# Fantasies of Freedom: Comparing Indentured Labor and the Border Industrial Complex in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*[1]

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*Abstract:*

This article seeks to reorient the frame of analysis within which Indian indentured labour—supplied from colonial India to sugar plantations in the Caribbean, Mauritius, and Fiji, amongst other sites—has been considered. While indenture is often treated in isolation or deemed a "new system of slavery," (Tinker, 1974), this article takes up the interventions of Lisa Lowe (2015) and Clare Anderson (2009) to contend that indenture as a "colonial innovation" (Anderson, 2009) should be reckoned with intimately in relation to the transatlantic slave trade and colonial penal settlements, and the ways in which such connected systems enable a shift and transformation of the British Empire between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In keeping with this issue's investments, this article uses the imaginative space of Mohsin Hamid's 2017 *Exit West* and Amitav Ghosh's 2008 *Sea of Poppies* to argue that the system of indentured labor and the contemporary border industrial complex offer us specific similarities that afford a productive comparison. Ghosh's representation of indentured labor, I contend, reifies mid-19th century liberalism's central contradiction—that colonial narratives of freedom imagine a successful overcoming of enslavement through freedom in the form of expanded free trade, even as they at once require and obscure colonial violence and deny

[1] This article is in part the product of the research undertaken by the author on literary representations of indentured labor for a doctoral dissertation entitled "Oceanic Intimacies: Coolie Women and the Afro-Asian Caribbean Literary Imagination." Some research presented here was also undertaken specifically for this publication.

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such freedoms to certain racialized bodies, such as indentured laborers. Similarly, Hamid's novel helps to throw into relief our contemporary moment's ostensible tension between the neoliberal fantasy of the unregulated borderless flow of goods, labor, and capital, and recent border fortification—a dissonance that echoes liberalism's dissonances. In an effort to assemble a lineage of historical moments that expose the fault lines of liberal and capitalist fantasies of freedom, I compare indenture to the border industrial complex to ultimately demonstrate how border fortification actually does not oppose but rather furthers neoliberal desires for open borders.

*Keywords:* indentured labor, slavery, border industrial complex, migration, liberalism

## Fantasías de libertad: una comparación entre la servidumbre por contrato y el complejo industrial fronterizo en *Exit West,* de Mohsin Hamid, y *Sea of Poppies,* de Amitav Ghosh

*Resumen:*

Este artículo se propone reorientar el marco de análisis en el que se ha considerado la mano de obra india que trabaja en la modalidad de servidumbre por contrato –suministrada desde la India colonial a plantaciones de caña en el Caribe, isla Mauricio e islas Fiyi, entre otros lugares–. Aunque la servidumbre por contrato suele tratarse de manera aislada o se considera un «nuevo sistema de esclavitud» (Tinker, 1974), este artículo adopta las intervenciones de Lisa Lowe (2015) y Clare Anderson (2009) para afirmar que la servidumbre por contrato como «innovación colonial» (Anderson, 2009) debe considerarse en estrecha relación con el tráfico transatlántico de esclavos y los asentamientos penales coloniales, y las maneras como esos sistemas conectados hacen posible un cambio y una transformación del imperio británico entre los siglos XVIII y XIX. De conformidad con los presupuestos de esta edición, este artículo usa el espacio imaginativo de *Exit West,* de Mohsin Hamid (2017), y *Sea of Poppies,* de Amitav Ghosh (2008), para argumentar que el sistema de servidumbre por contrato y el actual complejo industrial fronterizo nos ofrecen semejanzas específicas que permiten una comparación productiva. La representación que hace Ghosh de la servidumbre por contrato, sostengo, reifica la contradicción central del liberalismo de mediados del siglo XIX, que las narrativas coloniales libertarias imaginan como una superación exitosa de la esclavitud mediante la libertad en la forma de libre comercio ampliado, aun cuando directamente exigen y oscurecen la violencia colonial y niegan las mismas libertades a ciertos cuerpos racializados, como los trabajadores en servidumbre. De igual manera, la novela de Hamid permite un alivio a la actual tensión manifiesta entre la fantasía neoliberal del flujo de mercancías, mano de obra y capital sin fronteras ni regulaciones, y la reciente fortificación fronteriza, una disonancia que repite las disonancias del liberalismo. En un esfuerzo por unir un linaje de momentos históricos que exponen las líneas defectuosas de las fantasías liberal y capitalista de libertad, comparo la servidumbre por contrato del complejo industrial fronterizo para demostrar en últimas cómo la fortificación de las fronteras en realidad no se opone, sino que promueve los deseos neoliberales de fronteras abiertas.

*Palabras clave:* servidumbre por contrato; esclavitud; complejo industrial fronterizo; migración; liberalismo.

## Fantasias de liberdade: uma comparação do trabalho servil contratado e do complexo industrial fronteiriço na obra *Exit West*, de Mohsin Hamid, e *Sea of Poppies* de Amitay Ghosh

*Resumo:*

Este artigo procura reorientar o quadro de análise em que foi considerado o trabalho servil indiano –fornecido pela Índia colonial para as plantações de açúcar no Caribe, ilhas Maurícias e Fiji, entre outros locais–. Embora o trabalho servil contratado seja frequentemente tratado de modo isolado ou considerado um "novo sistema de escravidão" (Tinker, 1974), este artigo retoma as intervenções de Lisa Lowe (2015) e Clare Anderson (2009) para argumentar que é uma "inovação colonial "(Anderson, 2009) que deve ser considerada intimamente em relação ao comércio transatlântico de escravos e às colônias penais, assim como em relação às maneiras pelas quais esses sistemas conectados permitiram uma mudança do Império Britânico entre os séculos XVIII e XIX. Para manter os investimentos desta edição, este artigo usa o espaço imaginativo Exit West de Mohsin Hamid (2017) e Sea of Poppies de Amitav Ghosh (2008) para defender que o sistema do trabalho servil contratado e o complexo industrial fronteiriço contemporâneo nos oferece similaridades específicas que permitem uma comparação produtiva. A representação de Ghosh do trabalho servil, eu afirmo, reifica a contradição central do liberalismo de meados do século XIX, que as narrativas coloniais de liberdade imaginam uma superação bem-sucedida da escravidão por meio da liberdade na forma de livre comércio expandido, mesmo quando exigem e obscurecem a violência colonial e negam essas liberdades a certos corpos racializados, como os trabalhadores contratados. Da mesma forma, o romance de Hamid ajuda a aliviar a tensão ostensiva do nosso momento atual entre a fantasia neoliberal do fluxo desregulado de mercadorias, trabalho e capital e a recente fortificação das fronteiras –uma dissonância que ecoa as dissonâncias do liberalismo–. Em um esforço para reunir uma linhagem de momentos históricos que expõem as fissuras nas fantasias liberais e capitalistas de liberdade, comparo o trabalho servil contratado com o complexo industrial fronteiriço para finalmente demonstrar como a fortificação da fronteira na verdade não se opõe, mas favorece os desejos neoliberais de fronteiras abertas.

*Palavras-chave:* trabalho servil contratado, escravidão, complexo industrial fronteiriço, migração, liberalismo.

## Introduction

In the universe of Mohsin Hamid's Man Booker Prize short-listed 2017 novel *Exit West,* magical doors serve as portals that instantaneously "take you elsewhere, often to places far away" (Hamid, 2017, p. 72). Here, for the migrant trying to escape or "exit west" from unnamed war-torn cities to the relatively safer zones of the named and plottable global north, Hamid's doors are designed to collapse physical distance and undermine national borders. Certainly, on the one hand, the possibility of the free movement of bodies and therefore of goods, capital, and labor unsurprisingly paves the way for a fantasy of cheery neoliberalism/ neoliberal fantasy of cheery globalization.[3] Hamid offers us short vignettes that glorify the sudden global mobility everyone potentially has: two elderly men fall in love through a spontaneous crossing from Brazil (lone of the few identified places in the global south) to the Netherlands, a mother in the US is able to use a door to retrieve her daughter from an orphanage in Tijuana, and an accountant in London on the verge of suicide discovers a door to end up happy on the beaches of Namibia. And yet, at the same time that *Exit West* seems to celebrate a vision of globalization through migration untroubled by sinking boats or stopped caravans, the novel also demonstrates the impossibility of realizing this fantasy of universal mobility. Even as the magical doors are meant to disrupt national borders— which Cameron Smith (2018) argues are "fundamentally relations of *ongoing* colonial power" which "reify global divisions of power laid down under modern European colonialism and ongoing Western imperialism" (p. 15)— those doors discovered by state authorities become heavily guarded and militarized so as to reproduce the violence of borders. The ostensibly "free" and universally experienced borderless world is then marked once again by global power inequalities, xenophobia, and a new iteration of colonial infrastructures.

Through the device of the doors Hamid seems to suggest a fundamental dissonance: that even inside the novel's neoliberal fantasy of free movement that does away with the lived struggles of migrants' journeys across colonial and land/sea borders, imperialist state apparatuses can work to regulate, surveil, and criminalize migrant bodies at the border or door to reconstitute the precarity

[3] It feels important to specifically define my use of "neoliberalism," particularly because of its ubiquitous and often varied usage in scholarship over the last few decades. For the purposes of my argument here, neoliberalism refers both to an economic policy that involves prioritizing the free market and free trade, but also to, as characterized by Matt Sparke (2006) "a regime of governance" organized around the "twin ideas of liberalizing the capitalist market from state control and refashioning state practices in the idealized image of the free market" (p. 153-4). I purposefully employ the term "neoliberalism" as opposed to classical liberalism or late capitalism for two reasons: a) to invoke the political commitment of critique associated with the term as it was used with critical connotations towards economic reforms by Pinochet's regime in Chile in the 1970s (Ganti, 2014, p. 93), and b) to invoke neoliberalism's post World War I origins as deviating from classical liberalism in that free markets should be central but the state should intervene insofar as to preserve a "competitive order" (Ganti, 2014, p. 91-92).

of such crossings. *Exit West*'s doors then pose an urgent question that has been taken up by a number of immigration studies scholars (Varsanyi, 2007; Sparke, 2006; Hollifield, 2004) and that in part inspires this article's main charge: how can we negotiate our contemporary moment's seemingly divergent forces of the neoliberal fantasy of the free borderless flow of commodities, labor, and capital, and the fortification of national borders?[4] And what would it mean to trace a lineage of historical moments characterized by similar contradictions in liberalism that expose both the fault lines of contemporary neoliberalism's promises and the emptiness of rhetoric that criminalizes the unauthorized migrant?

Recent scholarship in critical border studies endeavors to demonstrate that such seemingly contradictory forces are not always necessarily at odds, but rather that if we can conceptualize the border as a "primary site at which state and capital combine to exercise authoritarian power," (Smith, 2018, p. 14), as Cameron Smith argues, then the increasing militarization of borders is actually put to work "in order to reproduce the mechanisms and power relations necessary for the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism" (p. 14). In framing the border in this manner, Smith sets up the idea of the "border industrial complex," theorized by Angela Mitropoulos as "a global assemblage of border control systems, in which state and capital combine to convert 'migrant control…into money and profits'" (as cited in Smith, 2018, p. 7). More specifically, for Michael Dear (2013) and Tanya Golash-Boza (2009), such an assemblage combines public and private sector interests towards the building, sustenance, and expansion of border security measures, the regulation of migrant criminalized bodies, and the proliferation of "anti-illegal rhetoric" (as cited in Smith, 2018, p. 7).

This article argues that the border industrial complex demystifies the ostensible dissonance between unregulated market forces and fortified borders, and instead theorizes border control as actually helping to further neoliberal desires. I contend that we can better understand how border fortification leads to—instead of obstructing—the "reproduction of neoliberal capitalism," (Smith, 2018, p. 205) by locating similarities between the contemporary border industrial complex

[4] By border fortification I am referring to the global increase in national border security apparatuses, surveillance and policies to regulate and criminalize unauthorized migrants. At the time that this article is written, the most notable manifestation of border fortification in North America is the humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border. In his July 2018 piece "Trump's Family Separation Policy: Facts and Fictions," Council on Hemispheric Affairs Research Associate Devin Lee outlines the crisis that began with the Trump administration's "zero tolerance" policy in April of 2018, which separated children from families, and Trump's executive order to stop separations two months later. Lee (2018) is interested in not only describing the effects of the initial policy even after its retraction, but also in tracing the ways in which Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy has some roots in policies made by the Bush and Obama administrations, although he claims that asserts that the specific separation of children from parents is "wholly new and exclusively characteristic of the Trump Administration" (Claim 2 section, par. 4). As of May 2019, five migrant children in US border detention facilities have died within the last six months (Van Sant, 2019, par. 1).

and earlier colonial apparatuses that are also characterized by this contradiction. One such colonial system, which this article focuses on, is that of indentured labor, whereby between 1838 and 1917, over three million laborers from colonial India and around 20,000 laborers from China were recruited voluntarily and often through involuntary methods of kidnapping and deception to other British colonial possessions—from sugar plantations in the West Indies and Mauritius to eastern Africa—to largely compensate for the labor force that slavery no longer provided. Through an exploration of the imaginative space of two novels—Hamid's earlier introduced *Exit West*, and Amitav Ghosh's 2008 Man Booker Prize short-listed novel *Sea of Poppies*— alongside histories and theorizations of indentured labor and the British Empire's shift from 18th century mercantilism to 19th century free trade, and scholarship in critical border studies, I identify two specific parallels between the colonial infrastructure of indenture and the contemporary border industrial complex.

I use indenture as a generative point of comparison for particular traits because indenture, as *Sea of Poppies* illustrates, and as has been theorized most prominently by Lisa Lowe (2015), produced divergent understandings of "freedom" that were instrumentalized by the British Empire for the purposes of expanding free trade and labor flows across colonial possessions in the mid-19th century while simultaneously relying on the strict regulation of migrant indentured bodies. The dissonance of what "freedom" connotes echoes the neoliberal fantasy of free movement and globalization abundant in contemporary rhetoric and which Hamid's magical doors in part allow for. The first specific similarity between indenture and the border industrial complex, that I argue that the two novels flesh out through Hamid's magical doors and Ghosh's imagining of a ship that transports indentured and convict laborers from Calcutta to Mauritius on the eve of the Opium War, is the central tension in both systems between a respective colonial or neoliberal "fantasy of freedom" and the state's control and militarization of borders, which Monica Varsanyi and Joseph Nevins call "borderline contradictions" (Varsanyi & Nevins, 2007, p. 224). Even though there seems to be a divergence between the desire for free global movement and border control, I show how *Exit West* and *Sea of Poppies* make visible how both apparatuses actually use the latter to propel the former. The other parallel that this article tracks between indenture and the contemporary border industrial complex is the conditional entry of the migrant—both systems rely on the free flow of labor even as they mobilize rhetoric that alienates and criminalizes the migrant.

To assert these parallels between a colonial labor system and a contemporary complex has stakes in both directions. On the one hand, drawing particular comparisons between indenture and the contemporary border industrial complex provides us the opportunity to better diagnose our current political neoliberal

moment and enables interventions in critical border studies. Specifically, reading Hamid and Ghosh's novels comparatively throws into relief how border fortification, migrant detention, and the criminalization of the migrant body work in tandem with and even further the neoliberal fantasy of the free flow of goods, labor, and capital. To identify parallels opens up the possibility of interrogating not only how profit incentives shape border practices and actually encourage migrant regulation and detention today—as has been established by the field—but also how border crossing regulation can affect the very nature of the capitalist interests involved. If, as this article seeks to demonstrate, scholars such as Lisa Lowe (2015) argue that the transition into indenture from slavery inaugurated a shift in colonial rule and expanded free trade, then we are left with the question of how the border industrial complex likewise anticipates and has the potential to usher in new forms of neoliberal capitalism.

On the other hand, locating parallels between a present phenomenon and a colonial labor regime also enriches indenture's treatment in postcolonial and transnational studies. My comparative analysis seeks to reorient the frame of analysis that indenture has been situated within so that it is reckoned with more intimately in relation to the transatlantic slave trade, colonial penal settlements, and the transformation of the British Empire. Specifically, framing indenture as comparable to the border industrial complex performs an important material intervention in indenture studies, for it throws into relief not only the economic motivations to introduce indenture as a replacement for slave labor but also the ways in which this introduction facilitated the transformation of capitalist forces themselves.

In order to establish two specific parallels between indenture and the border industrial complex through *Exit West* and *Sea of Poppies*, this article first traces the contours of scholarship that theorizes the border industrial complex and the ways it reconciles the dissonance between a neoliberal fantasy of free movement and increased border security. I then turn to Hamid's *Exit West* to analyze how the novel's magical device of doors heighten the tension and simultaneity of this dissonance. In subsequent sections of the article, I outline theories and histories of the indentured labor system to locate particular parallels between this infrastructure and that of the border industrial complex, and then investigate Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* for the way the novel also reifies contradictory ideas of "freedom."

## Theorizing the Border Industrial Complex

Michael Dear, Angela Mitropoulos, and Tanya Golash-Boza all conceptualize the border industrial complex as a state apparatus that combines public and private interests towards a profit motive. Similar to the prison industrial complex and military industrial complex, the border industrial complex has been theorized as involving "flows of money, contracts, influence, and resources among a vast

network of individuals, lobbyists, corporations, banks, public institutions, and elected officials" (Dear, 2013, p. 124), and a complex that generates through the control and detention of criminalized migrants not only profit but also capital. For instance, Dear (2013) situates the rise of the complex in the mid-2000s moment of the George W. Bush's administration's introduction of the US Security Border Initiative, which criminalized undocumented migration so that "catch and release" practices morphed into "catch and return" policies (p. 107). The subsequent detainment, prosecution, and deportation of migrants, Dear (2013) contends, enabled border agents to ironically move migrants—detained for their own movement— to more remote sites within the US that would decrease migrants' ability to acquire legal or emotional support, while simultaneously enabling and further anticipating the creation of public and privatized detention facilities incentivized by new jobs and profits.[5] Similarly, Mitropoulos (2015) points to the US border industrial complex of the late 2000s to make visible the possibilities of generating both profit and capital through border security and militarization: she specifically uses the example of Senator Robert Boyd, Chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, who established in 2009 a "bed quota," or quota for the number of migrants detained for the greater monetary success of contracted private companies such as Corrections Corporation of America (Mitropoulos, 2015, par. 15). For Mitropoulos (2015), such a quota becomes a way of generating profit but also capital, because it serves as a "rudimentary mechanism for calculating risk" (par. 16) and anticipates for investors' future profit margins and losses. Through its ability to attract future public and private investment in the control and detainment of migrants, the bed quota is not only a symptom of the border industrial complex but also a mechanism that, through the generation of capital, actually "drives the growth" of the complex itself (Mitropoulos, 2015, par. 17).

But even as this scholarship demystifies the relationship between the fortification of borders and the profit motive for public and private parties involved in that fortification, it does not necessarily reconcile the tension that the double function of the doors in *Exit West* articulate. That is, how do we grapple with the simultaneous national profit benefits of border control and neoliberalism's commitment to profit maximization through the free movement of labor and capital? Furthermore, how does border security not only generate profits from those detained but also profit from the un-detained free and often undocumented labor force that neoliberal logics rely on? Mitropoulos (2015) touches upon these broader impacts in her discussion of the border industrial complex:

[5] According to Dear (2013), as of 2008, of the 442,000 detainees that went through processing and detention facilities, 13% were held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency centers, 17% in privately operated facilities, and 67% in facilities that were contracted with local or state governments (Dear, 2013, p. 112).

"some capitalists support the *conditional* entry of migrant workers, and… these conditions (exclusion from, say, health care or specific working conditions) are in fact mechanisms of border control whose function is to create workers who will work for as close to nothing as possible" (par. 19).

The question of how borders and immigration policy affect the nature of the criminalized workforce that national economies benefit from taps into the larger debate around what precise role and function national borders have in the processes of transnational migration. Scholars such as Michael Kearney, Akhil Gupta, Aradhana Sharma, and Liisa Malkki argue that large-scale illegal border crossings undermine the power of borders and therefore warrant a reconsideration of the border as a hegemonic structure (Gomberg-Munoz & Nussbaum-Barberena, 2011, p. 367). Others, such as Robert Alvarez, Grace Chang, and Andre Drainville instead assert that such crossings are not symptomatic of borders losing legitimacy but rather are "a manifestation of [borders'] power" (Gomberg-Munoz & Nussbaum-Barberena, 2011, p. 367).

Similarly, as observed by editors Monica Varsanyi and Joseph Nevins, several articles in a *Geopolitics* journal issue that focuses on the "borderline contradictions" of "economic openness and territorial closure" (Varsanyi & Nevins, 2007, p. 224) suggest that the unauthorized migrant becomes the "embodied evidence of the Janus-faced nature of the neoliberal state" (Varsanyi & Nevins, 2007, p. 225) and the border becomes the site where such contradictions play out (p. 226). The journal issue brings to light how the marking of unauthorized migrant bodies as "criminal" and the consequent distinction of "insider" and "outsider" becomes a way for the border to be "woven throughout the territory of the nation" and throughout the national imaginary; this movement of the border from margin to center of the nation-state then "produc[es] a marginalized and flexible working class" (Varsanyi & Nevins, 2007, p. 226). Varsanyi expands on this creation of a new kind of labor force aligned with the neoliberal fantasy in her work on undocumented Mexican migrants in the US: for her, the unauthorized migrant is an important part of what Matt Sparke calls the "neoliberal nexus of securitized nationalism and free market transnationalism" (as cited in Varsanyi, 2007, p. 313). Varsanyi (2007), following Engin Isin's claim that unauthorized migrants are actually crucial to the constitution of citizens, posits that such migrants become the "perfect workforce" of the neoliberal nexus because they are often unorganized as workers, their labor is not regulated, and their wages are suppressed (p. 313). Such scholarship reiterates that heightened border security and the border industrial complex then not only criminalizes the migrant but concurrently produces and sustains a class of persons as "fearful, pliant, highly precarious and therefore hyper-exploitable" (Mitropoulos, 2015, par. 19). Even as the unauthorized migrant is stigmatized, prosecuted, detained, deported, and profited off of through the border industrial complex, the nation

state instrumentalizes the same complex to create a new strand of global labor aligned with the vision of neoliberalism. The border industrial complex therefore empowers nation states to have it both ways: to criminalize unauthorized migrant bodies while also depending upon the increased exploitability of "free" undetained undocumented migrant bodies.

## The Neoliberal Nexus and Border Industrial Complex in *Exit West*'s Doors

I turn to Mohsin Hamid's 2017 *Exit West* because I want to suggest that the novel's magical realist device of doors—which can potentially instantaneously "take you elsewhere, often to places far away" (Hamid, 2017, p. 72)—uniquely concretize and dramatize the complex workings of the border industrial complex. The novel begins in an unnamed city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war" (Hamid, 2017, p. 3) and follows the only two named characters—Saeed and Nadia—as they flee civil war and a violent but unnamed religious fundamentalist militant take-over at home to attempt to "exit west." Through Hamid's choice to selectively name and identify sites of the global north while not naming other sites marked by poverty or conflict, *Exit West* at first reads like parable: Nadia and Saeed's war-torn home city could be any city in the non-named and therefore non-global north regions of the world, perhaps affirming the reader's Orientalist imagining of a troubled global south. But what sets the novel apart is the introduction of doors, the only magical element in a narrative otherwise committed to realism. These doors are portals, can take the place of and appear indistinguishable from any normal door, and operate through a mode of magic unexplained and unmotivated; though each portal's destination remains constant, there is no way for a potential traveler to know where a particular door may lead to across the world. The doors are what facilitate mass migrations and global upheavals in the world of *Exit West*, but they also entirely reroute the ways in which migration happens. Unsurprisingly Hamid's novel has been heralded by book reviews as a "refugee novel" that "instantly feels canonical" (Tolentino, 2017), but Hamid's novel wrestles with a difficult question: what does it mean to construct a narrative thematized by the "refugee experience" when the doors that enable migration entirely do away with the material lived struggles of refugees along their journeys of displacement? What role can the doors play?

What distinguishes some doors from others in *Exit West* is whether a given door has been discovered by state authorities, and what desirability—or proximity to the West—the destination on one side of the door has to the other. This inconsistent treatment of the doors is what I argue allows for the mechanism of the door to uniquely throw into light and heighten Matt Sparke's notion of the neoliberal nexus: the concurrence of "securitized nationalism and free market transnationalism" (as cited in Varsanyi, 2007, p. 313). As this section demonstrates, I contend that through their potential to collapse global distances

into the passage of a doorway, the doors activate a neoliberal fantasy of freedom and globalization that imagines a borderless world. And yet at the same time that the doors undermine the colonial power of borders through this fantasy, doors become part of the state apparatus of control to not only reproduce but exaggerate the violence of borders and the precarity of migrant crossings—both through the unknowability of what circumstances and place lie ahead for a traversing migrant, and through the surveillance, detainment, and criminalization of migrants crossing through guarded doors. The simultaneity of the doors as representative of fairytale-like border-free mobility and as a new iteration of colonial infrastructure that regulates and restricts that very mobility offers us insights into two specific aspects of the border industrial complex that I later compare to the colonial labor regime of indentured labor. First, through the divergent experiences and success that various characters have with the doors, we get a sense of what Mitropoulos calls the "conditional entry of the migrant" and the ways in which the universal mobility that the doors promise in fact relies on the lack of mobility that many others—in the unnamed presumed global south—face. Secondly, the doors dramatize the tension between a neoliberal fantasy of undermined borders or "economic openness," following Varsanyi and Nevins, and heightened nativist rhetoric, xenophobia, and "territorial closure" (2007, p. 224). Through the particular trajectories of our two main protagonist refugees, *Exit West* endeavors to demonstrate how this economic openness and the fantasy of freedom—of goods, labor, capital, and bodies across borders—is at odds with but ultimately depends upon the restriction, surveillance, and precarity of other bodies.

## *Exit West's* Doors as Neoliberal Fantasy

At first, the doors put forward a cheery vision of globalization even in a world "flooded with refugees" who are fleeing war and religious fundamentalist militants. Specifically, the mechanism of the door promotes a neoliberal fantasy of unregulated movement, and the idea, as Jude Russo (2017) asserts, that "every social problem can be solved by the free flow of capital, goods, and labor" (par. 1), in three ways: through the doors' ability to undermine national border apparatuses, inspire serendipitous glorified encounters across the globe, and democratize and universalize the condition of the precarious migrant.

*Exit West* begins as a love story between Saeed and Nadia as their home unnamed city becomes increasingly chaotic as militants who seem to enter the city through magical doors take power. Within a few chapters our protagonists begin seeking a door to escape danger and fundamentalism, since doors serve as more secure alternatives to embarking on a physical journey across "overland routes," which are deemed "too perilous to attempt" (Hamid, 2017, p. 82). The capacity of the doors to emerge in any place and to be discovered by anyone allows the doors to facilitate mass often unregulated migrations that are soon "discussed by

world leaders as a major global crisis" (Hamid, 2017, p. 83). As doors become a more recognized and powerful force in global consciousness, borders are, as we might expect, increasingly undermined, and, aligned with the neoliberal desire of a borderless world, the idea of the nation-state begins to disintegrate: "the news in those days… was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands… Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory" (Hamid, 2017, p. 155). Perhaps the most straightforward way we can see doors as participating in the project of neoliberal freedom is through this gradual dismantling of conventional border structures.

Even as *Exit West* focuses on the itinerant trajectories of Saeed and Nadia as they become refugees and travel through multiple doors, Hamid sprinkles short vignettes throughout the novel that celebrates globalization through the serendipitous encounters and relationships that emerge out of the possibility that doors can lead anywhere in the world. In these contained episodes the doors are described as a "release" (Hamid, 2017, p. 157) or even life-saving for individuals not necessarily in war-torn places: a mother in the US is able to find her daughter through a door to an orphanage in Tijuana, and a suicidal accountant on the brink of slitting his wrists is overtaken by a door whose "nearby darkness unsettled him, and reminded him of something, of a feeling, of a feeling associated with children's books" (Hamid, 2017, p. 130). The most prominent illustration of glorified globalization that *Exit West* offers us is a blossoming and otherwise unlikely romance between two elderly men who meet through a spontaneous discovery of a door between Amsterdam and Rio de Janeiro. On Prisengracht, one of these men sees "emerging from the common shed… from which foreigners now came and went, a wrinkled man with a squint and a cane and a panama hat, dressed as though for the tropics" (Hamid, 2017, p. 172). Hamid's use of terms like "foreigners" instead of "migrant" marks this crossing as leisurely travel rather than a migrant's displacement and struggle. After a few more crossings of the Brazilian man into the Netherlands, the two "cobble together a conversation, a conversation with many long gaps, but these gaps were… almost unnoticed by the two men, as two ancient trees would not notice a few minutes or few hours that passed without a breeze" (Hamid, 2017, p. 174). The lack of urgency and the comfort here, accentuated by the luxury of "not noticing a few minutes or a few hours," is representative of selective or conditional entry into a fantasy of freedom. Russo (2017) observes that even while *Exit West* "sets out to remedy" (par. 2) what Hamid has diagnosed as "a failure to imagine plausible futures" (as cited in Russo, 2017, par. 2), that future is restricted to:

> The sorts of people who read expensive magazines in expensive cities, who regard the movement of peoples as merely multiplying the varieties of restaurants, and who treat religion, nation, and sex as accidents and preferences that should never impede the development of human capital. (par. 2)

Russo's observation that this future is "restricted" to certain class of people invokes Ghassan Hage's framing of contemporary borders and border fortification as creating an "apartheid" world (as cited in Smith, 2018, p. 206) that is similar to Varsanyi and Nevins's characterization of "borderline contradictions"; Hage describes two separate worlds, one of which is "experienced as open, in which people move smoothly across national borders, experiencing the world as almost borderless. This is the experience by the largely White upper classes, who are made to truly feel at home in the world" (as cited in Smith, 2018, p. 206). Hamid's vignette demonstrates that the Dutch and Brazilian men are part of this version of a globalized world.

I would argue that part of the neoliberal fantasy is the assumption that everyone can potentially experience the world as borderless, rather than experience apartheid as represented by these earlier vignettes and a world that Hage describes as "where a 'third world looking' transnational working class and underclass citizens live, and are made to feel that borders are exceptionally important and difficult to cross" (as cited in Smith, 2018, p. 206). *Exit West*'s doors in part promote the idea that everyone can be the same kind of migrant in the same kind of world, because any door in any place can potentially be a magical door. This aspect of the doors means that access to instantaneous travel and easy mobility is reorganized and democratized, and they produce a new kind of optimism in those trying to escape the strife of civil war in our protagonists' unnamed hometown. When rumors of these doors enter collective consciousness, "people beg[in] to gaze at their own doors a little differently" and "with a twinge of irrational possibility" (Hamid, 2017, p. 70). With the hope that the mechanism of the doors is able to indiscriminately inspire comes an easy glossing over of widely uneven migrant experiences.

We can observe a similar universalization of what it means to be a "migrant" later in the novel, when the novel describes an elderly woman in Marin, California as a "migrant" even when she has never left the place she understands to be home. Because of historical migrations and more dramatic recent door migrations, this woman no longer recognizes her neighbors and characterizes the many new people around her as "strange": "and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants through time" (Hamid, 2017, p. 208-9).

While Hamid may be interested in expanding our understanding of the "migrant," this vignette clearly positions "everyone" as a migrant, which at once makes the idea of the migrant somewhat of an empty signifier and also aligns with the neoliberal tendency of failing to account for unevenness in power and privilege. Instead, inside this fantasy, a Californian woman can be equated with the precarious and criminalized refugee body. Hamid (2017) echoed this desire in a *PBS NewsHour* interview, when asked what the doors are supposed to reify:

> Well I think the doors sort of already exist. Distance is collapsing in our world. We can travel by stepping into an airplane as I did, coming from Pakistan to America. We can Skype or go on video call… people are getting pushed together in new ways.

In likening the doors' ability to "collapse distance" to a flight or technology, Hamid might be suggesting that the privilege of such apparatuses is now available to all kinds of migrants through the doors. But claiming that doors exist in our present moment presumes that such experiences of distance collapsing are universally felt, which potentially again erases the material struggles of migrants who experience spatial distance and geographical and colonial borders very vividly.

### *Exit West's* Doors as New Border Fortification Infrastructure

What makes *Exit West* compelling to me is not how the doors simply glorify globalization but how they are rather for Hamid a crucial site upon which the contradictions of neoliberalism—or the "neoliberal nexus"—play out. Even as they are able to produce a neoliberal fantasy of unrestricted movement and undermine borders, as the previous section has shown, Hamid's doors at once become an integral part of the state apparatus that reproduce and amplify the violence of borders. In the same world that through a door two elderly men from Amsterdam and Rio de Janeiro can fall in love, the doors worsen inequalities between the global north and south, increase nativist rhetoric and xenophobia, and promote the surveillance, detainment, and deportation of unauthorized migrants. It also becomes apparent that the doors are a new iteration of borders through the desperation and terror that more precarious migrants in the novel experience and the creation of a new migrant labor force. Ultimately in this section I contend that through doors' double role—as producing a neoliberal fantasy of a borderless world and replicating national border violences—*Exit West* demonstrates how restricting and criminalizing migrants does not work in contradiction with a neoliberal desire but actually enables the creation of a new global strand of labor to further this globalization imaginary. The ways in which these forces work in tandem is precisely what the research on the border industrial complex seeks to make visible.

At the heart of Hamid's novel is a central contradiction between the different ways in which the doors are experienced and the ways the doors reshape the world: "it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart" (Hamid, 2017, p. 155). Such divergent experiences depend greatly on what position a character occupies, and the desirability of a door's destination. For instance, when Saeed and Nadia leave home through a door—undiscovered by the militants taking over their city and one that they must pay an agent to use—they arrive in a refugee camp on the named Greek island of Mykonos. Here they observe an important inconsistency in the guarding and militarization of doors:

> The doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from—although almost no one ever did—or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all. (Hamid, 2017, p. 101)

The selective guarding of certain doors sustains and dramatizes the unevenness of global power relations and the "apartheid" world of borders that Hage theorizes; such a system also illustrates that the doors, even as they eliminate the material struggle of the journey between two places, generate a different kind of terror because of the way many such migrants can potentially become "trapped" (Hamid, 2017, p. 110) between doors and often because of the unknowability of what place lies beyond certain doors. When Saeed and Nadia first leave their unnamed home city through the door to Mykonos, they leave behind Saeed's father, who refuses to leave his home or the memory of his recently killed wife. Nadia fails to convince him to join them, and at the end of a long attempt she promises to take care of Saeed and let his father remain in their war-torn hometown: "so by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid, 2017, p. 94). By associating migration through the doors with murder, the doors for refugees like Saeed and Nadia represent the same horrors as borders. What is more fascinating, however, about this moment is Hamid's use of the plural first-person and his use of "migrate": to shift from Nadia's specific experience of migration to "we migrate" indicates once again an inclusion of the reader, and operates under the assumption that this dramatic experience of migration is something that we all experience. But instead of the easy migration that the doors enable between the elderly men or the Californian woman who never experiences spatial displacement, the migration that we all are expected to be familiar with or experience here is associated with what Hage calls the " 'third world looking' transnational working class." The vulnerability of migrants, which further demonstrates how we might perceive doors as iterations of border infrastructures, is also visible when Saeed and Nadia observe other migrants' fears that they would be "trapped here forever, or until hunger forced them back through one of the doors that led to undesirable places... some people were nonetheless trying… venturing… to another unknown place when they thought anything would be better than where they had been" (Hamid, 2017, p. 110). The desperation that we witness in such migrants demonstrates how border fortification generates the "fearful, pliant, highly precarious and therefore hyper-exploitable" class of workers that Mitropoulos theorizes the border industrial complex as producing, which is ideal for furthering neoliberal desires for cheap labor and greater profits.

The precarity of certain migrants is also made evident in *Exit West* through the elaborate state surveillance technologies put to work to locate and detain migrants entering through doors to richer more desirable locations. One such family "on the move" (Hamid, 2017, p. 90) who use a door to enter a complex of luxury apartments in Dubai are instantly seen on a security camera "blinking in the sterile artificial light" (Hamid, 2017, p. 91) and they are immediately "simultaneously captured on three exterior surveillance feeds" (Hamid, 2017, p. 91). A quadcopter drone that communicates its footage to a "central monitoring station" (Hamid, 2017, p. 91) as well as two security vehicles are part of the surveillance architecture that efficiently detains the family. It is unclear whether the family is held in a detention facility or deported, but the militarization of the doors enables it to rehearse the same colonial power as borders.

As a number of doors are discovered by refugees who use them to bypass national borders, and by states that are trying to recreate borders, mass migrations to cities like London result in "a ring of new cities being built, cities that would be able to accommodate more people again than London itself" (Hamid, 2017, p. 167). Saeed and Nadia, who end up in London through a door from Mykonos, end up settling in a worker camp in the ring for an extended period of time and becoming migrant laborers: "In exchange for their labor in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty metres and a pipe: on forty square metres of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity" (Hamid, 2017, p. 167). It is important to observe here that while it is not entirely clear how Saeed and Nadia "find themselves" in such a camp, they move there from camping out in a room of a mansion in Kensington that the door from Mykonos opened into, after an onslaught of nativist mob violence. While the actual labor that Saeed and Nadia are assigned to—Saeed works on a road crew and Nadia lays pipe—seems to be exclusively for the rehabilitation of new migrants in these new London satellite cities, the exhausting labor that they are asked to do as "migrants" under the supervision of "natives" is indicative of the successful neoliberal creation of a new and more much dispensable labor force. I suggest that it is this moment in *Exit West* fleshes out the mechanism that helps us diagnose the border industrial complex: by employing the device of the doors, which both promise a neoliberal fantasy of the unregulated flow of goods, labor, and capital and reproduce the violences of borders, we can see how the surveillance and militarization of border infrastructures like doors actually help to generate a new labor force necessary for realizing the fantasy of freedom experienced by characters like the elderly men falling in love. It is uniquely through the divergence of what the doors mean throughout the novel that we can see how "borderline contradictions" may actually be necessary for the furthering of the neoliberal interests.

## Theorizations of Indentured Labor and the British Empire

The border industrial complex has been conceptualized as a fairly recent phenomenon. Mitropoulos (2015) traces its consolidation in Australia back to the 1992 national policy of the automatic and undifferentiated detention of all undocumented migrants who reached Australian borders by boat, while Dear (2013) situates the complex in US in the expansion of the Department of Homeland Security during George W. Bush's second term. Theorizing the border industrial complex, along with tension between neoliberal openness and territorial closure, or what James Hollifeld (2004) calls the "liberal paradox," thus calls into question whether such a paradox only manifests in our neoliberal contemporary, or whether we might be able to assemble a genealogy of historical moments that can be marked by similar contradictions. Particularly, what might be colonial predecessors to the neoliberal nexus, that could serve as rich sites to further diagnose the workings of the border industrial complex?

It seems to me that the "liberal paradox," along with the divergence of the idea of "freedom"—articulated within neoliberal logics as "free" trade and freely moving labor, even as those freedoms obfuscate unauthorized migrants' lack of freedom—invokes a similar but older divergence of "freedom" as theorized by Lisa Lowe in her work on indentured labor and transformations in the British Empire (2015). Drawing on and enriching postcolonial and critical race studies scholarship that reckons with the ways the modern liberal subject and ideologies of liberalism in the metropole have always depended upon colonial violence and slavery, (Gilroy, 1993; Joshi, 2002; Buck-Morss, 2009; Robinson, 1983), Lowe's (2015) project tracks an "archive of liberalism" to investigate the intimacies between the ascendance of European liberalism, the transatlantic slave trade, and settler colonialism, but also how indentured labor supplied from China and India becomes crucial to such narratives of freedom. Liberal forms of political economy and government for Lowe (2015) "propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the seizure of lands from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents" (Lowe, 2015, p. 3).

In theorizing the introduction of indentured labor in the British Empire, Lowe uses colonial records to reiterate the Marxist position that a "free" labor force was largely designed to replace slave labor at a stage of English capitalism when cheap contracted labor was more economically viable for capitalism's expansion than slavery (Williams, 1944; Baucom, 2005; Kale, 1998). Lowe's archives also enable her to determine how "freedom" was mobilized in strategic and often contradictory ways for the purposes of expanding capitalism. For instance, Lowe looks at the 1803 "Secret Memorandum from the British Colonial Office to the Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company," to track the use of "free labor" in colonial rhetoric and to identify what desires inspired

the decision to replace slave labor from Africa with indentured laborers from Asia (Lowe, 2015, p. 22). In the memorandum, colonial administrator John Sullivan expresses an anxiety that the ongoing Haitian Revolution could in turn activate revolutions in British island colonial possessions, and proposes that to avoid the possibility of revolt, the British empire should introduce a "free race of cultivators into our islands, who from habits and feelings could be kept distinct from the Negroes" (as cited in Lowe, 2015, p. 22). Sullivan's logic leads Lowe (2015) to contend that Chinese indentured labor, fashioned as "free," was imagined not only as a new cheap labor force that could further capitalism's development, as theorized by Marxist historians, but also as a force that could also prevent slave revolts.

Important for Lowe (2015) is how indentured labor in this memorandum and in other colonial records is manufactured as a "free race of cultivators" (Lowe, 2015, p. 22), even as the first indentured laborers from both China and India were often tricked and kidnapped into indenture, were brought on ships and had to sleep in the same spaces as slaves once did, and were often subjected to "a range of intermediate forms of coercive labor" (Lowe, 2015, p. 24; Tinker, 1974; Bahadur, 2013). The packaging of indenture as "freely contracted" and in opposition to slavery then enables a tension between different understandings of freedom, as Lowe (2015) argues: "The Chinese were instrumentally used in this political discourse as a *figure*, a fantasy of 'free' yet racialized and coerced labor, at a time when the possession of body, work, life, and death was foreclosed to the enslaved and the indentured alike" (p. 24). This fantasy of freedom generated by a narrative of progress from "unfree" to "free" labor eclipses over the ways in which the telos of liberalism excludes but simultaneously depends on the unfree conditions of certain colonized and indentured bodies. At the same time, Lowe (2015) proves through her analysis of John Stuart Mill's essays on free trade and East India company records that the British Empire's decision to replace slavery with indenture was not only symptomatic of the changing nature of capitalism in the metropole but that this shift actually anticipated and inaugurated the empire's global shift from 17th and 18th century mercantilist capitalism to 19th century expanded free trade and new kinds of colonial governance.[6] The fantasy of freedom for Lowe becomes a way of also then investigating the divergence between the "freedom" involved with "free" trade and the unavailability of such freedoms in the form of liberal sovereignty in the colonial sites that are freely traded with. The mid-19th century transition from slavery to indenture, which was characterized by a strategic mobilization of the concept of "freedom"—and which simultaneously secured a shift from mercantilism to expanded free

[6] See Lowe's (2015) *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, specifically Chapter 2 and 4, for a more elaborate and careful study of how abolition and the introduction of indenture anticipated and inaugurated expanded free trade and new forms of colonial rule.

trade while depending on the limited freedom and mobility of the indentured and enslaved—is then similar to our contemporary moment's tension between neoliberal desires and the border fortification that they benefit from. To more specifically locate similarities between the two systems, I examine Ghosh's rendering of indentured labor and its intimate relationship with convict labor, slavery, and shifts in imperial governance.

## Comparing Indentured Labor and the Border Industrial Complex

Lowe's (2015) formulation of the fantasy of freedom is precisely what plays out in the imaginative space of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. Like *Exit West*, in which the magical doors produce a contemporary neoliberal fantasy and its discontents, Ghosh's novel entertains a colonial fantasy of freedom even as it satirizes it and fleshes out the dissonances of liberalism that Lowe theorizes. Set in 1838—on the brink of the First Opium War and in the immediate aftermath of abolition—in colonial India and aboard the *Ibis*, a ship that sails across Indian Ocean to Mauritius, *Sea of Poppies* (Ghosh, 2008) follows an unlikely cast of characters from varied race, caste, and class categories. Newly reorganized into the colonial categories of indentured laborers, convicts, and lascars, these characters share the rich space of the coolie ship[7]—which has been likened to Paul Gilroy's (1993) famous slave ship chronotype by scholars such as Jacob Crane (2011) and Chandani Patel (2015)[8]—to form solidarities that illustrate the intimate relationships, as laid out by Lowe (2015), between indenture, slavery, and the expansion of free trade. By positioning newly recruited indentured laborers alongside a falsely accused fallen aristocrat turned "convict" and a criminalized opium addict on the *Ibis*, all headed for plantation labor in Mauritius, *Sea of Poppies* is also invested in demystifying the relationship between indenture and colonial modes of carceral labor and criminality, and in framing indenture, following Clare Anderson (2016), "in the context of colonial innovations in incarceration and confinement" (p. 93).

[7] "Coolie-ship" refers here to ships that transported "coolies"—which refers to indentured laborers in this paper—from India and China to other colonial sites. Originally appropriated from "kuli," the Tamil term for "work," by 16th century Portuguese captains to describe Indian dockworkers along the Coromandel Coast, "coolie" was eventually used more broadly and pejoratively by the British for Indian and Chinese indentured labourers. The term is still used as a slur for descendants of Indian coolies, and a term that shames and alienates the history of indenture from the Caribbean national imaginary, but literature in the last few decades has worked to rescue and reclaim the term. This is most perhaps visible in poet David Dabydeen's 1988 poetry collection *Coolie Odyssey*, and Mauritian poet Khal Torabully's subsequent formulation of "Coolitude," a literary movement that articulates the shared experiences of coolie descendants, celebrates the lived experience of indenture and locates the actual crossing and figure of the ship— rather than the country left behind— as an originary point of identity.

[8] The slave ship has been famously conceptualized by Paul Gilroy as, following Bakhtin, a chronotype or "a living micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 4), in order to emphasize the transnational nature of black identity and to further his argument that the black Atlantic and its circulation of ideas was crucial for the production of Western modernity.

Ghosh's constellation of indenture, convict labor, slavery, and the expanding opium trade, as well as his construction of certain characters as representative of larger systems and ideologies, allows *Sea of Poppies* to invite a reconfiguration of the indentured labor system as necessary for the expansion of free trade and the British Empire. In the next few sections I argue that the novel generates a productive comparison between the systems of indentured labor and the border industrial complex by illustrating the contradictions of 19th century liberalism in two specific ways. I first track how Lowe's formulation of a "fantasy of freedom" is imagined by colonial power as articulated by Benjamin Burnham, the owner of Burnham Brothers, a shipping and trading firm that negotiates the export of both opium to China and indentured and convict labor to British colonial possessions, who in the novel serves as a very deliberate mouthpiece for colonial and capitalist logics. I contrast this narrative of freedom with the lived experiences of almost every colonized and racialized character, all o whom are in various forms denied the very freedoms which Burnham uses to legitimize indentured and convict labor.

The second way that I contend Ghosh's novel fleshes out the contradictions of liberalism is by exploring the deprivation of freedom experienced by Deeti, a poppy field worker who escapes her village in northern India after her husband's death to become an indentured laborer aboard the *Ibis.* Particularly, Ghosh's construction of Deeti—as a character whose sense of destiny and free-will keeps shifting along axes of Hindu astrology, individual freedom, and capitalist market forces—becomes a way for the novel to delineate the impossibility of "freedom" granted to her.

By tracking Burnham and Deeti's contradictory understandings and experiences of freedom, similar to contradictory understandings and experiences of the doors in *Exit West,* I locate two parallels between the colonial 19th century indentured labor system and the contemporary border industrial complex: the conditional entry of the migrant, and the fact that the ostensibly contradictory forces of free movement and unfree restriction actually operate in tandem. Specifically, in the case of indenture, *Sea of Poppies* narrativizes Lowe's central project of exposing the ways in which colonial subjugation in the form of the unavailability of freedom was not oppositional but rather crucial for the inauguration and sustenance of the "free" Western modern liberal subject.

## Fantasies of Freedom in *Sea of Poppies*

*Sea of Poppies* revolves around a motley host of characters in 1838 colonial India from such unique and separate walks of life that the only way it seems plausible that all of them might encounter one another is in the space of a ship, and specifically a ship—the *Ibis*— to transport convicts and coolies to Mauritius. Part of the political utility of such starkly different characters are the possibilities that their interactions and relationships afford: in terms of affective bonds, transnational, interracial, and cross-caste solidarities, and even suggested connections between the various colonial systems that the characters represent.

Ghosh first offers us Deeti, an upper-caste peasant woman in Bihar, eastern India, who works in poppy fields for the production and export of opium to China and is married to Hukam Singh, an *afeemkhor,* or opium addict, who early in the narrative passes away. Deeti as a character continuously and purposefully grounds us in the novel's narrative as Ghosh's omniscient narrator flits between the not-quite-overlapping simultaneous worlds of Deeti and her lower-caste eventual lover, Kalua, and that of a handful of other main characters—Zachary Reid, an American sailor who is one eighth black by descent as the son of a Baltimore freedwoman, and whose racial positioning constantly troubles him; Raja Neel Rattan, of the formerly prominent Raskali landlord family, who after refusing to sell ancestral land is sentenced to penal labor in Mauritius; Paulette, a French orphan raised by a lower class Bengali mother who disguises herself as a coolie woman on the *Ibis*; and Jodu, Paulette's adopted mother's son who becomes a lascar.

It is in a conversation between Raja Neel Rattan, Zachary, and Benjamin Burnham—the owner of the Ibis and opium trader who serves as the mouthpiece for the "fantasies of freedom" (Lowe, 2015) produced by the colonial imaginary—that the contradictions of liberalism play out. With his self-volunteered lengthy opinions on the effectiveness of various imperial structures and racial and cultural superiority of European colonizers, Burnham becomes a deliberately exaggerated and almost satirical voice of colonial and capitalist reason. Specifically, his use of "freedom" in three different ways make visible the dissonances of liberalism's universal promises.

When Zachary, who sails to colonial Calcutta on the *Ibis* from Baltimore with the intention of shipping opium to China, meets Burnham, Burnham informs him of a change of plans: the intended export of opium must be halted. Burnham explains why:

> The Chinese have been making trouble on that score and until such time as they can be made to understand the benefits of Free Trade, I'm not going to send any more shipments to Canton. Till then, this vessel is going to do just the kind of work she was intended for. (Ghosh, 2008, p. 73)

It is 1838, on the eve of the First Opium War, and Burnham is narrating the frustrations that the British colonial enterprise faced in persuading the Chinese to open up their markets, which the impending war would soon oblige them to do, and which would cement the British Empire's shift from the mercantilism associated with the East India Company to new forms of power through consolidated trade routes (Lowe, 2015, p. 79). The "kind of work" the *Ibis* is intended for is the transportation of slaves, and since abolition has formally been instituted for five years in the British Empire, Zachary responds in surprise and confirms that the ship in fact cannot be used for its original purposes. Burnham agrees, but for him it is "sad but true that there are many who'll stop at nothing to halt the march of human freedom" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 73). When Zachary is not sure how abolitionists' efforts are against rather than for freedom, Burnham elaborates:

> Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races? As I see it, Reid, the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children out of Israel out of Egypt. Consider, Reid, the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas— is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant? (Ghosh, 2008, p. 73)

Burnham then clarifies that the *Ibis* is to be used for transporting indentured laborers, not slaves, since "when the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatick" (Ghosh, 2008, 74). Of course, on one hand, such remarks are perceived by a reader as deliberately absurd and easy to dismiss: how are we to not immediately reject the idea that slavery can even be imagined a form of freedom? Indeed, Burnham's perverse racist logics, in which even enslavement is postured as an act of "civilizing the savage," partly invert colonial narratives of freedom that construct a trajectory of the "unfree" state of slavery to the "free" state of emancipation; for Burnham the initial "unfree" state of slavery is already a state of freedom. In perceiving the white man as exercising "mastery" over the "lesser races," Burnham also explicitly demonstrates the racial lines along which the dissonant understandings of "freedom" are constructed. But on the other hand, it is curious to note that even as Burnham's framing of slavery as a "freedom" works against colonial logics of liberalism, he frames indenture as a kind of "freedom," in the same way that scholars such as Lowe (2015) argue colonial narratives of freedom do: as a "fantasy of 'free' yet racialized and coerced labor" (p. 24). If Burnham becomes a character we instinctively reject because of his conflation of slavery and freedom, then Ghosh invites us to similarly challenge Burnham's and colonial discourse's similar tendency to categorize indenture as a freedom or "free" form of labor: isn't it then just as absurd?

What makes Burnham and Zachary's exchange curious is the way in which "freedom" is mentioned in quick succession in two different contexts—in terms of free trade with China, and the freedom that Burnham associates with slavery as well as indenture. By casting a character who can call systems of indenture and slavery "freedom," Ghosh is able to hint at a direct relationship between free trade, slavery, and indenture by this repetition of "free"/ "freedom," and he can simultaneously gesture towards divergent understandings of freedom. Specifically, the fact that the *Ibis*'s intentions to carry opium exports to China from India are thwarted, which exposes the limits of British colonial power in 1838 and compels the ship to instead carry indentured laborers, allows Ghosh to demonstrate two important historical connections. First, these circumstances and repeated use of "freedom" imply that British frustrations with mercantilism coincided with the shift from slavery to indenture; second, if we consider the possibility that Burnham replaces the shipping of opium with the shipping of indentured

laborers in the hope that this replacement works to overcome Chinese resistance to free trade, then Ghosh is indicating that the introduction of indenture could potentially facilitate the British empire's shift into free trade.

Lowe (2015) does in fact assert that the introduction of indenture had the power to initiate the expansion of the British Empire beyond the East India Company's limited mercantilism. As evidence, she considers Olaudah Equiano's 1789 slave autobiography, in which Equiano, an advocate of the British Empire's freed slave resettlement project in Sierra Leone, recommends the empire replace the transatlantic slave trade with expanded commercial trade with Africa. This imagining of replacement, Lowe (2015) asserts, anticipates the shift from mercantilism to free trade. By also considering the establishment of Sierra Leone and Hong Kong as Crown colonies that became sites that regulated migrant bodies of "re-captive slaves" and Chinese indentured laborers respectively in the aftermath of the expansion of free trade, Lowe argues that the British Empire's transition was at once a cause and consequence of the transition from slavery to indenture. The repetition of "free" in *Sea of Poppies* points to a simultaneity of expanded trade and the institution of indenture, precisely because of the ways the meaning of freedom diverges.

Later in the novel, when Neel inquires about the state of the opium trade and why it is currently suffering, Burnham more explicitly explains:

> The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom— for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people. Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God. (Ghosh, 2008, p. 108)

Similarly, we see a repetition of "free" here, but the conflation of "freedom of trade" and "freedom of the Chinese people" signifies the relationship between free trade and the fantasy of freedom imposed upon the directly or indirectly colonized and racialized subjects, as opposed to the fantasy imposed on indentured laborers. The coinciding benefits of free trade for those in the metropole and the violences that colonial subjects suffered with new forms of colonial governance are much more familiar in postcolonial studies than the relationship between free trade and indenture and slavery,[9] but I draw our attention to this moment because it serves as another instance where *Sea of Poppies* is invested in making concrete liberalism's contradictions.

## Indentured Labor, Market Forces, and False Freedoms

Even as *Sea of Poppies* articulates a fantasy of freedom surrounding colonial apparatuses through Burnham, most of the other characters in the novel— lascars, convicts, indentured laborers— embody the ways in which the promises

[9] See Lowe's (2015) *Intimacies of Four Continents*, Chapter 4, for a more in-depth discussion of how free trade afforded new forms of colonial governance. Lowe specifically analyzes John Stuart Mill's essays on free trade alongside colonial records on forms of colonial rule on Hong Kong in order to illustrate the gap between the "freedom" associated with "free trade" and associated with denied freedoms in the colonial periphery.

of liberalism fail to actualize, and how that failure is actually crucial for liberalism to further its purposes for colonial and capitalist forces. In this final section I focus on Deeti's role in *Sea of Poppies* and her fluctuating understandings of "freedom," as she is forced to negotiate various socio-economic forces that play into every sphere of life, including, importantly, the psychic. By tracking Deeti's shifting perspectives of her visions, destiny, Hindu astrology, and autonomy from social and economic constraints, which presents itself as "freedom," I argue that even though Deeti in moments feels as though she is liberated, she ultimately realizes that these feelings are entirely propelled and determined by colonial logics and capitalist market forces. Through these constant recalibrations of "destiny" and "freedom," we can see that Deeti's experiences are representative of the colonial violence and regulation of freedom obscured by liberalism's narratives of freedom. Furthermore, the gap that Ghosh constructs between Deeti and Burnham's experiences of liberalism, I contend, brings to light liberalism's central contradictions, which feel similar to tensions of our contemporary neoliberal moment. In an effort to build a lineage of moments characterized by the "liberal paradox" (Hollier, 2004), I reiterate that this character contrast in *Sea of Poppies* helps to recognize that the conditional entry of the migrant into a fantasy of freedom within the context of colonial liberalism or contemporary neoliberalism is a shared trait between indenture and the border industrial complex.

Deeti, an upper-caste peasant from Bihar who works in a poppy field for the production of opium, is one of the most important characters in the novel. We find her in the beginning of the novel in a village whose farming and sustenance economy has been completely crippled by the colonial demand for opium. Opium has from the outset of *Sea of Poppies* already affected every sphere of life: Deeti's husband is an *afeemkhor*, or addict, her family is deeply in debt because villagers do not have the capacity to farm a variety of crops, and the opium processing plant in a nearby town sustains a highly precarious class of workers. A vision of a ship that Deeti conjures up in the novel's opening moment becomes a bearing point that constantly propels the narrative forward:

> The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, 'the Black Water.' (Ghosh, 2008, p. 3)

As Nandini Dhar (2017) observes, the image, like the novel in itself, "narrativizes the genesis of the coolie" (p. 13) and is not representative of a "single event that is narrated in advance but the entire history of indenture, congealed within a single

image" (p.17). Deeti immediately and confidently understands the apparition to be a "sign of destiny," because it exists beyond the limits of her knowledge and therefore exists independently of herself. The vision proceeds to become on an unconscious level a self-fulfilling prophecy; Deeti is distraught when early in the narrative she sees fellow villagers lined up to become some of the first indentured laborers to Mauritius because she immediately realizes what the vision might indicate. Alongside this sign the narrator also offers us an alternative framework of conceptualizing destiny, in the form of Hindu astrology: "[Deeti's] prospects had always been bedeviled by her stars, her fate being ruled by Saturn – Shani – a planet that exercised great power on those born under its influence" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 28).

With these two irreconcilable rubrics of "destiny" we witness Deeti's life unfold through traumatic events that occur so rapidly that the idea of choice or freedom may seem, according to Dhar, "a grim farce" (2017, p. 7). This idea of choicelessness is most strongly emphasized in early moments of the novel. For instance, when Deeti's addict husband passes away, and Deeti "decides" to commit sati primarily to avoid sexual assault by her brother-in-law,[10] she expects to enter the same "netherworld" described in the initial vision of the ship. Minutes before her planned self-immolation, another villager, Kalua, rescues an unconscious Deeti, and when she awakens to find herself on a raft, she perceives her surroundings to be those of the afterlife in the netherworld, even though, of course, the same river takes Deeti and Kalua towards the "netherworld" of the kala pani they will eventually cross. In equating these two choices—to run away into indenture, or to kill herself—by imagining the same outcome for either choice, Ghosh perhaps reveals the persistence of choice in the face of what feels like total choicelessness,

What makes Deeti striking to me is the way her changing perceptions of the ideas of destiny and astrology in the face of colonial market forces can reveal whether or not she, as an indentured laborer, can come to occupy the fantasy of freedom imagined by colonial narratives of liberalism. When Deeti first regains consciousness on the raft after Kalua rescues her and realizes she has not died, she determines that "she had shed the body of the old Deeti, with the burden of its karma; she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 163). This moment marks a decisive shift in what Deeti understands to be the governing logics of her decisions: her conviction in astrological signs fades as she is overtaken by the idea of being "free," and the idea that destiny is something that one can create for oneself. Deeti's new understanding is in direct opposition with the logics of the initial ship vision,

[10] Sati refers to the Hindu practice of widow self-immolation in the immediate aftermath of a husband's death, which became a highly "contentious tradition," according to Lata Mani (1998) in the early 19th century. Mani, among others, traces the ways sati became a crucial issue taken up by the British colonial imaginary as part of the civilizing mission: while the practice was banned in colonial India in 1829, the ban has been problematized as a way that the British could morally legitimize colonial rule.

for there is no possibility in that prior framework for the ship, which represents Deeti's destiny, to be something of her own creation. To be able to escape sati does certainly feel like a liberatory act, as Stasi (2015) observes, "Deeti's escape from that traditional world is to leap into modernity to become an indentured servant. This is, to be sure, a certain kind of freedom" (p. 337).

Deeti's sense of freedom continues when the *Ibis* first ventures into the *kala pani* of the Bay of Bengal: the sea is framed not like a dreadful taboo in accordance with the Hindu imaginary but as a "firmament, like the night sky, holding the vessel aloft as if it were a planet or a star" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 363). Here the metaphors gesture towards the precedence the sea takes over stars and the logics of astrology. To name the sea a "firmament" additionally signifies a shift from an astrological and theistic belief system to possibly one of the freedom of individual will. Indenture at this juncture, as the ship enters the kala pani, *does* seem to fulfill the fantasy of freedom produced by Burnham and the archive of liberalism (Lowe, 2015).

But the governing logics of Deeti's world change again, after Sarju, one of the other eight indentured women, is dying and leaves Deeti with a pouch of high-quality poppy seeds as a testament of old lives left in India. Later, Deeti finds one such seed stuck under her nail, and has a pivotal realization:

> It was a single poppy seed: prising it out, she rolled it between her fingers and raised her eyes, past the straining sails, to the star-filled vault above. On any other night she would have scanned the sky for the planet she had always thought to be the arbiter of her fate— but tonight her eyes dropped instead to the tiny sphere she was holding between her thumb and forefinger. She looked at the seed… and suddenly she knew that it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb— at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn. (Ghosh, 2008, p. 415)

Suddenly the power of astrology or the planets, which Deeti seems to reject for a brief time on the ship, is reinstated, but also repackaged in the form of the orb of a poppy seed, and is one that dictates the "freedom" that Deeti perceives herself to be experiencing in the earlier moment with Kalua on the raft. The poppy seed, representative of English colonial interests in expanding free trade, and the transformation of 18th century mercantilism to 19th century free trade, is framed as an omniscient god-like entity when the narrator points to its beneficence and wrath. The narrative of freedom that Deeti momentarily buys into does not feel all that different from the narrative of freedom that the doors promise to deliver in *Exit West* but largely fail to.

In Deeti's case, the poppy seed—a stand in for capitalist market forces—claims credit for choices that Deeti in earlier moments believes are motivated by the stars or planets, or motivated by her own autonomy. Instead, this realization proves

that all decisions, including Deeti and Kalua's decision to become indentured laborers, are always already propelled by market forces. In recasting the fantasy of freedom as entirely market driven, Ghosh exposes through Deeti the central contradiction of liberalism: that while colonial narratives generate a narrative of freedom where indenture is situated as a fantasy of freedom, these narratives depend on and obfuscate colonial violences and an unavailability of free choice, as embodied in Deeti's narrative.

Both the shift in Deeti's understanding of free will and destiny—from astrological belief to autonomy to a realization of opium's ability to "govern" a life—and the contrast between Deeti's narrative and Burnham's colonial imagining of indenture and slavery as "freedom" make visible liberalism's contradictions. Deeti's particular narrative with the poppy seed, in which market forces entirely motivated or compelled the "genesis of the coolie" (Dhar, 2017, p. 13) also reifies Lowe's (2015) intervention that capitalist forces were responsible for the transition from slavery to indenture. At the same time, Burnham's conflation of "free trade" and his or the colonizer's production of fantasies of freedom—used to legitimize slavery and indenture— also bring to light not only how changing forms of capitalism influenced the shift from slavery to indenture, but how such capitalist forces could be transformed themselves. As Lowe (2015) demonstrates, the moment of abolition and introduction of indenture anticipated new forms of empire and inaugurated the shift from mercantilism to free trade.

This article has endeavored to use the imaginative space of *Exit West* and *Sea of Poppies* to flesh out liberalism's contradictory forces and to unveil the colonial violences that narratives of freedom have always depended on and obscured. Both the indentured labor system and the border industrial complex expose similar ostensible paradoxes in the narratives of liberalism and neoliberalism respectively, but ultimately demonstrate how restriction and the unavaibility of freedom in many forms—through border militarization or precarious conditions on a former slaver—actually propel fantasies of freedom, free trade, and open borders. Such an exercise should compel us to construct a larger genealogy of similar moments that expose how forces that seem to work against each other—such as the neoliberal desire for borderless global flows of good, labor, and capital versus the fortification of borders—actually operate in tandem for capitalism's greater expansion. In the same way, while the colonial violences of the unfree work against the fantasies of freedom in the moment of abolition, such violences are actually necessary for liberalism's success. Comparing indenture and the border industrial complex complicates indenture's frame of analysis, but also helps us better diagnose our intensified border security moment.

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