

Annotated Bibliography – Immigrant and Refugee Experiences

Collected by Jad Rea

INTRODUCTION

The collection of books below shares a variety of perspectives on the immigrant and refugee experience. Some titles in the first section, **For Adults**, are written by refugees themselves, including Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlife*. This year, Gurnah became the first Black African author to win the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature in 35 years. Other titles provide an academic look at immigrant success and resilience, like Library Journal's Best Social Science Book of the Year, *After the Last Border* by Jessica Goudeau. In the second section, **For Young Adults & Kids**, books are accessible to a younger audience: like multi-award-winning *Dreamers*, a picture book by Yuyi Morales. Taking an intersectional look at immigration, we see the collision of identity and family; of gender, sexuality, and social expectation; of community and isolation.

FOR ADULTS

Abramitzky, R., & Boustan, L. (2022). *Streets of gold: America's untold story of immigrant success*. PublicAffairs.

In their study of immigration, Abramitzky and Boustan provide a new take on the role of immigration in American society and political policy. They argue that Americans base present social opinion and policy largely on myths and misunderstandings. Abramitzky and Boustan claim this study serves as a truthful, fact-based look at the often-divisive topic of immigration. With data gathered through ten years of research, the scholars support their assertion of the positive and vital role

played by immigrants in America's social and economic wellbeing.

Agustin, R. (2022). *Illegally yours: A memoir*. Grand Central Publishing.

Agustin uses equal parts humor and candor to share his story of coming to terms with his status as an immigrant. The memoir explores themes of identity, family, and the social repercussions that come from being the child of immigrants. His narrative comes as an answer to the ongoing and often combative discourse over immigration in America. In an issue characterized by generalizations and political policies, Agustin reminds the reader of the individual people stuck in the middle of the debate.

Banerjee, P. (2022). *The opportunity trap: High-skilled workers, Indian families, and the failures of the dependent visa program*. NYU Press.

Banerjee investigates the H-4 dependent visa programs and their effect on Indian immigrant families. She finds, despite the official language of the programs, immigrants face social and economic struggles. Banerjee argues the restrictive policies cause these families to rely on a single income, which is often not enough to sustain them. To support her assertions, Banerjee shares the findings of interviews with Indian immigrant couples. Her groundbreaking look at visa policy reveals the inadequacy of the present system.

Cohen, S. J., & Taylor, S. T. (2021). *Journeys from there to here: Stories of immigrant trials, triumphs, and contributions*. River Grove Books.

The immigration debate often focuses on narratives of despair and struggle; Cohen’s work adds dimensions of success and resilience. Drawing from her work as an immigration lawyer, Cohen shares stories of her clients in their own words. Firsthand accounts of courtroom proceedings allow a rare look inside the immigration process in America. Cohen and her clients encourage readers to reflect on themes identity, community, and belonging.

Creef, E. T. (2022). *Shadow traces: Seeing Japanese/American and Ainu women in photographic archives*. University of Illinois Press.

Creef explores the history of immigration through photographs. In her study of identity and visibility, she uses images as an intimate look into the Japanese and Japanese American women who immigrated to America. Creef applies a feminist lens to the study of immigration; she poses that we should take a more intersectional look at archival collections and investigate their potential for providing insights into race, class, and gender. She also provides suggestions on the integration of photographs and similar visual mediums into curriculum and research to offer a broader look at often overlooked communities.

Drake, S. J. (2022). *Academic apartheid: Race and the criminalization of failure in an American suburb*. University of California Press.

Drake looks at racial segregation in education in a present context, examining the complex political and social factors that perpetuate the policy despite the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* (1954) ruling making school segregation illegal. He compares ethnographic studies of two California high schools to lay out what systems of discrimination endure. Bringing together studies of immigration, race, ethnicity, and class, Drake also examines the role of criminalization and over-

policing of Black, Latinx, and low-income youths. To counter the systemic discrimination, Drake shares examples of community resilience and cooperation to fight for equality and success.

Eng, A. (2022). *Our laundry, our town: My Chinese American life from Flushing to the downtown stage and beyond*. Fordham University Press.

Eng uses his experience as a playwright and performer to reflect on his childhood as a Chinese American kid in a changing New York City neighborhood. He mixes literary analysis and anecdote to compare media portrayal—often few and far between—of Chinese and Chinese American characters and culture on stage and screen with the reality of his own childhood. His journey to discover himself begins in the Manhattan theater scene and takes Eng across the world to Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China. His memoir sits at the intersection of race and ethnicity, immigration, and identity.

Goudeau, J. (2021). *After the last border: Two families and the story of refuge in America*. Penguin Random House.

Goudeau examines the intersection of gender and immigration in her study of two refugee families and their journey to find a new home in America. The stories of Mu Naw of Myanmar and Hasna of Syria allow an intimate look into the cruelty and impossible circumstances faced by families across the world. Goudeau’s narrative offers a holistic look at America’s refugee policies, charting the history from the Second World War to present day and explaining the changing social values that shape Americans’ view on immigrants and refugees.

Gowayed, H. (2022). *Refuge: How the state shapes human potential*. Princeton University Press.

Gowayed puts a human face to the United States, Canada, and Germany’s policy response to Syrian refugees. She argues these policies dehumanize refugees despite performative emphasis on individuality.

Gowayed puts special scrutiny on the United States resettlement policies, which seem to set immigrants and refugees up for failure as they are often put directly into impoverished and difficult circumstances. Setting her study against a backdrop of shared human experience of identity and belonging, Gowayed emphasizes the human cost of these policies on families and individuals.

Gurnah, A. (2020). *Afterlives*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Gurnah became the first Black African author to win the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature in 35 years after he was nominated for his career-long, unflinching depiction of immigration and culture in East Africa. *Afterlives* is his most recent novel, a story set in the German colonization of the region. The individual stories of his characters weave into the greater narrative of brutality and injustice faced by residents beneath the oppressive regime of colonialism. Gurnah mixes history and fiction to tell the story of imperialism and resilience in East Africa.

Hartman, S. (2022). *City of refugees: The story of three newcomers who breathed life into a dying American town*. Beacon Press.

In America's Rust Belt, with towns left desolate as manufacturers closed factories and hundreds of livelihoods were lost overnight, the thought of immigrants can conjure fears of outsiders taking jobs. In her study, Hartman explores the stark difference between this perception and reality. She shows how the arrival of immigrant families to an upstate New York town did not destroy the community; instead, the newcomers helped the struggling city find a second wind to start to recover from economic devastation.

Johnson, M. T. (2022). *The middle kingdom under the big sky: A history of the Chinese experience in Montana*. University of Nebraska Press.

The popular image of "the Wild West" often neglect the vital role of immigrants in building and shaping the region; Johnson explores this phenomenon through the large Chinese population in early Montana. He examines

the role of myth and sensationalism in our present view of history. A key element of his book is the emphasis of documents and family papers, allowing Chinese pioneers to tell their own stories. Johnson's important study stands at the intersection of race and ethnicity, immigration, and agency in the American "Wild West."

Molina, N. (2022). *A place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican restaurant nourished a community*. University of California Press.

Molina examines the role of the restaurant as an important social gathering place in Los Angeles' Mexican and Mexican American communities. The Nayarit, created by Molina's grandmother in 1951, served as a place for connection: connection with community, food, and Mexico. With her intimate connection to the subject matter, Molina weaves a story of family and cooperation across both the good and bad. She relates the narrative to a wider exploration of the factors and relationships that shape our identity, from both inside and outside our own communities.

Ocampo, A. C. (2022). *Brown and gay in LA: The lives of immigrant sons*. NYU Press.

In this intimate look at the intersection of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, Ocampo investigates the complicated definition of identity in Los Angeles. Ocampo himself grew up a queer Filipino American in a community largely defined by rigid structures of masculinity and gender roles. He speaks of the delicate balance walked by gay children of immigrants like himself as they traverse their own communities and white spaces. Life is further complicated by social stigma and the weight of expectations as a member of multiple "othered" groups.

Reang, P. (2022). *Ma and me: A memoir*. MCD.

In this poetic memoir, Reang weaves a story of love, identity, and family. Her trials range from her family's escape from Cambodia to her childhood struggles to live up to her mother's expectations. Ma's dismissal

of Reang’s sexuality further strains their relationship. In heartfelt and bittersweet prose, Reang reflects on generational trauma and the intersection of individuality and duty to family.

Su, P. H. (2022). *The border within: Vietnamese migrants transforming ethnic nationalism in Berlin*. Stanford University Press.

Su investigates a community often overlooked in the study of the Cold War: communities of Vietnamese immigrants who settled on both sides of the Berlin Wall. She describes the political turmoil immigrants left behind in Vietnam, and the physical border between East and West Berlin that met them in Germany. Though seen as a single homogenous group by contemporary sources, Su argues the newcomers created social divisions within their own communities. She examines the social role of borders and unity, and the malleable concepts of ethnicity and identity.

Touloui-Semnani, N. (2022). *They said they wanted revolution: A memoir of my parents*. Little a.

Touloui-Semnani weaves personal life and politics as she tells the story of her family’s action in Iran. When her parents took part in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, she was just a child; fleeing with her mother to America, Touloui-Semnani grew up grappling with the fallout of revolution. Consulting primary sources and family memory, she comes to terms with her identity as a child of refugees and revolutionaries, and the personal cost of political change.

FOR YOUNG ADULTS & KIDS

Adewumi, T. (2020). *Tani’s new home: A refugee finds hope & kindness in America*. Thomas Nelson.

Tani Adewumi’s family had a life, a home, and a successful printing press in Nigeria—until, suddenly, they didn’t. When Boko Haram took power in Nigeria, Tani and his family were forced to flee the country. They arrived in New York City, homeless and seeking asylum.

Young Tani found hope in an unlikely place: chess. In just a few months, he went from practicing chess in a homeless shelter to winning the New York State Chess Championship. In this touching memoir, Tani reminds us we can find hope and community even in the most difficult circumstances.

Bui, T. (2017). *The best we could do: An illustrated memoir*. Abrams ComicArts.

Bui’s memoir of love and sacrifice spans generations. She tells the story of her family’s struggle to escape from South Vietnam in the 1970s, illustrating their difficult journey in this heart-wrenching graphic novel. Bui explores the way that times of struggle and uncertainty can blur identity and familial roles in ways that can go unnoticed and misunderstood for years. In a time of travel bans and an increasingly hostile environment toward immigrants, Bui’s experience is timelier than ever.

Morales, Y. (2018). *Dreamers*. Neal Porter Books.

In this heartfelt picture book, Morales writes and illustrates her own story of coming to America with her infant son. She tells a powerful story of hope and strength in the face of uncertainty. Readers of all ages can connect to the story of mother and son dreaming of a better life, remaining resilient in the face of soaring boundaries, and finding strength in each other.

Takei, G. (2019). *They called us enemy*. Top Shelf Productions.

In a frenzy of xenophobia and paranoia in the midst of World War II, Americans targeted Japanese Americans. By order of President Roosevelt, authorities rounded up Japanese Americans along the west coast—whether children of immigrants or immigrants themselves—and interned them in so-called “relocation centers.” Takei shares his family’s experience in these internment camps through the eyes of a child; he was just five years old at the time of his family’s forced relocation. In this chilling

and timely graphic novel, Takei urges us to remember and reckon with this shameful chapter of America's history.

Vega, S. R. (2023). *Drawing deportation: Art and resistance among immigrant children*. NYU Press.

In this unique insight into the circumstances of immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, Vega gathers interviews with families and the artwork of immigrant children. The unfiltered reality offered by the images puts a personal face to a policy issue, reminding readers of the human cost of the immigration debate. Narratives often dehumanize immigrants and remove their agency; Vega argues this treatment applies doubly so to children. By elevating their stories and listening to their hopes for the future, Vega offers a study of our current circumstances through the eyes of the children living it, and suggestions for how we might move forward.

Yang, K. K. (2020). *The most beautiful thing*. Carolrhoda Books.

In this picture book, suitable for K-3rd grade readers, Yang uses her childhood experience as a Hmong refugee to tell a story of beauty and identity. Young Kalia's family is full of love but faces financial difficulties as they adjust to their new Minnesota home. Kalia struggles with wanting more and turns to her grandmother for help. Speaking across generations and across the world, from Laos to Minnesota, her grandmother tells Kalia the most beautiful thing is found within ourselves and within those we love.