that narrates the event in itself, yet in a highly self-reflexive, metafictional tone:

I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased. (*TRF* 82-83, emphasis in the original)

Contained in a single sentence, the collapse of the towers is not described at length, the victims are not even mentioned and the reason for the collapse – the planes – is also brushed upon. What seems to be at stake here is the image created by the event and its reception by the character. In the end, the emotional reaction of pleasure pictured on the character’s face is just as shocking as the event itself – from “staring” to “smiling,” the reception of this represented event is immediate, yet mediated. In the passage that follows, the landscape of the event is quickly associated with symbolism and the implications of 9/11 for “America,” as a place and a nation:

But at that moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack – death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes – no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees. (*ibid.*, emphasis in the original)

The passage plays with the codes of fiction and reality, with a character who sympathises more with fictitious characters than with the real victims of the attacks. The event is summarised as “death on television,” and thus immediately categorised as a fictional trope rather than a unique event. Unimpressed by real events, the protagonist immediately categorises them visually, as a symbol signifying the demise of the U.S. national imaginary. In a novel written entirely in the first and second person, the idea of having “built up relationships” with characters is also a self-reflexive hint. In fact, the televised impression of 9/11 is not so much a turning point in Changez’s story, as it is one in the relationship between the narrator and the readers, who now

wonder whether Changez is after all a “fundamentalist,” a “reluctant” one, or is simply a critically minded citizen.

Throughout the novel, the events of 9/11 are thus constantly re-situated through Changez’s gaze rather than taken for granted. In her analysis of novels by South Asian writers addressing 9/11, where she includes *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* together with novels by Vikram Chandra and Arundhati Roy, Megha Anwer notes that in these narratives, the event “is deliberately decentred; the novels refuse to accord it centre stage or absolute finality and instead choose to culminate with a non-spectacular coda” (2014: 9). Staging the event via the television is one way of operating this “decentering”; instead of taking “centre stage,” the event is here put at a distance for several reasons. First, it is viewed by Changez, an immigrant whose nation is put at stake in the geopolitical strategies following 9/11. Secondly, it is viewed here from Manila, not from New York where Changez normally lives – the character witnesses the symbolic downfall of a certain West from a place in the East, and in that sense is subjected to a physical de-centering. The device of the screen operates the most obvious distancing effect, framing the event within the television – this is reinforced by the analeptic nature of Changez’s narrative, which also frames the plot. The broadcast of 9/11 on television is in fact paralleled with a similar scene, a few pages later, as Changez sees the invasion of Afghanistan on television: “I chanced upon a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post” (*TRF* 113). Again, the passage points to the construction of the event through the media, and the inevitable gaps between “what is described” and what happens. Here, the televised event triggers radically different emotions in Changez, who starts to “tremble with fury” at the sight of this invasion of “a fellow Muslim nation” (*TRF* 113-114). The passage continues the construction of a re-mapping of sympathy and understanding for the protagonist, one which entails full reckoning with one’s personal position on the geopolitical map of the world. The entire novel plays out on this difficult process of reckoning and the affective to-and-fros which Changez experiments. He remembers having thought on the next day: “all these world events were playing out on a stage of no relevance to my personal life” (*TRF* 114), resorting with this metaphor of the “stage” to the internalised rhetoric of the “theatre of war” discussed in the previous section.

Visualising the war in Afghanistan, Changez ultimately understands the side effects of the “War on Terror,” a war in which “the lives of those of us who lived in lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage” (*TRF* 203). Re-mapping his own place as “co-lateral,” Changez is made to realise the marginal position he lives in, despite the

previous illusion of having become an American worker. The representation of Afghanistan through “night-vision” images reinforces this impression of a place left in darkness in the media, but is also reminiscent of the moral semantics of light and darkness that prevailed during the “War on Terror.”⁹¹

In Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*, published in 2004, television also plays a key role in understanding both the scope of events, and one’s own place in a chain of global events. Even though it is uncertain whether the plot is set pre- or post-9/11, *Transmission* uses the lexical fields of threat and invasion to play with an intertext of fear and the key role of information in times of moral uncertainty. The protagonist Arjun, a young Indian IT genius who unwittingly unleashes a world-spanning computer virus, ends up being at the centre of events despite himself and a particularly fitting scapegoat, as a foreign other. Understanding that his mistake cannot be redeemed, Arjun first hides and then flees towards Mexico, hoping to escape the American justice system. His flight is in fact triggered by images of the manhunt that reach him, when a Swiss teenager is being detained in his stead as the suspect for the digital attack. As in Hamid’s novel, the television screen redefines the limit between the subject and the event: in the case of Arjun, the reader is told that seeing this young man’s gaze on CNN “shattered the screen he had erected to shield him from what was taking place” (T 158). Here, the television screen metaphorically *takes the place* of another screen – the mental boundary Arjun had created between himself and what was “taking place.” This intricate pattern of denial and revelation is repeated later on. At a bus station where Arjun is trying to catch a bus towards the Mexican border, he ends up seeing his own face appear on television: “Madness or a bad dream. Trapped on the other side of the glass. A news report. *Cyberterror suspect: FBI releases picture*” (T 215, emphasis in the original). Falling into the alternative reality of the news like a sort of Alice falling through the looking-glass, Arjun suddenly *becomes* the event, his identity being re-defined in the process as that of the number one public enemy. The symbolical transfer between the “release” of his picture and his identity being “trapped” in the news then finds its equivalent in the painful paranoia that he starts to feel: “Surely around the hall a hundred visual cortices were processing the configuration of his face, subconsciously lining shapes and colours to the mugshot on the news bulletin” (T 215). Slowly, the “shattered screen” of Arjun’s denial

⁹¹ The speeches of American President George W. Bush during the years that followed 9/11 are filled with similar semantics – on September 11, he declared that America was “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.” “Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks,” September 11, 2001. *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-terrorist-attacks> (accessed 28-01-2023).

is extended to his physical experience of place, and the mediated event begins to literally *take place* all around him.

Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Transmission* approach globally mediated events through the gaze of characters who are South Asian immigrants in the United States, thus creating doubling effects of strangeness and unfamiliarity. I have elsewhere argued that such an aesthetics can be read as doubly *un-homely*, borrowing from Freud's *Unheimlich* or the uncanny (Freud 2003). Indeed, the unfamiliarity of the foreign environment away from home is mirrored in the effects of familiarity and unfamiliarity fostered by large-scale events (Jeanniard du Dot 2019). Mohsin Hamid repeats this process in his more recent *Exit West*, replacing television screens with a smartphone causing an uncanny experience for a refugee character. Sitting on the steps of a building in London, Nadia has a dissociating experience as she recognises herself on a newspaper photograph on her phone: "she was startled, and wondered how this could be, how she could both read this news and be this news, and how the newspaper could have published this image of her instantaneously" (*EW* 154).⁹² Witnessing the mediated event is intricately linked with the experience of place, the character's perspective blurring the lines between a narrated event and her own sensations. The omnipresence of smartphones in contemporary life and their portability further complexifies these dissociations, as *Exit West* regularly suggests by evoking the refugees' use of their devices.

Kunzru's *My Revolutions* centres around a main character who travels through time more than space. Yet as in the novels just discussed, references to the media allow the narrative to investigate the relation between experienced events and the news stories told about them, which sometimes actually constitute them as events. In that novel, Mike, formerly Chris, tries to hide from his past life as a political activist in the late 1960s and 1970s at the intersection of anti-nuclear, anti-Vietnam War, anarchist and anti-capitalist groups. In the passages where he recalls these events, the narrator regularly refers to the importance of discourse about political events and more particularly the reporting of these events in the media. Kunzru's novel echoes Derrida's observation that events unfold in "places that we have to learn to analyze, and even contest or transform" (Derrida 2007: 446) – the protagonist in *My Revolutions* is indeed eager to "contest or transform" places such as media outlets and visible sites of power. In its concern with narratives and counter-narratives of controversial events, the novel also harks back to

⁹² A longer version of this passage has been examined in chapter 3.

Kunzru's concern with state power, surveillance and the forms of control that can emanate from the desire to withhold or release information.⁹³

Throughout Mike's recollection of his past, events such as demonstrations, collective actions and riots are always intertwined with place, and with a form of *taking place* that is embedded in the narration from the onset. During his first demonstration on Trafalgar Square, as the police is about to charge the crowd, he recalls that "[e]verything seemed to be happening at a distance, on a screen" (MR 36). The narrative construct notably plays with the role of images through the character of Miles, a photographer who regularly reappears in the different groups where Mike/Chris gets involved, yet whose aims are less clear – in the end, it is Miles who brings Mike back to his life as Chris, blackmailing him and threatening to reveal his past actions to his new family. At the time, Miles was already attempting to create an event out of the situations he witnessed: "he wanted to document the occupation. It was, he said pompously, a historic confrontation" (MR 161). "Documenting" the actions but never quite taking part, Miles remains at the border of events, safely remote from commitment yet ready to make the most of their narrative potential. The diegetic mechanism also induces a temporal distance from these events. As Mike/Chris reminisces, his experience is progressively historicised, but also spatialised, as if frozen in a given time and place.

For young Mike and his fellow activists, the perception and evocation of the event is actually part of a larger cultural subtext infused with the concepts of Guy Debord's *Internationale Situationniste*, published in the late 1950s and 1960s. The novel subtly inserts these concepts in the evocation of Mike's personal politics, including the notion of the *dérive*, manifested in Mike's obsessive practice of "drifting" from one place to another – this will be examined in more detail in the next chapter. With regard to the media, Mike abides by the theory of the "Society of the Spectacle," according to which modern societies have evolved so that "everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation" (Debord, 1967: 3).⁹⁴ Throughout the novel, the different activist groups attempt to challenge this by forcing actual, tangible events rather than represented ones onto a society they deem to be manipulated, lulled into the illusions of a post-war consumerist lifestyle. On several occasions, after actions that had been planned to disrupt the social order, Mike's groups have to recognise the absence of a meaningful impact, and the frustration of not even appearing in the media. After setting

⁹³ See the discussion of these subjects in chapter 5 of this work.

⁹⁴ My translation. In the original: "Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de *spectacles*. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation." Debord, Guy. *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967, 3 (emphasis in the original).

fire to military buildings, they look anxiously for their presence in the media: “There was nothing. We read that BBC1 had just started broadcasting in colour; an actor from *Coronation Street* had got married. No real news, just distraction” (MR 175). Their absence in the media is nurtured by an oxymoronic notion: that of “real news.” Progressively, the distinction between reality and mediated events gives way to a more ontological reflection about the experience of reality. In one instance of a failure to “make noise” and attract public attention about Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia, the need to appear in the media becomes more and more fundamental:

From callboxes we phoned the BBC and ITV, claiming responsibility. Then we waited. Three days later there had been no response. No news reports. No commentary. No acknowledgement at all. It was as if the bomb hadn’t detonated. But we’d heard the sound, a muffled crump. We’d seen emergency vehicles racing towards the scene. The day afterwards the bank was closed. Wooden boards covered the building’s ground-floor façade. Does something exist if it’s unobserved? Does something happen if it is not reported? (MR 184)

“Racing” vehicles and phone calls, resorting to “underground” press, all point to the event’s ability to set things in movement and transform space, yet the final response seems to be one of immobility. From the “muffled” sound to the wooden boards, the passage denotes the strategies of hiding and revealing the physical traces of an event in space. When asked about this particular passage, Kunzru explained that it reflected the stake of “stag[ing] [a] conflict in the social space” and the commingling of political interests that lead to such staging, including in more contemporary debates (HK ITW 2019). *My Revolutions* is particularly efficient in demonstrating how the seemingly unseizable conflicts in “social space” can be experienced physically in parallel to their presence through the media. The novel culminates with the bombing of the Post Office Tower, referring to the real-life event that took place in London in 1971. In the novel, Mike and his fellow activist Anna are responsible for the bombing and let the media know about it. Suddenly, the event starts to infuse every corner of urban space in London, as the narrator walks the streets and feels that it “had been absorbed into the air,” through “a headline behind the grille of the news-stand outside the tube” or “propagating through the radio spectrum” (MR 199). While events seem to invade space, they still remain evoked in terms of an ethereal presence, in the “air” or the radio waves. The narrative retains this ambiguity throughout, and also manifests the constructed nature of these political messages, by having them appear on the page regularly with a variety of typescripts and a plethora of exaggerated exclamations and capital letters. Parodying the format of the political pamphlet, the text suggests that this metaphorical “bombing” through language and the media

has its own pitfalls and runs the risk of tautological emptiness. In a final retrospective reflection, which verges on the metafictional, Mike (now Chris) observes:

the insidious message of the spectacle – that nothing takes place, even for the participants, unless it’s electronically witnessed and played back – took us over. We thought we were striking a blow against it, the hypnotic dream-show of fuckable bodies and consumer goods. Instead we fell into the screen. Our world became television. (*MR 202*)

Starting from organising demonstrations in Trafalgar Square and ending up obsessed about appearing in the media, the characters have indeed proceeded to a transfer, from the physical occupation and movement in physical places to the replication of their ideas in symbolical mediatic space. Again, the screen has *taken the place* of what actually takes place. In a reciprocal movement, the characters have redefined their sense of place, re-mapping their “world” so that it “became television” – not *televised* or transmitted, but crystallized in the object itself.

From the “theatres of war” to the “Society of the Spectacle,” Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels thus operate effects of distance and proximity towards events, emphasising the essentially narrative, constructed dimensions of events that can be channelled in the perceptions of place. Effects of framing, duplication or replication of events in different places allow for multifaceted readings which point to their subjective interpretation – and to some extent, their fabrication – in the over-coded world of contemporary communication. De-coding events is also central to the question of cognitive boundaries and making sense of terror, which is also a common streak running through their stories.

6.2. Events beyond understanding

As demonstrated by the passage from *Transmission* which gives its title to this chapter, events in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions are often described in terms of boundaries, borders and thresholds that entail delimitation and forms of transgression all at once. Most of all, this perception of events indicates the hermeneutic implications of certain events, which can resist understanding and prove a challenge to the imagination. Motifs of adventurous exploration and border-crossing are used in these novels as a thematic and generic device, and form part of the representation of place as much as that of events.

Events are represented as beyond understanding in the sense proposed by speculative fiction, through alternative worlds, utopias and dystopias including futuristic and science

fictional aesthetics. Hamid and Kunzru's shared interest for these generic forays can be read as yet another dimension of their poetics of place: where do unrealistic, unexpected events lead? What relations with place do they induce? Hari Kunzru's theory and practice of "the zone" in particular incarnates this interest, while allowing for a resistance to exclusive generic labels. Mohsin Hamid's own motifs such as the "black doors" of *Exit West* also allow for a reading of events through metaphors of unknown places.

Events can also appear to challenge cognitive limits because of realities such as terror, which may interrupt and undermine the subject's sense of space and time. Hamid and Kunzru both address the question of terror thematically, but also with regard to the narrative stalemates it might present. Their novels offer a re-appraisal of the trauma narrative: the oft-used psychological concept of fighting or fleeing when facing a life-threatening event is rearticulated around fleeing from, and fighting in or even *with* place. Rather than individual trauma, these representations of terror – or "terror effects," to take up the words of Robert J.C. Young (2009: 305) – are oriented towards collective fears, social upheaval and a reassessment of the sense of place.

6.2.1. "Into the zone": treading into the unknown

At the end of Kunzru's *Transmission*, the narrator engages in an apocryphal reassessment of the events surrounding the world-spanning Leela virus, unleashed earlier by the character of Arjun. Among many different interpretations, one of them leads to evoking the possibility that it might not be possible to explain the virus:

'We want to abolish the unknown,' writes one Leela researcher. It is a common enough desire. As humans, we want to know what is lurking outside our perimeter, beyond our flickering circle of firelight. We have built lenses and Geiger counters and mass spectrometers and solar probes and listening stations on remote Antarctic islands. (*T* 271)

Through the evocation of scientific and technological advances enabling to approach unknown events, the narrative voice emphasises the paradoxes of the glitch, the technological unknown incarnated by Leela. At the same time, the image of the "flickering circle of firelight," evocative of Plato's cave, returns to a more ontological concern with events: how can they be accessed and understood if not by changing one's perspective and moving from one place to another? The puzzling ending of *Transmission* plays with this notion, notably by enumerating different parts of the planet where interpretations of Leela might differ.

In most of Kunzru's works, characters indeed attempt to move towards and reach unexplained events. In *Gods Without Men*, the supposed abduction of young Raj, the belief in alien forms of life, or even the anthropological interest for other humans, all lead the characters to go further beyond the limits of their known world and explore the unknown, synthetised in the evocative power of the Mojave Desert. In *My Revolutions*, the protagonist's desire to get involved with activist groups first and foremost stems from the boredom experienced in the suburbs, and a wish to enter the central, eventful life of politics. In that novel, the crossing of thresholds towards the unknown also displays the limit between private comfort and public life, for instance when the narrator remarks that "[i]t's a strange thing to walk out of your front door on your way to a fight" (MR 154). Similar patterns can be found in *White Tears* and *Red Pill*, with characters whose journeys and quests are triggered by a failure to understand past events, and who eventually find themselves caught in uncanny experiences. In the works of Mohsin Hamid, the most visible enactment of this trope is to be found in *Exit West*, with the device of the "black doors" through which all the characters can reach different places throughout the world. The unknown also awaits behinds these doors, whether it is forced upon the characters by the need to flee, by their desire to get involved in an ongoing event – some characters reach Saeed and Nadia's city at war to join the fighting (EW 63) – or simply fostered by curiosity.

These representations of events through a transgressive movement in – or rather, across – place(s) plays with a philosophical and generic intertext concerning the event. First, they imply that events are conceived of as *the* event, a singular, radically transformative event that the characters have to apprehend, and a metaphorical threshold inducing a *here* and a *there*, a *before* and an *after*. Kunzru refers to this pattern through the disappearance of Raj in *Gods Without Men*, or the spread of the virus in *Transmission*, both located at the centre of the plots. The event in that sense goes back to its etymology as *ex-venire*, to come out – the event implies an emergence, whether it comes itself, or others reach towards it. Jean-Jacques Lecercle defines it so when reading Alain Badiou's notion of event, which is an "eruption, a hole forming in the daily life of the subject who experiences it" (2005: 2).⁹⁵ According to Lecercle, the fantastic is particularly well attuned to this perception of the event, precisely because it stages this eruption/irruption and its manifestations (2005: 4).

In fact, both Hamid and Kunzru consciously play with the fantastic through generic codes borrowed from science fiction and fantasy. Aside from the uncanny undertones which

⁹⁵ My translation. The original reads: "cette irruption violente est aussi une éruption, une trouée dans la vie quotidienne du sujet qui en fait l'expérience." Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. "Il y a Événement et Événement." *Polysèmes*, no. 7 (1 January 2005), 2.

run through their writings of the unknown, short stories published in different venues display a common interest in post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction. Hamid's forays include the invention of an alien invasion in the "Greater Lahore Amritsar Conurbation," or a post-apocalyptic story where two boys have to escape a drone attack ("Alien Invasion in the G.L.A.C.," *The Financial Times* 2013; "Terminator: Attack of the Drone," *The Guardian* 2011). Kunzru's use of dystopia in *Memory Palace* (2013) and in the short stories compiled in *Noise* (2005) also bear witness to the importance of these inspirations. Whether a fundamental event is impending or expected – as in the UFO subplot of *Gods Without Men* – or whether it is past and has forged a post-apocalyptic landscape, this conception of the event entails explorations and a transformation of the sense of place. In the words of Bert Oliver who analyses Alain Badiou's concept of event, the event can indeed provide a "portal or gateway to future possibilities" (quoted in Anwer 2014: 3). The imagery of doors and border-crossing which runs through both writers' works can thus be read in light of this trope of the portal, expanding the characters' knowledge and perception by having them enter new or transformed places.

For both writers, the "gateways" which a transformative event can provide are also gateways into different subgenres. Yet Hamid and Kunzru never fully abide by one or the other of these subgenres. The novels in particular make sure of this, by constantly balancing unsettling environments with more realistic situations, and by making the references to fantasy, science fiction or dystopia very visible and self-referential. When interrogated about the motif of the magic doors of *Exit West* in an interview, Mohsin Hamid is reluctant to assign the novel a specific genre, whether fantasy or magic realism. He explains: "interestingly, when one alters physics in this way – that is, you can pass through a portal and be in a different place – there's suddenly a notion that this must be a different category of fiction" (Khan 2021: 17). The writer insists that *Exit West* is not "a different category of novel from the ones that preceded it" (*ibid.*). In fact, one could argue, as Eva Menger does, that the defamiliarizing effects found in *Exit West* actually serve the purpose of questioning the status quo of contemporary realities by engaging readers with the defamiliarizing experiences of refugees. Rather than one specific subgenre, Menger prefers to read *Exit West* under the broad category of speculative fiction, defined as "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (Oziewicz qtd in Menger 2019: 80).

Hari Kunzru's own relation to a speculative writing of place and events can best be understood through his notion of the "zone," which gave its name to his 2020 podcast. Through characters who explore events, or even in his own journalistic endeavours, readers can regularly

perceive the notion of a “zone” where events are harder to explain yet fascinating to approach. In an interview for the *Washington Square Review*, Kunzru explains that this concept served as the guideline for his podcast, but it is also used in his creative writing classes, to describe, according to the interviewer, “how certain places feel.” Kunzru further points out that “[o]ne of the qualities of the Zone is the suspension of the ordinary set of rules,” for instance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, where all have witnessed “a suspension of our social life, a suspension of really fundamental rules of how we’re engaging with other people. It has an open-endedness” (Toms 2021). Examples of this pattern are numerous in Kunzru’s work, but *Gods Without Men* is probably the most telling narrative when it comes to puzzling events and their interactions with place. As Jaz and Lisa try to understand what happened to their disappeared son in the desert, Jaz attempts to map out the event by understanding the place:

One evening she came back from work to find him poring over a large-scale map of the Mojave Desert, drawing circles with a compass. Beside him was a yellow legal pad, scrawled with notes and calculations: how far a toddler could walk in an hour; the location of the nearest public road. (*GWM* 362)

Jaz attempts to draw out circles to understand what happened beyond the perimeter of his knowledge, trying to cover ground with a “large-scale” map that is as close as it can to reality. However, the inscription of his conundrums on paper does not allow to reconstitute the story: “notes and calculations” cannot merge into a coherent narrative for the event. While Jaz tries to rationalize the event, Lisa progressively comes to accept unknowability, but mostly, the impossibility to physically grasp and materially map out the event. About the police and the lack of progress on the case, she tells Jaz:

‘They have other problems, Jaz. Other cases.
‘But what happened to him? What do you think happened?’
‘Does it matter?’ (*GWM* 362)

The characteristic use of the word “matter” is here twofold – it evokes the importance of the unknown event, but also points towards certain events that resist physical materialization. The narrative opposes Jaz, who tries to make sense of the event at all costs, with Lisa, who progressively engages in esoteric practices and beliefs, leaning towards spiritual relief rather than physical proof derived from place. The novel further stages this opposition through the couple’s child, a non-verbal autistic boy, who is presented as a continued mystery to them.

Thus, in both Hamid’s and Kunzru’s uses of speculative fiction, the “suspension” of normality does not entail an atomization of meaning, nor a detachment from the material. Hamid’s *Exit West* balances the uncanny effects of the black doors with the more tangible realities of shelter, home-making in unwelcoming places, or finding access to digital

technologies. Kunzru's narratives, as for them, mitigate the symbolical hold of events by offering a plethoric variety of tentative interpretations for them – as in *Transmission* – or by playfully re-placing them in relation with other, equally unsettling events – as in *Gods Without Men*. Like the rest of his poetics, Kunzru's approach to unknown events implies a resistance to totalizing discourse, promoting an awareness of the unknown rather than providing a resolution of its conundrums within the space of the novel. In a recent interview for a collective volume about his work, Kunzru explains that his aim is not to write thick novels, preferring instead “[a] short novel with a lot of arrows pointing outside it” (Shaw and Upstone 2023: 195).⁹⁶

Because of their nuanced approach to speculation and their persisting entanglement with the places of everyday experience, Hamid's and Kunzru's works could be read together with Donna Haraway's acronym “SF,” which to her signifies

the poiesis – the making – of speculative fabulation, science fiction, science fact, speculative feminism, *soin de ficelle*, so far. The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; (...) they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others. SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come. (2016: 31)

Kunzru's “arrows pointing outside” and Hamid's trope of the doors echo this “patterning of possible worlds and possible times,” including possible places. The “suspension” of ordinary life that forms part of Kunzru's concept of “Zone,” and arguably of speculative fiction at large, can just as much be read as an engaging suspension, an attachment with something or somewhere else that is not directly described on the page. Treading into unknown events, in that sense, entails forms of *threading* into the unknown, forming narrative threads and possible attachments with other people and places. This vision of events thus also relates with anthropologist Tim Ingold's theory that place is an entanglement of lines, contending that in contemporary experience, “the environment does not consist of the surroundings of a bounded place but of a zone in which [people's] several pathways are thoroughly entangled,” and for which “there are no insides or outsides, only openings and ways through” (2008: 103).

This notion of entanglement, understood as finding oneself caught in a place which is both a physical site and a temporary situation, is also central to Hamid's and Kunzru's

⁹⁶ This poetics of the unresolved might differ from what is found in fantasy, for instance. In a 2002 article for *Mute*, Kunzru argues that in post-9/11 politics, one should be wary of the “desire for moral clarity” revealed by a renewed interest for fantasy works such as *The Lord of the Rings*. “Beyond Good and Evil?” *Mute*, 10 May 2002. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/beyond-good-and-evil> (accessed 21-01-2022).

respective descriptions of terror, which acknowledge the implications of events such as terrorist attacks and the discourse surrounding them.

6.2.2. Fight or flight: narrating terror in and out of place

In the introduction to the collective work *Literature, Migration and the “War on Terror,”* Stephen Morton explains how “terror” has become an overbearing signifier in the wake of 9/11, a term which “operates as a slippery and dangerous trope in the hands of dominant geopolitical forces, military leaders, formations of counter-terrorism, and the mainstream western media” (Tolan *et. al.*, 2012: 2). In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière also explains:

Little by little, (...) the word ‘terror’ has (...) come to designate not only the shock these events caused in people's minds, but also the fear that similar events might recur, possibly leading to further acts of inconceivable violence, and the situation characterized by the management of such fears by state apparatuses. (2010: 188)

Although this study does not intend to delve extensively into these fears through theories of trauma and affect – and doing so only in the context of this development would not do justice to such theories – one should acknowledge that the notion of terror has been significantly read together with such theories. Here, the reference to trauma theory through the “fight-or-flight” response, a concept coined by early-twentieth century American physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon to describe reactions to immediate threats (Brown and Fee 2002), is in fact used to convey the inscription of terror in place. More precisely, it refers here to the represented strategies of movement away from, or engagement with place in moments of terror. From a more topical standpoint, I would like to argue that Hamid’s and Kunzru’s representations of terror operate effects of placement and displacement which question the usual location of narratives of terror, often channelled by the “state apparatuses” mentioned by Rancière. Here I am focusing more particularly – but not exclusively – on the novels that immediately followed 9/11, Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kunzru’s *Transmission*.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a novel that holds in check the figure of the terrorist, within its very structure – a supposed fundamentalist is called “reluctant” from the start, and is given the possibility to defend himself, in the rhetoric of his narrative and possibly physically, in the Old Anarkali square of Lahore where he is facing an American intelligence agent. As observed in the previous section through the elusive, ironic description of the World Trade Centre attacks in this novel, representations of the event as a universally shared collective

trauma are questioned through the prism of a non-American character, a protagonist whose own homeland is suddenly threatened by imperialist retaliation. Peter Morey thus points out that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* goes against the grain of a flurry of “trauma narratives” of 9/11, and “effectively parodies the cultural certainties” often found in these narrations of the event (2011: 136). The novel offers a counterpoint to broken, disjointed narratives of terror and traumatic events, with a narrator who rather prefers to maintain a sustained conversation and occupy the entire space of the novel with his linear narrative. As Lindsay Anne Balfour points out, this is a novel about “what is means to engage with others and strangers in a time of terror” (2017: 215). Changez indeed offers a “fighting” response to the threat he is facing, defending with words the place he is now holding in the geopolitics of globalised fears. I would thus further argue that this is a novel about engaging with one’s place, and understanding the stakes of situated narratives of terror.

The novel indeed makes visible an already-made metaphorical displacement stemming from the association of the Muslim character with the figure of the terrorist. In *Terror and the Postcolonial*, Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton contend that novels such as Hamid’s question the “causal logic” inherent to

what Spivak calls “metalepsis”: where an effect of colonial discourse (here, the terrorist) is presented as a cause; or where a focus on the emotional-aesthetic connotations of terror is made logically to override awareness of the imperial interests that produced the terrorist. (2009: 11)

Intent on displaying such “imperial interests,” the narrator of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* turns on its head the semantics of terror, by associating it to the values he observes in American society and in the American interventionist policy. The narrative regularly returns to the “fundamentals,” a term used by Changez’s manager in New York and implying a “pursuit” (*TRF* 132) similar to the inherently American “pursuit of happiness,” which Changez soon decides to abandon after 9/11 (“my days of focusing on the fundamentals were done,” *TRF* 175). The “fundamentals,” as we soon understand, represent capitalist values and their harmful consequences. When recalling how he gave up on this ideal, Changez also remembers that he was then “analyzing data as though [his] life depended on it,” thus designating his American employer as a potential threat to his life, much in the same way as terror (*TRF* 132). This ambiguity is maintained until the very end of the novel, with the last sentence where Changez thinks he perceives “a glint of metal” in the American man’s jacket, then ironically observing: “I trust it is from the holder of your business cards” (*TRF* 209). Again, the narrator operates a

role reversal in terms of violence, but also associates the threat of physical violence with the evocation of business, a pretext that can seemingly justify any course of action.

Changez's displacements of the meaning of terror are particularly visible when he denounces the gap between American interventions abroad in the aftermath of 9/11, and the experiences felt by the inhabitants of the targeted places. In contrast with the magnifying proportions of the event that took place in New York, the narrator underscores the unspoken violence exerted by the United States in other places. He thus wonders about how America manages "to wreak such havoc in the world (...) with so few apparent consequences at home" (*TRF* 149), and comments to a reporter in Lahore that "no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America" (*TRF* 207). Havoc, death and fear are only acceptable when felt by others, in other places, the narrator seems to contend. Recalling his return to New York after having stayed with his family in Lahore for a short period of time, Changez tells the American man:

Given your background, you will doubtless have experienced the peculiar phenomenon that is the return to an environment more or less at peace from one where the prospect of large-scale bloodshed is a distinct possibility. It is an odd transition. (*TRF* 147)

The passage targets the hypocrisy of interventionism, where "fleeing" a threatened place is always an option for those who intervene, but not for those who live there. The narrator refers here to places as a "background" and an "environment," as if to emphasise the detached stance of the American intervention with regard to place. The possibility to extract oneself from places with life-threatening circumstances thus leads to a partial understanding of terror, one where terror is not forced on the subject but remains at a safe distance and/or can be controlled by military action. Analysing terror together with Burke's sublime and Freud's uncanny, Robert J.C. Young comments on this notion of distance:

Terror (...) is essentially a First World form of terror. You fear it, you fear its psychic, somatic, and potentially bodily effects, but for most people it remains, thankfully, always at Burkean remove. Compare this with the experience of people who actually live terror, suffer terror, in one form or another, on a day-to-day basis. We can see this marked by a linguistic survival: the verb "apprehend" is still used in South Asian English today as it was in Shakespeare's day - (...) meaning "To anticipate with fear or dread; to be fearful concerning; to fear" (*OED*). (2009: 323)

Terror as understood in the language surrounding attacks like 9/11 is therefore distinct from its occurrence in places where it is a daily reality. Hamid's evocations of terror in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also aim at materialising the meanings of terror, and mapping them together

with the sense of distance and proximity they imply – apprehending them and comprehending them all at once. While perceptions of fundamentalist terror are willingly re-oriented and debunked in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid chose to broach the question of terror at a different scale in his contribution to the Granta volume on Pakistan, in a very short story titled “A Beheading.” Told by a first-person narrator, the story describes how kidnappers invade the narrator’s house, take him hostage and then proceed to filming his beheading, which he also disturbingly witnesses until the end. Interestingly, throughout the story, the words “terror” or “terrorist” are never used. The narrator’s darkest fears are enumerated at great speed, in short sentences which quicken the pace of the story but also build up the mock suspense – from the very title of the story, one knows already what to expect. With this story, Hamid re-replaces the question of terror at an individual level rather than as a collective matter. The story also seems to hint at writers’ freedom of speech, as the narrator promises at the end that he will “never write again” (2010:195).

Exit West prolongs this reflection on the effects of terror at an individual scale, for the inhabitants of an unnamed Eastern city. Not only do Saeed and Nadia flee the “militants” who have invaded their city (*EW* 40), but they also continue to face violence in the places they reach as refugees, mostly by hostile mobs of local inhabitants. The novel unravels the causes and consequences of a regime of terror for these refugees, who keep living in fear for want of finding a place where they are welcome. After they hear that a cinema where hundreds of migrants were staying has been burnt down by anti-migrant mobs in London, Saeed reflects about leaving again and observes: “To flee for ever is beyond the capacity of most: at some point even a hunted animal will stop, exhausted, and await its fate, if only for a while” (*EW* 163). Terror can lead one to leave a place, to flee in the face of a threat. Fleeing from a place is in fact inherently linked to the figure of the migrant, in more than one way.

This is what Hari Kunzru suggests in *Transmission* through the metaphor of the computer virus, unleashed by a naïve character who also happens to be the perfect culprit because he is an immigrant worker. Like Hamid, Kunzru repurposes the language of terror and channels it into the description of the computer virus, emphasising the role of the semantics of terror in the ethical positioning towards otherness. As the virus covers the entire social space with its effects, the only means for society to get hold of this unfamiliar matter is to seek revenge through physical violence:

Across America, citizens started to look with suspicion at the computers on their desks. These machines which had always terrorized them in small ways (...) were now revealed to harbour something more sinister, something with an agenda. This was it, the enemy within, a technological fifth column in the

homes of ordinary Americans. By the time talk-radio got hold of it, a consensus had emerged that the attack should be avenged in blood. Calling into a nationally syndicated show, Bobby from Topeka summed it up for a lot of people.

‘Torture,’ he said. ‘That’s the only way we’ll find out who’s behind this.’ (T 154)

Starting with the material presence of the “computers on their desks,” the hissing rumour of “something more sinister” is answered with a “consensus,” which connects rumours, ideology and prejudice into a primal reaction of violence. “Bobby from Topeka,” a small-town citizen presented as a synecdoche for the entire country, promotes the banalisation of violence, where perceived terror is automatically met with the evocation of torture in a very mundane, down-to-earth tone. Just like the computer virus has invaded “the homes of ordinary Americans,” the language of violence and retaliation has pervaded their minds even in small towns and unexpected places, and is seeping back into public space.

Kunzru’s *Transmission* indeed suggests how the politics of terror in the context of 9/11 leads to the formation of new symbolical or physical places, but can also imply the erasure of someone off the face of the earth. There are no explicit mentions of 9/11 itself in the novel, yet passages about terror and military power keep alluding to a context of widespread control over individuals under the guise of freedom and the defence of so-called Western values. For instance, Arjun starts fleeing after he understands his mistake, and witnesses the treatment of his actions by the media. He progressively starts considering what the symbolical labelling of his actions as “terror” might imply:

They were calling him a terrorist, which meant that he would probably just join the ranks of the disappeared, the kneeling figures in orange suits against whom anything was justified, to whom anything could legitimately be done. It was the revenge of the uncontrollable world. (T 159)

The “uncontrollable world,” that of computer viruses seeping into information systems, finds its revenge in extreme forms of control. As he tries to flee, Arjun is reminded of “kneeling figures,” people who have been forced to stop and whose bodies have become disposable, to the point of becoming mere “figures” rather than fully fleshed human beings. The worst abuses of the American prison system are contained within the paradoxical excess of doing “anything” to these people, while doing it “legitimately.” As Robert J. C. Young argues, novels like *Transmission* articulate contemporary fears of migration with fears of terror and fears of uncontrollable circulation, showing that “terror, migration, and globalization are not randomly linked: fear of migrants and illegal immigration has turned out to be one of the most consistent terror effects of all” (2009: 322-323). Kunzru gives a postcolonial inclination to the American

culture of paranoia found in DeLillo's novels, notably through a sweet-natured protagonist who is nothing but a "reluctant terrorist" and a victim of neoliberal violence – the virus begins because of Arjun's desperate attempt to avoid being fired from his company. In the process, a novel like *Transmission* also asks what place is ascribed to immigrants in the post-9/11 social order of the so-called West, and what conceptions of shared spaces such an event might have fostered. Maintaining a critical stance towards the canonisation of 9/11 in a variety of ways, novels like Hamid's and Kunzru's actually play more generally with narratives of beginnings and endings, questioning the mythologisation of certain events within and through place(s).

6.3. The place of an ending: cosmogonies and eschatologies

In *The Fate of Place*, Edward Casey compares the plethora of cosmogonies across the world, contending that they often have to do with the formation of *place* as much as the appearance of a founding event. "Events," Casey explains, "call for cosmic implacement: no event can happen unplaced" (2011: 7). He adds that "[t]o create 'in the first place' is to create *a first place*" (*ibid*, emphasis in the original). In mythical and folkloric narratives, creation and destruction never stand far apart from each other, as Casey explains through the notion of chaos (2011: 9). This commingling of destruction and foundation is also a frequent trope in philosophical approaches to the notion of event – Jean-Jacques Lecercle thus notes that in the philosophy of Alain Badiou, the violent, transformative perception of the event implies that it is "also an advent: it destroys, but also founds" (2005: 2).⁹⁷

The question of beginnings and endings is evidently inherent to the form of the novel. Plot linearity has long coincided with a pattern of "construction bound for destruction," as Jacques Rancière reminds us, whether in the classical Aristotelian model, or in modern conceptions of progress (2019: 115). In Hamid's and Kunzru's stories, this idea of progress towards an end (and ending) is revisited in parodies of coming-of-age stories like *The Impressionist* or *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, or through the mechanisms of second-person narration in Hamid's novels, whereas analeptic novels like *My Revolutions*, or multifocal stories such as *Gods Without Men* or *Moth Smoke*, tend to unsettle expectations of such a narrative curve.

⁹⁷ My translation. In the original : "l'événement en question (...) est aussi un avènement : il détruit, mais il fonde aussi." *Op.cit.*, 2.

From a thematic standpoint, both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru revisit this “sense of an ending,” (and/or new beginning), to quote Frank Kermode’s famous phrase (2000),⁹⁸ and channel it into their writing of place. Since their writing careers began – significantly, at the turn of the twenty-first century – this trope of the beginning and end of times has kept reappearing in different forms. Through these themes, their narratives engage with the mythologization of events such as 9/11, but also testify to their respective rejections of purity and authenticity, as discussed earlier in this work. Megha Anwer argues that some contemporary South Asian fiction, including Mohsin Hamid’s, “laughs at pomposity of the discourse of origins which sets store by the cataclysmic/overwhelming/terroristic event as a launching pad for a new world, whether dystopian or utopian” (2014: 9).

Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels upend the expectation that the inception, decay or destruction of a place may signal profound civilizational changes, bearing in mind, as will be discussed here, Mohsin Hamid’s explicit reluctance towards the notion of “civilizations” (Hamid 2015: xvi). Hamid’s writing of transposable experience, and Kunzru’s minute attention to historically and culturally situated places, each in their own way show that narratives of endings and foundational beginnings can be re-examined together with multifaceted imaginaries and experiences of place.

I will first discuss representations of place as a matrix, a container from which founding events can stem – this is particularly visible in references to Platonic space and place, as well as mythology, in Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*. A second development is dedicated to the notion of crisis, and how the writing of place in the novels of Hamid and Kunzru is pervaded by re-writings of apocalyptic fiction and the aesthetics of decadence. Lastly, I wish to address more specifically the imaginaries of nuclear annihilation which recur in several of the two writers’ works and obviously engage with the imaginary of place, or rather, with the imagined end of place.

6.3.1. Making room for the void: place as matrix

As mentioned earlier in this study, Hari Kunzru’s first novel *The Impressionist* is a highly self-referential piece of fiction, one which should be read, in Churnjeet Mahn’s words, as “a hypotactic montage of colonial scenes arranged in a dense set of textual and historical allusions” (2023: 19-20). The first instantiation of this stage set or reproduced background

⁹⁸ The eponymous book was first published in 1967. Note that the phrase can also be used in reference to Julian Barnes’s 2011 novel of the same name.

appears in the first pages of the novel to be a cave. The character of Forrester, a British land surveyor, finds himself trapped in a cave with an Indian woman on her way to an arranged marriage. The encounter between Forrester and Amrita leads to the birth of Pran, the shape-shifting character whose misadventures the novel then leads readers through.

The motif of the cave is an evident reference to E.M. Forster's 1924 *A Passage to India*, where two English women are taken to a trip to the Marabar caves, an imaginary location where the youngest of them, Adela Quested, has an unsettling experience leading to the incrimination of their host, Dr Aziz, by the Anglo-Indian community. In Forster's novel, the caves crystallise the prejudice of the English who fail to understand India, but also more largely, the question of the unknown and of the indescribable experiences that places can provoke. In their hollowness, the caves signify human relations to meaning and in particular the meaning ascribed to a place. When mentioning the relation of the locals to the caves, the narrator of the novel thus notes that "[n]othing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend upon human speech" (2005: 116).

Through this opening encounter in a cave, Kunzru's novel opens out even wider the hermeneutic gap already opened by Forster's Marabar caves and their frightening echoes. From the uncertain, unspeakable event that took place in Forster's cave, here the encounter is fully fleshed and even produces another event – the existence of Pran. Because the cave appears at the onset of the novel, the place is presented as a matrix, an envelope leading to the formation of the plot and the character, a place "in which something is bred, produced or developed" (Casey 2011: 24).

Starting with a tragic flood, this parodic cosmogenesis is articulated around chaos – in the first sense of a chasm, a void – which, as Edward Casey explains, is to be understood as "a scene of *emerging* order (...) a scene of spacing, not just gaping but 'gapping'" (2011: 9). While Forrester was previously presented as "a khaki-clad vacancy, dreaming of trees and waiting for something, anything, to fill him up" (*TI* 5), he ends up being "engulfed" in "[t]he mouth of a cave" (*TI* 12-13), metaphorically consumed by his sexual encounter with Amrita, before he is rejected to the surface and perishes in the storm. This chaotic scene operates as an opening jumble, announcing from the onset the novel's engagement with impurity – whether it is racial, spatial, or the essential impurity of a text that keeps rewriting existing stories. Here, the mythical beginning does not evoke a pure origin, but instead proposes that narratives of origins are always essentially impure.

This impurity can be read in the references this beginning makes towards eschatologies, bearing many mythological subtexts – a deluge appears for instance in the myth of Manu, the

first man, in Vedic cosmogony (Britannica 2022). At the same time, there are of course references to the creation of humankind in this sexual encounter, yet these are playfully tweaked. Moving from Forrester's perspective to Amrita's, the narrator plays on a respective exoticisation of the foreigner's body. Seeing Amrita's body for the first time, Forrester finds her to be radically different from the "rosy-cheeked" pin-ups he often dreams of, whom he hears "asking oh will you not come into the garden my dear" (TI 13). Compared with these Eve-like temptations, the cave is not a garden of Eden – it is a more primal place, where Amrita is a "goddess," "[s]haped out of the raw clay by the flood" (TI 14). Forrester then revises his Christian presumptions of a woman born out of man, reflecting that "[h]e has not created her. She has created him" (*ibid.*). The passage plays out on a mutual confusion nurtured by mythology and imagination – who has created whom? – resulting in the two characters' skins appearing "an identical red-brown colour. The colour of the earth" (TI 15). Re-formed by the earth, the two characters emerge changed by the cave and by their encounter, yet eternally associated with the place where they met.

For beyond religious cosmogonies and eschatologies, this opening engages with the very definition of place and space, notably in its reference to the platonic and Aristotelian notion of *chora*. Often translated as "region," the term refers to "both the container and the contained," "rather than a thing, (...) a locatory matrix *for* things" (Casey 2011: 34, emphasis in the original). As Casey explains, "[s]uch a region is finally a matter of place rather than of space – if 'place' implies finite locatedness and 'space' infinite or indefinite extension" (*ibid.*). The cave is a *chora*, which contains and *is* all at once, bearing possibilities of emergence and containing them within its bounds. As an event within an event, the characters' encounter in the cave in the midst of a flood reproduces such effects of containment – the narrator thus remarks that "small miracles are woven into the pattern of every large event" (TI 13). In the same way as the "boundaries of any complex event" found in *Transmission* (T 156), Kunzru's narratives of event are therefore always intertwined with his writing of place, questioning what lurks beyond the perimeter of familiarity and understanding.

The trope of the cave re-appears in an occlusive effect at the end of *The Impressionist*. As Pran has now embarked on a Conrad-inspired journey into Fotseland with an Oxford anthropologist, he ends up being captured and exorcised by the tribe in a cave, the Fotse believing that "he has been possessed by a European spirit" (TI 475). Pran himself having become the vessel for a plethora of identities, this second cave is the place where the void indicates his own, personal emptiness, the impossibility for him to materialise as one identity or another. Carried into "the body of the earth" (TI 473), placed in a clay mould in the same

way as his parents, whose bodies were re-formed by clay, Pran's re-birth depends on a journey into the depths of place, which highlights his own superficiality in the process. In a 2008 interview, Kunzru commented about these caves:

I didn't intend mirroring the opening and the closing. If anything, the cave at the beginning was to open out from a mythical beginning (this womb-like, platonic space) to this very hectic life that makes up the story proper. In contrast, the end of the novel opens out into vacancy and into a blankness. At the end, Jonathan's going onwards, but there's still no sense of his direction. His future travel will be into more empty landscapes. (Aldama 2008: 12)

From "platonic space" to "empty landscapes," the motif of the cave is both a hostile and welcoming place for the reader – allowing the story to set in, and the character to emerge, it also indicates from the start the vacuity of the imperial project incarnated in Pran. Rather than extensively mapping the territories of Empire, *The Impressionist* looks at the gaping void it has "fostered" not only in the Empire's understanding of the places it colonised, but also in the identities of those who were born from it. On the one hand, the caves can be read as symbolising "a crucible or chrysalis where the rigidities of imperial structurings are annihilated" (Childs and Green 2013: 77). Yet the void, as Edward Casey contends, can also be read as "already on the way to place" (2011: 21), making it possible to keep conceiving of these places and of their future becomings.

Another perception of becoming can be found in the representations of apocalypse and decadence present in Hamid's and Kunzru's novels. While the representation of place as matrix evokes a beginning through place, the notion of crisis and the representations associated to it suggest a terrifying ending of place, which the narratives address and tweak.

6.3.2. Places in crisis? Apocalypse and decadence

When asked in a 2022 interview about his choice to describe what has been called the "refugee crisis" in *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid replied: "I do believe that this thing that we call the refugee 'crisis' is partly a crisis because we don't let people move. If we did allow them to move, we might not consider it to be a crisis" (Ramzan 2022). The contentious use of the word "crisis" in this context, and in many other contexts in contemporary times – whether it is financial, or has to do with identity – can in fact reveal Hamid's position from a more directly creative standpoint. Looking at this notion of crisis together with several of Hamid's and Kunzru's works can help decipher the discursive stakes of such a notion, and the role of place in its representation. Indeed, representations of a transformative event or moment negatively

impacting societies, whether it is a temporarily critical moment or a dreaded apocalypse, are dependent on a sense of the place where it might happen. As Hamid's reflection suggests, the perception of place – in this case, of the movement between places – can impact the perception of a situation as critical and / or destructive.

In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Frank Kermode notes that “there is a myth of crisis, a very deep and complex one, which we should make more sense of if we could reduce it from the status of myth to the status of fiction” (2000: 28). Kermode further contends that “the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world” (*ibid.*). Hamid's and Kunzru's novels interact with this unconscious narrative of apocalypse, perceptible not just in how we “make sense of the world,” but most acutely in the sense of place. Through the questions of migration, of political, societal and even seasonal changes, these narratives defuse the spectacular undertones of the apocalyptic and rather display its banality, where stories of an end approaching have become a background to our imaginaries and pervaded the places we live in.

While *Exit West* is articulated around the possibility to move around the world without the hassle of border-crossing, life-threatening seafaring, and equally hazardous returns, it also depicts a world fraught with war, violence, and xenophobic hatred. Many have commented on the dual utopian/dystopian dynamics which informs the novel and its depiction of the future, (Sadaf 2020: 644; Menger 2019: 89), but *Exit West* also focuses on the ordinary present, where the most mundane experiences are unsettled by a sense of impending doom. While the “black doors” provide an overtly magic realist trick in an otherwise realistic setting, Hamid's narrator also unsettles readers by balancing the harsh semantics of crisis and apocalypse with the unassuming resilience not only of characters, but of the places they come across in their journey. The narrator first introduces Saeed and Nadia's birthplace as “a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war” (*EW* 1), which is also said to be “teetering at the edge of the abyss” (*EW* 2). Later, this notion of the “abyss” is reinforced through dramatic irony when evoking Nadia's estrangement from her family. Discussing the possibility that they might reconcile, the narrative voice informs the reader that “the impending descent of their city into the abyss would come before they realized that they had lost the chance” (*EW* 18). The crisis is therefore described dramatically as an “abyss,” a chasm irremediably swallowing the place – here, the vertical irruption of the events of war takes on a hellish turn, dramatically leading a place to its downfall.

Yet later on, this perception is nuanced as Saeed and Nadia's experiences of violence and displacement become more and more regular. While in London, facing brutal mobs at the

front door of the hotel they occupy, the characters' perception of violent events becomes more contrasted, replacing the verticality of a sudden war with the horizontality of a regular, chronological ebb and flow:

the feeling that hung over London in those days was not new to them, and they faced it not with bravery, exactly, and not with panic either, not mostly, but instead with a resignation shot through with moments of tension, with tension ebbing and flowing, and when the tension receded there was calm, the calm that is called the calm before the storm, (...) when we are compelled to pause and not act but be. (*EW* 136)

The characteristic parataxis that runs through this novel mirrors the mention of an “ebb and flow,” the juxtaposed clauses seemingly conveying the many crises that run through the place continuously. Re-evaluating the crisis as a “moment of tension,” it becomes a feature of the place and the landscape, just like the ebb and flow or even the storm. No resistance can be opposed to these natural features, which make the crisis a moment of existential questioning – the crisis calls for being in place, instead of attempting to act, in vain, against time. The ending of the novel, where the characters have re-settled with other refugees in Marin County, near San Francisco, echoes this relativist approach to the language of crisis, and its biblical or otherwise mythical undertones. The narrator thus rejects the overwhelming evocative power of apocalypse, proposing other imaginaries as a way out of this pattern:

The locality around Marin seemed to be rousing itself from a profound and collective low in those days. It has been said that depression is a failure to imagine a plausible desirable future for oneself, and, not just in Marin, but in the whole region, in the Bay Area, and in many other places, too, places both near and far, the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and (...) plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief. (*EW* 215-216)

Comparing the drastic event, the apocalypse, with the more familiar realities of depression, the narrative suggests that a sense of the future lies not only in the reproduction of spectacular myths but also in “plausible desirable futures,” operating what Kermode suggests in “reduc[ing] [the crisis] from the status of myth to the status of fiction” (2000: 28). The term “plausible” reconciles fiction with the ordinary, hinting that imagined futures need not be dramatically dystopian, nor bear the ideals of a traditionally enunciated utopia. This conclusion rather suggests an accommodation with change, crystallised in a shared place. Indeed, it is still the *topos* that is at stake, “the whole region” and “places both near and far.” Here, the apocalypse does not put an end to the experience of place. Rather, the “abyss” previously mentioned in the

novel becomes a springboard, and the turn to place for a new beginning helps to rise to the surface after a “collective low.”

Overall, *Exit West* takes its distance from imaginaries of the end, as demonstrated in the final chapter which comments on the “cyclical” “lives of cities” (EW 227). The refugees’ passage through the doors is also evoked as “equally like a beginning and an end,” insisting on the “opacity” of the doors on both sides (EW 98). Hamid’s frequent reluctance towards specific toponymy thus finds a counterpart in the refusal to abide by the urgent, spectacular logic of the crisis, instead preferring to leave a door open towards a dialogic sense of the contemporary. In that sense, *Exit West* exemplifies Giorgio Agamben’s definition of contemporariness, understood as “a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it” (2009: 41). Keeping a distance, taking a step back from the events of one’s own time, also requires an awareness of place and of its potential to foster resilient, renewable imaginaries. In fact, *Exit West* could be read as an instance of what Anahid Nersessian calls “utopian minimalism,” which questions the values of “hedonism” (2017:93) often associated with utopian narratives and instead proposes narratives which “adapt the cultural inheritance of utopia to suit new and urgent purposes,” in adequation with challenges of the late Anthropocene such as the mass displacement of people (Nersessian 2017: 94).

Kunzru’s evocations of political change also emphasise repetition and cyclicity, thus defusing the symbolical power that can pervade the contemporary notion of crisis. It is perhaps no coincidence that two of his “American novels” end with recent presidential elections, as if the ending of the narrative had to signal towards changes to come. Jaz, the character of *Gods Without Men* who has just experienced a crisis on a personal level, observes how “the election took over again, its frenzied culture-war tribalism leaving no room for anything else in the national consciousness” (GWM 339). In its mention of “culture wars” and tribal reflexes, the passage hints at the sense of division and violence which hovers over such events. The presidential election takes up all the “room” in public space, while he finds his neighbours “imagining change they could believe in, canvassing and putting up posters” (GWM 337). In *Red Pill*, it is the 2016 election of Donald Trump which forms the last pages of the narratives. The narrator and protagonist also finds his wife and friends spreading posters and leaflets, holding public meetings to support the Democrats. Upon witnessing the alternate outcome happening, and after having spent weeks chasing a far-right leader across Europe in the hope of mitigating the spread of his ideas, the narrator reflects: “Maybe everything I hoped about the world, and hoped to bring about in it, is doomed to fail” (RP 282). Yet the protagonist and his

wife end up “imagining escape routes” (RP 284). In both cases, imaginaries of the end are confronted to imaginaries of “change” and of “routes,” gesturing towards the mobility of societies despite and beyond narratives of the end.

Through “culture wars” and personal values, these passages also call upon the notion of civilisational change, whether it involves a “clash” – in the famous and contentious words of Samuel Huntington – or a crisis of sorts (Huntington 2011).⁹⁹ In fact, Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s narratives sometimes play with the legacy of the decadence. In his volume on the Victorian “Fin de Siècle,” an artistic and philosophical movement which embraced the idea of decadence, Stephen Arata explains that these fears have historically been perceived as “the collapse of culture, the weakening of national might” (1996: 1). Hari Kunzru addresses this trope upfront in a story from the 2005 collection *Noise*, called “Memories of the Decadence.” In that story, a first-person narrator recalls an unspecified past period when a reasonable community started behaving more and more irrationally and engaged, one after the other, in a series of strange hobbies and pleasures. By de-historicising this decadent episode, and endowing it with the fable-like tone of the short story, Kunzru parodies the illusion of an ending that frequently infuses the sense of history in contemporary times. The story ironically comes full circle when the characters start thinking of a “new” decadence, having reached a time of quiet and peace:

Yet one day the Decadence ended. We began to be moderate in all things.
(...) We are content. And yet ... And yet there is something stale in the air.
Citizens whisper in the social clubs. They say that it cannot last. (N 36)

Feeling the air, feeling “seized with a peculiar sense of potential” (N 29), the characters in this story behave along the lines of the *Kairos*, the moment that passes by and comes to exist because it is named or grasped, and therefore embodied in some way. Oscillating between *chaos* and *Kairos*, the decadence conveys the charged sense of a change in time and space, impacting the relation of subjects with the contemporary.

Mohsin Hamid also questions the relevance of the sense of decadence. For the writer, there is no such thing as a civilisation – he calls for the invention of “a world that is post-civilization, and hence infinitely more civilized” (2015: xviii). Indeed, in the introduction to his collection of essays *Discontent and its Civilizations*, he explains:

We are told to forget the sources of our discontent because something more important is at stake: the fate of our civilization.
Yet what are these civilizations, these notions of Muslim-ness, Western-ness, European-ness, American-ness that attempt to describe where, and with

⁹⁹ *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* was initially published in 1996.

whom, we belong? They are illusions: arbitrarily drawn constructs with porous, brittle and overlapping borders. (2015: xvi)

Questioning the foundations of civilisations along the lines of nations and religions, Hamid once again resorts to spatial metaphors and to the question of borders. Gesturing towards Huntington's theory of a "clash of civilisations" between the so-called East and West, Hamid debunks the debates that have permeated the turn of the twenty-first century and resonated in the climate of the events of 9/11 and the "War on Terror" launched by the United States.

This background is of course most prescient in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the sense of a culture war pervades the narrative thematically and structurally, particularly after 9/11 takes place in the diegesis. The notion of a decadence appears notably as associated to certain places, as suggested in an exchange between Changez, the protagonist, and his New York manager Jim:

"(...) You're blood brought from some part of the body that the species doesn't need any more. The tailbone. Like me. We came from places that were wasting away." (...) There was a certain ring of truth to his words, but I was uncomfortable with the idea that the place I came from was condemned to atrophy. (*TRF* 110-11)

Here, the notion of place is connoted culturally and socially, as Jim amalgamates his underprivileged background in the United States with Changez's roots in Pakistan. Jim's comparison with the "tailbone" bears disturbingly eugenic undertones, proposing that someone like Changez is not supposed to be on the winning side in the survival of the fittest. Changez as for him associates the idea that his birthplace was "wasting away" with a form of "atrophy," which is particularly telling in the case of a young nation such as Pakistan – the term denotes a stunted development, a failure to last durably.

Yet the narrator turns this accusation back towards the United States, reflecting regularly on the nation's "dangerous nostalgia" (*TRF* 130) which appears in the aftermath of 9/11. Looking at flags and inflammatory speeches about national superiority, Changez re-evaluates his perception of the United States as a place of progress: "I had always thought of America as a nation that looked forward; for the first time I was struck by its determination to look back" (*TRF* 130-131). For the narrator, this growing nationalism is reconsidered as another sign of "atrophy," or at least, as a decline of sorts. Resorting again to the "status of fiction" borne by the discourse of crisis (Kermode 2000: 28), Changez reflects on the golden age which American nationalism proposes to return to: "I felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether – if it could indeed be animated – it contained a part written for someone

like me” (TRF 131). The discourse of a nation in crisis is therefore two-dimensional, and excludes those who do not fit its historical narrative.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* but also elsewhere in Hamid’s fiction, defusing a sense of crisis is also operated with the mention of seasons. Changez thus tweaks the representation of 9/11 as an apocalypse by telling his American interlocutor: “September has always seemed to me a month of beginnings, a *spring* of sorts” (TRF 187). A few pages later, he also remembers the first anniversary of 9/11, and re-situates its symbolical importance by comparing it with the geopolitical consequences of the “War on Terror” in his own region of the world, recalling how it contributed to rekindling the Indo-Pak conflict:

September was deemed to be the best month for battle, since the mountain passes of Kashmir might be closed by snow as early as October. So we waited as our September ticked by – little noticed by the media in your country, which was focused at the time on the first anniversary of the attacks on New York and Washington – and then (...) the likelihood of a catastrophe that could have claimed tens of millions of lives receded. Of course, humanity’s respite was brief: six months later the invasion of Iraq would be under way. (TRF 202)

The abstract sense of an impending catastrophe is here counterbalanced with the more concrete obstacles represented by the snow. In a climate that is literally and metaphorically cold, the narrator remembers “*our* September,” re-appropriating the symbol represented by this month, and inscribing it in the physical and political landscape of his country. The narrator is also intent on placing the attacks in “New York and Washington,” which, rather than a synecdoche, form a counterpoint to the ongoing nationalist discourse about “America.” Ultimately, it is “humanity” at large which is at stake with the invasion of Iraq, echoing in that sense the “post-civilisation” order which Hamid calls for and suggesting the widespread effects of war, on both the attacker and the attacked.

Just like the language of cyclicity and of the ordinary discussed above, the motif of seasons also contributes to questioning the paradigm of the crisis. In Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, seasons form part of the novel’s ecological writing, with a narrative that unfolds just before and during the monsoon. Even if the narrative is told from multiple perspectives – that of Daru, the protagonist, but also his friends and relatives, interrogated at his trial – all keep referring to the scorching heat that Lahore is experiencing at the time of the narrated events. The impacts of the season on the place and its people crystallise all the tensions that are under way in this city – an impending nuclear war with India, but also the car accident that leads to Daru’s trial, or

the betrayal Daru enacts by having an affair with his best friend's wife. Rather than attaching the sense of an impending catastrophe to all these events, it is the monsoon which allows the narrative to convey a sense of unease and irregularity. Suggesting that not even the weather can be taken for granted on the eve of the twenty-first century, the narrative proposes that place and its climate are just as critical as the many events that take place.

The first-person narration by Daru regularly provides comments on the heat and on the sense of discomfort he feels. Comparing the monsoon to the particular moment of the diegesis and the many anxieties of the period, he comments: "All my life the arrival of the monsoon has been a happy occasion, ending the heat of high summer and making Lahore green again. But this year I see it as a time of festering, not rebirth" (*MS* 265). The hushed sounds of this sentence betray the sweltering heat that starts to pervade the character's thoughts, and form a haze – a smoke, as the title of the novel suggests – around his perception of contemporary events. The idea that "festering" has replaced renewal, that time is upside down and events do not run their normal course, is again reflected in a discussion between Daru and Manucci, his house servant:

'What is it?' I yell.

'Saab, an andhi is coming,' he says.

I get up and pull open the curtains. It's dark, like late evening. 'Shut all the windows,' I say. 'I'm going outside.'

Lahore could use an andhi, especially if it brings rain. There's too much dust everywhere, and it's too damn hot too early this summer. (*MS* 121)

In the topsy-turvy order of the *andhi* – or dust storm – the morning turns into night, and the character counter-intuitively goes outside while asking for the house to be locked. The season does not behave normally either – the evocation of a hot weather that comes "too early" is reminiscent of climate deregulation. While conveying the tense political situation Lahore finds itself in during that summer, evocations of the upcoming monsoon and the *andhi* also revisit the trope of the looming apocalypse through the uncontrollable yet familiar vagaries of the climate in this place. In her review of *Moth Smoke* for *The New York Review of Books*, Anita Desai praised Mohsin Hamid for the change he proposed in comparison with other South Asian writers, noting in particular Hamid's talent for describing the *zamana*, the contemporary age:

There is a wonderfully eloquent word in Urdu for the times, the age: it is *zamana*. To hear an elder take a puff at his hookah and sigh, "Such is our *zamana*," (...) is to hear a world of comment on our day, our history, the passage of years and of human experience, in a way not quite conveyed by its equivalent in other languages (the German *Zeitgeist* comes closest in meaning but has not the same intimacy or emotion). *Zamana* is a word we use a good deal on the Indian subcontinent where time moves slowly and time moves inexorably, inviting reflection rather than reaction. Its concept hovers over a

line in Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke*: "I know that no place has longer afternoons than this place, Lahore." (Desai 2000)¹⁰⁰

In fact, the line quoted by Desai appears in the first pages of the novel, as if to indicate the pace of the plot from the onset. While the form of the novel traditionally imposes a condensed, self-contained sequence of events, Hamid plays with rhythm in this novel, returning regularly to Lahore, the place where it all happens, and which dictates the sense of time (and weather) felt by the characters. In contrast with the language of crisis, *Moth Smoke* indeed suggests "reflection rather than reaction," and an adaptation to the demands of place. Surrounding the main plot with the story of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and his sons, the narrative structure also re-situates this contemporary story of Lahoris in the waiting within the long history of the subcontinent. The *zamana* thus brings with it a disjointed sense of time, but does not preclude tension and fear – as Anita Desai also notes, the novel brings with it a sense of "the constant threat of an explosion – of population, of crime, of the nuclear bomb, some kind of terrible explosion" (Desai 2000). As will be explored in the next section, the evocation of nuclear power in novels like *Moth Smoke*, but also in Hari Kunzru's novels, contributes to conjoining the writing of event with that of place.

6.3.3. Nuclear imaginaries and the atomisation of place

In a now famous essay about the role of nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pak relationship, published in 1998, writer Arundhati Roy denounced what she deemed to be "The end of imagination" brought about by the nuclear threat, and which authorities in India and Pakistan seemed to be overlooking in the face-off that opposed them in that particular year. In this text, Roy attempts to debunk the abstraction ascribed to the nuclear threat, often used as a political symbol, and instead describes the very concrete, material consequences of a nuclear attack on the population and the earth. Roy writes: "If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself" (2016: 46). To Roy, the earth at large, not just the place one lives in, is at stake, as well as the body: "The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no man, no god has the right to put it there. We're radioactive already, and the war hasn't even begun (2016: 50). Because the nuclear weapon has been used continuously as a verbal threat, its capacity for annihilating people and places seems to have been progressively lost in abstraction. Conceiving

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, fellow Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam chose to name his fictional city Zamana in his 2017 *The Golden Legend*.

of the bomb as highly tangible re-situates contemporary subjectivities at the centre of this abstraction. In *The Fate of Place*, Casey notes how the thought – the imagination, as Roy terms it – of nuclear annihilation is central to shaping the sense of place:

certain devastating phenomena of this century bring with them, by aftershock as it were, a revitalized sensitivity to place. Precisely in its capacity to eliminate all perceptible places from a given region, the prospect of nuclear annihilation heightens awareness of the unreplaceability of these places, their singular configuration and unrepeatable history. (2011: xiii)

Contrary to other “devastating phenomena” provoking an “aftershock,” nuclear destruction is often conceived of as a “prospect,” a possible future event. Yet as Arundhati Roy argues, imagining this event entails imagining annihilation itself, what it means for the places at stake and their inhabitants. Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* narrates precisely the events Roy refers to, in the spring and summer of 1998, when India and Pakistan competed with each other with a face-off of nuclear tests. The presence of nuclear power in the South Asian imaginary since the early 2000s has been so pervasive that Michaela M. Henry identifies a body of Pakistani “nuclear novels,” among which is also Kamila Shamsie’s 2009 *Burnt Shadows* (2019: 69).

Moth Smoke addresses this pervasiveness and the movement from abstraction to concrete experience, by having the nuclear tests progressively become more and more tangible. The protagonist Daru and his friend Ozi first laugh at the possibility of a nuclear fight, talking about “nuk[ing]” Lahore and what Pakistani city would be destroyed first (*MS* 108). The event of the nuclear test in India is evoked casually: “Ozi comes in and (...) tells me the neighbors have gone nuclear” (*MS* 106). The tone of the narrative mocks the seemingly parodic contest which the conflict has become, and the lack of awareness about the consequences. For instance, one of Daru’s dealer friends, Raider, tells him there have been parties to celebrate the nuclear tests, which Daru immediately transforms into a mock-apocalyptic narrative, calling them “Armageddon parties” (*MS* 151). The fictionalization of the nuclear is further enacted when Murad Badshah, Daru’s rickshaw driver friend, hears his employees talk about the televised broadcast of the event:

‘What was it like?’ asks a mechanic.

‘They did it under a mountain,’ explains sweaty nose. ‘The mountain trembled like an earthquake. Dust flew into the sky. And the rock turned dark red, like the color of blood.’

‘How would you know?’ asks Sindhi cap. ‘You only have black-and-white television.’

‘But it’s a good one. You can almost see colors.’ (*MS* 165)

The rickshaw driver's account of the event again resorts to the language of the apocalypse, with an emphatic tone enunciating one chaotic scourge after the other (an earthquake, a dust storm, rocks turning into blood). The playful banter that ensues stands in sharp contrast with the gravity of the nuclear tests, emphasising the absurdity of this passive yet destructive conflict, but also its inherently pre-determined, pre-narrated dimension, even when the event has occurred underground and was therefore hidden from view. Discussions of "nuking" or "going nuclear" equally demonstrate how the reality of nuclear destruction has been superseded by the meaningless repetition of discursive tropes. Murad Badshah, however, is acutely aware of the risks associated with nuclear threat, and brings the discussion back to its physical reality, including the presence of the bomb "in the body" as suggested in Arundhati Roy's essay:

'We had to protect ourselves.'
'My roof protects me,' says Murad Badshah. 'My full belly protects me. You boys think we've done a great thing. But you'll see. Difficult times are ahead.'
(MS 167)

In Murad's words, protection from harm is physically inscribed into place, through one's house or the access to food resources. Rather than through a potential for self-defence, protection is redefined in terms of immediate physical safety, relocating the nuclear threat in relation to place and particularly the "sensitivity to place" it implies (Casey 2011: xiii). In *Moth Smoke*, the haze of mystery which surrounds the image of the nuclear cloud is thus reconsidered from the concrete perspective of Lahore, Hamid's birth city and a frontier city on the brink of an explosive conflict. The characters' contrasted negotiations of the event, which either construct or bust the narrative of nuclear superiority, betray the complex mental mapping of this border and of national sentiment in the lingering Indo-Pak conflict.

Imaginariness of the nuclear also pepper Hari Kunzru's novels, which engage with the role of the nuclear threat in the narratives of fear that have pervaded post-war Western societies. In *Gods Without Men*, located in the Californian Mojave Desert, Kunzru creates a character who is a spiritual guide resembling George van Tassel, the inventor of the Integratron, a building supposed to facilitate contact with UFO forms of life. Van Tassel was notoriously anti-nuclear, claiming that UFO messages had warned him of the threats posed by nuclear explosions (Stringfellow 2018). In Kunzru's novel, the community gathered around this figure in the 1950s and 1960s is notably perceived through the gaze of Dawn, a young woman who has joined them to escape her nearby town and her toxic family. Dawn has mentally integrated the fear of nuclear threat, among many others:

It turned out there were many sources of negative energy vibrations, including:

War
the H-bomb
cities
greed
artificial fibers
the financial markets
television
needle drugs
plastics
fear rays
other dark side weapons

Of all these the H-bomb was the worst. Not just because it was nuclear. Because it used hydrogen. Splitting hydrogen atoms threatened the life-force. It was in air and water, part of the Earth's very soul. (*GWM* 160)

Presented in the midst of a jumble of fears imposed on the gullible character of Dawn, the nuclear threat is at once intangible and highly material, as threatening as “plastics” and “needle drugs” but also categorised under the mystic label of “dark side weapons.” Here it is hydrogen, the very matter of the bomb, which takes centre stage and gives it its name. The passage hinges on the language of pseudo-scientific knowledge inherent to cult discourse, entangling hydrogen with “the Earth's very soul” and the esoteric undertones of a “life-force.” Resorting to a personification of “the Earth,” the passage also resonates with the mentions of Native American lore and beliefs elsewhere in the narrative, as they are also entangled with the history of the Mojave Desert. In the same way as in Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, the mention of the bomb is thus shrouded in a myriad of subtexts representing catastrophes and apocalypse, including when Dawn is made to imagine “a tidal wave rushing across the desert” (*GWM* 160). The desert, a place where nuclear tests have historically taken place due to its de facto barrenness, is here made to concentrate many potential fears and presents itself as a blank page where they can be imagined, or perhaps escaped – the UFO cult's desire to escape is in fact oriented vertically, towards the sky, rather than along the lines of the desert.

In *My Revolutions*, fears of the nuclear are on the contrary placed very centrally, at the heart of the *polis* where debates and collective action take place. While it discusses the catalysation of those fears, the novel also presents forms of resistance to the nuclear, understood as a political mistake and a threat to humanity at large. This is in fact how the political commitment of protagonist Mike (formerly Chris) begins, as he starts acting in the Campaign

for Nuclear Disarmament, a British organisation which formed in London in 1957. For young Chris, fears of “the Bomb” (always capitalised) begin as he listens to the radio in his bedroom, hearing about the nuclear threat. To him, this fear is associated with loss and the changing relation with place that would ensue:

Each time you thought of anything, anything at all, you discovered that it, too, was part of *everything*, which was what would blow up if they dropped the Bomb. I tried out survival techniques in my imagination. Ducking, crawling under the kitchen table, running down into the cellar we didn't have. Even the tube trains went above ground at Ruislip. Where would we go? (*MR* 49, italics in the original)

As young Chris attempts to map out the world he lives in, “the Bomb” destabilises the scale of his environment, moving between his neighbourhood in London's Ruislip to an “everything” that has seemingly no bounds, and even extending to an imaginary cellar. In this fractured sense of place, movement seems to be offered as an antidote, with movements of “ducking” and “crawling” as attempts to occupy space differently. The possibility of the nuclear event ultimately presents itself to Chris as an annihilation of *all* places, wondering if there would be any “where” left, if it should take place.

For Chris, the solution therefore lies in imagination strategies, and politics seem to appear as one such strategy. Joining a protest with the CND, he remembers that for him, those who were aware of the realities of a nuclear threat were the ones having a strong imagination, where imagination was understood as an acute sense the world beyond one's personal comfort: “I marched to Trafalgar Square, part of a crowd (...) who felt what I did; who had the imagination to look beyond their never-had-it-so-good daily lives to the threat that lay just over the horizon” (*MR* 55). In contrast with the reduced scale of the consumerist lifestyle, Chris finds boundaries that he can understand in the form of a “crowd” and a “horizon,” immaterial limits which however seem more concrete with regard to the nuclear threat than the reality proposed by property ownership in the suburbs. The character's commitment effectively begins to constitute a barrier between himself and his family, who do not understand his politics. When they discover his engagement with the CND, a dramatic row ensues and Chris recalls: “That day was the end of something in our family. I couldn't give it a name, but after that it had gone” (*MR* 58). With a mentally ill mother and a father and brother turned against him, the evolution of Chris's world thus leads to an atomization of the nuclear family, as if the nuclear threat had pervaded every aspect of his life.

In their narrations of the nuclear, both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru question the imaginaries of place implied by an event that aims first and foremost at destroying it. Whether considered as a threat looming over the “horizon,” “underground,” as in Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*, or in “air and water,” as in *Gods Without Men*, the nuclear seems to constantly move to every corner of the spatial imaginary, remaining unseizable yet always maintaining a powerful symbolic hold over the sense of place. In a 1984 article, critic Frances Ferguson theorised the “Nuclear Sublime,” adapting Edmund Burke’s aesthetic theory to the recurring presence of the nuclear in contemporary narratives. Comparing nuclear imaginaries to the disturbing and fearful feelings Burke remarked in the experience of romantic art, Ferguson explains that “[t]he nuclear sublime (...) operates much like most other versions of the sublime, in that it imagines freedom to be threatened by a power that is consistently mislocated” (1984: 9). In their contemporary narratives, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru play on this “mislocation,” showing how narratives of the nuclear will always somehow be in the wrong place, if only because they occur before, after, or elsewhere than the time and place of the explosion, but also because the overuse of the nuclear as a political threat has partly turned it into an unseizable signifier.

The cognitive challenges posed by the nuclear have also been examined by philosopher Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Conceiving of the nuclear bomb as one such “hyperobject,” Morton points to what he calls its “nonlocal” quality, stemming from his contention that “[l]ocalities are abstractions” (Morton 2013: 47). A nonlocal object is one that exceeds the particular and cannot be found in one’s immediate environment (2013: 54). In the case of Hiroshima, for instance, Morton remarks that “[e]ach story [about this event] is told in a narrative present that is necessarily different from the moment in which the bomb hit. The constraints of human physicality and memory displace the bomb” (2013: 49). In a recent interview, Hari Kunzru noted how Morton’s hyperobjects are of interest to his own thought, particularly the notion “that we’re enmeshed in these systems that are essentially beyond our ability to calculate or comprehend” (Shaw and Upstone 2023: 193-194).

Both the aesthetic of “mislocation” and the “nonlocal” quality of the nuclear event are in fact revealing of the mutability and mobility of events, which constantly circulate and form unexpected encounters in/with place(s). This will be examined in the next section through the examples of simultaneity, rumour and opportunity.

6.4. From taking place to taking part: moving agencies

In *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime*, Bruno Latour examines the notion of “geopolitics,” where “geo” is often taken as “the *framework* in which political action occurs” (2018, 42, italics in the original). Drawing from this prefix, Latour extends it to the sense of history, which according to him, would have become so intrinsically spatial and three-dimensional that it becomes a “geohistory”:

If the Terrestrial is no longer the framework for human action, it is because it *participates* in that action. Space is no longer that of the cartographers, with their latitudinal and longitudinal grids. Space has become an agitated history in which we are participants among others, reacting to other reactions. It seems that we are landing in the thick of *geohistory*. (2018: 42, italics in the original)

Echoing the reconfigured “agencies” which nurture Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and subsequent writings (1999; 2005), this proposition implies that historical events are utterly entangled with the spatial. Latour’s mention of “other reactions” enlarges the spectrum of possible human and non-human agencies forming an event, or rather, *taking part* in it – in the French version of Latour’s text, “*participate*” appears as “*prend[re] part*” (2017: 58). In this perspective, space and place(s), “no longer the framework,” become an active component in the formation of historical events – *taking place* means that place itself *takes part* in events.

This understanding of events echoes Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of the event, conceived in Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* as “the part that eludes its actualization in everything that happens. The event is not the state of affairs. It is actualized in a state of affairs” (1994: 156).¹⁰¹ In Deleuze and Guattari’s conception, an event is double: it escapes physical actualisation, but also materialises in discourse, in “a state of affairs.” To Jean-Jacques Lecercle, this conception of the event is particularly attuned to the work of reading literature – “it incites us to consider not the event that is in the text, but the event of the text, the text as event” (2005: 6).¹⁰² Conceiving of “the text as event” might also mean that a novel itself *takes part* in the shaping of events.

¹⁰¹ The French version of this quotation is discussed in Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s “Il y a événement et événement,” *Polysèmes 7* : 2005, 4. “C’est ce qu’on appelle l’Événement, ou la part dans tout ce qui arrive de ce qui échappe à sa propre actualisation. L’événement n’est pas du tout l’état de choses, il s’actualise dans un état de choses (...).” Lecercle quotes from this edition : Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1991, 147-148.

¹⁰² My translation. In the original : “Le concept d’événement-Deleuze nous incite (...) à considérer non pas l’événement dans le texte, mais l’événement du texte, le texte comme événement.” *Op.cit.*, 6.

In the last section of this chapter, I propose to examine examples of tropes which are common to Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions and which help read anew the question of agency and the causality of events. With the term "agency," I refer to a question phrased as follows by Rita Felski: when looking at the encounters that take place in the space of the novel, "[w]ho is setting what in motion?" (2020: 65). The narration in these novels operates a displacement of authoritative discourse, re-situating the active role of place – of subjective location, resources, movement and mobility – in the making of recent history. The novels suggest the mattering and forming potentialities of narrated events, which constantly *make* places and take shape as they are told. The first development is dedicated to the notion of simultaneity, considering the writers' renditions of an era where all places are supposedly connected at all times, and events are made available to all. In the second section I wish to examine the motif of the rumour, a diffuse force seemingly devoid of agency, which keeps recurring in both writers' works and permeates the writing of place.

6.4.1. "It was all connected": pantopia, simultaneity and awareness

In his 1995 *Les Messages à Distance*, French philosopher Michel Serres theorised the notion of "pantopia," or what he believed to be a contemporary form of utopia whereby "all places [are] in each place and each place in all places, centres and circumferences, in a global maintenance" (1995: 22).¹⁰³ Such a utopia is of course not detached from globalisation and a perception of a globe that is becoming homogeneous, "all places" becoming the same as one. For Emily Apter in *Against World Literature*, this can be best expressed in one of her "untranslatables,"¹⁰⁴ an expression she calls "oneworldedness," and which to her, "often masks its identity as another name for 'America'" (2014: 126), pointing "more narrowly to a delirious aesthetics of systematicity; to the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise that 'everything is connected'" (2014: 127).

Hamid's and Kunzru's fiction propose narrative forms and aesthetic modes which engage with this problematic simultaneity and connectedness, articulating the sense of connected places with the multiplicity of discourses on immediate events – what Marc Augé

¹⁰³ My translation. The original reads: "tous les lieux en chaque lieu et chaque lieu en tous les lieux, centres et circonférences, entretien global (...)." Michel Serres, *Les Messages à Distance*. Montréal: les Editions Fides, 1995, 22.

¹⁰⁴ For more on "untranslatables," see also *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, eds. Barbara Cassin, Steven Rendall, Emily Apter. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

calls an “overabundance” of places and of events in the contemporary age (1992: 55).¹⁰⁵ In attempting to describe this dynamic, their narratives complexify and counterbalance the premise that “everything is connected,” re-adjusting it to the different roles and agencies of people and places in these effects of simultaneity. In his 1967 “Des espaces autres,” translated in 1984, Michel Foucault considered simultaneity as one facet of an upcoming shift from the prevalence of time to a focus on space: “The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (1984 *n.p.*) In their efforts to convey the “side-by-side” and “the dispersed,” Hamid’s and Kunzru’s respective novels seem to form part of what Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges and Emilio Sauri consider as “literature’s efforts at exploding the notion of a singular contemporary” (Brouillette *et.al.*, 2017: xviii), and in the process, the notion of a singular, homogeneous sense of place. By constantly shifting viewpoints and gazes, these narratives propose a poetics where the unity of the novel is made to include multiple voices, multiple *narrative* agencies, as well as comment on the agencies which form contemporary experiences of place.

As developed earlier in this work, Kunzru’s *Transmission* is particularly efficient at untangling the material realities of globalisation, displaying at the same time the highly unequal experiences of hyper-connectivity and the very tangible downsides that a seemingly immaterial digital world can imply. Simultaneity and connectedness are also integral to a novel like *Gods Without Men*, which critic Douglas Coupland famously called “translit,” a literary form which “seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader’s mind” and “inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present” (2012 *n.p.*). Yet this to-and-fro between different places and times, and the subsequent “narrative traction” it operates, does not seem to respond to Michel Serres’s definition of pantopia – an amalgamation of all places into one, and of one place into all others – as it rather seeks to foster an awareness of specific, distinct experiences of/in place. Commenting on Coupland’s assertion, Kunzru explained in an interview that he was interested in knowing “how completely different the world seems from different places and perspectives” (*HK ITW* 2019).

The writing of simultaneity in Kunzru’s novel thus often translates as an awareness of one’s place *and* of what happens in other places. In *Gods Without Men*, this awareness is twofold. First, it manifests in the characters’ relation with the desert, which often entails an

¹⁰⁵ My translation from the French “surabondance”.

uncanny sense of connectedness with other human and non-human presences in this peculiar place. But it is also found in the depiction of Raj's disappearance in 2008, as the boy's story is presented as one of many events occupying the American media frenzy of the early twentieth century. Jaz, his father, is staying in a hotel room as the detectives continue to look for the boy. For Jaz, the event of Raj's disappearance progressively leads to feeling besieged by events:

Now that he was sensitized to obscenity, it seemed to jump at him everywhere. He didn't even have to leave his hotel room; (...) it just shoved its way right in. The newspaper hanging in a plastic bag from the door handle was full of it; a little girl shot at a Baghdad checkpoint; then shoppers blown up in a street market. (...) But what was new? The war had always been going on somewhere. It just changed faces and locations. There wasn't anything you could do. So why did he sit on the floor with the *Weekend Edition* spread out around him, tears streaming down his face? (*GWM* 325)

The siege Jaz is submitted to translates in the multiplication of fricatives, describing the events “**sh**oving” their way in, including the girl being “**sh**ot,” the “**sh**oppers,” the “**s**pread” newspapers and the “**s**treaming” tears. For Jaz, the sense of the simultaneity and connectivity of events is highly oppressive, even if contained within a newspaper symbolically placed on his door. Pushing open the door of information, the character is made to question his own position and agency – his own *place* – in these events. The cliché notion that “there [isn't] anything you [can] do” manifests the common attempt at self-persuasion when facing an overflow of events, an excess of awareness which challenges one's ethos and capacity for action. Yet the boundaries erected around the man in his hotel room are symbolically superseded when the physical boundaries of his body overflow with tears. The hermeneutic and emotional excess presented by these world events thus result in the equation of connectedness, which seems to assemble all conundrums: “If the world was made of signs, why couldn't he read it? He had to be some kind of fool. All he could say for sure was that everything was connected – Raj, Walter, the desert” (*GWM* 331). Associating his autistic son Raj, the desert, and Walter, his complex software analysing financial data, Jaz associates everything he does not understand into a connection, suggesting that inter-relation and comprehensive awareness can form a pathway to understanding.

In Kunzru's earlier novel *My Revolutions*, the premise of connectedness is made to serve the protagonist's activism. In this narrative, ideological commitment meets geographical awareness in a kind of *Internationale* of events, whereby knowing what takes place somewhere else is a token of political relevance. In their meetings, the activist characters frequently discuss the political events unfolding in other parts of the world. This also happens when they are interviewed on Trafalgar Square after a protest:

The reporter, a small wiry man with a prominent nose and a flat-topped scrub of sandy hair, suggested that ‘all this,’ meaning the march, was ‘just a substitute for sorting out your problems closer to home.’ Ken, blindsided, couldn’t think of anything to say and the newsman pressed home his advantage: ‘Isn’t it easier to criticize America than to do something about injustice here?’

I interrupted, trying to explain that it was all connected, that the differences between the Viet Cong and poor blacks in Mississippi and factory workers in Bradford were artificial (...). (MR 31-32)

Here as in *Gods Without Men*, the narrative voice is made to interact with a discursive trope – the premise that raising awareness on suffering or trouble in other places is an escapist means of avoiding action. The reporter’s use of subjective reference markers – “your problems,” “home” – successfully destabilises the activists’ sense of place and surrounds them with a different mental geography – significantly, the character feels “blindsided,” which evokes physical restriction as much as a cognitive stalemate. Ultimately, the protagonist Chris returns to the idea of connection, countering the practical issue raised by the journalist with his sense of global geopolitics. This sense reappears later on in the novel when Chris describes the different activist groups they have connected with: “we were now part of something much larger than ourselves, an international network with nodes in Frankfurt, Milan, Beirut, Bilbao” (MR 230). Incidentally, the terms appear almost similarly when Jaz, in *Gods Without Men*, hears his colleague Cy Bachman declare that his complex software Walter is “part of something larger than itself” (GWM 138). This synecdochic mode of thinking thus betrays a perception of the global where connection is not just a practical reality, but entails a redefinition of one’s sense of self and of place.

Hari Kunzru’s fictions are indeed pervaded by this idea of knowing about other places and other experiences, but also by the recognition that experience is always partial. In Kunzru’s narratives, any pretence at universality associated with the novel form is superseded by a more nuanced model of awareness, where the novel, as a “dirty, messy, baggy thing” (HK ITW 2018) always attempts to include the particular.¹⁰⁶ Understanding other places forms part of this awareness – as Adam Kirsch notes about what he calls the “global novel,” such a fiction does not take global connectedness for granted, but rather resorts to it “as a theme by which place is mediated” (qtd in Nicol 2023: 104). Returning to Douglas Coupland’s categorisation of Kunzru’s work as “translit,” which fosters “narrative traction in the reader’s mind” (2012 *n.p.*), one could perhaps contend that this “narrative traction” does not so much lean towards an

¹⁰⁶ Kunzru’s use of this phrase, which re-appears in his 2019 interview with Stephen Piccarella, is probably a thinly veiled reference to Henry James’s famous definition of novels as “large, loose, baggy monsters.”

escapist aesthetics but instead invites to an increased presence to contemporary events and places. In *The Poetics and Ethics of Attention in Contemporary British Narrative* (which does not include Kunzru's fiction), Jean-Michel Ganteau describes how the writing of attention can lead to a repositioning of readers' own relations with the coordinates of space and time:

Contiguity, proximity, immediacy and "presential enthrallment," all such items point at a situatedness in relation to the object and other subjects of attention that inheres in the reader's own embodiment and thereby resonates in temporal and spatial terms. (2023: 171)

Jean-Michel Ganteau quotes metalepsis as one method used by writers to provoke a sense of "temporal and spatial proximity released by the effects of contiguity" (2023: 170), and which indeed transpires through Hari Kunzru's works – as exemplified in the synecdochic motifs quoted above – but also in the displacements operated in Mohsin Hamid's fiction.

Hamid's *Exit West* is perhaps the most revealing example of a writing of simultaneity and connectedness. Here, the supposed utopia of a world-scale "pantopia," where all places merge into one and vice-versa, is manifested through the motif of the black doors and the smooth movement from one place to another. While some have cast suspicion on this trope for being reductive in terms of specifically located experiences (Goyal 2020), and playing out according to the homogenising dynamics of cultural globalisation, it could also be read in light of an event's ability to *take place*, metaphorically and physically. Indeed, the event of the refugees' arrival in different places can be understood together with what historian François Hartog calls "the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous" (2021: 436). Hartog uses this expression to describe historical encounters where conflicting perceptions of the passing of time were confronted, for instance in colonial encounters in the Americas and the Caribbean. He extends this reflection to humankind's contemporary relation with time in the Anthropocene, where the Earth is now imposing its temporality on a species which seemingly lives with a different sense of the passing of time (2021: 436-437). *Exit West* echoes this idea of a disjointed simultaneity as characters who have experienced the urgency of war or other forms of violence reach more peaceful, slow-moving places, implying adjustments and sometimes drastic confrontations. This is further mirrored in the narrative structure and style, with what Vanessa Guignery calls "sudden rifts" in the diegesis between different events and places (2022: 11). As she notes, Hamid frequently resorts to conjunctions like "as" or "while" to demonstrate both "continuity and discontinuity" (2022: 18). A particularly telling instance can be found in the connection

made between Saeed and Nadia's experience in a refugee camp in Mykonos, and the events unfolding at the same time in Vienna:

As Saeed was coming down from the hill to where Nadia again sat by their tent, a young woman was leaving the contemporary art gallery she worked at in Vienna. Militants from Saeed and Nadia's country had crossed over to Vienna the previous week, and the city had witnessed massacres in the streets, the militants shooting unarmed people and then disappearing, an afternoon of carnage unlike anything Vienna had ever seen, well, unlike anything it had seen since the fighting of the previous century, and of the centuries before that (...). (*EW* 104)

Here, the displacement is operated not only through the characteristic use of grammatical conjunctions and the idea of simultaneity, but also through the implicit connection that Saeed and Nadia have with other refugees from their city, who have gone to other places. The "simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous" is particularly intricate in this example, where refugees escaping a place under siege in the East find themselves in a Western city that was peaceful until their arrival, but had actually suffered violence in "the previous century," in an implicit reference to Nazi violence in Vienna. While the arrival of the refugees triggers new and extreme forms of violence, already historicised with the phrase "an afternoon of carnage," this particular event is re-situated within the long history of the place. The passage is articulated against a subtext of circularity, intimating that violence keeps recurring at different times and in different places, which are always slightly out of joint yet connected through the experience of violence. Another level of connection is operated diegetically, since Saeed and Nadia's presence in Mykonos is but a temporary step in their journey towards the West, and the reference to simultaneous events in Vienna anticipates the violent welcome they later experience in London.

The imagery of simultaneity in this narrative is also introduced with the recurring mention of smartphones, an invaluable tool for refugees on the move. The connection between different times and places thus takes the shape of connectivity, by which, as Claire Chambers underlines, "[p]ossession or otherwise of a charged phone symbolises those who are connected to, or disconnected from, both their loved ones and the wider world" (2018 *n.p.*). The phones indeed allow for "escapism as well as information," (*ibid.*) and in that sense illustrate the paradoxes of the characters' relations to place and events. On the one hand, these devices bring other places and utopian imaginaries to the refugees; on the other, they allow them to be aware, to be *grounded*, literally and metaphorically, as this passage shows: "Nadia and Saeed sat next to each other on the ground and caught up on the news, the tumult in the world, the state of their country, the various routes and destinations migrants were taking (...)" (*EW* 103). The characters sit on the ground and purposely decide to connect with other places and events,

showing an active stance towards what takes place exactly as they are sitting there. At the same time, their phones provide pathways for an escape, “routes and destinations” which can further enact the distance they have placed between them and their city at war.

In some respects, a novel like *Exit West* thus reflects the “presential enthrallment” put forth by Jean-Michel Ganteau, and which to him, allows for an increased awareness of space and time for both character and reader. In his volume focusing on attention in contemporary fiction, Ganteau also discusses the situation of literature within what has been called the “attention economy,” or the competition entertained by media and social media companies in trying to benefit from their users’ attention (2023: 2-8). In a recent interview, Mohsin Hamid commented on the fear of refugees depicted in *Exit West* and why he chose to describe it. The writer connected it to this same concept:

The attention economy which has us all in its grips recognises that the easiest way to get our attention is to frighten us (...). In reality, the things that are likely to change our lives are things like climate change, which are happening slowly and which, for the most part, are considerably underreported compared to the smaller, apparently more dangerous immediate threats that are relentlessly being conveyed. As a result, we are very anxious, frightened citizens of the attention economy. (Khan 2021: 16)

The shifts in pace (and place) in *Exit West* can be read together with Hamid’s opposition between “immediate threats” and “slowly” moving changes, among which climate change – this is the example also given in François Hartog’s theory of distinct temporalities which paradoxically coexist, or “the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous” (2021: 436). In the interview, Hamid goes on to wonder “what mode of writing is most appropriate” in view of these competing paces, adding that the fast-paced world of the attention economy makes him “prefer the novel even more now than [he] did in the past” (Khan 2021: 19), perhaps because it allows to convey events in a more nuanced manner than the narrative forms of contemporary mass media. Kunzru voiced the same concern with attention in our 2018 interview, talking about “the quality of attention” in what he deems to be “a distracted world” (*HK ITW* 2018).

Evolving relations to attention also manifest in the role given to sources of information. In their fictions, Hamid and Kunzru not only represent simultaneous events, but they also propose narratives of events constructed by different agencies. Whereas the ideas of connectedness and simultaneity help reconsider one’s own role and place in ongoing events, the motif of the rumour shows how the circulation of an event as information contributes to its very shaping.

6.4.2. In/forming storylines: rumours shaping place(s)

In “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” Jacques Derrida argues that events are inherently singular, pointing to the aporia of language when it attempts to describe an event. Derrida notes that “the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event,” and “is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability” (2007: 446). The rumour, a type of discourse which keeps appearing in Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s works, is particularly reflective of these repetitions and transformations. For it is indeed the question of formation and *information* which is at stake in the narration of events, engaging the matter and shape of events in social space. As Bruno Latour remarks in *Reassembling the Social*, “a form is simply something which allows something else to be transported from one site to another (...). To provide a piece of information is the action of putting something into a form” (2005: 223). In Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fiction, the rumour, as a piece of in/formation progressively taking shape, also constitutes a storyline which guides readers through the many events taking place. The rumour blends in the language of the novel, progressively forming what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls a “metaleptic contamination” in *De l’interpellation* (2019: 129, my – literal – translation). The rumour moves at an intradiegetic *and* extradiegetic level, and the novel itself functions at times along the unstable patterns of rumour.

In Mohsin Hamid’s novels, rumours convey the sense of unease and instability felt by migrant subjects. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, information about the post-9/11 backlash against immigrant communities in the United States reaches the narrator Changez, and leads him to attempt reasoning in order to dissipate the rumour:

I ignored as best I could the rumors I overheard at the Pak-Punjab Deli: Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people’s houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse. I reasoned that these stories were mostly untrue; (...) and besides, those rare cases of abuse that regrettably did transpire were unlikely ever to affect me because such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year. (*TRF* 107-108)

The metaleptic dynamics of the rumour is here manifested in the movement from “Pakistani” citizens to “Muslim men,” creating unstable mental associations with the protagonist’s own identity. From cabs to mosques, shops and houses, every corner of the space occupied by Pakistani and Muslim communities is targeted by such events and permeated by the rumour. The “shadowy detention centers” function as an oxymoron, associating a “central” place with

the blurriness of secret services and unjustified detention. Changez's own reasoning operates a displacement, whereby he exchanges his national and religious identities with his place on the social scale, in a transnational order where wealthy "Princeton graduates" can escape the forced narrative of enforced power, and create their own "rags to riches" narrative. Changez goes on to evoke how he thus remained "clad in [his] armour of denial" (*TRF* 108), the martial metaphor indicating that the rumour needs to be resisted and fought against if one wishes to retain a sense of safety.

The entanglement of the rumour with physical safety also permeates *Exit West*, where rumours provide hope and fear in turn to the refugee characters. The black doors through which the characters move from one place to another are themselves introduced as a rumour at first, with the characters "investigating the possibility of securing passage through the doors, in which most people seemed now to believe, especially since any attempt to use one or keep one secret had been proclaimed by the militants to be punishable (...) by death" (*EW* 82-83). For Saeed and Nadia, the reality of the rumour is made brutally tangible by death threats – rumours of escape routes, impacting the citizens' mental geography, are a threat to the militants who try to maintain a hold on this place. The rumour progressively contributes to making the doors appear in the narrative, in a contrapuntal pattern. As Saeed and Nadia hear about the doors, for instance through "a rumour that a new door out had been found" (*EW* 107), the existence of these doors is confirmed to the reader in the interspersed passages unfolding in other places, with different characters. Thus, the rumour progressively draws out the shape of the novel itself and of its narrative structure, the magic realist trick progressively permeating all the subplots of the narrative. In one particularly telling example of "contamination," the rumour mirrors the shape of a cordon crossing London, where Saeed and Nadia have temporarily taken refuge:

Rumours began to circulate of a tightening cordon being put in place, a cordon moving through those of London's boroughs with fewer doors, and hence fewer new arrivals, sending those unable to prove their legal residence to great holding camps that had been built in the city's green belt, and concentrating those who remained in pockets of shrinking size. (...) (*EW* 134-135)

The characteristic parataxis of *Exit West* seems to follow the thread of both the cordon and the rumour, unravelling in one long sentence the claustrophobic settlement of the cordon around the refugees. Redefining social space, the rumour constantly reconfigures – by "shrinking" or extending – the places Saeed and Nadia make for themselves, and the sense of safety they draw around their shelters. The rumour also creates new spaces, yet retaining them within an equally restricting "belt." This metaphor of circling is particularly revealing of the shifting senses of

place and agency in situations of social exclusion. For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, the rumour has “no source,” yet has a “target,” made manifest by the metaphor of encircling. This metaphor “functions in two opposed manners: in the fantasy of being circled by the victims of the rumour, the group of scapegoats (...); and in the reality of seeing such scapegoated places surrounded by those who believe in the rumour” (2019: 139).¹⁰⁷ This dual encircling therefore implies a dual relation to narratives, one which confronts “fantasy” and “reality” in the discourse of the rumour. Hamid’s novel stages this metaphor in his writing of place, whether through the “cordon” mentioned in the above passage or in the circling of the refugees’ squat by angry mobs (*EW* 131).

For African literature scholar Xavier Garnier, the rumour is also characterized by horizontality, “propagating in decentered patches” (1995: 892).¹⁰⁸ This is perceptible in Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, which begins in the city of Agra in 1916, when the Spanish flu is progressively contaminating the entire population. The external narrator introduces Agra through the hovering presence of the virus, which “hangs like a miasma over the knot of streets” (*TI* 19). At the same time, this mischievous narrative voice invites the reader to “plummet down” and “swoop down” in the manner of an aviator to zoom in on Pran Nath Razdan, the protagonist, who is resting on a rooftop unconcerned by the virus propagating in the streets below (*ibid.*). This opposition of a virus spreading horizontally, and a main plot introduced vertically, conjures up the merging of a singular life journey with the wider course of history, around which the entire novel is articulated – Pran indeed keeps finding himself unwittingly caught in the midst of major historical events. Here, the horizontal rumour of the Spanish flu spreading over Agra also connects the city to other places:

Within a week of the first cases of ‘Spanish Flu’ being reported in the city, thousands are ill or dying. In America or Europe millions have already succumbed, and it is known that little can be done for the afflicted. Panic sets in and the bazaars empty of people. Stories filter in from remote districts about ghost villages and bullock trains found by the roadside with all the drivers dead in their seats. (*TI* 34)

The rumour is rendered through an impersonal set of references, whether they are numbers (“thousands”) or substantives (“the afflicted”): the rumour, in that sense, is always centred

¹⁰⁷ My translation. The original reads : “cette métaphore de l’encerclement est elle-même paradoxale, car elle fonctionne de deux façons inverses : dans le fantasme d’encerclement par les victimes de la rumeur, le groupe des boucs émissaires (« Nous sommes tous en danger », « La France a peur ») ; et dans la réalité de l’encerclement des lieux boucs émissaires par ceux qui croient à la rumeur.” Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *De l’interpellation: sujet, langue, idéologie*. Paris : Éditions Amsterdam, 2019, 139.

¹⁰⁸ My translation. The original reads : “La rumeur (...) est anucléique. Elle se diffuse horizontalement, se propage en nappes décentralisées.” Xavier Garnier, “ Poétique de la rumeur : l’exemple de Tierno Monénembo,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* vol. 35, n°140, 892.

around a figure of otherness. Both the rumour and the virus appear through intrusion, demonstrated in the parallel of “panic set[ting] *in*” and “stories filter[ing] *in*” – the boundaries of social order are transgressed and challenged by the “stories” heard about other places. The ghostly semantics of the final sentence also point to the ethereal nature of rumours, which can have very tangible consequences, yet always remain shrouded in superstition and fear.

The rumour also bears importance in others novels by Hari Kunzru, such as *Gods Without Men* or *Transmission*. In these novels, the rumour takes up space on the page, through the use of intermedial elements such as television chatter, tweets, forum entries or e-mails. In *Gods Without Men*, Kunzru notably explores the role of the media in the spreading of rumours about legal cases, with the disappearance of young Raj in the diegesis set in 2008. Admittedly, Kunzru was interested in fictionalising what happened with the Madeleine McCann case, which involved a British family in 2007 – reactions to this yet unsolved case included a collective public frenzy around the girl’s parents, notably her mother (Naughtie 2007). In the novel, Jaz and Lisa, the boy’s parents, are shown struggling with the media speech and the suspicions targeting them:

Suddenly #matharus was a trending topic. The internet was calling him a murderer. Everyone on earth seemed to have an opinion. (...) He read the articles, the blogposts, watched the webcammed talking heads, immersing himself in the appalling churn of rumor like a yogi standing in a freezing river. (GWM 329)

In this passage, the rumor again seems to resist singularity, blending “talking heads” and “everyone” into a mass of discourse moving towards the target of the rumour. The rumour also objectifies, indifferently turning Jaz’s last name into a digital object circulating on the web. The character shows an active stance towards the rumour, attempting to drown himself in it and seemingly accepting his fate – yet the rumour’s power to form is here once more challenged by images of liquefaction, the churn and the river.

In his most recent *Red Pill*, Kunzru extends this reflection on rumour to conspiracy theories and to the permeation of everyday language by a subtext of suspicion, defiance and eventually xenophobia, in this case transmitted through the script of a television show. Confronting the writer of this show, a figure of the alt-right named Anton, the narrator keeps receiving ironic responses: “If I wanted to send a message, I’d use Western Union” (RP 163). In that novel, the sense of an underlying message requiring interpretation actually leads the protagonist to many different places, trying to follow the sender of the message in the hope of finding answers – he pursues him around Berlin, in Paris and even to a Scottish island in the hope of understanding this unsettling discourse spreading over the media.

For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, it is ultimately the challenge of authority – exemplified in *Red Pill* by a character like Anton – which makes the rumour such a malleable type of speech, and which makes it particularly attuned to the mechanisms of literature:

The rumour shares with the literary (or cinematic) text at least one characteristic: it is profoundly democratic. (...) the rumour addresses the masses on an equal footing: not through watchwords, but through words of contamination, outside of any authority (which it contests – this is what one calls the conspiracy theory). Literature, as for it, hides a discourse of authority (...) under the guise of equality. (Lecercle 2019: 143, my translation)¹⁰⁹

This “democratic” conception of discourse is particularly relevant to the ethics of literature found throughout Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works. Placing and displacing ultra-contemporary events on the page, through more or less authoritative voices, their novels confront readers with their own representations and suggest that the novel form can be an extension of the public sphere. For Hamid, whose destabilising second-person narrators correspond to a desire of “co-creation” with the reader (Hamid 2015: xviii), and Kunzru, whose literary publications are interspersed with journalistic writing, the novel constitutes a “democratic” threshold highlighting the hubbub of voices which constitutes events, yet maintaining creative authority over the forms they take and the places where they unfold.

This chapter has explored the complex interactions of place(s) and events in the novels and short stories of the two writers. As they stage and deconstruct the imaginaries and discourses surrounding the narration of events, whether they are contemporary catastrophes or powerful mythical subtexts, these novels show that events are always co-constituted with imaginaries of place. By re-situating the contemporary focus on “*the*” event – a monolithic, paradigmatic and often politically charged moment – within the perception of place and the multiplicity of experiences it entails, the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru allow to look at places and events differently. On the one hand, they propose “experiencing [the] eventfulness [of place] otherwise,” as suggested by Edward Casey (2011: 337); on the other, they promote an alternative relation to events in the slow-moving time of fiction reading and writing. This relation entails an attention to the contemporary, grounded in place and in the awareness of other(s’) places, rather than a fleeting, passive reception of events passing by.

¹⁰⁹ In the original : “la rumeur partage avec le texte littéraire (ou cinématographique) au moins une caractéristique : elle est profondément démocratique. (...) la rumeur s’adresse aux foules sur un pied d’égalité : non des mots d’ordre, mais des paroles de contamination, hors de toute autorité (qu’elle conteste – cela s’appelle la théorie du complot). La littérature, quant à elle, cache un discours d’autorité (...) sous une apparence d’égalité.” Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. *De l’interpellation: sujet, langue, idéologie*. Paris : Éditions Amsterdam, 2019, 143.

In his analysis of time in the Anthropocene, François Hartog explains how this era requires thinking anew the sense of agency one has over historical events. He writes:

It is no longer, as it was in the good old days, a matter of simply articulating past, present, and future but of taking into account pasts, presents, and futures whose impacts may differ, diverge, or even contradict each other but which nonetheless form a nexus or a web of temporalities in which, to one or another degree, we act and are acted upon. (2021: 438)

The image of a “nexus or a web” here again suggests the spatial dimension of events – events form through a multiplicity of agencies converging in place. As Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives of events demonstrate, “diverging” and “contradicting” temporalities are always caught up in experiences of place. It is in their creative forays into divergence and contradiction, in their representations of spatio-temporal cracks and gaps, that their po/ethics of place can ultimately be approached.

Chapter 7 Cracking place

“[O]ther events which may be attributable to Leela have dropped through the cracks.
To this day much remains invisible to the counters and chroniclers (...).”
(*T* 156-157)

In her 1988 *Ice Candy Man*, republished in 1991 as *Cracking India*, Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa writes about partition through the eyes of a child, Lenny. Hearing about the upcoming partition, Lenny is baffled: “There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road?” (1991: 101). Since this novel or even Rushdie’s 1981 *Midnight’s Children*, the metaphor of cracking which was integral to novels of the partition has been re-appropriated and adapted at different scales in transnational anglophone fiction. For novelists like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, who have connections to South Asia but have not experienced partition in any way – remembering Hamid’s claim that his is a “post-postcolonial generation” (qtd in Jay 2014: 106) – the notion of “cracking” has progressively come to infuse the writing of place, whether this concerns places located in South Asia, or a host of other imagined and physical places.

For Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, and other writers of the same generation, “cracking” manifests as a scattering of scales and perspectives. Their novels embody a shift from the focus on nations and territories to a de-multiplication of scales, where place is perceived both globally *and* locally, as macro *and* micro, within *and* beyond national borders, and where the novel becomes a repository for this diversity of experiences. As observed thus far in this thesis, this “cracking” also entails observing the partial, broken traces of former narratives of place, whether these conjure up the British Empire, contemporary American imperialism, Germany’s Nazi past or the history of racial segregation in the United States. The crack, conceived of as a “narrow opening” (*OED*), can be a means to escape or distance oneself from overwhelming, totalitarian forms of control. In their engagement with the situated consequences of events such as 9/11, or the treatment of refugees in Europe today, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru’s novels also show cracks in the social fabric, and how these cracks impact collective and individual approaches to shared space.

In many of the thematic approaches to these texts, I have observed a poetics that keeps “cracking” place – making sure that it is not indiscriminately submitted to a hegemonic gaze

and reduced to a simplified totality. In that sense, Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's stories echo Yi-Fu Tuan's argument that place is "a concretion of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily" (1977:12). For all that, "cracking" is not equated with downright destruction – refusing totalisation is compatible with recognising the intricate, and sometimes fragile co-dependencies inherent to the experience of place. What these texts propose is precisely to better understand the making of place and its mutations; to *crack the code* and make sense of the diverse mechanisms that lead a place to form and to be experienced, while acknowledging that some dimensions of place can never quite be grasped.

This "cracking" of place can prove a meaningful lens to understand and represent the plurality of contemporary modes of being. In *Plurivers: Essai sur la fin du monde*, philosopher Jean-Clet Martin contends that a "pluriverse" has started to replace what was until now a totalising "world." For him, the dominant mode today is a *monadology*, a term borrowed from Leibniz, which to him means that "every element, even the most minute, contains an entire text – the entire universe – reflecting the totality from its viewpoint and from its very particular place" (2010: 120).¹¹⁰ Martin resorts to a poetic image to better encapsulate this reality. Like the leaves of a book, or those of a tree, the world is plucking itself – "*le monde s'émonde*" (2010: 119). In the process of plucking, which echoes the dynamics of "cracking" suggested here, this all-powerful "world" is met with a "pluriverse" of stories, all of which *re-place* narratives of the "world" and the "globe." The image of the *monad* reflects the importance of singular places, and could further be read to replace that of the modern *nomad* – a trope which, as observed in the introduction to this work, might be found to "flatten the huge diversity of experiences" of place (Bender qtd in Mianowski 2020 *n.p.*). The idea of "reflecting" the world from one's place evoked by Jean-Clet Martin also echoes the narrative effects found in Hamid's and Kunzru's works. The "pluriverse" of their writing is one that leaves room to readers for the "co-construction" of narratives (Hamid 2015: xviii). In these novels, readers are offered their rightful place, their "very particular place" (Martin 2010: 120) in texts that aim for the recognition of diverse subjectivities.

In this final chapter, I wish to examine two transversal dynamics which pervade the writing of these two novelists, and demonstrate their poetic ways of "cracking" place, in all senses of the term – unpicking place, showing the cracks and gaps that remain in experience and understanding, and de-multiplying its representations.

¹¹⁰ My translation. The original reads: "*Monadologie* signifie que chaque élément, le plus infime, contient un texte entier – l'ensemble de l'univers – réfléchissant la totalité selon son point de vue et depuis sa place si particulière." Jean-Clet Martin, *Plurivers : Essai sur la fin du monde*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, 120.

First, one can observe how Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's fictions present forms of deviations, which constantly unsettle and traverse the places they write about. The reader follows these deviations in forms of turning and returning to place, where past and present intersect. Other diversions and deviations operate in the writers' mentions of digital space, paralleled by what a critic has called a figure of the "router" in contemporary narratives (Irr 2013: 29). Deviations can also be found in Hari Kunzru's explorations of the cultural and historical underground.

In the second section, cracking place is read as *hacking* place. The term "hacking," used by critics in reference to Kunzru's works (Leonard 2014; Mathews 2020), can extend to Mohsin Hamid's own fiction in several ways. In these novels, hacking takes the form of creative subversions and appropriations which once again "crack" totalising narratives of place. I propose to look at occupied places in the novels of both writers, whether they manifest as camps or squats, and to observe their semantic impact in the narratives. The analysis then moves on to the dynamics of "switching places," which refers notably to Hari Kunzru's trickster figures, and to the playful narrators of Mohsin Hamid.

7.1. Drifting: deviating places

In *Psychogeography*, Merlin Coverley examines literary motifs reflecting the eponymous term coined by Guy Debord and the Situationists, contending that there has been a "psychogeographical revival" in late twentieth-century British fiction by J.G. Ballard or Iain Sinclair (2009: 11). These writers have undoubtedly influenced Hari Kunzru, who for instance paid homage to Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* in a collective piece for *The Guardian* (Gray *et al.* 2014). But Kunzru has also been inspired more directly by Guy Debord's theories, clearly perceptible in *My Revolutions*, where the characters explicitly reject the "Society of the Spectacle," and also abide by Debord's practice of drifting or *dérive*.¹¹¹ The *dérive*, first coined by Debord in 1958, is presented as "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances," which "involve[s] playful-constructive behavior" and in that sense is "quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll" (2006 *n.p.*).¹¹² While Debord inscribed this practice in

¹¹¹ The mention of the "Society of the Spectacle" in *My Revolutions* has been discussed in the previous chapter with respect to the writing of events.

¹¹² Translation by Ken Knabb. In the original : "une technique du passage hâtif à travers des ambiances variées. Le concept de *dérive* est indissolublement lié à la reconnaissance d'effets de nature psychogéographique, et à l'affirmation d'un comportement ludique-constructif, ce qui l'oppose en tous points aux notions classiques de voyage et de promenade" Debord, Guy. "Théorie de La Dérive." *Internationale Situationniste* 2 (December 1958). *n.p.* <https://www.larevuedesressources.org/theorie-de-la-derive,038.html> (accessed 15-02-2023).

physical space, insisting on “the primarily urban character of the *dérive*” (2006 *n.p.*),¹¹³ in her article “Psychogeography, Détournement, Cyberspace” Amy J. Elias considers that current practices and aesthetic manifestations of the *dérive* are found to extend to cyberspace and the circulation of internet flows (2010: 821).

Hari Kunzru and Mohsin Hamid’s novels incorporate both the legacy of practiced urban space *and* contemporary extensions of spatial imaginaries, including but not restricted to cyberspace. Here I wish to suggest that their novels frequently function with drifting processes, derivations and deviations which can be thematic, semantic or structural, and contribute to unsettling – to “cracking” – narratives of place. “Cracking” in that sense also induces a form of humorous conniving with the reader, reminiscent of the “playful-constructive behaviour” advocated by the Situationists. Following narrators through a diversity of places, one is led into a willful disorientation which can reveal many stakes of imagining place, and contributes to both enlarging and singularizing the experience of place.

This section first approaches the dynamics of turning and returning, whereby narrator-protagonists keep returning to the same place(s), in a dynamic of spatial or temporal circularity. This also includes returning to the underground in Kunzru’s novels, as a theme that allows to explore unspoken and invisible experiences of place. A second development looks at the re-routing processes which stem from a thematic and linguistic engagement with the discourse of digital flows, and the digital practices that impact the sense of place.

7.1.1. Drifting as (re)turning: unsettled chronotopes

In *The Intelligence of Place*, Jeff Malpas explains that the relation to place always entails a practice of returning, which has to be repeated constantly and offers no definite resolution:

the thinking of place has to take the form of a returning to place that has always to be repeated – a returning that is never simply accomplished and completed, a returning that never brings us, once and for all, into a fully and enduringly present ‘there,’ a returning that never results in our finally and forever finding ourselves simply and unequivocally ‘at home.’ The thinking of place remains a demand, a challenge, simply because place is so fundamental – so much an inevitable and inextricable part of things. (2015:4)

As has been examined thus far, the novels of Hari Kunzru and Mohsin Hamid undoubtedly abide by the principle that place is “an inevitable and inextricable part of things.” Some of these stories more particularly display this practice of returning, both spatially and temporally, and

¹¹³ In French: “le caractère principalement urbain de la *dérive*” Debord, *op.cit.*

embed it in the narrative structure. These unfinished, unresolved returns are in fact reflective of the different “cracks” inherent to their writing of place, making visible the fact that the relation to place can never quite be fully completed or contained. I wish here to examine the novels *My Revolutions* and *Red Pill*, two novels where Hari Kunzru’s narrators embark readers on their quests towards past moments entangled with past places. Kunzru’s writing of place is as spatial as it is temporal – this might be explained by the fact that his narratives often connect past and contemporary experiences. In an interview with Max Haiven, the writer explained that he uses history as “a way of interrogating the present” (2013: 18). In that sense, his writing echoes Malpas’s argument that “the thinking of place” is always “a demand, a challenge” that needs renewed, repeated tackling. I wish to compare the processes found in Kunzru’s novels to the analepses operated in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where protagonist Changez keeps returning to his past experiences in New York. In all three novels, these returns correspond to what Mikhail Bakhtin theorised as the literary chronotope – “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature,” where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (1981: 84). It is towards this “concrete whole,” expressed in fictional terms, that the narrators of all three novels try to return, thus allowing the writers to show “a returning to place that has always to be repeated” (Malpas 2015: 4). Indeed, the puzzling chronotopes of these plots are never fully seized – fully “cracked” – by their narrators.

In Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*, narrator Mike Frame’s relation to the past forms a complex system of knots and tangles. Reminiscing about his past actions as Chris Carver, a political activist in 1970s London, the protagonist reflects on the meaning of the political revolution, on what it meant to him then and whether it still means anything now. Having travelled Asia in hiding, his memories of his youth keep coming back to him in a cyclical manner as he ponders over whether he should surrender and reveal his identity to his new family. In fact, the novel shows a shift from an activist who actively practices “drifting” – understood as “rapid passage through varied ambiances” in the manner of the Situationists (Debord 2006 *n.p.*) – to a compulsive need to return, to places and towards the past.

The novel plays with these two seemingly contradicting semantics. While the character recalls having “drifted” in a number of situations, placing the verb in the past, a contrapuntal refrain regularly appears with the isolated expression “round and round,” manifesting Mike/Chris’s mental forays into the past – and his cyclical memory processes – but also his present driving on the *périphérique* in Paris, after he has gone to the South of France in search of Anna, a fellow activist from the past (*MR* 74). In fact, the notion of “drifting” and that of

going in circles seem to merge progressively. Mike/Chris remembers people “drifting off” after a meeting in a London commune (MR 96), but then the activists start drifting *around* most of the time. He recalls having “drifted around, sleeping on floors and sofas” (MR 149); then having “drifted around in Asia” after escaping the movement (MR 167). With this connotation of cyclicity, the practice of drifting seems to progressively become counter-productive and meaningless, as in a memory where Chris ends up drunk at a festival and meets a girl he once knew, named Alison:

She seemed almost absurdly excited and carefree, as if she were the inhabitant of a parallel world where young people were allowed to drift around on September afternoons without worrying about raids and explosives and surveillance and the secret state. She was living nearby. And me? ‘Round about,’ I said. ‘Staying with friends.’ (MR 234)

The passage displays the failure of “drifting” as a political ideal – it has led the girl into a “parallel world” rather than in the confrontational world of politics. The geographical markers have in fact become weakened in the process, the girl stating that she lives “nearby,” before the narrator himself replies that he lives “round about,” their exchange turning into a parody of vague banalities that seem to go nowhere. During his long exile in Asia, Mike/Chris tries to find meaning to this cyclicity in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand, where he learns to walk “round the stupa” (MR 72) and to consider life as a cyclical return. A *New York Times* review explains that the protagonist’s escape from activism leads to “a series of painful turns on the karmic wheel: poverty, heroin addiction, anonymity” (Blythe 2008 *n.p.*). In the end, the blurred intersection of drifting and cyclicity leaves him altogether directionless. After he thinks he has seen Anna, his fellow past activist, in a village in the South of France, the protagonist returns there on a whim to find out that the woman was not Anna at all. He states: “finally I’m forced to admit that I’m completely *adrift*, without reference or marker” (MR 274-275, my emphasis). This stands as a final recognition that no pattern nor practice can completely solve the intricacies of our relation to place, echoing Jeff Malpas’s notion of “a returning that never results in our finally and forever finding ourselves simply and unequivocally ‘at home’” (Malpas 2015: 4). This difficulty to be “at home” is further mirrored by the character’s continued discomfort in the materialistic life he shares with partner Miranda in her cosy cottage, and his difficulty to face the radicalism of his past – neither extreme individualism nor extreme collectivism can provide the place he is looking for.

Another first-person narrator obsessed with returning can be found in Kunzru’s *Red Pill*. The plot of *Red Pill* revolves around a man who seeks to unearth certain poetic mysteries. Going to a writers’ residency in Wannsee in the hope to write a book about the “Lyric I,” the narrator-

protagonist keeps returning to the nearby *Kleistgrab*, the grave of Heinrich von Kleist, a Romantic poet who committed suicide in Wannsee. Strikingly, when describing a play by von Kleist and its connection to the poet's suicide, the narrator talks about a mindset of "drifting" – the play only evokes "aimless drifting and *tristesse*, because what could ever top the rush of the last few seconds before a bullet blows your brain and makes you immortal?" (RP 32). The poet himself is described as a man whose movements through life are irrational and dramatic. Born in a noble Prussian family, "he went spectacularly off the rails, (...) each burned bridge bringing him closer to the lake and the bullet" (RP 57). Fascinated by this poet despite himself, the narrator keeps returning to his grave by the lake (RP 32; 51), unconsciously directed towards the place and its past, just like von Kleist himself felt a drive towards his death. Paradoxically, the narrator's very first visit to the lake is underpinned by a fear of returning, as he theorises his distaste for "reversing direction":

I thought about turning back, but I have an aversion to reversing direction on a walk. When you're going back somewhere, it is hard to think of anything but the destination. (...) You see for a second time the landmarks on the route you're retracing, and drift to thinking of the routine you'll follow when you get back home. (RP 31-32)

In this passage, the narrator's relation to place is one that values immediacy rather than reproduction, experience rather than memory or the imagination. From the "route" to the "routine," his evocation of the dynamic of returning has negative undertones, connoting boredom and precisely the "*tristesse*" (RP 32) of the Romantic poet seeking a thrilling experience. Here "drifting" becomes a byword for this boredom, the unconscious movement of those who wander in search of a place that might bear transformative potential. At the same time, the paronomasia contained in his "aversion to reversing" suggests the intricate mental space of this unreliable narrator, and contributes to building up the novel's incursions in the psychological thriller. Soon enough, the character's drifting actually takes the form of a circular movement around the lake:

Though I hadn't left Wannsee, my walks in the area had become longer and more strenuous. I would put on my coat and follow a path round the lake, trudging through muddy woodland, under winter trees that seemed to set the sky in relief, their bare branches like cracks in a slab of pale stone. (...) It was a place where I could have lost myself. It would have been so easy to wade out into the weeds, slipping down a little deeper with each step. (RP 64)

As he keeps returning to the lake, the narrator's account starts to be infused with the language of the Romantics – the vivid description of the "winter trees" acting over the landscape is clearly infused with pathetic fallacy. This can be found also in the way the language of political action

pervades the reminiscing of the narrator in *My Revolutions* – with Kunzru’s narrators, the language of the past progressively contaminates the accounts made in the diegetic present, as if to indicate that returning to a place and time also means (re)turning to words.¹¹⁴ Again, paronomasia is resorted to as a token of the man’s confusion, as he wishes to “wade out in to the weeds.” The passage also shows that returning to the past through the practice of place can lead one into a semantic “crack”: the “cracks in a slab of pale stone” entice him into a wish to “wade out” and “slip down,” progressively going under the surface of place in a worrying set of images. Yet the narrator’s quest for the past intentions of Heinrich Von Kleist remains unsuccessful, notably because the landscape of the Wannsee lake has been written over: “Colonized by rowing clubs and villas, the view carried no information, nothing that made it easier to understand the violence that had taken place there” (*RP* 51). Returning to the place constantly cannot allow him to “crack the code” of the poet’s suicide, once again showing how “[t]he thinking of place remains a demand, a challenge” (Malpas 2015: 4). The *practice* of place through walks round the lake mirrors this constant demand. That same chapter ends with an equally unresolved conclusion: “You could object that all I had to do was read different books, decide to take another route on my walks. It ought to be easy to forget a dead writer” (*RP* 58). Reading, walking and memory are intrinsically associated in the quest for a past place. While this final sentence suggests that the narrator’s obsession is not about to end, the subsequent chapters seem to carry along with them the mood of Heinrich von Kleist’s melancholy tale, as the protagonist starts exploring other moments of the place’s history in a spiralling movement. It is only when returning to New York with his wife that the narrator ends up understanding his own place and the stakes of the present. After the election of Donald Trump, his fears and concerns lead him to observe the benefits of one specific “crack,” the crack that allows “the world” to enter subjective consciousness: “Outside the wide world is howling and scratching at the window. Tomorrow morning we will have no choice but to let it in” (*RP* 283). Rather than the “Lyric I” of the Romantic poet, the “wide world” is presented as an inevitable place from which one cannot deviate nor drift.

Processes of deviation are also integral to Kunzru’s approach to the themes of his novels, and in particular of his attempts at understanding cultural and political trends. In 2008, he was invited by Zadie Smith in Radio 4’s programme “Today” and proposed a list of concepts and

¹¹⁴ The same self-reflexive pattern actually unfolds in Kunzru’s *White Tears*, where the protagonist Seth explains that he returned to different places and “drifted through the city” in a moment of confusion involving the dead bluesman Charlie Shaw. Seth starts repeating himself – “Did I already say that?” (*WT* 140).

people which to him, encapsulated the notion of underground. He defined the term as what is “in some way difficult, experimental, marginal, odd, or otherwise unlikely to be available on your local high street.” He also warned that “[b]y definition, the underground is – underground. So there's no overview, no definitive guide” (Kunzru 2008). Without a “guide” to explore the underground, Kunzru creates his own pathways into the “experimental, marginal, odd,” leading readers into unexpected places and attempting to “crack” the surface in order to access what lies below. This also underpins Kunzru’s approach to the craft of writing, which makes the most of the internet and “the availability of archive” (Haiven 2013: 18).

Looking at what lies beneath the surface of commonly held knowledge, Kunzru’s investigations of the underground in his novels often take the form of a highly documented chronotope: the moment and place of emergence of said underground are rendered vividly, leading the reader into unknown territories. Looking into the “experimental, marginal, odd” that constitute the underground is a means for Kunzru to reconcile journalistic investigation with the novel, as he devises fictional chronotopes based on little-known realities. *My Revolutions* and *Red Pill* provide the most telling examples of these deviations into the underground.

Through its protagonist, a former activist who tries to untangle his past that keeps coming back to him, *My Revolutions* forms an investigative insight into the motives and political arguments pushed forth by groups such as the Red Army Faction in Germany – also known as Baader–Meinhof Gang – and the Angry Brigade in the United Kingdom. Although the novel is largely inspired by the actions of these groups, Kunzru clarifies in the final acknowledgements that “this is not a representation of the politics or personalities of the Angry Brigade” (2007 *n.p.*). In this novel, the exploration of an underground movement raises several questions about the writing of history: it interrogates the scope of political action; what it means when being part of an underground political movement leads someone to live *undercover*; and how the actions of an underground movement are used – or manipulated, or discarded – in the construction of a collective memory. The protagonist’s underground movement is characterized by a paradoxical desire to be both at the centre of action and visibility, yet to deviate from the political mainstream. In a leaflet, the group express their wish with spatial metaphors – they want to “[c]onstruct zones of liberation, counter institutions, alternative systems of exchange” (*MR* 82).

Following the same dynamics as in *My Revolutions*, the motif of the underground in *Red Pill* is entangled with the questions of secrecy and anonymity. Similarly, the narrative shows how a character who commits to a seemingly selfless movement can end up losing

herself in the process, reaching a point of no return. In the course of his investigations about the “Lyric I” and the Nazi past of Wannsee, the narrator meets Monika, the woman who cleans his room at the Deuter Center.

Monika’s story spans thirty-five pages of the novel, located at its centre within a section titled “Zersetzung (Undermining).” Her story is a strange interlude which has no actual function to play in the unfolding of the plot but to echo its main themes. It is indeed the story of an *under/mining*, both a destabilization of the character and a metaphorical mining of her traumatising experience in the underground. As a young woman, Monika lives in an East Berlin suburb, first with her parents and then alone. Bored with her life and mortified at the idea of becoming a suburban housewife, she regularly goes to the Alexander Platz in Berlin and tries to join the punk movement. She is hired by two girls to become their drummer, and the three move in together in an abandoned bombed building. One day, Monika is trapped after work by a man who starts threatening her, and ends up caught in the conspirations and intimidations of the Stasi, ultimately turned against her friends from the punk movement, and having to hide forever from the public gaze because of her past as a supposed informer. In an episode of his podcast “Into the Zone” called “Never Mind the Stasi,” Kunzru explored the evolution of the punk movement in the GDR in the early 1980s, notably through a band called *Planlos* that really existed at the time (2020, 5). The story of Monika illustrates Kunzru’s interest for this moment of confrontation between the cultural underground and the secret service.

At first an exciting perspective, Monika’s life in this cultural underground manifests itself as a spatial experience: her band has their first gig in a “cellar” (*RP* 118), followed by other concerts in “[b]arns and cellars and old factories” with people offering “floors and couches to crash on” (*RP* 121) – she moves between places, singing underground and sleeping on the floor. Yet soon these enticing aspects of the underground give way to the Stasi threats imposed on Monika, and the hidden cellars are replaced with interrogation rooms (*RP* 123). Her band, who call themselves “The Transparent Women” – a thinly veiled metaphor for the surveillance society –, see their den, a shabby squat in a bombed building, completely searched and emptied by the Stasi (*RP* 137).

For Monika, this process of exposition results in a complete loss of intimacy which significantly upends her sense of place. Convinced that the Stasi is still regularly searching her life and surveilling her, even years after her punk experience is over and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she reflects:

Everyone said that the Stasi were gone, but was it really true? For her they’d simply sunk underground, into the walls and the floorboards, the fabric of

things. Objects still moved around in her apartment. (...) All of it was suspicious. The texture of her reality was soft, spongy. (RP 142-143)

The underground, first associated to cultural dissent, becomes a byword for secrecy and state surveillance. Disseminated into the “fabric of things,” the word has also disseminated its meaning so that it becomes hard to locate it from a moral standpoint. Consequently, Monika’s experience of place and materiality is entirely unsettled by the possibility that others might be watching her and moving her property. The image of the sponge is particularly revealing: while soft at first, it can be squeezed just like the Stasi can drain individuals and drive them to exhaustion in interrogation rooms. For the character, the only way out of this sense of emptiness and dispossession is to scale down her personal environment, making it harder for others to penetrate: “Little by little, she made a life for herself. One with small dimensions, but safe and sustainable. Objects stopped moving around” (RP 143). As “objects stop moving around,” the past of the underground also stops returning to the character and resurfacing in her life.

In Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a different type of “crack” can be read in the events of 9/11, which have indeed caused a physical gap in the urban space of New York but also a variety of conundrums and hermeneutic gaps for the narrator, Changez, whose “American Dream” has been cut short by the events. Changez, who narrates his memories from Old Anarkali Square in Lahore, keeps returning to his time in New York, and more specifically to the chronotope of a pre-9/11 New York, where he felt welcome and confident as a young immigrant worker. For Changez, returning to that time and place in his narrative is not only returning mentally to New York, but also to the place that New York itself has taken in his life journey: “It still occupies a place of great fondness in my heart, which is quite something, I must say, given the circumstances under which, after only eight months of residence, I would later depart” (TRF 37). Such proleptic and analeptic to-and-fros pepper the narrative – Changez is intent on maintaining a suspense as to the reasons for his “later departure.” In the same manner as Kunzru’s narrators, Changez’s forays into the past are made to seem unreliable, yet he remains mischievously likable for the reader as he jokingly attempts to cajole his American interlocutor. Constantly investigating the difference between his pre- and post-9/11 lives, Changez’s interrogations unveil his evolving feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity, of comfort and discomfort. In the process of returning to these past chronotopes, the notion of “home” is interrogated and seems to become an unstable signifier. Praising the multicultural atmosphere of the city, where Pakistani food and music can be found, Changez tells his American interlocutor: “for me moving to New York felt – so unexpectedly – like coming

home” (*TRF* 36). Later on, he also states how he “felt at home” in the childhood bedroom of his girlfriend Erica (*TRF* 57). Yet when he returns to Pakistan for a holiday – a physical return to his real “home” – Changez struggles to report his American life to his family: “It was odd to speak of that world here, as it would be odd to sing in a mosque; what is natural in one place can seem unnatural in another, and some concepts travel rather poorly, if at all” (*TRF* 143). As an immigrant, Changez struggles to straddle the divide between the two places he is attached to, and compares this strange feeling to the inadequate use of a sacred place. The complexity of his attachments can actually be read in his own assertion that “some concepts travel rather poorly” – this could include the very concept of “home.” The narrator’s verbal returns to New York do not suffice for him to unpick his sense of place – they echo Jeff Malpas’s idea of “a returning that never results in our finally and forever finding ourselves simply and unequivocally ‘at home’” (2015: 4). In one of Changez’s memories, the return to his pre-9/11 sense of place doubles up as a physical return to places where he spent time with Erica. The nostalgia for his past relationship with Erica is mirrored by a yearning for past places:

I wandered about the city revisiting places she had taken me to, whether because I thought I might see her or because I thought I might see something of us, I am not now certain. A few of these places – such as the gallery in Chelsea we had visited on the night of our first date – I proved unable to find; they had vanished as though they had never existed. Others, like the spot in Central Park where we had gone on our picnic, were easy to locate but seemed to have altered. Perhaps this was the effect of a change in season; perhaps also it was in the city's nature to be inconstant. (*TRF* 187)

Looking for the remnants of a love entanglement, the character is drawn to the meaningful places experienced with Erica. Place is thought of as a container of memories, where the loved one might even materialise. Significantly, Changez is drawn to an art gallery as he looks for the landscapes of his past relationship, seeking the representation and framing of his memories. In an uncanny effect, the narrator suggests that these chronotopes are so connected with Erica that have disappeared with her. The passage shows how even physical location of a place might not prove sufficient to return to its past incarnation. In this desperate mapping of the past, Changez ends up conjuring a semantic displacement of his relationship with Erica – the “inconstant” reality of Erica’s affection is transferred onto the city which has rejected him in the aftermath of September 11. This of course echoes again the many interpretations of the novel that read Erica as an allegory for Am-Erica (Hartnell 2010: 337; Morey 2011: 140). Re-placing this impossible quest within the “nature” of the city or “a change in season,” the narrator also hints at the inherently dynamic nature of place, which can never quite be retrieved as it was. From a strictly formal point of view, Hamid’s short, condensed novels are in themselves an invitation

to return – in an essay from his collection *Discontent and its Civilizations*, the writer praises “slender literary long-form” and the practice of “rereading” (2015: 73).

While the patterns of returning that can be found in these novels display the characters’ limited agency and power over past places, other novels by Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru propose that new trajectories can be formed in the digital imaginary, and contribute to diversions that induce a “cracking” of place.

7.1.2. “A place of abstraction and warmth”: digital space and rerouting strategies

You watch one after another of the ubiquitous, hyper-argumentative talk shows that fill your television, aware that in their fury they make politics a game, diverting public attention rather than focusing it. But that suits you perfectly. Diversion is, after all, what you seek. (*HTG* 115)

“Seeking diversion,” in the manner of the protagonist from Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, could extend to the poetics of re-routing that can be identified in both Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. While this specific second-person protagonist seeks televised diversion in order to escape his grim financial condition, others use mediatised diversion as a creative outlet, which also seeps into the narrative structure.

In *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), Caren Irr proposes the phrase “Digital Migrant Novel,” which to her corresponds to a trend visible in the first decade of the twenty-first century whereby novels of migration have incorporated the logics and dynamics of the digital. To her, “a significant number of migration narratives produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century reduce their investment in the motif of trauma, turning instead to an exploration of a digital-media space” (2013: 29). This shift is characterised by a movement from the “inward” space of traumatic migration to a dynamic that imitates the “router,” “the organizational logic of digital-media systems,” which can be seen “[w]hether or not they directly take digital media as a topic” (2013: 28). Formally, this manifests as a “strong omniscient narrator” which precisely plays the role of the “archivist, bookmaker, detective, traveler, or surfer – that is, the router” (2013: 29). Caren Irr also pinpoints that these narratives often have a “sharper, satirical” tone, and that they contain “a crisis point in a public space (such as a church, prison, palace, street, monument, festival, or café)” (*ibid.*). Rather than engaging with their inner conundrums like the narrative of traumatic migration proposes, the narrators and protagonists of these novels end up producing “maps of transnational arenas” in the process of moving and transmitting information (*ibid.*).

I wish to examine here the extent of this interpretation in Mohsin Hamid's and Hari Kunzru's novels, many of which precisely address the notion of digital space but also contemporary experiences of migration. One can observe how processes of rerouting, whether or not they are attributed to a homodiegetic narrator, contribute to a poetics that seeks to unsettle and deviate approaches to place. From a thematic standpoint, the inclusion of digital space within the writing of place also contributes to unsettling traditional imaginaries of place, often restricted to physical space in realistic novels. Hamid's and Kunzru's narratives show how the abstract places of the digital world have also become integral to the sense of place.

The presence of digital space in Hamid's and Kunzru's novel operates a rerouting of familiarity and comfort, re-orienting the places where digital practices occur and mapping out new places in the contemporary experience. This thesis has largely addressed the engagement with the language of new technologies found in Hari Kunzru's 2004 novel *Transmission*, which responds to Caren Irr's idea of an omniscient narrator that "reroutes" the narrative, and exposes satirically the new social order that has emerged together with the digital. In this novel, digital space is the common experience linking the different subplots of the novel. Structurally, the impacts of the *Leela* virus on a global scale are often used to connect together the various stories that cohabit in the novel – each of the different characters sees his or her life entangled in the consequences of the virus. Yet despite the worrying spread of the virus, digital space also sometimes connotes comfort. For Arjun Mehta, an IT engineer, the digital world provides respite from the unsuccessful experience of migration and the social exclusion he feels in real life. It also unexpectedly provides stability and takes the shape of a refuge – as he is fleeing the police who have found out that he unleashed the *Leela* virus, Arjun finds a "gamer's café" in San Diego and is able to go to "his secret space" on a server (*T* 218-219). A similar experience unfolds for Guy Swift, the businessman who travels the globe by plane. As he is going back to London after a trip to New York, Guy seems to find comfort in the space conjured by his laptop:

He removed his laptop from its padded ripstop case, swiped his company credit card through the reader on the phone and hooked the two devices up. Then, just for a moment, he closed his eyes and drifted into a place of abstraction and warmth. A few seconds went by. The abstraction darkened, and he experienced a sudden unpleasant sensation of falling through his own interior space, *through himself*. Cast unpleasantly out into consciousness, he breathed heavily and opened his eyes to see ten new mails in his inbox. (*T* 115)

Through an act of connection, the character is made to "drift" into a new place, inviting the reader to follow suit. Guy Swift, a marketing manager for whom abstraction is key – he keeps inventing and selling vacuous mottos – is comforted by the perspective of the abstract, yet the

narration shows how escaping into abstraction can sometimes fail. Digital space is shown as an antidote to “interior space,” to having to confront one’s consciousness and real-life experiences. Paradoxically, it is the material presence of the computer which allows the digital drifter to escape reality – the passage displays how the “drifting” inherent to digital practices induces a tightly-controlled management of one’s visual and physical surroundings. In *Places Through the Body*, Ken Hillis explains this paradox of “visual cyberspatial environments”: “[c]yberspace is an interiorized world within which it is suggested that (assuming the price of admission) we all might come together in the free play of imagination and information.” This utopian ideal promotes a “disembodied imagination,” yet “this imagination is being conceptually relocated to *exist in the technologies of transmission*” (2005: 68, emphasis in the original). In other words, the “free play” at stake with the digital world is never completely independent from specific technologies and their uses, and thus never completely detached from the physical world. To some extent, this is replicated at the level of Kunzru’s narrative, where incursions into the digital world are constantly pulled back towards the material. Throughout the novel, the more abstract and metaphysical issues raised by the *Leela* virus are constantly “rerouted” towards their material consequences on banks, cities, companies or even individuals, and the seemingly democratic spaces opened up in the digital are always counterbalanced by experiences of discomfort and inequality in physical space.¹¹⁵

A more recent novel like Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) also shows the complex co-existence of these two parallel – and sometimes intersecting – worlds. In this story of refugees on the move, the mention of digital space hovers between Caren Irr’s definition of a playful “digital migrant novel” where narrative redirection prevails, and what she defines as the novel of “traumatic” migration. Saeed and Nadia, who live in a city under siege, find imaginary shelter in their phones: “In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be” (*EW* 35). Inserted within the “magical” subtext of the novel, the smartphones function as a second type of portal, in the same manner as the “black doors” through which the refugees can flee. With these evocative “antennas,” Hamid poeticises the material reality of smartphones and inserts it into his rewriting of magic realism, thus transforming the widely shared experience of smartphone use into an uncanny phenomenon with a geography of its own. For the characters stuck in their city at war, undergoing a curfew and a restriction of their movements,

¹¹⁵ This has been examined in chapter 5 regarding speed notably, and in chapter 4 concerning the question of touch.

smartphones seem to provide direction and connection with the outer world. In fact, the loss of “internet connectivity” in their city is shown as a first form of exile:

Deprived of the portals to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones, and confined to their apartments by the night-time curfew, Nadia and Saeed, and countless others, felt marooned and alone and much more afraid. (*EW* 55)

Again, digital connection is described in spatial terms – smartphones are a bridge of sorts and their disappearance severs the inhabitants from one another. As in the previous example, the phones form a double relation: “to places distant *and* near,” “to each other *and* to the world.” This is where a constant form of rerouting can be read. In the same way that the novel constantly resituates Saeed and Nadia’s journey in relation to other events unfolding in other parts of the world, smartphones constantly resituate local connections and relations with the wider world. Internet connectivity in that sense impacts the relation to place, since each and every one’s place is compared and competes with plethoric discourses and images about other places. In fact, the characters’ use of smartphones in *Exit West* reflects their relations to physical places. Saeed, who is overall more reserved than Nadia with regard to occupying space and going to new places, “partly resisted the pull of his phone. He found the antenna too powerful” (*EW* 55). While he resists this outward pull, the narrative also shows that the refugee’s nostalgic use of his phone can pull him backwards: “He was drawn to people from their country, both in the labour camp and online” (*EW* 187). Again, the dual structure seems to place digital space in a constant dialogue with real-life experiences. Whereas Saeed seems to represent Caren Irr’s notion of a “traumatic” relation to migration, where the character is given to nostalgic, inward dynamics, Nadia is more agile in her relations to both physical and digital space – she is what Caren Irr calls “detective, traveler, or surfer – that is, the router” (2013: 29). For Nadia, phones are an antidote to stasis, to the “stationary nights” she is confined to:

In contrast to Saeed, Nadia saw no need to limit her phone. (...) she rode it far out into the world on otherwise solitary, stationary nights. She watched bombs falling, men exercising, men copulating, clouds gathering, waves tugging at the sand like the rasping licks of so many mortal, temporary, vanishing tongues, tongues of a planet that would one day too be no more. (*EW* 37)

The series of gerunds mirrors the kind of dynamic, mobile outlet that the smartphone represents for Nadia. In fact, the smartphone is described as a vehicle that one can “ride” to explore unknown territory. The list of what Nadia looks at on her phone is revealing of the wide imaginary potential it conveys, containing “bombs,” “clouds,” “waves” and “men” in a three-dimensional enumeration. The final poetic incantation of the passage actually presents Nadia’s

digital explorations as a limit to the imagination, by hinting at climate change and extinction. The metaphor of the “tongues” seems to echo the de-multiplication of discourse over the internet, and the “waves” of information that not only overwhelm social media users but also tend to relegate the urgent issue of global warming behind more sensationalist information – in a 2021 interview, Mohsin Hamid expressed his concerns about the “attention economy” and the way information is prioritised (Khan 2021: 16). The constant routing and rerouting of information can prove detrimental when digital technology is taken at face value.

Nadia, however, is shown to be savvy in her use of smartphones, trying not to disclose her identity and redirect it with misleading names: “Nadia frequently explored the terrain of social media, though she left little trace of her passing, not posting much herself, and employing opaque user names and avatars, the online equivalents of her black robes” (*EW* 37-38). Another spatial metaphor is resorted to with the “terrain,” which is in fact a more passable “terrain” for her than physical public space. Here again, the narrative operates an internal reference to Nadia’s overall relation to place and space, having mentioned on several occasions her decision to wear black robes in order to avoid the gaze of men. In digital space, Nadia finds more safety and comfort than in the everyday hazards that public space can comprehend for a young woman.¹¹⁶ The narrative goes on to explain the difference between her experiences “online” and “on the street”: “Online there was sex and security and plenty and glamour. On the street, (...) there was a burly man at the red light of a deserted late-night intersection who turned to Nadia and greeted her, and when she ignored him, began to swear at her” (*EW* 39). The comfort evoked in the self-contained first sentence contrasts with the “deserted” place Nadia finds herself in, and the unexpected behaviour of the man – the online world, on the other hand, seems to be predictable. For Nadia, the digital world provides a refuge from a hostile public space, just like the apartment where she has decided to live by herself.

Hamid’s dual patterns show how digital technology can contain within it both the local and the global, the intimate and the public, a movement forward or one directed backward. Paul Veyret explains that in *Exit West*, Hamid “describes the smartphones and social networks which supplement human connections” (2020: 130). One could argue that they also supplement the sense of place, and have in fact become integral to the mediation of space and place in our imaginaries.

Mutating together with their time, Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s stories explore the concrete, material developments of the “place of abstraction and warmth” that digital

¹¹⁶ This has been discussed in more detail in chapter 5, in the section about control and gender.

technologies have become for so many. In the process, they show that digital space is never just an abstraction and has utterly concrete implications. From a metafictional point of view, Hamid and Kunzru have found how novels can incorporate the language of the digital world and in the process, integrate the digital within the writing of place. As Kunzru's novels in particular tend to show, by juxtaposing tweets and YouTube comments (*GWM* 251-254) or e-mails (*T* 100) on the page, the novel form can adapt and provide playful narratives for these experiences in which societies and individuals are utterly entangled today. By using the digital as a thematic and structural component, such novels help readers understand their place in these entanglements – they help crack the code, shatter the screen and understand these technologies' deeper implications from a philosophical and geographical standpoint.

Whereas metaphors of the digital contribute to re-orienting the narrative and to portraying changing relations to place, they also extend into the notion of hacking, which, as will be explained hereon, takes on several meanings and roles in Hamid's and Kunzru's fictions.

7.2. Hacking: subverting places

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb “to hack” as follows: “cut with rough or heavy blows”; “kick wildly or roughly”; “use a computer to gain unauthorized access to data” (*OED* 2008). The term encapsulates both physical actions and the more intangible, insidious practices found in digital trespassing. Two critics have used the term in their investigation of Hari Kunzru's fiction. Peter D. Mathews focuses on *My Revolutions* and *Gods Without Men* to argue that Kunzru's characters seek to hack the “society of control” (2020). In an article called “‘A revolution in code?’ Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and the cultural politics of hacking,” Philip Leonard explores Kunzru's engagement with the figure of the hacker in *Transmission*, where Arjun Mehta, the young IT worker, unleashes a virus only he can master in order to be hired back at his job. Leonard notes:

as much as the term *hacker* might point to a series of diverging ethical, political, and personal imperatives, corporate, media, and official responses tend to collapse this miscellany into a socially threatening figure, one who has crossed the threshold that separates maverick nerdishness from dangerous criminality. (2014: 268)

Casting a likeable social outcast in the figure of the hacker, Kunzru's *Transmission* indeed suggests that hacking stems from many “diverging (...) imperatives” rather than a lust for crime. Discussing Kunzru's novel together with McKenzie Wark's famous essay *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), Philip Leonard notes that “[a]ttaching a resistant or libertarian ethic to

hacking is now a familiar undertaking” (2014: 76). For a novelist like Kunzru, the ethics of hacking mostly translates into a playful writing, one that can allow for a plurality of perspectives and a resistance to restrictive totalisations. It is this playfulness which leads some to read novels like *Transmission* as “intellectual comedies” (Robinson 2008: 77).

I would like to address more specifically how this poetics of hacking might apply to the writing of place, and how it can also extend to Mohsin Hamid’s own writing. The “maverick nerdishness” of the hacker described by Philip Leonard can actually function as a metaphor for the subversive uses and experiences of place described in Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels. In *The Intelligence of Place*, Jeff Malpas contends that “[t]o talk of the ‘intelligence’ of place is to refer both to the intelligible character that belongs to place and to the apprehension of that character in our own thinking” (2015: 1). Between this inherent “intelligibility” of place and our own interpretations, hermeneutic gaps and cracks can lurk, giving way to appropriations and subversions of the meaning of place. The novels show how the “intelligible character” of place holds the potential for hacking practices that can manifest spatially, but also in narrative form. Hacking is one of the means through which Hamid’s and Kunzru’s narratives upend the notions of purity and authenticity discussed in the first chapter of this work – any pretence of primacy seems to be debunked by the “unauthorized access” (*OED*) and reappropriations perceptible in the hacking of certain places. Beyond associations with a reprehensible digital crime, hacking can be read as one of the metaphors for the multiple modes of being with place found in these novels.

A first form of hacking that can be observed is the practice of occupation, represented in the passages of Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels describing refugee camps and squats. Examining the semantic implications of these two types of places, I wish to observe how they unveil dynamics of exchange and appropriation that once again show the mechanisms of place-making, especially in contemporary settings. In a second development I propose to approach the metaphor of switching places, which runs through the novels thematically but also from a narrative standpoint, with the dialogic writing that characterises Hamid’s writings more particularly.

7.2.1. “Carving out a utopia”: occupation and place-making

In the main narrative thread of Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*, the narrator is blackmailed by a man he formerly knew while he was an activist in the 1970s. Miles Bridgeman is threatening to reveal the narrator’s past to his family and to the public, in an intricate political

machinery also involving Pat Ellis, another former activist who has now become part of the government. The narrator asks:

‘(...) What did Pat Ellis do to you, Miles? She must have done something.’
‘To me? Nothing at all. It’s just politics, Chris. Real, grown-up politics, not the kind that starts by carving out a Utopia and then hammering at the world, trying to make it fit.’ (MR 207)

In *My Revolutions* but also in other novels by Hamid and Kunzru, “carving out a utopia” seems to define forms of creative place-making, where hacking can be understood as cutting out and delimitating new spaces – remembering that “hacking” also means to “cut with rough or heavy blows” (*OED* 2008). In this apparently oxymoronic expression, where the imaginary notion of utopia materialises three-dimensionally in physical space, the cracking of place functions as a dent, a bump or a gap in conventional uses of space. While here the character of Miles derides the notion, the novels display such attempts to “make a utopia fit” into reality, with varyingly successful outcomes. One particular way of doing this, found in *My Revolutions* and in other narratives, is to occupy space. According to sociologist Michel Lussault, contemporary forms of occupation in urban space function along the lines of the opposition between local and global, as they make it possible “to anchor individuals and things here rather than elsewhere, and to give meaning to this localisation – in this case, the possibility that remains of *jutting out* in the smooth space of economic globalisation” (2017: 165, my emphasis).¹¹⁷ Attempting to make imagined places “fit,” and to “jut out” at the same time, the physical occupations at stake in Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s novels proceed to unsettling the status quo of empty or public space. In these processes of appropriation, new places become visible both physically and in the collective imaginary. The narratives show the role of hacking but also exchange and adaptation in the making of these places.

7.2.1.1. Camps: bartering for space

Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s representations of the contemporary lives of refugees include different types of camps, which all seem to be “jutting out” in space, as Michel Lussault’s words suggest. The descriptions of camps display unstable three-dimensional structures, reflecting the difficulty for the occupants to “fit” in the social space where they have

¹¹⁷ My translation. The original reads : “En se localisant, on ouvre un autre espace-temps, on affirme la possibilité d’ancrer les individus et les choses ici et pas ailleurs, et de donner du sens à cette localisation: en l’occurrence la possibilité toujours ouverte de faire saillance dans l’espace lisse de la globalisation économique.” Michel Lussault, *Hyper-lieux : les nouvelles géographies politiques de la mondialisation*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017, 165.

arrived, but also the creative resourcefulness of those who have to create new places for themselves. In Kunzru's *Red Pill*, a camp managed by NGO workers on the outskirts of Wannsee is located in

an enormous room, bigger than a gymnasium, with peeling magnolia walls and a high ceiling supported by metal beams. The space had been partitioned with sheets of plywood to form dozens of cubicles, each one with a number spray-painted on the side. (*RP* 190)

The place is characterised by an encounter of horizontal and vertical structures, all of which converge towards an image of decay and of improvised settlement. Between the “peeling magnolia walls” and the evocation of “sprayed” paint, even paint seems to “jut out” and to interfere in three dimensions. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia's “worker camp” in London displays similar installations:

The two of them occupied a small curtained-off space in one of these dormitories, the curtains suspended from cables that ran almost as high as Saeed could reach, above which was an empty space, as though the lower part of the pavilion was an open-topped maze, or the operating rooms of a huge field hospital. (*EW* 168-169)

As in *Red Pill*, the space of the camp gives off an impression of vertigo and claustrophobia all at once. The high suspended cables are met with a “small curtained-off space,” the refugees trying to find intimacy in the midst of a shared camp. From the image of the “hospital” to that of the “maze,” the camp provides at the same time a well-deserved respite for the homeless refugees, and a confused trap from which they have to find a way out.

The dynamics of exteriorising and protruding manifest the importance of the outside in representations of camps. Sociologist Michel Agier has explained how migrant camps are articulated around “exception, extraterritoriality and exclusion.” The lives of migrants in camps are treated as an *exception* in terms of legislation – they cannot be ascribed the same regime of laws as others. Camps are *extraterritorial* – they are often unregistered and unmapped. Finally, camps *exclude* as they relegate otherness to specific places (2014; 2011: 23).¹¹⁸ Hamid's *Exit West* actually shows how this relegation to the outside implies a constant negotiation of one's place, giving way to forms of bartering and reassessments among those in and around the camp. On the Greek island of Mykonos, where Saeed and Nadia first stop in their journey, this type of bartering manifests in the exchanges which regulate the lives of refugees. In some cases, the exchange of space is rather flexible, for instance as they walk near “one of the big migrant camps, of which there were many, and to which anyone might belong, joining or leaving as

¹¹⁸ My translation for the three concepts, but the words are transparent.

they saw fit” (EW 108). In other cases, patterns of exchange depend on the duration of one’s presence in the place:

Saeed and Nadia had never been to the old town, for it was off limits to migrants at night, and they were strongly discouraged from going there even by day, except to the outskirts, where they could trade with residents, which is to say those who had been on the island longer than a few months (EW 113)

Here long-term occupation endows the refugees with new rights, or rather new territory. Instead of the other camps by the beach, far away from the town, these refugees have managed to access the “outskirts” and can use this authority to “trade” with newer occupants. In fact, these people have moved from the status of occupant to that of *resident*, one who has a “permanent home in a particular place” (OED 2008). Hamid plays on the paradox of this term – the text suggests that these “residents” are in fact still refugees living in camps, but they have managed to access – to hack – a better location. To describe this complex process of appropriation and negotiation, Hamid refers to American foundational myths, as the narrator points out that “[t]he camp was in some ways like a trading post in an old-time gold rush, and much was for sale or barter” (EW 101). The writer’s characteristic use of comparison and contextual transposition is repeated when explaining that the island is “like most places”:

The island was pretty safe, they were told, except when it was not, which made it like most places. Decent people vastly outnumbered dangerous ones, but it was probably best to be in the camp, near other people, after nightfall. (EW 101)

From the dynamics of exchange to the transposable realities of place, the text ultimately proposes that “other people” are crucial in the making of a place for oneself. In the dire realities of the camp, occupation is first and foremost a matter of otherness – of being “*near* other people” and delimitating the need for space accordingly.

7.2.1.2. Squats: grabbing place

In her book *Un monde de squats*, Florence Bouillon returns to the origins of a term that has now become mainstream and used internationally. The noun “squat,” she explains, comes from the French *esquatir* or *esquater*, meaning to flatten down. Exported to North America in the eighteenth century, it became synonymous with squatting *down* – cowering – before it started to refer to someone who illegally seizes and hangs on to a territory (2009: 5). In fact, the squatter is an avatar of the hacker in physical space, following the same “resistant or libertarian ethic” quoted earlier on from Philip Leonard’s study of *Transmission* (2014: 76).

Hamid's and Kunzru's novels regularly refer to the squat in their writing of place, showing how some places can be "cracked" open by squatters and creatively occupied, re forging narratives of place in the process.

In fact, most of the squats in these narratives are represented as already "cracked," empty shells devoid of inhabitants. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the refugees start occupying houses all through London, and the narrator operates an unsettling hierarchy of emptiness:

It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard-hit, their absentee owners often discovering the bad news too late to intervene (...). (*EW* 126)

Drawn towards emptiness, the squatters seem to abide by the concept of *horror vacui* – space needs to be filled up as if essentially. The image of certain spaces being "more empty" than others is puzzling – it suggests that the relation between homelessness and available space functions like communicating vessels. This puzzling image is reinforced with the irony of cosy mansions being "hard-hit," in sharp contrast with the horrendous living conditions previously described in Saeed and Nadia's city at war.

The squat is also "pre-cracked" from a moral standpoint in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. In this mischievous second-person narrative, the father of the "pretty girl," the protagonist's love interest, spends all his time and his money in an infamous bar, described as "an underground establishment run by illegal African immigrants in a room that moves around the neighbourhood, relocating each time the police, despite the bribes they receive, feel enough pressure from religious activists to make a show of shutting it down" (*HTG* 49). With a personified room that "moves around," squatting is characterized by repetition and agile place-making in the corrupted networks of the "Rising Asia" described in Hamid's novel, where the illegality of the squat is humorously counterbalanced by the crooked behaviours of the local police.

In Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill*, squats are used by the punk band of Monika, the woman the narrator meets on the outskirts of Berlin and who tells him about her past involvements with the Stasi. In the GDR, squats reveal the abandonment of urban space and the decay of the social fabric – waiting for social housing, the young people have no choice but to use these buildings:

The girls, Katja and Elli, were living black in a place on Linenstrasse, with a rotating cast of boyfriends to carry furniture and fix things. It was a tenement that had officially been declared unfit for habitation – on one side there was nothing but rubble, on the other a building whose frontage had collapsed, a sort of skeleton that no one had got round to demolishing – but several of the

apartments were occupied by young people who didn't have a hope of getting on the list for official housing. (RP 116)

The place evokes at the same time the comedic resourcefulness of the young squatters – the girls' boyfriends seem to “rotate” at the same pace as the furniture – and the bleak stasis of life in the GDR, where buildings have become vacuous “skeletons.” Emptiness is also contained within the phrase “living black,” connoting the problematic void that underpins these illegal occupations. Indeed, for Monika who starts building up her life in this squat, everything soon becomes two-dimensional: the Stasi asks her to spy on the others and the squat soon turns into an even more transparent “skeleton,” where everything is constantly scanned and examined. The place is ultimately emptied again as the punk band is denounced and the Stasi officers come to evict them by force (RP 137). In the end, Monika's moral journey as hostage to the Stasi leaves her metaphorically squatted in turn: “she felt she had no inside. She was a sort of hall or public gallery that people could walk about in as they pleased” (RP 140).

The most detailed engagement with squats is to be found in Hari Kunzru's *My Revolutions*, where the narrator remembers his experiences as a squatter in and around London in the 1960s and 1970s. Squats in this case are used in the context of collective organisation and political activism. Constantly moving from one occupied house to the next, the narrator recalls his participations in creative forms of place-making. In one particular example, in a bucolic place called Sylvan Close, the narrator's perception of the squat manifests as a lust for places –the empty space of the squat leads to imagining a plethora of other places in its stead:

The things we could do! Knock some walls together to make a library. Open a space up as a crèche. We could convert one area into a communal laundry, another into a bake-house. Helen joined us and collectivized our imaginary gardens, planting vegetables and fruit trees, planning a compost heap, a pool, glasshouses, swings. It would be a life of luxury. We'd have saunas and windmills, solar panels, looms. (MR 157)

The character's poetic flourishing, manifested in the echoing sounds of “saunas” and “solar panels and looms” turns the empty squat into a plentiful land of Cockaigne. In this passage, the creation of a new place is at the same time physical and imaginary – the characters' political project turns into a wish to “collectivise the imaginary,” create new places not only in physical space but also in the collective unconscious.

What seems to matter particularly in the creation of these imagined and physical places is the function of naming. In *De l'interpellation*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle explains how the revolutionary event depends on the use of the *watchword*, voiced publicly to specify the

subject(s) concerned, the moment of the event, and its location in space (2019: 134-35). Without these three dimensions, a planned political event cannot be thrust with force and instead becomes a rumour, with a more diffuse dynamic. In *My Revolutions*, naming the squats is particularly important. In London, the activists start squatting the house of a fellow activist named Charlie – “Lands End, as we’d started to call it” (*MR* 147). For this squat, the name proves programmatic, as the activists finally decide to “shut it down, at least temporarily, and join an occupation that was in progress a few miles away in Leyton” (*MR* 156). The name is particularly significant given the fact that the narrator is looking back on his past and how his political commitment ended. With his retrospective gaze, he actually rewrites the meaning ascribed to the place in the collective imaginary nurtured by others: “The name started as a sort of shorthand. It had none of the complicated meanings I’ve heard ascribed to it” (*MR* 151). In fact, the many squats described one after the other in the novel prove to be somewhat meaningless places in retrospect – what matters is that they contained the experiences of the political struggle. Squats in that sense, always remain temporary signifiers, an experience of place intrinsically linked to a moment in time.

Crystallising desperate, opportunistic or utopian approaches to place, squats challenge the conventional functions of property, stability or familiarity often associated with place. The squat represents place as a springboard for the unexpected and the collective, best exemplified by the international Babel that the London hotel of *Exit West* ends up becoming (*EW* 124).¹¹⁹ The encounters that take place in the dynamic of hacking can also be examined in the motif of switching places that appears in the two writers’ novels.

7.2.2. Switching places

In a 2021 interview, Mohsin Hamid explained:

There’s a certain degree of perspective that one chooses for oneself; it’s possible to choose a stationary position, to imagine that one is in the same place, that one’s point of view is not particularly likely to change, and then, from that fixed point of view, gaze out upon the world, write about it and engage with it. That rests very far from my point of view. I think of myself as continuously changing over time, but also almost always in relationship with context. (Khan 2021: 15)

¹¹⁹ One of the passages describes the international community of refugees facing an assault outside the house and sharing their experience through language: “in their terror they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers” (*EW* 124).

Hamid's and Kunzru's respective approaches to place can in part be illustrated by this refusal of a "stationary position." As this thesis has observed, they simultaneously singularise and demultiply perspectives, proposing a writing of place that can echo what Jean-Clet Martin called the "pluriverse," where "every element (...) contains an entire text – the entire universe – reflecting the totality from its viewpoint and from its very particular place" (2010: 120).¹²⁰ More than just "reflecting" a totality in particular places, I wish to suggest here that with certain descriptions, tropes and devices, Hamid's and Kunzru's novels introduce a dynamic of *switching* places, which can be intradiegetic but might also operate in a playful conversation with the reader. To some extent, switching is the ultimate form of reflection – it is an invitation to go beyond the looking-glass of representations and proceed to imagining being in someone else's place, in their "context," to quote Hamid's words. This switch manifests in whimsical trickster figures in Hari Kunzru's fiction, but also in the principles of shared storytelling found in Mohsin Hamid's works, where readers are sometimes offered to exchange places with the writer. Forms of hacking and unlocking are once again integral to the process, as these exchanges entail "cracking" new accesses and playfully modifying the expected order of things.

7.2.2.1. *Coyotes and motels, tricksters and crossroads*

Mischievous representations of hacking and diverting are found in Hari Kunzru's novels which revolve around American history, namely *Gods Without Men* and *White Tears*. In those novels, Kunzru himself seems to proceed to a form of "hacking" as he appropriates American culture and lore. The writer revisits tropes that are in part spatial, with encounters taking place on thresholds and at crossroads, often resulting in a metaphorical exchange of places. I propose to examine here the hacking operated by Kunzru's trickster figures, before looking at the specific *topos* of the American motel.

In *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Lewis Hyde explains the role of the many trickster figures that appear in traditional and contemporary art forms:

They are the lords of in-between. A trickster does not live near the hearth; he does not live in the halls of justice, the soldier's tent, the shaman's hut, the monastery. He passes through each of these when there is a moment of silence, and he enlivens each with mischief, but he is not their guiding spirit. He is the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town. He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither. (2010: 6)

¹²⁰ My translation, see the first occurrence of this quotation at the onset of this chapter for the original text.

Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* and *White Tears* are replete with roads, doorways and isolated small towns, conjuring classic topographies of the American West, as well as the racially segregated South in *White Tears*. They also call upon many different mythologies, especially in *Gods Without Men* which is an exploration of many spiritualities through the variety of characters and time periods that the narrative encapsulates. Judaism, Hinduism, Native American spirituality or even Mormonism find their place in the Mojave Desert, a place which triggers a need for mystical planes of interpretation. For Peter D. Mathews, Kunzru's use of trickster figures in this novel "highlights how theological codes of control may be hacked using their own logic, whether in the form of the 'rasa lila' in Hinduism, the mysteries of the Zohar in Jewish Kabbalah, or the trickster god Coyote in Native American religions (2020: 7-8). Not only can these codes be "hacked," but they can be redirected towards the narrative thrust and participate in the articulation of this multi-layered novel.

As evoked in the first chapter of this thesis, Kunzru makes a direct reference to the Native American story of "Coyote and the Origin of Death," listed in Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz's *American Indian Myths and Legends* (1984). In the story, Coyote travels to and fro between the realm of the dead and that of the living, ultimately closing the door between the two by mistake. In the plot set in 1920 around the figure of an anthropologist, Kunzru revisits this story as the anthropologist is listening to a basket-maker, a woman who is herself metaphorically weaving together the two worlds (*GWM* 126). Throughout the novel, Coyote is the one who further blurs the geography of the desert, continuously moving and changing patterns, and he also crosses several of the different timelines and plots, reappearing under various guises. The novel starts with a small chapter where the reader is made to understand that Coyote is cooking meth in a remote part of the desert. The first sentence of the novel indicates from the onset the uncertain geography brought about by this character: "In the time when the animals were men, Coyote was living in a certain place" (*GWM* 1). At the end of the four pages that form this hallucinatory opening fable, where Coyote has strangely exploded and resuscitated several times over, a fake ending is proposed: "And Coyote left that place. That is all, thus it ends" (*GWM* 4). Coyote's fake beginnings and endings are connected to place, to forms of leaving and swapping that are anchored in the landscape of the desert.

Represented as a "crack" addict in the contemporary subplots of the novel, Coyote keeps cracking the order of events and interfering with timelines. In fact, the trickster figure is articulated with Hari Kunzru's own interest in flows and noise, two motifs that pervade his work. Coyote keeps playing with flows, clogging systems and disconnecting pathways. The narrative voice thus explains how he is "mixed up in the paths and flows" of finance in the

contemporary plot, set around the height of the 2008 financial crisis. This extends beyond the financial sphere, as readers are told that “Coyote (...) had to mess with stuff, connect things together. He had a rage for transformation” (*GWM* 356-357).

In fact, the Native American subtext of Coyote’s inversions and diversions is also echoed by a historical subtext of subjection and alienation. The subplot following Deighton, an anthropologist who studies the Native American people of the Mojave, ends with an unsettling role reversal. Deighton’s wife has eloped with Willie Prince, a Native American man. A manhunt unfolds whereby Willie is killed by local white men, encouraged by Deighton. Years later, Willie and Eliza’s son, Ike Prince, is working with the local sheriff to try and get Deighton out of a hole in the ground where he now lives. Ike Prince tells him: “You know you were tricked? You been down here in a hole all these years. Where you wanted to put my father, down in a hole. But he tricked you. You took his place. He’s alive and you’re dead” (*GWM* 318). His speech enacts the revenge of the Native American man over the white anthropologist who destroyed his father. The dead Willie Prince reappears as a trickster who has switched places with the man who had him killed.

This passage is very similar to the place-switching at stake in *White Tears*, Kunzru’s exploration of cultural appropriation and racial segregation. In this novel, switching places occurs through the figure of Charlie Shaw, a Southern bluesman, initially a figment of the narrator’s imagination who ends up haunting him vividly until he ultimately jumps into his skin and starts speaking through him. The narrator Seth, initially impervious to the practice of cultural appropriation that he reproduces with the habit of record collecting, ends up being appropriated himself by the mischievous ghost of the bluesman, who voices the history of violence that he has undergone as a poor Black man in the United States. On several occasions in the second half of the novel, Charlie Shaw is introduced as a trickster figure, one who crosses thresholds and invades the narrative not only thematically but discursively. The narrator, more and more confused, starts conveying his voice: “He had followed me at other times, in other places. Papa Charlie, guardian of the crossroads, where the two worlds meet. Excuse me, excuse me, as I step across the threshold...” (*WT* 303). Designated as a “guardian of the crossroads,” the transformation of Charlie Shaw into a trickster figure is also perceptible through the many names given to him: “Wolfmouth, Papa Charlie, Charlie Shaw, crossing the threshold, walking out of the picture frame. For much of that day, he had left me alone. Now he seemed closer than ever” (*WT* 306). The name “Papa Charlie” in particular, is evocative of figures such as Papa Legba, the messenger of God in voodoo beliefs – he is the equivalent of Elegua or Eshu in Yoruba spirituality. Kunzru purposely refers here to a legacy in African but also African

American writing, using what Henry Louis Gates, in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, calls a “Pan-African repository of figuration and interpretation,” featuring centrally “Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba trickster figure” (2014: xix). The story of Charlie Shaw is also a thinly veiled reference to that of Robert Johnson, the 1920s bluesman who is said to have made a Faustian pact with a devil at a crossroads so that he could become an incredibly skilled guitar player (Lewis 2011). All through the novel the characters in *White Tears* always seem to stand on an uncomfortable threshold or at a crossroads. They often find themselves on the “wrong side of the tracks” (*GWM* 195), a spatial metaphor which also replicates the “tracks” of the blues vinyl they listen to.

The idea of unexpected encounters and uncanny exchanges is finally replicated in the American trope of the motel, which Kunzru places in a remote town in the Mojave Desert in *Gods Without Men*. This motel is described in the parts of the novel that take place in 2008 and 2009, and is managed by Dawn, a woman who previously took part in the UFO cult that settled in the desert in the 1970s. Several characters see their trajectories intersect at the motel. Jaz, Lisa and their son Raj find themselves there at the same time as Nicky Capaldi, a British rock star who has come to the desert to escape the other members of his band. For Bruce Bégout, the motel is particularly reflective of a dichotomy of inside and outside – of a threatening threshold: “one feels at once protected by the surrounding white walls and vaguely worried by the desolate environment that lurks beyond” (2009: 27). Throughout the novel, the desert motel indeed seems to connote attraction and repulsion at once, as when Nicky Capaldi explains to Dawn why he came to the desert:

‘Tell me something,’ she said. ‘Are you out here looking for lights?’
‘No. Well yeah, I suppose. Maybe. I’m just trying to get away from things, you know?’ (*GWM* 27)

Dawn’s motel, ironically called the *Drop Inn* (*GWM* 27), concentrates strange events in which one might “drop” accidentally. Bégout adds that those who go to a motel wish to “extract themselves from the world, yet feel that someone could, at any moment, knock on the door” (2009: 27).¹²¹ Indeed, the motel introduced in *Gods Without Men* seems to be characterised by these “knocks on the door” representing a disruption. The narrative describes how Jaz and Lisa chose this place because it could accommodate the “disruption” that some perceive in the

¹²¹ My translation. Bégout’s book has been translated but I have not had access to the translation. The original reads: “On s’y sent à la fois protégé par les cloisons blanches qui nous entourent et vaguement inquiété par l’environnement souvent désolé que l’on devine au-delà. On voudrait se soustraire au monde et l’on sent pourtant qu’il pourrait, à un moment ou à un autre, frapper à la porte.” Bruce Bégout, *Lieu commun: le motel américain*. 2003. Paris: Allia, 2009, 27.

presence of their autistic son – Dawn’s motel is “the kind of place where they were condemned to stay in because (...) the romantic inns he and Lisa knew from the old days wouldn’t put up with the disruption” (*GWM* 59). In fact, their son Raj is presented throughout the novel as a figure of otherness, his sudden disappearance mirroring all the other unexplained events taking place in the desert. In the end, Laila, the Iraqi girl working in the military base, sees Raj reappear after she heard “an animal,” suggesting that Raj’s abduction was just one of Coyote’s many tricks (*GWM* 308-309).

Kunzru’s trickster figures which constantly seek to switch places are actually quite similar to Mohsin Hamid’s omniscient narrative voices, which transpose and juxtapose different experiences of place. While the former function on a more parodic level, both point to the self-referential powers of fiction and the possibility to open up space in their readers’ imaginaries. For Kunzru, the trickster figures are also a means to access the American narrative, to “hack” playfully the myths and stories of a different culture. In an interview about *Gods Without Men*, Kunzru explained:

There are big gaps in this book (...) gaps you fall into that have no real obvious way out. That’s something that I find increasingly interesting in a lot of art in different formats. (...) You could tie it up in a little bow and it would all run like clockwork. And I think it would lose what is most interesting about trying to put a bunch of different stuff together, which is: just let them oscillate together, just let them resonate together. Allow the reader to kind of live in the gaps a little. (Silverman 2012)

The writer’s own practice of hacking thus consists in cutting out some hermeneutic gaps in the narrative and leaving them open. At once claustrophobic and liberating, the proposition made to the reader to “live in the gaps” can also contribute to explaining why these narratives articulate a poetic of cracking.

7.2.2.2. “Living in the gaps”: unfinished makings

In one of his essays, Mohsin Hamid explains how he grew up with interactive forms of fiction such as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series and the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. To the writer, the open endings and creative outlets provided by these forms proved pivotal – they helped him and his friends build up “collective imagining with a shared narrative” (2015: 77). Later on, reading Camus’s *The Fall*, Hamid confirmed his taste for interaction in fiction: “I was amazed by the potential of the ‘you,’ of how much space it could open up in fiction” (2015: 78). “Opening up space” on the page could easily define what novelists like Mohsin Hamid and

Hari Kunzru attempt to do. While the seemingly unresolved ending of *Gods Without Men* can “allow the reader to live in the gaps a little,” a novel like *Transmission* also offers a choice of interpretations to the reader, in the form of a series of apocryphal media interpretations about the virus Leela and the escape of Arjun Mehta, the digital hacker. The narrator notes that “other events which may be attributable to Leela have dropped through the cracks. To this day much remains invisible to the counters and chroniclers” (T 156-157). In *White Tears*, some of the last few pages are pervaded by the resonating laugh of the ghost of Charlie Shaw, a mystery that remains to be cracked.

For both writers, letting the readers “live in the gaps” is yet another means of cracking narratives and refusing totalisation, of place but also the narrative. In Mohsin Hamid’s novels, second-person addresses and mischievous characters create such gaps, notably in their creation of more or less welcoming settings. Often levelling the plane between storyteller, character and reader in this way, Hamid’s narrators make visible the gaps between these positions. The space of the novel thus becomes an experiment in adjustment, for instance in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, where the narrator Changez seeks to create spaces of equality and exchange:

in the even older districts that lie between us and the River Ravi – the congested, maze-like heart of this city – Lahore is more democratically *urban*. Indeed, in these places it is the man with four wheels who is forced to dismount and become part of the crowd. (TRF 36)

Placed at the beginning of the novel, the passage inscribes in the spatial descriptions the “democratic” narrative that Changez is simultaneously putting in place. The narrator chooses to “dismount” and enter the Old Anarkali square of Lahore together with readers and with his intradiegetic interlocuter, all of whom become “part of the crowd.”

In forging these ambivalent narrative spaces, Hamid purposely leaves some gaps for the reader to explore. This also corresponds to what Christian Moraru terms a form of “un-telling” in novels like Hamid’s (2018: 6). Moraru observes the processes of toponymic de-specification found in Hamid’s novels and argues that this poetic pattern is at the same time inclusive and exclusive. On the one hand, these narratives are exclusive because they operate “by omitting or declining to release data and thus specify the geopolitical signposts that ordinarily assist the reader.” On the other hand, they are inclusive because the openness of their settings presents “the novel as a ‘relational sphere’ susceptible to accommodate a world readership community” (2018: 6).¹²² When reading Hamid’s fiction with Moraru’s theory, the notion of gaps can thus

¹²² Moraru borrows the phrase “relational sphere” from Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002, 43.

have a twofold meaning – these gaps in the descriptions can prove difficult to cross without any “signposts,” or they might just as well appear easy to fill up with one’s own imaginary, thus implicitly proposing that reader and writer switch places.

For both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, “living in the gaps” also means writing the unseen or the misunderstood, by pointing to the gaps in usual representations of contemporary spatial experiences. From the life of a pedestrian immigrant in suburban California (in *Transmission*), to the unequal uses of space in the rural compound of an imagined village in “Rising Asia,” or even the gap in which a Pakistani immigrant loses himself in the fractured social space of post-9/11 New York, readers are invited to look into these gaps in representation and to acknowledge major discrepancies in the experience of place. The narrator in Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* casts a geographer’s vision on these discrepancies as he mentions the “yawning gap that exists between countryside and city” (*HTG* 132-133). In an interview with Claire Chambers, Hamid explains the evolution of this specific gap, contending that in Pakistan, “the rural/urban split is blurring” due to a rampant urbanisation as people keep settling along main roads. He observes a “tracery of urbanization that penetrates the periphery” (qtd in Chambers 2014: 148). Encapsulating these mutating topographies in his fiction, the writer – trained as an urban planner – proposes to channel gaps as well as “traceries” through the voice of a playful second-person address, which seems to morph and move as quickly as the social and spatial organisation of this “Rising Asia.”¹²³

In the novels of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, gaps in narrative authority and gaps in representations of place are therefore two sides of the same coin. The writers’ play with form engages place, refusing to use it as a motionless background or setting in the construction of the narrative. All along their novels, places move and morph, and in the process create fusions and attachments as much as temporary gaps that readers are invited to examine. By acknowledging these “cracks” in their narratives of place, Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels echo Rita Felski’s proposition that the aesthetic experience could be “semidetached,” allowing readers “to trace actual ties without presuming inevitable foundations” (2020: 21).

This chapter has shown that there are no “inevitable foundations” in the making of place proposed by Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictions. Rather, in their novels they show how place is partly formed by cracks, whether the cracks originate in temporal fractures – as in the returns to place found in *Red Pill*, *My Revolutions* or *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – underground

¹²³ I have mentioned previously that Mohsin Hamid submitted a thesis in resource planning at Princeton (see chapter 5 notably).

deviations, digital rerouting, physical occupations or the exchanges performed by mythical trickster figures. The narratives show how de-multiplications of scales and discourses in the contemporary experience of place necessarily implies forms of cracking. With this dynamic of “cracking,” the narratives paradoxically allow for connections and evolutions, because they show place as permeable and modifiable rather than as an immutable, monolithic totality. Returning to Edward Casey’s idea of “place at work,” quoted in the introduction to this thesis, where place is “part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else” (2011: 286), one can better understand how cracks participate in the continued dynamics and tensions that traverse place. In fact, Casey’s notion of “place at work” can itself resonate with the theorisation of gaps proposed by philosopher François Jullien, who proposes to “put gaps to work” (“*faire travailler les écarts*”). Rather than the paradigm of difference, where one compares cultural specificities, or classifies them along the lines of sameness and otherness, Jullien proposes a more fruitful and open tension made possible by gaps (Jullien 2012: 7). Just as Hamid’s and Kunzru’s novels do not “presume inevitable foundations” (Felski 2020: 21), François Jullien explains that the gap “does not imply nor posit as a principle an identity which one would be hard pressed to pinpoint” (2012: 7).¹²⁴ In his recent book *Rouvrir des possibles: dé-coïncidence, un art d’opérer*, François Jullien further argues for the role of gaps in approaching present experience. In the face of what he considers to be current forms of blockage and walling up in the contemporary world, an apt course of action would be “to seek – locally, minimally, from where one stands – to *detect* more than to *project*: to notice what is obstructing the present, blocking it, in order to ‘fissure’ it, so to speak; and, by *fissuring* it, ‘opening up possibilities’” (2023: 12-13).¹²⁵ “Detecting more than projecting” is particularly relevant to what Hamid’s and Kunzru’s fictional narratives propose: a mode of being with place – an *ethos* – where reading enables to observe singularities and to crack certainties.

¹²⁴ My translation. In the original : “L’écart pointe un départ à la dissociation, mais ne sous-entend pas pour autant une identité posée en principe, mais qu’on serait bien en peine de designer.” François Jullien, “L’écart et l’entre. Ou comment penser l’altérité,” Leçon inaugurale de la chaire sur l’altérité. Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, WP, Février 2012, 7.

¹²⁵ My translation. In the original : “il s’agirait, se retournant sur la situation présente, de chercher – localement, minimalement, là où l’on est – à *déceler* plus qu’à *projeter* : à repérer ce qui obstrue le présent, y fait blocage, de façon à le « fissurer », si je puis dire ; et, le *fissurant*, y ‘rouvrir des possibles.’” François Jullien, *Rouvrir des possibles: dé-coïncidence, un art d’opérer*, Paris: Éditions de l’Observatoire, 2023, 12-13.

Conclusion

“I propose to address ourselves to our inevitable exit strategies, yours and mine, preparation, in this lifelong case, being most of the battle” (*HTG* 219)

1. “Doom or denial?” Staying with place

In a 2016 interview for *The New Yorker*, Mohsin Hamid explained the optimistic subtext behind the characters of *Exit West* who attempt to imagine “plausible desirable futures” for themselves at the end of their journey (*EW* 216):

maybe our children and grandchildren can still inhabit a world where they have a chance at hope and optimism. Fiction can explore this possibility, it can make us feel something other than the sense of either doom or denial that is so prevalent in our nonfiction discourse. (Leyshon 2016 *n.p.*)

This statement echoes the utopian streak that runs through much of Mohsin Hamid’s fiction as well as his personal philosophy. Yet the “hope and optimism” found in these novels are not dramatically idealistic – as observed earlier in this thesis, they rather suggest a form of “utopian minimalism” which combines a utopian tone with the material realities and the concerns for sustainability in contemporary societies (Nersessian 2017: 93). Utopias, according to Foucault, are “unreal spaces” which have “no real place,” and present an inverted version of “the real space of Society” (1984: 3). On the contrary, the places described in Mohsin Hamid’s stories are anchored within society and cannot be said to lack a “real place” – they are utterly focused on singular experiences such as those of refugee camps, cities undergoing war or terror, villages in the throes of powerful landlords, countries lacking essential resources, or historical centres where sublime architecture stands alongside crime and prostitution. There is no escapism at stake in those imaginaries of place – no spectacular *tópos* in these utopias. Hope is not directed towards *another* place in *another* time, but concerns the places readers live in today, and what they might become in the near future.

In their novels, Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru address the stakes of a discourse of “doom or denial” in the contemporary relation to time and space. Their narratives engage with the discourse of doom – the overwhelming semantics of the “crisis,” as discussed in chapter six; the sensation of a crumbling of Empires and nations, as discussed in chapters two and three; the multifaceted fears of contamination and confrontation, in a world where borders and other

social divides still have a powerful hold on the imagination; or even the fears of a loss of any material experience altogether in the era of digital space. As for denial, it transpires in the novels' depictions of hostile reactions to foreigners, or in the illusions of the discourse of purity and authenticity, which, as has been examined throughout this thesis, is frequently debunked by the two writers. Denial also connotes a practice of detachment, echoing a relation to place that has emerged and predominated together with modernity and globalisation. This is best expressed as what Bruno Latour calls the "view from nowhere" – a "vision from the vantage point of the universe" which proclaimed its objectivity, and nurtured a positivism which has ultimately led to become excessively detached from the world we live in (2018: 68). This perspective has given way to

the illusion of the Global as the horizon of modernity. From this point on it was necessary, *even if one stayed in place*, to shift one's position virtually, bag and baggage, away from subjective and sensitive positions toward exclusively objective positions, finally freed of all sensitivity – or rather of sentimentality. (2018: 71, my emphasis)

As Latour suggests, some are still restrained in their movements, and still have to "*stay in place*" – this is what Bauman remarks when he talks about those who are "chained to place" in the age of globalisation (1998: 45). But this physical and social reality has been combined for all, moving and unmoving, with a cultural championing of an elsewhere, an outside, one which is perhaps reaching its limits insofar as climate change is now impacting every place in the entire world. This calls for a reexamination of the "sensitivity" and "sentimentality" once associated with "subjective positions." As Hamid's and Kunzru's novels demonstrate, this "sensitivity" to place can in fact be accessed in the experience of literary fiction, in narratives that resort to empathy, humour and that debunk the fallacious language of a homogenising globalisation.

Indeed, faced with the proposed dilemma between "doom" and "denial," which seems to prevail according to Mohsin Hamid, the writers suggest a third course of action in their fiction: *staying with* place. This means engaging with one's existence by means of singular places, rather than through the totalising dynamic which promotes the globe as the only valuable and desirable sphere of action. This also means relinquishing "doom or denial," or, as Donna Haraway terms it in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, "apocalyptic or salvific futures":

staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (Haraway 2016: 1)

In this thesis I have striven to demonstrate how Hamid's and Kunzru's descriptions and narrative articulations of place can provide alternative scales which allow to be "truly present" to contemporary challenges, including the reconfigurations of collective imaginaries.

Even when staying with place paradoxically manifests as unsuccessful returns to places, or a switching of places – as evoked in chapter seven – it calls for an ethos where every place matters. This manner of looking at the world through place, and of privileging place as the prism for a comprehensive, attentive storytelling, is not a downright invention but rather a re-orientation towards concepts and experiences that never stopped existing. As Jeff Malpas contends, "[t]he world is given in and through place no less now that it ever was – the difference is that we may be more prone to forget or to overlook or to neglect this basic ontological and existential fact" (2015: 8). Staying with place, in that sense, induces a form of "lucid" narrative (Westphal 2000 *n.p.*), which could seem to countervail the craft of fiction, yet in the case of Hamid and Kunzru, seems to de-multiply their creative input, responding to Lawrence Buell's argument that "artists who take it upon themselves to think intently about place can be instructive witnesses to its influence" (2001: 61).

Indeed, for both Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, the space of the novel allows to encapsulate many singular experiences of place and to provide comprehensively "lucid" and "instructive" stories. Both writers seek to channel and portray multiple subjectivities within their narratives, whether through unconventional voices which stretch and extend the boundaries of the diegesis to invite the reader in, through spatio-temporal deviations and the overlapping of subplots which form a "narrative traction" (Coupland 2012 *n.p.*), or even by parodying a multiplicity of mediatised speeches and echoes, using juxtaposition and collage. While highly mobile and dynamic, constantly moving from place to place, these devices all reinforce the possibility for readers to perceive precisely the dynamism and the singular experiences borne by place. As I have proposed in this thesis, this multiplicity contributes to showing places "in the making." The necessarily partial viewpoints entailed by these shifts suggest that while places cannot be fully grasped and contained, they still deserve active investigation, a movement *towards* place. To Christian Moraru, such investigations found in contemporary transnational novels show that they are "embedded with the world," committed to "making and remaking" it in fiction:

What I am talking about, then, is not a literature that leaves the historical, existing world behind, but one that enlarges, takes up, and takes responsibility for this world, its wonders, and shortcomings by engaging in its contemporary making and remaking. (2018: 4)

Seeing the “wonders and shortcomings” requires being attentive to other experiences of place than one’s own, but also to changing narratives of place. For writers like Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru, this sometimes implies shedding or challenging reductive stereotypes, and instead proposing alternative planes of experience where readers, characters and narrators can meet. It also implies stretching out the restrictive places sometimes hastily ascribed to writers, accepting that like the experience of place, literary interpretation can never be subsumed to a totality.

2. “Planting weeds in the conceptual garden”

While I accept that there is a domain of literary language that uses words in, let’s say, a non-denominative way, I am a scientist, and as a man of science, I can’t allow anyone to plant weeds in the conceptual garden. (*RP* 43)

This is one of the peremptory speeches of Edgar, the neuroscience expert whom the narrator of Hari Kunzru’s *Red Pill* keeps encountering at the cafeteria of their writers’ residence. Kunzru’s parody of academic discourse could be read as an invitation to do just the opposite – to attempt, precisely, to “plant weeds in the conceptual garden.” The writer’s cautious eschewing of academic and marketing labels throughout his career has proved particularly efficient in this respect – it still remains challenging to pinpoint exactly what place his writing holds in the “conceptual garden.”

This proposition also echoes the two writers’ debunking of the pure and the authentic, a language used particularly in discourse about identity and history but also in regard to place. Planting weeds, in their novels, can take the form of a thematic and structural hacking – as seen in chapter seven – or even of patterns of extension, where place grows and expands beyond its perceived limits – as examined in chapter one. Like the traces evoked in chapter two, weeds evoke what remains, the unseen or the marginal, which however points towards something larger. Weeds grow across and through physical limits, and sometimes create new ones. While carefully crafted and self-contained, Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s narratives of the contemporary seek to encapsulate oddity and marginality, “noise” and disturbances.¹²⁶ This apparent contradiction is perfectly grasped in the words of a commentator of Kunzru’s podcast, who states that “Kunzru’s language, whether written or spoken, is precise in a way that lets you see exactly how messy the world is.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ As frequently discussed throughout the thesis, noise – in the sense of a disturbance, a clogging of information systems – is a recurring motif in Kunzru’s works.

¹²⁷ The username is blinkiblorp9000 and it was posted on 10-12-2020 on Apple Podcasts. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/into-the-zone/id1521535384?see-all=reviews> (accessed 21-03-23).

In this thesis I have also aimed at abiding by the logic of “planting weeds” conceptually, by reading the role of place in these transnational novels without restricting the conceptual lens to one line of thought or another. By using the input of geography, philosophy, literary theory and sociology, I have endeavoured to do justice to the multiple contexts and intertexts Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru call upon – bearing in mind Hamid’s background in urban planning, and Kunzru’s frequent references to philosophy and social sciences – and to demonstrate how their writing engages creatively with the complex geographies of the contemporary. From a literary and cultural standpoint, I have tried to reconnect Hamid’s and Kunzru’s works with the multiple genres and forms that they refer to, while suggesting how their novels repurpose such references towards their writing of place. Whether or not one chooses to take them for granted, the reluctance voiced by the writers towards the themes and the labels of the postcolonial (Hamid qtd in Jay 2014: 106) compel the academic reader to either conceive new names for analytical categories, or to propose a practice of literary analysis that does not take such labels and concepts at face value. Ultimately, novels like those studied here keep challenging conceptual categorization, yet point towards a common movement and new models, as Jahan Ramazani explains in *A Transnational Poetics*:

[A]s we move away from the mononational paradigm, as identitarian ways of structuring knowledge come under increasing scrutiny, as postcolonial and global studies make deeper inroads, English studies and other humanistic disciplines will be better able to project and delineate models of cross-national imaginative citizenship that are mobile, ambivalent, and multifaceted. (2009: 47)

The notion of an “imaginative citizenship” is perhaps key to understanding what is at stake with novelists like Hamid and Kunzru: a practice of literary fiction understood as a mode of being, and notably a mode of being with place. Between this “citizenship” and Christian Moraru’s idea of a literature that “takes responsibility for this world,” Mohsin Hamid’s and Hari Kunzru’s fictions confront their readers with their own role in the two intersecting paths of storytelling and place-making. In the end, these shifts in agency can be read together with what French writer Georges Perec advocated in *Species of Spaces*: “the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors” (1997: 79, emphasis in the original).¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Translation by John Sturrock, listed in the bibliography. In the original : “le monde (...) comme retrouvaille d’un sens, perception d’une écriture terrestre, d’une *géographie* dont nous avons oublié que nous sommes les auteurs.” Georges Perec, *Espèces d’Espaces*. 1974. Paris : Éditions Galilée, 2000, 156.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Three interviews with Hari Kunzru

INTERVIEW 1 - July, 3 2018, Paris

On categories, borders and sharing space

Preliminary note: the interview took place near the “Shakespeare and Company” bookshop in Paris, where Hari Kunzru was set to interview writer Michael Moorcock.

MJDD. I wanted to start with the *Granta* collection on Pakistan. You wrote an enlightening introduction for a collection of visual art called “High Noon.” You explained that identity is too often used to discuss the aesthetic choices of South Asian artists. You claim that identity is an “elusive quality” and that many artists have “internalized the categories of post-colonialism” to the point that they reproduce what is expected of them (namely, being “belated, constructed, supplicatory”).¹²⁹ It is an interesting position that shows how complex these labels are.

Even though you try not to be defined as such, do you still feel sometimes that your work is too systematically related to this South Asian “identity”? Have you sometimes been afraid of replicating this “internalization” yourself?

HK. Yes, and yes, I think, is the simple answer. It’s a circuit that’s partly an intellectual circuit, in that people read theory and they are tempted to construct work that speaks to the theory or is valorised by that kind of theory, so I think some of that work in that portfolio seems to me very clearly to have come after or in the wake of the traditional set of postcolonial ideas. But it’s a question of the market as well, and especially for a writer of fiction, it’s impossible to pretend that your work circulates outside some very strictly controlled...

MJDD. ... some labels ...?

HK. Yes, and in a way my first novel was knowingly addressing all that. I have grown up reading this theory and feeling very ambivalent about the commodification of a certain sort of “exotic” South Asian identity. It was also a project that was to do with the history of English literature and the canon of novels, that is to do with the British colonial subject going to India. But I think now, it is falling apart, really, because people have found its interpretative limits, and also because of gatekeepers. Mostly, for South Asians, the gatekeepers are in London, in the way that in the eighties the Latin American gatekeepers were in Paris, and perhaps more recently in New York. There has become an Indian market for fiction that is made domestically. If you go into a bookstore in New Delhi now, you’ll find an incredible variety of genre fiction, that is purely for Indians— they’re doing everything from techno thrillers to “sex and shopping.”

So, there is a cultural confidence. There is an impatience with some of the limitations of the forms that were imposed on us. You still most clearly uncover a desire, and I think that is where the ideology is most apparent, because they’re trying to market to what they can encompass as

¹²⁹ Kunzru, Hari. ‘High Noon.’ *Pakistan*, edited by John Freeman, *Granta*, 2010, pp. 134–36.

the centre of their audience, as the largest part of their audience, and they use a lot of clichés, they use a lot of easily decodable symbols that are clearly aimed at a white audience...

MJDD. You mentioned the hennaed hands as one of these...

HK. Yes, and it is very hard to bite the hand that feeds you, but it is something that a lot of writers talk about in private, and not just South Asian writers.

MJDD. One particular theme which keeps recurring in your fiction is that of borders, which are sometimes closer to boundaries. I think it appears not only in physical space but also in the characters' relations to their social environment, notably the limits imposed on characters from minority backgrounds, from poor backgrounds: the Virugenix premises in *Transmission* are highly gated; it also appears with the prison system in *White Tears*, which is directly aimed at black people as a continuation of slavery. And on the other end of the social spectrum, there are border control strategies sold by Guy Swift's company in *Transmission*.

Obviously, the refugee boats in the Mediterranean and the ICE situation at the US border are a reminder that borders are still very much an issue today. You are famously involved in programs helping refugees, notably with the Refugee Council. Would you say that your perception of the border—both as a concept and as an experienced space—has evolved since you started writing?

HK. I suppose it has. There is a sort of radical position which I think is important to keep hold of, in a way, which I took from my contact with the “No Borders” movement in the 1990s and the German slogan “*Kein Mensch Ist Illegal*,” “no one is illegal.” At the time I felt that we were on the winning side, or I was on the winning side of this question, and that we were entering a world where the nation-state wouldn't be so important, where increased communications would mean the kind of atavistic differences of race and nation would be dissolved in a very positive kind of globalization. But at the same time, it seems that there was a strong interest in the free movement of capital *without* the free movement of people. The best way of ensuring supplies of cheap labour is to make it very hard for people to go to where their labour is more valuable.

Now, plainly, the landscape has completely changed. Today, as we are speaking, I've just read that Angela Merkel has had to back down on her asylum policy because of the new right-wing challenge to her—already conservative—rule. And the idea of “no borders” is seen as absurdly utopian, even by people who consider themselves to be “the left.” In a pragmatic way, I understand what is politically possible for policy makers, but at the same time I think that regardless of questions of national security and economics, the principle that no one is illegal is a profound moral principle and I would still like to assert that.

MJDD. And will you continue exploring this in your work?

HK. I am very pessimistic about the situation at the moment. I think the policing is only going to get more intense. I'm living in the US, and now the machinery of border control has been very explicitly linked to a white nationalist ideology—the idea that America can be a “whites only” or a “whites first” nation, a nation whose identity is determined by white protestants, is back on the agenda in a way. I never believed that it would be. And it is very scary to be there at the moment. They send agents to the courthouse, they send agents to the school gates, and then my immigration status is fine, but I'm not a citizen, and I can't do certain things. You know, if I was to be arrested in a protest, that would put my whole situation in jeopardy. So, ironically, I'm thinking of taking citizenship in order to be able to protest!

I am also very sad about Brexit, because I think people in Britain have forgotten the non-economic side of the European project. The idea of peace in Europe seemed so impossible a hundred years ago, and after the Second World War it was such an urgent thing to achieve. And the Franco-German alliance that is at the centre of Europe is an extraordinary thing given the history. It is an incredible political achievement, and there is no appreciation of that in the British political class. I think it is very parochial of them, actually. And I'm very sad that it is not part of the discussion, really, in Brexit.

MJDD. Your works discuss mobility— that and border-crossing can be read as one and the same thing, in a way. I'm thinking particularly of how physical mobility mirrors social mobility, or lack of mobility, in *Transmission*. While Arjun is condemned to being a pedestrian, the wealthier characters constantly move about in big cars and planes. In 2004, in *The Guardian*, you explained that what you called the “global class” is so mobile that “they reject the idea of place.”¹³⁰ Could you develop on this phrase, “reject[ing] the idea of place,” and what it implies for the contemporary imagination?

HK. It's very interesting what happened to that formulation since I made it, in that now, with the resurgence of nationalisms, there is a reassertion of place as a desirable commodity in a way. Figures in America like Steve Bannon, and figures on the right— the sort of Russia/Le Pen/Bannon/Tory Party axis— are all reasserting some kind of natural connection to place against the problems they see that are caused by globalization, and they identify people like me as part of this problem, in the kind of cosmopolitanism that I think is the positive side of globalization. They now see it as a problem because we are insufficiently attached to place.

I had two very formative work experiences in my twenties working for magazines, one was *Wired Magazine*, a technology magazine, the other was *Wallpaper Magazine*, which is a lifestyle magazine. Both of them had a very explicitly globalist agenda. *Wallpaper* was all about being part of a class of people who can hop on a first-class plane or private plane and have lunch in one city and dinner in another city. It's this lifestyle that is unattainable for 99.9% of the world's people. And so, with a character like Guy Swift, I was trying to get to a sort of anxiety that I think comes with that, that is about a frictionless movement where everywhere begins to look the same; I have him in hotel rooms but he doesn't know where he is anymore and so on and so forth... But at that time, I wanted to think about the politics of that: who gets to move and who doesn't get to move.

But now we're back in a moment where people are ascertaining their priority and the antiquity of their presence in a particular place, like “*cher pays de mon enfance...*” It's very complicated; I feel I have to defend a sort of cosmopolitanism against the accusations of a sort of neoliberal globalization, and those things are not simple. In the British debate, there is a writer called David Goodhart, who is somebody of the centre right, who seems to be moving further to the right, who is writing against immigration and against multiculturalism, and he decries people like me, he says that some people are “*somewheres*,” and some people are “*anywheres*.” And he feels that Britain should be run for the *somewheres* rather than the cosmopolitans. And I'm made very nervous by this language, because it does echo the language that was used against the Jews in the middle of the twentieth century. The insult “rootless cosmopolitan” was the quintessential anti-Semitic insult, the fact that you may not have the patriotism or the attachment to your country that a “real” French person or English person would have.

¹³⁰ Cooke, Rachel. “I'm the bloke who got the big advance.” *The Guardian*, 16 May 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/may/16/fiction.features3> (accessed 02-11-2022).

So, I think the terms are shifting, and at the moment I'm trying to find a way of unpicking the things that I want to defend and assert from the things that I think on recent criticism today, and globalism, Guy Swift [in *Transmission*], is part of that.

MJDD. So, there is a conceptual shift...

HK. Yes, and I think that the politics around this are shifting very rapidly, and these issues are going to get more intense as climate change increases migration. By the time sea levels rise and Bangladesh is inundated, and desertification in the Sahel, it will make more people want to risk their lives and cross the Mediterranean, and there will be a call for ever harsher measures. And I think it's very important, for those of us who want to assert the humanity of non-white people, to make these arguments in the face of very strong opposition. And these emotive images of columns of Syrian refugees crossing Hungary, and Africans dying in the Mediterranean, make people think of these old ideas of invasion, and infection, and swamping, and all these things.

MJDD. I'll come back to this concern with infection, because I am interested in how you deal with that in your work.

In fact, people do not react that much to all those violent images, like the Syrian boy on the Turkish shore, and these columns of desperate moving people. Do you think that somehow there is a failure at narrating these stories, and do you think that fiction could be more efficient than images or the news in engaging people?

HK. It's often an argument made for fiction, that by telling these stories, you increase sympathy for the distant other. Sadly, I think this clearly doesn't function as well as we would hope—let's be honest. But at the same time, fiction is very useful for me, because it can be a way of thinking through quite complicated things, and at many different levels; it's much more intuitive to tell the story of a little boy who is on a boat in the Mediterranean than it is to present statistics or historical arguments, or to talk about the politics of Northern Nigeria... The accusation is that a politics driven by sentiment is not enough. I also think there is a danger of speaking to the converted. I don't discount fiction's ability to make political change, but I think organizing more directly political activity is more useful at this point. We are in a moment of crisis; and if I was primarily an activist, I wouldn't be hoping that my novels would make that change.

MJDD. We discussed the meaning of mobility. Part of the "global class" represented in your work shows through the figure of the self-assured corporate man: Guy Swift (*Transmission*), Cornelius Wallace in *White Tears*, or Jaz and his financial analyst colleague Cy Bachman in *Gods Without Men*. You even chose to do a character study of such a man in the story "Ink," endowing him with a first-person voice. Yet you never give way to an over-simplification of this figure. Among the characters I quoted, there are very subtle nuances (homosexuality, the Wallaces' history with slavery, Jaz's own background as the child of immigrants...). What makes this figure good character material?

HK. In some ways, I feel close to those men because I was supposed to be one, I think. Had things turned out slightly differently, had I been exposed to slightly different things, had both my parents been white... I don't know. I know some of these people, and I think that in some ways fiction has not done very well at presenting the corporate world in a meaningful way. I clearly have my disagreements with that way of life, and the way of thinking that comes with it, because I think it is limited—they are blind in ways that they don't understand, and they tend to think that they are smarter and better informed than other people, but they lack a certain sense

of experience. I am fascinated to see some of the people I went to university with, who had a very smooth passage from a good family, private school, elite universities, straight into that world. They have never been outside, in a way. And they may think that they can imagine what it is like, but they can't.

You know, I'm clearly not a marginalised figure in any meaningful way, but I have had periods of insecurity, and I think anybody who has been a freelancer in a creative position understands certain things about how the world works, when you don't have a structure, when you don't have a safety net. And the way things are run now, the removal of that safety from people, is a way of disciplining them. Fear is the way that people can be induced to work for long hours for little pay, fear is the way that they can be induced to be silent about political things that they actually believe, and we have a world of increased fear and discipline.

But I think it's not served by creating cartoon figures with top hats saying "I want all the money." How do things get built? How do complicated work structures get organized? This is not about the cheap morality that comes from leftist liberal writers sometimes, and that just discounts the importance of these projects. I think there are ways to look at a society; but at the same time, I admire some of the things that happen, you know, building bridges, these kinds of projects. I am interested in the nuances of that experience and I'm always very happy when I get to meet people who are moving around in these worlds because it is an experience that is different from mine, and it is an experience that has many sides, and I think it's part of one's general education to know about finance, let's say, or the law, or branding.

MJDD. What you did in the short story "Ink," by returning to the character's childhood, is an example of this.

HK. Yes, and I think it is an intellectual effort that writers should make.

MJDD. I would like to discuss something different, which is the meaning of soundscapes in your work, of sound. You're obviously intent on exploring this, notably in your work entitled "Listening to New York;" there is also the last part of *Transmission* which is called "Noise," like your short story collection. And of course, *White Tears* dives headfirst into the question of sounds, with this character who tries to capture all the sounds he hears on the streets. You mentioned that like many writers, you have often found it easier to use "visual language" than to describe sounds.¹³¹

Twenty-seven years ago, Adorno pointed to a "regression of listening"¹³² in contemporary societies. Do you think this is still valid, and do you believe fiction has a part to play in turning our attention away from images and screens and back to sounds?

HK. I love Adorno, but I think that kind of stern Adorno of high culture has some problems. I am interested in attention, and the quality of attention that we are able to give things in a distracted world. Then there's noise in the sense of, you know, *bruit* and distraction, and in *Transmission* it's much more to do with information theory and signal and noise, what is meaningful and what is not meaningful, and that being at least partly dependent on what you need from the transmission.

¹³¹ "Hari Kunzru, *White Tears*: hipsters, blues music and race in the US," *Foyles*, August 1, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3RMNtv5qbU> (accessed 02-11-2022)

¹³² Adorno, Theodor W. "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The culture industry. Selected essays on mass culture*. ed. J. M. Bernstein. London: Routledge. 1991, p. 26-52.

I was very struck when I read the historian Alain Corbin, and the idea of the auditory territory, as a way of organizing social space. I read that a long time ago— I like his work on the beach as well— and that got me thinking about what kind of cities, what kind of territories there are. I was always very interested in the situationist ideas about urban geography and the rather subconscious ways in which space gets organized, is pleasant or unpleasant, places we feel we can go into and places we can't.

It is also on the limits of human community and sharing, I suppose. I mean, it comes into contact with the idea of the commons, and public space— here we are, doing professional work in a public space, and this is the best place we have found in the neighbourhood to do that, it's very pleasant, and we didn't have to pay to sit here. You know, we're in a period of enclosure — sorry, I'm drifting off the question!

It *is* a very visual culture that we have. It is a little easy to moan about solipsism and headphones, any news writer in the world has written a column about that. But I think there are positive things about being able to control your auditory environment, especially if you are in a temporarily unpleasant place, like a metro carriage, and to be able in some way to overlay your physical space with an auditory space.

I listen to ambient music when I write, partly because I live in an apartment with some children and another writer and it's in the city, and there are a lot of minor distractions that can pull me out of my concentration and so I wear headphones and I create meditative space using this very minimal music. I'm interested in sound as a tool for inducing concentration. I think we are prone to distraction, and actually my own experience is that distraction can feel unhealthy, it can feel like it is actually stressful. I have had some very important experiences in the last few years of being alone and silent. I went to stay for a week on a Scottish island, away from everybody else, in a place with no internet and no phone, chopping wood for the fire and walking, and that depth of engagement with my own experience of the world is actually really sustaining. But at the same time, I'm somebody who's on social media, I dive into all this world— and I enjoy it, I dive into it with pleasure, but it can feel overwhelming and induce some kind of anxiety.

MJDD. There are also those rather self-contained contemporary means of expression which you insert directly in the narration, such as short e-mails (*Transmission*), YouTube comments (*Gods Without Men*), and even hashtags (*White Tears*). Why do you choose to include these forms? Is it only parody or is it something deeper? The YouTube conspiracy theories in particular are full-on comedy, with the caps lock on and hesitant spelling...

HK. One of the unforeseen side effects of the internet has been the creation of a lot of new language. Even with the visual possibilities of communication, there is still an amazing, fertile, new kind of linguistic expression that is happening, and I take simple pleasure in that.

I enjoy exploring sub-cultures: I want to participate in them, I'm fascinated by observing them, and also now it has a political urgency. The scandals around Russian influence in European and American politics are showing that it's possible to automate influence and to use this type of conversation that comes in the comment sections and in chatrooms to create a reality for people. The production of opinion has never been so great, and much of that opinion is fake opinion. You can increase the volume of some kinds of opinion by using automation.

The novel is an old-fashioned form, people are constantly talking about how it's going to die, because it's *not* social media or whatever fashionable medium of the day. "Is TV going to kill the novel?" "Is cinema going to kill the novel?" I think it resists that because it can incorporate all this new material. It's very easy for me to write like a YouTube comment, and to dwell inside this kind of thing... You know, I like the novel for not being a rigorous modernist activity. It's a dirty, messy, baggy thing. It gets involved with all sorts of stuff; you can point it in all sorts of directions. It's a really nice, flexible way of thinking. So, I think it's something that can incorporate all these other kinds of language into it.

MJDD. You were saying that sometimes there are "big" questions as to whether the novel is going to endure, whether TV is going to kill the novel, etc. When *Transmission* was published in 2004, a *New York Times* reviewer said that even though your writing was worthy of praise, the reader will still "pick up his remote, switch on the news (...) [because] [n]ovelists just can't compete."¹³³ Perhaps that would be even more salient today, in the era of social media. What do you make of this statement?

HK. I think on one level that's definitely true, if you try to be as quick as the news, because the time of production is too long. I suppose you could write something that appeared every day and then collect it together, you could have a sort of nineteenth-century practice like that. But interestingly, Michael Moorcock, whom I'm speaking to on Thursday (*NB. at Shakespeare and Company in Paris*), has always done that. As a younger man he could write a novel in three weeks. He has this character who is a time-travelling hip detective. But he prefaces each chapter with quotations from newspaper articles, so this new book has been written in the last few months, and it has that immediacy.

I think that what I was experimenting with *Transmission* was somehow attempting to be very modern in a way that I felt was doomed to fail... At the time I wrote it as a historical novel, because it's explicitly set in the late 1990s, and it was written in the early 2000s, I chose a moment, as I always try to do, and now it's clearly a historical novel. But actually, lately that book seems to be read more and more, and I feel quite vindicated by that. Because even though it was written before Facebook and YouTube and all these things, it seems to still speak to people. I like the fact that an internet thing is like a two-hundred-year-old thing!

I think that the novel should not try to be something that it can't be. I finished *White Tears* at the beginning of 2016 and it didn't appear until the beginning of 2017, and I was desperate for it to come out as quickly as possible, because I felt that was part of a conversation about race and politics, which as it turned out, is becoming more intense than before.

MJDD. I have a question about what you were just saying, whether *Transmission* was going to stay relevant in the long run, or whether people would relate to it as much as they do. There was probably an element of dystopia in the scale which you imagined for the virus then. But now, digital intrusion is familiar to anyone, if we think for instance of the Facebook analytics scandal...

HK. I think the mechanism was wrong, as it turns out. I mean, now we do talk about computer viruses shutting down power stations and things like that, and we're used to this mass hacking of credit card numbers, so in that sense, perhaps some of the mechanism I invented is coming

¹³³ Kirn, Walter. "Dateless in Seattle," May 23, 2014, *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/books/dateless-in-seattle.html> (accessed 02-11-2022).

true. But, I mean, the heart of any book is much more to do with the relationship between people and place. It still seems to be functioning to me, I think it has a life, that book...

MJDD. It very much has, yes. We were talking about this idea of a “competition” between the news and fiction writing. News channels and newspapers often form an embedded narration in your narratives, whether the reported event is the *Leela* virus, the disappearance of little Raj in *Gods Without Men*, or the death of Leonie in *White Tears*. Sometimes the headlines appear directly *per se* in a paragraph (ex. “Breaking News: Virus Suspect Held”).¹³⁴ It is sometimes disturbing for the reader not to be provided with a single authoritative voice on what is going on, but at the same time it makes reading highly hermeneutical. Is it also a far cry for critical thinking, in the age of information?

HK. I have always liked collage and parataxis as forms. I think you can do a lot by just placing different things side by side, by placing different registers side by side. When you have a screaming headline about an event about which you have been told very little, you have that experience of the distortion of reality by the media just by placing them side by side. It is a very efficient way of talking about that.

I think in a lot of my work, I go in one direction and then dislike it. This thing about a single authoritative voice and a single texture is maybe currently more interesting to me than producing a kind of kaleidoscope of different effects, whereas at other points I’ve loved the idea of writing a paragraph that has ten different things going on at the same time. As a very young writer starting out, I was very fond of a lot of American writing that was full of fireworks... And also, these Oulipian and *Nouveau Roman* things... You think of things like post-war writing, modernist writing that was trying to reproduce the experience of being in a city by bringing in all sorts of different things, headlines, and that kind of thing. Right now, that is just less interesting to me, but maybe I will go back to it.

MJDD. Talking about the city, I can’t really say that there is one particular genre which you adopt for the description of cities in your work. The London in *My Revolutions* is rather realistic, while in *White Tears*, New York is very uncanny, reminiscent of “The Man of the Crowd,” with this character walking and failing at understanding what is going on...

HK. I have this heritage from *The Painter of Modern Life*, “The Man of the Crowd...” It’s a way of looking at cities that is very important to me, the city as a phantasmagoria, as a hallucination. I walk around cities and feel that. If I’m in a strange city and I decide to just go walking in an undirected way, that’s an experience I have, being lost in a strange city, with that edge of panic and fear of not being able to get to your bed!

With London in *My Revolutions*, I wanted to meticulously reconstruct a version of the city that existed before I knew it in order to try to understand what had happened to that generation. So it had to be quite considered, researched.

And with the New York in *White Tears*, it was to do with this idea of being haunted, and haunting as a collapse of linear time: not feeling that you’re moving forward into the future, not being just dragged back into the past, but the past is not gone. So, as he walks through New York sometimes it’s one year, sometimes it’s another year. He goes to the same block and sometimes there are some shops there and sometimes it’s a different version of itself. That is of

¹³⁴ Kunzru, Hari. *Transmission*. London: Penguin. 2005, 158.

course a way of talking about gentrification and the changes in the city that are taking place very rapidly.

MJDD. Are there any other inspirations when you write about the city? I am thinking also of how you write about the suburbs in *Transmission*.

HK. I grew up in the suburbs and hated them with passion. The city was a place of possibility for me. I had the social relation to the suburbs, where everybody has their own space behind a wall and the idea of shared public space is actively avoided. It's what you go there to avoid. What I always wanted was a kind of democratic public space, where people of all kinds could look each other in the eye. That is still my ideal. That is still extraordinarily important. That is why I'm still committed to some idea of the public, this social democratic idea of shared space that is not privatized, that is not owned, where people have to negotiate with each other as equals to say "where I am going to put my blanket to picnic?"

MJDD. As you were saying before, you are a keen Twitter user...

HK. Yes.

MJDD. ...and you often express political opinions on current events. How do you navigate between your fiction writing and your everyday connection with the world, on a daily basis?

HK. I would love to tell you that this is an extremely considered position, but I think I use Twitter as the equivalent of sitting with the newspaper at the table in the morning and spitting out my coffee: I get angry about things, and I talk about them!

I know writers who are very concerned not to alienate people, and very concerned that they appear pleasant, and that their public image is accessible to as many people as possible. I'm sure I alienate people because I speak intemperately and I speak angrily, and I express strong political opinions. But the time seems to demand it. Ever since I have had access to some kind of media platform, ever since journalists would ring me up to ask what I thought about things, I have realized that it is quite privileged to have a platform where you can say things. I try and push out and retweet a lot of things, and I push these paper stories that I read out because I think they should be more discussed, and I think that a lot— I *know* that a lot of people follow my Twitter feed because I curate things. I have made an input for myself that is quite a good way of finding out what's happening in a lot of different areas of life. I follow good scientists, I follow finance people, I love it as a means of receiving information, and I find it more efficient than a newspaper. There is no newspaper that I go to every day. It is really my news-receiving machine, and my followers have to put up with a certain amount of me being grumpy about Trump...

As a fiction writer, you can make two decisions about your interface with the world of news and comments: either you decide that only your fiction should speak, and the name on the jacket is of the book, and the only time it appears is in front of this very considerate writing. I have good friends who don't use social media, and who will only appear in a public way in connection with a novel. I don't think I was ever really given a chance to be that; even if I had been temperamentally that kind of person, right from the beginning I had to talk about other things. Anyone would ask me about race, and so I would talk about it, and then suddenly you're in another territory. And very early on, I got involved in various political controversies, because I rejected a prize, and I said things about refugees, and then suddenly there you are.

Actually, I was given advice by a columnist, who said, “Make sure that if you write something it should count.” I don’t take that much newspaper work these days. I think it’s quite hard to be a daily presence in someone’s newspaper and be a novelist. I’m actually not sure what happens if you’re a daily presence in someone’s newspaper...I know that some people follow me on Twitter and they don’t even know I am a novelist and then find out and then somewhere down the line they read a book. I mean, that’s what I do... I don’t know if it’s a good thing or not!

I do feel that by participating in that, there are things I understand about the world, especially all this ebb and flow of opinion, all the stuff that is coming out now about how social media is manipulating people’s perception of reality... I understand about silos and I understand about the kind of volume of comment coming to you. In a very practical way, I think it’s useful for a novelist who needs to understand these things.

MJDD. Your writings often focus on crises and catastrophic events, whether on a small scale or a larger scale. But I find that there is a real playfulness in the way you create timelines surrounding them. I particularly like what you did in “Memories of the Decadence,” where you have this unnamed community living in a state of chaos and nonsensical obsessions, before “one day” they suddenly become “moderate” in a pattern that is that of Western people today.¹³⁵

I can perceive the influence of science fiction and post-apocalyptic stories in your take on the catastrophe, but are there other or more specific subgenres and writings which led you to the catastrophe? I’m thinking notably of the virus motif, which is in *Transmission* and in the story “Kalt es Klares Wasser,” on malaria.¹³⁶

HK. That short story came from a very specific experience, which was being invited by *Médecins Sans Frontières* to go and visit a malaria treatment project that they had in the northeast of India. So, I spent a week or two living with MSF volunteers in a place with a low-level civil war going on. I really began to understand about the politics of public health and the politics of malaria, a disease which affects millions of people every year, and whether there’s a financial incentive to solve it. That sort of question always fascinates me: in the intersection between, in that case, big pharma companies, and the humanitarian motives of curing a disease.

Obviously, as we’ve already said, this idea of infection has a history: who is pure and clean and healthy, and who is a disease on the body politic. I grew up in a milieu where some people thought my existence was a form of disease: the mixing of an Indian man and an English woman was an unpleasant by-product of colonization, colonialism or whatever; and so, I’ve always been attracted to writing for the unhealthy and the diseased rather than for the people who want to be pure or think of themselves as pure.

MJDD. Your novels are very acutely documented. You admittedly spend a lot of time researching historical events for your novels, but at the same time they are never fully realistic and leave space for unresolved mysteries. Would you say you are indebted to magic realism, and to Salman Rushdie in particular?

HK. Yes, of course, I’m indebted to Salman and to that space he opened up. I like his exuberant storytelling...But I don’t want to identify with magic realism, because I don’t think that the

¹³⁵ “Memories of the Decadence,” in Kunzru, Hari, *Noise*. London : Penguin, 2005. 29-36.

¹³⁶ Kunzru, Hari. “Kalt es Klares Wasser.” *Ox-Tales: Water*, edited by Mark Ellingham and Peter Florence, London: Profile, 2009, pp. 53–68.

effect of what I do is “magic.” There are unknowns in my fiction, especially in *Gods Without Men*, that is a novel with lots of very big holes, and it breaks a contract between the reader and the writer, you know, this very famous Chekov comment that if you have a gun that appears in the first act it has to be fired in the third. By making *that* the subject, the unknowability of certain things, I know I can make some critics quite cross.

I’m not fond of magic, I think of myself as a materialist, but I’m a materialist who is interested in belief, in the sense of the limits of knowledge. And so, things like UFOs appear in my work, not because I think that the UFO religion has done something on the real presence of aliens who come down in spaceships, but because of what it says about our yearning to make meaning.

MJDD. In *Noise* as well as in *Memory Palace*, you chose, on the opposite, not to insert any historical or realistic details— even though there are hints at London in the latter. As often with the short story, there is a fable-like quality to some of these stories, although it remains difficult to identify a moral stance...

HK. I don’t write much short fiction, but I’ve often used short fiction as a way of getting away from realism and making something more fabular and more playful. The stories in *Noise* are very old; they are work I did in my mid-twenties. *Memory Palace* is more recent than that. It is this quite specific genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. I think there are some things that do not sustain over the length of a novel. If I read a novel, I want that kind of engagement and thickness and emotional presence. But if you’re going to read ten pages of a short story, it can be a *jeu d’esprit*... Which does not sustain over a novel’s length.

INTERVIEW 2 – July 2019, Paris

On endings, speculation and history

Preliminary note: we met in Paris, where Hari Kunzru was teaching a biannual creative writing workshop organized by NYU.

MJDD. I would like to start with *My Revolutions* in mind, and the fact that some of your novels explore in depth the commitment of individuals within groups that are on the margins of society– it’s also the case with the UFO cult in *Gods Without Men*.

HK. I suppose I have the feeling that some people feel that they are in the centre of their own lives, and some people arrive in groups or arrive in situations from the outside. I’m interested in belonging, in general. That’s been a complicated part of my life. And certainly, when I think of a revolutionary group, the fantasy is that of a loss of self, or a subsumption of self into the group. Something bigger than the group into history, into “the people,” the bridging of the gap between individuals, the connection between everybody in a sort of utopian community. It’s my observation that people who are most captured by that fantasy are often very individualistic people, artists and people who maybe don’t have an everyday experience of the good and bad of being in a community. If you live in a small village and your neighbours are looking at your business, then your experience of a close community is positive and negative, whereas maybe if you’re in a city and you’re working in a precarious job and you’re a freelance cultural worker, then you imagine this kind of community that you don’t have as something that would be good.

There is a sort of religious aspect to it as well. I’m not sure that this kind of thing is a secularised religious impulse, but certainly, the wish for purity and clarity of purpose and a clear moral framework, all these things are religious ideas– and for the political milieu of *My Revolutions*, that’s true. For a cult it can also be straightforwardly about religion. *Gods without Men* was less to do with community in religion– although that’s true of various groups– but more to do with how you relate to the unknown, whether you accept that there are things beyond your comprehension or whether you wish to fill that with some kind of answer or name or determinate thing, or whether you believe that everything is potentially knowable. If you have a strong side that is rationalist and you believe in progress, then maybe that sort of unknown is a moving horizon that would eventually vanish. Perhaps that in itself has a utopian impulse– the end of ignorance.

MJDD. And when you’re within a group you reach closer towards that “end of ignorance,” you sort of find meaning in a group?

HK. Yes, I suppose there is something interesting in group dynamics and how groups come to their idea of what the truth is. You read about what happens when the millenarian prophecy doesn’t come true. What do you do the next day? They’re surprisingly resilient. Somehow, they discover some elasticity that maybe they didn’t understand, and can say things like “we said it was the end of the world today or tomorrow, but maybe we prayed so hard that the world didn’t end...”

MJDD. The unknown is something we discussed last year. It is very frequent as a theme. I find there’s also a formal lack of closure as well in your work... The chapters and sections often end with questions or riddles, or the novel endings act as a deflation for the reader. The one that got me thinking a lot was the ending of *Transmission*.

HK. I don't know if I was completely successful in *Transmission*, but the idea of *Transmission* was this relationship between signal and noise, the central metaphor is that metaphor from information theory whereby you have a sender and a receiver and a medium of transmission. Whether the signal gets through depends on the amount of noise in the medium. I wanted a signal to become more and more noisy and for a single possibility to become more and more indeterminate.

Obviously, the conventional thing for a plot is that there is a resolution and that resolution is a reaffirmation of the world in some ways. It tends to be in disruption before the ending and it ends up being resolved in death or marriage, you know, the classic resolution. I was wondering what would happen if you did have a plot that somehow dissolved and became less and less certain. That was the idea, and that is what happens to this character, his fate becomes indeterminate. And then I suppose there is a tension.

I'm naturally quite drawn to plot. I tend to have things happen in my writing! I tend to enjoy those structures, but I also often don't really like what the resolutions mean. I'm often very disappointed by a certain sort of cinema plot where everything is completely tightly wrapped up. I think my writing pulls in two directions: I want to have the pleasures of story but without accepting that there has to be closure in that way. For *Gods Without Men*, the structure is slightly different. The central metaphor is about the desert, and about what you feel about absence. The guy goes up to the top of the hill and he looks down for an answer. He looks at the desert, and the desert is an absence, the absence of human life, it's "god without men."

More recently I found myself less satisfied with things dying away and fading out. *White Tears* had a precise ending, and an ending that was appropriate for a ghost story, I suppose.

The book I'm writing now has a lot of things that are potentially unresolved beyond the ending, but there is an ending.

MJDD. While there is no strict pattern with endings, at the same time it's quite playful when you do these fade-outs— it's like a "Choose-your-own-ending" story. Have you ever thought of experimenting with that, perhaps online?

HK. I have thought about it. I used to write a lot about technology and the internet, and I met a lot of people who were keen about this. I even actually developed a project with the BBC in Britain to maybe make something like that. Really, games are the place where that happens now, and there's a quite developed culture around that. And they have slightly different impulses. A game should be a world that you can explore freely, and the more open that system is, the more interesting the world is. But for a piece of fiction, it is somehow unsatisfactory to be asked "what do you prefer?," because you're there to experience a kind of resolved aesthetic construct, and if it doesn't matter whether the character lives or dies, it feels like you're stuck in the middle somewhere. In the 90s there was such an excitement around this idea, and somehow, the fact that it has become more common is just a testament to the fact that people find it unsatisfactory.

MJDD. Yes, or not efficient enough. To continue with this question of the unknown, something which is intertwined with it, to me, is the omnipresent fear of a loss of control, whether it appears as a virus (in *Transmission*) or as miscegenation (*The Impressionist*) but also as the

excesses of radical activism for Chris Carver (*My Revolutions*). Is fiction a means to show that nothing can be controlled ultimately? In a cathartic way?

HK. There is a straightforward political idea that I have been trying to understand over the years, to do with the kind of control that is exerted from the top down and forms of organization which happen from the bottom up, which emerge from the interactions of individuals. The fantasy of absolute control or absolute power is absolutely terrifying and totalitarian on one side, but it also has that sort of modernist utopian dimension to it, you know, of a rational society that is governed according to “the good.” We are in Paris right now, and I feel that that notion gets born in 1789 and troubles begin to show in 1792 and 1793! And so, we’re still fighting out that issue about the perfectibility of humans, the possibility a rational society or government, or is it better to accept the messy transactions that come to make human life.

I was very excited as a young man encountering mathematical ideas about emergence and complexity, and the idea that order could come out of these thousands or millions of different interactions. I felt that would be a way of breaking out of that problem without attempts to impose an order from on high and without just saying “it will always be like this,” the sort of conservative acceptance of the status quo. I think if you have that kind of impulse to make change or for things to be better than they are, but you don’t want to be the commissar shooting people against the wall, then there seemed like there might be possibilities there. I don’t know where I stand with that now really, I think I’m probably more cynical about the possibility of change but I’m not prepared to just say “well, things are how they are, the poor are always with us,” or something like that.

MJDD. In a *New York Times* review of *Gods Without Men*, Douglas Coupland called your novels “translit,” which he defines as follows: “Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader’s mind.”¹³⁷

Do you feel that this definition does justice to your creative project? To me, it seems that space is central to your writing, but I am not sure I see it as “collapsing”—it always seems to be expanding, rather.

HK. I think it is an interesting place to start. I like the nuanced distinction between a historical novel and a novel that takes place at different points in history. My rough notion of a historical novel is a novel that in some ways uses the furniture of history, as an aesthetic, or to be decorative, whereas I think it is possible to write scenes set in other times that aren’t kitsch in that way. I have more of a problem with the idea of the collapsing of place, because I think that suggests a kind of globalization or globalism that flattens everything into one system of relations. If anything, I am more interested in refusing that in some way, and understanding how completely different the world seems from different places and perspectives.

If what we’re talking about is some conversation about national literature, or one of these critical categories, I do think that inevitably I come from a transnational perspective. I have moved around, I am a product of migration, and increasingly that is an identity in itself—there is a refusal of atavistic nationalist sorts of belonging. Maybe when we talked last it didn’t seem as urgent as it is now, we’re in a real moment of crisis again—a crisis that I didn’t expect to see.

¹³⁷ Coupland, Douglas. “*Gods Without Men*, by Hari Kunzru.” *The New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/books/review/gods-without-men-by-hari-kunzru.html> (accessed 02-11-2022).

Certainly, when I was writing something like *Transmission*, I imagined that we were heading towards a kind of globalization which was broadly accepted by most people, and that the issues would be around participation in those global flows. There were clearly going to be winners and losers, it wasn't "the end of history," or the end of politics. Now it seems that as a reaction to the loss of prestige through globalization, many people have turned to forms of nationalism that I thought were completely discredited.

MJDD. It is still very much the case that some people get to move and some don't, which means the sense of place is still very important, it hasn't "collapsed."

HK. Yes, in Europe and in the US, the border is more powerful than ever before. The upheavals of the last few years have totally given the lie to any easy idea of friction-free globalization. Maybe one thing I did get right in *Transmission* was the difference between speed and slowness, the difference between choice in moving and choice in staying and that some people have to move and some people are forced to stay where they are and aren't allowed to move to the other side to make their life better. Now those categories seem to be functioning in a more clear, extreme way than before.

MJDD. Your last two novels both grappled with issues that are at the core of Americanness: the question of race and that of the desert, the wilderness. From what I have heard, your next novel will not be set in the United States. Why is that? Did you fear that you were going to be labelled as an American writer?

HK. Just by having been in New York for over ten years now, I'm now part of that conversation maybe more than I am in a conversation in London. I feel like I don't know so much what's happening in London— I mean, I've spent more time here in Paris than in London in the last couple of years!

The new book is called *Red Pill*, and I've very nearly finished a draft of it. It has a strong European dimension but there's an American dimension as well. It is a writer who is living in Brooklyn with his wife and a small child, he's a nonfiction writer and he has taken a prestigious fellowship in Berlin. And he is kind of surprised to have got this: he has never been a popular writer. He almost accidentally wrote something that was popular and began to have some recognition. He has a creeping sense of dread, of unease, and it's making him impossible to live with. His wife, who is a lawyer, says to him, take this fellowship, go away for three months, write your book, deal with your trouble, whatever that is, you need to come back with your head in a better place. This is what he has decided he's going to do. He wants to write a book about lyric poetry and the self. He is talking about Adorno, Madame de Staël, he is talking about all sorts of ideas of what the lyric is, this expression of selfhood, and a contemplation of what it is to be a person.

He arrives in Germany to this institution in Wannsee, in the Western suburbs of Berlin, to find that he slightly misunderstood where he is going to be. He's expected to work first in a communal space with other people, and he was so focused on the idea of being on his own and not being observed, that just the simple thing of having to work in a room where other people will see him, is very problematic for him— he behaves very badly. He says he is not going to work there and locks himself in his room and basically refuses to participate in the life of this place. He has interactions with other fellows in this institution, that are quite bruising. There's a neurophilosopher that says there is no such thing as the self, and that he is completely outdated. He starts to think, maybe I don't have an interior life, and it becomes more and more

troubling to him. There is the lake in Wannsee, and on one side of the lake is the house where the Wannsee conference took place. It has this historical background. But also, it's the place where Heinrich von Kleist, the German romantic poet and playwright and fiction writer, killed himself in a suicide pact by the lake. The narrator was hoping to have this kind of communion with Goethe and Heine and this very calm, kind of German lyric experience. He becomes very over-involved for thinking about Kleist.

Kleist was not calm— he was anxious, troubled by the world, everything he tried to do just went wrong, he would have terrible arguments with people. He was a much younger writer than Goethe. He went to see Goethe, this grand old figure, and ended up having an argument with him and getting so angry that he challenged him to a duel. That's an absurd thing for a 25-year-old man to do with a 70-year-old man! Trouble followed him wherever he went. At 32, he kills himself and leaves behind these stories that are very excessive, too much happens in them, people called him "hysterical." This becomes the presiding life figure in this guy's life, and he goes towards this sort of nervous breakdown.

The other big aspect of the plot is that instead of writing his book, he realizes he can't. He doesn't do any work at all. And instead, he is watching TV on his computer and he is obsessed with an American police show. A very violent and nihilistic show. He starts to see that this is how the world is, this kind of dog-eat-dog, Darwinian competition, and he meets the show-runner of this show, who turns out to be a figure of the alt-right. There is a kind of encounter with a double or an alter-ego; somebody who's like him but ridicules everything that he cares about and stands for. The story takes him through this loss of confidence in all his broadly liberal assumptions about the value of art and selfhood. You could say it's my way of processing the last few years!

MJDD. Yes, that's interesting! There also seems to be a lot of your own experience in the initial stages of the plot.

HK. I made him close to my biography and situation in certain useful ways— I also spent six months in Berlin at the American Academy. I have stolen their physical buildings and I have put another institution in there, a slightly crazier kind of place.

MJDD. If I understand well, this novel is again dealing with the negotiation between the self and the world...

HK. Absolutely, and I'm very interested in what's happening around human rights, an idea of universal human rights, especially around migrants and refugees. But for years, especially in literary, theoretical circles, we've talked about the post-human and the face in the sand being washed away by the tide, but if we abandon an idea of the human, what happens to the rights that are attached to "human"? If there is nothing special about being human, what's to stop human beings used as raw material or being used in any way possible? So that seems to be a question that's coming up in the world now. And that is also just because of the idea that universalism or globalism is a dirty world for some people on the right, and the idea of universal rights becomes under threat.

MJDD. Going back to this notion of Americanness, but in a slightly different light— you gave an interview at the British Council in 2017 with Bernardine Evaristo, and you said that you feel

close to the way American writers write about the contemporary.¹³⁸ I would like to know what you meant by this, and also discuss this notion of the contemporary. You probably know this text by Agamben, where he defines contemporariness as “a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it, and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.”¹³⁹ Do you agree with this?

HK. I suppose I was being asked to justify why I had moved to the United States, and the honest answer was a very complex mix of personal and professional reasons. To say that it was a purely artistic decision would be overstating it. I would say that certainly British literature is always in dialogue with a kind of national past. There is a certain conservatism about form— social comedy, domestic drama, these are the forms that are the most comfortable for British literature. There is a British avant-garde, but it has been very, very marginalized and it is allowed very little voice in the literary culture. I think there is one in visual arts and in other forms—British avant-gardes tend to be forced away from the novel, certainly.

In the US, I would say in New York specifically, I found a cultural cosmopolitanism about fiction writing that didn’t seem to be available in the UK. That is partly because there is this university system which is actively recruiting people from all around the world, and there is a certain amount of money around, and there is a publishing culture which is soliciting people from around the world. In New York, there certainly is a lot of South American literature, some European traditions of literature, Asian literatures, and that has made me feel more... free to write things, and I’ve become much more a reader of a lot of fiction that wasn’t written in English. I think as a young British writer, I read a lot of Americans, and I felt that they were able to say things that didn’t seem around in British fiction. Now I’m not reading so many Americans, and I’m finding some Spanish and French...Right now, I’ve got very into Patrick Modiano... I know it’s kind of an old hat, he’s not a surprise to anybody in France!

I’m very excited by his work, and the autofictional tradition. I’ve been reading Emmanuel Carrère and Annie Ernaux. And with Karl Ove Knausgaard there was this big interest in the English-speaking world, but he was much less of a surprise to French people, I think, because of this tradition. It’s not what I do, what I write, but as a reader I am very interested in that. I don’t know if that answers your question.

MJDD. Well, would being a contemporary for a writer mean being cosmopolitan?

HK. So, I think to be a contemporary writer is to allow yourself some freedom to write outside literary tradition, to find ways to stand beside your time and make work that is about that. I am involved in social and political questions and they have seemed only to become more and more urgent, and I feel that the kind of writing that is useful to make is writing which addresses that. I think there is a bias against political writing which takes a polemical position, probably because it is usually considered aesthetically inferior by liberal culture gatekeepers.

I’m interested in the ways that one can be engaged. The form that I work in is quite a conservative form because of the time it takes to write a novel. And actually, because publishing

¹³⁸ *Hari Kunzru Reading and in Conversation at #BritLitBerlin 2017*. Directed by British Council Germany, 2017. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omo2iYVVG1U>. 37’18-37’28.: “There were ways that I felt I was more attuned to the ways of talking about contemporary culture that I saw coming out of American fiction.” Accessed 02-11-2022.

¹³⁹ Agamben, Giorgio. ‘What is the contemporary?’ in *What is an apparatus? and other essays*, Stanford University Press, 2009, 41.

times are increasing— you are lagging behind in certain way, you’ll never be able to have the immediacy of the commentator, or to drop a piece of fiction into the cultural conversation at the right time. So the game is slightly different. It is impossible to be absolutely contemporary as a writer of novels because you can be contemporary “minus three years,” or “plus three years,” whichever way you want to think of it. I am often surprised by the unwillingness of fiction writers to address the times in a head-on way and to address things like technological modernity, things like globalization. I don’t see so many writers who are doing this, especially writers who are valued by the literary establishment. It seems the preference is for a kind of writing that would filter these questions in a rather bleak, mournful way, through for examples the lives of a young couple, in modern London or Paris or wherever it is, and make side references to whatever it would be, terrorism ...

MJDD. or Brexit...

HK. or Brexit, but the idea of something that would ideally make that the subject of a novel... there’s a queasiness about it, and I don’t understand why that is, because I think that novels are rather good at that, because novels can be complex and take many different perspectives, and can have a broad scope. You could do the battle of Waterloo and then you can come down to a love story. It’s almost inherent in the form of the novel that it should be these big, messy, global questions. And who does that better than cinema, than narrative cinema? You know, I think that essay film as a genre is sadly underused— where is the Chris Marker of now? There ought to be people making that. There are possibilities for the novel there, and I am surprised that more people aren’t using them.

MJDD. I was going to ask you a question about the historical novel, but I think you’ve mentioned it before...

HK. You know, I think one of the best English novelists at the moment is Hillary Mantel, who is considered a writer of historical novels. She writes these perfectly researched books. I’ve been reading a book that she wrote— she must have been in her thirties— it’s an enormous novel about the French Revolution called *A Place of Greater Safety*. It’s a seven-hundred-page novel, with Danton, Camille Desmoulins and Robespierre as the central characters and it shows them from their childhood up to the Terror. And it’s great, it’s really good. It’s a novel about then rather than now, I think she wrote it in the 1980s and maybe I could see some sort of relevance to the 1980s. It is almost this kind of Borges-Quijote idea of thinking away back to how it would have been then. She’s a historical novelist I suppose, and she’s really good.

MJDD. Right, but last year you told me that *Transmission* had been intended as a historical novel, although it was set only ten years before you wrote it— so in terms of time span, what does a historical novel entail?

HK. Well, because I was dealing with technology, I had to pick a year and understand that by the time the book came out it would all have changed. Now, you look at all the things that aren’t there in that book: there’s no social media, no YouTube, no smartphones— there’s a kind of intimate culture that’s completely gone. But I think it still manages to talk about networks... You know what I said about it being impossible to be absolutely contemporary? I suppose that is what I meant, rather than the historical novel as a genre. It is fated to be contemporary with built into it. It’s a production.

MJDD. You are a keen reader of sci-fi and fantasy, as we evoked last year when you interviewed Michael Moorcock at Shakespeare and Company. The influence definitely shows, although I am thinking of the UFO-related passages in *Gods Without Men* which sometimes verge on parody— or perhaps a homage, I'm not sure...

HK. I'm probably not exactly sure either!

MJDD. Why didn't you choose these genres for your own writing? Is it because you were already too involved in social and political aspects that could not be explored with sci-fi and fantasy?

HK. I have written a dystopian piece of science fiction [*NB. Memory Palace*] and I have this unfinished future time science fiction novel that, for whatever reason, I never finished. Fantasy was the love of my childhood, really, and the limitations of that become very difficult for me now, and there's so much fantasy that's some kind of crude translation of something you take from the real world and you tweak the names, and essentially, it's the Catholic church, or something like that, some institution or some culture that has been used as a decorative thing over a story. I find that for me now, there's not a hard boundary between those, but let's call them both speculative fiction. I think speculation is still very, very useful and it's one of the core activities of all fiction. Realist fiction is clearly not telling the truth— Balzac describing in minute detail a boarding house dining room at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot* is no less fictional than somebody describing spaceships orbiting the earth. I think the habit of speculation, the systematic imagination of things that don't exist, is exciting to me but it doesn't necessarily have to take place in the future or to be an examination of things that are very technologically driven.

I quite like the sort of science fiction where the writer will tell you for fifty pages how the spaceship drive works, but I wouldn't be able to write that. I quite like finding out from writers like that about how things might happen, how might you build a spaceship or whatever it would be. And that — we probably talked about that with Michael Moorcock — there was an interesting turn in the 1960s and 1970s from outer space to inner space, and science fiction becomes about altered states of consciousness. One of the most exciting science fictions novels I've read recently is an old book, it's a 1990s book called *Permutation City* by a writer called Greg Egan. It's imagining the logic of what would happen if it was possible to upload your consciousness to a virtual world, and how very rich people would ensure themselves against death by having a kind of copy of themselves ready-to-go in a world like this. But he thinks through it very seriously, these existential issues around, what if this is a constructed world? There are boundaries which have been mathematically specified, so what kind of human freedom do you have, even if your brain state is complex and you feel yourself to be the same kind of self as you were in a human body, and what is your relationship to freedom ... That as itself gets very interesting to me, it is very much like the kind of thought experiment that philosophers do, but with more adjectives!

MJDD. Indeed, yours is a curiosity in the philosophical dimension of science fiction.

HK. Yes, and I think I come from a generation of writers many of whom have read genre work of some kind or another as young people, but we don't have the hierarchy that was enforced maybe for previous generations; it would be very bad to admit that you liked romance or whatever, whereas people now are happy to say, well, sometimes I read crime fiction, sometimes I read literary fiction. And then there's that slightly wrong-headed argument that

literary fiction is a genre among genres, in the attempt to flatten it out completely. So, there's something about high and low culture that has changed, which makes it possible, I think, for genre elements to enter the literary— and be accepted as literary work.

MJDD. In 1997, you wrote a profile for Donna Haraway in *Wired*. That was around the time when you started writing fiction. The interaction between the natural and the artificial is important in works like *Memory Palace*, and you don't have to look far to find cyborgs, in short stories like "Drone" or "Bodywork."¹⁴⁰ There is this passage in *The Impressionist* where Pran Nath is described as "in pieces" and "[a] pile of Pran-rubble."¹⁴¹

I was wondering how much you think Haraway's concepts influenced your work.

HK. She is very important to me. I came across her earlier, when I was a philosophy graduate student, and the idea that it was possible to construct yourself, and the idea that there were these passages between nature and technology, that these two categories were much more troubled and much more complicated than I understood. That was an important revelation for me.

She had refused to speak to anybody from *Wired Magazine*, because she didn't like the libertarian politics of the magazine. I was in the London office rather than with the San Francisco people, and I wrote to her and I showed her that I understood the Marxist background of her work and that I was more politically sympathetic to it than some of the other writers. So, she agreed to speak to me, and that was important for me. It was also the first time I'd done anything like that— I had to get myself up to where she lived in Northern California, which involved renting a car and driving. I remember that being kind of a challenge, I hadn't done that before. She is a real West Coast person, living up in the Red Woods in a cabin and she is part of a radical tradition that is from that part of the US. Lots of things about that were very important for my later work as well.

MJDD. There is this concern with authenticity in your works, whether it manifests itself through Pran's impersonations in *The Impressionist* or more recently with the question of cultural appropriation in *White Tears*. Isn't there a paradox in the fact that you constantly explore authenticity while creating fictions?

HK. Absolutely. With authenticity as a category that has been imposed on me, it's something I have to negotiate with, and my failure to be authentic is always part of what I have to write about and defend, or work around, maybe. I am suspicious of authenticity, for all the kind of twentieth-century historical reasons that one ought to be suspicious of authenticity, and the kind of appeals that are being made now, politically. There are all sorts of places where there are certain people who have a right to be in a certain place and others don't. Again, I feel like I have to go round these circuits. Actually, it's kind of draining.

But then of course, what better way to assert yourself than your ability to construct yourself in a cyborg way, or to make yourself, than the writing of fiction? As I amass a larger word count, I am making a version of myself out, out of these words I am defining my terms and conditions. I make jokes that I am the least authentic person I know, and in some way, I'm writing *for* people who are troubled by or who feel oppressed by this contest of authenticity.

At the same time, I think especially now, we do have to recognize that the kind of cosmopolitan flattening of globalization leads to a— colludes, let's say, with a particular kind of marketized—

¹⁴⁰ Kunzru, Hari, *et al.* *Memory Palace*. London: V&A Pub, 2013. Kunzru, Hari, *Noise*. London: Penguin, 2005.

¹⁴¹ Kunzru, Hari. *The Impressionist*. London: Penguin, 2003 (2002).

I mean, it's very boring to say, everybody uses the word 'neoliberal,' but let's say it's a neoliberal version of the world order which is a sort technocratic, market-driven production of consumers, the subjectivity that is produced by that order is deracinated because that is convenient for capital. I accept that there are aspects of that kind of inauthentic, cosmopolitan positioning that can lead towards that, but that is something I would like to resist.

MJDD. There is this powerful question at the heart of *My Revolutions*, when Chris's radical group struggles to have their actions reported in the media: "Does something exist if it's unobserved? Does something happen if it is not reported?"¹⁴²

To me, it also echoes the omnipresence of collage and juxtaposed media in your novels. It is interesting to question this co-dependence between language and experience, and logocentrism, in the middle of a fiction piece. Could you expand on the meaning of this reflection?

HK. I really did mean that in the context of political activism. Historically that is what happened with a lot of these British radical groups: the British state was very good at letting things slide into silence. They understood that if less and less things had a presence in the media— and they did have a kind of spectacular effect— then they might as well not have happened at all. You can compare that with what happened in particular in Germany at the same time, where there was a kind of neurotic reaction. They made the Red Army Faction fugitives into superstars and they staged this conflict in the social space, and both sides colluded into this.

The same, I think, is true of the "War on Terror." There are people on both sides who wish to stage this as a big social confrontation and in that way, I feel very angry to this day, about the way that the right in Europe and in the US colluded with Al-Qaeda and other groups to stage this clash of civilizations as the spectacular, defining conflict of a period, whereas other things happened in silence which were arguably just as important, just as significant. So, the second part of your question was relating that to the practice of writing fiction?

MJDD. It's one aspect of it, perhaps; what you were saying goes back to the question of truth and the manipulation of events, which occurs often in your works. What I meant was that it's interesting to have that in a fiction piece, because fiction is perhaps essentially untrue.

HK. Yes. I often end up referring to that line by Don DeLillo, I think it's in *Mao II*, he says "Novelists and terrorists play a zero-sum game," and that was a book that was written in the early 1990s, but it was very prescient of what occurred later on. He understood that there was a staging in the spectacular terrorist attack, and in some way, he felt that was outpacing the ability of writers to stage, or represent, or be contemporary... If that's our job, to sometimes stand aside, beside the present, indicate it, or represent it, then he felt that in that moment, terrorists were doing that in a more efficient way.

MJDD. DeLillo, then, is one of the American writers who influenced you...

HK. I would still say that he has been more or less— certainly— the most important writer for me as a young man. When I was very young, I liked Thomas Pynchon, and now it's been a long time since I was able to really read Pynchon. But DeLillo has been hugely important for me. One of the pleasures of going to New York was the pleasure of finally getting to meet him and

¹⁴² Kunzru, Hari. *My Revolutions*. London: Penguin, 2007, 184.

to realize that he reads my work. He kind of acknowledged that I was working in his tradition, that was great!

MJDD. You chose to use an external narrator in *The Impressionist*, *Transmission* and *Gods Without Men*, while *My Revolutions* and *White Tears* are written in the first person.

HK. As is the new one.

MJDD. How do you make such choices? Does it have to do with a more directly historical aspect?

HK. I think it is what serves the story. With *White Tears* and *Red Pill*, the new book, the subjective experience of the narrator is what I'm interested in— and in *My Revolutions* as well. With *My Revolutions*, it was about how his subjectivity had changed overtime and of course he ends up living under an assumed name, and this question of inauthenticity comes up around that. I could not write that story with somebody who could stand outside the experience of the young radical and talk about what it felt like to be that young radical and at the same time who was *not* still the person who would have harangued you at a political meeting— it would have been impossible to tell a fiction through that.

With the new book, it's got this kind of concern about selfhood, and the experience of self, and somebody who wishes to have this luxurious, lyric selfhood but feels that he's falling short of that, so that becomes a reason to use the first person, whereas with *Gods Without Men*, there is a broad sweep — there was no voice like a *Salman-Rushdie*sque, kind of fantastical omniscient chatty narrator, you know. You could have done that sort of story with that, but that would have been an intrusive presence to me, and I like to have the voice that can stand outside any individual story. I don't have a defining preference for one or the other, I've flected between both.

MJDD. You have explored a number of creative, innovative formats, especially in *Memory Palace* and *Twice Upon a Time* in which your fiction interacted with visual art and with sounds. Are there other genres and art forms you haven't addressed yet and that you would like to experience with? Have you ever thought of theatre or cinema for instance?

HK. I love cinema and I have always suspected that I am not wired up to be able to direct. I know what I would want to do, but I don't think I can make anybody do it! I tried theatre directing as a student and I realized that I found it very stressful to try and manage people and persuade them that you would like things to be a certain way and to take responsibility for these choices when other people were questioning them. I prefer to hide in my room and write!

One thing I am doing, which may turn into a thing, is that I was asked to make a podcast. I like sound, I am very interested in music and sound. I was approached by a company which has worked with some big American nonfiction writers like Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Lewis, the sort of journalists who write long form nonfiction— Gladwell writes about social sciences and Michael Lewis knows about finance. They asked me whether I would like to do something, and I made a program which hasn't appeared yet, where I went to Harvard to talk to a genetics researcher who specializes in ancient DNA, and he is discovering all sorts of things about migration patterns, and one of the things that he discovered was that the people who built Stonehenge have no genetic relationship to modern British people.

MJDD. Really?

HK. It was very interesting to me, because of stories about origins and for all the reasons that you can understand. So, then they sent me to Stonehenge for one of the ceremonies, the spring equinox, I stood in the circle with the druids who were celebrating and I asked them whether it mattered to them whether they were related to the builders of the monument, and interestingly they were saying no. I was expecting they would be kind of Brexit druids, and they would very much be like “this is *our* place.” I think there were one or two people who were, maybe, a couple of guys seemed like they might be English nationalists, but most of them were just there, in medieval clothes...

Anyway, I got to tell a story about Britishness and where I’m from and so on and it was very enjoyable, and they liked it, and we’re in negotiations to make a series of these programs. There will be a science element to a lot of them and a lot of it is tied to technology, but also addressing social questions. I wanted to make one on immunology, and ideas about the body politic, and all that disease-related discourse about migration, and one about the self. If that happens as well, I’ll be doing this in full, maybe six episodes like that, that will be available on the internet.

(NB. The podcast has since been released by Pushkin, and is called Into the Zone; it is available on the main podcasting platforms)

INTERVIEW 3 – October 2020, online

On *Red Pill*, hospitality and hostility

Preliminary note

This interview was recorded ahead of the “Hospitalities, Hostilities: Narratives and Representations” conference, which took place on November 19 and 20, 2020, and was organized by Université Grenoble-Alpes (lab. *ILCEA4*). The interview was recorded on October 30, broadcast during the conference and later uploaded on the conference website. Hari Kunzru kindly accepted to discuss the concepts of hospitality and hostility, more specifically as these notions appear in his novel *Red Pill*, which had just been released in September 2020.

Hari Kunzru read two passages from *Red Pill*, which are not reproduced here for copyright reasons. The pages are indicated and refer to the hardback edition.¹⁴³

MJDD. Rather than starting with literature itself, I would like to start with your political commitment to the questions we are studying in this conference, through events that our conference participants may not know. When you started writing, your first novel *The Impressionist* got really famous for winning a prize but also for the position you held upon receiving it. The John Llewellyn Rhys prize was delivered by the *Daily Mail*, and you declined it because of the *Mail*'s position towards immigrants and refugees. You later got involved with the Refugee Council, and more recently— as you now live in the US— you were quite vocal about the ICE crisis at the US-Mexican border, notably in a piece for PEN America about the US's immigration policy.¹⁴⁴ Why did you choose to be vocal and politically engaged on the question of immigration rather than only having it appear through your fiction?

HK. I found I had no choice, really. I am the product of migration— I suppose that is the first thing to say. I wouldn't have had the life I have had without the colonial connection between India and Britain. My Indian father came to the UK in the 1960s and married my English mother. One of the very important, determining factors of my life is that experience of migration and an understanding of what it takes to make a life in a new country. Growing up during the 1980s, the media, particularly newspapers like the *Daily Mail*, used the threat that is familiar to everybody: the figure of the migrant and the immigrant as a scapegoat for various kinds of social problems. So, it was a very difficult moment for me when I was offered this prize for my first novel. I was a young writer, I was obviously very pleased to be recognized, but at the same time the idea of shaking hands with the editor of the *Mail On Sunday* was just not possible for me. I wasn't expecting the reaction to be as strong as it was. I think it was because there was some money attached to it and people don't usually say no to money— especially writers!

It also showed how little political activity there had been in Britain for some time— the fact that it was shocking that I was refusing this prize on the grounds of the newspaper's continual hostility towards migrants. It became something of a drama, and it became a kind of springboard for me to make other statements. I was then invited to talk about these things quite a lot, and I saw no reason not to.

¹⁴³ Kunzru, Hari. *Red Pill*. 1st edition, London: Scribner UK, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ “Points of Entry: Writers on the Border.” *PEN America*, 3 July 2019, <https://pen.org/literary-activists-immigration/> (accessed 02-11-2022).

So, I became a figure with some kind of public platform, at least in the UK. Then much later on, I moved countries and I am now living in New York as an immigrant, and I am married to a Japanese American novelist and her background also has a history of migration— it was her parents who came to the US from Japan. Our particular family history is very complicated and is absolutely determined by these journeys. Of course, now, we have been living for some years under an administration that has a kind of nativist idea about what America should be. They are very explicit about the notion that America should be a white, Christian country and the rest of us there are under sufferance. In a way, it returned me to this moment twenty years ago: having to make a clear stance and having to be a political commentator away from fiction. These issues, of course, also come up in my fiction.

MJDD. Your latest novel *Red Pill* broaches many urgent yet intertwined topics such as the rise of far-right discourse in the United States and Europe, surveillance society, and the relation between the self and the other— but also what the self is, or could be. Could you perhaps remind us of the plot and how all this plays out together?

HK. It is a book about a writer who goes to Berlin on a literary residency and he is troubled in a way that he can't really name. Before going, he feels very anxious; he feels that the future is very uncertain, not just on a personal level— actually his personal life seems fine— but in some more inchoate, wide-ranging way. He feels a sense of instability. For me, writing the book, I was interested in expressing the sort of generalized anxiety that I think a lot of people in the world are feeling, as the tectonic plates of the post-war political order shift around, and we have a new kind of challenges to the liberal democracy that certainly in Western Europe and America seemed completely unquestionable when I was growing up. After the Cold War ended, there was this 90s moment when the phrase “the end of history” turned up— Francis Fukuyama's phrase—, the idea that politics was going to be just a question of management. It was going to be a technocratic business. And instead, of course, we've had a very different experience.

So, in the novel, my character goes to Berlin. He intends to write a book about lyric poetry and the self. He is very interested in the tradition of German romanticism. In a secret way, he just wishes to have this luxurious experience of selfhood. He feels that it would solve something for him if he was allowed to be alone with himself and to experience himself in a grounded way. Instead of that, he becomes more and more anxious; he is unable to work; he can't write his poetry book. Whenever he looks inside, he doesn't find this deep sense of self. He finds fragments— he finds nothing there, and that's a worrying experience.

To take his mind off his various failures, he begins to watch an American TV police show on a streaming service. And he becomes increasingly obsessed with this show, which has a very bleak, you could say Darwinian, view of the world: everyone is in competition with everybody else, the weak are destined to be crushed, the only realities are force and financial power... And he begins to suspect that the maker of this TV show— which is a genre piece, not an intellectual show, but an escapist piece of TV— he begins to suspect that the showrunner is seeding messages into this, and promoting this particular world view as a way of softening people up for abandoning things like democracy and human rights. It is a very excessive reaction to a TV show, but when he actually meets the maker of the TV show at a party for the Berlinale film festival and realizes that the man is involved in far-right politics, he is unable to do anything about that. The novel is more concerned with the narrator's fragile mental state than anything else.

MJDD. It is also very much about the radicalization of discourse in general, whether it is spoken or written, on social media, on television. I would say it is more particularly about the many possibilities for spreading unchallenged hate speech today— at one point, the narrator calls it a “blast of hostility.”¹⁴⁵ It’s something you also mentioned in an opinion piece about the website *4Chan* and similar online communities.¹⁴⁶ I would like to know where you think fiction stands with regard to hostile discourse, how it might be able to keep it in check, or at least question, the hostility of speech as we witness it today?

HK. Fiction has a particular role to play here, I think, actually, because most kinds of speech in this area and most kinds of writing are inevitably polemic in that they take sides; they enact the vision that they are commenting on. You say “hate speech is bad” or “the alt-right is bad” and you are taking a position and being engaged in that dialectic. Fiction writers, myself included, obviously have commitments—we have opinions, we don’t speak from a neutral place. But fiction can clear a space where these conflicts can rise up and be examined as conflicts. One of the things I try in this book is give a very strong version of the attractiveness of this alt-right position. I wanted to have a sense of the charisma of some of these alt-right figures and why it is attractive.

It is part of the problem that for a very long time, centrist, liberal, democratic discourse was so convinced that there was nothing to even look at in this right-wing sphere of discourse. It was ignored. It grew and it came as a surprise, I think. For most people in the US, the events of 2015 and 2016 and the rise of Trump felt very disorientating because these people hadn’t understood the culture that had been growing around these ideas for many years. And of course, it is not just in the US. There is a particular circuit, between, let’s say Renaud Camus and the French far right,¹⁴⁷ and the more intellectual end of the Trumpist spectrum in the US. There are Russian figures, there are British figures, there are Brazilian figures... There is a kind of “*Internationale*” of this extreme right.

But in fiction, what you can do is stage this. You can actually spend quite a lot of time trying to feel out the textures of these debates, and the rhetorical ways that people behave rather than just looking at the content and saying “this idea is right” and “this idea is wrong,” and you can understand all the kind of non-denotative ways in which this kind of politics functions. A lot of this politics is emotionally based and is not really a question of rational argument at all. It is a question of feelings; a question of fear and desire. It operates on levels that are not very tractable to the kind of mainstream political debate where two people are having an argument and the one who appears to be the most convincing wins.

MJDD. I see. It seems that this echoes what you explored in your podcast episode on the subject of the dialectic as well.¹⁴⁸ There is this passage in the book where Anton, the alt-right television writer, tells the narrator that he has “a sentimental wish to help other people far away, nice abstract refugees who save you from having to commit to anybody or anything real.”¹⁴⁹ I think it really resonates with the concerns we have in this conference, trying to reconcile theory and

¹⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, 175.

¹⁴⁶ Kunzru, Hari. “For the Lulz,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2020.

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/03/26/trolls-4chan-gamergate-lulz/> (accessed 02-11-2022).

¹⁴⁷ Hari Kunzru refers twice to Renaud Camus’s polemical book *Le Grand Remplacement* published in 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Pushkin Industries, Hari Kunzru. “It’s Always Sunny in the Dialectic,” *Into the Zone*, Episode 5, <https://www.pushkin.fm/show/into-the-zone/> (accessed 02-11-2022).

¹⁴⁹ *op. cit.*, 176.

practice, and again, I can see the type of dialectic you are pointing to here. But is this also a cynical outlook on your part? Are we all bound to think of refugees as “abstract” in the end?

HK. I think this is, in fact, the accusation from the right. The phrase that is always used in English discourse is “virtue signalling”: the idea that certain sorts of public speech and public action are staged in order to make the speaker look good... The strong version of the far-right argument is that rather than dealing with your neighbours, rather than dealing with the situation as it actually is and dealing in an immediate way with, let’s say, social inequality or unemployment, an elite liberal centre-left is orientated towards a nicely abstract figure of goodness and suffering. It is a quasi-religious thing. Some on the right wing will refer to this liberal order as “the cathedral...”

I think it is incorrect. I don’t think that such an argument is valid, but there is an interesting question about to whom we owe duties and how far out the circle of our community should go. The accusation would be that we neglect those closest to us in favour of an abstraction. There are many ways to counter that and I think we *do* owe duties to people who we don’t have cultural similarities to and who have come to meet us from other places. I think there is a left tradition of internationalism which I think is one that could be revived to do some work here.

There is an interesting reaction in the Anglo-Saxon world to the politics of multiculturalism which at a time— and I understand it has worked very differently in France— but in the post-imperial setting of Britain and Canada and other, mostly English-speaking places, the idea that culture could be multiple and that many people could bring something and a new culture could emerge was quite powerful. Certainly, that was the politics that bridged the post-war moment in Britain and allowed people to find a way of adjusting to a country with mass immigration. And then the critique has come back from the right, saying, “is diversity in itself a good?” And what happens when diversity goes beyond a certain point and there is a certain social solidarity breakdown? For example, are you prepared to pay high taxes to support people with whom you have little in common? It is a conversation that is happening a lot in Scandinavian countries.

The problem with multiculturalism in the UK partly became to do with who gets to define what a culture is and who gets to negotiate on behalf of a particular group, especially in the aftermath of the Iraq War. The kind of politics where cultural conservatives were allowed to kind of barter for influence would emerge, at a moment when the government was trying to regain the trust they had lost by participating in the Iraq War. There is a real question about how we deal with people with whom we feel we have little in common.

But what we’ve forgotten is the plasticity of culture. I am an example of that. In many ways, I am extremely culturally British. I have a certain set of references— you know, I feel tearful when I hear William Blake’s Jerusalem! My existence has very strong elements from India as well and yet I don’t experience myself as split in any way, and that kind of growth and change takes place over a single generation. The anxiety about “*le Grand Remplacement*” is predicated on the idea that everybody is static rather than the fact that people bring things and a new thing emerges that is a hybrid thing, that includes the best of what was there before and includes the best of what has arrived.

Hospitality is not just giving: you receive in return for your hospitality and that circuit is an important thing for us to remember as we try and conceptualize how to proceed.

MJDD. There is one passage in *Red Pill* when the narrator is forced to look at all this and at the refugee crisis in the eye, quite literally, as he encounters a refugee and his daughter in the suburbs of Wansee. Could you read this passage for us and comment on it?

HK. This is a moment in Berlin when the narrator is waiting for a bus and he is looking at a little girl in front of a fast-food restaurant; she is a small child and does not seem to have a guardian. [*H.K. reads from pages 155-156*]

MJDD. They appear several times in the novel, this father and daughter who are refugees. What was the intention there?

HK. It was again this question of a personal encounter rather than an abstraction. I spent six months in Berlin at this time, around 2015 and early 2016, and it was a very strange moment to be somebody who looked like me, because very often Berlin people would assume I was a refugee and react to me accordingly— either very positively, being very welcoming, or very negatively. I had these moments of connection, and also somebody I knew there was working with refugee children so I spent some time assisting with a choir of refugee children. I actually saw this event happen, this man dumpster-diving with his little daughter; it shocked me at the time because actually, the refugees were provided with food and shelter. The German government was very well organized, even though it was an extremely complicated thing to do and they were being housed in schools, gymnasiums and an aired field in Berlin.

But for the narrator who wants to prove his commitment to his fellow humans, on a personal basis rather than an abstraction— he gets very muddled. He is having a breakdown, and eventually, he follows the father and daughter to where they are living and makes a very confused attempt to give them money and is eventually thrown out of the facility. He makes a fool of himself. He frightens them and his gesture goes badly wrong. I wanted to stage something that was to do with the difficulty of that: the difficulty of charity on a personal basis. What I want to say is that there should be some structural way in which this duty of care or hospitality is enacted and it clearly has to be on a mass basis, on the level of governments and large organizations. But at the same time, there is this accusation that it is nicely separated from the personal. Yet personal interactions can go so badly wrong.

It is a moment for fiction rather than an argument. I'm not trying to make a conclusion from it. I'm trying to stage the difficulty and in some sense the embarrassment of this situation. What does it mean to have a lot when somebody has nothing? We often end up with a mistaken preoccupation with our own feelings of guilt or our own states, whatever they might be— emotional states... Whereas actually, what you feel about something isn't really the point in this situation. There is a need for something more than sentiment— for something that pushes sentiment aside.

MJDD. *Red Pill* has this sort of open ending where the main character witnesses the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and sees a sea of supporters with red MAGA hats, and a whole reflection unfolds on the meaning of hospitality for the alt-right. Could you read this ending for us as well?

HK. [*H.K. reads from p.283-284*]

MJDD. I think this passage really echoes and illustrates the ambivalence of hospitality. On the one hand, it seems to be a universally shared, ancient value binding humanity together. On the

other hand, as Derrida analysed it, the condition of hospitality is to establish the limit between self and other, which can actually lead to forms of hostility, as represented here with a teenager in the crowd wearing a sweatshirt saying “We Only Love Family.”¹⁵⁰ What do you make of these ambivalences that seem inherent to hospitality?

HK. Somebody was explaining to me yesterday that in Chinese, you only use polite forms with somebody you are not close to. You wouldn’t speak very politely to people who you consider to be inside your circle of hospitality– it is not deemed necessary. In the same way, the forms and customs of hospitality are perhaps ways of negotiating with potential enemies: you leave your weapons at the door and come with a gift in your hands. But it is about reciprocity, and I think that is very important.

One of the weaknesses of liberal political discourse is that it is very comfortable with the individual, and has much greater problems understanding individuals’ responses towards the group: when do you become part of a group? What do you subsume of your individuality in order to participate in a group? I think that is– as ever– the crucial political question for our times. In America, we have a president who has a very impoverished understanding of that reciprocity. He feels like anything America does, there is another people or another group taking advantage of America. There is a lot of rhetoric about how “they are laughing at us behind our backs,” “they think we are foolish to give money to NATO” etc. He doesn’t have any sense of the gift– that with that, something comes back, and that something could be respect, cooperation, understanding; important building blocks for, in this case, an international order.

On a micro level, the alt-right / far-right discourse again doesn’t understand reciprocity and the way that one can become part of the community. If you think about someone like the philosopher Roberto Esposito talking about how community and immunity are very linked, in the same way as what you mentioned about Derrida: it’s always about defining the outside by bringing somebody or something *inside*.¹⁵¹ That is a continual process and it is not a question of “parasitism,” which is the language the far right often reaches for. If I have a political hope, it is that we manage to think community in this fluid, inclusive way; which is nothing as banal as “we’re all human, and that’s an end to it,” because of course it is more complicated than that. But the acknowledgement is that by these acts of hospitality– these *continual* acts of hospitality, and continual migrations, things change and things move on. We produce community out of those.

MJDD. We are now four days from a new US presidential election [*N.B. November 2020 election*]. Do you think this political hope could materialize, then?

HK. It is very stressful, I must say. I don’t know what I will do if Trump gets re-elected for another term. It is a serious question for my family whether we will stay or not. It would be very hard for us to leave because we have jobs and the children have school– all the usual things that keep you in a place. But right now, I have hopes that Trump will lose, and lose convincingly enough that there won’t be a difficult transition, but I am trying to psychologically prepare for what happens if there is a disputed transition.

¹⁵⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Hospitalité: Volume I - Séminaire (1995-1996)*. Paris: Seuil, 2021.

¹⁵¹ Hari Kunzru is referring to Roberto Esposito’s trilogy where he developed the concepts of “*communitas*,” “*immunitas*” and “*bios*” as a means to re-think the social body and the community.

Even if we get a Biden administration, that just means that a lot of the things that should have been talked about four years ago will now have to be spoken about– the climate, for one thing. There has been a lot of damage done to the social fabric here in the last four years and there is going to have to be a work of reconciliation of some kind. The country is as polarized as ever and there will be a substantial minority who will not accept the new administration, whichever way it goes.

Annex 2.

Résumé de la thèse en français

Tel que demandé par l'ED LLSH et le laboratoire ILCEA4 (Université Grenoble-Alpes) dans le cadre de la dérogation accordée pour une rédaction dans une langue autre que le français

**La fabrique des lieux : po/éthique du lieu dans les œuvres de fiction de
Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru**

Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot

Sous la co-direction des professeurs Marie Mianowski (Université Grenoble-Alpes, ILCEA4)
et Saugata Bhaduri (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

Liste des abréviations

1. Pour les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid

MS *Moth Smoke*

TRF *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

HTG *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

EW *Exit West*

LWM *The Last White Man*

2. Pour les œuvres de Hari Kunzru

TI *The Impressionist*

T *Transmission*

N *Noise*

MR *My Revolutions*

GWM *Gods Without Men*

MP *Memory Palace*

LNy *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*

WT *White Tears*

RP *Red Pill*

HK ITW Entretiens avec Hari Kunzru menés en 2018, 2019 et 2020 (suivis de l'année correspondante pour chacun des entretiens)

Nota bene :

- Par souci de concision, ce résumé ne comprendra pas de lectures analytiques de longs passages issus du corpus. Les courtes citations des œuvres du corpus, ainsi que leurs titres, sont maintenus en anglais. Les citations d'entretiens sont aussi maintenues en anglais dans le corps du texte mais traduites en bas de page.
- Ce résumé ne fait pas apparaître les sous-titres jusqu'au dernier degré du plan de la thèse, mais les idées directrices sont indiquées en caractères gras dans le texte.
- La norme bibliographique utilisée ici est la même que dans le corps de la thèse en anglais, soit des citations sur le modèle (Auteur Date) et lorsque nécessaire (Auteur Date : Page).

- **Thèse défendue et méthodologie**

Cette thèse propose une étude comparative des œuvres de fiction respectives de Mohsin Hamid (né en 1971) et de Hari Kunzru (né en 1969) en s'attachant plus particulièrement à leur écriture du lieu. L'objectif est d'analyser les figures et métaphores du lieu qui parcourent leurs romans, et dans une moindre mesure leurs nouvelles, en proposant qu'ils en viennent à former une po/éthique du lieu. Ce mot-valise cherche à indiquer comment l'intérêt partagé de ces écrivains pour le lieu est à la fois formel, thématique et profondément engageant, nourri par les effets politiques, économiques et culturels de la mondialisation qui ont émergé en parallèle de la carrière et de la vie de ces deux écrivains. Dans cette écriture souvent ultracontemporaine du lieu (qui est avant tout un écriture *des* lieux, au pluriel), les romans démontrent un attachement à décrire les conséquences actuelles et les persistances symboliques mais aussi matérielles de certaines formes d'impérialisme, des inégalités de mouvement creusées par la mondialisation, ou encore des questions éthiques posées par les technologies numériques ; autant de questions souvent exclues du champ littéraire. Cette thèse s'intéresse à la façon dont les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru sont représentatives d'un tournant transnational dans la fiction anglophone depuis les années 2000 – que l'on pourrait aussi faire partir du 11-Septembre – dont ces écrivains ont été des fers de lance, avec un succès critique et commercial indéniable.

Par ailleurs, ces écrivains ont en commun d'avoir eu des vies transnationales. Hari Kunzru est né au Royaume-Uni d'un père indien cachemiri et d'une mère anglaise, et vit désormais à New York. Mohsin Hamid est né au Pakistan, a vécu à New York et Londres, où il a obtenu la nationalité britannique, avant de retourner vivre à Lahore. Tout en veillant à ne pas limiter les interprétations à une lecture biographique des œuvres, ces éléments contextuels sont fondamentaux pour comprendre la place de ces romans destinés à un public anglophone, publiés par des maisons d'édition prestigieuses (le groupe Penguin principalement), et lauréats de prix tout aussi reconnus, du *Betty Trask Award* (pour tous les deux) au *John Llewelyn Rhys Prize* (pour Hari Kunzru), en passant par la nomination au *Man Booker Prize* (pour Mohsin Hamid). Au-delà de leurs seuls lieux de naissance ou de vie, une myriade de lieux peuple les récits de ces deux écrivains, reflétant une expansion radicale des imaginaires à l'ère de l'hypermédiatisation et de la mondialisation. Dans des styles et intérêts formels tantôt distincts, tantôt communs, Hamid et Kunzru jouent avec les codes du roman, pour pouvoir inclure cette diversité sans risquer l'homogénéisation des lieux par le récit. Des jeux de genre mais aussi de

collage, de parataxe ou de superposition diégétique permettent de naviguer du lieu rêvé de l'utopie au lieu craint de la dystopie, du lieu médiatisé par les écrans au lieu ressenti viscéralement, de la « chambre à soi » à la place publique. Les romans et les nouvelles de Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru manipulent et reforment constamment la narration des lieux du contemporain, tout en démontrant la subjectivité et la malléabilité qui caractérisent la notion même de lieu.

Cette étude de la notion de lieu (« *place* » dans le manuscrit anglais) entre en résonance avec les travaux de nombreux géographes et philosophes anglophones de ce qui a été nommé le « tournant spatial » (Soja 1989) dans les dernières décennies du vingtième siècle (Casey, Malpas, Massey, Ingold), mais aussi avec des ouvrages centraux de la « *French theory* » qui se sont intéressés à la pratique du lieu et aux enjeux socio-politiques des lieux (Foucault, de Certeau, Lefebvre). On aura également recours aux concepts établis par les sociologues de la mondialisation (Appadurai, Bauman, Castells) ainsi qu'à la « théorie de l'acteur-réseau » (« Actor-Network Theory ») et aux pratiques proposées par les « nouveaux matérialismes » au travers de voix comme Bruno Latour et Donna Haraway.

• **Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru : des trajectoires parallèles**

Lahore, Amsterdam, le Désert des Mojaves, New York, le sud de la France, des vaisseaux spatiaux, New Delhi, des squats punk de Berlin-Est, des squats de réfugiés à Londres, les banlieues-dortoirs californiennes, le Mississippi, l'Écosse – autant de lieux qui peuplent les récits de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru, et annoncent dès le cadre diégétique de leurs œuvres une volonté de démultiplication géographique. Le rapport de ces écrivains à leurs lieux de vie est tout aussi révélateur. Hari Kunzru est né et a grandi dans l'Essex avec une mère anglaise et un père indien, puis a vécu à Londres, et vit à New York depuis la fin des années 2000, faisant des voyages réguliers à Paris où il donne un cours de « creative writing » pour les étudiants de la *New York University*. De son enfance dans la banlieue de Londres dans les années 1970 et 1980, Hari Kunzru a retenu une conscience aiguë du fait que sa propre identité reposait sur différents lieux plutôt qu'un seul (*HK ITW* 2018 ; Romig 2012). Il se joue lui-même de ces multiples étiquettes pour se décrire : « Londoner, British (that one's only crept in since I came to live in New York – to anyone in the UK, it's weirdly meaningless), English, the son of an Indian father and an English mother, Kashmiri Pandit, rootless cosmopolitan » (Kumar

2012).¹⁵² Mohsin Hamid, quant à lui, a passé son enfance entre Lahore au Pakistan, et les États-Unis, où son père préparait un doctorat. Il est ensuite retourné aux États-Unis pour étudier lui-même à Princeton, avant de devenir conseiller pour McKinsey. Après quelques années à Londres, il a obtenu la nationalité britannique. Depuis le début des années 2010, il est retourné vivre à Lahore avec sa famille (Hamid et Wilkinson 2017).

Il importe de recontextualiser le moment où ces deux écrivains ont commencé à émerger sur la scène littéraire, pour mieux comprendre non seulement le rôle des lieux dans leur écriture, mais aussi pourquoi on estime ici que leurs œuvres sont comparables. Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru ont tous les deux publié leurs premiers romans respectifs au tournant du vingt-et-unième siècle. Mohsin Hamid, d'abord, publie *Moth Smoke* en 2000. Ce récit est situé dans le Pakistan contemporain, mais encadré par un prologue et un épilogue qui renvoient à la chute de l'Empire Moghol. L'intrigue suit la chute sociale d'un anti-héros à Lahore en 1998, durant l'escalade nucléaire entre l'Inde et le Pakistan. Lors de sa sortie, *Moth Smoke* reçoit un accueil critique encourageant par des figures littéraires comme Anita Desai (Desai 2000), et est récompensé par un *Betty Trask Award*.¹⁵³ Deux ans plus tard, la première place de ce même prix est décernée à Hari Kunzru pour *The Impressionist*, qui lui vaut alors une avance d'éditeur d'une valeur d'1,25 millions de livres (Loh 2019 : 346). Mais un autre événement marquant entoure la sortie de ce même roman : Hari Kunzru refuse d'accepter le *John Llewellyn Rhys Prize*, parce qu'il est sponsorisé par le *Daily Mail* et le *Mail on Sunday*. Kunzru exprime alors sa perception de ces médias : « [a]s the child of an immigrant, I am only too aware of the poisonous effect of the *Mail's* editorial line » (Kunzru 2003). Selon lui leur ligne éditoriale poursuit une certaine logique : « vilifying and demonising refugees and asylum-seekers ». ¹⁵⁴ Ce premier roman de Hari Kunzru aborde lui-même de façon critique les débats sur l'identité raciale, à travers le récit d'apprentissage d'un protagoniste né d'un père anglais et d'une mère indienne dans les dernières décennies de l'Inde britannique.

¹⁵² « Londonien, Britannique (celui-ci m'est seulement venu depuis que je vis à New York ; pour n'importe qui au Royaume-Uni, ça ne veut pas dire grand-chose), Anglais, fils d'un père indien et d'une mère anglaise, Pandit Cachemiri, cosmopolite sans racines ». On notera cette dernière expression qui fait référence aux insultes dirigées contre les personnes juives dans l'Europe du début du vingtième siècle, et qui revient dans les entretiens menés avec Hari Kunzru. Le terme « cosmopolite » fait l'objet d'une analyse dans le troisième chapitre de cette thèse.

¹⁵³ Depuis les années 1980, ce prix a été décerné à de nombreux écrivains devenus célèbres depuis. Chaque année il attribue des sommes plus ou moins importantes à cinq ou six auteurs « de Grande-Bretagne ou d'Irlande du Nord ou du Commonwealth » dont c'est le premier roman. Voir le site de la *Society of Authors*: <https://www2.societyofauthors.org/prizes/the-soa-awards/betty-trask-prize-awards/> (accessed 21-02-23).

¹⁵⁴ « En tant que fils d'immigré, je ne suis que trop conscient de l'effet néfaste de la ligne éditoriale du *Mail* », laquelle tend à « diaboliser et à diffamer sur les réfugiés et les demandeurs d'asile » (Kunzru 2003).

Le 11 septembre 2001, au moment où ces deux premiers romans étaient en passe de conquérir leur public, des avions s'écrasent dans les tours du World Trade Center à New York. Dans un mouvement parallèle, les deux écrivains redirigent leurs intérêts pour la construction de soi et le récit national vers les peurs ultramédiatisées qui se multiplient dans le sillage de l'événement, lesquelles nourrissent un discours de « civilisations » opposant l'occident à l'orient, le même à l'Autre. C'est avec *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) que Mohsin Hamid gagne plus nettement sa reconnaissance internationale, ce roman étant placé parmi les finalistes du célèbre *Man Booker Prize*. Peu avant, le roman *Transmission* (2004) de Hari Kunzru avait déjà entamé une réflexion sur la polarisation politique et la peur de l'étranger, mais surtout sur la narration d'un événement retransmis à l'échelle planétaire. Chacun des deux écrivains a expliqué depuis comment le 11-Septembre a pu constituer un tournant dans leur écriture mais aussi dans leurs vies, en tant qu'habitants de pays occidentaux ayant des origines indienne et pakistanaise respectivement (Hamid and Simon 2022 ; Kunzru 2010a). Il apparaît toutefois que cet événement d'ampleur mondiale n'était qu'une étape parmi d'autres dans leurs trajectoires créatives, où les questions de positionnement national, politique et éthique vis-à-vis du lieu – la question de se placer dans un lieu, mais aussi *avec* les lieux d'où l'on vient – sont depuis restées centrales.

En plus de la chronologie comparable de leurs carrières littéraires et de la reconnaissance de leurs œuvres, Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru ont tous les deux connu des trajectoires protéiformes, et à certains égards similaires sur le plan social. Mohsin Hamid étudie d'abord le commerce international, le droit et l'aménagement à Princeton et Harvard, puis travaille plusieurs années comme consultant pour McKinsey, tout en prenant des cours de « *creative writing* » et en travaillant sur ses deux premiers romans (Khan 2018). Après des études dans une école privée puis à Oxford et Warwick University, où il obtient une maîtrise de philosophie, Hari Kunzru travaille comme journaliste à son compte dans le milieu émergent des cultures numériques dans les années 1990. Il écrit alors pour des magazines comme *Wired* et *Wallpaper*, tout en fréquentant les milieux de la musique et des arts visuels. Kunzru a récemment écrit un article inspiré par cette période pour *Harper's Magazine*, dans lequel il analyse les racines de la culture d'entreprise et du rapport au travail qui règnent aujourd'hui dans la Silicon Valley (Kunzru 2023). La figure du jeune cadre dynamique, communicant ou commercial, réapparaît fréquemment dans les récits de Hari Kunzru. Interrogé sur cette figure lors de nos entretiens, Hari Kunzru explique : « I feel close to those men, because I was supposed to be one, I think »

(HK ITW 2018).¹⁵⁵ Mohsin Hamid, quant à lui, a expliqué dans une interview de 2018 sa perception de sa première carrière comme consultant : « I always thought I was going to wind up in Pakistan (...) I was afraid that if I kept walking down the path at McKinsey, that I would (...) start earning a lot of money and price myself out of my own dream » (Khan 2018 *sic*).¹⁵⁶ Dans l'analyse de leur poétique du lieu proposée ici, il faut donc garder à l'esprit que les deux auteurs ont jusqu'ici évolué dans des lieux socialement et géographiquement variés, et que si leurs œuvres proposent souvent de s'intéresser aux expériences du lieu de populations marginalisées, leurs expériences personnelles leur ont aussi ouvert des perspectives sur certains lieux de pouvoir culturel et économique.

Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru démontrent dans leurs écritures respectives un très large champ d'inspirations littéraires, qui permet aussi d'expliquer la malléabilité générique de leurs romans. À bien des égards, les romans de Hari Kunzru s'inscrivent dans la lignée de figures du roman britannique. Par leur usage de l'ironie, de la satire sociale souvent basée sur des conflits de classes sociales, mais aussi de retournements de situation incongrus et de dialogues enlevés, ces récits reconnaissent en creux cet héritage. Ces traits semblent aussi le rapprocher d'écrivains plus contemporains comme Iain Sinclair ou Zadie Smith, et le recours au sarcasme ou aux narrateurs non fiables qui résistent aux étiquettes sociales rappellent les romans et nouvelles de Hanif Kureishi.¹⁵⁷ Influencés par son adolescence dans l'Angleterre de Thatcher, les récits de Hari Kunzru réécrivent souvent le discours de l'exclusion sociale et de la violence derrière des allures de comédie.

Par ailleurs, une tout autre série d'influences peut se retrouver dans l'affection que Kunzru avoue nourrir pour la fiction spéculative. Une figure tutélaire en ce sens est celle de J.G. Ballard, dont le patronyme est donné à l'un des personnages de *Transmission*. Ainsi, les romans de Kunzru naviguent en permanence entre réalisme conventionnel et explorations de l'inconnu, ou, comme il aime à le qualifier, « l'inconnaissable » (« the unknowable », Romig 2012). Ce double jeu donne lieu à des intrigues complexes et des superpositions narratives, renforcées par la paranoïa des personnages, et mettant au défi le lecteur de trouver une

¹⁵⁵ « Je crois que je me sens proche de ces hommes, parce qu'en toute logique j'aurais dû être l'un d'eux ».

¹⁵⁶ « Je me suis toujours dit que j'allais finir au Pakistan (...). Je craignais qu'en restant sur ma lancée à McKinsey, je me retrouverais petit à petit à gagner beaucoup d'argent et que mon rêve d'écriture se retrouverait ainsi acheté » (Khan 2018).

¹⁵⁷ L'émergence parallèle des romans de Kunzru et de ceux de Zadie Smith au début des années 2000 n'implique pas que leurs romans soient comparables en tous points. Le rapport à l'héritage littéraire de E.M. Forster par exemple les distingue. Voir Peter Childs and James Green, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p.62.

échappatoire à un monde ultra-matérialiste qui reste paradoxalement bercé par un besoin de spirituel. On peut lire dans toutes ces ambivalences l'influence des écrivains américains postmodernes, notamment Thomas Pynchon et Don DeLillo – Kunzru cite souvent l'influence de DeLillo et se désigne dans une interview comme étant un « amateur de Pynchon repentant » (« a recovering Pynchonite », Picarella 2019 ; *HK ITW* 2019).

Des écrivains américains ont aussi joué un rôle important pour Mohsin Hamid – dans son cas, ce sont Toni Morrison et Joyce Carol Oates, auprès de qui il a pris des cours de « creative writing » (Khan 2018). Le romancier reconnaît aussi souvent l'influence d'écrivains européens comme Camus, Calvino et les membres du *Nouveau Roman*, notamment en ce qui concerne ses jeux de voix articulés autour de narrations à la seconde personne (*ibid.*). Il cite aussi l'écrivain argentin Jorge Luis Borges, qui l'inspire pour construire certains effets de défamiliarisation que l'on associe souvent au réalisme magique (Khan 2021).

La culture littéraire pakistanaise est bien sûr tout aussi perceptible dans les récits de Mohsin Hamid. Ceux-ci renvoient souvent à des motifs traditionnels et à des figures centrales comme le nouvelliste Saadat Hasan Manto, dont le nom est emprunté comme nom de plume par un des personnages de *Moth Smoke* (*MS* 53), ou les poètes Mirza Ghalib et Faiz Ahmed Faiz mentionnés dans *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (*TRF* 43). L'importance de la poésie et du symbolisme ourdou se retrouvent dans les passages les plus lyriques des romans de Mohsin Hamid, où la poésie alterne avec des évocations plus pragmatiques de la mondialisation, de l'expérience urbaine et de la migration. Paul Jay nomme ainsi le premier roman de Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, une « analyse matérialiste » (« materialist analysis », Jay 2010 : 107) des interactions entre le Pakistan et les dynamiques de la mondialisation.

Les romans de Mohsin Hamid sont par ailleurs résolument urbains, souvent inspirés par les villes où il a vécu, en particulier New York, Londres et Lahore, sa ville d'origine. Dans une interview de 2018, Hamid reconnaît que son écriture de Lahore fait écho à celle de Bapsi Sidhwa, pionnière du roman anglophone pakistanaise dont le roman *Ice Candy Man* publié en 1988 (renommé ensuite *Cracking India*) a inspiré la génération de romanciers pakistanaise qui a suivi au tournant du vingt-et-unième siècle (Khan 2018). On cherche notamment à montrer dans cette thèse comment Mohsin Hamid partage avec cette génération d'écrivains une volonté de montrer la réalité complexe du Pakistan contemporain, tout en prêtant attention à d'autres formes d'expériences, celles-ci transposables et partagées à l'échelle mondiale.

- **Corpus primaire et état de la recherche**

Le corpus de cette thèse inclut tous les romans publiés à ce jour par Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru, au nombre de onze. Les romans de Mohsin Hamid sont *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2011), et *Exit West* (2017). Le roman le plus récent, *The Last White Man* (2022), est cité sporadiquement mais n'est pas inclus en tant que tel dans les analyses du fait de sa publication très récente. On n'aura pas non plus inclus le roman de Hari Kunzru *Blue Ruin*, qui est à paraître en 2023. Les romans de Hari Kunzru étudiés ici sont *The Impressionist* (2002), *Transmission* (2004), *My Revolutions* (2007), *Gods Without Men* (2011), *White Tears* (2016) et *Red Pill* (2020).

D'autres publications sont prises en compte, notamment le recueil de nouvelles *Noise* publié par Hari Kunzru en 2005, son récit graphique *Memory Palace* (2013), produit d'une collaboration avec le Victoria and Albert Museum à Londres, son livre audio interactif *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York* (2014) et son podcast *Into the Zone* (2020). Pour les deux écrivains, on renverra aussi à des nouvelles publiées parfois dans des recueils, parfois en ligne, mais aussi à des essais et articles publiés dans divers journaux et magazines, et au recueil d'essais de Mohsin Hamid *Discontent and Its Civilizations* (2015). Enfin, cette étude est complétée par trois entretiens accordés par Hari Kunzru en 2018, 2019 et 2020, qui sont placés en annexe et cités selon la norme indiquée dans la liste d'abréviations.

Au cours de leurs carrières, les deux écrivains ont été fréquemment adoués par les lecteurs dans le monde anglophone, et reconnus par des prix littéraires. Les œuvres de Hari Kunzru ont été traduites dans vingt et unes langues, et celles de Mohsin Hamid dans plus de trente (Pushkin 2020 ; Vezzaro 2013). Tous deux font l'objet d'une certaine attention de la part du milieu universitaire international, et ce depuis leurs premières publications. À ce jour, quelques thèses de doctorat au Royaume-Uni ont inclus soit Mohsin Hamid, soit Hari Kunzru, soit les deux, dans des études plus largement consacrées à la fiction contemporaine (Green 2007; O'Gorman 2014; Shaw 2016).¹⁵⁸ En France, des universitaires ont consacré des travaux à Mohsin Hamid (Waterman 2010; Moraru 2018; Veyret 2018, 2020; Cathelain 2021; Guignery 2022), mais les œuvres de Hari Kunzru semblent avoir suscité peu d'intérêt en comparaison, peut-être en raison de changements fréquents de maisons d'édition pour les traductions

¹⁵⁸ Syeda Sughra Naqvi a soutenu en 2019 une thèse sur la littérature pakistanaise qui comprenait l'œuvre de Mohsin Hamid, à l'Université de La Rochelle sous la direction de David Waterman. Voir bibliographie.

françaises, ou bien parce que la façon dont l’auteur échappe aux catégories nationales complique l’accès à son œuvre dans les rayons de la littérature étrangère.¹⁵⁹ On remarque en effet que dans les volumes et articles critiques, Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru sont catégorisés parfois comme « *postcolonial* », mais aussi « *diasporic* » ; parfois situés comme « *British* » ou bien encore « *American literature* » (Shaw 2021; Chambers 2011; Cilano 2013; Irr 2013).

Si leurs œuvres ont jusqu’ici été fréquemment rassemblées dans de tels volumes, les associant à d’autres écrivains de la même génération, et s’il est vrai que leurs nouvelles aussi se sont côtoyées dans des recueils thématiques (*Granta* 2010 ; 2015), cette thèse choisit d’opérer une étude comparative qui ne comprend que les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid et celles de Hari Kunzru. On souhaite ici analyser ensemble les œuvres de ces deux écrivains anglophones de la même génération, qui ont des origines dans le sous-continent indien mais aussi des attaches au Royaume-Uni et aux États-Unis, et qui démontrent un intérêt commun pour la mondialisation, les migrations et la mobilité, les discours d’authenticité et de pureté, la mémoire collective, la notion de communauté, la politique de l’événement – tout autant de questions qui se trouvent catalysées dans l’écriture du lieu.

L’impératif inconscient d’une affiliation nationale plane souvent au-dessus des lectures et approches critiques de ces œuvres, mais les écrivains semblent souvent chercher à s’en défaire, ou du moins à en assouplir les contours. Les récits de Hari Kunzru sont souvent lus avec ceux des britanniques Zadie Smith et David Mitchell, dont les thèmes de prédilection font écho à ceux de Kunzru (Nicol 2023; Green 2007; Childs and Green 2013).¹⁶⁰ Cependant, son installation aux États-Unis au début des années 2010, la publication de romans qui se focalisent davantage sur des sujets américains (*Gods Without Men* en 2011, *White Tears* en 2016 et *Red Pill* en 2020), mais aussi sa participation régulière aux débats du moment dans des journaux et magazines comme *Harper’s Magazine* et *The New York Review of Books*, lui valent désormais d’être perçu dans certains milieux culturels comme un observateur éclairé de la vie publique américaine. Kunzru est souvent invité à des événements en Europe mais aussi en Inde – un épisode a particulièrement attiré l’attention, lorsqu’il fut invité au Jaipur Literary Festival en 2012,

¹⁵⁹ À ma connaissance le seul article universitaire français comparant les deux écrivains a été publié par Cécile Girardin. “In the Heat of Combat: Insurrectional Moment and Political Time in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions*,” *L’Atelier*, n°4, 2012.

¹⁶⁰ James Green a étudié les premiers romans de Kunzru en les comparant à ceux de Mitchell et de Lawrence Norfolk, dans sa thèse soutenue en 2007 : *Flows, Routes and Networks : The Global Dynamics of Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell*.

il a essayé de lire un extrait du roman *The Satanic Verses*, en réaction à une interdiction de séjour au festival dont Rushdie venait de faire l'objet.¹⁶¹ Kunzru est ainsi devenu une voix incontournable du milieu littéraire, dont les interventions se font entendre, comme sa fiction, à une échelle transnationale. Le paragraphe de promotion pour la récente monographie consacrée à Hari Kunzru remarque que l'écrivain est parvenu à éviter les restrictions de catégorie, construisant ainsi ce qui est appelé « a career in resistance of narrow labelling » (Shaw and Upstone 2023), et qui peut en réalité s'appliquer à la multitude de genres et formes maniés par Kunzru aussi bien qu'aux questions de nationalité.¹⁶²

Mohsin Hamid est souvent associé à un groupe d'écrivains pakistanais dont les romans écrits en anglais connaissent un certain succès depuis les années 2000. Parmi ceux-ci se trouvent notamment Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam et Daniyal Mueenuddin. On peut reconnaître beaucoup de points communs à ces œuvres, en particulier dans leur manière d'aborder les évolutions de la société pakistanaise. Les romans de Mohsin Hamid sont peut-être les plus « mondialisés », en ce sens qu'ils ont très rapidement atteint un très large public international. Les cercles littéraires des États-Unis et du Royaume-Uni ont vite adopté ses courts récits métafictionnels, mais ce succès est aussi reconnu par les autorités du Pakistan qui lui ont délivré le *Sitara-i-Imtiaz*, en anglais « *Star of Excellence* », pour services rendus à la littérature. C'est peut-être cette position toujours double qui lui vaut d'être tantôt admiré pour ses représentations réalistes du Pakistan (Desai 2000), tantôt critiqué pour avoir simplifié l'identité pakistanaise et l'Islam, en les réduisant au fondamentalisme religieux et au crime afin de souscrire aux attentes de son lectorat international (Mian 2019). Le roman *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* a un statut particulier en cela qu'il a été très largement associé à un courant de littérature dite « post-9/11 », au sein de laquelle il a fait l'objet de lectures en tant que fiction américaine, et parfois transnationale (Tolan, Morton *et.al.* 2012 ; Liao 2012). Depuis qu'il a obtenu la nationalité britannique, et depuis la sortie d'*Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid est aussi perçu comme une voix importante de la littérature « post-Brexit » (Shaw 2021 ; Day 2017) qui s'attache à questionner et repenser les frontières en Europe et ailleurs dans le monde à l'aune d'un retour des nationalismes. Hamid a par ailleurs déclaré appartenir à une génération « post-postcoloniale », qui n'a jamais vécu l'expérience du passage à l'indépendance et dont les intérêts poétiques mais

¹⁶¹ Kunzru a aussi lu l'incipit des *Satanic Verses* en public à un événement organisé à New York par PEN America, une semaine après l'attaque dont Rushdie a fait l'objet en août 2022. Il était accompagné de Colum McCann, Kiran Desai, Paul Auster et bien d'autres.

¹⁶² « une carrière qui a su résister aux étiquettes limitantes ».

aussi politiques se distinguent de ceux du canon postcolonial établi par la génération précédente (*in Jay 2014 : 106*).

Au cours des analyses de la thèse, on cherche à mettre en évidence cette résistance aux catégories et les enjeux d'interprétation que posent les postures transnationales d'écrivains comme Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru. En gardant à l'esprit que les catégories basées sur l'appartenance nationale ou l'identité persistent, notamment parce que la littérature fait l'objet d'une commercialisation et d'une classification dans les milieux universitaires, cette thèse souhaite refléter la façon dont les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru ont permis, ces vingt dernières années, de représenter de multiples points de vue dans et au-delà des cadres nationaux. On souhaite ici prendre en compte toutes les étiquettes culturelles et théoriques auxquelles ils peuvent se voir apparentés, tout en maintenant un dialogue critique sur les limites de ces catégories, et en reconnaissant que ces œuvres peuvent être lues dans une approche transnationale sans pour autant chercher à les « résoudre » ou les restreindre à terme. On aimerait démontrer dans ce travail que la réticence des deux écrivains aux catégories universitaires et commerciales transparaît dans le fond et la forme de leurs fictions, et que c'est notamment cette réticence conjointe qui justifie la comparaison dont ils font l'objet. Par ailleurs, c'est aussi parce qu'ils ont connu des trajectoires mouvantes entre le sous-continent sud-asiatique, les États-Unis et le Royaume-Uni que la notion de lieu est si centrale dans leur écriture.

- **Vers une po/éthique du lieu**

Interrogé en 2004 sur l'un des personnages du roman *Transmission*, un homme d'affaires qui voyage en première classe à travers le monde, Hari Kunzru expliquait dans une interview qu'il s'intéressait aux membres d'une certaine classe sociale mondialisée qui « rejette l'idée de lieu » (« reject the idea of place »), en ajoutant que cette posture comprend « de mauvais côtés » (« this has its dark side ») et peut mener à « une perte de contact avec l'échelle locale » (« a loss of contact with the local ») (Cooke 2004). Lors de notre entretien en 2018, j'ai demandé à Hari Kunzru de commenter ces déclarations. Il reconnaissait alors que ces préoccupations restaient centrales pour lui mais pour des raisons différentes, au vu de discours émergents comme ceux du penseur britannique David Goodhart, qui dans un ouvrage de 2017

parle d'un conflit social entre les « quelque part » et les « n'importe où » (« somewheres » et « anywheres ») (HK ITW 2018 ; Goodhart 2017).

En creux de ces débats se trouvent certaines des questions principales posées par les théories de la mondialisation depuis son émergence : non seulement « *qu'est-ce qu'un lieu ?* » mais aussi « *où est le lieu ?* », comment le situer ou le *localiser* dans les changements d'échelle auxquels les imaginaires collectifs sont désormais confrontés ? En outre, la terminologie établie par David Goodhart ne vise pas seulement à définir les lieux, mais aussi les personnes, selon une division bien précise : on serait soit *un* « quelque part », soit *un* « n'importe où ». Cette seconde catégorie évoque une identité sur le mode négatif, vide ou disloquée, tandis qu'être un « quelque part » induirait au contraire une forme d'accomplissement par lequel on se connaîtrait soi-même en connaissant son lieu, sa *place*. Le rapport entre lieu et conscience de soi a largement été exploré dans la pensée moderne, depuis le *Dasein* de Heidegger jusqu'aux penseurs plus récents du « tournant spatial ». ¹⁶³ Ce rapport est devenu une caractéristique centrale des œuvres de littérature transnationale qui tentent de se saisir des modes d'être-au-monde contemporains. Comme on se propose de démontrer au sein de ce travail, ces questions conduisent également les écrivains à s'intéresser aux dimensions plus strictement matérielles du rapport au lieu, lesquelles n'ont cessé d'évoluer au rythme de la mondialisation.

Le mot « lieu », en lui-même, peut difficilement se voir circonscrit à une unique définition. Dans le manuscrit anglais de cette thèse on emploie évidemment le mot « *place* », qui n'est pas parfaitement équivalent au français « lieu ». En abordant les contributions de penseurs comme Foucault ou Lefebvre dans la construction d'une philosophie du lieu, l'Australien Jeff Malpas remarque une dimension intraduisible des termes « espace » et « lieu » : « One cannot assume, for instance, that a term like *espace*, in French, can be unambiguously translated into the English 'space' nor *lieu* (or indeed *place*) into 'place' » (Malpas 2015: 3). ¹⁶⁴ Pour Malpas, il y a aussi des inclinaisons plus sociologiques et politiques à ces termes français, tandis qu'il perçoit une connotation plus ontologique dans les mots anglais « *place* » et « *space* ». Cette complication sémantique peut aussi être attribuée à la façon dont les penseurs français naviguent parfois entre « lieu » et « espace » sans les distinguer nettement, comme le fait Michel Foucault, qui dans son discours sur les « hétérotopies » parle

¹⁶³ Bien que le terme ne lui soit pas directement attribué, on considère que ce tournant a été identifié par Edward Soja dans *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London : Verso, 1989.

¹⁶⁴ « On ne peut pas présumer, par exemple, qu'un mot comme *espace* en français puisse être traduit sans ambiguïté par le terme 'space' en anglais, et il en va de même pour *lieu*, ou même *place*, qui n'est pas tout à fait l'anglais 'place' ».

de « ces espaces différents, ces autres lieux », auxquels il attribue un fonctionnement à part (2004 : 15).

Par opposition, dans la pensée anglophone, et en particulier parmi les penseurs du « *spatial turn* » (un terme attribué à Edward Soja dans son ouvrage *Postmodern Geographies* publié en 1989), la distinction entre « space » et « place » fait l'objet d'une réévaluation constante et même de prises de positions. Dans un volume de 1997 qui a fait date, le philosophe Edward Casey réexaminait ce qu'il nommait « *the fate of place* », le « sort » du lieu, avec une ambition marquée : « the project of regaining recognition of the power of place », (2011 : xi), « reconnaître le pouvoir du lieu » qui a été selon lui mis de côté trop longtemps.¹⁶⁵ Dans cette thèse, la préférence donnée au terme « *place* » pour les interprétations n'implique pas que l'on se désintéresse de « *space* » ou même de « *landscape* », des termes qui sont en réalité inséparables, selon des penseurs comme Casey ou Malpas (Malpas 2015 : 3). Le géographe Yi-Fu Tuan, dans *Place and Space : the Perspective of Experience* (1977), reconnaît la co-dépendance des termes : « [t]he ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition ».¹⁶⁶ Il tente ainsi d'établir des connotations propres à l'un et à l'autre, associant une qualité plus « abstraite » à « *space* », ou proposant que « *space* » dénote « l'ouverture, la liberté et la menace » (« openness, freedom and threat ») tandis que « *place* » renvoie à « la sécurité et la stabilité » (« security and stability ») ; le concept de « *space* » « permet le mouvement » (« allows movement »), et par opposition « *place* » correspond à une « pause » (1977: 6). La géographe Doreen Massey, dans *For Space*, propose au contraire de « refuser la distinction » entre les deux termes et de « se défaire de ces connotations désormais presque intuitives » (« refuse that distinction » ; « let go of those, by now almost intuitive, understandings ») (2012 : 6, 8).

Les imaginaires que l'on retrouve dans les romans de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru interrogent précisément de telles connotations et présuppositions. Ils témoignent de la manière dont les idées de « sécurité et stabilité » associées à « *place* », par exemple, se voient mises à mal dans une période de surveillance numérique accrue ou bien dans le contexte d'une démultiplication des conflits à l'échelle internationale. L'idée de « *place* » comme « pause » est elle aussi remise en cause, dans des sociétés où la rapidité et l'hyper-connectivité, le passage constant d'un lieu à l'autre, se font sentir. Au travers du terme « *place* », la malléabilité de la langue anglaise donne aussi lieu à un grand nombre de détournements conceptuels, où « *place* »

¹⁶⁵ On renvoie dans cette thèse à l'édition de 2011 pour cet ouvrage.

¹⁶⁶ « Les idées d'espace et de lieu ont besoin l'une de l'autre pour pouvoir être définies ».

peut se retrouver dans « *displacement* », « *placelessness* » ou encore la notion d'être « *out-of-place* », au mauvais endroit au mauvais moment. Dans leurs récits, Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru soulignent la persistance, la mutabilité et l'adaptabilité d'un concept dont le « sort » incertain pourrait peut-être se voir déterminé dans l'espace créatif de la fiction.

En réalité, les dynamiques nées de la mondialisation économique et culturelle, et les redéfinitions du monde post-colonial qui ont émergé en parallèle, laissent souvent penser qu'il y aurait une forme de « *placelessness* », un détachement du lieu que l'on devrait à un certain nomadisme et à une préférence pour l'ouverture évoquée par l'espace, « *space* ». C'est ce que cherche à recouvrir la distinction de David Goodhart citée précédemment – il y aurait une annihilation de l'attachement au lieu, visible chez des personnes qui vivraient « n'importe où », et dont le détachement serait perçu comme une perte de sens à l'échelle sociétale. D'autres ont montré comment les imaginaires du lieu sont au contraire démultipliés dans un contexte de migrations de masse et de circulation des imaginaires, à un moment où tous peuvent « annexer le global » dans leur pratique des lieux (« annex the global », Appadurai 1998 : 4). Dans *A Handbook of Material Culture* (2006), Barbara Bender explique qu'il faut se méfier d'une volonté de faire correspondre davantage de mobilité à une relation standardisée, ou même une absence de relation au lieu :

The trope of nomadology (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), whilst it hammers the privileged Western emphasis on roots and belonging, also threatens to flatten the huge diversity of experiences (...). We have to recognize that though people may be *dis*-placed or *dis*-located they are never no-where. They are always – somehow, and however desperately – in place. (cité in Mianowski 2020 *n.p.*)

Comment la fiction contemporaine se comporte-t-elle vis-à-vis de cette supposée « mise à plat d'une grande diversité d'expériences » (« flatten[ing] the huge diversity of experiences ») ? Comment de tels romans et nouvelles peuvent-ils entrer en dialogue avec les relations paradoxales que nous entretenons avec les lieux à l'époque de la mondialisation, mais aussi face au changement climatique, à un moment où le besoin de quitter et d'atteindre des lieux ne va faire que s'intensifier ? Comme le suggère Barbara Bender, « placer » la mobilité à l'échelle mondiale implique de raconter cette diversité d'expériences, et de continuer à promouvoir le lieu comme prisme pertinent pour les processus d'interprétation et d'identification propres à l'expérience de la narration.

C'est justement parce qu'elles prennent en compte cette « diversité d'expériences » que les représentations littéraires du lieu proposées par Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru peuvent être lues comme une po/éthique. Le mot-valise « po/éthique », que l'on retrouve en anglais (« *poethics* ») dans divers ouvrages critiques de sciences humaines (Adema 2018; Retallack 2004), est employé ici dans une visée double.

D'une part, cette thèse propose d'étudier la *poétique* qui se constitue dans ces œuvres. On souhaite ici resituer et analyser l'apport créatif de ces romanciers, en considérant que l'écriture du lieu répond tout autant à un principe de représentation qu'à une volonté de façonner les lieux du contemporain *dans* et *par* le récit. Dans *Postcolonial Poetics: 21-st Century Readings*, Elleke Boehmer remarque qu'une grande partie de la critique consacrée à des romans du monde post-colonial a jusqu'ici eu tendance à ne les lire que comme une « représentation » de certains problèmes ou questionnements, et ajoute que cette concentration des interprétations sur la sphère politique conduit les lecteurs à se placer à une « distance contre-productive » (« *unhelpful distance* ») vis-à-vis du texte et des choix créatifs qui font sa *poétique* (2019 : 21). Ce dernier terme est défini par Boehmer à partir du *Oxford English Dictionary*: « the creative principles informing any literary, social or cultural construction, or the theoretical study of these; a theory of form » (2019: 20). On souhaite ici se prémunir d'une telle « distance », et proposer qu'une lecture au prisme du lieu permet précisément de l'éviter. Pour ce faire, on tâchera d'analyser les « principes créatifs » de ces œuvres, et comme le suggère Elleke Boehmer, de s'intéresser tout autant au « comment » qui permet de « communiquer et d'interpréter », qu'au « pourquoi » de l'écriture postcoloniale » (« the communicative and interpretative 'how' rather than the themed 'what' of postcolonial writing », 2019 : 10).

D'autre part, on cherche ici à établir le champ d'action d'une écriture qui se veut non seulement poétique mais aussi *éthique*. Comme le démontre la définition donnée par Elleke Boehmer, le « social » ou le « culturel » ne sont jamais totalement détachés des principes créatifs. Depuis le début de leurs carrières littéraires, Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru sont tous les deux devenus des figures incontournables dans certains débats, non seulement littéraires mais aussi politiques et sociaux. On peut se demander si ce choix est entièrement délibéré ou bien s'il s'impose *de facto* à des écrivains associés à la sphère du post-colonial, notamment du fait des thèmes de leurs récits mais aussi de la catégorisation de leurs œuvres par les médias, le monde de l'édition et les universitaires. Depuis qu'il a causé une polémique en exprimant

publiquement son rejet d'un prix décerné par le *Mail on Sunday*,¹⁶⁷ Hari Kunzru se voit régulièrement offrir des éditoriaux et articles où il s'exprime sur une grande variété de sujets. Cela n'est évidemment pas anodin au vu de sa première carrière en tant que journaliste, et lui permet de maintenir un statut d'écrivain au cœur de la cité, qui commente et interagit avec le monde tout autant qu'il l'imagine. Mohsin Hamid, lui aussi, écrit souvent pour *The Guardian*, ou *The Financial Times*.

Les romans de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru entrent en fait constamment en dialogue avec des questions ultracontemporaines, lesquelles renvoient souvent aux enjeux de pratique, de partage et d'usage des lieux. Leur écriture est imprégnée par des représentations de la condition des réfugiés, par l'impact de revendications et d'interventions impérialistes sur certains lieux, par les questions liées au changement climatique ou encore par les nouveaux lieux apparus avec le numérique. Ces œuvres peuvent en fait être lues dans le sillage de ce que certains nomment un « tournant éthique » dans la fiction contemporaine. Pour Paul Veyret, il s'agit à la fois d'un tournant et d'un *retour* (« ethical (re-)turn ») qui s'opère selon lui dans la fiction post-coloniale, notamment dans des œuvres comme le roman *Exit West* de Mohsin Hamid. Cette approche éthique, selon lui, renvoie à « des obligations morales et éthiques qui appellent les lecteurs à s'engager » (« moral and ethical obligations that call for the readers' engagement », 2020 : 111). Peter Boxall explique que ce tournant éthique se manifeste par des choix thématiques qui appellent à se pencher sur « la condition globale contemporaine » (« the contemporary global condition », in Shaw 2017 :1). Selon Christian Moraru enfin, il se produit dans ces récits une « éthicisation » progressive des différents enjeux de la mondialisation (2015 : 73).¹⁶⁸ Même si Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru restent très impliqués dans les débats de leur époque par le biais d'articles et d'essais, c'est par le truchement de la fiction qu'ils enjoignent leurs lecteurs à se confronter à de nombreuses questions éthiques, lesquelles requièrent souvent de reconsidérer sa propre place et son rapport au lieu.

Dans *Dissensus : On Politics and Aesthetics*,¹⁶⁹ Jacques Rancière associe l'émergence d'un tournant éthique aux nombreux discours sur le « mal » et le « bien » apparus au moment de la « Guerre contre la Terreur » menée par George Bush (2010 : 74-75). Pour Rancière, il ne s'agit pas d'un simple retour du « jugement moral » ni d'une lubie postmoderne (2010 : 199),

¹⁶⁷ Voir plus haut.

¹⁶⁸ Le mot est transparent.

¹⁶⁹ Ouvrage paru en anglais.

mais bien plutôt de la façon dont on fait coïncider un « environnement » avec un « principe d'action » – en d'autres termes, il y a dans l'éthique une forme d'interaction vis-à-vis de l'existant, qui enjoint à se positionner ou à agir. Surtout, Rancière rappelle l'origine du mot *ethos* : il exprime tout à la fois le « lieu d'habitation » et une « façon d'être » ou un « mode de vie ». ¹⁷⁰

La participation des romans et nouvelles de Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru à une écriture « éthique » coïncide avec cette double définition. Pour ces écrivains, l'écriture éthique, ou « po/éthique » comme on souhaite le défendre ici, induit un mode d'être-au-monde et engage par là même les lieux dans lesquels nous vivons et évoluons, les lieux auxquels ils sont eux-mêmes attachés, et ceux vers lesquels ils souhaitent diriger l'attention des lecteurs. Le philosophe Edward Casey explique que la façon habituelle de penser l'éthique tend à l'éloigner du lieu : « investigations of ethics and politics continue to be universalist in aspiration – to the detriment of place, considered merely parochial in scope » (2011 : xii). ¹⁷¹ En employant des mécanismes propres à la fiction, ces romans remettent en question cette dualité entre l'universel et l'étriqué (« parochial »), entre le global et le local, ou même les oppositions entre « *space* » et « *place* », discutées précédemment. Plutôt qu'aspirer à un universalisme où les lieux sont indifférenciés, les écrivains font appel à des « façons d'être » et à la manière dont les lieux peuvent les déterminer.

Il n'est par exemple pas anodin de voir Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru expliquer que leur propre créativité dépend du lieu où ils se trouvent. Mohsin Hamid, dont la carrière littéraire a été partagée jusqu'ici entre New York, Londres et Lahore, a déclaré dans une interview pour le *Financial Times* : « I'm certain my books are different because they were written in different places » (Hamid and Wilkinson 2017). ¹⁷² Dans un échange au sujet de son inspiration pour *Gods Without Men*, Hari Kunzru explique qu'il était d'abord parti à New York pour écrire un roman situé en Inde au seizième siècle, mais s'est trouvé dans l'incapacité de le faire : « it totally fell apart as soon as I got to New York. I just couldn't concentrate on anything that

¹⁷⁰ Les traductions proposées ici sont les miennes. Pour plus de fluidité j'ai inséré les traductions plutôt que le texte original dans le texte principal. Voici l'original : « [t]he reign of ethics is not the reign of moral judgements over the operations of art or of political action »; « Before signifying a norm or morality, the word *ethos* signifies two things: both the dwelling and the way of being, or lifestyle, that corresponds to this dwelling. Ethics, then, is the kind of thinking in which an identity is established between an environment, a way of being and a principle of action. » (2010: 184)

¹⁷¹ « les préoccupations éthiques et politiques aspirent souvent à l'universalisme, au détriment du lieu, que l'on perçoit comme trop étriqué ».

¹⁷² « Je suis certain que mes livres sont différents les uns des autres parce que je les ai écrits dans des lieux différents ».

wasn't set in America » (Barron 2017).¹⁷³ Dans *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, Bertrand Westphal remarque « les effets temporels et spatiaux de l'acte d'écrire » par lesquels « l'écriture dévoile sa labilité, la fragilité de son ancrage spatio-temporel » (2007: 37). En plus de cette « fragilité » qui impacte l'acte d'écrire, la conscience qu'ont Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru de l'influence des lieux dans lesquels ils se trouvent fait écho à l'idée ainsi énoncée par le géographe Tim Cresswell : « place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world » (2005 : 11).¹⁷⁴

Pour des écrivains comme Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru, une approche éthique de l'écriture implique donc une attention au lieu – à sa propre place, au lieu qu'on occupe sur la carte du monde, mais aussi à la position sociale, et à la place donnée aux autres ; à la façon dont les lieux sont formés, mais nous forment aussi à leur tour ; et enfin à la réévaluation constante des modes d'être-au-lieu qu'implique une écriture du contemporain. Leurs romans semblent se composer en un art du témoignage,¹⁷⁵ qui joue avec les codes littéraires et le réalisme mais refuse pour autant de s'adonner à une totalisation du lieu, à la tentation de l'exotisme ou du récit d'évasion, autant de modes qui risqueraient de renoncer à la singularité des lieux. Les pratiques du lieu mais aussi de l'acte de la lecture que proposent leurs œuvres enjoignent les lecteurs à une forme d'attention, dans un monde où l'attention, et le manque d'attention, deviennent un enjeu de pouvoir (Ganteau 2023 ; Khan 2021). Elles font en ce sens écho à ce que Rita Felski appelle « a critical ethos of attentiveness » (2015 : 740).¹⁷⁶

Dans *The Routledge Guide to the Environmental Humanities*, Deborah Bird Rose et Thom van Dooren proposent aussi une définition de l'éthique, du point de vue de l'écocritique. Pour eux, l'éthique est comprise ainsi : « an openness to others in the material reality of their own lives: noisy, fleshy, exuberant creatures with their multitude of interdependencies and precarities » (2017 : 24).¹⁷⁷ C'est notamment au regard de cette « réalité matérielle », de ces « interdépendances et précarités », que l'on peut lire les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari

¹⁷³ « Le projet est complètement tombé à l'eau dès que je suis arrivé à New York. Je n'arrivais tout simplement pas à me concentrer sur un projet dont l'intrigue n'aurait pas été située en Amérique. »

¹⁷⁴ « le lieu n'est pas juste une chose qui se trouve là dans le monde, mais bien une manière de comprendre le monde ».

¹⁷⁵ On fait ici référence à Rancière, qui dans sa définition du « tournant éthique », parle de la manière dont ce tournant donne lieu à des « *testimonies of participation* » et « *testimonies to the unrepresentable* » dans la création artistique (2010 : 194-195).

¹⁷⁶ « un *ethos* critique de l'attention ».

¹⁷⁷ « une ouverture aux autres dans toute la réalité matérielle de leurs vies : celles de créatures charnelles, bruyantes, exubérantes qui font partie d'une multitude d'interdépendances et de précarités. »

Kunzru comme une « fabrique » des lieux. Plutôt que de lire le terme de « fabrique » seulement sur le plan de la création littéraire, on se propose ici d'analyser comment les lieux que l'on trouve dans ces récits sont représentés à la manière des « agentivités » de Bruno Latour, c'est-à-dire, selon Latour : « with their *mode* of fabrication and their *stabilizing mechanisms* clearly visible » (2005 : 120).¹⁷⁸ Le lieu, en somme, est toujours en cours de fabrication, et les récits du lieu étudiés ici permettent de mettre en scène et de comprendre ces mécanismes à l'œuvre mais aussi la place de tout un chacun dans ces mêmes dynamiques de fabrication. On cherche en effet ici à démontrer comment les modes d'écriture de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru, tour à tour communs et distincts, cherchent à amener leurs lecteurs vers une po/éthique du lieu, en utilisant les effets de voix, de regard et des structures diégétiques complexes pour mieux refléter les subtilités et les paradoxes du lieu dans le monde d'aujourd'hui. Par là même, leurs œuvres suggèrent la façon dont le roman, un genre dont la mort est fréquemment programmée et assurée par certains (*HK ITW* 2018), peut en réalité se montrer résilient face aux changements qui sont en train de reconfigurer nos rapports aux autres et aux lieux.

Parce qu'ils n'ont de cesse d'interagir avec des événements ultracontemporains, incorporant dans la fiction leurs réactions immédiates au 11-Septembre, au Brexit, à la « crise des réfugiés » de 2015 en Europe ou encore l'élection de Donald Trump en 2016, les récits de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru sont aussi en cours de fabrication d'un point de vue temporel. Cette thèse a elle-même évolué à mesure que les écrivains publiaient de nouveaux romans. De nouvelles lectures critiques des récits du 11-Septembre continueront d'émerger avec le temps, tout comme celles qui s'intéresseront au Brexit, ou aux technologies de l'information. Un exemple est frappant à cet égard : le roman *Transmission*, de Hari Kunzru, publié en 2004. Dans notre entretien en 2018, l'écrivain a lui-même admis que ce récit est toujours étrangement parlant pour celles et ceux qui le découvrent aujourd'hui, alors même qu'il évoque un rapport à la technologie qui est délibérément ancré à la fin des années 1990, au moment où l'accès à internet était encore loin d'être aussi démocratisé qu'aujourd'hui (*HK ITW* 2019). Sans chercher pour autant à leur imaginer un futur, il reste certain que ces récits continuent de faire écho au présent immédiat et contribuent à donner du sens aux lieux avec lesquels nous vivons. Qu'il s'agisse des lieux qui subissent des actes de terrorisme, des lieux immatériels de l'ère numérique, ou de lieux comme le Pakistan qui se trouvent aux avant-postes du changement climatique, les lieux fictionnels de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru sont en dialogue permanent avec leurs lecteurs, et les mettent au défi de reconnaître leur propre place dans l'évolution de ces lieux.

¹⁷⁸ « en faisant apparaître leur *mode* de fabrication et leurs *mécanismes de stabilisation* ».

Dans l'introduction de *The Fate of Place*, le philosophe Edward Casey entreprend d'explorer toute une série de théories sociologiques et philosophiques sur le lieu, qui selon lui témoignent du lieu comme étant « à l'ouvrage » : « place *at work*, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else » (2011 : 286, italiques dans le texte original). Cette thèse a pour ambition de suivre le même chemin, en adoptant l'idée directrice que le lieu est toujours « à l'ouvrage », « dynamique » et « fait partie intégrante d'autre chose » que lui-même. Les analyses proposent d'observer ce qu'un tel dynamisme implique sur les plans formels et thématiques dans les œuvres de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru.

N.B. les résumés de chapitre ci-après comprennent un résumé global du chapitre, puis les titres traduits des parties et sous-parties.

Chapitre 1

En quête de lieu : formes de l'ici et de l'ailleurs

Dans ce premier chapitre, on procède à une typologie des principales dynamiques de l'écriture du lieu dans les romans de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru, au travers de la dichotomie qui oppose « l'ici », le lieu familier, visible et reconnaissable, à « l'ailleurs », un imaginaire inconnu ou rêvé. En comparant des exemples tirés des romans des deux écrivains, on étudie le rôle de motifs récurrents comme **l'authenticité**, le **déplacement** ou **l'extension** des lieux. Ces questions donnent souvent lieu à des réévaluations et des questionnements sur ce que peut être le lieu dans l'imaginaire collectif, ou sur ce qu'il n'est pas. Au passage, on perçoit chez les deux écrivains une volonté de situer leurs écritures respectives vis-à-vis de certains *topoi* littéraires et certaines influences héritées des représentations du lieu dans la **littérature post-coloniale**.

On s'intéresse d'abord aux notions **d'authenticité** et de **pureté**, termes employés par les deux écrivains eux-mêmes dans diverses sources, et qui permettent de penser tout à la fois leur rapport au matériel dans le monde contemporain, où certains lieux tendent vers l'artificialité, mais aussi la construction littéraire des lieux pour les écrivains originaires du sous-continent indien, qui voient penser sur eux des attentes quant à une représentation « authentique » de leurs lieux d'origine, et qui placent ainsi leurs fictions face au risque du stéréotype.

La question de l'ici et de l'ailleurs est ensuite lue au prisme du **déplacement**. L'analyse de ce terme conduit à considérer la place de ces écrivains dans l'écriture dite de la « *South Asian diaspora* », et d'interroger la façon dont cette même notion de diaspora se déploie ou est au contraire remise en cause dans leur écriture. On examine également leurs représentations de l'émigration vers les États-Unis ou le Royaume-Uni de personnages indiens ou pakistanais, en s'interrogeant sur la façon dont Hamid et Kunzru traitent la **déception** face au lieu rêvé, un trope récurrent de la littérature diasporique. Enfin, cette partie est l'occasion d'aborder le problème de la **référentialité** chez Mohsin Hamid, dont les topographies cherchent souvent à rendre transposable l'expérience du lieu, et en particulier celle du déplacement.

La notion d'**extension**, dans le troisième développement, est lue comme une dynamique de **connexion** qui s'opère entre des lieux distincts, mais aussi comme une **expansion**, par laquelle les contours du lieu semblent s'étirer. Dans leurs récits, les deux auteurs présentent la propension des lieux à tendre toujours vers un « ailleurs » ou un agrandissement. Le lieu, en somme, n'est jamais circonscrit à la seule perception immédiate, mais montré comme ce qu'il *peut être*, sur les plans à la fois esthétique et thématique. On prend pour exemples le **désert américain** des Mojaves dans *Gods Without Men* de Hari Kunzru, l'extension opérée par les « **flux** », métaphore des théories de l'information dans son roman *Transmission* (que l'on étudie au regard de la théorie d'un « espace des lieux » et d'un « espace des flux » proposée par Manuel Castells, 2000 :14), et enfin la mutabilité de la ville, qualifiée ici de **plasti-cité**, dans *Exit West* de Mohsin Hamid.

1.1. Lieu authentique, lieu problématique

1.1.1. « *No one place's realer than another* »: « démêler » l'authenticité

1.1.2. *Mangues et minarets : lieux du stéréotype*

1.2. « Exit West » et autres échappées : imaginaires du déplacement

1.2.1. *Esthétique de l'éparpillement : diaspora et déplacement*

1.2.2. *Une ruée vers l'Ouest ? Tropes du déplacement déçu*

1.2.3. *Mohsin Hamid : « universalité » du déplacement et référentialité*

1.3. « Feeling out territories »: schémas d'extension

1.3.1. *Quand le désert s'étire : jonctions et expansions dans Gods Without Men*

1.3.2. *Transmission : l'espace des lieux et l'espace des flux*

1.3.3. « *Remodelling the earth itself* »: la ville comme plasti-cité dans *Exit West*

Chapitre 2

Le lieu à la trace : lieu et mémoire

Le deuxième chapitre est articulé autour des interactions entre lieu et mémoire, souvent manifestées par une écriture des **traces**, au sens où l'entend Paul Ricoeur : la trace est un « effet-signe », qui tout à la fois manifeste le passé et appelle de futures investigations (Ricoeur 2007: 219).

Dans la première partie du chapitre, on s'intéresse à la notion d'**impérialisme**, entendue avec W.J.T. Mitchell comme un processus d'appropriation et de contrôle par la violence, qui s'exerce de façon à la fois « concrète » et « symbolique » (2002 : 9). Les symboles ici sont d'abord les descriptions de **ruines** dans *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* de Mohsin Hamid, et qui permettent d'interroger depuis une place du vieux Lahore les traces de l'impérialisme britannique du passé, et américain du présent, à travers l'expérience des lieux construits. Dans *The Impressionist* de Hari Kunzru, c'est l'Empire britannique qui est en jeu, plus particulièrement le Raj à la fin des années 1910 qui tombe métaphoriquement en **poussière**. Enfin, dans *Gods Without Men* de Hari Kunzru, la trace fait écho à un **pistage** de la présence coloniale, dans un désert californien où rien ne semble laisser de trace.

Les romans de Hari Kunzru démontrent aussi un intérêt particulier pour les **palais** du passé et du présent, manifestation **architecturale** d'une volonté de laisser une trace dans l'espace. Le **palais** ou château semble réapparaître régulièrement sous différentes formes – « palais de la mémoire » métaphorique dans une œuvre protéiforme accompagnée d'une exposition, le palais kitsch d'un *nawab* excentrique dans *The Impressionist*, les nouveaux palais que constituent les gratte-ciels de verre, évoqués dans *Transmission*, ou encore le *topos* du manoir inquiétant, revisité à l'aune de l'histoire du nazisme dans *Red Pill*.

Le dernier développement vise à aborder l'importance des **sons** chez Hari Kunzru, et les fonctions de l'environnement sonore dans son écriture des lieux. On s'intéresse plus spécifiquement à une œuvre intitulée *Twice Upon a Time : Listening to New York* dans laquelle Kunzru s'adonne à une **écoute de la ville** en la parcourant, et retranscrit ses impressions, mais aussi ses recherches sur la figure de Moondog, un musicien de rue, dans ce récit sous forme de **livre audio** en ligne accompagné d'effets spéciaux. Le roman *White Tears* témoigne aussi de l'importance des échos sonores, qui sont ici ceux du **blues** – le récit déploie la métaphore de l'écho à travers un bluesman afro-américain qui hante le narrateur après que celui-ci a cherché à capturer et collectionner des airs de blues.

2.1. Traces de l'impérialisme

- 2.1.1. « *[W]e built the Lahore fort* » : des ruines au (re)placement de l'histoire dans *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*
- 2.1.2. *The Impressionist* ou *l'Empire en poussière*
- 2.1.3. *Pister la mémoire américaine* dans *Gods Without Men*

2.2. Palais et places fortes

- 2.2.1. *Memory Palace* : faire place à la mémoire
- 2.2.2. *L'art du mirage* : les faux palais de la mémoire dans *The Impressionist*
- 2.2.3. *Transmission* ou *les palais du capital*
- 2.2.4. *Les manoirs de Wannsee* et la médiation mnémonique dans *Red Pill*

2.3. Échos du lieu : traces sonores dans le New York de Hari Kunzru

- 2.3.1. *Explorations cacophoniques* dans *Twice Upon a Time: Listening to New York*
- 2.3.2. *Résonances de l'écho* dans *White Tears*

Chapitre 3

Du lieu au(x) lien(s) : le lieu au prisme de l'attachement

Le troisième chapitre est consacré à la notion d'attachement, ou comment les récits montrent les attachements matériels et symboliques qui se forment dans le rapport au lieu. On examine la façon dont ces écrivains abordent les images des « chaînes » ou des « racines » qui décrivent souvent l'attachement au lieu, et leur préfèrent des **modes d'attachement** plus dynamiques et multidirectionnels. On cherche ici à comprendre comment la **reconnaissance des attachements** existants entre sujet et lieu(x) peut permettre de nouvelles lectures des modes d'être-au-monde, différentes de celles d'un nomadisme ou cosmopolitisme qui se voudraient libérateurs *parce que* détachés du lieu.

Les rapports entre soi (« *self* ») et lieu font l'objet du premier développement, où l'on s'intéresse notamment aux réécritures du **récit d'apprentissage** dans *The Impressionist* de Hari Kunzru et *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* de Mohsin Hamid. Dans d'autres romans, la notion de « *self* » permet aussi de percevoir la façon dont les conflits intérieurs du sujet révèlent la **fragilité** du lieu.

Un second développement permet de s'intéresser à la narration du **transnational**, dans des récits où le **paradigme de la nation** comme lieu d'attachement est remis en cause, notamment au regard de l'héritage du **conflit indo-pakistanaï**, ou bien face au **Brexit**, et où la **ville** semble constituer une forme d'attachement alternatif dans l'expérience contemporaine. On tâche ici de reconsidérer ces romans dans les différents cadres critiques de la littérature transnationale et de percevoir dans quelle mesure ils y participent ou bien s'en défont.

Enfin, on examine la notion de **détachement** et les paradoxes qu'elle recouvre dans les modes de vie contemporains de la mondialisation, par exemple une fragmentation symbolique des rapports aux lieux, désormais « consommés », ce que Hamid et Kunzru représentent sur le mode de la **métonymie**. D'autres paradoxes apparaissent dans les imaginaires du **cosmopolitisme** – on observe les évolutions et limites du concept à travers ces récits.

3.1. « The self ! Where is it ? » Lieu, attachement et écriture du soi

3.1.1. Les Bildungsromane et leurs attachements : de l'apprentissage comme passage

3.1.2. Conflits intérieurs / extérieurs : le soi face au monde et la fragilité du lieu

3.2. « Places of enormous size » : attachement et détachement dans le paradigme transnational

3.2.1. « Atomized lands », « illusory nations » : re-situer le national

3.2.2. « The era of cities » : la ville comme attachement alternatif ?

3.3. Les paradoxes du détachement

3.3.1. Textures du global : consommation des lieux et métonymie

3.3.2. « That overused word » : le détachement face au cosmopolitisme

Chapitre 4

Lieux communs et modalités du partage

Dans ce chapitre, on propose d'explorer les manières dont le lieu est une condition de **coexistence** et un enjeu de partage. On analyse comment les récits de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru mettent en évidence les **zones de contact** (Pratt 1991), les négociations et les reconfigurations qui se produisent dans des expériences du lieu, qui en font un *lieu commun*, au sens littéral. Dans leurs œuvres, ces négociations apparaissent comme des formes de friction,

par lesquelles le sentiment de **proximité** ou celui d'une distance vis-à-vis d'autrui, et les adaptations qui en découlent, influencent l'expérience du lieu.

On s'intéresse d'abord à la codépendance du lieu et du **corps**, qu'il s'agisse de corps qui facilitent l'accès aux lieux ou au contraire d'une interface limitante. Les récits de migration et de mobilité sociale qui apparaissent fréquemment dans ces romans laissent entrevoir la notion d'**inconfort** et le rapport aux lieux qu'elle induit. Chez Hari Kunzru, la « topie » que constitue le corps (Foucault 2009 : 9) devient parfois utopie ou dystopie, faisant appel aux imaginaires du **cyborg** qui se construit et reconstruit à l'envi.

La notion de l'**intime** est elle aussi centrale. Chez Hari Kunzru, elle dévoile les interactions complexes du sujet avec le monde qui l'entoure, qu'il s'agisse d'une expérience de la dématérialisation numérique (dans *Transmission*) ou de l'activisme politique (dans *My Revolutions*). Dans le cas de Mohsin Hamid, elle participe de la façon de rencontrer les lecteurs dans l'œuvre. On analyse ici comment des éléments caractéristiques de son écriture, comme les références à des motifs de *ghazals* du sous-continent indien, ou bien l'emploi de la deuxième personne que l'on retrouve dans trois de ses romans, contribuent à des formes de connexion entre lecteurs et narrateurs.

Le chapitre est consacré ensuite aux **limites**, et à ce qu'elles font à l'expérience du lieu. Les écrivains examinent notamment les peurs de **contagion** ou de transmission qui prennent plusieurs directions thématiques dans leurs récits, et qui renvoient au sous-texte ancien d'une peur de l'étranger et du contact dans l'expérience coloniale. De façon plus strictement contemporaine, les romans permettent de reconsidérer le besoin de « **personal space** », théorisé par le sociologue américain Edward T. Hall en 1966, et qui semble imprégner le rapport au lieu dans les sociétés contemporaines.

Enfin, l'écriture des migrations chez ces deux écrivains fait écho aux notions d'**hospitalité** et d'hostilité, qui donnent à voir le rapport à son propre lieu et au partage des lieux. Dans leurs narrations de la « crise des réfugiés » de 2015 en Europe (dans *Red Pill* et *Exit West*), des politiques d'accueil européennes (dans le roman *Transmission*) mais aussi dans la structure narrative à l'œuvre dans *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, on voit apparaître toutes les oppositions et les complémentarités des concepts d'hospitalité et d'hostilité, tels que théorisés par Jacques Derrida (Derrida et Dufourmantelle 2000).

4.1. Une « topie impitoyable » : lieu et corps en partage

4.1.1. Corps placés et déplacés : récits de l'inconfort

4.1.2. Lieux incarnés

4.1.3. « *The body is the message* » : des « *Databodies* » mouvants aux cyborgs mutants

4.2. Proximités négociées : lieux de l'intime

4.2.1. *Transmission : la quête du toucher à l'ère « digitale »*¹⁷⁹

4.2.2. *My Revolutions : cartographies du personnel et du politique*

4.2.3. *Intimité, Soufisme et connexion créatrice dans les romans de Mohsin Hamid*

4.3. Terrains d'entente en limite de lieu

4.3.1. *D'inquiétantes transmissions : la zone de contact et ses risques*

4.3.2. *Désirs de lieu dans le « personal space »*

4.4. Rencontres en milieux (in)hospitaliers

4.4.1. « *Predatory delicacies* » : *l'hospitalité, une consommation et consommation du lieu*

4.4.2. « *The world's VIP room* » : *des hospitalités limitées*

Chapitre 5 « Géométrie du pouvoir » et lieu(x) sous contrôle

Ce cinquième chapitre est consacré aux représentations des formes de contrôle qui émergent lorsque le lieu est perçu comme un **enjeu de pouvoir**, en analysant plus particulièrement la façon dont les écrivains évoquent des pratiques de **surveillance**, des **divisions** ou des **inégalités inscrites dans l'espace**, et comment celles-ci peuvent façonner le rapport au lieu. Le terme « géométrie du pouvoir » (« power geometry ») est emprunté à la géographe Doreen Massey dans son analyse des inégalités d'accès aux lieux et à la mobilité qui caractérisent la mondialisation (2001 : 149-150).

On s'intéresse notamment aux lieux de l'**exclusion**, qui se manifestent dans la géographie urbaine proposée par Mohsin Hamid, mais aussi par l'écriture des « *suburbs* », l'espace péri-urbain, chez Hari Kunzru. Des formes d'exclusion s'opèrent également dans les descriptions des prisons, lieux qui pour Foucault sont conçus « sans extérieur ni lacune » (1975 : 238). L'exclusion se joue aussi dans des lieux genrés ou dans une pratique des lieux qui se fait au prisme du genre.

Dans un second développement sur la **surveillance**, on s'intéresse à ce que celle-ci fait aux lieux, qu'il s'agisse de lieux statiques aux allures de **panoptiques**, ou bien de panoptiques

¹⁷⁹ Le terme anglais « digital » renvoie à ce qu'on traduit en principe en français par le « numérique » : ici le mot « digital » est francisé pour conserver une proximité sémantique avec l'idée du toucher.

contemporains plus mouvants, dans ce que Bauman appelle une forme de glissement (« *slippage* ») dans les modes de surveillance (2000 : 11). Un exemple manifeste est celui du **drone**, figure de surveillance commune aux récits des deux écrivains.

Enfin, on perçoit dans ces récits une remise en question du **paradigme du pouvoir**, par lequel les lieux sont conçus comme l'objet d'une conquête ou d'une maîtrise. Deux exemples sont examinés : d'abord le rôle de la **vitesse**, parodiée dans *Transmission* de Hari Kunzru, et que l'on peut lire avec la notion de « dromocratie », le règne de la course, théorisé par Paul Virilio (1977 : 53) ; ensuite, la question des **ressources**, de leur partage et de leur finitude, dans les récits de Mohsin Hamid qui évoquent la place du Pakistan et du sous-continent indien face aux défis du changement climatique.

5.1. Lieux de l'exclusion

5.1.1. *Sociabilités clôturées dans les romans de Mohsin Hamid*

5.1.2. *Le « droit à la ville » : misères du monde péri-urbain dans les romans de Hari Kunzru*

5.1.1. *« Sans extérieur ni lacune » ? Récits de la cellule*

5.1.2. *Lieux genrés / genrer le lieu*

5.2. Surveillance et contrôle

5.2.1. *Du « panopticon » contemporain*

5.2.2. *« Drones don't help »*

5.3. Du pouvoir-mouvoir au pouvoir-avoir : repenser le récit du pouvoir

5.3.1. *« Powered motion » : trouver son chemin dans la dromocratie*

5.3.2. *Pouvoir, ressources et lieu(x) (du) soutenable dans la fiction de Mohsin Hamid*

Chapitre 6

« At the boundaries of any complex event » : récits de l'avoir lieu

À partir des nombreux passages dans ces récits qui abordent les **conflits** actuels ainsi que l'**information de masse**, le sixième chapitre s'articule autour de la notion d'**événement**. Ce qui « a lieu », au sens littéral comme métaphorique, peut représenter un défi pour l'imaginaire. Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru s'emploient tous les deux à intégrer dans leurs

récits les questions d'**immédiateté** et d'interprétation posées par des événements qui marquent l'imaginaire collectif, en faisant appel à leurs interactions avec le lieu.

On analyse comment les événements contemporains donnent lieu à de nouvelles formes de **paysages**, et comment les deux écrivains opèrent des effets d'encadrement et de distanciation sur le plan narratif afin de replacer et déplacer certaines mises en scène discursives, par exemple autour du 11-Septembre et de la guerre en Irak. Ces mises en scène sont aussi celle d'une banalisation de la violence, dans les villes décrites par Mohsin Hamid, ou la mise en scène de l'engagement politique radical dans *My Revolutions* de Hari Kunzru.

Un second développement est consacré aux représentations de l'événement axées sur l'inconnu et l'impensable, en analysant comment Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru, tous deux amateurs de **fiction spéculative**, réemploient certains de ses ressorts et notamment ceux d'un lieu inconnu et/ou effrayant à découvrir. C'est aussi l'occasion d'analyser les représentations de la **terreur** dans ces récits, en observant les déplacements sémantiques que peuvent créer les discours autour du terrorisme – dans leur théorisation du tournant post-11-Septembre dans la fiction post-coloniale, Elleke Boehmer et Stephen Morton parlent d'une littérature de la **métalepse** (2009 : 11).

Dans leur questionnement des événements, ces œuvres revisitent par ailleurs des tropes et mythes de la fin, tels que les notions de **crise**, d'**apocalypse** ou de **décadence**, en observant leurs ancrages dans le lieu. Celles-ci sont souvent parodiées et donc désamorçées, à l'instar des évocations du nucléaire que l'on retrouve chez les deux écrivains. Enfin, on s'intéresse aux nouvelles formes d'**agentivités** et de responsabilité discursive que soulèvent les romans. En effet, des effets de superposition et de trame narrative permettent de mettre en scène les dynamiques du **simultané** et de la **rumeur**, comme des façons d'appréhender l'événement qui sont aussi des modes d'être-au-lieu.

Au travers de ces interactions multiples, les récits proposent une lecture complexe des événements, qui remet en cause une certaine **singularisation** qui s'opère dans les interprétations philosophiques de « l'événement », pour lui préférer **les** événements vécus au travers de l'expérience des lieux. On suggère que ces lectures des événements par le truchement de lieux singuliers et de positions sociales différenciées font partie d'une **éthique de l'attention** plus largement à l'œuvre dans ces récits (Ganteau 2023: 2-8).

6.1. Paysages des événements

6.1.1. Théâtres de guerre

6.1.2. Récits du paysage médiatique

6.2. Aux confins du pensable

6.2.1. « *Into the zone* » : le saut dans l'inconnu

6.2.2. « *Fight or flight* » : le lieu aux prises avec la terreur

6.3. « The place of an ending »: cosmogonies et eschatologies

6.3.1. *Faire place au vide : le lieu comme matrice*

6.3.2. *Des lieux en crise ? Apocalypse et décadence*

6.3.3. *Imaginaires nucléaires et atomisation du lieu*

6.4. Prendre part à l'avoir lieu : nouvelles agentivités

6.4.1. « *It was all connected* » : la pantopie et le simultané

6.4.2. *La rumeur comme trame*

Chapitre 7 Le lieu par l'écart

Dans ce dernier chapitre, on suggère que les récits de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru donnent à voir les **écarts** qui se manifestent au travers de(s) lieu(x). Dans le manuscrit de thèse en anglais, on parle de « *cracking* », au sens de « fissurer » mais aussi de « déchiffrer » ou « **décoder** ». Il s'agit alors tout à la fois de **trouver la brèche** – trouver une ligne de faille qui permette de mieux percevoir et de comprendre certains aspects d'un lieu – mais aussi de reconnaître que le lieu, loin d'être **réductible à une totalité**, est tout entier mu par des écarts et par une perception diffractée qui persistent dans toutes les expériences que l'on en fait. Cette analyse convoque le concept de « **plurivers** » énoncé par le philosophe Jean-Clet Martin, concept selon lequel « chaque élément, le plus infime, contient un texte entier – l'ensemble de l'univers – réfléchissant la totalité selon son point de vue et depuis sa place si particulière » (2010 : 120). L'écriture de l'écart est en ce sens une forme d'antidote à l'**englobement** promu par les pensées du global, et lui oppose une écriture attentive, pluralisée et multiscalaire des lieux.

Deux dynamiques manifestent cette pratique narrative de l'écart. La première est une forme de **dérive**. C'est d'abord la dérive de Guy Debord et des Situationnistes, une « technique du passage hâtif à travers des ambiances variées » correspondant à « l'affirmation d'un comportement ludique-constructif » dans l'espace urbain (1958 *n.p.*) – celle-ci est nommément

citée et contextualisée dans le roman *My Revolutions* de Hari Kunzru. Cette pratique de la dérive semble en réalité s'étendre à d'autres pratiques visibles dans les romans, par exemple le **retour** vers des lieux du passé, comprenant les lieux symboliquement souterrains des milieux « *underground* » que Kunzru aime à explorer. Des formes de déviation sont aussi en jeu dans les descriptions de l'**espace numérique** chez les deux écrivains, qui peuvent mener, comme le suggère Caren Irr, à une interprétation du narrateur comme **routeur** qui redirige constamment l'information (2013 : 28).

La seconde dynamique de l'écart est celle du **piratage**, ou « *hacking* » en anglais. On voit dans les romans comment des formes d'**occupation** des lieux, décrite au travers de camps de réfugiés mais aussi de squats politisés, peuvent constituer des incursions créatives dans l'imaginaire. Enfin, on voit transparaître dans les romans une tendance à l'**échange**, comme s'il s'agissait de **changer de place** pour mieux se saisir du lieu. Ces échanges sont opérés chez Hari Kunzru par des figures du « *trickster* », renvoyant aux mythes amérindiens du coyote (dans *Gods Without Men*) ou encore à la légende du bluesman qui fait un pacte avec le diable au milieu d'un carrefour (dans *White Tears*). Kunzru souhaite que ses lecteurs puissent « vivre dans les écarts » en lisant ses œuvres (« *live in the gaps* », Silverman 2012) ; cette métaphore peut s'étendre aux inconnues laissées volontairement dans les récits de Mohsin Hamid, et à son projet de vouloir rencontrer les lecteurs dans une forme de « co-construction » narrative (Hamid 2015: xviii).

7.1. L'art de dériver : des lieux déviés

7.1.1. La dérive comme retour : chronotopes en suspens

7.1.2. « A place of abstraction and warmth » : espace numérique et narrateurs-routeurs

7.2. L'art de s'introduire : des lieux piratés

7.2.1. « Carving out a utopia » : l'occupation comme fabrique des lieux

7.2.1.1. Les camps : négocier son espace

7.2.1.2. Les squats : s'emparer d'un lieu

7.2.2. Échanges de places

7.2.2.1. Figures du « *trickster* », des motels aux carrefours

7.2.2.2. « *Living in the gaps* »: constructions inachevées

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Places in the making: the po/ethics of place in the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru

La fabrique des lieux : po/éthique du lieu dans les romans et nouvelles de Mohsin Hamid et de Hari Kunzru

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Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru have been widely acclaimed figures of the transnational literary scene since the 2000s, and their fictions have often converged since then around the experience of place. This thesis proposes to read this shared writing pattern as a po/ethics, involving both poetics and ethics, in the sense that it demonstrates the two novelists' engagement with events that have upended relations to place, and modes of being with place, in the early twenty-first century – from 9/11 to Brexit, but also migration and climate change – while simultaneously playing on narrative voice, metalepsis and overlapping to represent the ubiquity of the contemporary sense of place. In doing so, they also relentlessly question the categories of nation or origin ascribed not only to imaginaries of place, but to the writers themselves, and accordingly display inspirations from a variety of sources in the British, American, as well as Pakistani and Indian literary canon. Because they often resort to dialogic forms, these narratives also seem to interrogate readers constantly about their own relations to place and their own role in the making of common places. These also include literary common places – *topoi* – in the sporadic references to the fable, to horror or, more frequently, to speculative fiction. From Pakistan to London via Berlin and the Mojave Desert, these narratives of globalisation offer new perspectives for a situated, attentive reading of the multiple attachments formed and reformed with place. The analysis focuses on the entirety of the two writers' fictions to date, and includes interviews conducted with Hari Kunzru.

Keywords : novel, place, ethics, space, globalisation, event, contemporary, migration

Figures acclamées du roman transnational anglophone des années 2000, Mohsin Hamid et Hari Kunzru ont depuis développé une écriture résolument connectée au lieu et aux formes qu'il prend dans l'expérience contemporaine. La thèse propose de lire leur écriture comme une po/éthique, à la fois poétique et éthique, en ce sens qu'elle démontre une volonté de se confronter dans la fiction aux événements qui ont bouleversé les modes d'être au lieu dans le tournant du siècle – du 11-Septembre au Brexit, en passant par les questions migratoires et le changement climatique – tout en jouant sur les voix narratives, la métalepse et la superposition pour représenter l'ubiquité des lieux du contemporain. Ce faisant, ils questionnent en creux les catégories de nation ou d'origine auxquels les imaginaires du lieu, mais aussi les écrivains eux-mêmes, sont souvent réduits, et revisitent des voies tracées par des figures tutélaires du roman britannique, américain, tout comme du roman anglophone pakistanais et indien. Par leur recours à des ressorts dialogiques, ces récits semblent aussi constamment interpellier les lecteurs sur leurs propres rapports au lieu et sur la constitution de lieux communs. Ces lieux communs sont également littéraires lorsque les récits pratiquent des variations de genres, incluant parfois la fable, l'horreur ou plus souvent la fiction spéculative. Du Pakistan à Londres en passant par Berlin et le Désert des Mojaves californien, ces romans de la mondialisation offrent des perspectives pour une lecture située et attentive des multiples attachements qui se forment et reforment avec les lieux. L'analyse porte sur l'ensemble de l'œuvre de fiction des deux écrivains, accompagnée d'entretiens menés auprès de Hari Kunzru.

Mots-clés : roman, lieu, éthique, espace, mondialisation, événement, contemporain, migration