

*Borders and Postimperial
Melancholia in the Works
of Mohsin Hamid and
Raja Shehadeh*

Samar H. Aljahdali

My hope is that I'll succeed in imaginatively recreating the region as it existed at the time of the Ottoman Empire, when the land was undivided. (Raja Shehadeh 49)

The doors to richer destinations were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from. (Mohsin Hamid 101)

The post imperial is not a rival to the postcolonial but its comrade. Postcolonial literary studies, until now dominated by the aftermaths of European, especially British and French, colonialism, needs to address the question of comparative imperialisms beyond the European. The toppling or challenging of authoritarian regimes and struggles for democracy in nations formerly colonized, ostensibly postcolonial but in fact unevenly and incompletely de- and neo-colonized, does not mean that ‘postcolonialism’ as a field of study has ended, but that the very question of empires, colonies, and nation-states is entering a new phase of investigation, and, indeed, of political hope. Not all empires were the same; nor were their legacies. (Donna Landry 127)

Responding to voices claiming the death of the postcolonial, Donna Landry finds in the postimperial a useful way of reviving and rerouting the field of postcolonial enquiry to address comparative imperialisms beyond the European frame. Her article, “The Ottoman Imaginary of Evliya Celebi: From Postcolonial to Postimperial Rifts in Time” (2015) marks an intervention into the intersections of the demise of Empires and the nostalgic return, discursive and otherwise, to imperial control in a postcolonial world of nation-states that is “incompletely de- and neo- colonized” (Landry 127). Despite lack of criticism on the postimperial as a theoretical comrade of the postcolonial, Landry conceives of the term as

a conceptual frame for negotiating the multiplicity and diversity of empires and their legacies. This paper contributes to debates over the relation of the imperial past to the colonial present, negotiating alternative models of imperial control and dominance; namely the Ottoman and the Euro-American, as represented in Raja Shehadeh's *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle* (2010) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) respectively.

The introductory quotes to this paper highlight the relevance of the selected narratives to engage with the dialectics of the imperial and postcolonial in relation to border making and border control. The Palestinian writer, Raja Shehadeh revisits his uncle's travel narrative to recover the borderless world of the Ottoman Empire at a time when the land that was once undivided has been extremely fragmented by settler colonialism. With surrealistic overtones, however, Mohsin Hamid sketches an imaginary travel to the future to anticipate fissures in borders and a migration apocalypse, as well as a Western nostalgic return to racial consciousness and imperial control. In this context, the paper investigates conceptualizations of border in relation to what Paul Gilroy (2005) defines as "postimperial melancholia" (90). The 'post' in the term suggests a distinction from an earlier phase of 'imperial melancholia' as Gilroy explains: "An older, more dignified sadness that was born in the nineteenth century should be sharply distinguished from the guilt-ridden loathing and depression that have come to

characterize Britain's xenophobic responses to strangers who have intruded on it more recently" (90). According to Gilroy, the inability of a nation, made by war and victory, to face the loss of the empire, along with its reluctance to deal with that unsettling history, feeds into the more recent resonance of discourses representing postcolonial migrants to the center and asylum-seekers as "unwanted alien intruders without any historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects" (90). Gilroy cites the example of Mathew Arnold's articulate melancholy as a representation of the country's dignified sense of its imperial civilizational responsibilities and relation to classical empires in contrast to more recent racist and nationalist responses by populists to Commonwealth immigration during the 1950s and 1960s (91). For Landry, the 'postimperial' signifies a historical and conceptual distance from the imperial, articulating a mode of thought set in a context following the demise of Empires and at the same time a detachment from its ideological bearings. However, as Caroline Rooney and Kaori Nagai contend in their introduction to *Kipling and Beyond*, it is not always easy to distinguish between imperial and postimperial melancholia; a melancholia that fails to mourn the loss of Empire will fail to attain a postimperial mode and remain in the imperial mode (8).

What Gilroy emphasizes as "Britain's xenophobic responses to strangers", characterizing postimperial melancholia is clearly related to border making (Gilroy 90).

Recently, border studies have paid attention to the dialogics of border and mobility, conceptualizing borderlines and the power politics that determines border making and border permeability. This paper brings together two different yet timely reflections on borders and mobility: namely Raja Shehadeh's *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle* (2010) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). The two narratives deal with postcolonial global borders in complementary fashion, invoking the past and the future respectively to grapple with the complex present.

The paper offers an exploration of the shift from imperial polity to postcolonial legacies, and the rise of nostalgic postimperial melancholia. The word 'imperialism', as defined by Robert Young, has been used to denote two meanings:

it originally constituted a description of a political system of actual conquest and occupation, but increasingly from the beginning of the twentieth century it came to be used in its Marxist sense of a general system of economic domination [...]. When people originally used the term 'imperialism' to describe a political system of domination in the first sense, it did not necessarily carry critical connotations; its later use to denote the new broader meaning of economic domination, by contrast, always implies a critical perspective. This shift really registers changing global attitudes to imperialism itself. (Young 2012, 32)

The adjective ‘imperial’ came to be commonly used in reference to an expansionist mode of control over space, accommodating different lands and different groups of people. This accommodation of diversity is a key element in the imperial paradigm that sets it apart from the postcolonial model, which celebrates nationalism and national solidarity. As opposed to this postcolonial frame of reference, a nostalgic return to a lost imperial world with its spatial expansionism and multiethnic polity has emerged as an alternative model to European postcolonial legacies of rival nationalisms and bordered nation-states.

Bringing together Raja Shehadeh’s recounts of his Ottoman uncle with the travel narrative of the Ottoman writer, Evliya Çelebi, Donna Landry has foregrounded a “rift in time” towards “an historical opening up of the past,” in search for an alternative and more cosmopolitan model than offered by European colonialism (141). This study builds on Landry’s understanding of the ‘rifts in time’ (127) to intervene discourses of border making and border permeability in relation to postimperial consciousness. By bringing together Shehadeh and Hamid, I will use Landry’s postimperial paradigm to negotiate borders within the contexts of Ottoman imperialism and European colonialism, sketching ways of how a postimperial perspective might offer a critical positioning to the functioning of borders within postcoloniality.

Shehadeh's narrative offers material for border conceptualization within the emergent geopolitics of settler colonialism in the particular Middle Eastern context. Hamid, however, foreshadows a future return to bordering in the face of mass migration from (post)colonial peripheries to the center. The imagined worlds inscribed by Shehadeh and Hamid neatly capture the ways of travelling through time and space, speculating the past and anticipating the future respectively, for possible alternatives for the tribulations of a bordered present.

Emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of border studies, David Newman urges scholars to develop reinventions of traditional concepts of borders in the light of contemporary temporal and geopolitical forms (2003, 13). This concern is shared by Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly who has sketched a history of ideas on borders and contributed to the development of a model of border studies, bringing together tools and 'variables' from different disciplines, including geography, history, economy, anthropology, political science, psychology among other social sciences (Brunet-Jailly, 2005, 633). Contributing to a renaissance of border studies, Newman investigates the complex nature of borders as both lines of separation and opportunities of connection (2006, 150). He argues that the function of the border is to perpetuate difference and maintain order between 'our' compartment and that of the 'other' (Newman, 2003,15). Highlighting the "protection function" of the process of bordering, Newman defines borders as "institutions," as opposed

to simply lines of demarcation, with their internal rules that govern mobility among other forms of border behavior (2003, 14).

Borders are not immune to the hegemonic hierarchy that has separated the world, and eliminated its “structures of welcoming” (Derrida 2002, 361). With that logic, Gloria Anzaldúa defines the border, as “a dividing line, a narrow strip, a long a steep edge,” made “to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them” (Anzaldúa, 1987, 3). She emphasizes the artificiality of borders, and the power politics underling their production and functioning. For her, “a borderland is a vague and undermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa, 1987, 3). Ambivalence, unrest, and tension characterize the borderland, while death is always an unwelcome but familiar resident.

In a later study, Newman has revisited “the lines that continue to separate us,” shifting focus to border crossing as forms of resistance (2006, 3). The very lines designed to maintain the self/other binaries are susceptible to the need for cultural interaction in that liminal space. With particular focus on her experience in the US/Mexico borderland, Gloria Anzaldúa has examined the processes of interaction between cultures across the divide. For her, the processes that the border personality usually undergoes contribute to the decolonization of the “*mestiza* consciousness” (Anzaldúa 1987, 80). Ac-

cording to Anzaldúa, the hybridity of the mestizo liberates him, albeit partially, from the limiting monologism of postcolonial nationalist vigour.

Writing her own experience, Anzaldúa showcases the relation between border and narrative. Being a poet and fiction writer, Anzaldúa powerfully and usefully implements poetry in her book, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2004), in which Spanish and English verses intervene and interact telling of walks along the barbed wire and describing ocean waves “gashing a hole under the border fence,” while another scene features Mexican boys running after a soccer ball, “entering the US,” signaling the vulnerability of the border to human and non-human penetration (2004, 2). In her poetry, the Mexico/US border is a “1,950 mile-long open wound,” “running down the length of [her] body, staking fence rods in [her] flesh” (Anzaldúa, 2004, 2). Literary writing and story telling have been instrumental as medium of voicing the border and borderland experience. For Newman, they are useful materials to better understand the diverse and intricate perceptions of borders:

One way to have a deeper understanding of boundary perceptions is to focus on border narratives and the way in which borders are represented through a variety of images, ranging from the real life landscapes and practices, to literature, media, art, maps, stamps, lyrics etc. The notion of difference, of the walls that separate, figure prominently in all of these popular representations (2003, 20).

Sharing this concern for border narratives, Sharon Navarro has explored the interaction of narrative and the identity formation of the border community, arguing that their story telling, testimonies, and life stories are replete with power politics and counter hegemonic discourses (2003, 129-130). This paper contributes to the instrumentality of narratives in promoting deeper understanding of bordering within (post)colonial contexts.

Beyond the physicality of borders, Henk Van Houtum has investigated the centrality of a power/knowledge dialogic in their making, whilst simultaneously showcasing their dehumanizing effect on landscape. Negotiating abstractions of border, Houtum contends that due to their action related conception, borders are verbs that continue to make and/or are made, thus suggesting the verb “bordering” as a more useful lexicon (2011, 51). In other words, they are constructs, limiting and more often constraining mobility. However, the conception of border has developed interpretations inclusive of connectivity and inclusion beyond what Houtum describes as “a narcissian centripetal orientation” of the border (2011, 50). He cites the example of the door as becoming both a border and a passage, promising further connectivity. Houtum further develops his conception of the border as a “fabricated truth” or a construction of knowledge, serving the power politics of the territory; whereby “the practice of border making, of bordering, confirms and maintains a space, a locus, and focus of control” (2011,

51). Critical of the practice of bordering, Houtum emphasizes the resulting dehumanization of the landscape.

Borders are both protection walls and thresholds; highly connected to the geopolitics of place. According to Houtum, “a socially constructed border is a form and manifestation of self-repression. It suppresses the total potential of personal mobility and freedom by constructing a sphere of trust inside and a fear for what is out there, beyond the self-defined border” (2011, 59). Self/other relation helps understand what Houtum refers to as the “Janus face of the border,” with one side facing the inside whilst the other watching the unfamiliarity of what lies beyond the border (2011, 58).

The unfamiliarity linked to the border experience, with its associated fear, limits, and more often than not, constrains connectivity and mobility. Central to Donna Landry’s argument on the need for the postcolonial to open up and address the question of comparative imperialisms (Landry 2015, 127) is the right to move and the possibility of connectivity permitted by the imperial model. Emphasizing the assumption that “not all empires were the same; nor their legacies,” Landry invites postcolonial studies to investigate alternative imperial formations to the European colonial model, with particular focus on the issue of bordering (2015, 127). The work of the Ottoman traveler, Evliya Çelebi (1611-1685), according to Landry, offers a representation of the Ottoman imperial formation, with its *millet* system,

as exemplary of a cosmopolitan model based on religious tolerance and a powerful symbiosis of multi-ethnic groups, with a high measure of free movement across a vast Ottoman landscape.

Read contrapuntally, the narratives of Shehadeh and Hamid offer ways to understand the current issues of movement, migration, and colonial control by reflecting on comparative paradigms of Empire. While Shehadeh returns to the past to invoke an imperial system borderless and hospitable of ethnic multiplicity, Hamid warns of a future resurgence of an imperial impulse that continues to operate beyond the historical demise of Western Empires. In both contexts, the immigrant, who struggles for the right to return to his native land as well as the right to move freely in the host land, is the target of the postimperial melancholia. For Gilroy, failure to accept the loss of the imperial domination of the past has reproduced in the present an imperial impulse towards immigrants (102-103). This imperial impulse creates invisible borders unreceptive of immigrants and against the ethical responsibility towards refugees. This imperial impulse creates invisible borders unreceptive of immigrants and against the ethical responsibility towards refugees.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) offers an exploration of border making in the postcolonial world, dealing with global issues of displacement and mass migration. The

narrative tells the story of Saeed and Nadia who fall in love in an unidentified city in the middle of a civil war. To escape the chaos and threatening conditions of the city, the couple travelled westward to Greece, England and the US. The novel suggests a timely response to massive migrations to Western shores by groups of non-Westerners from postcolonial peripheries, unsettled by internal and external threats. While the author's native city of Lahore resonates in the representation of the unidentified city, there seems to be more indirect associations to the Arab cities of Aleppo and Mosul, which have been shattered by extremists, violence and civil wars. While featuring global migration and displacement, the narrative simultaneously interrogates the authority to build borders, the right to move, and the forced direction of border crossing.

Exit West redefines borders across a diverse set of divides, including racial, Marxist and colonial power politics. The passage to the Euro-American hemisphere is entangled with jeopardizing rites. Escaping the poverty, death, and loss that ravished havoc in their native city, Saeed and Nadia decide to cross one of the rectangular black doors that appear suddenly in the vicinity. To exit west does not always guarantee a boarding pass to a peaceful land and successful future. More often than not, it is the gateway to apocalypse, burning all ties and disconnecting the migrants from their past, family, and culture. Nadia and Saeed, upon emerging in Mykonos, were relegated to a limited space in the periphery, and

“had never been to the old town, for it was off limits to migrants” (Hamid 2017,113). Each of the two migrants has taken a different path in dealing with the unfamiliarity of the host environment. Saeed a conformist, retreats to the less privileged group that shares some commonalities in terms of skin color and economic deprivation, while Nadia, a non-conformist, seems to find more security in aggregating herself with the dominant group. For Nadia, denouncing Muslim and Eastern codes mitigates her imprisonment and facilitates her mobility across ethnic and racial divides. The narrative tells of the enormous crushing pain of leaving one’s homeland, bringing sorrow and mourning to the fore of the migrant’s story.

The construction of these imaginary doors echoes the surrealism of chaos that led to massive migrations and universal mobility. These “doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away” (Hamid 2017, 69) have been described by international media coverage as “a major global crisis” (83). When the characters step through one of these, they emerge in a different locale. For example, Nadia and Saeed step through a door in their unidentified city and emerge first in a Greek island, then in London and later in California. Approaching the door of their first journey, they have been “struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end” (98). The door becomes a powerful symbol con-

necting the local to the global. More importantly, they function as a useful technique to compress the journey and allow the novel to focus on the experience of migration and the limits imposed on movement rather than the moment of border crossing.

In border narratives, the effect of imperial dominance is showcased in the control of the center over the political and geographical borders. In Hamid's *Exit West*, however, the emergent magical doors represent the collapse of concrete borders whilst simultaneously maintaining the invisible border of racial consciousness: "Without warning people began to rush out of the camp [...] a new door out had been found, a door to Germany" (107). The emergence of the doors provides a means of escape and mobility to the periphery, whereas to the center these doors seem to threaten imperial power. Hamid's narrative emphasizes that the dissolving of political borders will not necessarily dissolve the racial boundaries upon which Western empires have been built. The migrants' relative freedom to roam in Western locales is received with rage and disapproval from 'nativists' who support the government rejection of migrants. For Hamid, mass migration is far beyond the powerful control of the West: "the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, [...] and the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist" (164). The description of the doors in *Exit West* in relation to fissures in bordering can be understood in

terms of the dual backward-looking and forward-looking dialectics of postcolonial existence. These doors are both beginnings and ends; featuring the historical end of colonialism and the beginning of neo-colonial ideologies and practices; the collapse of empire and the continued effect of imperial hegemony.

In *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle* (2010), Raja Shehadeh's postimperial melancholia of the Ottoman times expresses a position against settler colonialism. While both Hamid and Shehadeh negotiate forced migration and displacement, the undefined parameters of Exit West are contrasted with Shehadeh's clearly demarcated space/time. Shehadeh inscribes his reenactment of the travels of his great-great Ottoman uncle, Najib Nassar, highlighting radical changes, particularly the limits on mobility imposed by the Israeli settler colonization of Palestine. Najib, a lawyer by education, was the founder of *Al-Karmil*, a weekly newspaper, which voiced out his warnings of European colonial interests in the land; a position that made him travel from 1915 to 1917 to escape arrest by the Ottoman government. Following the footsteps of his uncle's journey through what was known as Greater Syria along the Great Rift Valley, Shehadeh's narrative includes a clear and direct note of the author's purpose: an imaginative restitution of what was once an undivided land: "My hope is that I'll succeed in imaginatively recreating the region as it existed at the time of the Ottoman Empire, when the

land was undivided” (Shehadeh 2010, 49). Shehadeh’s account can be read as a political nostalgic return to the time of Ottoman imperial expansionism over the land and a reproduction, albeit discursively, of the joy of a borderless geography.

For Shehadeh, the reimagining of his great uncle’s travels links borderlessness with forms of resistance. This reflective nostalgia of a time when “the land was undivided” by borders, roadblocks, checkpoints, and barbed wires articulates resistance of the invisibility enforced upon Palestinians by bordering (Shehadeh 2010, 49). Borders make other groups and landscapes invisible to viewers across the divide. “Unlike Najib,” observes Shehadeh, “I cannot look from this high cliff and see myself beyond the present borders. My field of vision stops at the Golan Heights, at the border between Israel and Syria” (Shehadeh 2010, 35). Defying what Gary Fields defines as “enclosure landscapes,” often effected by means of “cartographical,” “legal,” and “architectural” instruments, Shehadeh, at the turn of the twentieth century and despite a rift in time, re-inscribes a borderless imperial geography in danger of forgetfulness (Fields 2011, 183). Through this reenactment of Najib’s route along the Rift Valley, Shehadeh resists confinement and invisibility by exploring the Rift Valley from geographically dispersed vantage points including Mount Arbel, the Belvoir fortress, the Jordan Valley, and the Biqa in Lebanon. What remains for Shehadeh from his great uncle’s

extended walks is the view from Mount Arbel, one of the highest points in the plateau of Galilee, which offers both a way of looking and a position of enunciation into the bordered and the inaccessible.

Shehadeh's project has not been without failures. There are occasions when his uncle's route became inaccessible and impossible to walk through, requiring constant re-routing. Imagining the route to visit A'yn Anoub, Najib's village in the Lebanese mountains, Shehadeh laments:

I'll first have to travel east to Jordan in order to go north-west to Lebanon. They didn't have to cross any border, while I have to cross three. Before the First World War, when Najib lived in the area, the whole region was under Ottoman rule. The entire stretch of the Rift Valley, from the Taurus Mountains in the north all the way down to the tip of the Hijaz, modern-day Saudi Arabia, was under one regime. Najib might have had other problems to contend with, but they did not include the fragmentation of the land and the tormenting restrictions on movement that plague my life and the lives of most Palestinians, many Arabs, and to a lesser extent Israeli Jews in the Middle East. (2010, 35)

The quote articulates a palimpsest of two historical moments that can be defined within imperial/settler colonial paradigms. The present settler colonial condition is unfavorably compared to the imperial past. Shehadeh's

postimperial melancholia offers both a political commentary on the tribulations of the colonial present and a nostalgic recollection of imperial borderlessness. In contrast to a borderless Ottoman Empire, border making is the legacy of both a European colonization of the region, and the ongoing Israeli settler colonialism.

While Shehadeh's concern was on the physicality and harsh concreteness of borders both inside the settler colony and along its geographical borders with the outside world, Hamid shifts focus to the invisible borders of postcolonial geography, unveiling their reconfiguration as sites of closure and control. The doors in *Exit West* are highly symbolic, signifying a convergence of politics and economy. Saeed notes that "the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from" (Hamid 2017, 101). Mobility across borders from poor to rich locales is restricted and more often prevented, whilst movement in the opposite direction is often facilitated. The "rich countries" respond to this "unprecedented flow of migrants" with more "walls" and "fences" built to strengthen their borders (Hamid 2017, 71).

Concomitant to the discourse of border security, *Exit West* redefines signs, commonly known to signify openness and accessibility. In that unidentified city, windows

are reconfigured in relation to the instability caused by the civil war. Instead of opening opportunities to connect with the outer world, the window has come to be realized as “the border through which death was possibly most likely to come” (Hamid 2017, 68). Amidst turmoil, these windows open room for death and destruction, urging people to seal them with bookshelves. In Hamid’s representation, doors and windows perform fissures in imperial control and the functioning of its borders, allowing infiltration and instant transportation of refugees.

In the particular context of Palestine, as Shehadeh notes, border making has taken many forms including the redefining of natural waterways as military borders. The River Jordan is a significant case in point. The River has a unique history of functioning as a frontier, hosting fights for survival and human dignity. The battle of Yarmouk and Karama are two examples. In 1921, the River Jordan was first marked as a border by British colonial authority, separating Jordan from the Palestinian lands under British Mandate. It has further been manipulated by Israeli settler colonialism to function as a border, separating settlers’ dominions from native locales. In June 1967, the River Jordan became a political border, further pushing the 1948 lines, and demarcating Israel from what has come to be known as the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Standing on which side of the River can now define your identity

and political affiliation. This geopolitical manipulation of the River signifies what Houtum has described as the dehumanization of landscape by bordering, a familiar practice in a settler colonial paradigm.

But this was not the case under Ottoman imperialism. “For the first sixteen years of my life,” laments Shehadeh, “the River Jordan was not a border” (2010, 56). In his description of the River and its openness, Shehadeh has engaged with its historical and religious legacies along its geographical signification. Commenting on its hospitable nature, Shehadeh points to the smaller waterways that flow peacefully into the River, whose banks have never been attached to a single major city. However, its fluidity and changeability implicate tendencies towards resisting rigidity and sustaining diversity. The ‘baptismal site’ on the River Jordan signifies rebirth and rejuvenation (Shehadeh 2010, 57). Always receiving travellers, border crossers through the Allenby Bridge, and the religious rituals, the River Jordan had long defied colonial division by its cosmopolitan legacy.

However, Shehadeh’s postimperial imaginary intervenes the present scene to reveal the divisions and restricted mobility inflicted upon the land and its native inhabitants by settler colonialism. He reflects how the River Jordan had long been a site of reconnection and celebration:

It took a number of years to internalize the new geography. The river where we used to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany and had had our picnics had become a lonely border river made inaccessible on either side by mines and barbed wire, a river that could only be glimpsed when there was a bend in the road as we drove along the heavily guarded border that it now marked. (Shehadeh 2010, 61)

What has long been shimmering with the lights of celebration, the smell of food, and the music of dancing crowds, has now sunk into deep silence and unfamiliar absence. After being announced a military border, the once lively River Jordan has diminished into a “lonely” military border (Shehadeh 61). Throughout the book, Shehadeh’s description emphasizes the loneliness of the River, which has now been deserted by both settlers and natives.

The River Jordan, however, resists being relegated to a “lonely” border, and continues to serve as a palimpsest of the multi-cultural history of the land (Shehadeh 61). Now an ethnic divide, the River Jordan, marked by its shifting courses, resists a static and fixed route. While inscribing the history of a settler colony, “the river of the desert,” to use Shehadeh’s description, articulates a form of resistance (Shehadeh 2010, 56). Being both an ethnic border and a form of resistance reveals only one side of a site loaded with contrasts and ambivalence. The River of baptism and rebirth flows into the Dead Sea, where

it faces “the terrible ordeal of death by osmosis in water so high in concentrations of salt” (Shehadeh 2010, 56). At this site, notes Shehadeh, incongruent opposites such as fresh and salt water, life and death, come to a striking proximity (Shehadeh 2010, 56). Shehadeh notes, however, how the local name of the River bears witness to its functioning as a path of connectivity over religious bonds. The River is also known as “Al Shari’a al Kubra,” signifying meanings of the great path and faith (Shehadeh 2010, 56). Unlike the Nile or Euphrates, the River Jordan has resisted being limited to one civilization, indicating its openness to humanity. The ambivalent representation of the River Jordan in the book further complicates colonial conceptions of border making, as borders often deconstruct the function for which they are constructed.

Shehadeh represents the Rift Valley as a signifier in danger of losing its signified. During the Ottoman Empire, the Rift Valley has long been defined by its connectivity of what was known as Greater Syria. However, the dividing legacy of the British Empire and the settler colonial geopolitics has put these meanings to risk. The Valley comes to bear witness to man-made bordering whilst naturally maintaining its connectivity as it “starts north in Syrian plains, through Lake Qaraoun in Lebanon and down to the Dead Sea and Lake Tiberias” (Shehadeh 2010, 53). With little hope, Shehadeh expresses prospects of “travel through this valley, imagining it as it had once been, all one unit, undivided by present-day

borders” (Shehadeh 2010, 54). The decline of Ottoman imperialism, followed by British domination and the present Israeli settler colonization of the land has created rifts in time, geography, memory and literary representations between Najib’s and Shehadeh’s chronotopes.

Not only the Rift Valley, but also the Allenby Bridge has lost its signified meaning. The bridge, built across the River Jordan to connect the lands of Palestine and Jordan, now becomes a highly secured border. While his great-great Ottoman uncle was able to cross the River on horseback with no conditioning regulations on his right to move, Shehadeh expresses his fear at the sight of a long line of vehicles halted along the road.

During that historic June week the pressures of vehicles and people crossing to the east bank using the already bombed out Allenby Bridge was so heavy that the bridge collapsed and fell in to the river. Those fleeing had to walk across the crumbling remains that were half buried in the fast-running water. The crushed bridge symbolized the severing of ties between the two banks of the rouge river. (Shehadeh 2010, 60)

Destroyed bridges break all possibilities for connectivity and mobility. A river and a bridge, one natural, one man-made, uncommonly put further limits on Palestinian movement.

Settler colonialism features a mode of bordering uncommon to imperial and colonial paradigms. Under the guise of Western discourses of ecology and nature conservation, some areas in the colony are designated as nature reserves with limited accessibility. Through the historicization of conservation ideals and practices in the African context, Jaidev Singh and Henk Van Houstum challenge the visionary rhetoric of conservation and reveal the politics that manipulate the enclosure and control of resource rich regions (2002, 255-257). While exploring the boundary making aspects of conservation in a settler colonial context, Shehadeh's telling of the reenactment of his uncle's travels reveals the othering and bordering processes inherent in the emergent geopolitics of conservation. Shehadeh's plan to walk through Wadi al Bira, following in Najib's steps has been thwarted by the conversion of the village to a nature reserve with marked walking trails. This representation of Wadi al Bira contributes to our understanding of the environmental geopolitics that relates to border making. In this Palestinian context, the two frameworks of political ecology and settler colonialism have mediated the designation of nature reserves and (b)ordering of Arab localities.

Shehadeh is voluntarily oblivious to what he describes as man-made borders, as his walks sketch ways to reconstitute a lost freedom whilst simultaneously effecting a political commentary on comparative imperialisms. Fanon

emphasized the compartmentalizing scheme of colonial worlds and the increasing immobility imposed by these internal borders:

A world divided into compartments, a motionless, Manichaeistic world [...] this is the colonial world. The native is being hemmed in; apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments, of the colonial world. The first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. (Fanon 1967, 40)

Compared to the exclusionist model of European colonialism, according to Najib's pronounced position, the Ottoman imperial formation presents "a multi-ethnic system that never attempted to colonize the land" (Shehadeh 2010, 21).

Against global concern for bordering, Hamid negotiates the universality and inevitability of migration and mobility. The Old Lady from Aalo Alto is a good case in point. Although she has never moved from her house, she has been subject to migration. Her neighborhood has changed beyond recognition to an extent that her vicinity has become unfamiliar to her as if she has moved to a new place. When she opened her door and went out, "it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives [...] We are all migrants through time"

(Hamid 2017, 209). Reflecting on mass migration as a defining aspect of the modern postcolonial world, the omniscient narrator comments:

That summer it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places. (Hamid 2017, 167)

It is interesting how this global migration takes one direction, featuring the movement of the unprivileged global south towards the more privileged world of the global north. Equally possible is the internal movement within the geopolitical space of the south or the north.

Ironically, *Exit West* features an unsettling image of the metropolitan city of London as an extended refugee camp, with a million migrants pouring into the city, occupying its uninhabited mansions. Furthermore, “the great expanses of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens” were soon “filling up” with the migrants’ “tents and rough shelters” (Hamid 2017, 126). No European quarter seems to be immune to the ramifications of this global migration. The “voyage in” that Edward Said has introduced in *Culture and Imperialism* has taken a sweeping, massive form (Said 1994, 295). Those migrants are changing the demography of a metropolitan city, “forming their own legions” (Hamid 2017, 132),

and dividing London into dark and light spaces. The voyage from colonial peripheries to London has been addressed, with subtle irony, by the Jamaican poet, Louise Bennett in “Colonization in Reverse”:

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
I feel like me heart gwine burs’
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse. (Bennett 1983, 106-107)

Whilst singing for the migrants’ hopes for a new life in the motherland, the poem suggests that this act of reverse migration to the metropolis challenges a history of colonialism marked by racism and exploitation: “tun history upside dung” (Bennett 1983, 106-107). With accelerating racism, native Londoners respond with nationalist calls, inviting decision makers “to reclaim Britain for Britain” (Hamid 2017, 132). This means more borders and more security measures. A very clear translation of this call is the Brexit project. Britain seeks security and prosperity by retreat to some nativist closures, fortifying its interior circles to protect the homogeneity of the population against infiltrations of foreign species.

The invocation of Najib’s travels in Shehadeh’s narrative brings the openness and porousness of boundaries during the Ottoman Empire in sharp contrast with the colonial legacies of division and bordering. While focusing on Palestinian geographical frames, the narrative is

hinged upon the global dimension of the Israeli/Arab question. Hamid, however, has taken a more resounding global position. In *Exit West*, the unidentified city along with recurrent references to “the global south” and “global displacement” (2017, 167) indicates the globalizing tendency of the narrative. The locations to which migrants move are geographically dispersed throughout the globe as to include Lahore, Mykonos, London, and California. Moreover, frequent references to the media reports and the emergent topic of migrants further add a globalizing effect, as more cities come to scope.

The postcolonial narratives discussed here negotiate with postimperial melancholia in different ways. Hamid’s novel offers a critique of that imperial nostalgia that refuses to mourn the loss of empire and yearns for that power that would re-homogenize the nation. Shehadeh, however, manipulates postimperial melancholia to offer a nostalgic historical return to the borderless landscape of Ottoman imperialism, suggesting a useful paradigm for a tolerant and multi-ethnic system. Negotiating bordering at the intersection of postcolonial forms and comparative imperialisms reveals possibilities for rifts. These rifts are vital for opening up and maintaining a critical position in relation to hegemonic modes and practices. Raja Shehadeh and Mohsin Hamid provide two different models for conceptualizing borders in relation to postimperial melancholia, highlighting the pressures that might rift these dividing formations.

Both narratives have mediated temporal and geographical rifts, against the borders of nationalisms and ethnic divides to offer an alternative imperial model of the Ottoman multi ethnic polity and ways of envisioning possible future mass displacement respectively. Shehadeh's post-imperial nostalgic recovery of Ottoman history, and Hamid's envisioning of future disconnectivity should be seen as opportunities to think of comparative frameworks that accommodate humanities beyond the intellectual and geographical borders of a Eurocentric frame and allow further mobility and multiplicity.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bennett, Louise. 1983. *Selected Poems*. Kingston: Stranger's Book Stores Limited.
- Brunet-Jailly, Emmanuel. 2005. "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective." *Geopolitics* 10 (4): 633-649.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2002. "Hospitality". In *Acts of Religion*, edited and translated by Gil Anidjar. London: Routledge. 358-420.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Fields, Gary. 2011. "Enclosure Landscapes: Historical Reflections on Palestinian Geography." *Historical Geography* 39: 182-207.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2005. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Houtum, Henk Van. 2011. "The Mask of the Border." In *Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Doris Wastl-Walter, 49-61. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing House.

- Kant, Immanuel. 2003. *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*. Translated by Ted Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Landry, Donna. 2015. "The Ottoman Imaginary of Evliya Çelebi: From Postcolonial to Postimperial Rifts in Time." In *Post-Empire Imaginaries: Anglophone Literature, History and the Demise of Empires*, edited by Barbara Buchenau, Virginia Richter and Marijke Denger, 127- 158. Leiden: Brill Rodopi.
- Navarro, Sharon. 2003. "Border Narratives: The Politics of Identity and Mobilization." *Latin American Politics and Society* 45 (3): 129-139.
- Newman, David. 2003. "On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18 (1): 13-25.
- Newman, David. 2006. "The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in our 'Borderless' World." *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (2): 143-161.
- Rooney, Caroline and Kaori Nagai, eds. 2010. *Kipling and Beyond: Patriotism, Globalisation and Postcolonialism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.

Singh, Jaidev and Henk van Houtum. 2002. "Post-colonial Nature Conservation in Southern Africa: Same Emperors, New Clothes?" *Geo Journal* 58: 253- 263.

Young, Robert J. C. 2012. "Postcolonial Remains." *New Literary History* 43 (1): 19-42.