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Greg Forter

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# CAPITALISM, TEMPORALITY, PRECARIETY

UTOPIAN FORM AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN CONTEMPORARY  
LITERATURE AND THEORY

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Greg Forter

Among the most compelling theoretical developments in the humanities since the turn of the millennium has been a renewed interest in time and the philosophy of history. This development comes on the other side, so to speak, of the “spatial turn” in cultural theory, with its influential theses concerning historical time’s death or obsolescence and its corresponding emphasis on simultaneity, spatial extension, and global circulation (see Jameson 2003; Foucault, 22). The reasons for this shift from space (back) to time are manifold and would bear further scrutiny. What I wish to emphasize here is that many of these new works share a striking intuition: they connect the critique of our contemporaneity with a theorization of historical time as internally heterogenous and multiple (rather than homogenous-progressive and singular). The works I have in mind suggest, indeed, that a critique of the present is best conducted by grasping how our “now” is historically noncontemporaneous with itself, inhabited by undigested residues of past aspirations, sufferings, and unrealized possibilities, as well as by intimations of an at least potentially liberatory future. This intuition is shared by critics who diverge on many other, often quite significant points. It animates analyses of such varied theoretical provenance as the Derridean (Cheah), the postcolonial (Chakrabarty, Wenzel), the phenomenological-antiracist (Scott), the queer (Muñoz), and the expressly Marxist (Dienst; Malm 2016; Morfino and Thomas).

But perhaps no work has explored these issues more imaginatively than Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. The book is at once unusual in its brilliance and exemplary in its braiding of a critique of capitalism with a thematization of the alternate futures inhering in yet foreclosed by that system. It has also met with

the kind of acclaim that all but guarantees its widening influence, winning both the Victor Turner and Gregory Bateson prizes in anthropology, for example. I want therefore to treat Tsing's book at some length in this article, with the aim of explicating its theoretical ambition, its methodological assumptions, and also some of its limitations. In light of those limitations, I then proceed to supplement Tsing's analysis with a theoretical work, Anahid Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited*, and a work of speculative fiction, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, that permit me to develop the terms for an eco-materialist and antihistoricist utopianism.<sup>1</sup>

The argument that emerges from these juxtapositions is as follows. While Tsing's book provides invaluable insight into the devastations wreaked by contemporary capital and the alternate futures that lie latent in its ruins, her resolute antiutopianism and her grounding of political engagement in the unrepeatable, nongeneralizable singularity of human/nonhuman entanglements make moving outward from her examples difficult.<sup>2</sup> It's for this reason that I place her claims alongside those of Nersessian. The latter's ecological critique of capitalism hinges, paradoxically, on a discussion of literary form. She proposes a link between *formal* attunements to the finitude of earth's resources and utopian norms that are in principle generalizable, such that form becomes a medium for fulfilling the desire called "utopia" by delimiting it. The dialogue I stage between Tsing and Nersessian thus brings together an attentiveness to the heterotemporal dimension of capitalist processes with an emphasis on the formal delimitation of desire as the basis for actualizing a future at once utopian and green in its implication.

*Exit West* then offers an extraordinary fictional elaboration of these concerns. It encodes in its forms a minimalist deformation of our capitalist present that introduces the magic of a future already inhabiting that present. It does this by imagining a world in which human bodies are granted the capacity for the instantaneous, frictionless transit that global capital grants (only) to its virtual objects. The novel reveals how such a state of affairs engenders a new kind of universality: a global redistribution of precarity that inaugurates a form of utopianism that's dialectically indistinguishable from apocalypse. I conclude by proposing that such a commitment to radical limitation is at once the substance of noncommodified creativity, the basis for erotic delight, and the condition of a world in which nature will have been "lightened of the burden of furnishing abundance" because people have become,

in Nersessian's words, "agents of less catastrophic harm" (Nersessian, 25, 42).



The originality of Tsing's account comes partly from her focus on what thrives in the refuse of our capitalist present. Stressing the revelatory power of metaphor to inform and enrich our abstract concepts, and subordinating linear argumentation to the wayward profusion of story, her book uncovers in the ruins of capital some minimalist practices of personal freedom and "pericapitalist" economic activities that thrive, in fact, *only* among the ruins capitalism has wrought. *Mushroom* in this sense takes seriously the precarity of a world in which "everyone depends on capitalism but almost no one has what we used to call a 'regular job'" (3).<sup>3</sup> It proposes that this condition signals the bankruptcy of liberal and Marxist teleologies alike; that what one needs to understand such a world is an openness to indeterminate encounters, unencumbered by narrative and theoretical preconceptions; and that such an openness tunes our senses to the constitutive character of apparently marginal "entanglements" among peoples and species—entanglements inhering in devastated histories yet replete with intimations of futurity. These are entanglements best approached, Tsing wagers, by way of an eco-ethnographic depiction of the delicacy at the book's heart, the matsutake mushroom.

For this is a delicacy that's at once a commodity and incompletely subordinated to the "rationality" of commodity production and exchange. It cannot be deliberately cultivated but is found instead in the deepest reaches of forests blighted by timber cultivation—especially in the Eastern Cascade forests of Oregon. There it is foraged by largely Southeast Asian pickers who work "for themselves" rather than for employers and whose workplace therefore stands outside conventional processes of capitalist rationalization and work discipline (but also of course leaves the pickers bereft of wages, benefits, and job security). These pickers stage improvisatory open markets to sell their wares in the forests, where the mushrooms are bought by buyers and bulkers and commodity traders who only then, at a considerable remove, transform them into legible "inventory" in a global capitalist supply chain.

Tsing goes on to show how the mushrooms reexit the commodity circuit upon reaching their main destinations in Japan. Because they're

almost exclusively given as presents and surrounded by rituals of gift giving, they transmogrify into objects that escape the logic of abstract equivalency and exchange. This escape is never, of course, total; Tsing insists that the economy of matsutake is simultaneously “inside” and “outside” of capital, and she remains skeptical of a too-rigid binary between gift and commodity economies. But she suggests that at *both* ends of the matsutake supply chain something approaching a gift economy obtains. “Gifts are salvaged from capitalist commodity chains,” she writes—or, put otherwise, objects alienated from the site of their production and into the substancelessness of abstract equivalency can be *dealienated* in such a way as to come to mean *otherwise*, to enter into circuits of value that are intimate, relational, embodied, and reputational (123). This is what happens at the tail end of the process, when the inventory reaches Japan. But at the front end, too, in the forests of Oregon,

mushrooms and money are as much tokens and trophies of an exchange of freedom as valuables in themselves. They gain value through their connections to freedom. They are not isolated objects to own but person-making attributes. It is in this light that—despite the fact that there are no explicit “gifts” here—if I had to judge this economy in a gift-versus-commodity contrast, I would place it on the side of gifts. (126–27)

Matsutake is thus “a capitalist commodity that begins and ends its life as a gift” (128). It is something “salvaged” at either end of the capitalist market’s alienations and abstractions, just as that market itself relies upon a similar act of salvage. For this latter point is key. The matsutake “spends only a few hours as a fully alienated commodity,” Tsing writes, “the time when it waits as inventory in shipping crates on the tarmac and travels in the belly of a plane. But these are hours that count. [Capitalist] relations . . . are cemented within the possibility of these hours. As inventory, matsutake allow calculations that channel profits to exporters and importers, making the work of organizing the commodity chain worthwhile from their perspective. This is salvage accumulation: the creation of capitalist value from noncapitalist value regimes” (128).<sup>4</sup>

Tsing describes her eco-ethnographic approach in passages like this one: “To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method*. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis

is the indeterminate encounter. To learn anything we must revitalize arts of noticing" (37). Such a procedure uncovers what she calls "patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs" (4). The assemblages enact their spatial and temporal multiplicities precisely by way of contamination: "How does a gathering become a 'happening,' that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. . . . One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival" (27). Precarity, indeterminacy, assemblages, contamination—and above all, the discovery of new "world-making projects" that seize upon and actualize alternative spatiotemporal "rhythms": these are the figures through which Tsing imagines new ways of being-in-common, or, as she puts it in the book's subtitle, "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins."

No one who grapples seriously with these arguments will fail to be compelled and even moved by them. Still, I wish to pause over some of the book's implications, especially as these relate to the politics Tsing derives from her analysis. "Without progress, what is struggle?" she asks in a pivotal chapter near the end. "The disenfranchised had a common program to the extent that we could all share in progress. It was the determinacy of political categories such as class . . . that brought us the confidence that struggle would move us somewhere better." But now, in the purported ruins of Marxist understandings of class as the motor of history-as-progress, such certainty is impossible. Tsing proposes to respond with a new kind of "political listening" (drawing here on the organizational labors of the activist Beverly Brown). The listening she has in mind reveals "that any gathering contains many inchoate political futures and that political work consists of helping some of those come into being. Indeterminacy is not the end of history but rather that node in which many beginnings lie in wait. To listen politically is to detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas" (254).

The effort to conceptualize this mode of attention leads to a passage worth quoting at length:

I search for fugitive moments of entanglement in the midst of institutional alienation. These are sites in which to seek allies. One might think of them as latent commons. They are latent in two senses: first, while ubiquitous, we rarely notice them, and, second, they are undeveloped. . . . They are what we hear in Brown's political listening and related arts of noticing. . . . I characterize them in the negative:

*Latent commons are not exclusive human enclaves. . . .*

*Latent commons are not good for everyone.* Every instance of collaboration makes room for some and leaves others out. . . .

*Latent commons don't institutionalize well. . . .*

*Latent commons cannot redeem us.* Some radical thinkers hope that progress will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons. In contrast, latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble. And humans are never fully in control.

Given [all this], it makes no sense to crystallize first principles or seek natural laws that generate best cases. Instead, I practice arts of noticing. I comb through the mess of existing worlds-in-the-making, looking for treasures—each distinctive and unlikely to be found again, at least in that form. (255)

The appeal of such formulations is to my mind considerable. The statements not only keep faith with the temporal heterogeneity of our capitalist present but locate in that heterogeneity a plethora of potential futures-in-common—precisely, a *latent commons*—some of which we might legitimately seek to realize in the strong sense of *making real*. The question for me is then the following: on what basis are we to decide *which* of these latent futures to “help” come into being? The emphasis on indeterminacy and its related Deleuzian category of the “assemblage,” along with a committed antiutopianism that insists on the permanence of antagonism and the impossibility of world-historical change (there will always be winners and losers; the “latent commons cannot redeem us”), risks reducing political listening to a species of bad empiricism, an attentiveness to the unrepeatable, radical singularity of encounters that permit of no generalizing models at all (“each” instance of indeterminate encounter is “distinctive and unlikely to be found again” [255]). To put the case bluntly: it remains unclear what the *desirable* futures embedded in the present of the matsutake foragers might be, or what the political “movement” (in the sense of change) is that Tsing's book recommends. If all we can do in the wake of “progress” is listen and attend to the unrepeatable, nonmodular singularity of specific entanglements, it's hard to know what norms to appeal

to in facilitating some futures while leaving others to wither on the vine. The domain of generalizable norms or values that do not arise solely from the indeterminacy of entanglement seems to be foreclosed in advance. My fear is that, without such norms, we resign ourselves to marveling at the resourcefulness of peoples' and species' responses to precarity rather than seeking to minimize it or to challenge its inequitable distribution. We risk capitulating to the triumph of capitalism and to dwelling (only) in the ruins of its "salvage accumulation" rather than inventing alternatives to it—indeed, rather than actualizing the latent *futures* that Tsing herself appears to want.<sup>5</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that any materialism worth its salt must include a critique of the "homogenous, empty time" that forms the basis of historicist narratives (narratives of "progress") of the kind that Tsing rightly rejects. I've also proposed that the project of utopia remains urgent if we are to retain, however provisionally, some normative sense of the futures we wish to retrieve from the ruins of history or the temporal profusions of our present. Here the heterotemporal poetics of Walter Benjamin have seemed to me especially valuable. This is because Benjamin's cultivation of a method that "blasts" unrealized futures from the amber of the past is at once attentive to historical indeterminacy and guided by a revolutionary imperative.<sup>6</sup> As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, "The present as the moment of revolutionary possibility acts as a lodestar for the assembly of historical fragments [in Benjamin's work]. . . . The present as 'now-time' keeps the historical materialist on course. Without its power of alignment, the possibilities for reconstructing the past are infinite and arbitrary" (338–39). This latter point is of course a version of the one I made about Tsing a moment ago: without some normative sense of which latent futures we wish to actualize, the possibilities for engaging the indeterminacy of our present are infinite and arbitrary. I return to this problem and to Benjamin's way of addressing it in my conclusion.

Here, however, I wish to bring Tsing's claims into contact with the two works mentioned earlier: Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited* and Hamid's *Exit West*. Neither of these is naively utopian. Each understands and directly confronts the danger of projects for social change that are undemocratic and coercive, that attempt to browbeat the future into submission to a pre-given blueprint, or that enforce premature closure



in such fashion as to fetishize an image of “perfection” while foreclosing disagreement, dialogue, or alterity itself.<sup>7</sup> Yet each declines to deduce from these dangers the unviability of utopian projects or what Benjamin calls historical “redemption.” Each decouples the critique of progress from a suspicion of institutionalization and “universality,” remaining complicatedly in favor of these latter but unambiguously against the homogeneity undergirding narratives of historical progress.<sup>8</sup>

Nersessian’s book provides a compelling place to begin. Her central contention is that utopian thought is best served less by aspiring to unlimited fulfillment—with its associated visions of plenitude and abundance—than by embracing constraint and an enabling curtailment of desire’s ambitions. She makes this claim in the context of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Or, more properly, she articulates it in relation to “Rcsm,” Northrop Frye’s shorthand for “Romanticism” in the notes for his so-called (and unpublished) “Third Book.” Nersessian appropriates this abbreviation for the way it “makes visible on the page the down-tuning of an aspirational form to its not-quite-barest minimum.” The shorthand embodies, in graphic form, that utopianism of the minimal and pared back that Nersessian finds in the literature that interests her: it is “the little abbreviation that could, an expansive category that actively contests the ‘crass . . . delusion’ that ‘whatever bends a norm is politically radical,’ and whatever upholds paradigms of restriction and constraint [is, by contrast,] authoritarian or fascistic” (25). She continues:

[Rcsm encodes] allegorical practices for envisioning utopia in the midst of an impoverished present. . . . It [is] an occasion to dramatize how art works as a propositional grammar of the political imagination, a hypothesis about the organization of finite things (matter, shapes, bodies) in dwindling space. And perhaps Rcsm, finally, is in quest of the ordinary because the ordinary is a medium through which we contact the determinate and determining, learning how to dwell in embodied proximity to possible worlds no less rich for their simultaneous recession into and emergence from the mundane. (31)

The “rush of stories” employed by Tsing to explore the eco-ethnography of matsutake is here displaced by a literary-critical and -theoretical inquiry into the reflexive potential of expressive forms. Romanticism

enacts a specific type of delimitation—meditating upon the aesthetic necessity of binding objects in space and time—such that readers encounter its forms as models for a relation to the world *defined* by a kind of ecstasy of the limited. The utopian then becomes inseparable from literary acts of “reducing, contracting, abridging, cutting-back and paring-down” (25); it is enabled by “contact [with] the determinate and determining,” an aliveness to the world-as-it-is “where the extraordinary is newly calibrated to the ordinary in such a way that everyday life crackles with [a] ‘certain charge’ while remaining recognizably pedestrian” (22).

It would be possible to show how such claims stand in a productive if idiosyncratic relation to the tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century utopian thought. Especially noteworthy in that context are Nersessian’s resistance to Jameson’s suspicion of the utopian imagination’s purported “closure[s]” (what she prefers to call “boundedness”), as well as her extension through the category of limitation of Ernst Bloch’s “concrete utopia”: the not-yet that inhabits every now as a potential *Novum* whose future realization is *possible* (but in no sense guaranteed) precisely because it inheres in the material conditions or “tendenc[ies]” of the now (Jameson 2005, 289; Nersessian, 17–18; Bloch 1986, 13; Bloch 1991, 136–37).<sup>9</sup> Rather than rehearse these arguments here, I want to suggest that the very idiosyncrasy of *Utopia, Limited*’s claims provides a unique vantage for the kinds of arguments I am advancing. The implications of those claims reach well beyond the immediate case study of her own investigation (i.e., Romanticism). We can see some ways in which this is so by exploring in greater detail the book’s relationship to Tsing’s text.

For if Nersessian’s focus on literary form appears detached from *Mushroom*’s more direct examination of human/nonhuman relations under capital, the parallels are nonetheless striking. There is, first, a shared concern with the extraordinariness of the ordinary: each book is interested in how a certain kind of (literary or anthropological) attention makes visible novel life forms secreted within what we call “reality.” Second, this hidden reality is in both cases linked to *time* and the forging of *other worlds*. The “worlds-in-the-making” and “inchoate political futures” that Tsing uncovers in what she calls “gatherings” find their corollary in Nersessian’s description of how we “dwell in embodied proximity to possible worlds no less rich for

their simultaneous recession into and emergence from the mundane," as well as in her suggestion that Rasmussen speaks to "the imminent content of a future whose matter and shape are yet unknown, but which will have to 'grow and revivify' in this world . . . and no other" (Tsing, 255, 254; Nersessian, 31). What lies hidden in our ordinary world is, in these cases, the heterotemporal intimation of some other social order-to-be-actualized. Third, Nersessian no less than Tsing makes capital the decisive "frame" for her inquiry. Romanticism's abstemious utopianism encodes an "anti-capitalist perspective on limitation," "a situation of maximum liability in which we confront the necessity of relinquishing what sustains us, including the inequitably distributed perversions of an unsustainable 'prosperity'" (Nersessian, 24). The works she discusses then become goads to confronting contemporary "neoliberalism's . . . fantasy of itself as a [sustainably] never-ending cycle of production and consumption" (4).<sup>10</sup> Fourth and finally, the injuries of capital are figured most forcefully in both these works as ecological violation. The urgency animating Tsing's account of the "blasted landscapes" from which matsutake emerges (3) finds its echo in Nersessian's contention that the texts which model "utopia, limited" "take . . . [their] own formalism to mime a minimally harmful relationship between human beings and a world whose resources are decidedly finite" (16). The aesthetic of the abbreviated is, in this sense, one tuned to the timbre of our world's *limited* ability to meet human beings' apparently unlimited demands upon it.<sup>11</sup>

The difference entailed in Nersessian's formalism is also a difference that matters, however. That formalism is inseparably bound up with the book's political imaginary. *Utopia, Limited* asks us to see how the political *depends* on the formal, how the submission to form as a principle of material, affective-somatic, and conceptual delimitation is part of what makes politics possible in the first place. Form permits and hence denotes the most minimal kinds of order and determinacy, enacting those tentative, provisional "closures" that are necessary to *any* political vision whatsoever. When Nersessian criticizes Laura Kipnis's celebration of adultery for its determination "to see bound-  
edness . . . as . . . the cellblock" of desire, when she describes Hardt and Negri's conception of political love as strangely "independent of formal as well [as] corporeal strictures," she is arguing against "the 'crass . . . delusion'" that politics entails the shattering of forms and

for the politically productive potential of formal circumscription (36). “Politics, like form, is . . . ‘an ordering action,’” she writes.<sup>12</sup> Both have to do with “the pressure that molds inclination into an intentional force, bringing bodies together in space, people together in public, wealth and other resources together for some performative, distributive, or redistributive purpose” (38). This means that there can no more be a politics than there can be an art without formal strictures. For politics to happen, the indeterminacy of encounter and the endless proliferation of assemblages must give way to the crystallization of fluidities into (relatively) permanent if flexible forms. That is the barest minimum—but there is more. Nersessian helps us see how the *types* of form through which one imagines matter. The shapes of our political imaginaries can serve to encode particular values that do not arise immanently from the encounter but rather emerge from the dialectical interplay between such encounters and the norms we bring to bear. It’s only on the basis of such formalized norms that one has grounds for choosing which worlds germinating in the debris of our “now” to actualize and what forms such worlds might productively take.

For there are, of course, many possible ways of “ordering” or giving shape to such worlds. Some of these would promote the *surmounting* of abbreviation and curtailment, striving toward their own transcendence while inciting an unfettered, Promethean expansion of human desires and capacities. Nersessian’s book encourages us to resist the allure of Promethean forms. Her project holds out as *normative values* a refusal of excess and an embrace of limitation, which are best achieved through “formal operations” that help us “not only to imagin[e] but actually to mak[e] a world lightened of the burden of furnishing abundance” (32, 25).

I’m suggesting that the interplay between normative contents and forms that incarnate by miming those contents can serve as the basis for a utopian response to the disasters of our present. (Without form, we might say, no politics in general; but without normative content, no utopian politics in particular.) I’m also proposing that, while Tsing’s and Nersessian’s projects intersect in important ways, the two texts are most fruitfully read as supplements to each other. Tsing provides a thick description of contemporary capitalist processes and the latent futures that are both produced by and incompletely “contained”

by those processes; yet her bundling of historical materialism with the progress narratives whose bankruptcy she endorses, along with her related embrace of indeterminacy, assemblages, and unrepeatable singularity, makes it hard to find in her work the normative basis for actualizing such futures. Nersessian's formalist, literary-theoretical enterprise lacks, in contrast, the directly social engagement of Tsing's inquiry; but her method turns out to provide the means for articulating a set of generalizable norms (utopia, limited) while distilling from the futures in our present the forms that enact or "model" those norms. The value of putting these claims side by side then goes something like this: if we wish not merely to depict but to embody alternatives to global capitalism's devastations, if we wish in particular to explore how Nersessian's ethos of diminishment might be instituted and marshaled against such ruins, we could do worse than attend to how contemporary *literature* addresses these matters. We might turn to works that enact with special force the dialectic between normative content and formal invention. We might ask how such a dialectic can help map the various kinds of violence that operate in tandem with the ecological to reveal the depredations of capital in its contemporary, uneven distribution of privilege and precarity across the globe. And we might seek out works that conjure a mundanity "crackling" with the heterotemporal promise of other worlds, depicting extraordinary forms of the ordinary while also selecting, from the mundane-extraordinary, the lineaments of a different *order*—a properly utopian intuition about the shape of new social forms.



Several recent works of fiction seem to me rich in potential for this purpose—Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Karen Thompson Walker's *The Dreamers* (2019), Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014), and Hamid's *Exit West*, for example. In what follows, I focus exclusively on the latter because it provides a powerful reflection both on the issues raised so far and on the relation of the novel's depictions to the forms in which it distills them. *Exit West* hinges, in fact, on a formal operation that could itself be said to "operationalize" the mundanely extraordinary for heterotemporal and utopian purposes. The book's initial action takes place in an unnamed city of the Global South, in a nation rapidly succumbing to war between government forces and Islamic

insurgents. The texture of ordinary life is thus from the start beset with frictions that defamiliarize by charging it with an indeterminate future. Hamid's central concern, in other words, is with the imminence of a social calamity out of which some kind of newness will be born. By setting his novel on the cusp of that futurity—by placing his main characters, Nadia and Saeed, in a time and place rendered liminal by encroaching war—he achieves a heightened attunement to the intrusion of the “not-yet” into the “now,” a sense of foreboding, to be sure, but also more generally of imminence and impending futurity as qualities inhering in the fabric of the present.

At the level of content, the novel proffers a number of figures for this imminence. The most significant of these is closely tied to the book's speculative-fictional form. It concerns a class of everyday “objects” whose ordinariness borders (ordinarily) on the banal: doors. “Rumors had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all.” Nadia and Saeed at first dismiss these rumors. “But every morning, when she woke, Nadia looked over at her front door, and at the doors of her bathroom, her closet, her terrace. Every morning, in his room, Saeed did much the same. All their doors remained simple doors, on/off switches in the flow between two adjacent places, binarily either open or closed, but each of their doors, regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility, became partially animate as well” (72–73). The existence of *fully* animated doors or “doors that could take you elsewhere” turns out to be the central fact of the book's world. We can think of them in Nersessian's terms as ordinary objects that crackle with the charge of the extraordinary—with magic. The magic takes the form of an annihilation of physical distance that's also an abrogation of time. In the rendering adjacent of the physically nonadjacent, what would ordinarily be a future separated by the time it takes to travel vast distances becomes immediately contiguous to the present, a future achieved instantaneously by the mere act of stepping through a door. The doors in this sense become figures for that collapse of the “horizon of expectation” (the future) into the present and its sedimented pasts—its “spaces of experience”—that Reinhart Koselleck

has associated with the processes of bourgeois modernity (266, 259).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the novel contextualizes these processes in ways that make the doors emblematic of a new kind of global precarity. They metaphorize not merely how the geopolitics of the twenty-first century renders the Global South vulnerable to wars whose perpetually impending character worries the fabric of any prewar present but how a future of permanent migratory and ecological crises is already upon us, on a scale so vast and a pace so rapid as to seem unfamiliar or even “futuristic” while remaining nonetheless pedestrian and of this world.<sup>14</sup>

This latter set of meanings lies at the heart of *Exit West*'s concerns. The magic doors are in one sense *exits* or escape hatches for those in the Global South (in the title's imaginary, the non-West or implied “East”); they open onto new modes of survival and new possibilities for collectivity, as we shall see. Their most immediate effect, however, is to accelerate the northward flight of migrants so radically that cities of the Global North are thrown into permanent crisis. The doors are therefore immediately militarized;<sup>15</sup> in the unnamed city where Nadia and Saeed grow up, the militants both arrive through doors and, once full-blown war breaks out, guard the exits to the West to prevent the population from absconding. When the couple finally escapes through one of these doors to Mykonos, they find that “the doors to richer destinations . . . were heavily guarded, but the doors . . . from poorer places . . . were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back where they came from . . . or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all” (106).<sup>16</sup> Saeed and Nadia finally do find an unguarded door through which to pass, ending up in a London mansion occupied by immigrant squatters; there they learn that “all over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way. . . . It seemed the more empty space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea particularly hard-hit, . . . and similarly the great expanses of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, filling up with tents and rough shelters, such that it was now said that between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were in a minority, and native-born ones vanishingly few” (129).

Predictably, this state of affairs leads to the militarization of London's public spaces. It gives rise to nativist riots and to “rumors . . .

of a tightening cordon being put in place.” The cordon “mov[es] 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 greenbelt, and concentrating those who remained in pockets of shrinking size,” surrounded by “soldiers and armored vehicles” and, “above” them, “drones and helicopters” (137).

This emphasis on militarized borders and on techniques for surveilling, controlling the movement of, and concentrating immigrant populations into camps signals once more that the book’s apparently alternate “present” functions as a proleptic mirror for our own. But to see exactly how this works, it’s important to clarify the causes and contours of precarity as the novel conceives them. A cursory reading of *Exit West* might lead one to think that the causes of global calamity in this case have little to do with *capitalism*, and hence that the book’s analytic frame differs significantly from Nersessian’s and Tsing’s. This is in my view mistaken. The novel in fact allegorically encodes a profound critique of contemporary capital and, especially, of its border-transgressing, globalizing imperatives:

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 be becoming 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.

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. (158)

The passage once more disorients by making the purported catastrophes of the future *present* in a world too much like our own. The world it depicts is ours/not ours inasmuch as it is characterized by a weakening of borders that makes the “skins” of nation-states more porous than they once were and also inasmuch as it exhibits (while exaggerating) the separatist ambitions and impending fragmentations that trouble



the unity of nation-states from within. At the same time, the device of the doors in this case reveals the causal role of capital in these processes. The borderlessness induced by those doors is here the effect of how Hamid *has transferred to human bodies the capacity for instantaneous transit* that in our world belongs only to the “objects” of neoliberal, post-Fordist accumulation: some types of commodities, virtual capital, and digital information especially. The speculative dimension of this (speculative) fiction can then be reformulated thus: *what if* bodies moved at the same pace as the virtual objects of a post-Fordist, neoliberal capital? How would the economically exploitative erosion of borders and the concomitant uncertainty about the “role” of nation-states be transformed by literalizing (that is, embodying) the frictionlessness that capital seeks but fails ever quite to achieve? We shall see in a moment that the novel’s answers to these questions are at once more radical, more “ecological,” and less purely apocalyptic than might be apparent.

As regards what I’ve called the “contours” of precarity, two particular points need emphasis. First, the precarity that those in the Global South are fleeing is inseparably bound up with their surplus vulnerability to suffering. It concerns the excess dependency and susceptibility to loss that accompanies the fraying of that “social network of hands” that Judith Butler has theorized as the trans-subjective basis for surviving the vulnerability constitutive of all human life (14). To say that global capitalism distributes precarity unevenly is to point precisely to this fraying. The neoliberal “liberation” of capital in the name of its unfettered, supra-national expansion wreaks special havoc on *some* denizens of our world, forcing them to bear the weight of a surplus exposure to suffering that follows from and reinforces the construal of their lives as unintelligible to grief. (The beneficiaries of this system, meanwhile, are permitted to live without this surplus, to suffer only the humanly unavoidable levels of precarity that Butler calls “precariousness,” and so to foster the illusion of their individual and collective “autonomy” [Butler, 25].)<sup>17</sup> If the exposure characteristic of such precarity makes for lives that are socially ungrievable, it is nonetheless, as the novel insists, an exposure that accumulates grief.<sup>18</sup> Hence Saeed is shown to lose not just his homeland but his mother (killed by a stray bullet as she searches for an earring in her car), then his father (who insists on staying behind when Saeed and Nadia pass through

the doors), and also more generally, his “people” (for whom Saeed’s identificatory longing increases the greater his distance from home).

The devastation wreaked by this surplus sorrow is not hard to see. In the face of growing friction with Nadia, Saeed at one point wonders “whether all his losses had not combined into a core of loss, and in this core, this center, the death of his mother and the death of his father and the possible death of his ideal self . . . were like a single death” (188). The suggestion here would seem to be that the sheer extensiveness of surplus grief can come to seem a (singular) Truth that constitutes the “core” of migrant subjectivity. At the same time, this surplus suffering enables a knowledge of the generality of precariousness that the beneficiaries of precarity’s uneven distribution are able to deny. The understanding arrives for Saeed by way of devotional prayer. Hamid writes toward the end of the book that Saeed begins to pray “several times a day, and he prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. When he prayed he touched his parents . . . and he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, . . . and this loss unites . . . every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow . . . and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death, to believe in humanity’s potential for building a better world, and so he prayed as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope” (202–3). *Exit West* does not exactly endorse prayer as the answer to precarity. But it does suggest that the insights granted to Saeed through prayer—insights into the commonality of finitude and the disavowed universality of precariousness—may furnish the norms on which we can ground “humanity’s potential for building a better world” (203).

My second point about the contours of precarity concerns not its effects on those from the Global South but the shape it assumes after passing through the doors. For if the speculative dimension to this fiction asks what happens in a world where human bodies circulate with the frictionless instantaneity of capital, the novel’s main answer is the *redistribution of precarity across the surface of the globe*.<sup>19</sup> The redistribution is both human and ecological. “That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move,” Hamid writes, “much of the global south head[ing] to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places” (169). Or again, a bit further on: “All 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 surges, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields, and slipping away from other people too, people they had in some cases loved" (213). In both these cases, at stake is a calamity whose global character is ordinarily masked by the geographical inequities of post-Fordist accumulation but that the doors have now revealed as truly world-historical "events." Those doors perform the magic of subverting the unequal distribution of precarity. They bring home to the centers of power the ecological devastations and geographical displacements from which the North believes itself safe. They produce a world in which it's no longer just global southerners who are "on the move" but also "northerners moving to other northern places." The "once fertile plains cracking with dryness," the "seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges," the "overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields"—each of these is either literally transmitted through the doors or else reframed by them in a way that makes it newly visible *in* the Global North, subverting the material and representational powers that permit precarity's geographical disparities.

This last example can help us make a different point as well. It is a point about the novel's form, or rather, one that recasts the arguments so far as a *series* of points about form. For what enables *Exit West* to universalize precarity "within" its representation is its formal subversion of the realist restrictions on bodies' movements through space and time—that is, its deployment of magic doors. The very procedure that charges the ordinary with the extraordinary and makes the future "present" to the now also universalizes the precarity inflicted by the North yet systemically cordoned off from it. In this sense, it's precisely the (speculative) form of *Exit West* that permits its most trenchant political insights. Those insights concern not only the redistribution of precarity I've described but also (and in the name of that distribution), the modeling *through form* of social relations that incarnate a normative precariousness. The formal device of the doors does this by approximating Nersessian's principle of limitation. The doors are a *limited* formal intervention, in that they introduce a single, "not-quite barest minimum" of magic into an otherwise thoroughgoing social realism. That magic is the slenderest of slender threads from which absolutely everything dangles. Without it, the represented world

would simply be “ours.” With it, our world is raised and turned to the slightest, refracting angle, revealed as pregnant with determinate futurity, and hence becomes a present-future in which apocalypse and utopia coincide because each is the other’s name for a planet “lightened of the burden of furnishing abundance” (Nersessian, 25). Put a bit differently: a world in which precarity has been socially generalized is a world defined by what Nersessian calls the “down-tuning of an aspirational form” (Nersessian, 25). It is a world of minimalist reduction and attunement to the finitude of earthly resources. It is also a world, as this novel conceives it, only minimally different from our own, a difference detectable in that “twinge of irrational possibility” with which Saeed and Nadia regard their ordinary, nonmagical doors—and that the novel seeks to infect us with as well.

*Exit West* reflects on the minimalism of its form in ways that articulate the “propositional grammar” linking that form to its political imaginary. In one series of passages, for example, Hamid connects the novel’s technique to the technological necromancy of the smartphone. “Nadia and Saeed were, back then, always in possession of their phones,” he writes. “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” (39). The analogy here between doors and smartphones borders perhaps on the banal: each embodies a form of “magic” that provides intimations of other worlds while serving as a portal that *brings those worlds close* (both spatially and temporally). But the formal dimension to which I’ve referred adds a more intricate layer of significance. If the novel is “like” the doors in performing a minimalist technological feat (a magic) that annihilates space and time to reveal the extraordinary character of the mundane, then analogizing such doors with phones equally analogizes the novel with them. Smartphones, in turn, as *Exit West* will show, are at once the symptomatic expressions of neoliberal surveillance capital (hence, inseparable from the forces that drive a militarized, data-financialized, and inequitable globalization) and the technological medium for forging new solidarities and “entanglements.”<sup>20</sup> The relay from doors to phones to novel thus reveals how the text encourages us to view the political intentionality of its forms. That intention now includes not only the minimalist and redistributive

dimensions noted above, but also a decidedly *this-worldly* element—the utopian future, Nersessian says, must “‘grow and revivify’ in this world . . . and no other”—arising as it does from a formal ambivalence by which those forms participate in the devastations they seek to negate.

These three components of the book’s formal grammar (minimalist, precarity-redistributive, *this-worldly*) comprise the heart of its normative vision. Unlike in Tsing’s analysis, that is, attunement to the human-ecological precarity of our present does not just index “worlds-in-the-making” whose contents are constitutively indeterminate and so unrepeatable as to resist generalization into transportable norms. These are, instead, components of a future embedded in the present that *Exit West* selects and *endorses*. It does so on the basis of a commitment to expose and redress the injustices of global capitalism (especially its inequitable distributions of precarity). That commitment exceeds an attunement to merely “local” worlds-in-the-making, at least inasmuch as it makes such attunement the grounds for an analysis whose scope and application are clearly global. And yet the commitment is detectable only “in” the singularity that this book is. *Exit West* articulates it both as theme in its representation and by formally embodying it. Or better still, as the example of the smartphones suggests, it does so by way of a dialectic that generates and affirms representational analogues for the novel’s inmost formal logic. The analogues themselves are many and sundry and could be pursued at length.<sup>21</sup> In the interest of space, I limit myself to discussing one more, before moving on to show how the norms incarnated by these forms provide the basis for utopian contents.

The example concerns an ecological revelation provided by digital photography. While still in their native city—before the couple’s first passage through the doors—Saeed uses his phone to show Nadia some “images by a French photographer of famous cities at night, lit only by the glow of the stars.” The light emanating from the cities themselves has been removed “by computer,” Saeed says. Nadia then remarks that the photographer has “left the stars bright,” but Saeed responds as follows:

“No, above these cities you can barely see the stars. Just like here. He had to go to deserted places. Places with no human lights. For each city’s sky he went to a deserted place that was just as far north, or south, at the

same latitude basically, the same place that the city would be in a few hours, with the Earth's spin, and once he got there he pointed the camera in the same direction."

"So he got the same sky the city would have had if it was completely dark?"

"The same sky, but a different time."

Nadia thought about this. 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. Whether they looked like the past, or the present, or the future, she couldn't decide. (56–57)

This technique of placing the camera in a future that will have irradiated the present—of capturing cities' unpolluted starlight by going to "deserted places" that those cities have not yet reached, but will—is a differential reprisal of the doors' and the novel's technological necromancy. As with the doors and the novel itself, the effect is to superimpose on the present a future that's immanent in it but that only a set of normative imperatives permits the photographs to *realize*. Those imperatives again have to do with an enabling minimization or curtailment: the "human lights" are stripped from the image in order that nature's starker illuminations might be seen to emerge.<sup>22</sup> Locating those illuminations in a darkness that figures the cities' spatiotemporal "not-yet" is a way of suggesting that these are photos—and this is a novel—committed to orchestrating a future denuded of human beings' Promethean ambition, at least in its global-capitalist form. For "New York, Rio, Shanghai, Paris" are all major relay points in capital's transnational exchanges and virtual flows.<sup>23</sup> Stripping such sites of their infrastructural power (light) is therefore an act of aesthetic insurgency, an apocalyptic effort to disrupt the processes those cities represent and return them to "an epoch before electricity." Nevertheless—and at the same time—this apocalyptic intervention must be seen as a form of utopianism. It stitches together and renders "undecidable" the distinction between present, past, and future ("Whether they looked like the past, or the present, or the future, [Nadia] couldn't decide"). It constructs, that is, an image of these spaces as "no-places" or u-topoi, images grounded in existing cities yet beyond our ordinary, spatio-temporal categories of perception. The images produced through this process are what Hamid calls "achingly beautiful." They're at once estranged and estranging images whose power is inseparable from

the pain induced by the starkness of worlds *on the other side* of capital—worlds in which, as Nersessian puts it, humans will have perhaps become “agents of less catastrophic harm” (42).

Let me conclude my discussion of *Exit West* by pointing out how the apocalyptic utopianism embodied by its form (and for which it generates representational analogues) is reprised in the forms and contents of the lives migrants make after passing through the doors. The final section of the novel takes place in and around the fledgling city of Marin, California.<sup>24</sup> “It has been said,” Hamid writes, “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 . . . 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 life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief” (217). The sentence provides an extraordinary affirmation of the continuity between apocalypse and “utopia, limited.” It describes a utopianism that emerges when “the apocalypse appear[s] to have arrived” but has not, that dwells in the fractional “adjustment” of life to a world brought to the brink of collapse by the acceleration of global capitalism’s frictionless flows. That recalibration to an “end” that does not end (a devastation that does not devastate) gives birth to new, *post-capitalist* desires that appear for the first time plausible, “not unimaginable.” It is, in other words, in capitalism’s wake that desire’s enabling curtailment may alone be fully possible. Rather than merely attending to “assemblages” that form in the ruins *constitutive* of capital (the ruins that facilitate what Tsing calls capitalism’s “salvage accumulation”), Hamid at least proposes we imagine disasters caused by capitalism that bring that system itself to ruin, making visible the social forms that might be assembled on the far side of that collapse.

The novel goes on to give to these forms a range of social contents—contents that themselves incarnate the utopian norms implied by the novel’s forms. These include an ecological reclamation of the “animal” that human being “is” but that has fallen into historical forgetfulness and can be recovered only once the human has been stripped bare, in something like Agamben’s sense (138–39);<sup>25</sup> a multicultural but

anti-identitarian form of democracy, in which decision-taking is both severely circumscribed and newly significant precisely because those decisions are aimed at protecting and nourishing the not-quite barest minimum of social belonging (147–49); and novel forms of economic activity, including the practically universal pirating of infrastructural needs, a rephysicalization of labor (to cope with new, subsistence-level demands), and modes of exchange and welfare provisions that are premised on the heterotemporal character of the (non)apocalyptic present (the characters “barter” not so much “goods” as “time” itself [133] and subscribe to a “time tax” that involves paying less into the common coffer the longer one has been a member of the community [170]).

Nothing, however, reveals more clearly how the content of utopia is actualized limitation than a passage linking constraint to both artistic creativity and sexual pleasure. Hamid at one point describes “a great creative flowering in [the Bay Area, where Saeed and Nadia now live]. . . . Some were calling this a new jazz age,” he writes, “and one could walk around Marin and see all kinds of ensembles, humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin with gleaming metal with matte plastic, computerized music and unamplified music and even people who wore masks or hid themselves from view.” In this creative ferment gather “different tribes of people, tribes that had not existed before . . . and at one such gathering, Nadia saw the head cook from the cooperative [where she worked], a handsome woman with strong arms” (217–18). The very scarcity of expressive resources here gives birth to new, noncommodified musical forms and new experiments in the interplay of surfaces (plastic, metal, light skin, dark skin), which in their turn engender new possibilities for minimalizing “identity”—those who wear masks while performing—and new “tribes” or modes of collectivity. This entire sequence is then reprised in Hamid’s account of Nadia’s relationship with her coworker, the cook. That woman “had eyes that seemed an almost inhuman blue, or rather a blue that Nadia had not previously thought of as human.” So alien is this color that it makes the cook seem blind when her eyes are trained elsewhere. “But when they looked at you there was no doubt that they saw, for this woman gazed so powerfully . . . that her watching hit you like a physical force, and Nadia felt a thrill being seen by her, and seeing her in turn” (218). Here, the inhuman



quality of a blueness that belongs, nonetheless, to a human eye has the effect of reestablishing the natural-inhuman as the heart of human relations. That reestablishment licenses a sensuality at once measured and restricted, creative and ecstatic. “The cook was, of course, an expert in food, and over the coming weeks and months she introduced Nadia to all sorts of old cuisines, and to new cuisines that were being born, for many of the world’s foods were coming together and being reformed in Marin, and the place was a taster’s paradise, and the rationing that was under way meant you were always a little hungry, and therefore primed to savor what you got” (218–19). Not a feaster’s paradise, but a “taster’s”: the formulation signals an intimacy among sensuality, limitation, and utopia (“paradise”), an intimacy born of and thriving in the need for “rationing,” which generates both culinary syncretisms and a delight perpetually shadowed by hunger.

Neither fullness nor emptiness, in other words, but something closer to bare sufficiency, is here the substance of pleasurable transfixion. “Nadia had never before delighted in tasting as she did in the company of the cook,” Hamid continues, “who reminded her a bit of a cowboy, and who made love, when they made love, with a steady hand and a sure eye and a mouth that did little but did it so very well” (219). This “little” that the cook’s mouth does, and does “so very well,” is nothing more (or less) than an eroticization of the utopian-limited. It’s an abbreviated erotic motion or a movement of Eros *constituted* by its abbreviation, indistinguishable from the smallness of its nonetheless successful gesture. Nersessian’s “little abbreviation that could” becomes in this sense coextensive with the “thrill” of an erotico-gustatory—because constricted—orality. Where delight is conditional upon the prosaic, we might say, and the prosaic is a function of generalized precariousness, each of us is invited to graze but *prevented ever from becoming full*. That is as true of our consumption of food as of our relations with other people. And *that*, perhaps, is the content of a “commons” we might choose to make from those “latent” in our present—a future whose forms this book would have us realize on the far side of capitalism’s apocalyptic undoing.



In one of his early sketches for the *Arcades Project*—a sketch whose importance can be gleaned from how much of it finds its way into the

Convolutates themselves—Walter Benjamin speaks of the need to develop “a philosophy of history that at all points has overcome the ideology of progress” (857).<sup>26</sup> Such a perception appears synonymous with what he describes in his theses on history as “a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time” (2006a, 397). Benjamin states in the latter piece, too, that the “concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time” (394–95). The critique of historical progress is thus inseparable from an insistence on temporal-historical heterogeneity, on the presence in any “now” of unmetabolized splinters of “what has been”—splinters that serve as “a secret index by which [the past] is referred to redemption” (390). The aim of historical inquiry becomes one of arresting the flow of empty time by grasping how the present “constellates” with a given moment in the past—recognizing the present as “intended” by that past—and “blasting” that moment from the continuum of history in order to repurpose it for radical ends (what Benjamin calls “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past”) (396).

This critique of progress and the corollary insistence on a heterotemporal dimension to the present have obvious affinities with the more contemporary critical arguments with which I began. The organizing intuition of Tsing’s text in particular hinges on acknowledging the bankruptcy of progress narratives and the need to generate alternative concepts for thinking our present conjuncture.<sup>27</sup> That text is also intensely alive to the plurality and future-orientation of our present—the many “worlds-in-the-making” that constitute the “now” in which we live (255). And of course, Tsing and Benjamin, along with Nersessian, focus their arguments on specific historical instances of capitalism and the forms of precarity it induces.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the quotations from Benjamin can also help us resist (once more) some of the conclusions Tsing draws from her premises. A critique of progress that includes a suspicion of Marxist historicisms *need not* resign us to a dissolution of “determina[te] . . . political categories such as class” or to the unviability of revolutionary change and total overthrow. It is possible to criticize conceptions of time as homogeneous and empty—to view the continuum of history as constituted as much by serial catastrophes as by unending improvements—and yet retain the insights necessary for imagining the radical transformation

of society as a whole. This means stressing the capacity of capitalism to generate counter-collectivities over and above those found in the local, the singular, the unrepeatable and indeterminate encounter. It means a commitment to articulating norms on the basis of those larger, more “universal” collectivities. And it means a willingness to take the risk of imagining futures that incarnate such norms and might (therefore!) “save us”—redemptive futurities whose imaginary status renders them less coercions than invitations to move in the austerity of their forms.

It’s in these senses that my argument has unfolded broadly under the sign of Benjamin.<sup>29</sup> Nersessian’s concept of utopia, however, has also permitted a more restricted set of claims. These include an argument about formal limits and abbreviation as distillates of utopian norms that the content of the utopian imagination might productively reprise. They include as well an opening up of the concept of limitation onto the category of precariousness and a suggestion that the generalization of this condition may be necessary to forging utopian solidarities that are also green in their implication. My essay has shown how *Exit West* provides an exceptionally trenchant working out of these problems that highlights the possibilities for sustainable collectivity in a present future that has been stripped bare, rendered minimal, and constituted by the fulfillment of abbreviated motion.

Yet here too—and perhaps more surprisingly—Benjamin’s arguments prove germane.<sup>30</sup> In a discussion of Fourier in his meditation on history, Benjamin proposes retrieving the truth value of that much derided, nonscientific socialist view of “a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb” (2006a, 394). A bit further on, thesis XVIII elaborates:

“In relation to the history of all organic life on earth,” writes a modern biologist, “the paltry fifty-millennia history of *homo sapiens* equates to something like two seconds at the close of a twenty-four hour day.” Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation [*einer eungehueren Abbiatiatur*], coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe. (396)

Here, Benjamin articulates the rudiments of an ecological materialism by way of a figure central to Nersessian’s arguments and to my own:

abbreviation. That figure speaks at once to the temporal compression by which now-time “tells” the entirety of human history in a flash; to the comparatively “abbreviated” span of history denoting the subordination of human to geological time; and—more implicitly—to Benjamin’s own compositional method, which entails here, as in the *Arcades Project*, the compiling of quotations and aphoristic fragments that “often seem to abbreviate a thought” (Tiedemann, 932). The yoking together of these three dimensions is in itself significant. It’s as if Benjamin were proposing that the method of compression and conceptual abbreviation is the necessary formal condition for articulating both a materialist ecology and an antihistoricist utopianism. Just as human beings partake of a history that abbreviates (i.e., shortens while indexing) geological history—and just as now-time abbreviates (shortens while indexing) the entirety of human history up to and including that history’s utopian-disruptive redemption—so, too, does the Benjaminian fragment aspire to an abridgment that distills while indexing a conceptual “totality” from which such fragments are also severed and deliberately deracinated. The abbreviated thought becomes in this way a nonorganic correlative for that most foundational of ecological insights: the dwarfing of human time scales and consequent decentering of humankind as the measure of all things historical. This kind of thought embodies a singularity that disjunctively intimates the history in which it (disjunctively) partakes. If we wish to develop a materialist ecology alert to the local or the radically singular yet attuned to the totality determining that singularity, we could do worse than to take seriously this view and this aspiration.

**Greg Forter** is professor of English at the University of South Carolina. He has published widely on U.S. modernism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, gender studies, and postcolonial literatures and theory. His most recent book is *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds* (2019).

## Notes

1. Here my essay joins recent efforts at reclaiming the “green” potential of materialist thought, which has often been excoriated for its lack of ecological consciousness or (even worse) its active contribution to conceptual paradigms that

view nature merely as an object to be dominated. Brilliant and persuasive rejoinders to these criticisms can be found in Foster, Malm 2016, and Malm 2018.

2. These aspects of Tsing's book align it closely with an influential strand of contemporary post-Marxist thought. The strand views Marxism as fatally flawed by what these theorists construe as its outdated assumptions about capitalism, its Eurocentrism, its class reductionism, its adherence to systemic ("totalizing") thought, and/or its teleological simplifications of history. For a critique of two theorists (Cheah and Scott) who approach the heterotemporal through some of these assumptions, see my "World Enough." There are, of course, post-Marxists who think of themselves as Marxists, of whom the recent Antonio Negri (in collaboration with Michael Hardt [2001]) and the Althusser-inspired thinkers associated with *Rethinking Marxism* are good examples.

3. On the term "pericapitalist," see Tsing, 63–65.

4. Since it has some bearing on what's to come, I note here that Tsing's view of alienation in this passage and elsewhere tends to flatten it from its Marxist conception into something closer to physical "separation": the fruits of one's economic activity (the foraged mushrooms) are "alienated" inasmuch as they leave the site of their gathering to be circulated as commodities. Marx is of course interested in this dimension of alienation. He writes in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* that "the worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien object*," so that "the more powerful . . . the alien objective world [becomes] which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own." But Marx goes on to argue that in capitalist societies workers are alienated not just from the products of their labor but from nonhuman nature, from each other, and from themselves, and that this latter is so precisely because such labor is not free but compulsory: "Labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; . . . in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (108, 110).

5. Inasmuch as one might counter that Tsing is "for" the gift economy over and against the hegemony of the commodity, I offer two observations: (1) it's not clear how this is a preference for a *future* rather than a description of how things work at present, or (relatedly), how it provides an alternative to the precarity of foragers' lives; and (2) there's nothing in her methodological commitments that permits such a preference on theoretical grounds; the choice would seem to be made on a purely voluntaristic basis.

6. I refer here primarily to "On the Concept of History," though versions of Benjamin's statements on method can be found, too, in the "N" convolutes (especially) of his *Arcades Project*, 456–88. For one example of the method in action, see "On Some Motifs." Illuminating discussions of the Benjaminian dialectic between utopian recovery and a critique of historicism can be found in Pensky, Cohen, and Buck-Morss.

7. The strongest version of this latter argument comes from Fredric Jameson, who has for many years contended that all *content* to the utopian imagination is ideological because circumscribed by the language and range of desires made possible by the social world that such imagination would oppose. The corollary to this is that utopia's real "vocation" (for Jameson) is the *formal* and *negative* one of revealing the impossibility of thinking utopia, while also exposing, as in a photographic negative, the possibility of some other, currently unrepresentable order. See, for example, Jameson 2005, 288–89. Jameson has recently (2016) softened his suspicion of utopian content to the point of advancing a quite specific set of such contents.

8. The importance of ecological crisis to both texts is doubtless part of their intuitions about universality; as Andrew Pendakis and Imre Szeman have argued, the urgency of the environmental "crisis has . . . generate[d] the conditions for a new receptivity to the notion of . . . universality, one mirrored within the domain of capitalist production by the now global experience of precarity. Such a confluence . . . creates obvious openings for the reintensification of the political scale indexed by the concept of revolution" (9).

9. For especially fine discussions of Bloch in the context of utopian studies, see Levitas, 97–122; Wegner, 18–24. I stress Nersessian's oblique relationship to this field not only because a utopianism of diminishment, finitude, and loss seems to me difficult for the field as currently constituted to metabolize but because she herself notes that her book "does not strictly identify" with that field (214, n. 9).

10. The ecological emphasis on limitation has a long history in materialist thought, stretching as far back as Epicurus (whose influence on Marx was profound). "The wealth demanded by nature," wrote this Roman philosopher, "is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity" (Oates, 36). For an extended discussion of Epicurus's influence on Marx's materialism and on his critique of the exploitation of nature, see Foster, 33–43.

11. At the extreme, this imperative leads to writings that "traffic in tropes of erasure, several of which [in the Romantic case] treat the possibility of a world without people as an allegory for a state in which people are agents of less catastrophic harm. The effect of these tropes is . . . both . . . lonely and joyous," Nersessian writes, "for [they] invoke . . . a human susceptibility to being minimal as the key to utopian achievement" (42).

12. The internal quotation here is from Sanford Kwinter. But see also Rancière's assertion that "what makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided" (32).

13. Koselleck is of course one of many thinkers who theorize this condition. See the well-known passage in the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels describe how capitalism's remorseless commitment to growth sends the bourgeoisie restlessly across the globe, annihilating distance and introducing new "wants" that can be filled only by products from far-flung lands (83–86). On post-Fordist time-space compression, see Harvey, especially chap. 17.

14. This opening of magic doors onto a future that's practically indistinguishable from our present—along with the global distribution of precarity that follows from it—is part of what makes Hamid's depiction a unique appropriation of this common fantasy/sci-fi trope: ordinarily, the world one enters through such doors is radically different from our own. For a useful classification of portals in the fantasy/sci-fi tradition, see Sicoe. An illuminating account of doors that focuses on two recent authors can be found in Baker.

15. I've been influenced here by Özsalcuk's brilliant paper, which links the militarization of doors to Hamid's renunciation of conventional, liberal tropes for imagining the horrific degradations of immigrant "journeys." (There are no such journeys in *Exit West*.)

16. This militarization of magic doors is clearly meant to play upon the rage for building physical walls among national leaders in the post-Cold War era. Wendy Brown has theorized such walls as emerging *in defense of* nation-states but *in response* to a waning of their sovereignty, and hence as *aimed at* nonstate, non-sovereign dangers. The walls "target nonstate transnational actors. . . . They react to transnational, rather than international relations and respond to persistent, but often informal or subterranean powers, rather than to [other nations'] military undertakings." The purported threats "take shape apart from conventions of Westphalian international order," and "as such, they appear as signs of a post-Westphalian world." Brown goes on to indicate that by "post-Westphalian" she does not mean that the international order of sovereign nation-states inaugurated by the Peace of Westphalia is simply over but rather that we live in Westphalia's long shadow while also having broken with it, in some ways decisively (21). *Exit West*, I'm suggesting, makes hyperbolically visible this asymmetry (nation-state defensive actions against nonstate actors in the shadow of Westphalia) and exposes the constitutive ineffectiveness of militarized borders in that context.

17. Butler is primarily concerned with the discourses and practices of war; I have modified her account to make capitalism central.

18. I stress here that ungrievability is fully compatible with liberal forms of "empathy," which evade the redistributive imperatives that follow from the kinds of grief work theorized by Butler.

19. See here Nersessian, 11–12: "If a traditional understanding of utopia would place equality at the center of its political framework, limited utopia would add that this equality must entail an even distribution of restraint as well as an even distribution of depleted resources."

20. I forgo detailed demonstration of these points, which derive especially from *Exit West*, 40–43, 154, 157–58. On surveillance capital, see Zuboff and, for a bracingly Marxist analysis, Foster and McChesney.

21. It's hard to resist mentioning one example that I've left out for reasons of space: the magic mushrooms that Saeed and Nadia ingest toward the beginning of their relationship reveal (as Hamid stresses) new "worlds" latent both in their own world and in Nadia's eyes (44–47).

22. This meditation on starlight suggests that *Exit West* has drawn into itself as part of its “substance” the entire history of the novel as a genre and of theoretical reflections on that genre’s significance. Hence the passage echoes while transforming Lukács’s well-known discussion of the birth of the novel form in the movement from presecular to secular modes of worlding—a shift Lukács figured in part through the metaphor of stars. His book describes a transformation from earlier ages in which “the starry sky [was] the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths [were] illuminated by the light of the stars”—to a secular modernity in which “Kant’s starry firmament . . . shines only in the dark night of pure cognition” (29, 36). Also pertinent, if in a different register, is Jonathan Crary’s account of the industrial introduction of electric light in the nineteenth century as a key conduit for the inexorable temporal rhythms of capital—rhythms tending toward the eradication of sleep, reverie, and nondisciplinary sociality, precisely because they aspire to a state of permanent integration of subjectivity into the networks and apparatuses of capital.

23. That this is so for New York and Paris is perhaps obvious enough. But on New York in particular, especially its place in a network of metropolises that ruthlessly compete with each other yet sustain global capital by distributing key functions among themselves, see Sassen. Wang discusses Shanghai in relation to post-Fordist regimes of accumulation. Rio functions as a more ambivalent site, combining global dynamics of commerce and finance with the extreme forms of urban destitution induced (in the Global South) by neoliberal modes of governance. See Davis, especially chap. 5.

24. Here, too, Hamid plays with the temporal/historical tension between the city he represents and its real-life cognate: he proposes that this is a “new” city, born in the crisis precipitated by the doors, but gives it the name of an actually existing city founded largely by African American migrants, who came to work in the naval industries of Sausalito around the start of WWII.

25. In fact, the novel draws on while rearranging Agamben’s account of bare life as the form of *bios* that results from natural life’s (*zoē*’s) originary conscription into sovereignty, and especially, its subjection to the latter’s unconditional power of death.

26. “Convolutés” is the term scholars use for the sheaves into which Benjamin grouped the quotations, notes, and conceptual distillations for the *Arcades Project*, which remained incomplete and unpublished at the time of his death in 1940.

27. Tsing herself quotes Benjamin’s famous lines on history as memory that “flashes [up at] a moment of danger” (50).

28. Benjamin’s essay speaks less directly of precarity than of the “state of emergency” that had become (by 1939) “not the exception but the rule.” Recognizing this fact was for him a necessary moment in bringing about “a real state of emergency”—that is, a crisis consciously claimed as such and mobilized in the fight against fascism (2006a, 392). See on this point Agamben, 54–55.

29. One difference that would repay further thought is the emphasis in Benjamin on rupture—his argument that the only way to overcome the hegemony of



history as progression through homogeneous time is through an “interruption” that makes that continuum “explode” (2006a, 395). Tsing, Nersessian, and Hamid are each inclined to think transition in less dislocated terms—as a kind of recalibration that precipitates the future from the present—though as I’ve shown, the latter two authors place apocalypse in intimate relation with that recalibration.

30. I say “perhaps” because there is now a substantial literature on Benjamin’s ecological thinking, especially as this emerges from his idiosyncratic concept of natural history or *Naturgeschichte*. That term designates for him less a history outside the human than the dialectical relation between human and nonhuman temporalities—a dialectic in which, to quote Adorno, “the moments of nature and history do not disappear into each other, but break simultaneously out of each other and cross each other in such a way that what is natural emerges as a sign for history, and history, where it appears most historical, appears as a sign for nature.” This process is most visible for Benjamin in the detritus (the ruins) of capitalist modernity, which appear to him (again quoting Adorno) “as fossils or plants in the herbarium [of] the collector” (quoted in Buck-Morss, 58, 59). My emphasis on the “abbreviated” in what follows is a rearticulation of this concern that emphasizes the correlation between Benjamin’s thinking and Nersessian’s. For important readings of Benjamin that draw out these ecological implications, see Hanssen and Thompson.

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