

Article

The Great Displacement: Reading Migration Fiction at the End of the World

Ben De Bruyn

INCAL (Institut des civilisations, arts et lettres), ECR (Centre de recherche écriture, création, représentation),
Faculté de Philosophie, Arts et Lettres, UCLouvain, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium;
ben.debruyn@uclouvain.be

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Abstract: This paper examines how contemporary works of fiction and nonfiction reflect on anticipated cases of climate dislocation. Building on existing research about migrant agency, climate fiction, and human rights, it traces the contours of climate migration discourse before analyzing how three twenty-first-century novels enable us to reimagine the “great displacement” beyond simplistic militarized and humanitarian frames. Zooming in on stories by Mohsin Hamid, John Lanchester, and Margaret Drabble that envision hypothetical calamities while responding to present-day refugee “crises”, this paper explains how these texts interrogate apocalyptic narratives by demilitarizing borderscapes, exploring survivalist mindsets, and interrogating shallow appeals to empathy.

Keywords: climate change; migration; contemporary literature; empathy; Mohsin Hamid; John Lanchester; Margaret Drabble; Amitav Ghosh

1. Introduction: Climate, Migration, Fiction

One of the ways in which climate change manifests itself in contemporary culture, and contemporary culture shapes our understanding of climate change, is through real and imagined stories of human relocation.¹ Narrating this story is a real challenge, for critics insist that the very notion of environmental migration is problematic, as I will explain, and that traditional fiction is incapable of representing global heating. Nevertheless, the topic of climate migration has received considerable attention in recent years from journalists and public intellectuals as well as social scientists and literary writers. It is easy to understand why, for the topic is both urgent and controversial, as a short survey of relevant literary and non-literary publications will show. This overview of climate migration discourse also sets the stage for my subsequent analysis of three novels: Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017), John Lanchester’s *The Wall* (2019), and Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016). As I will argue, these texts raise important questions about climate, migration, and fiction, and thereby encourage us to reimagine what I will call the “great displacement”.

Many journalists and intellectuals have addressed the topic of future migration. Naomi Klein has highlighted the broader ties between racial justice and the climate crisis: “[t]he reality of an economic order built on white supremacy is the whispered subtext of our entire response to the climate crisis” (Klein 2014, n.p.). Turning to explicit discussions of migration, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* (2016) begins by noting that his distant ancestors, originally from Bangladesh, “were ecological refugees long before the term was invented” (Ghosh 2016, p. 3). He also draws on the work of Christian Parenti

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to describe the likely response of the West to future dislocation: “The tasks of the nation-state . . . will be those of keeping ‘blood-dimmed tides’ of climate refugees at bay and protecting their own resources . . . The outlines of an ‘armed lifeboat’ scenario can already be discerned in the response of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to the Syrian refugee crisis” (pp. 143–44). In *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), David Wallace-Wells refers to the same crisis rather than the established example of low-lying islands in the Pacific: “[b]eginning in 2011, about one million Syrian refugees were unleashed on Europe by a civil war inflamed by climate change and drought—and . . . much of the ‘populist moment’ the entire West is passing through now is the result of panic produced by the shock of those migrants” (Wallace-Wells 2019, p. 7). He admits that the role of the environment in the Syrian conflict is hard to pinpoint, but warns that even a small push in the wrong direction is worrisome: “wars are not caused by climate change . . . in the same way that hurricanes are not caused by climate change, which is to say that they are made more likely, which is to say the distinction is semantic” (p. 124). The European migrant crisis that peaked in 2015 accordingly seems a stark warning, given that estimates by the World Bank and the United Nations project much larger numbers of ecological refugees in years to come, with estimates ranging between 140 million and no less than one billion displaced people from South Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, in a world that will be “less receptive”, Wallace-Wells fears, “the browner those in need” (pp. 7–8). The topic is explored more systematically in Todd Miller’s *Storming the Wall* (2017), a journalistic account of how apocalyptic visions of environmental migration are enabling “an increasingly authoritarian world in which climate change, the displacement of people, and border militarization define the experiences of untold millions in the 21st century” (Miller 2017, p. 26). Whereas post-apocalyptic movies like *Children of Men* locate such scenarios in the future, Miller points out that “for many people, the imagined world of a degraded environment, combined with an authoritarian high-tech surveillance state, already exists” (p. 73). As his interviews bear out, securitized borders are expanding outward and inward across the world, with high-tech surveillance equipment being deployed to monitor fragile points inside as well as outside nations, targeting unwanted citizens and foreigners alike.

While fears of climate disruption and militarized borders are well-founded, social scientists such as Giovanni Bettini and Andrew Baldwin maintain that we should treat climate migration discourse with considerable caution. As “climate science does not provide any formula for how to connect ecological conditions to migration” (Bettini 2013, p. 67), they advocate “pluralising” the debate because “the relation between climate change and human mobility is open to wide interpretation and, thus, . . . can be, or better yet *should be* . . . debated and challenged” (Baldwin 2014, p. 525). The notion of the “climate refugee” is particularly problematic, their research explains, for it remains a speculative concept with no accepted legal definition and invites reductive accounts of migration’s compound causality, which is rarely triggered by ecological factors alone. It also dismisses the agency of displaced subjects, who are systematically deindividualized and racialized in these debates, and presented as either manifest security threats or inevitable humanitarian victims, while readers are often interpellated, by contrast, as white, rational, historical agents. Nor should we forget that the notion goes hand in hand with predictions about the number of displaced people that are finally as speculative as they are spectacular. Even well-intentioned accounts are troubling, Bettini clarifies, for the use of similar apocalyptic images by writers on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum points toward “a gradual closing of the still open debate” (Bettini 2013, p. 68), a convergence that “pav[es] the way for xenophobic reactions, de-empower[s] the concerned populations, and de-politiciz[es] the issue” (pp. 63–64). Formulated more strongly, Andrew Baldwin contends that “[in the figure of] the potential climate change migrant, we might start to trace a new racism in the making, a future-oriented racism that is perhaps specific to the Anthropocene” (Baldwin 2017, p. 299). In his view, we should therefore “rethink climate change and migration not as a problem to be solved or as an object of state management, but as a racial relation to be historicized” (p. 301). We should shift the debate, in other words: “the mobility justice concept enables us to re-characterize those displaced by ‘climate change’ not as ‘climate refugees’, but as displacees of a globalized network of intersecting mobility regimes

fueled by fossil fuel extraction” (Baldwin et al. 2019, p. 291). Even though the category of the “climate refugee” is far from innocent, these scholars agree that the underlying issues should be investigated further. Todd Miller’s conclusion seems hard to dispute, after all: “the environment has become the new human rights battleground” (Miller 2017, p. 197).

Joining the ranks of journalists, public thinkers, and social scientists, contemporary novelists have tackled climate displacement in a variety of ways—returning to a theme that was broached already in the work of John Steinbeck and Octavia Butler. Some of these narratives concentrate on characters who are internally displaced within newly failing states, as in Claire Vaye Watkins’s *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) or Megan Hunter’s *The End We Start From* (2017), which are set in a drought-wracked California and a flooded UK, respectively, while others portray people who flee to foreign countries because of runaway climate change, as in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013) and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* (2017). Yet another, more diffuse category of novels explores related topics without mentioning climate migration explicitly, and includes N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season* (2015) and Jesse Ball’s *The Divers’ Game* (2019). Whether these stories focus on internal or transnational migration, opt for a realist or a fantastical frame, and remind us of the plight of Pacific Islanders, Syrian refugees, or Dust Bowl victims, all of them imagine worlds subject to the impacts of climate change, and characters shaped by harsh biopolitical realities. As Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has documented, the reports of some readers indicate “that climate fiction might be an effective vehicle for cultivating an empathetic awareness of climate injustice, by diminishing the *social distance* between privileged readers and victims of climate change in the Global South and elsewhere” (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, p. 486, emphasis in original). It seems plausible that climate migration stories generate similar effects, as they redraw the parameters of our imagined communities by interpellating all of us as migrants-in-waiting, even when we live in London, Australia, or Los Angeles. What is more, anthropological research suggests that creative stories might play a critical role in reimagining our future. As Kari Norgaard has explained, we should not underestimate the role of emotions and cultural frames in the “socially organized denial” of climate change that characterizes even ecologically sensitive communities (Norgaard 2011, p. 207). If we want people to tackle this problem, existing attention to “science communication” should accordingly be complemented with accounts of “the active production of cultures of emotion and talk regarding climate change” (p. 9)—and one place where that production takes place, surely, is in climate literature.

Once again, we should approach these treatments of ecological dislocation cautiously. Apart from the fact that migration is a complicated topic, as noted above, thinkers such as Timothy Clark and Amitav Ghosh have asserted that the multi-scalar phenomenon of climate change resists literary representation. To return to *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh believes that traditional realist novels have failed to accommodate unpredictable climates and nonhuman life more generally, and have naively participated in fostering our desire for cheap energy. In modern society as well as its dominant narratives, in other words, it appears that “the bourgeois belief in the regularity of the world ha[s] been carried to the point of derangement” (Ghosh 2016, p. 36). We should therefore ask ourselves hard questions about fiction’s role in our disastrous patterns of behavior: “Is it possible that the arts and literature of this time will one day be remembered not for their daring, nor for their championing of freedom, but rather because of their complicity in the Great Derangement?” (p. 121). Similarly difficult questions should be raised in thinking about climate migration fiction. Given that these novels invite us to adopt the viewpoint of future refugees, we should critically reflect on their seemingly effortless appropriation of the migrant experience, for instance—a topic I return to below. As Brandon Jones has suggested in a rare discussion of this subject, literary representations of environmental dislocation feature both problematic and productive strategies. In his view, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) indicates “the political value of a utopian approach to refugee agency . . . under conditions of climate-induced migration” (Jones 2018, p. 641), whereas Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Water Knife* (2015) erases refugee subjectivity: “Even if the point of representing climate refugees in this [ghostlike] way is to evoke sympathy . . . , [Bacigalupi’s work] only presents an opportunity to imagine responses by those in a position of offering hospitality, not by those actually vulnerable” (p. 650). Furthermore,

the existence of a visible subset of literary fiction that centers explicitly on climate change might lead us to focus exclusively on the representation of undocumented migrants in “cli-fi” without taking into account that planetary concerns are seeping into all genres, even those that seem remote from these debates. Our analysis of climate fiction should not just be attentive to the form’s lingering anthropocentric presuppositions, in other words, but consider multiple subgenres and move “beyond cli-fi”, as I have argued in earlier publications about historical novels (De Bruyn 2016), realist fiction (De Bruyn 2017), and military narratives (De Bruyn 2018). And I would argue that stories of forced migration, even when they do not fit the narrow parameters of cli-fi, should likewise be mined for their insights on the Anthropocene. Because climate narratives may often feature a scientist, as Adam Trexler has noted (Trexler 2015, p. 31), but that scientist is often joined by soldiers, ordinary citizens, characters from the past, and people on the move.

After sketching the contours of climate migration discourse, I will now proceed to a more finely grained discussion of three examples that are productive to think with in this context. The novels in question illustrate distinct ethical and representational challenges, as they include a migration novel that humanizes future migrants by accentuating the everyday character of displacement (Hamid), a work of climate fiction that implicitly reveals the limitations of the survivalist mindset imposed by apocalyptic conditions (Lanchester), and a social novel about aging and exile which intimates that uncritical forms of empathy threaten to efface the elusive individual experiences of asylum seekers (Drabble). These heterogeneous texts are similar too, however; while each of these narratives refers to hypothetical disasters in the future, they are rooted in recent debates about the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, as they offer fictionalized takes on the plight of displaced people traveling to the EU from countries such as Syria (Hamid), consider the earlier migration crisis that unfolded on the Canary Islands in 2006 (Drabble), and evoke a future emergency modeled on these events in which waves of refugees set course for the UK coast (Lanchester). More generally, they represent the politically charged story of future relocation as a “great displacement”. They all point toward the scale of the challenges we are facing as social and ecological pressures converge (the *great displacement*). Without neglecting the threat of violence, moreover, they encourage readers to consider climate and migration crises as democratic challenges rather than savage spectacles (the *great displacement*, not the migration apocalypse). As suggested above, they also gesture towards a form of geographical reorientation, in which the perceived threat of dislocation is no longer exclusively associated with the Pacific or the Arctic, but with European coasts and, increasingly, the entire planet (an additional form of spatial displacement). Finally, these novels indicate that this topic has cultural and literary implications alongside strictly political ones, in line with the argument by Amitav Ghosh I outlined earlier, which makes a case for more creative narrative responses to climate change (the *great displacement* is linked to the *great derangement*). Building on existing research in literary studies and anthropology, my account examines these points in further detail, and describes how these novels rethink apocalyptic imaginaries and literary reading by contesting reductive militarized and humanitarian views of climate-related migration.

2. Beyond Militarization

A first writer who has explored these issues in a thought-provoking manner is Mohsin Hamid, author of celebrated novels including *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013). Consider this excerpt from an opinion piece:

The scale of migration we will see in the coming centuries is likely to dwarf what has come before. Climate change, disease, state failure, wars: all these will push hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, to leave one country for another. If we do not recognize their right to move, we will be attempting to build an apartheid planet where our passports will be our castes, and where obedience will be enforceable only through ever-increasing uses of force. There is another way. We can recognize the human right to migration. We can recognize that we are ourselves, all of us, doubly migrants. We are migrants historically: our ancestors came from

somewhere else, and originated, long ago, in the same spot in Africa. And we are migrants personally: life is the experience ... of abandoning each present moment for the next, of temporal migration. (Hamid 2014, n.p.)

In thinking about the present, Hamid accentuates the value of “redemptive impurity” (Hamid 2018, np) but also underlines “the impact of climate change”, which “is likely to be much more devastating than so many other things we worry about” (Hopkins 2017, n.p.). Yet he refuses to interpret these developments in a sinister light, arguing that we should neither embrace nostalgia, nor fear the future. When the “migration apocalypse” strikes, what will happen “is a great deal of change and trauma, but in the end, ... the world goes on as it always has, because we’ve always been migrating” (ibid.). Fiction is helpful here, Hamid confidently proclaims, as it drives home the lesson that all humans are migrants. “Literature is the practice of the impure”, seeing that “[a] reader, in the moment of reading, experiences a pooling of consciousness that blurs the ... boundaries of the unitary self” (Hamid 2018, n.p.). As these observations imply, Hamid’s essays respond to climate disruption and anticipated resettlements in an explicit and self-conscious manner. They also stress our common humanity, a seemingly universal condition we are expected to reconnect with in the act of reading.

These topics return in *Exit West*, a novel that productively rethinks migration without fully acknowledging the alarming predictions of climate scientists. The story starts in a setting that resembles Lahore but remains unspecified, Hamid elucidates, because “[t]o live in any city today is to live with ... a sense of impending apocalypse – through political, economic or climate change” (Yassin-Kassab 2017, n.p.). Interspersed with vignettes about minor characters on the move, the plot follows a young couple, Nadia and Saeed, as their undefined country slides into civil war and they are compelled to emigrate via mysterious portals that are opening up across the world and transport these characters to Greece, the UK, and finally the US. Juxtaposing futuristic and contemporary plot elements, notably the fallout of the Syrian civil war that started in 2011, Hamid’s novel repackages in fictional form the observations I quoted earlier; as the narrator reflects, “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” (Hamid [2017] 2018, p. 215). *Exit West* accordingly participates in the cultural task outlined by Ruben Andersson, whose ethnographic account of the “illegality industry” powerfully explains the need for replacing “a counterproductive framing of mobility-as-threat with an enabling and ‘normalising’ frame” (Andersson 2016, p. 1056). Current border regimes inevitably produce recurrent “crises”, he demonstrates, and we should therefore reorganize human mobility so that political and commercial actors can no longer frame it as a security emergency for personal gain and we can begin “to normalize migration” (p. 1070). Hamid’s novel contributes to this effort by portraying a migration apocalypse that turns out to be surprisingly everyday. As one reviewer notes, the plot’s use of sci-fi-like portals discloses that Hamid “is less interested in the physical hardships faced by refugees in their crossings than in the psychology of exile” (Kakutani 2017, n.p.). Vividly describing this trauma, the narrator muses that, when we emigrate from a country at war, “we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (Hamid [2017] 2018, p. 94). These painful memories are folded into an invigorating view of human existence, however: “we are all children who lose our parents, ... and we too will all be lost by those who come after us ... and this loss unites ... every human being, ... and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible ... to believe in humanity’s potential for building a better world” (p. 202). This message of hope manifests itself even on a micro-structural level, given the novel’s characteristic use of long, full-page sentences, which keep attaching content and clauses in their attempt to represent an ongoing human present—and which contrast markedly with the truncated style of other novels about future calamities.

Exit West makes migration relatable through its focus on love, family, and hope, but also by emphasizing the ordinary quality of life in refugee camps and by reimagining militarized borderscapes. In line with its interest in individual experiences, first of all, Hamid’s novel draws attention to the ways in which migrants establish new homes for themselves in challenging circumstances. Their behavior is a textbook example of the “desperate housekeeping” represented in “shelter writing”, a mode of

writing that, as Susan Fraiman has observed, “documents the painstaking creation of a private space by those who have been battered by the outside world” (Fraiman 2006, p. 348). We encounter such shelter-building when Saeed escorts a family to their part of a makeshift worker camp, for example:

He took them to their designated space in one of the new pavilions, unoccupied and basic, with a cot, and some fabric shelving hanging from one of the cables, and he left them there to settle in, ... the three of them staring and motionless. But when he returned an hour later ... and the mother pushed aside the flap that served as their front door, ... what he glimpsed was a home, with the shelves all full, and neat bundles of belongings on the ground, and a throw on the cot [while the daughter was holding] in her lap a little notebook or diary[.] (Hamid [2017] 2018, p. 184)

This camp is not a jungle that reduces displaced subjects to so-called “bare life”, but a space that can rapidly be turned into a neat and comfortable home, which is conducive to building a literate private life, as the diary indicates, in proper bourgeois fashion. Descriptions of such shelters extricate exiled subjects from spectacular images of deprivation. The refusal to interpret refugee existence as a tragedy of abject destitution returns on a communal level. For Hamid’s novel is akin to failed-state fiction too, which allows us to see, contra Giorgio Agamben’s influential account of biopolitics, that “state and civil society [a]re alive if not well in war zones and refugee camps” (Marx 2008, p. 599). As John Marx has explained, after all, these spaces foster a kind of “aspirational administration” against the odds (p. 605). In a similar vein, *Exit West* recounts how new political structures emerge in these unpromising settings, as in the cumbersome but useful deliberations of a makeshift “council” (p. 144) and the utopian attempt to establish “a regional assembly ... with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from” (p. 219).

The novel’s normalizing notes do not cancel out migration’s disquieting aspects, especially the militarized management of racialized subjects by rich countries, which monitor the inhabitants of refugee camps, “people of many colours and hues ... but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea” (p. 100). This omnipresent oversight explains why *Exit West* puts great emphasis on border and surveillance infrastructure. As Michael Rubenstein (2017) has detailed, Hamid’s novels are secretly obsessed with public utilities. Yet *Exit West* is less concerned with the national energy infrastructure of Pakistan, which is unreliable but desirable, and more with the global borderscape, which seems disquietingly powerful and dangerous—though it likewise shapes the identities of Hamid’s characters. By mentioning “surveillance feeds” (p. 86), “communications satellite[s]” (p. 100), and “drones overhead” (p. 151), the novel uncovers the high-tech “cognitive assemblages” that monitor irregular migrants. This phrase coined by N. Katherine Hayles (2016) refers to the fact that human decision-making has become increasingly interwoven with the nonconscious cognitions of technical devices, as in traffic regulation systems, military drone swarms, or the usually invisible network of fences, drones, and databases that is on display in Hamid’s novel. The story does not just uncover this security infrastructure, however, but actively tries to demilitarize cross-border migration, in an attempt to normalize this “crisis” and reintegrate displaced people into everyday life. Violent technologies prove unnecessary, for example, for the narrator relates how a standoff between “natives” and future migrants is resolved by “decency” (p. 164)—in contrast to the simplistic assumption that migration functions as an automatic catalyst for violence. Nor does border technology always appear in a threatening light:

One night one of the tiny drones that kept a watch on their district, part of a swarm, and not larger than a hummingbird, crashed into ... their shanty, and Saeed gathered its motionless iridescent body ... and [Nadia] smiled and said they ought to give it a burial, and they dug a small hole right there ... and Nadia asked if Saeed was planning on offering a prayer for the departed automaton, and he laughed and said maybe he would. (pp. 204–5)

This scene does not overlook the inhumane treatment of displaced people in the name of national security. For it features a child-like creature that is buried by two migrants and thereby hints at the

familiar violence of small graves. Yet the drone's unusual description connects this representative of the borderscape to the childless couple and figuratively transforms this military device into a beautiful bird, prompting a surprising shift toward a religious, compassionate perspective that defuses further antagonism. Drone culture typically reveals anxieties about masculine military agency, as Nathan Hensley (2016) has shown, but Hamid's story opts for a different approach here, and points toward everyday devices that make clumsy mistakes and are as vulnerable, ultimately, as children and small birds.

While normalizing migration is a productive move, we should not integrate climate change into everyday life without acknowledging its disastrous long-term consequences. Investigating the impact of cli-fi on real audiences, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2018) has found that apocalyptic narratives are counterproductive, as they engender feelings of helplessness and lead readers to dismiss chilling predictions as wild exaggerations. Yet as temperatures rise, Wallace-Wells warns us, there is a real danger that we accommodate ourselves to an increasingly uninhabitable earth and "normalize climate suffering at the same pace we accelerate it, ... so that we are always coming to terms with what is ahead of us ... and forgetting ... the absolute moral unacceptability of the conditions of the world we are passing through in the present tense" (Wallace-Wells 2019, p. 216). This warning is pertinent here, for while Hamid's nonfiction stresses the urgency of the climate crisis, *Exit West* finally relegates ecological issues to the sidelines. The novel does not overlook nonhuman life and explicitly ties future migration to the environment: "[a]ll over the world people were slipping away ... , from once fertile plains cracking with dryness, from seaside villages gasping beneath tidal surges, from overcrowded cities and murderous battlefields" (p. 211). This rudimentary theme is not developed further, however. In fact, the novel's ending is a happy one, not just because Nadia and Saeed reestablish contact after losing touch, but because intermittent references to environmental problems turn out to be intimations of a diminished future that never really arrived:

Half a century later Nadia returned for the first time to the city of her birth, where the fires she had witnessed in her youth had burned themselves out long ago, the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city she found herself in was not a heaven but it was not a hell ... Above them bright satellites transited in the darkening sky and the last hawks were returning to the rest of their nests ... (pp. 227–28)

The narrative's global migration episode might have been fueled by climate disruption, but neither problem seems particularly pressing half a century later. This reassuring conclusion is reinforced by the reference to hawks, for it means the novel has come full circle in ecological terms too, as Saeed spots "a hawk" who "tirelessly" constructs "its nest" at the start (p. 4). Whether these birds function as symbolical stand-ins for humans who are likewise trying to establish shelters against the odds or as real nonhuman creatures that remain an unquestioned presence in future cities, neither interpretation does justice to the ecological concerns voiced in Hamid's nonfiction. At one point in the story, the desire to accommodate vast numbers of refugees prompts a gigantic infrastructure project, which looks as though "they were remodelling the Earth itself" (p. 177). Yet the narrator does not seem truly concerned by the direct consequences of this project, despite the fact that "a great many birds ... would soon lose their trees to construction" (p. 180), or by its energy cost, even though its carbon impact would undoubtedly exacerbate the conditions driving the large-scale migration waves present at the start of the story and absent at its end.

3. Beyond Survivalism

The topic of climate relocation is addressed more explicitly in John Lanchester's *The Wall*. In line with the author's previous novel *Capital* (2012), which deals with the 2007–2008 financial crisis, *The Wall* responds directly to current social dilemmas. Focusing on a young conscript, the story imagines what life would be like on both sides of a new defense wall built along the entire UK coastline after climate collapse decimates global food supplies. The novel exemplifies the trend identified by Jimmy Packham,

in which recent British fiction engages with “contemporary political discourses that see the coast—the space that illuminates Britain’s relation to the wider world—as a potent site to explore a current crisis of national identity”, by evoking an “uncanny coast” (Packham 2019, p. 206) that is littered with traces of imperial violence (pp. 211–2) and “ecological alienation” (p. 216). The defamiliarized shore of *The Wall* fits into a narrative that points beyond the nation, however. A member of the elite clarifies the storyworld’s uneven geopolitical landscape in a speech to the “Defenders” guarding the wall:

The Change was not an event but a process ... that in ... some unlucky places, has not stopped. In many of the hotter places of the world, ... the Change is ... still reshaping landscapes, still impacting people’s lives. Men and women fled from it, ... tried to make new lives for themselves, ... to climb to higher ground, to find a ledge, a cave, a well, an oasis, a place where they could find safety for them and their families. But ... the Change did not stop. The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. ... So the unfortunates must flee again, and they have begun, again, in numbers, like the numbers from many years ago when the Change first struck. Big numbers[.] (Lanchester 2019, p. 111)

Taking a dim view of the government’s isolationist worldview, which deindividualizes and racializes these migrants along the lines mentioned earlier, the basic message of Lanchester’s novel is comparable to that of *Exit West*: privileged citizens and irregular migrants are fundamentally similar, despite their militarized separation, and climate change threatens to make environmental refugees of us all, with or without borders. Though the story’s events end up transforming the protagonist from a Defender into an “Other” (p. 203), Kavanagh mentally transgresses that boundary from the start. His military training disabuses him of the belief that, on the unforgiving Wall, “there were still small human margins here and there, ... space for forgiveness” (p. 48). Yet this “human” margin keeps resurfacing via Kavanagh’s speculation on the viewpoints of the Others, which hesitates between imaginative identification — “I could imagine what it would be like to be an Other, floating in the dark, on some makeshift boat” (p. 65)—and unknowable difference—“I could just about imagine burning sand, ... salt water stinging in cuts, the weak being left behind, ... no, I couldn’t really imagine” (p. 80). While this primary message is important, I want to highlight two other aspects here, namely the novel’s evocation of the personal and social costs of climate collapse, and its representation of political agency after the world ends.

As existing research has charted, typical cli-fi narratives preemptively mourn our present world from the perspective of a degraded future, via what Stef Craps calls “the art of anticipatory memory” (Craps 2017, p. 479). Readers of Lanchester’s novel will have little difficulty finding traces of such proleptic mourning. One scene breathes fictional life into two points mentioned by Wallace-Wells, namely that climate change promises to destroy “any beach you’ve ever visited” (Wallace-Wells 2019, p. 60)—“[i]t will take thousands of years, perhaps millions, for quartz and feldspar to degrade into sand that might replenish the beaches we lose” (p. 61)—and that its impact will abruptly undercut “propaganda of human progress and generational improvement”, as “the dark ages would arrive within one generation of the light—close enough to ... share stories, and blame” (pp. 201–2). Both of these observations resonate with the scene where Kavanagh visits his parents and ponders their “generational guilt” for failing to avert the Change as well as their nostalgic memories of beaches (Lanchester 2019, p. 55). In this future world, many people “have a thing about beaches [and] watch movies and TV programmes about beaches” (p. 56), and Kavanagh’s parents share that elegiac fascination: “I don’t know whether [they were watching] a documentary or a film, I didn’t wait to see, but the opening shots showed sand and ... blue water, and small figures climbing up onto boards and riding waves” (p. 60). What is more, migrants who manage to breach the wall are forced into a system that is slavery in all but name. At a certain point, an older woman explains why she agrees to use a former Other as “Help”:

I know it's terrible to have Help. . . . Another human being at one's beck and call, . . . in effect one's personal property . . . though of course . . . it isn't at all like such arrangements in the benighted past, it is a form of providing welfare . . . and refuge to the wretched of the world – but no, still, I would not have believed you. It is . . . a lessening of one's own humanity. . . . But what could I do? . . . I am not getting any younger . . . People of your time in life don't understand this but [this is] perhaps the only thing which is true for all humans everywhere, the terribleness of age. (pp. 148–49)

These self-serving justifications in the name of a putatively shared humanity ring hollow, as this character with a “caramelly skin tone” seems to realize (p. 147). Nor does everyone accept this system. For a shadowy underground group is working to combat the UK's insular politics and human rights abuses: “Some of your countrymen don't agree with the Wall. They think you need the Wall to keep out the water but not to keep out human beings. Some of them don't agree with turning people into Help. They think it's slavery. It's a big network, much bigger than you realise” (p. 191). As these passages demonstrate, the novel accentuates the costs of exclusionary politics on a hot planet.

That is not to say that the narrative is devoid of hope. But its restricted view of politics and social agency should give us pause. Even in a desperate future, *The Wall* implies, people on the move will not always find themselves at a closed door. This positive message is conveyed by two scenes at the start and ending of the novel. Upon visiting his parents, Kavanagh ponders the meaning of a crucial word:

Home: it didn't just seem as if home was a long way away, . . . it actually felt as if the whole concept of home was strange, a thing you used to believe in, an ideology you'd once been passionate about but had now abandoned. Home: the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. Somebody had said that. But once you had spent time on the Wall, you stop believing in the idea that anybody, ever, has no choice but to take you in. Nobody has to take you in. They can choose to, or not. (p. 54)

These bleak observations appear to criticize sentimental views like the ones voiced in the Robert Frost poem that Kavanagh alludes to here. But the story's conclusion invites readers to reject this dispiriting argument, as it revolves around the decision of a lone survivor on an oil rig to take in Kavanagh and Hifa—as if to suggest that, even in these dire circumstances, the idea of home has not been completely abandoned, and strangers will on occasion still make you feel “welcome” (p. 250). This episode even offers an uplifting variation on the mythical celebration of “fire” in Cormac McCarthy's notoriously disheartening *The Road* (2006), as the survivor's hospitality allows Lanchester's protagonists to witness the “ordinary miracle” of fire again (p. 260). While this is a hopeful end to a bleak story, we should not lose sight of the fact that the novel's political imagination remains highly circumscribed, as Jane Elliott's work allows us to see.

As Elliott has explained, life in a neoliberal society is characterized by a peculiar form of “suffering agency”. This paradoxical experience finds its clearest expression in survival narratives: “[t]he extreme options and intense interest in life that characterize [such] stories gesture toward one of the cruelest aspects of suffering agency—the fact that the worse the choices on offer are, the more interested in the decision the subject will tend to be” (Elliott 2013, p. 92). This experience proves hard to describe using a traditional political lexicon, because in these situations “agency can remain recognizably agency while becoming indistinguishable from profound domination” (p. 89). Yet its omnipresence in twenty-first-century culture discloses how pervasive the neoliberal model of personhood has become, Elliott asserts, for in confronting us repeatedly with extreme scenarios of self-preservation in which individual interests are key, these stories train us to see meaningful action in terms of “[our] possession of individual interests and [our] ability to rank and decide between them” (p. 84). Our lives are increasingly shaped by this self-defeating type of agency, in sum, and its presence in our culture silently endorses the underlying, neoliberal view of choice, personhood, and politics. Another way to summarize this argument is to reformulate the dictum popularized by Fredric Jameson, which states that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. For Elliott's

argument implies that the end of capitalism is hard to conceive because to imagine the end of the world is to imagine *the continuation of capitalism*, as the apocalypse compels us to adopt a thinly veiled micro-economic mindset in which life-and-death choices appear as the only meaningful actions of people seen as individual “decision unit[s]” (p. 83). Crucial for my purposes is that this suffering agency plays a decisive role, as Elliott elucidates, in disciplinary dystopias like *Never Let Me Go* (2005), castaway stories like *Life of Pi* (2001), and post-apocalyptic tales like *The Road*. Because this implies that her account illuminates *The Wall* too, which actually blends these three templates; a survival narrative par excellence, it portrays life in the regimented setting of a dystopian borderscape, relates how the protagonists are put to sea after their section of the wall is breached, and features multiple scenes in which post-apocalyptic conditions impose horrifying decisions on everyone. Accordingly, the novel’s portrayal of future mobility evokes the restricted view of politics outlined by Elliott, in which to be an active person is to make self-interested choices about your private well-being under deeply constrained conditions.

Several scenes invoke this micro-economic imaginary, a model of choice and personhood that leaves little room for long-term decisions or communal problem-solving. When you become a Defender, we learn on the first page, the space for decision-making is reduced to vanishing point: “everything about the Wall means you have no choice” (Lanchester 2019, p. 3). That does not mean your actions are devoid of meaning, quite the opposite; in combat, Kavanagh reflects, it feels as though “death, yours or your opponent’s, is not just an event in life, but the entire point of life” (p. 90). On the boat too, choices and actions are crucial but fatally constrained: “[w]e took rowing easy, . . . because doing it too energetically made you perilously hungry. It was a trade-off, calories for movement” (pp. 194–95). When they see another vessel on the horizon, the options again have to be weighed, and the characters end up “running through the same calculations” (p. 195, see p. 179). At every point in the narrative, people are consequently shown to operate in a world that continually forces life-or-death decisions on them. Underlining the minimal but critical nature of such choices, Kavanagh almost dies at the end, not because of external violence, but because he dangerously miscalculates his energy level (pp. 267–69). These scenes require our attention, for we have seen that a similar mindset is applied to the question of migration, in Kavanagh’s observations on the meaning of home and the concluding offer of sanctuary on an isolated oil rig; in both cases, the social obligation of hospitality is represented as a binary personal choice, in line with the minimalist conception of personhood and politics evoked in the rest of the novel. Granted, the narrator does not endorse this bleak situation or Kavanagh’s austere redefinition of “home”, and the floating community encountered on the sea represents an alternative approach and admits new people after a vote, for example (p. 207). However, the fact remains that the story’s only real sanctuary beyond the Wall turns out to be a micro-society, to which Kavanagh and Hifa are admitted after one unbalanced survivor individually decides that they pose no threat because there are “only two” of them (p. 273). What is more, both the floating society and the miniature community on the oil rig are expressly located on the high seas, outside of any national framework. As the reader learns little about the underground resistance movement mentioned earlier, this means that *The Wall* puts a strong emphasis on micro-economic choices that reduce the question of politics to that of bare survival—in contrast to the communal political imagination of *Exit West*. According to Brandon Jones, debates and stories on climate-related migration should make more room for “the capacity of forced migrants to determine, as much as they can, the terms of their displacement and relocation” (Jones 2018, p. 650). This is true, but the writings of Elliott and Lanchester allow us to see that freedom under deeply constrained conditions is but a form of “suffering agency” and that survivalist stories highlight individual choices at the expense of broader political questions, and of social agency worthy of that name.

4. Beyond Empathy

After analyzing the demilitarized imagination of *Exit West* and the hopeful survivalism of *The Wall*, I now turn to Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises*. This novel repeatedly mentions the perilous

geological processes taking place beneath the Canary Islands and interprets the migration crisis that unfolded on these islands in 2006–2008 as a prefiguration of future turbulence: “The Western Sahara is a dull and empty quarter, when you compare it with Libya, Syria, Iraq, Iran or Egypt, which are in the process of fomenting greater . . . atrocities and migrations on a scale that will make the Canarian voyages seem tame” (Drabble 2016, p. 73). Yet these future-oriented plotlines are part of a mosaic-like novel that also contemplates aging, the fate of literature, and the cultural history of the Canary Islands—and that continues Drabble’s career-spanning analysis of gender and UK society. Consequently, *The Dark Flood Rises* depicts the state of the nation as well as the planet, its anxious anticipation of the coming flood notwithstanding. Even more strikingly, this story about climate and displacement deliberately withholds spectacle. In contrast to the “highbrow catastrophe novel” already half-forgotten, funnily, by one of its characters (p. 110), Drabble’s narrative stresses that ordinary life continues, even in ominous times. “One wouldn’t mind dying of a cataclysm, but one doesn’t want to die young by mistake, . . . as her son’s latest partner had recently done”, the main character ruefully notes, and it is no coincidence that the latter event plays a greater role in the story than the cataclysm everyone keeps expecting (p. 10). Writing about climate narratives, Stephanie LeMenager has invited us to avoid the “masculinist Paleo romance” of apocalyptic stories (LeMenager 2017, p. 233) and to contemplate an “everyday Anthropocene”, as articulated in novels about attempts to live with what is left and save what can be saved (p. 223). Such stories develop “a project of paying close attention to what it means to live through climate shift, . . . in individual, fragile bodies”, “a project of reinventing the everyday as a means of . . . making home of a broken world”, “in a sense distant from settler-colonialist mentalities”—a type of writing that finds its clearest articulation, she adds, in the work of women writers and writers of color (p. 225–26). Traces of that alternative Anthropocene imaginary can be found in *Exit West* and *The Wall*. But LeMenager’s description applies even more to Drabble’s novel about aging characters and their quotidian climate anxiety. It aptly characterizes her representation of migration too, two interconnected aspects of which I will single out here, namely its implicit critique of humanitarian empathy and its inclusion of a charismatic minor character. As we will see, these points allow us to interrogate uncritical appeals to the “human” in my previous cases as well as their confident ventriloquism of the future refugee experience.

In recent years, several scholars have explored the limitations of humanitarian feelings and projects, one of which is modern literature. Building on the work of Dorothy Thompson and Hannah Arendt, Lyndsey Stonebridge has explained how empathy, “historically speaking . . . was a ‘fancy word’ that covered up the world’s failure to negotiate political terms for the new human rights order in the last century” (Stonebridge 2017, p. 446). This is apparent, for example, in a documentary about Palestinian refugees from the 1950s, which “mutes any specific reference to geopolitics, relying instead on a conspicuous showering of biblical references to generate a sense of shared religious and cultural history” (p. 448). Humanitarian feelings have traditionally papered over political violence rather than addressed it, in other words, and today, clearly, the challenge of rethinking migration “beyond either the limits of well-intentioned empathy or the failing politics of human rights is newly acute” (p. 454). Investigating our present “age of humanitarianism” (p. 35), anthropologist Didier Fassin poses a related question: “Why does it work so well?” (Fassin 2013, p. 40). When thinking about the public’s strong response to the human cost of wars and disasters, we should ask ourselves “how much this undoubtedly sincere mobilization of moral sentiments was rewarding not only for those who acted but . . . for those who were simply witnessing it” and who “could have the illusion that we shared a common human condition” (pp. 35–36). Reflecting on this predicament, while foregrounding colonial and ecological issues, Julietta Singh adds that aid work “allows the humanitarian to fantasize about becoming more fully human precisely by repressing their participation in the constitutive dehumanization of aid recipients” (Singh 2015, p. 139). Applying these insights to the reading process, Singh dismantles the belief that empathy for fictional characters in crisis zones already constitutes a “humanitarian intervention” of sorts (p. 141) and stresses the uncomfortable implication that such “reading ‘humanizes’ the reader at the expense of those represented by the text”, who are implicitly

rendered less than fully human (p. 143). This critical analysis of foreign aid projects and the mindset of the “humanitarian reader” is prefigured, she adds, in “post-humanitarian” stories such as Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007). As human rights are far from secure, these scholars contend, we should be suspicious of appeals to empathy and universality, which may function, like the survivalist imagination discussed earlier, to downplay practical political questions.

These observations cast a critical light on climate migration fiction and invite us to develop post-humanitarian responses to future crises. For stories such as *Exit West* and *The Wall* appeal to a collective humanity, as we have found, and *The End We Start From* shares affinities with the documentary analyzed by Stonebridge, as this novel likewise sidesteps political questions and is interspersed with quotations “adapted from a myriad of mythological and religious texts from around the world” (Hunter [2017] 2018, p. 145). In his account of *The Road*, the blueprint for many of these stories, Christopher White claims that McCarthy’s story contemplates “the fate of empathy as a human resource in a post-apocalyptic world” (White 2015, p. 532) and exposes how “empathic connection with others” is crucial to human existence (p. 539). If we bear in mind the previous paragraph, this is a dubious message, however; we should perhaps not accept this promotion of personal emotions over political solutions, especially in the case of climate migration, given the suspect role of Western empathy in past human rights crises. Vulnerable people do not need our emotions, as elicited by scenes of suffering, but our rights, as protected by a political framework the failings of which are obscured by appeals to a universal humanity that disregard social and racial inequities. Ghosh makes a related point in *The Great Derangement*: “the individual conscience is now . . . seen as the battleground of choice for a conflict that is self-evidently a problem of the global commons, requiring collective action” (Ghosh 2016, p. 132). We need to develop alternative, more self-reflexive views and stories of humanitarian crises, in other words. One promising strategy in this respect, I will hazard, is to replace empathy with heartlessness, however counterintuitive that might appear. According to Deborah Nelson’s reading of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, these female writers articulated an “ethics without empathy” (Nelson 2006, p. 88), which resisted the conventional belief in “the healing power of empathy as the glue of solidarity and the aim of progressive politics” (p. 87). Their peculiar stance proved hard to swallow for many, as its emotional distancing was mistaken for apathy and ran counter to the “warmth” conventionally expected from women (p. 99). However, Nelson believes that it involves a productive “condition of maximum exposure to cold, hard facts”, which produces an autonomy and impartiality that unsettles what we think we know about ourselves and others (p. 89). These remarks invite us to adopt a mode of *distanced* reading, you might say, rather than distant reading.

Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises* charts a related path, which shuns the depoliticizing focus on empathy in conventional versions of Anthropocene fiction. Admittedly, it remains unclear whether the protagonist experiences this calm autonomy; “[s]ome believe that our emotions thin out as we grow old”, we read at the start, and “Fran often wonders if this will happen to her, if it is already happening without her marking it” (Drabble 2016, p. 15). Her emotional state continues to waver throughout the novel; one scene suggests that age has not brought “calm and indifference” (p. 227), while another records how “[a] great and sad calmness descends on Fran” (p. 313). Like the opening of Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016), moreover, Drabble’s novel highlights the unnerving apathy of tourists confronted with washed-up migrants: “[In a YouTube clip] an immigrant who had struggled ashore onto a holiday beach in Fuerteventura . . . can be seen sitting . . . amidst the parasols, and a holiday-maker had *calmly* filmed him as he sat there, breathless” (p. 187, emphasis added). Nevertheless, the narrator systematically returns to the calm light of the Canary Islands (pp. 74, 184, 213, 313), in passages that seem to illuminate the novel’s underlying poetics, and it offers an unusually dispassionate view of migration and climate change. The narrative does not minimize the threat of global heating, nor does it downplay migrant suffering. But it is reluctant to capitalize on past and future tragedies, and avoids appeals to universal emotions that crowd out concrete political questions. Indeed, these questions receive explicit attention in references to the Spanish Civil War and to the hunger strike of a female

activist “against the allegedly brutal Moroccan domination of a largely unrecognized North African state which called itself the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic” (p. 12). The novel’s unemotional approach is most obvious, however, in its treatment of a minor character who fails to fit the script of the traumatized migrant.

The life of Ishmael should not be romanticized, to be sure. For “[h]e had been washed up ... on the shores of Fuerteventura from a sinking vessel from Mauritania” and “[s]ome of [his] fellow voyagers on the overcrowded ... ship of death had perished” (p. 139). His is an exceptional case, furthermore, being “one fortunate one plucked from the thousands” (p. 66). Yet this character is not devoid of political agency; at the end of the novel, he joins forces with Fran’s son to finish the human rights documentary Christopher’s deceased wife was planning: “Christopher Stubbs and Ishmael Diatta ... have sailed on. They ... crossed the narrow Atlantic straits [and] have arrived ... at Nouadhibou ... These ignoble comrades will tell this story or die in the attempt. They will finish Sara’s project” (p. 325). Other scenes confirm that his charismatic figure is not a tragic, mute victim:

[Two other characters] are vying for the attention of a fine-looking young black man in a battered straw hat ... Teasing and laughter have been taking place. ... Ishmael smiles, ... as one who is much at home here, as one whose gardening implements pertain more to iconography than to hard labor. ... He does a bit of gardening and also makes himself useful to the Red Cross ... (pp. 138, 139)

[The characters contemplate a melodramatic painting of drowning immigrants.] It is ... clear that Ishmael has been used as a model ... Ishmael shrugs, in a faint disclaimer, as though the whole thing has nothing to do with him. “It had a Yamaha motor”, he offers, as some kind of apology ... (p. 186)

[D]ark and elegant in his designer jeans ... Ishmael is on his mobile phone, speaking to his mother in Wolof. [Another character] listens, benignly, to this animated chatter in an unknown tongue. (p. 285)

This migrant character does not fit typical tragic templates, but is handsome, at ease, and helpful, and defuses the awkward scene in front of the painting by mentioning the everyday detail about the motor. Although his foreign tongue positions him on the edge of the novel, he uses it for what seems to be a perfectly banal dialogue. Ishmael’s story does not function as a stereotypical prompt for empathy, these points imply, but fits into the more distanced approach outlined earlier. In fact, I propose reading it in terms of Heath Cabot’s plea for an “anthropology of not knowing” (Cabot 2016, p. 645). If we want to do justice to “refugee voices”, she claims, we should realize that “images of refugees as vulnerable and tragic figures ... contribut[e] to the silencing of refugees as active and critical subjects” (p. 648), as is illustrated by a public awareness campaign that features one of her informants, who is rendered as a ghostly refugee despite being a “lively, articulate person” (p. 646). Such rhetorical strategies “may be useful for their capacity to tug on heart-strings” (p. 647), but they obscure real individuals, “[t]hose persons and life-worlds that remain inaccessible to our knowledge practices” (p. 650). Similarly, Drabble’s narrative subtly exposes the inadequacy of conventional sentimental templates for comprehending irregular migrants. Generating feelings of empathy that may apply to anyone, supposedly, may cover up features of other lives that are unique, as well as perfectly ordinary. That lesson applies more generally, for *The Dark Flood Rises* reiterates that we should not presume to know other minds: “we do not have the right to get too close to [Ivor]” (p. 82); “[w]e don’t know what happened to Poppet in that ... relationship” (p. 144); “[h]ow could one ever know what was going on, in that handsome head of [Ishmael]?” (p. 198). Emphasizing the autonomy of individual characters and concrete political questions, Drabble’s novel avoids tightening emotional bonds, even in the humanitarian context of migrations past and future.

5. Conclusions: Beyond Planet Apartheid

How does literary fiction respond to climate dislocation, in a context where apocalyptic frames dominate the debate and the question of forced migration has become newly globalized? As I have shown, recent novels by Mohsin Hamid, John Lanchester, and Margaret Drabble complicate stereotypes of “climate refugees” by speculating about future migrations while bearing witness to recent “crises” on European coasts. These narratives advance the debate on the great displacement by demilitarizing borders, exploring survivalist reflexes, and resisting easy appeals to empathy. They do not propose clear or conclusive answers, but their imaginative experiments help to open up a debate that threatens to be cut short, as even commentators with opposed political agendas regularly paint the same apocalyptic pictures in connecting destabilized climates and involuntary relocation.

Especially when they evoke an everyday Anthropocene, these novels abandon existing narrative templates for both migration and climate crises. Stories that do not fetishize the unspeakable trauma behind dislocation offer a welcome relief from the narratives analyzed by Bishupal Limbu, which problematically suggest that “the sympathy of the metropolitan reader” should only be bestowed on “‘proper’ refugee[s]” instead of “economic migrant[s]”, as these narratives privilege memories of “terrible suffering” (Limbu 2018, p. 81) and discount stateless subjects with a less spectacular background of “mundane and ongoing suffering” (p. 93). In encouraging us to consider the socio-political questions raised by climate change, moreover, these novels point towards a more expansive view of current ecological challenges and their literary representation. It might be true, as Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has noted, that climate justice constitutes “a structuring absence” in several celebrated examples of American “cli-fi” (Schneider-Mayerson 2019, p. 958), which ignore “people outside the cocoon of American whiteness” (p. 956) and overlook issues such as “the resettlement of climate refugees” (p. 959). This is not true of the more recent novels examined above, however, which integrate these concerns in ways that are thought-provoking even if they occasionally miss their mark.

These attempts to open up the debate and to expand all-too narrow definitions of “cli-fi” merit further scrutiny. While I cannot do it justice here, Amitav Ghosh himself has addressed the great displacement in *Gun Island* (2019), for instance, an indirect sequel to his critically acclaimed *The Hungry Tide*. In line with my primary case studies, this novel prioritizes ongoing migration crises on European shores while suggesting that far-flung countries are increasingly interconnected and environments are becoming inhospitable across the globe. But it does so with a clear-eyed emphasis on the long history of imperial power and the necessity of global climate justice. Just like *The Great Derangement*, in fact, *Gun Island* refers to Geoffrey Parker’s sweeping history of the Little Ice Age and the subsequent “global crisis” in the seventeenth century, a situation that prefigures our current predicament, as one of Ghosh’s characters asserts: “Couldn’t it be said that it was in the seventeenth century that we started down the path that has brought us to where we are now?” (Ghosh 2019, p. 137). Ghosh’s attempt to grapple with these issues in fiction deserves a fuller treatment, but this single quotation already demonstrates that there are further ways in which we can reinvigorate the debate on climate refugees; if we want to leave planet apartheid behind, we should not just move beyond militarization, survivalism, and facile empathy, but also the blinkered view of presentism.

As I have argued, literary representations of climate-induced migration are not flawless, as they occasionally fail to address ecological problems, contract the scope of political agency, and assume that human identity is a given. Yet their narrative thought experiments help to make this topic thinkable in ways that normalize migration without overlooking the slow violence of climate change. Most strikingly, they reveal that writers can tackle this topic with the help of different rhetorical strategies, interpellating their audience variously as readers who share universal human emotions, calculate the outcomes of impossible choices, maintain a calm view that keeps in view real political questions, or actively trace the veiled historical ties between climate, capital, and colonialism. Such stories and reading experiences resist the debate’s premature closure and help us to see that the great displacement is a serious topic, but an everyday phenomenon too.

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