

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Winter 2021

Literature of Displacement

Target audience: advanced and lifelong learner

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Literature forces us to recognize the humanity of other people, even fictional people, and it can sometimes unearth deeper truths than non-fiction can. Literature's capacity to generate empathy — rather than sympathy, or worse, disgust — makes it an indispensable source for understanding forced migration, particularly when we read works by people who have themselves experienced displacement. In the media, in politics, and in history textbooks, there is no shortage of xenophobic ideas about migration. Even well-meaning narratives from humanitarian actors or nations can flatten the humanity of people who've experienced displacement and present them as victims of history, traveling wordlessly through the world.

Literature by people who have experienced life as a refugee or migrant can eat away at the crusted, calcified layers of learned xenophobia, condescension, or garden-variety ignorance that cake our minds. The works of fiction that follow, published in the last twenty-odd years, do not pretend to constitute an exhaustive list — far from it. They represent but a tiny sample of the many novels, collections of stories, and poetry about movement and displacement, by people who have experienced these processes firsthand, that present a bevy of human characters, staged on the flat page in multidimensional joy and pain and in the context of their relationships with other human beings.

Please note that because the books that follow are all about displacement, their pages contain potentially disturbing scenes and traumas. Please also note that no one is (or should be) defined by their most traumatic set of experiences, and the talented wordsmiths featured here (and their equally talented peers whose work is not listed below) have written many other books that are about topics other than forced migration. Writers who have experienced displacement, like all writers, have much to teach us about the full spectrum of human experiences and emotions, and

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we would do well not to pigeonhole the writers that follow as only “useful” for thinking about displacement.

NOVELS

- Alain Mabanckou, *Blue White Red*, translated by Alison Dundy (1998)
- Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (2017)
- Yuri Herrera, *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, translated by Lisa Dillman (2015)
- Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007)
- Aura Xilonen, *The Gringo Champion*, translated by Andrea Rosenberg (2017)
- Behrooz Bouchani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018)
- Sulaiman Addonia, *Silence is My Mother Tongue* (2018)

Congolese French author Alain Mabanckou’s *Blue White Red*, recently translated into English, follows the protagonists, exiles living without documentation in France, as they try to strike it rich in the former colonial metropole — a novel by turns grim and witty, and always empathetic. Ghanaian American author Yaa Gyasi lays out a multigenerational narrative, following the descendants of two women, Effia and Esi, through enslavement, dislocation, the knitting together of families, and the resonances with the past that not even an ocean and centuries can keep at bay. Mexican American author and political scientist Yuri Herrera’s brief but powerful novel tells of journeys both physical and mythological. Dinaw Mengestu’s sterling debut novel inhabits the gentrifying Washington, D.C. world of a man forced to flee Ethiopia and who is, in many ways, still inwardly on the run. At just 19 years old, Mexican filmmaker and writer Aura Xilonen crafted a tale of sports, the journey from Mexico to the United States, and the sustaining power of books is built on her experience living without documentation in Germany and her refreshingly inventive use of language. Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrooz Bouchani smuggled his prize-winning debut book out of the detention camp on Manus Island, Australia, via WhatsApp; the result is autobiographical, but its literary merit is unmistakable. Sulaiman Addonia, born in Eritrea and residing in Belgium, weaves a growing-up story set in a refugee camp in Sudan like the one in which Addonia grew up, as his protagonist, Saba, tries to make a home for herself amid strong sibling bonds, restrictive gendered expectations, and the possibility of escaping to the West.

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COLLECTIONS AND SHORT STORIES

- Rowan Hisayo Buchanan, ed., [*Go Home!*](#) (2018)
- Edwidge Danticat, “Children of the Sea,” in [*Krik? Krak!*](#) (1996)
- Nyuol Lueth Tong, ed., [*In Their Faces a Landmark: Stories of Movement and Displacement*](#) (2018)

Asian diasporic writers reflect on the many meanings of home in Rowan Hisayo Buchanan’s edited collection *Go Home!*. Edwidge Danticat’s “Children of the Sea” meditates on flight, African diasporic history, and more; the other stories in *Krik? Krak!* are equally excellent. In an issue of McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern, Nyuol Lueth Tong positions a collection of stories by 17 migrant authors on home, belonging, and movement as the gravitational center of global literature.

POETRY

Ocean Vuong, [*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*](#) (2016).

- [Video](#) of Vuong reading from this collection

Javier Zamora, [*Unaccompanied*](#) (2017)

- [Video](#) of Zamora reading from *Unaccompanied*

Patrice Vecchione, and Alyssa Raymond, ed., [*Ink Knows No Borders: Poems of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience*](#) (2019)

- [Video](#) of featured poet Yosimar Reyes reading “The Legalities of Being”

Warsan Shire, [*Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*](#) (2011)

- [Video](#) of Shire reading her famous poem “Home”

Jehan Bseiso and Becky W. Thompson, eds. [*Making Mirrors: Writing/Righting by and for Refugees*](#) (2019)

- [Video](#) about the collection

Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese American poet, explores the aftermath of war and how memories can haunt and inspire at the same time. Javier Zamora’s debut book of poems retraces the journey he made, by himself, from El Salvador to the U.S.A., and each poem evokes both what is left behind and what lies ahead. Patrice Vecchione and Alyssa Raymond highlight the creative powers of young people who have experienced displacement in this collection of poetry by first- and second-generation young adult refugees and migrants, including Vuong and Zamora. Acclaimed London-based poet Warsan Shire’s debut pamphlet is a moving

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meditation on exile, womanhood, and what is passed down through family ties that span continents. Jehan Bseiso and Becky Thompson deliver a compact grouping of work by over forty poets on their experiences of displacement, exile, and belonging.

CREATED FOR CHILDREN, BUT RIGHT FOR EVERYONE

- Thanhha Lai, *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011)
- Edwidge Danticat and Leslie Staub, *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (2015)
- Yuyi Morales, *Dreamers* (2018)
- Dia Cha, Chue Cha, and Nhia Thao Cha, *Dia's story cloth: The Hmong People's Journey to Freedom (bilingual) = Diav daim paj ntaub dab neeg = Dlav dlaim paj ntaub lug nruag* (2002)

These books for younger readers feel lighter in the palm than the volumes above, but are no less hefty intellectually. Thanhha Lai uses poetry to chronicle a young girl's journey from Vietnam to Alabama in 1975, mirroring Lai's own journey. Through Edwidge Danticat's words and Leslie Staub's illustrations, we see a young girl find her voice as a writer, inspired by the cassette tapes of Haitian folklore her mother sends her from immigration detention. Based on her own experiences, author and illustrator Yuyi Morales tells of a mother and son crossing from Mexico to the U.S.A. and finding joy in a library. Finally, Dia Cha uses a story cloth stitched by her aunt and uncle (co-authors) to tell the story of the Hmong people's many journeys in search of freedom, across land and sea.