

FIRST EDITION

Edited by

**Holli Levitsky,
Monica Osborne
& Stella Setka**



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LITERATURE OF EXILE AND DISPLACEMENT

AMERICAN IDENTITY IN A TIME OF CRISIS

First Edition

LITERATURE OF EXILE AND DISPLACEMENT

American Identity in a Time of Crisis

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Had it been possible for me to fix the plane permanently in the sky, to defy the winds and clouds and all the forces pushing it upward and pulling it earthward, I would have willingly done so. I would have stayed in my seat with my eyes closed, all strength and passion gone, my mind as quiescent as a coat rack under a forgotten hat, and I would have remained there, timeless, unmeasured, unjudged, bothering no one, suspended forever between my past and my future.

—*Steps*, Jerzy Kosinski

INTRODUCTION

“**T**he exiled pilgrim,” writes Yitzhak Orpaz, “carrying with him a curse, an affliction, a mortal sin, does not turn to God in his distress. In the strictest sense of the word he has no God; He, too, has fallen by the wayside. A dim, ancient memory of something broken, of vague yearnings, is stored inside him. He does not call it by name, he does not know its name, but he needs it and he is looking for it.” While the particular context for Orpaz’s words is his own immigration to Palestine from Soviet Russia in 1938, the idea of the displaced subject as a repository for memories of things broken resonates on a universal level. We are reminded that the displaced person does not simply experience exile as a phenomenon outside of the self, as something affecting or infecting the self; rather, exile is carried within. It is transported, with the self, to a new and foreign place. It is experienced as a lens through which the exile understands the new surroundings—a land foreign to the self in culture and custom, language and location. And, like Orpaz suggests, innate understanding of the exilic defines the exile. It is inescapable and insurmountable. Yet the exile does not wish to be separate from it because it links to the past. It is part of the identity.

The irony, of course, is that the person who experiences the solitariness of exile is not alone. Exile is a dominant theme of our times. It can be found not only in the forced migration of populations but also in the temporal, cultural, and physical alienation of the individual’s experiences of the post-modern world. *Literature of Exile and Displacement: American Identity in a Time of Crisis* explores this world of unstable, shifting identities. The carefully selected stories in this volume examine issues of remembering and forgetting, trauma and nostalgia, time and space, social and sexual exclusion, and multiple others. It is a multifaceted literary exploration of exile and displacement—geographical, temporal, corporeal, and/or performative—and it provides an important analysis of a significant and fascinating aspect of contemporary culture.

The volume is both contemporary and historical, balancing in its collection of stories an understanding of the many exilic histories of the last 100 years, with narratives so current that we read about their changing contours almost daily. We live in a time of crisis. Political unrest, social and cultural upheavals, economic struggles, military and land conflicts, technology gone awry, historical legacies, psychological breaking points, and bouts of terrorism all contribute to the turbulent undertone of our era. Each new crisis leaves us with a feeling of collective vulnerability, and we often feel compelled to remark on the uniqueness of the event. We forget that the experience of crisis, though it may appear (and reappear) as a result of vastly different struggles, is neither new nor remarkable in its distinctness. The experience of crisis has long been a factor in identity formation, and literature that explores exile and displacement that result from crises is valuable not only because it allows us to bear witness to the suffering of human beings in a way that will enable us to respond ethically to their needs but also because it establishes the universality of an experience that transcends time and space.

As one can see, displacement is a global phenomenon. Regardless of which country we inhabit, we are sure to encounter individuals who have fled a crisis in another country. This volume's primary area of inquiry, however, is the emigration to the United States resulting from terrors and crises around the world. America has historically been a place of refuge for those fleeing injustices or simply seeking new lives and greater opportunities. For this reason and others, American society is a stronghold for the immigrant position. But while we as a nation have sympathized collectively with the plight of the displaced person, the daily reality of what it means to be an immigrant living in and attempting to assimilate into American culture often reveals few signs of this sympathy. The texts we have chosen to include demonstrate the harsh existence of the immigrant in America.

With this in mind, our primary objective in the classroom is to promote an understanding of the complex issues resulting from exile. Many of the narratives in this volume contain thematic similarities, again reinforcing our belief in the universality of the experience of exile. But we have also been careful to include voices from different parts of the world because despite the commonalities inherent in all tales of exile, each voice is distinct and must be read as such. We include stories that focus on characters' exile from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Bosnia, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, Cuba, the Caribbean, Korea, Japan, and China, whose attempts at adaptation to the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are challenging on almost every level. The characters depicted in the stories we have chosen are faced with new and unfamiliar geographical, cultural, political, and linguistic environments. The narratives that frame these difficult encounters reflect the nuanced challenges that immigrants to America face every day. Additional areas of inquiry include issues of remigration, the longtime impact of exile on the next generation as well as a comparative view of different experiences of exile, and the complexity of dealing simultaneously with trauma and exile.

With the unprecedented upheavals of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, exile and displacement have become the norm rather than the exception. Contemporary imagination, in turn, has been affected by the narratives of migration and dislocation. Thus, the contents of this book include mostly stories written since 1990. All of the stories, by definition, characterize exile as a source of creativity while being deeply enmeshed in a history of wars and violence, immigration, and colonization. The book considers narratives of homecomings alongside narratives of no return, stories of voluntary exile alongside stories of forced displacement. All of them look closely at the concepts of identity, home, language, and memory.

The organization of the book not only shapes a particular consciousness of this century of exile but also emphasizes similarities among experiences of exile and the ensuing displacement in the United States. Many of the narratives invite an especially complex reading given that they are generated in the aftermath of various traumas that transpire in the characters' respective countries of origin and are simultaneously contextualized, if only implicitly, in the collective tragedy experienced by Americans in the wake of the events of 9/11. That is to say, some of the selected texts depict characters who, while working through their own traumatic memories, become enmeshed in an American society that is collectively still working through its own traumatic upheavals. As one can imagine, this can create an especially fraught environment for the immigrant, who exists as an outsider in a society that has grown increasingly fearful of the outsider.

Many writers focus on the complex cultural, racial, and religious issues that surface in the United States both before and after 9/11. The excerpt from Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* deals specifically with this precarious subject position and paints a vivid picture of Arab and Asian immigrants desperately trying to prove their loyalty to America in its immediate aftermath. Abdullah demonstrates the ways in which this desperation manifests both externally and internally. Restaurant owners frantically erect "God Bless America" signs to avoid discrimination while men cut their beards and women exchange their hijabs for Western attire. At the same time, these immigrants withdraw into themselves, "guilt-ridden with sins they did not commit" and struggling with a new tension—that of feeling the need to hide their ethnic or national identities while being unable or unwilling to untether themselves from their origins. In Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, we see a snapshot of an Afghan father and son living in the Bay Area of California in the 1980s. The story precedes the events of 9/11 by decades, but written in 2003, just a couple of years following 9/11, the story is infused with a kind of literary prescience that can only come from having been written in the specific historical post-9/11 moment. Baba and his son Amir leave everything behind in Kabul. Baba, even years after emigrating, still finds it difficult to adjust to life in America while Amir conceives of America as a place to bury his memories. Amir's story, it turns out, is not the only one in which a character feels as if he or she must bury his or her memories in order to survive, and even if only implicitly, the idea

of America as a burial place for immigrants' memories is a theme that arises continually in this volume.

The specific contexts for the selected texts are widely varied, but many of the writers—such as Hosseini and Abdullah—deal not only with the violence that is experienced in countries of origin but also the violence, or threat of violence, that is experienced in America. In the novel *What is the What*, from which this selection is taken, the young Sudanese man Valentino unwittingly opens his door to two thieves, one of whom brutalizes him to the extent that he wishes he were back in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya where 80,000 war refugees from Sudan and other countries existed on one meal a day and lived in huts of plastic and sandbags. That he wishes, even if only momentarily, to be back in Kakuma with thousands of refugees who have witnessed violence on a daily basis is chilling. That Valentino, faced with two thieves who have invaded his home, imagines that “evil of this kind” did not exist in the Kakuma refugee camp is a sobering revelation of how painful the transition into a new culture can be for those who have been displaced even when they themselves are fleeing intensely violent and traumatic existences in their countries of origin. And, finally, Valentino’s impulse to wonder whether cosmological forces have united to chastise him for leaving Africa and dreaming of attending college in America offers crushing insight into the psychological complexity that necessarily contributes to the difficult experience of those in exile.

The effects of displacement on women and families carry special consideration. Lourdes Puente, one of the Cuban protagonists of Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, patrols the five-block square of Brooklyn that makes up her beat as an auxiliary policewoman. She prefers to remain vigilant, watching and waiting for miscreants and troublemakers rather than allow them to surprise her, catch her off guard. Her work shoes are dark, sturdy, and thick-soled, and she reflects on the fact that if women wore such shoes, “they wouldn’t worry so much about more abstract equalities.” García’s story confronts the complexity of living as both an immigrant, displaced from one’s own culture, and a woman, which can be tantamount to being displaced within one’s own culture. Similarly, Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* reveals the darker reality of being a woman in a wartime situation and explores the ways in which war often provokes sexual violence against women. Akiko, a young Korean refugee of World War II, involuntarily marries a Christian minister and accompanies him to America. Keller’s narrative depicts a reality woven together with dreams, and to Akiko even America is a country that “glitters, beautiful, like a dream.” But it’s also a country of “excess and extravagance,” and while the idea of America is the impetus for many dreams, it also becomes the vehicle that destroys these same dreams. For even if America presents a golden landscape, it is also a country where Akiko feels that she has no face, no place. Such is the experience for many of the immigrants we encounter in the narratives contained in this volume. Finding a new home does not always resolve the

experience of being displaced. Rather, it often exacerbates it or allows the character to feel its textures more poignantly.

This sense of perpetual displacement is a theme that is pervasive among the selected texts. Layers of exile inevitably complicate the position of the immigrant. Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* is infused with humor, but despite the comical moments that seem to find Vladimir Girshkin, the 25-year-old Russian protagonist, his job at the Emma Lazarus Immigrant Absorption Society presents us with a landscape littered with displaced people from around the world. And though we laugh, we know that we laugh only in the shadow of both trauma and suffering. Vladimir's job is to help immigrants resolve the many problems they encounter as they attempt to assimilate into a foreign American culture. We are reminded here that finding a new home—or a new *place*—does not dissolve the experience of displacement. Rather, it adds another layer to an already immense burden of exile. Like many of our selections, Shteyngart's narrative focuses implicitly on how critical it is that the immigrant finds a job quickly—that he or she establishes a means to become financially independent and learns how to fit him or herself into an American economic framework.

Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* confronts similar issues of the importance of employment and the tragedy of joblessness. The Bosnian narrator, on his way to a job interview, avoids talking with a woman who is friendly with him because he prefers isolation to having to explain that he has no job or that his last job was smashing boxes at a bookstore. And one of the dominant themes of Andre Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog* is the importance of building a financial foundation for one's family. For this narrative's Persian family living in Northern California, having a job and a home is everything—for without it, the daughter of the family cannot be married to a respectable man from a Persian family. Without a substantial amount of savings, they cannot afford to send their son to a university. These are the anxieties that frame many of the stories of immigrant families. For some characters, however, the economic class divide becomes too much to bear. The narrator of Jerzy Kosinski's *Steps*, for example, fantasizes about engaging in violent acts against the wealthy—cutting the throats of doormen and slashing through family portraits. He imagines waging war against the city “as if it were a living body.” The selection from *Steps* does not present a substantial narrative, but it offers a compelling if chilling snapshot that characterizes the disparity between economic classes, the lowest of which is often inhabited by the immigrant.

Finding employment gives immigrants a means to begin to support themselves financially, but it also enables them to engage with Americans while transitioning into American culture. Many of the characters in our stories, however, find that establishing and maintaining connections with other immigrants or with friends and family from their countries of origin are critical. The structure and function of networking is a theme common to many of the stories in this volume. The ability to establish contacts and build

collaborations with other exiles or to remain in contact with sympathetic friends and family in their host countries often proves crucial for survival. These communication networks allow for friendships and collaborations to overcome the separation and isolation caused by exile. In the classroom, examining a theme such as networking across several stories, especially ones from different countries and/or continents, will both avoid a narrow focus on representative works or figures and also open new perspectives about existence under the difficult conditions of emigration and exile.

For example, in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen's happiness depends largely on the extent to which she is able to communicate with her family in India. But over time, and with the death of her grandfather, she begins to feel disconnected from them, and we watch as the less equipped she becomes in navigating the difficulties of a new society, the more disconnected she becomes from her network at home. Similarly, young Anya in Sana Krasikov's *One More Year* works as a dishwasher in a restaurant where other immigrants are also employed, but none of them are Russian, like her. Though, certainly, immigrants face similar challenges despite their places of origin, Anya believes she has little in common with the immigrants from Guatemala and Ecuador, and as a result, she experiences a perpetual sense of loneliness. She feels isolated even among a community of isolated people. Many of the stories depict a similar phenomenon of feeling alone even when an immigrant is part of a community of other immigrants. We find that the opportunity to engage and interact with others who share one's history and culture is vital. Often, a text's style of writing suggests this implicitly. In Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog*, the narrator refers to his co-workers as the Chinese, the Panamanians, and the Vietnamese. He feels no kinship with these other outsiders.

Most of the selections we've included in this volume are very contemporary. Exceptions include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, both of which reveal some of the darker realities of the immigrant experience of the 1920s. Both narratives reveal the squalor of tenement life and the impact that abject poverty has on both the internal and external lives of immigrants. In doing so, they become social and political commentaries that sharply critique the discrepancies between those who have and those who have not. We find that the inclusion of these classic narratives of displacement in America are crucial to the volume for a number of reasons, but primarily because juxtaposed against more contemporary narratives, they reveal the extent to which little has changed for the immigrant even though nearly 100 years have passed in some instances. The difficulties experienced by those in exile transcend time and space, and while the details of the stories may change, the thrust of the narrative remains constant. Sui Sin-Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* is also set in the early twentieth century and vividly depicts how immigrants are often at the mercy of seemingly arbitrary laws and regulations. The Chinese immigrant couple in the story decide that the wife should return temporarily to China to give birth to their son in their homeland. When she returns to America without

the proper papers for their son, he is taken from them for ten months and cared for by missionaries. While the story ends happily in that the parents are, after many letters and the exchanges of money and valuables, reunited with their small son, it is a bittersweet moment because the child no longer feels a connection to his parents.

The impact of the experience of exile on family dynamics is showcased in many of our selected texts. In Sin-Far's story, we feel the pain of the mother, who waits in anguish for the return of her son. But we can only imagine the effects that the tragic circumstances will have on her child. The effects of displacement on children are also addressed by many of our selected texts. Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* is an especially pertinent example of the ways in which being removed from one culture and implanted into another affects children. Lucy recalls a poem about daffodils—flowers she would never see in real life until she was 19 years old—that she was forced to memorize at Queen Victoria Girls' School when she was ten years old. Consequently, as an adult, Lucy lacks the capacity to enjoy, with Mariah, the beauty of the daffodil flower. Instead, Lucy is reminded of conquests and brutes. She feels sorrow and bitterness when she sees the flower that has become emblematic of what she has lost rather than what she has gained. For Lucy, the daffodil is “wretched.” Her impression of a flower that Americans typically find beautiful is, to say the least, less than beautiful, and this difference becomes symbolic of the multiple ways in which her worldview differs from those of the people around her. But while Lucy is alone in dealing with her new surroundings, other characters, such as Tristan Brodsky in Adam Mansbach's *The End of the Jews*, navigate their new surroundings as part of a family. Tristan is the teenage son of Jewish immigrant parents who focus all of their efforts on ensuring that he receives an education. While playing stickball in the street, Tristan hears German and Yiddish being spoken, languages that are not his own. His father refuses to teach him German even though he speaks it himself. And his mother laments Tristan's choice to take a college literature course rather than something “useful,” such as a class in the field of law. Mansbach's narrative, set in 1935, highlights the generational divide that is commonly experienced by immigrants and their children, but it also reveals how critical it is for the displaced person to receive an education if he or she wants to fully assimilate into mainstream American culture. This selection is especially important because it also highlights the ways in which the legacy of exile can be passed down to the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

A traumatic past hovers in the background of each narrative, but each text deals with trauma or collective tragedy in a different manner. Some texts deal more explicitly with it than others. In Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis* two young girls discuss the slaughter of Jews at Babi Yar—which claimed the lives of some of one girl's family members—over ice cream cones. This conversation comes just after one in which the girls refer to matzo as “Jewish crackers.” In the narratives we have selected, it is not uncommon for traumatic moments to be revealed in the context of mundane conversations and activities, such as eating an ice

cream cone or, as in the case of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, looking at Christmas lights or nativity scenes.

Through these narratives, we learn the language of exile and displacement. The concepts themselves are universally shared, but the experiences are unique. Each story shapes our understanding of the concepts in a particular way and, thus, contributes to the developing lexicon. Some stories, such as Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, return to an ancient language to tell a very modern story, offering a powerful example of the universality of the displaced subject. The Greek immigrant family suffers considerably, afflicted by a curse yet inextricably bound together by ecstasy or *ekstasis*, literally a state of displacement. In the excerpt, we see the origin of that word's meaning for future generations. The Spanglish of Junot Díaz's *Drown* contributes, as well, to a language of displacement. In his struggle to adapt to his new life in New Jersey, Yunior's streetwise narration reveals a particular understanding of such American concepts as freedom and hope. Being transplanted into a new culture, a new world, does not always guarantee a fresh start or a new beginning. We find in many of the selected texts that the immigrant is often haunted by the past he or she wishes to shed.

Literature of Exile and Displacement: American Identity in a Time of Crisis can stand alone as a text whose aesthetic form is shaped by cultural consciousness. Each narrative in the collection is lifted out of its original context and subjected to analysis by its inclusion alongside the other stories and excerpts. In this way, it can be used to identify and examine the aesthetics of the condition of exile and displacement. The inclusion of 20 of the most outstanding aesthetically agitating stories on this theme also make the collection viable as an anthology from which one may choose to read or to teach only some of the stories. We are aware, of course, of the limitations of this collection, which is not meant to be exhaustive. By introducing the theme in this way, we hope to encourage students and readers to seek out and read the original texts and to pursue additional texts in the subject area.

The structure of the book is designed to showcase great literary writing on the theme of exile and displacement. But by organizing these narratives according to geography, we hope to assist readers in finding new and different ways to experience and to analyze these many instances of exile and displacement. In following each reading with a set of discussion questions geared specifically to the story or excerpt at hand, we offer each reader the opportunity to flesh out his or her understanding of the motivations of the characters, the themes offered up by the story, the style and structure of the writing, the historical moment depicted by the author, and the larger understanding of exile and displacement within which each story exists. The sections, "Further Questions for Discussion" and "Suggested Readings" will assist readers wanting to deepen their thinking on the subject or to focus on particular areas of discussion and research. Including these additional resources can help bridge new connections between the literature of exile and

displacement and other subjects and themes. We hope that engaging with the literature in this volume will show the ways in which the exile's search for identity and home is a universal search and will reveal the value in knowing their stories, for the present and for the future.

We have created this first edition of *Literature of Exile and Displacement: American Identity in a Time of Crisis* with the goal of enhancing student engagement with the existing material. We have been guided in this endeavor by our own experiences in using the preliminary version of the textbook in our college literature classrooms and, with this in mind, have added several new features. First, to better equip our students for the task of reading and interpreting each story, we have added 1) maps that trace the path of the exile's migration, 2) brief introductions that explain the historical, social, and (where necessary) textual context of each story, and 3) short author biographies accompanied by author photos. Second, we have added a section titled Voices of Exile, which includes a brief introduction and autobiographical essays from five exiles from different continents. These essays complement the short stories and novel excerpts, establishing the universality of an exilic experience that allows us to bear witness to the suffering of human beings in a way that will enable us to respond ethically to their needs. Finally, to make this book even more accessible to instructors and their students, we have included an Appendix that provides a step-by-step approach to composition and literary analysis, a guide for using thematic terms, sample assignments, student papers, a list of further questions for discussion, a glossary of literary terms, and a glossary of foreign terms. These features have been designed to facilitate the use of this textbook in the college classroom and to make the writing process less intimidating for students.

Literature of Exile and Displacement: American Identity in a Time of Crisis offers a new perspective on the American immigrant narrative and considers the universality of the exilic experience as well as the conditions that have precipitated the migration of millions from other countries to the United States. It is our hope that readers will gain a greater critical purchase on American narratives of exile and displacement through the works we have selected.

—Holli Levitsky, Monica Osborne, and Stella Setka

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Recuerdos

Lloyd Royal H

