

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

On Teaching Im/Migration in an Undergraduate Classroom

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BORDER CROSSER BY [PETE RAILAND](#), FROM 2012'S MIGRATION NOW! PORTFOLIO PRODUCED WITH CULTURESTRIKE VIA JUSTSEEDS

In the course of my university-level teaching career in the United States, I made, a couple of years ago, a momentous transition in my own standing in the country: from non-resident alien to resident alien. It was in my updated alien-ness, therefore, that I found myself planning a course on “Studying the Margins: Language, Power, and Culture” (English 4589 at The Ohio State University) in late autumn 2019. I would teach this class in the winter-spring term, that is, in the first half of 2020: a time when the world would go into multiple lockdowns over a pandemic, the US would see a phenomenally reality-challenged leadership (one which has to date led to the deaths of over 600,000 people in the country), and during which our semester would be broken sharply into halves of “in-person” and “online” instruction. In autumn 2019, I did not know any of this. But I was newly a parent, and in all my ins and outs with US Citizenship and Immigration Services—“look this way” and “roll your finger over that way;” “submit L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z documentation,” “resubmit W, Y, Z papers,” “wait here,” and “come back in *n* days”—I was thinking, every day, of the children at the southern border of the US: children who were being taken from their parents and asked to shoulder grief and terror that no native adult in this country had to; children who often didn’t have full (or any) means of their native language to communicate their needs or their story; children who were being deliberately denied care and belonging; and children for whom, unbelievably, the US government seemed to have lost track of parents. I rolled my fingerprints on to the biometric machine with such force that the whites of my fingers showed. (“Good pressure,” said the officer.) I exited another waiting room and stood in the street for a long time. I breastfed and cried afterwards. My alienness cost me sleep, money, hours, stress, and repeated visits to USCIS and to medical providers to yet once more bio-certify that I was not a mobile incubator of various diseases.

I needed to do all this to remain in the country, to retain my employment, to keep my family together. Yet, my alienness was as nothing compared to the alienness daily manufactured for the children and parents at the border. Warsan Shire wrote earlier in our dehumanizing century of terrible migrations: “No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark” (“Home”). And I wondered: what must it be like to make your children leave home? To make your children leave—and thus take your home with them? To be a child and be made to leave home, parents, language, friends, food, landscapes, soundscapes? To be a child and leave with your family—and upon arriving, against many odds, be separated?

Even before I came to title my course “Movements, Migrations, Memories,” I knew that I wanted the class to grapple with the critical and historical vocabulary of making strange, making home, making other, making own. Every immigration *to* somewhere is an emigration *from* somewhere. Othering and belonging are, among other things, matters of vocabulary—and those vocabularies have histories. Also, I have never had the option of *not* teaching migration, just as I have never had the option of *not* teaching race, in the US. I look and sound “foreign” and

“strange,”—and until I came to know better, I would ask all sorts of “weird” questions among friends, colleagues, students. (“Why are there advertisements in the middle of a football game?” “What—why—is student debt?” “There seems to be a non-consensus about healthcare for everyone?”). Only, now, I would make time for us to examine those vocabularies of othering and belonging. We would focus, by virtue of the subject of the class, on the language and literature of a matter that currently affects over 270 million worldwide.¹ In my course description, I wrote that I wanted us, together, to “consider contemporary texts in a variety of genres as we examine how movements, often at the intercontinental and planetary level, form and inform our current sense of human inhabitation of the earth and our responsibilities towards each other in an era of unprecedented mass migrations and human influence on the natural world.” The course goals were:

1. a thoughtful sampling of a variety of contemporary works exploring movements, migrations, and margins;
2. developing awareness of and empathy for familiar and unfamiliar ways of longing and belonging in the world;
3. inculcating methods and strategies for interpreting complex ideas and language; and
4. explaining those interpretations in precise oral and written work.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of teaching literature classes is that I get to read—and teach—stories. I had long been aware of the numbers, worldwide, for migration and human mobility. In my part of the world, rising temperatures and therefore sea-levels have had clear and terrible consequences.² I did not have the luxury, as even the most earnest “first world” climate activists do, of not perceiving through my own settings and experiences the appalling effects of global warming. For good tactical reasons, long-time climate-change activists in the US, such as Bill Kckibben, talk about a possible window of opportunity within which we, as a planet, can yet perhaps halt the worst.³ But I came from a land that is increasingly marsh and sea, and has already tipped into no return. And I knew the numbers and shapes of the picture. “India’s coastal regions, home to about 170 million of the country’s 1.4 billion people, are on the front lines of a shifting climate, experiencing sea-level rise, erosion, and natural disasters such as tropical storms and cyclones.”⁴ “It has been estimated that by 2050, one in every seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change.”⁵

Yet, I also knew that statistics, by themselves, do not enable the empathic connections that create lasting human commitments to ideas, actions, change. For my literature class, therefore, I deliberately chose a selection of phenomenal—and accessible—storytellers for us to read together. My final reading list reflected a blend of short and long writing, poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, traditional writing and graphic composition, memoirs and the fantastic. I also prioritized the voices of writers who, through subject positions within the global South, have had to shoulder the burden of *knowing* migration in a way that

more privileged demographics and geographies in the world, such as the global North, have not. Thus, we should read: Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (New York: Abrams, 2017); Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017); Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (London: Vintage, 2008); several of the *Refugee Tales* from the three volumes edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 2017, 2019), and an assortment of essays from the two collections entitled *The Good Immigrant*, the first edited by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2016) and the second by Shukla and Chimene Suleyman (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2019).

In addition to these readings, I also brought into class a specific set of short readings for students' oral presentations. Since these presentations set the tone for both the historical awareness my students developed over the term *and* the frank conversations they had with me and one another for the rest of the semester, I shall open my discussion of the classroom in this essay with a fuller account of this exercise.

For my students' class-presentation-oriented reading, I brought the deeply-researched, open-access *TIDE Keywords* (<http://www.tideproject.uk/keywords-home/>) into my class as testaments to the changing valences of words that we think we know, but which have multifarious and sometimes surprising histories of usage.⁶ I wanted my students to grasp that language is not neutral, that it has a history, and that that history is not unconnected from prevailing ideology. Students were asked to read the *TIDE Keywords* "Introduction" for an orientation as to *why* words such as "stranger," "alien," "settler," "traveller," "vagrant," and "exile," for instance, warrant a closer look, especially from our vantage in the twenty-first century. Then, they were asked to pick one keyword (out of the 39 available) to read thoroughly about and present to the class on.⁷ As I told the class, the goal was to collectively hear about as many keywords as possible—we were a class of seventeen—and we therefore didn't want to "repeat" keywords. The questions that each presentation would address were:

- What is the history of the keyword in question? Please provide a brief summary of what you read in your *Keyword* chapter.
- What in the history of the keyword you read has been surprising to you, as you encountered that history from a twenty-first-century perspective?
- Having read the keyword of your choice, what contemporary examples/issues/matters come to mind, and why? (i.e., how would you connect what you read to the world around you today?)
- and finally, open-endedly: what questions would you like to bring to the class for us to talk about?

Each student would present their keyword for fifteen minutes, with up to fifteen more minutes for subsequent discussion. After the day's presentation, the student presenting would also summarize the main points of their talk into a single-page document and submit it through the class website. In my evaluation, I would grade along the following criteria: the student's ability to address the assignment prompt; the student's clarity of comprehension *and* clarity of presentation (i.e., their care about the comprehension of the rest of the class); their engagement with what they read and their ability to make cogent connections with the world they lived in; their ability both to ask substantive questions of their classmates and field questions that they received. Students were welcome to bring presentation slides, if they wanted to.

As students picked their keywords, the choices varied between what they thought they knew, and what they knew they did not. For instance, if "Foreigner" was an apparently known concept, "Denizen" was not; if "Jew" was potentially known, "Blackamoor" was not; if "Merchant" was possibly known, "Mercenary" was not. Since the editors of the *TIDE Keywords* have provided a rich array of known-unknowns and almost-knowns, and since the appearance of the keywords on their web-page encourages scrolling and browsing, students had no trouble picking seventeen different keywords on the day of the sign-up. The choices came accompanied with comments such as "I know what this word means now, or I think I know—but I wonder what that word meant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," or "I mean, it's still English, but is it the same English?" or "I've never heard that word before, I want to know what it means." In the class, most of the students called the US, and central Ohio, home; most were white; and all of them owned their positions as coming from families that had immigrated to this country in the near or not-so-near past. Thus, I found the students curious about a history that they knew to be, in an inalienable way, also their own.

Whether the presentations happened in person (before the lockdown) or online (after the lockdown), students consistently demonstrated both genuine curiosity and engaged attention with one another. I see this as a testament both to the intellectual integrity and generosity of my students, and to the accessibility of the keyword chapters. The students *wanted* to do the reading. And in a few cases, students also "read along" with their classmates even though they were not themselves responsible for presenting particular keywords. This led to even richer discussions, with the work of a few helping to propel the whole class into deeper conversations. In keeping with my pedagogical principle of facilitating situations where students can and even must teach each other, I usually held back for the first ten minutes of the question-and-answer period unless specifically asked for a response. (If I was specifically asked, it was usually when a student wanted to double-check with me about historical context).

Being obliged to present on a keyword ensured that students paid meticulous attention to details as they read their selected essays. Engaging with materials already

imbued with cultural etymology also helped, I noted, to encourage students to go back and forth between the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, and their keyword essays. Suddenly, the early uses of words mattered: the texts of early uses, the contexts of early uses, and the changes in meaning of a word with every subsequent use. Since I had explicitly stated, too, that the weight of the class discussions during this exercise was on them, and that they must take care to be intelligible to classmates who had *not* read the essay assigned to the presenter, the presentations and following discussions proved to be focused, accessible, and wide-ranging. Some of the best launching-points for later chats were in students' articulation of the associations they made between their reading and their own lived histories. What might it have meant for a family arriving in the US in the early twentieth century—and what might their path to citizenship in a strange land/country mean? When a student called the US and central Ohio "home" today, but was close to her grandparents who emphatically *didn't* call the US home, what did *that* mean for the family's position of belonging? One student's non-US-citizen boyfriend had been asked to resubmit papers for US entry—yet, their mutual affection, she told the class, mad them want to refus the border that wer now being imposed on them by the visa and immigration system. One student was in the class on an F1 visa, a student visa—and after his degree, he wanted to go home. He thought aloud on whether he even wanted to call himself an "immigrant" in this country. *Is one an immigrant while one thinks of oneself only as passing through? One student talked of a great-grandparent who was Native—"but that's not the culture I was brought up in."* How should such a person understand reparation and repatriation?

Here are some of my favorite instances from the questions and comments I had the pleasure of responding to or building on:

"You know, being a denizen sounds like being a second-class citizen—like if you're from Puerto Rico [and in the US]. We like your taxes, but we don't like you."

"You're saying that being a pirate was actually legal?!"

"I knew that people couldn't have been calling *themselves* pagans—it was the Christians calling them that. Which explains some of the things they [the Christians] said about them [the pagans]."

"I'm seeing that *Merchant of Venice* speech about an 'alien' plotting against a 'citizen' now in a whole new light."

"The word they're using is 'rogue,' or even 'gypsy,' but really, they're using these categories to define disability, in a way. Otherwise why go on about the 'sturdie' beggar or vagabond?"

"The way we refer to people, that is, the terms we use, has consequences for how people are legally treated."

"Wow, I didn't know that passports were something that not everyone could get!"

"Can one become a stranger in their own home/country?"

"So, the nervousness about the alien is a nervousness about their *allegiance*, isn't it? I also thought about how we hear a lot of 'yes, please bring your diversity to this country [the US]' but at the same time, 'now please learn English and perform your belonging'."

"That reminds me, did you know that a study found that a whole lot of US citizens could not pass the US citizenship test?"

One result of this emphasis on discussion was that we often spent half the class period on the presentations and the lively deliberations and debates that took off. In a class time of 80 minutes, we frequently spent 45 minutes on two *TIDE Keyword* presentations. I don't regret this, because as the days passed, I developed some important skills myself: of explicitly building aspects of the students' discussion into my own lectures (for instance, of an "alien" condition as having parallels in the lives of unaccompanied minors crossing the US-Mexico border, as Valeria Luiselli's book discusses); of offering summative comments and remarks to further contextualize the keywords for the class (for instance: yes, "Indian" remains a fraught word, especially in the US, with this country's history of Native genocide); and of generating keywords-related study-questions for texts we were about to read (for instance: in Amitav Ghosh's novel, what picture do we get about the belonging and loyalties of a *global* "citizen"?).

It is also always a joy for me when the point-following-kind of discussion that I have modelled for my class is taken up and emulated by students—and I can sit back for a while and simply steer. But when I do this *TIDE Keywords* assignment again, I shall provide a little more scaffolding—telling students, for instance, how much time to spend on each part of their presentation (I shall recommend no more than 3 minutes for each), and asking each student, before their presentation, to send on to the rest of the class a paragraph of about 300 words outlining the thrust of their initial interest and findings (something along the lines of "I started this research because I thought I knew or wanted to know X, I found out Y, and I shall talk in class about the connections with Z"). This will help maximize time for the analytical aspect of the students' presentations, and also allow more time for the subsequent discussion.

In a midterm check-in, and in end-of-term reflections, students documented how valuable they had found their engagement with the keywords. One student wrote: "Much of my learning in this class came from our in-class discussions that followed our keyword presentations. The presentations were great because they allowed me to learn the origins of key English words and how those words were used to push ideologies and oppress marginalized groups. And with this, our class discussions that followed allowed us to address tough questions regarding these topics of oppression, and receiving varying viewpoints on these questions helped open my mind to various possibilities." Another wrote: "[Without the *TIDE Keywords* assignment] I would have never seen parts of history repeating itself again and again. I learned so much from my own keyword project that I would have never expected to learn."

Most of our class time was dedicated to discussion of our readings. In this section, I want to talk about some specific payoffs of the texts we considered and indicate how they opened intersectional lenses for our thinking. For it is relatively common today to register, for instance, that a story or a narrative is “about” race, or gender, or sexuality, or disability, and so on—and to use the specific analytic as either the only or main lens through which we read or engage with that text. But the reality of our lived condition in the twenty-first century is that the most devastatingly marginalizing factors based on identity and context seldom operate alone, or even in conjunction with *an* other definite dynamic of discrimination. I wanted us, in the classroom, to register the *multiple* and often impossible-to-fully-address-with-global-North-vocabularies factors at play in the lives of the people we were reading about. And I wanted us to grasp some of the profound, terrible, commonalities through which mechanisms of human disqualification work across the world. I also wanted us to note the frightening versatility of these mechanisms across geographies and even political contexts. Finally, I wanted us to continue, in the model of the *Keywords*, to register the discourses through which disadvantages and detriments were systemically *manufactured* for peoples, and even demographics, in order to render those peoples expendable in and through various arenas.

Throughout, I also wanted us to read and use the power of the stories we were considering—stories of love, loss, movement, belonging, fear, grief, nostalgia, courage, and peace—to *counter* those systemic oppressions. I neither subscribe to nor teach narratives of easy subversion. Thus, it was not my goal to in any way underplay the magnitude of the problems confronting peoples, or to sugarcoat the trauma of the persons (and characters) we studied. But, both temperamentally and pedagogically, I also cannot indulge in easy cynicism, which is itself another means of shirking responsibility. Thus, I both modelled and taught the work required of a reader’s hard empathy and harder hope. Further, since it is never enough for me to “generate awareness” about an issue without discussing positive and actionable onward steps to address that issue, I made deliberate room for discussions of how the self-criticality and awareness we now had could translate into policy and change, and what that might look like. By example of some of the finest writers anywhere—the example presently on my mind is that of the poet and polemicist John Milton, author of the landmark *Paradise Lost*—I understand literature is a means of taking in and responding to the world. In my literature classroom, therefore, I was teaching a mode of study that I hoped would result in my students being better citizens of the world. And I was teaching, I hoped, means by which my students, most of them citizens of what is today the biggest and most pernicious global empire, the US, might be able to confront this nation’s part in continued colonization and devastation of the planet, and work towards a more just future for all.

Valeria Luiselli’s *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* worked brilliantly as a first text for this class—

both firmly placing our center of beginning in our current geography, and simultaneously decentering our focus to enable what Luiselli calls a “hemispheric” imagination. Luiselli’s impassioned yet restrained prose, both confronting and negotiating a difficult subject—that of unaccompanied minors crossing the US-Mexico border—made it possible for us to read all our texts in this class with both anger and urgency. Reading Luiselli’s *Forty Questions* also effectively shattered my students’ obliviousness about US border and foreign policy that the overwhelming majority of US nationals live in.

For students themselves considering a career in law or policy, for instance, the book and our discussions sparked curiosity about how the law itself could be used to demarcate, oppress, exclude—even those policies that were created by a federal administration purported to be “welcoming” of immigrants, a government that called itself thoughtful and “humane,” a President, Barack Obama, whose election had been seen as a watershed in terms of racial dynamics in this country. With our own newspapers now running stories of “children in cages” at the US Southern border, we had to ask, after considering the evidence provided by Luiselli, how much of the inhumanity that was currently in action had been enabled by the previous “progressive” and “liberal” government. The US stands, after all, on four pillars: colonialism, slavery, genocide, and war. We wondered if there had ever been, or *could* be, in our lifetimes, a government truly confronting that devastating legacy in its entirety.

Another big takeaway for students was that most problems confronting our time didn’t just happen out of the blue, but were created, even created with deliberate design, and that someone, or a group, profited from deploying that problem.⁸ For no discussion of the US and its place in the world can be complete without a reckoning of its pernicious capitalism, its prioritizing of profit over human or planetary worth. An unexpected remuneration, for me, was also in hearing students tell me, usually after class or in office hours, that they appreciated having facts and research with which to talk to more conservative family members. For instance, they could now address the right-wing look-how-reasonable-we-are comment “Of course we support immigration, we only don’t support *illegal* immigration” with “And how are unaccompanied minors fleeing drug cartels supposed to activate this legal immigration if both the language and the spirit of the law is stacked against them? Or should we just say that we don’t give a damn about those children, let them die, not our problem?” Another student asked: “This immigration crisis—how did it happen unless powerful governments allowed it to happen? Not just in America but also Europe?”

Javier Zamora’s poems, from his book *Unaccompanied* (Copper Canyon Press, 2017), were particularly good as a next set of texts. A Salvadoran-US poet who writes in a brilliant bilingual register, who discusses matter-of-factly the US-enabling—with direct funding—of the Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992), and who poetically documents his own migration to the US across Guatemala, Mexico, and the Sonoran Desert, Zamora came across to my students as a

deeply accessible writer blending memory and documentary evidence. We read his poems “from The Book I Made with a Counselor My First Week of School” and “Second Attempt Crossing.” The volume is full of many other fantastic options for a class on teaching im/migration.

In a future version of this class, I want also to bring in the work of Indian-Guyanese writer David Dabydeen, whose poems (especially, for instance, “Coolie Mother” and “Coolie Son,” both in the collection *Coolie Odyssey*, Hansib Books, 1988), in a different bilingual register, talk about the movements of caste in indenturement and the reality and aftermath of slavery. Similarly, I wish to include, the next time I teach this class, some poems from the challenging but again profoundly accessible *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008) by M. NourbeSe Philip. Especially the poems from the book’s first section, “Os,” stand to provide just the kind of reckoning and orientation that can lead even new readers of poetry to the rest of this volume, while also training students in methods of research, creative work, and understandings of collective memory. A great deal in this course, but *Zong!* perhaps in particular, asks for a content warning.⁹ I assert, however, that the experimental and accessible poems from this book are urgent for discussions not only of poetry and migration, but also for what counts as a record of the past and what that record means for the world we have inherited.

The next cluster of texts were probably, for my students, the most unexpected and exciting: two multiple-award-winning graphic memoirs, Thi Bui’s relatively recent *The Best We Could Do* (2017) and Marjane Satrapi’s relatively older but already-acquiring-the-status-of-a-classic *Persepolis* (2008). I had chosen these texts out of a conviction that many students, steeped as they are today in a visual world dominated by images, films, montages, advertisements, and visual-materials-packed-social-media, are adept at analysis of visual or visual-adjacent texts. Sure enough, not only did students do their “reading” with great promptness, but their midterm essays, which asked for close readings of sections of these texts, exhibited their intuitive reading of sketches, colors, graphic spreads, visual mood, and verbal minimalism.

To me, another significant pedagogical payoff was in implicitly communicating that literature takes many forms, and that these forms, such as graphic memoirs, for instance, can bear serious critical unpacking.

The stories in the graphic memoirs belonged to crossings between Vietnam and the US, and Iran and Europe. Thus, my students found themselves engaged in “researching the history that isn’t really taught in schools, you know.” But the stories of the protagonists in the texts—Satrapi and Bui themselves—made the lives of these young girls and then women also strangely “relatable” for my students. “I don’t want to say it’s the same thing at all, me

here in Ohio and Thi Bui’s mother in Vietnam during the war,” as one student said, “but the story of wanting to belong and wanting what is good for your children really spoke to me.” Another student reflected on the reality of growing up in the midst of war: “Who wouldn’t want to leave, or at least want their children to leave?” To me, another significant pedagogical payoff was in implicitly communicating that literature takes many forms, and that these forms, such as graphic memoirs, for instance, can bear serious critical unpacking. The skills of close reading apply here too, and our world is richer for our being able to pay attention across genres and forms.

In a future iteration of this class, I should like, especially having noted how fast my students read the graphic memoirs, to include another recent work that speaks to matters of childhood, belonging, displacement, political precariousness, and coming-of-age in an uncertain world: Malik Sajad’s *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (Fourth Estate, 2015). There should not be a class on migrations that does not teach about Kashmir, which has been under military occupation for decades, and violent and overtly contra-human-rights military occupation since August 2019. (In August 2019, the Indian government breached the fundamental conditions of the Instrument of Accession by which the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir had acceded to India in 1947). Earlier in this class, we had looked at Malik’s op-art essay entitled “An 18-Month-Old Victim in a Very Old Fight” (*The New York Times*, 19 January 2019), which documents the Indian state’s attack on its own citizens, even its youngest citizens. Sajad’s heartbreaking essay remains a powerful work through which to talk about military occupation, borders, citizens’ rights, and migrations; in future classes, I seek to pair the op-art essay with his graphic memoir *Munnu*.

The final movement of the course was in a duo of novels, both nominally “based” in South Asia, but spanning worlds and globes, and thinking across borders, climates, changes, and even species. Mohsin Hamid’s poetically rendered little novel *Exit West* reads fast—with readers held to the uncertain ties and fates of the two protagonists navigating human matters of love and longing as the world begins to disjoint and repair around them. Amitav Ghosh’s longer *Gun Island* reads even faster—with readers taken for voyages and flights through time and geography. Both novels speak in a measured, practiced, deeply generous voice—the kind that comes from a novelist knowing their craft, loving it, and doing it well. And in their own ways, both novels end with what can be called miracles and hope. It is a gift of these books to make hope itself look necessary. For *Gun Island*, in particular, it was useful to pair our reading with excerpts from Ghosh’s meditation on the climate crisis and the nature of fiction: *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016). Consequently, the decentering of us and ours that Luiselli’s book had achieved for the class early in the term now became more radical: as Ghosh’s fiction taught also a decentering of the human itself, and a genuine rumination on the non-human world around us.

In the teaching of this class, therefore, I was able to articulate for myself and my students that it is not enough to think of migration along only human terms any more. We must also think along the scale of our planet. In relation to this interconnectedness of the human, the political, the international, and the planetary, one student recommended to me Ai Weiwei's vivid documentary film *Human Flow* (2017), whose opening shot, he asserted, brought home to him as never before the sheer planet-scaled vastness of the *journeying* undertaken by refugees and displaced migrants in our time. Another student noted the irony of our world's boasted "connectedness" in terms of high-speed internet, access to information, and so on, alongside the fact of hardening borders and the increasing dispensability, as it would appear, of human life and planetary resources. Not for the first time, nor the last, we found ourselves mapping the lines between our continuing conditions of global colonialism/neo-colonialism, advanced capitalism, border-control and "homeland security," for-profit carceral systems of the global North, white supremacy, "maintenance of 'our' way of life," climate-change-denial and extractive destruction of the earth, and corporate systems' rendering of human life itself as collateral for the profit of a few.

In this final section of my essay, I shall discuss the second set of "presentations" undertaken by the class, and close with my students' comments about their most significant takeaways from the course. Students' comments, alongside the depth and range of their final projects, will provide a sense of the class as a learning experience that encouraged students to inhabit the world as a place where their learning *and* their actions matter.

To begin with, the second set of class presentations (after the first set on the *TIDE Keywords*) was planned to be on essays picked by students from the *Good Immigrant* and the *Refugee Tales* collections. I had placed all five volumes in course reserves at our Library and flagged early for my students that I wanted them to read, browse, and pick an essay to talk to the class about. They could pick either a *Good Immigrant* essay or a *Refugee Tale* to talk about. They should discuss: Why did they pick what they did? What in the essay arrested their attention? What did they connect to? What had they learnt about the journey, and possibly the life, of the writer (in the case of the *Good Immigrant* writers), or the person written *about* in the *Refugee Tales* (for these tales are not conventionally "authored" by the refugees/asylum-seekers/detainees, but instead, told to and documented by established and emerging writers working with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in the UK)?¹⁰ Unlike the previous presentation, this one would be shorter, more informal, more conversational. The goal was simply to put more migrant voices on the table, and for the class to know of multiple reasons, modes and means of travel, arrivals, and (since many *don't* know of the possibility of this) of *non*-arrivals and lives put inhumanely on hold, in the form of indefinite detainment. But even as we read in the volumes, our own world was drawing closer to a lockdown, and suddenly, one day, we had already met in person as a class for the last time.

With the final half of the term now online, and with early Zoom fatigue setting in in our newly-rendered-to-the-screen workday reality, I opted not to continue with the class presentations. Instead, I asked my students to upload—with the possibility of sharing among the class—a "Letter to the Immigrant" (from the *Good Immigrant* books) or a "Letter to the Refugee" (from the *Refugee Tales* books). I suggested a length of 3-4 pages, but the letters could be as long as they needed to be. When the submissions came in, they made for strangely moving reading. My students had written to their own "Good Immigrant," sometimes a well-known one, such as Himesh Patel or Riz Ahmed or Alexander Chee or Chigozie Obioma, with genuine curiosity and even admiration for their achievements. ("I read your book recently," or "I love your acting and follow your work, but I didn't know this part of your story.") And they had shared their own stories—sometimes along lines of confluence with the immigrant's story, and sometimes to explicitly say that they, the student and the Good Immigrant, appeared to come from different worlds.

But most students wrote to the "Refugees" they had read about. The *Refugee Tales* take their name from Geoffrey Chaucer's Middle English *Canterbury Tales* (written in the later fourteenth century and first printed by William Caxton in 1476). The *Refugee Tales* explicitly announce their literary indebtedness to the names of their predecessors (such as "The Miller's Tale" or "The Wife of Bath's Tale" or "The Clerk's Tale" or "The Man of Law's Tale") with such present-day titles such as "The Lover's Tale," "The Chaplain's Tale," "The Interpreter's Tale," and "The Mother's Tale." Many of my students owned that they had picked their *Refugee Tales* based on the titles of the tales. And now, writing *back* to their necessarily anonymous addresses, whom they could not know but whose lives we had *some* knowledge of, my students wrote with heart, heat, tenderness, anguish, indignation, helplessness, and a kind of hope. The questions surfaced again and again in their letters: "What can I do for you [the refugee I have read about] now? What can I do *but* listen? What can I do *more* than listen?" or "How can I help you [the detainee I have read about]? *Can* I help you within the system we are both in? Or do I have to break the system to do so?" or "May I tell your story [that I just read] widely myself? Do you even like having your story told? To strangers like me? But I feel as though I know you now?"

Students were aware that the refugees themselves could only have spoken—and told these sections of their tales—under conditions of unforgiving anonymity. They were aware, too, that they were reading each *Refugee Tale* through the necessary mediation of a narrator, who was often a well-known writer, such as Ali Smith, Kamila Shamsie, Bernardine Evaristo, Patience Agbabi. Yet, according to my students, the *details* of the travellers/refugees/asylum-seekers/detainees themselves, *their* pain and *their* loss, *their* reasons for leaving and belonging, came through. One student told me: "I didn't know you could tell stories like that, but it makes sense." Another followed up: "How else would these stories get told?" Another wrote: "The final Immigrant Tale assignment,

in which you had us write a letter to our selected immigrant, was particularly effective in this [class goal of developing awareness and empathy], as it compelled us to involve our own personal histories and experiences with the experiences of the immigrant.”

As the semester neared its end, students climbed into and out of their final projects. What might earlier—in non-lockdown and libraries-open conditions—have been a research or literature-review paper (“How does immigration law operate for unaccompanied minors?” or “What is the experience of immigrant mothers giving birth in the US when they don’t know English and cannot access traditional forms of care?”) now became a close reading paper or an opinion paper or a research plan for a future project (“How does Thi Bui depict her experience of her own giving birth and her mother’s giving birth, and what do these depictions tell us about intergenerational dynamics in this Vietnamese-American immigrant family?” or “What is the significance of the final miracle in *Gun Island*, and what can it teach us about hope in the face of what Ghosh himself calls [in *The Great Derangement*] the ‘unthinkable’?” or “Why are US immigration laws so different for Mexican immigrants than for other immigrants coming across the Southern border?”).

What I saw persist in my students was a desire to think hard, to continue their learning on the topic of im/migration and em/migration, and to convert the term’s scholarship into future organizing and educating at the community-level and beyond. As we travelled deeper into the pandemic, and our own physical movements wound down, students continued to think across greater expanses of place and space. One student wrote: “I loved the relevancy to current issues surrounding migration. This course was extremely eye opening, and I would recommend it to anyone. This course will make you more empathetic, worldly, a better writer, and a more critical reader.” Another reflected: “I particularly liked that the course challenged us to think of movements and migrations pluralistically. In other words, rather than thinking of movements and migrations as just a movement of people from one place to another, there are also movements of ideas, technologies, words, cultures, power, and even climate, all of which are deeply intertwined with the movements of people. [...] I should also mention that the diverse sampling of literary works is also a boon for any lover of [writing in] English: the sample shows the rich artistic contributions that movements and migrations have had upon the [English] language.”

Notes

¹ See the United Nations International Organization for Migration *World Migration Report 2020*, p. 2 (https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf.) It is important to underscore, however, that nearly two-thirds of this number pertains to labor migrants, who are the most disenfranchised in rights, livelihoods, and opportunities for themselves and their children. (In 2015 alone, more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced.)

² See, for instance, the report “Climate Displacement in Bangladesh,” by the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (2012), https://unfccc.int/files/adaptation/groups_committees/loss_and_damage_executive_committee/application/pdf/ds_bangladesh_report.pdf; “The Country Disappearing under Rising Tides,” *BBC Future* (2 September 2019), <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190829-bangladesh-the-country-disappearing-under-rising-tides>; and “Climate Change Creates a New Migration Crisis for Bangladesh,” *National Geographic* (24 January 2019), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/climate-change-drives-migration-crisis-in-bangladesh-from-dhaka-sundabans/>.

³ See, for instance, McKibben’s ongoing series *The Climate Crisis*, *The New Yorker’s* newsletter on the environment: <https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/bill-mckibben>.

⁴ Architesh Panda, “Climate Change, Displacement, and Managed Retreat in Coastal India,” <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/climate-change-displacement-managed-retreat-india>

⁵ See the report on “Climate Displacement in Bangladesh” by the Environmental Justice Foundation, <https://eifoundation.org/reports/climate-displacement-in-bangladesh>.

⁶ The multi-year TIDE Project is hosted online through the Universities of Liverpool and Oxford, and funded by the European Research Council, 2015-2020.

⁷ Nandini Das, “Introduction,” *TIDE Keywords*, <http://www.tideproject.uk/keywords-home/>.

⁸ See especially Luiselli, pp. 45-46 and 84-87.

⁹ Here are the first sentences from the back-cover of *Zong!*: “In November, 1781, the captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered that some 150 Africans be murdered by drowning so that the ship’s owners could collect insurance monies. Relying entirely on the words of the legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*—the only extant public record document related to the massacre of these African slaves—*Zong!* tells the story that cannot be told yet must be told.”

¹⁰ See <https://www.refugeetales.org/>.



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