

UNFAIRY TALES AND OTHER REFUGEE STORIES: CREATING RELATIONS
THROUGH THE HUMANITARIAN IMAGINATION IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST*
AND HELEN OYEYEMI'S *GINGERBREAD*

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In 2016, UNICEF created a series of short, animated films titled *Unfairy Tales*, narrated by child refugees and telling their stories of flight. These one- to three-minute films visually come across as innocent cartoons; however, their stories focus on the violence of war-torn nations, the fear of death, the pain of grief, and, eventually, the hard journey of escape. UNICEF's term, "unfairy tale," plays upon a number of the films' tropes: their incorporation of fairy tale narrative cues and elements, their focus on children, and their evocation of the unreal. However, the prefix "un-" complicates the films' depictions as fairy tales, emphasizing that these are true stories with no happy endings. Framing these refugee stories within the tradition of the fairy tale aligns them with two recent novels by Mohsin Hamid and Helen Oyeyemi, respectively: *Exit West* (2017) and *Gingerbread* (2019). Hamid's and Oyeyemi's refugee-story novels also draw on fairy tale narrative elements and call for a broader consideration of the connection between refugee stories and the fairy tale genre.

In a 2019 interview with Adam Vitcavage, Helen Oyeyemi characterizes her most recent work *Gingerbread* as a novel "more about how it's told than the story itself...it is a very long bedtime story." *Gingerbread* focuses on the life of Harriet Lee, a refugee living in London who comes from Druhástrana, a country that the rest of the world believes to be imaginary. As a "bedtime story," *Gingerbread* incorporates numerous fairy tale elements derived from stories

such as “Hansel and Gretel.” For example, it interrogates the complex role gingerbread plays in these tales where the baked good vacillates between a tool for survival and one of temptation and threat. This blending of the fantastic with a refugee story also occurs in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*. *Exit West* follows the journey of Saeed and Nadia, who are forced to flee their unnamed city as it is taken over by extremists. *Exit West* is often classified as a magical realist novel rather than a fairy tale.¹ However, its plot is driven by the appearance of magical doors that instantly transport people to faraway countries, making the novel reminiscent of portal fairy tales such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. In this way, both *Exit West* and *Gingerbread* are refugee novels shaped by fairy tale elements, which is a reoccurring narrative trend that even modern news sources have used when discussing the topic of refugees and migration.² According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the end of 2020, there were an estimated 20.7 million refugees in the world and 82.4 million displaced people, and in light of recent world events such as the Taliban regaining control of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these numbers are only continuing to increase as many flee these countries for safety. Given this exploding global refugee crisis, the inclination to draw upon fairy tale tropes when discussing refugee stories raises significant questions concerning the global imaginary and its capacity for understanding when it comes to the experiences of refugees. Namely, what do these narrative choices offer the refugee story and its depiction of the refugee figure, and what are the capabilities and limitations of the type of humanitarian imagination these choices seek to invoke in an effort to procure effective responses to refugee needs?

The “humanitarian imagination” refers to a form of global consciousness rooted in compassion for distant suffering. According to human rights scholar Keith David Watenpaugh,

the humanitarian imagination “is the organizing principle of *organized compassion*: it is defined by historical encounters between the subjects and objects of humanitarianism; by the existence of constituencies, advocacy groups, and diasporas; by the prevailing logics of civilizational narratives; and by how successfully empathy is created and then sustained” (33). The humanitarian imagination builds connections between peoples across the globe through storytelling that encourages identification. In this way, the humanitarian imagination acts as what David Palumbo-Liu might refer to as a “delivery system.” Specifically, in regard to literature, it “engenders a space for imagining *our relation to others* and thinking through why and how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically. This in turn creates *new forms of narration and representation*” (14). Amidst the current global refugee crisis, this delivery system becomes a necessary tool for engendering action and responses from those nations refugees turn to for aid and asylum. Recognizing this, novels such as *Gingerbread* and *Exit West* that focus on the plights of refugees through the use of fairy tale tropes and conventions are able to deliver not only refugee stories but also the emotional and affective realities of refugee experiences. While other scholars such as Yogita Goyal and Michael Perfect warn against the way novels such as *Exit West* problematically universalize the refugee experience, I argue that *Exit West*’s and *Gingerbread*’s narrative forms resist the universalization of refugeehood and instead provide a literary framework that encourages a greater interrogation of the refugee figure and experience and how these become represented within the global imaginary.

Due to the refugee crisis and its inconceivable numbers, the term refugee has already become a sort of empty signifier that is more label than human, its meaning becoming ever-more displaced especially as refugees continue to be referred to as metaphorical floods and tides³ that are more entities than people. Therefore, in order to overcome this trap of language, refugee

narratives need to challenge their readers to engage with them through new, productive ways of representation that resist an easy interpretation or conclusion. I argue that novels such as *Exit West* and *Gingerbread* accomplish this through the deployment of allegory that focuses on affect over realism. These novels utilize the tropes of fairy tales in order to make the unfamiliar experiences of refugees comprehensible while accounting for the incomprehensibility of the violence and suffering experienced; these novels do so by normalizing elements of the unreal and drawing upon the unsettled affect of strangeness. In this article, I will show that the fusion of the fairy tale with the refugee story thus becomes one means of appealing to a type of humanitarian imagination capable of creating identification across difference and fostering a deeper engagement with refugee realities. I examine the storytelling allowances such a fusion enables and how it can help to account for the complex relationships refugees have with time, trauma, and questions of belonging. Consequently, this paper explores how combining refugee stories with fairy tale elements overcomes and transforms those obstacles of what Amy Shuman refers to as narrative “tellability,” while demonstrating the need for more expansive literary frameworks when it comes to refugee texts. I draw upon scholarship from the fields of postcolonial and narrative theory as well as from the field of refugee studies. While this latter scholarship becomes a blend of literary, anthropological, and geographic studies, I find this intermixing relationship between humanities and social science work to be a necessary facet of my argument because of the way it anchors my focus in real refugee experiences despite my argument’s focus on the anti-realism of the novels I am examining. In doing so, I ultimately argue that while the blending of fairy tale elements with refugee stories may allow for a greater flexibility of narrative that can expand readers’ understanding of refugee experiences, this practice can also become limited by the polarizing ways people view difference and how a

recognition of difference can rouse some towards ethical responsibility while inciting others towards persecution.

I. Fairy Tale Tropes and Refugee Stories

For many refugees, their stories are a form of legal currency that decide whether or not they will be granted protection by a nation. During asylum hearings in particular, refugees must convince asylum officials that their stories are true, often being required to give precise accounts of their experiences. However, due to factors such as trauma, stress, and the fact that stories are always representations, crafting an account that will be considered credible in the eyes of an asylum official is a complicated task. In fact, asylum requests are often denied for reasons such as an individual failing to convey a sense of persecution as it is defined by the UNHCR, the dates of recalled events being incorrect, or one's story sounding too much like another's. According to Owen Flanagan, there are four factors of human life that lead to narrative serving as a "natural" structure for understanding. These include time, memory, the tendency for humans to be future-oriented, and human sociality (qtd. in Atrey 10). However, in cases when the storyteller is constantly relegated as "other" or possesses a history of trauma, each of these factors becomes impacted, disrupting this concept of a "natural" narrative structure that ultimately is rooted in colonialist and ableist discourses. The political asylum process inherently demands a shaping of one's testimony into a comprehensible and consistent narrative; however, refugee stories are often far from being tidy, and stripping these stories of their messiness, contradictions, and extraordinary components separates them even further from their reality. This is where fiction plays a vital role. By providing a space for refugee stories to exist in their messiness and

recognizing this as its own form of truth-telling, fiction, specifically fantastical fiction, allows for that which other discourses deny.

The fairy tale genre recognizes narrative as a world-making process that embraces rather than dismisses anomalies of experience, allowing for the extraordinary to exist alongside the mundane. Folklorist Max Lüthi explains that folktales do not aim to create an exact replication of the world, but instead, they seek to transform it into something new that is free from the constraints of realism (375). A version of the folktale, fairy tales are not restricted in their world-making by the limits of reality either, enabling them to share their stories and lessons in creative ways that reflect real-world truths. As postcolonialist scholar Debjani Ganguly argues, “Fictional worlds, notwithstanding their ontological parallelism, have varying degrees of distance from and proximity to the actual world” (81). In the case of fairy tales, writers use this distance to create greater narrative flexibility that can depict the world through a transformative lens.

The dynamism of contemporary fiction equips it with the potential to engage with a number of geopolitical discourses and demonstrates how fictional world-making functions as an effective tool for transnational exchange. Ganguly describes the contemporary world novel as “a temporal and spatial collage. It contains many worlds that travel with, haunt, layer, and disrupt other worlds even as it is informed in our present time by technologies that amplify our sense of the interconnections among these myriad possible worlds” (85). Ganguly’s analysis suggests that while fictional worlds draw from real moments and truths, there is never a direct alignment between fiction and reality. Instead, the worlds of stories are inescapably influenced by not only the teller’s experiences of the real world but also by the stories preceding them that have already crafted certain understandings and interpretations of the ontological world as envisioned by readers or listeners. Recognizing this interplay leads to what Ganguly calls “interworld

questions,” which examine “the relationship between contemporary world novels and their emplacement within larger global systems” (81), ultimately arguing that “[t]he contemporary world novel...is a genre that opens up many worlds that variously converse with, interrogate, interrupt, and even inter [*sic*] the forgotten histories of the world made in the image of contemporary global capital” (83). The construction of fairy tales traditionally recognizes this fictional world-making process by embracing the extraordinary elements of its storytelling that allow for greater narrative possibilities.⁴ Fairy tales are stories understood to be fabrications crafted for the purpose of teaching or conveying a real-world truth or moral. Rather than shifting away from the extraordinary, they often lean into it, using certain interpretive categories and narrative tropes to suspend disbelief and allow for more nuanced engagements with the truth of a text that can unveil itself in imaginatively complex ways. These stories do so while using certain narrative tropes within stories that serve as a recognizable backbone for readers while reminding them of their fabricated nature. When applied to refugee literature, these tropes are therefore key signals to readers that the stories being told are only representations of reality that require further engagement and analysis. In this way, the refugee story that employs fairy tale elements can be classified as a sub-genre of the larger contemporary world novel category. *Gingerbread* and *Exit West*, world novels that follow the plight of implied Eastern European and Middle Eastern refugees, draw upon fairy tale tropes such as an abrupt immersion into a new world, the fluidity of time and space, and the normalization of the unbelievable in order to better illuminate aspects of the refugee experience through both allegory and affect.

The fairy tale trope of the abrupt immersion into a new world transports readers and characters alike into the unfamiliar, where they must leave the rules of the real world behind them. Applied to stories concerning refugees, though, this sudden change of environment and its

norms is not one of temporary adventure but rather captures the abrupt and permanent loss of a refugee's old world. In *Gingerbread*, Harriet and her mother, Margot, leave Druhástrana after eating gingerbread that puts them into a death-like state. Their bodies become "two corpses" that "spilled out like 'vats of custard'" once they arrive in England (Oyeyemi 132). The fact that Margot's and Harriet's escape from Druhástrana begins with death aligns with anthropologist Michael Jackson's contention that "[i]n flight, as in bereavement, a person's intersubjective world is shattered...Images of death press in on the mind, conveying an experience of moving through a totally destabilized and devastated lifeworld" (89). The death-like state Margot and Harriet travel in plays upon this preoccupation with death that refugees experience, destabilizing the construction of narrative beginnings and endings for readers and mimicking the "lifeworld" of the refugee through the novel's world-making.

Just as *Gingerbread* inexplicably thrusts Harriet and Margot into England, *Exit West* similarly plays upon this trope of the abrupt immersion into a new world by allowing magical doors to transport Nadia and Saeed between countries. This immersion is reoccurring, as Saeed and Nadia enter several "new worlds" through the portal-like doors that instantly transport them across time and space into new countries. As the narrator describes, "the passage was both like dying and being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it, and she felt cold and bruised and damp as she lay on the floor of the room on the other side" (Hamid 104). As with Harriet and Margot, Saeed and Nadia's journey into new lands resembles a form of death—of leaving one life for another irreversibly. After their crossing, Nadia observes "Saeed pivot back to the door, as though he wished maybe to reverse course and return through it...but then he strode forward, and they made their way outside" (105). While the portal appears to offer a return to the life just left,

it is an ungraspable possibility because to return means to fall back into a world of threat and violence.

This inability of the characters to backtrack parallels the longing refugees may experience to return home but the practical impossibility of doing so. This severance from home becomes a death Nadia and Saeed repeat several times throughout the novel as they travel from Mykonos to London to Marin. Their death, however, is then always followed by a rebirth representative of the geopolitical reconstructing of the self that new nations and circumstances often demand through linguistic, cultural, or social assimilation. Aside from Nadia and Saeed's portal crossing, the novel also captures similar entries into new worlds by including several side stories of other men and women crossing through the doors, their initial findings, and sometimes how these experiences change these characters. Liliana M. Naydan explores this phenomenon in her work on *Exit West*, noting that the characters "live as simultaneously connected to and yet disconnected from one another, their homes, and the nations to which they migrate. They live divided among past, present, and future, and in their divided existence, they resemble divided nations" (434). While Naydan's analysis examines this connection and disconnection through the digital traversing of time through technology, I think it also valuable to consider the novel's narrative depiction of time through the lens of loss. These deaths and rebirths do not signify clear endings and beginnings but rather come to represent a division of the self and how integral parts of one's identity such as family and nationality become cut away and lost when fleeing from one's home country. These divisions thus carry the loss of the past into the characters' presents and futures, gesturing towards the ways in which refugees' precarious relationships to place create arrested temporalities.

Refugee narratives not only complicate the linear progression of time through their disordered encounters with metaphoric death and rebirth, but they also capture how refugees' experiences keep them perpetually trapped in a state of loss and unbelonging. Migration anthropologist Marita Eastmond describes refugees as always being in the middle of their stories, and this inability to reach a conclusion keeps them in a constant state of precarity (251). As noncitizens occupying land at the mercy of other nations, refugees are without future security. Therefore, as they try to tell their stories, they continue living them, and this ever-ongoing condition impacts their perception of time. In her 2012 book *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Mimi Thi Nguyen refers to this refugee condition as becoming "stuck in time," suggesting that "[e]ven after settling in a new land, a refugee may find that being rootless and adrift is not a transient condition but a permanent, sometimes debilitating state of mind" (55). This rootless permanence Nguyen addresses not only halts refugees from progressing forward but also strips them of a self-identifying past, both of which remove them from linear constructions of time. Consequently, this temporal disruption unsettles narrative construction. As political psychologist Molly Andrews notes, "Linear time is central to the workings of the nation-state" (37). Refugees, however, exist outside of the nation-state, and so this temporal structure often collapses, leading to testimony which is "marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility" (37). While this temporal dissonance for the refugee resists the typical linear construction of realist narratives, it does not feel out of place in the genre of the fairy tale, which embraces more fluid constructions of time and space.

Hamid's *Exit West* revolves around this fluidity, collapsing and expanding time and distance through the structural framing of the narrative. Just as fairy tales often use verbal cues to signal beginnings, endings, and transitions within a story (e.g., "once upon a time"), the narrator

of *Exit West* frames shifts in the story through transitional language. For example, early in the novel the narrator switches the focus from Nadia and Saeed to “far away in Australia” (Hamid 7). This shift between the individual story of Nadia and Saeed and the larger story of the world itself demonstrates how both are interconnected as well as altered by the appearance of the magical portals. Furthermore, this transitional language is used to mark the passage of time for Nadia and Saeed, such as when the narrator describes, “A week passed. And then another...” (166) or “Half a century later...” (229). It is then also used to capture what is occurring outside of their immediate lives: “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been” (213). This collapsing and expanding of time and perspective enables the narrator to draw upon the details of particular, personal stories and then connect these together to craft a fuller picture of a fantastical world with porous borders, demonstrating the connection between individual experience and global geopolitics. Simultaneously, this narrative trope mimics that of the refugee condition in which time appears to fall away and the lives of refugees become marked by their moments of transition.

As in *Exit West*, the characters in *Gingerbread* similarly experience ever-shifting relationships to time and space that leave the characters feeling unrooted. When preparing to tell her daughter Perdita about her past in Druhástrana, Harriet remarks, “Talking or thinking about ‘there’ lends ‘here’ a hallucinatory quality that she could frankly do without” (Oyeyemi 47). Just the thought of Harriet’s past disrupts her present, reordering her relationship with time so that *then* seems more present to her than *now*. Similarly, once in England, Harriet’s relationship to space becomes perpetually destabilized in her new home. When she and Margot move in with their sponsors and distant relatives, the Kerchevals, Harriet observes that the rooms of the home are constantly shifting because their cousin Aristide

liked to move his office around at the press of the button, so the staircase that ran through the center of the building was the only fixed unit, and all the other rooms slid up and down like beads on an abacus. Harriet would knock on what she thought was Gabriel's bedroom door only to find herself chatting with Margot or Rémy, as Gabriel's room had gone up or down a floor. (137)

Because the rooms are constantly shifting, the house remains continually unfamiliar to Harriet. This relationship becomes symbolic of the ephemeral relationship refugees have to place. As geographer Tim Cresswell argues, "Place plays a particularly powerful role in the labeling and treatment of people who appear to be mobile, without place, of no fixed abode. The idea of 'home' as an ideal kind of place has particularly negative consequences for the homeless" (173). Without a defined home, refugees are trapped in a cycle of transition that in *Gingerbread* manifests itself for Harriet through the Kercheval house.

Harriet experiences a disconnection to place not only through the Kercheval house, but also through her and Perdita's relationship to other people in England. One example of this is Harriet's relationship to her lunch companion Samreen Shah, with whom she has been sharing lunch for "the past three months" (Oyeyemi 21). When Samreen fails to show up one day, Harriet calls her and is told that "Samreen hasn't saved her phone number, forgot Harriet's name very soon after first being told it, and in fact doesn't recall exchanging numbers at all...Samreen is a bit alarmed that Harriet knows so much about the book she's working on, and as Harriet does the necessary reframing of their acquaintanceship, her memory of their lunchtimes is altered too" (22). Samreen's strange amnesia is another fantastical element of *Gingerbread* through which hours and days Harriet believed they shared together are erased with little question; however, this moment also demonstrates how difficult it is for Harriet, as a refugee, to build relationships

in her new country, even years after living there. Harriet's one-sided relationship with Samreen is also mirrored in Perdita's relationship to her peers: "Harriet has heard Perdita ask a question and seen the answer directed at somebody else without a skipped beat, as if the question came from the other girl. Perdita doesn't seem to mind this or to sense that she is in danger of losing her right to corporeality" (8). Harriet and Perdita both struggle to form relationships with others in London. This lack of a connection to others characterizes them as what Cresswell might describe as an "anachorism." Playing upon the term anachronism, anachorism refers to "things in the wrong place" (166) or those occupying a space to which they do not belong. Cresswell uses this concept to discuss the state of people without a home, explaining that homelessness is characterized by "disconnection from particular forms of place" (175). While London becomes home for Harriet, her disconnection from her past in Druhástrana prevents her and her daughter from establishing connections in their present; their rootlessness keeps them adrift even in their new lives, which is a state of being that speaks to the political and global positioning of refugees in the world through allegory.

Fairy tales often use allegory in order to illuminate an idea, serve as a warning, or teach a lesson. According to Shuman, "Allegory requires the listener to locate the message in the figural, instead of the literal, message. The genre conventions of allegory require the listener to recognize the comparative relationship between a specific taleworld described in the story and another world" (75). In this way, allegory operates within fictional world-making by demanding close analysis and interpretation. It gestures towards the connections between the real and fictional world while encouraging the reader to engage with the parallels in a nuanced and complex manner. In *Gingerbread*, Harriet's and Margot's time in Druhástrana and their experiences in London become representative of the refugee journey through the novel's use of allegorical

figures and places, many of the details of the novel remaining purposefully ambiguous. For example, Druhástrana itself is “an alleged nation state of indeterminable geographic location. Very little verifiable information concerning Druhástrana is available, as there have been several prominent cases of stateless people claiming Druhástranian citizenship under a form of poetic license” (Oyeyemi 16–17), but those who have been there “describe it as ‘nightmarish’” (19). Druhástrana becomes an allegory for nations that create refugees. As Valerie O’Riordan recognizes in her review of *Gingerbread*, the characters of the novel and Druhástrana itself serve as

a neat place-holder for all sorts of issues highly pertinent to real-life geopolitics. Oyeyemi’s characters are refugees. They’re fleeing from bad marriages and child labour and an isolationist government. They’re poor and female and stateless (again, literally: nobody believes their home exists)...So what we’ve got is a grim story of exploitation and unbelonging.

The vague descriptions of Druhástrana and its cruelties enable the nation to represent a multitude of oppressive conditions; Harriet’s explanation that “[t]o be Druhástranian is to be dissatisfied with one’s condition until one can find some official personage to sign off on it” (159) embodies the situation of many refugees seeking escape and asylum. Harriet’s and Margot’s story “is a form of narrative that travels beyond its owners; moreover, it is intended to travel,” thus making it allegorical in its design “to be translated across contexts and across experiences” (Shuman 71). This translation work of allegory is what enables *Gingerbread* to serve as a narrative capable of speaking to a number of refugee experiences through its presentation of a nation and characters unbound by reality.

Like *Gingerbread*, *Exit West* similarly employs allegory to draw connections between its fictional world and the refugee crisis of the real world. *Exit West* captures the global anxieties of this crisis, depicting a world in which refugees are no longer shoved to the outskirts of society or denied passage across borders but instead can move freely between nations through the portal-like doors. While scholars such as Perfect worry that “to replace overcrowded dinghies with magical doors is to side-step all too conveniently the suffering of the very people at the centre of that crisis” (196), I would suggest that instead the doors offer a means of reconceiving the refugee subject so that they can become more than just their suffering; in other words, the novel permits Nadia and Saeed to express their vacillating desires, frustrations, and fears in a way that makes them more relatable than Other. Additionally, the portals grant the novel the ability to focus on the aftermath of forced displacement without lingering on the time when refugees are between nations. By circumventing this transitional period, the novel repositions refugees so that their presence and humanity become central and gestures toward how the refugee crisis might come to shape the real world as the number of refugees remains ever-increasing and the need for expedient, long-term solutions becomes ever more demanding.

While *Exit West* captures the variety of responses the world may have to the sudden dissolution of borders—riots, violence, a lockdown of resources, citizen vs. migrant hierarchies and rhetoric—ultimately, the novel demonstrates why these responses are not viable. Just when the violence against the refugees in the novel seems to be building to a point of climax, it suddenly stops, the narrator suggesting that “[p]erhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps they grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open” (Hamid

166). Such a peaceful resolution is one reason scholars such as Goyal argue that, “[w]ritten like a fable or a parable, the novel draws on the techniques of children’s literature, suggesting that the reader should approach the material with the same innocence with which Hamid writes it” (247). I propose, however, that rather than simplifying the material, *Exit West*’s allegorical dissolution of borders serves as both a cautionary tale and lesson that demands reader engagement. It forces readers to confront the arbitrary and unstable existence of borders while predicting an eventual breaking point within the current refugee crisis where nations will be forced to either enforce their borders through mass bloodshed or accept a coexistence that requires a reconceptualization of borders altogether. While these may not be decisions that need to be made within a span of weeks as they are in *Exit West*, the allegory encourages deeper reflection on how the refugee crisis will eventually come to shape the world and its nations and demands a recognition of the humanity of refugees. Given that many cases of border enforcement have already led to mass bloodshed, this reflection becomes especially poignant when it comes to conceptualizing the best way for nations to continue forward, the allegory of *Exit West* drawing from the refugee crisis’s past and present to shape one possible imagined future.

II. The Normalization of the Unbelievable

As many theorists have previously noted, the difficulty of narrating refugee stories first-hand largely stems from refugee trauma. According to Shuman, “All stories about things that shouldn’t happen share a problem about how to talk about tragedies without romanticizing or somehow distancing the events from one’s own experiences” (20). Having fled from areas of violence by dangerous journeys, many refugees suffer from the trauma of pain, loss, and fear that compound the difficulty of retelling their experiences. This may be why in *Gingerbread* the

experience of leaving Druhástrana is unrecalable and why in *Exit West* the deaths of Nadia's previous boyfriend (Hamid 34), Saeed's mother (74), the ponytailed man (42), and "less than a hundred" hostages (43) are all mentioned in passing—often in the latter clause of a sentence—rather than given a spotlight. In her book *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore observes that trauma eludes both representation and language, demonstrating the limits of both of these tools of communication (6). These limits create a "chasm" between what can and cannot be expressed through language (Andrews 39); the danger of this gap between experience and expression is that it can lead to both silence and doubt. For Shuman, the "tellability" of stories lies not only in the agency of the teller but also in the willingness of the listener.⁵ She argues, "The tellability of these trauma narratives is compromised by the unacceptability of the events. These are stories about things that shouldn't happen, rather than about things that didn't happen" (20). When listeners refuse to move past the "shouldn't" in these instances, refugee stories become dismissed, their truth questioned and unbelieved. While the narrative obstacles that refugees face have been widely acknowledged, few have examined how they also serve as narrative opportunities for reconstructing the extraordinary as normative in a way that can affectively express the emotional realities of the refugee experience. Amanda Lagji is one scholar who has done this work, but while her analysis of *Exit West* concentrates on "the existential and affective experiences of waiting" (219), I am more invested in examining the affective experiences of strangeness that refugees encounter and how the depiction of this strangeness becomes another means of communicating violence in a way that diverges from the normal refugee story tropes of pain and grief.

In fairy tales, the unreal, the magical, and the unexplainable merge into narrative without question; these elements become normalized within the fairy tale genre and accepted as a part of

the narrative's strange reality. By shifting from a concentration on the normative to the extraordinary, the recategorizing of experience this storytelling performs enables a greater flexibility of narrative that weaves strangeness into the fabric of the story itself. Strangeness is corporeally visceral and registers abnormality, which makes our gut reaction to the sensation one of aversion or a need for correction. More often than not, refugees are thought of as strangers or aliens—groups of people out of place, unfamiliar, and invasive. Yet looked at from the reverse perspective, it is refugees who must constantly navigate themselves through the strange and unfamiliar. They must steer themselves through new terrains, cities, languages, customs, and people with little to no assistance where failure can mean the cost of personal safety or survival and success does little to make their new surroundings less strange. In the case of refugee stories such as *Exit West* and *Gingerbread*, fairy tale conventions that diffuse strangeness throughout the novels become especially apt for depicting these experiences of uncertainty and disorientation.

Gingerbread and *Exit West* draw upon the aspects of fairy tales that normalize the strange or unbelievable through their portrayals of violence and its deep integration within their fictional worlds. One way they achieve this is by playing upon the connection between distance and perception. The more distant people are to an event, the less real it appears to them; their understanding of it is, therefore, skewed. *Exit West* demonstrates this concept through several short scenes. For example, Saeed's father believes he sees young boys playing with a football before realizing that instead they are men "not playing with a ball but with the severed head of a goat, and he thought, barbarians, but then it dawned upon him that this was the head not of a goat but of a human being, with hair and a beard, and he wanted to believe he was mistaken...but something about their expressions left him in little doubt of the truth" (Hamid 87). It requires closer inspection for Saeed's father to both recognize and process the horror of this moment, but

he is able to do so because of his ability to translate “their expressions.” This recognition suggests that Saeed’s father’s world is one well-acquainted with the gruesome and a disrespect for life.

While startling for the reader, the narrative does not linger on this moment with Saeed’s father nor return to it, but instead it continues steadily moving forward, preserving the unsettled atmosphere it creates without giving time to process it. Fittingly, the scene that follows discusses Saeed and Nadia’s acceptance of the magical doors as their only means for escape. They consider “the possibility of securing passage through the doors, in which most people seemed now to believe, especially since any attempt to use one or keep one secret had been proclaimed by the militants to be punishable, as usual and somewhat unimaginatively, by death...even the most reputable international broadcasters had acknowledged the doors existed” (Hamid 87–88). Coupled together, these scenes depict two extraordinary scenarios, unbelievable for different reasons: the horror of the former and the physical impossibility of the latter. However, within the fictional world of *Exit West*, where portals become accepted as fact and killing is deemed “unimaginative,” normalcy becomes redefined because of the novel’s fairy tale elements and concentration on the refugee experience, both of which reconstruct perceptions of everyday life by normalizing the strange and unsettling.

Just as magical doors and extreme violence are normalized by characters in *Exit West*, in *Gingerbread*, “normalcy” also becomes restructured through the characters’ perceptions. For example, Harriet and Perdita regularly converse with Perdita’s four dolls: Bonnie, Sago, Lollipop, and Prim. These dolls listen along with Perdita when Harriet tells her about her past in Druhástrana, and they regularly interrupt her as she speaks. This strangeness of the dolls is readily accepted by Harriet and Perdita, who have become desensitized to such phenomena. At

one point, Bonnie remarks, “What are they going to do if this particular bedtime story has an ‘it was all a dream’ interlude that truthfully refers not just to the tale and its teller but to all those to whom the tale is being told? ‘Suppose we’re not even character characters but figments of another character’s imagination’” (Oyeyemi 47–48). Bonnie, the talking doll, frets over being revealed as imaginary, but this concern is quickly dismissed by another doll, Prim, who argues, “We’ve still got our side of the story. It’s like having a return ticket. We can all go there and back together, can’t we” (48). Prim’s reassurance suggests that in *Gingerbread*, the line between the real and the imaginary is porous and that those objects or beings that are imaginary have their own sense of agency. This derives from the novel’s multiple, contradicting perspectives, which permit the extraordinary to not only exist but for it to become a sentient entity. In his review of the novel, Nicholas Mancusi observes that “[s]ome words critics have used to describe this technique are *heady*, *uncanny* and *surreal*—some others might be *confusing* or *frustrating*. These words could also be used to describe the experience of dreaming, a state that Oyeyemi is skilled at evoking.” Rather than a state of dreaming, however, I would argue that the uncanniness and deliberate sense of alienation the novel evokes instead seek to capture the jarring and confusing experiences of refugee peoples who struggle to make sense not only of the dangerous worlds they sought to escape but also of the new, unfamiliar nations in which they must learn to adapt. Rather than simply describing these feelings, though, the novel uses fantastical elements such as the dolls to immerse the reader in the everyday affective experiences of strangeness and disorientation. In doing so, *Gingerbread*—like *Exit West*—seeks to deconstruct the structure many refugee stories take, replacing literary realism with affective realism, a technique that seeks to expand the global imaginary when it comes to listening to these stories and understanding the refugee figure.

III. The Humanitarian Imagination's Capabilities and Limits

Returning to UNICEF's *Unfairy Tales*, it becomes clear that, compared to fiction, the mobilization of fairy tale elements within nonfiction can have a more jarring effect. For example, the UNICEF short film "The Story of Ivine and Pillow" tells the story of a refugee girl named Ivine. In the final seconds of the film, the style switches from animation to real life, viewers seeing Ivine in the flesh for the first time as she laments, "I feel so sad. Why is life so hard?" (00:2:12–00:2:15). Her story then stops. This sudden cut of the film into the real world wrenches viewers from the fictionalized world of the story into the reality of its source, forcing them to recognize that the story reflects Ivine's actual life and experiences.

As with many refugee stories, Ivine's does not have an ending but instead is perpetually halted as she continues living in a space of future uncertainty and instability. This lack of conclusion that characterizes many refugee stories resists typical narrative expectations concerning endings. Like many of UNICEF's other *Unfairy Tales*, "The Story of Ivine" does not seek to make sense of Ivine's experience and offer resolution, but instead the lack of a resolution operates as a major facet of the story itself, emphasizing that this is a true story with no current happy ending. By leaving those watching to wonder about the fate of Ivine, the video fosters interaction between her and the viewer, thus turning the viewers into characters themselves. This transformation becomes a crucial act of mediation between Ivine and the viewer that "takes into consideration the real, material circumstances in which the event is embedded and reflects back on the relation the sufferer and the observer have to it" (Palumbo-Liu 20). Just as Ivine remains stranded in the middle of her story, so too is the viewer; the structure of the story and its refusal of a conclusion mirrors the material realities of Ivine's experience in a way that attempts to

deliver her story to others. In doing so, this *Unfairy Tale* operates as what Ganguly would call a “formal and semantic construct through which the human imagination as well as the humanitarian imagination seeks to make some sense of and sensitize our reading publics to the worlds of war and violence” (85). UNICEF designed its *Unfairy Tales* to elicit empathy for their subjects and incite viewers to take action to aid them; they do so through a kind of humanitarian imagination evoked by the use of fairy tale tropes to present the unfamiliar stories of refugees through the familiar narrative style and elements of a traditional bedtime story.

These relationships that can deliver the story of the Other become a means through which the viewer or reader internally experiences the world through another’s eyes, which in turn serves as an integral means of fostering empathy. “The Story of Ivine and Pillow” aims to generate empathy that is more than simply heightened emotion, though, avoiding a trap that Shuman describes as a problem of packaging “suffering as sentimentality.” Instead, narratives must “interrupt the easy empathy or ‘downward directed sympathy’ that readers often fall into when reading about the tragedies of others” by “unsettling readers into a sort of stammering knowing” (24). The trap of narrative empathy is often that it hinges on emotion that ultimately does more for the reader than the teller. It is too “easy,” thereby preventing any complex thought concerning the circumstances arousing it. However, as in *Gingerbread* and *Exit West*, “The Story of Ivine and Pillow” normalizes the unbelievable by infusing fairy tale elements within Ivine’s story of suffering. In doing so, through the film’s disquieting visuals, music, and narration, viewers become pulled into the video’s unsettling affect. This creates what Elizabeth Anker refers to as an “embodied politics of reading” (3), which can collapse the divide between reader/viewer and text and offer a means “to excavate submerged registers of understanding” (74) that are complex and never exact. Therefore, such understanding might best be described as

what Shuman refers to as “stammering” because it is a hesitant means of identification based upon the affect the story evokes within viewers rather than their misappropriation of Ivine’s emotions. This hesitancy is what Shuman would argue makes for a more generative empathy. It recognizes the incapability of translating trauma and complete identification while encouraging readers or viewers to delve deeper into the narrative for the source of their horror, outrage, despair, etc. As Shameem Black explains, “Admitting one’s inability to inhabit the perspectives of others sometimes enables the very breakthrough that allows for the encounter with significant otherness once considered impossible” (44). In other words, it can be the recognition of difference that encourages one to open up to the experiences of others and listen to what they have to say and share, while awakening the listener to their own ethical responsibility. This form of empathy development calls upon the reader or viewer not to passively absorb a narrative but to actively respond to it as a global citizen and now witness.

UNICEF’s *Unfairy Tales* demonstrate the productive potential of this type of humanitarian imagination that uses the fantastical to teach readers about difference, but other refugee stories that similarly employ fairy tale elements illustrate its limits and how it can ultimately hinder solutions for the refugee crisis rather than create them. For while Black suggests that a recognition of difference possesses the potential for building ethical responsibility, such a recognition can also lead to persecution rather than protection. For example, in the 2019 *New York Times* article “A Fairy-Tale Baddie, the Wolf, Is Back in Germany, and Anti-Migrant Forces Pounce,” Katrin Bennhold reports on the way the fairy tale figure of the wolf has become adopted by anti-migrant lawmakers in Germany as an allegory for refugees and migrants. Bennhold observes, “In the home of the Brothers Grimm, where the big, bad wolf has been the stuff of children’s nightmares for generations, it is now also the stuff of

populist election manifestoes.” Bennhold illuminates the trend of politicians comparing Germany’s growing wolf crisis with the country’s refugee crisis, quoting anti-immigrant lawmaker Karsten Hilde as saying, ““There are a lot of parallels between the settlement of wolves in Germany and the refugee crisis’...The arrival of 1.2 million migrants since 2015 had led to ‘rapes, murders, attacks on police officers.’” A story such as this operates as a sort of reverse delivery system. Rather than creating a narrative that builds identification with the refugee figure, anti-immigrant politicians are, in this case, using the metaphor of the wolf to construct a narrative that equates refugees to the threatening villains of the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales. In doing so, the narrative serves as a warning of the fairy tale genre’s potential for narratively dehumanizing the refugee figure rather than calling for a deeper engagement with their stories. This easy switch can occur because oftentimes the humanitarian imagination is “shaped by how the salvation of those in danger meets the political and moral needs of the humanitarian subject, and whether or not those helped are gauged to be *deserving* of that help” (Watenpaugh 33). As discussed earlier, just as asylum-seeking individuals must have their stories found to be credible by officials, their stories also must qualify them to be “deserving” of asylum, which is often determined by very limiting criteria in regard to what counts as persecution or oppression. In *Gingerbread* and *Exit West*, we also see representations of this self-centric way of regarding refugee needs and intervention. In *Gingerbread*, the Kerchevals serve as the Lees’ sponsors because it fulfills their family’s moral need of performing one “collective good deed” a year (Oyeyemi 137), while in *Exit West* “nativists” of Britain call for the “wholesale slaughter” of migrants like Saeed and Nadia because they are perceived to be invaders rather than people in desperate search for a home (Hamid 159). This latter example demonstrates how one’s capacity to recognize a group as human is highly vulnerable to those narratives that depict the refugee

figure as an enemy or threat. To use Watenpaugh's language, while this characterization identifies that refugees are "a problem for humanity," it resists identifying them as "a problem of humanity" (33; emphasis added). This prerequisite for intervention that is susceptible to rhetorical manipulation therefore operates as another limitation of this form of the humanitarian imagination that operates through narrative.

Fairy tales are known for their happily-ever-afters, but refugee stories are messier than fairy tales because they have no ending; their experiences do not follow a model of progression but rather vacillate between a haunting past, precarious present, and unknowable future. Despite this reality, novels such as *Exit West* and *Gingerbread* end optimistically, their characters eventually attaining what they had long sought, even if it is through fantastical means. These optimistic endings are not wrong or a weakness of their narratives; rather, these works point out that the current insolvability of the refugee crisis has led to a global imaginary desperate for hope. It might be argued that such endings create a narrative satisfaction that could fail to prompt readers into action. However, instead, I maintain that they challenge the global imaginary to continue conceiving possible solutions to the crisis, regardless of how extraordinary or impossible those solutions may initially appear. So, while conclusively happy endings concerning this crisis continue to remain out of reach, the potential to create hopeful endings that gesture towards positive change are still well within our grasp, offering the opportunity for both future and present responsibility and connection.

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NOTES

¹ Magical realist books incorporate magical elements into their stories while still being rooted in reality, while fairy tales incorporate magical elements and are often completely removed from reality. An argument could be made to classify *Exit West* and *Gingerbread* in either category depending upon how fantastical a reader views both books' worlds.

² For examples, see Aviv; Bennhold; and Leigh-Hewitson.

³ Migration scholars such as Emma Hadda (2008) and Tim Cresswell (2014) have pointed out that refugees are often referred to by politicians and the media as “floods” or “tides” of people—a description that depicts refugees as a force to be protected against rather than as a group of people in dire need.

⁴ For examples of these “extraordinary elements,” see Garry and El-Shamy.

⁵ Shuman uses the term “tellability” to describe how stories come to be both fashioned and interpreted, using the concept to convey that an exchange determined by certain “norms and values” (12) must take place between both teller and listener in order for a story to be both communicated and accepted. For Shuman, examining the “tellability” of stories enables her to “unpack the association between storytelling as order...and stories as a way of establishing and preserving a dominant order” (13), a task with which this article is also concerned.

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