



GREAT WORLD TEXTS IN WISCONSIN, 2026-2027

Teaching *Exit West* in Wisconsin

A Guide for Educators

2026–2027 Great World Texts Program
UW-Madison Center for the Humanities



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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Wisconsin–Madison occupies ancestral Ho-Chunk land, a place their nation has called Teejop (day-JOPE) since time immemorial.

In an 1832 treaty, the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory.

Decades of ethnic cleansing followed when both the federal and state government repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from Wisconsin.

This history of colonization informs our shared future of collaboration and innovation.

Today, UW–Madison respects the inherent sovereignty of the Ho-Chunk Nation, along with the eleven other First Nations of Wisconsin.

INTRODUCTION

Reading Across Time and Place

Exit West is a work of fiction. While a novel can help us to teach culture, history, politics, and so on, no single piece of literature can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. Teaching *Exit West* requires understanding both the specifics and the generalities of the experiences described in the novel. As you teach this text, please keep in mind the cultural specificities that make it unique while finding ways to emphasize when certain social and cultural phenomena are universal experiences. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will help you and your students appreciate the text's ability to speak across both time and space. Certain sections of the teaching guide, such as Units 1, 3, 4, and 5, will be especially useful for this purpose.

How to Use This Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide a variety of approaches for teaching Mohsin Hamid's novel and its many contexts. We believe that understanding the historical and cultural background is necessary for appreciating this work and the questions it provokes. We also encourage you to teach the text thematically, tying it to related disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Recommended Readings

The recommended readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some are also accessible to students. These readings provide further information for instructors as well as a variety of materials that might aid instructors in creating handouts and supplementing class discussions and project research.

Discussion Topics, Assignments, & Activities

The discussion topics, assignments, and activities provided in this guide are designed to be tailored to the way you teach the text in your own course, as well as your time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units might be taught over one or several days, or over the course of a few weeks. You can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each unit is organized according to themes that include points for lecture and discussion, suggestions for close-reading, specific quotes from the text or other readings, as well as in-class activities and assignments that might be used to further discussion.

Close-Reading Strategies

The guide assumes that you will have read the entire text, but all units also offer suggestions for specific passages within the text that would benefit from careful and attentive reading, analysis, and discussion. During class discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close-reading lends itself well to both large-group work and small-group discussions, and it is an excellent way for students to develop their critical thinking skills as they make connections, use textual evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close-reading to work successfully, it is important that the teachers always remind the students to point to the passage, line, or occurrence that supports their position when sharing their ideas. Close-reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also allows students to assess the text on its own merits without essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Addressing Violence in the Novel

Teaching *Exit West* promises to be an enriching and exciting experience. Given the sensitive nature of the topics the book addresses, however, it is important to proceed with care. In the interest of supporting trauma-informed teaching, we begin Unit 6 of this guide with content warnings that alert you to topics—such as extremist violence and xenophobia—that some students could find triggering and/or difficult to navigate without prior preparation. Teachers can use the activities, guidelines, and more in this guide to emotionally prepare themselves and their students.

Teaching Toward the Student Conference

Schools participating in the 2026–2027 program will bring students to the University of Wisconsin-Madison on April 5, 2027, to present their work to their peers and meet the author Mohsin Hamid. Unit 7 in this guide is explicitly devoted to preparing students for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students’ projects must present a critical analysis of the text.

Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects, which will be submitted to the Great World Texts coordinator (greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu) approximately three weeks before the student conference. Each school will nominate one student, or group of students, whose work is exemplary, to present to the entire conference. It’s recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the “best” project for this presentation, which will be max 3

minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed, and timed (3 min max), and that they will provide an opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. All other students are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference and will have the opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present their work at the conference.

A Note on Embedded Links

You may notice throughout this guide that recommended readings and other sources contain embedded links. These links are available in the digital version of this guide, which can be found on the UW Madison Center for the Humanities webpage [humanities.wisc.edu].

A Note on Terminology

This guide employs a variety of terms to describe displaced people. This might be confusing for students who are unfamiliar with these terms, and we encourage educators to briefly describe them.

Refugee: a person who is “forced to flee their own country to seek safety in another country” (UNHCR). The term “refugee” also designates a legal status defined by international law that comes with protections (namely, the guarantee that they cannot be returned to the country from which they fled). To qualify for refugee status, applicants must demonstrate a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

Asylum Seeker: “a person who is seeking protection as a refugee, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision” (Amnesty International). As opposed to refugees, who receive refugee status while they are still abroad, asylum seekers apply for protection after they are already in the destination country or port of entry.

Migrant: a general term to describe someone “who [moves] from one place to another, often to find work or better living conditions” (International Catholic Migration Commission). Unlike refugees or asylum seekers, migrants are “not forced to leave their native countries because of persecution or violence but rather are seeking better opportunities” (International Rescue Committee). There is no internationally accepted legal definition for a migrant.

Immigrant: a person who “leave[s] his or her home and move to a foreign country with the intention of settling there, but not because they are fleeing war, violence or persecution” (International Rescue Committee). Unlike migrants, who move from place to place, immigrants usually move permanently and go through a long, legal process to become citizens. They are also free to return to their home country whenever they choose.

Internally Displaced Person: a person who “ha[s] been forced to flee their home by conflict, violence, persecution or disasters, however, unlike refugees, they remain within their own country” (UNHCR).

UNIT 1. REFUGEES & RESETTLEMENT: U.S POLICY & LOCAL CONTEXTS

Objectives

- To introduce key concepts from refugee studies and familiarize students with the bureaucratic process of seeking asylum
- To critique the myth of a “Nation of Immigrants” through a global lens
- To connect the themes of *Exit West* to local histories of displacement and resettlement in Wisconsin

Preparatory and Recommended Readings

- Berti, Benedetta, and Evelien Borgman. “What Does It Mean to Be a Refugee?” *YouTube*, uploaded by TED-Ed, 16 June 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=25bwiSikRsI.
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ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit is designed to provide historical and contemporary context to support class discussions on forced and voluntary migration, indigeneity, and national belonging. This unit starts with an opening activity that allows students to put themselves in the shoes of a refugee and consider whether they would take the same risks if faced with the difficult circumstances that confront refugees. The second subsection in this unit, “Refugee Studies: A Brief Overview,” familiarizes readers with who “counts” as a refugee and the bureaucratic process that they must go through in order to achieve asylum or citizenship. Subsection three, “A Nation of Immigrants,” interrogates the meaning of this common moniker for the United States, which advocates for an idea of cultural pluralism yet obscures the harsh reality that the US was founded on indigenous dispossession and forced migration through slavery. By detailing these histories of forced and voluntary migration, this unit allows students to investigate, “Who actually belongs here?” Finally, the last subsection, “Refugee and Indigenous Communities in Wisconsin” offers an overview of histories of migration to Wisconsin. Suggested activities, assignments, and discussion questions are interspersed throughout.

OPENING ACTIVITY

What Would Make You Leave?

1. On the board, display the question: “What would make you leave your home and country?” Give students a moment to consider the question.
2. Provide the following scenarios to students. By a show of hands, ask students if the given circumstances would make them pack their bags to embark on a dangerous journey of escape. Alternatively, you can also arrange, “Yes,” “No,” and “Maybe” corners of the room and ask students to go to the corner they most identify with.
 - Scenario 1: The internet and cell service cut out permanently across the nation, and the economy stalls. Do you leave?
 - Scenario 2: A new government takes over and passes a law making your specific lifestyle, religion, or speech illegal. If you stay, you might face arrest unless you conform. Do you leave?
 - Scenario 3: Bombing and street violence break out three cities away. It’s getting closer, but your neighborhood is currently safe. Do you leave?
 - Scenario 4: A mortar shell hits your neighbor's house. There is no water or electricity left. Your entire family remains in the city. Do you leave?

3. Ask a few volunteers to share the factors they considered while making their decision. Were any of the scenarios particularly difficult for them to decide on? Why?
4. How did you feel when you saw other students with different answers than you? What did this make you think? Did it ever influence your thinking or answer?

REFUGEE STUDIES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

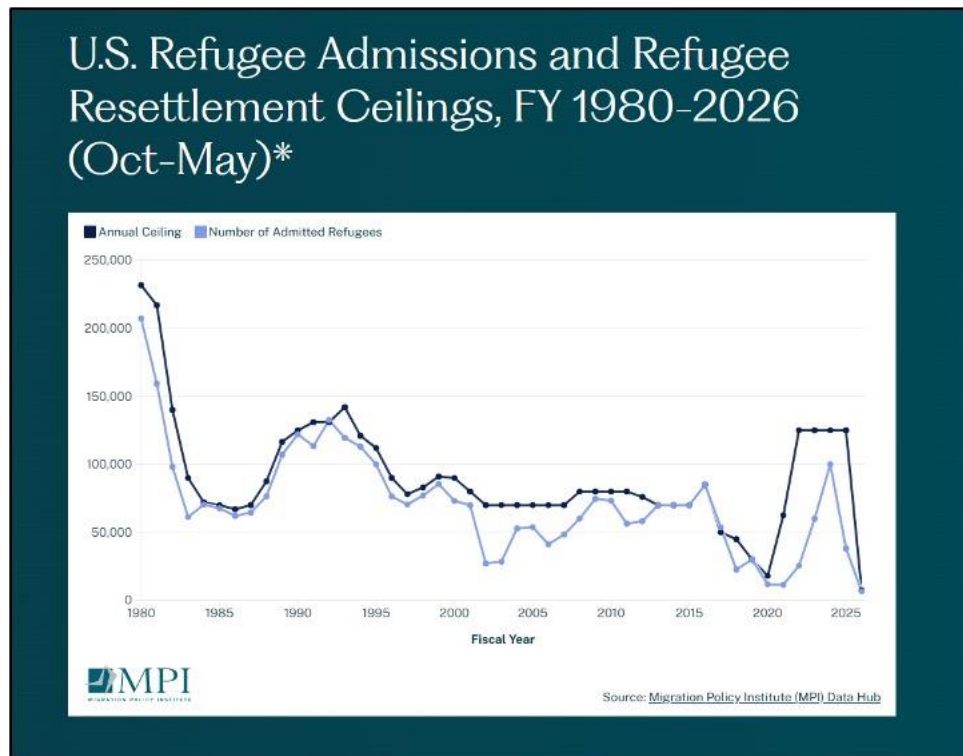
According to the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, which was drafted in response to the millions of displaced Europeans following World War II, refugees are defined as “people who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country.” Compared to other terms like immigrant or migrant, which are generally used to refer to someone who has willingly left their home to live in new country, refugee refers to someone who has been forced to leave. Significantly, “refugee” is also a legal status that entails rights and protections, while the term migrant is not. Refugees are namely protected by the principle of non-refoulement, which states that “a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.” In order to achieve refugee status, refugees must undergo a rigorous vetting process that includes health examinations, background checks, and multiple rounds of interviews to determine whether the applicant demonstrates a “well-founded fear of persecution.” Notably, many scholars are critical of the narrow parameters by which someone “counts” as a refugee, since this definition excludes economic migrants, those displaced by environmental disasters or climate change, and internally displaced people who, despite undergoing similar experiences as refugees, remain within the borders of their home country. Every country has its own bureaucratic process for refugee admissions. In the US, the process can be summed up in the graphic below:



Resettlement to the United States (Church World Service 2025)

Refugee resettlement is a collaborative effort between “the United Nations, the federal government and a network of nonprofit resettlement agencies” (“Refugee Resettlement”). First,

refugees must register for refugee status through the U.N High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to determine if they qualify. If successful, refugees are then referred to a host country that accepts refugees. If that country is the U.S, then next steps are coordinated by the U.S Refugee Admissions Program and “one of nine Resettlement Support Centers around the world, jointly operated by the State Department” (“Refugee Resettlement”). After refugees safely arrive in the host country, these refugee resettlement agencies assist in providing refugees with lodging, food, clothes, and resources necessary to find employment.



U.S Refugee Caps and Admissions (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub)

According to a Congressional Research Service report on global refugee resettlement, among the millions of refugees across the globe, “less than 1% are submitted for resettlement.” Each year, countries set a cap for refugee admissions, or the highest number of refugees that a country agrees to accept. In the US, this ceiling is set by the President in consultation with Congress. As of 2026, refugee admissions were set at 7,500, the lowest level in the 45-year history of the US’ refugee resettlement program. Above is a graph that represents the annual ceiling set for refugees in the U.S and the actual number of refugees admitted between the years 1980, when the resettlement program was established, and 2026.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. Although the plight of displacement is harrowing, why is actually attaining the *legal status* of “refugee” important for those fleeing home and seeking safety abroad?
2. Does understanding the complicated process of achieving refugee status alter your understanding of the early chapters of *Exit West* and what you think Mohsin Hamid was trying to say? What about the end of the novel?
3. Think about the terms immigrant, migrant, expatriate, and refugee. Compare the implications and associations you have with each label. How do they differ? For an involved explanation of each of these terms, please refer to the index in the introduction.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Place-Making & Definitions of Home

In this place-making activity, students are encouraged to consider what makes a place a home and when a place *stops* being a home. Throughout *Exit West*, even as Saeed and Nadia flee from city to city, they find ways of making a home out of their dwellings—whether in a mansion in London or a refugee tent in Mykonos. For instance, when the couple emerges from one of the doors to a hotel bedroom, they both know they will not be able to stay long. In spite of this knowledge, however, the first thing Saeed does is “[remove] the photo of his parents that he kept hidden in his clothing and [place] it on a bookshelf...transforming this narrow bedroom, at least partially, temporarily, into a home” (Hamid, 124). For her part, although Nadia cannot bring her records from home with her, she “rebuild[s] her music library on her phone” (Hamid, 135). Later, when Saeed is in charge of helping accommodate another refugee family in the worker’s camp in London, he is impressed by how quickly they have filled and decorated the tent to make it theirs. The daughter, he notices, has brought with her “a little notebook or diary” (Hamid, 185).

1. Ask students: “You are given less than 24 hours to flee your home. What are 3 things you would pack with you?”
2. Allow students to share their responses with each other in small groups.
3. Re-group the class for large discussion. Ask students: “Are there any connections between the items that everyone named?” Students may note that many of the items they named were either sentimental objects or related to practical survival.
4. Ask students, “Given these responses, what do you think makes a place a home?” Students may mention basic safety, community, or even memories and emotional connection.

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

The United States has commonly been referred to as “a nation of immigrants,” a phrase that gestures at the multiple cultures and identities that have shaped the country. The phrase was popularized by President John F. Kennedy, then a Senator, whose eponymous 1958 book was written to promote immigration reform in light of rising xenophobic sentiment. Although the phrase pushes for an idea of cultural pluralism, or the belief that “diverse immigrant contributions enrich the nation’s fabric,” many critics and activists have argued that this narrative glosses over the United States’ violent history of indigenous dispossession, slavery, and forced migration (Powers). After all, to refer to the US as “a nation of immigrants” is to undermine indigenous sovereignty by presuming that America was unoccupied and uncultivated land that free for the taking when, in fact, complex native societies had existed on that land for centuries prior to the arrival of settlers. This belief is known as *terra nullius* and was used to justify European settler colonialism, or the process by which Europeans settlers exterminated and permanently displaced the native inhabitants of a region (“Terra Nullius”).

In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid triangulates the refugee experience against various constructions of “nativeness.” In chapter ten, after Nadia and Saeed have reached Marin, California, Hamid names three types of indigeneity:

1. Native Americans, whose populations were severely depleted through genocide
2. Settler colonialists (or European migrants), who “claimed the rights of nativeness most forcefully,” and
3. Africans, who, according to most anthropologists, archaeologists, and geneticists, are the originators of modern homo sapiens, a theory known as “Out of Africa” theory.

Hamid’s allusions to these distinct histories highlights the way that empires weaponize the jurisdiction to determine who may stay and who must go, all while destabilizing the idea that any one group has a more legitimate claim to national belonging than another.

For instance, while Nadia and Saeed are in London, nativist mobs riot against the increased presence of refugees in an effort “to reclaim Britain for Britain” (Hamid, 135). By referring to these mobs as “nativists,” Hamid points out the irony of their assertion that they are the rightful inhabitants of Britain. Their claim to “nativeness” and absolute belonging is undercut by the fact that they are descendants of European settlers whose arrival to the Americas displaced groups who *were* native to the land. This irony is sharpened after Nadia and Saeed reach Marin, where they occasionally interact with Native Americans sharing their tales and selling their wares at trading posts. In alluding to the history of indigenous dispossession, Hamid undermines nativist rhetoric about who does and does not belong by offering an example of a group who “was there first.” For more on the history of nativism across geographic contexts, see Unit 4: Anti-Immigrant Sentiment, and the subunit, “Nativism & Nationalism.”

Hamid's naming of the African slave trade also invites the reader to think about what is illuminated when distinct histories of migration are considered together rather than separately. In this way, Hamid places the figure of the refugee in conversation with what scholars have called the "settler-native-slave triad." In their seminal work, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," indigenous studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain how "people of color who enter/are brought into the settler colonial nation-state also enter the triad of relations between settler-native-slave" (Tuck & Yang, 17). They write:

...dispossessed people are brought onto seized Indigenous land through other colonial projects. Other colonial projects include enslavement...but also military recruitment, low-wage and high-wage labor recruitment (such as agricultural workers and overseas-trained engineers), and displacement/migration (such as the coerced immigration from nations torn by U.S. wars or devastated by U.S. economic policy). In this set of settler colonial relations, colonial subjects who are displaced by external colonialism, as well as racialized and minoritized by internal colonialism, still occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land. (Tuck & Yang, 7).

Just as Hamid critiques the way that "nativeness" is weaponized against newcomers, he also honors the distinct experience of forced labor migration in comparison to the refugee plight. Rather than being disenfranchised and forced to move to and work in a new land, as slaves were, refugees are fleeing *from* violence and precarity.

Ultimately, while the myth of the U.S as "a nation of immigrants" paints a simple portrait of migration as a linear, voluntary progression from arrival to assimilation, *Exit West* skewers this national narrative by highlighting the histories of slavery and indigenous dispossession that such a narrative elides. Rather than fuel a sense of national exceptionalism, as the "nation of immigrants" rhetoric does, *Exit West* imagines the disintegration of national borders and a world shaped by global co-existence.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

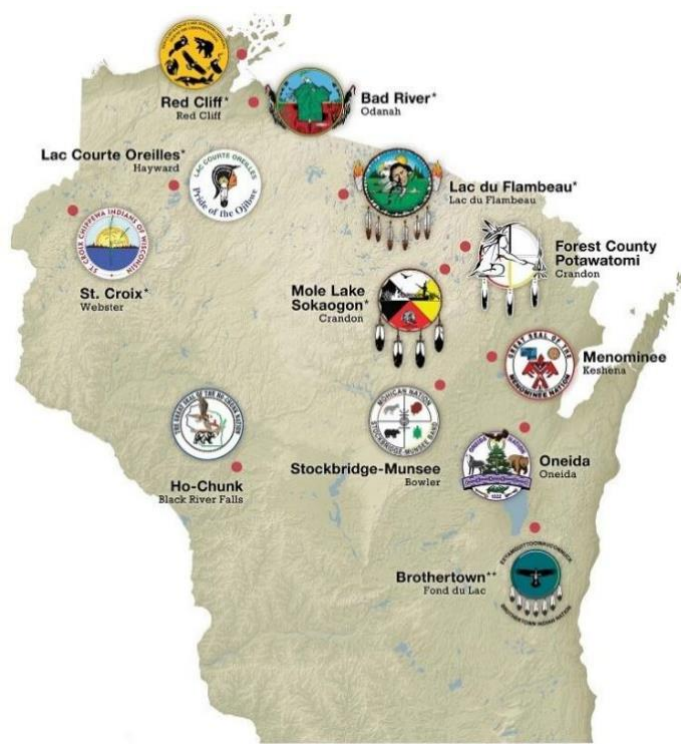
1. Have you heard the phrase "a nation of immigrants" before? Who or what does it make you think of? Who is left out of this narrative?
2. When Saeed and Nadia are in Marin, Hamid reminds the reader that their new home in California used to belong to Native Americans. Why do you think he brings this up?
3. Do you think that Saeed and Nadia "squatting" in the mansion in London can be compared to European settlement of Native American land? Why or why not?
4. What is the difference between fleeing home as a refugee and being stolen from home as a slave? Why does Hamid bring up African slaves in a book about modern refugees?

REFUGEE AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN WISCONSIN

While *Exit West* spans several geographic sites from London to Tokyo, Tijuana, Dubai, and more, the novel's central concerns about forging community and belonging on contested land can be observed here in Wisconsin, which not only has a rich Native American legacy, but has also resettled several refugee communities.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin is home to “11 federally recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities,” which include:

- Bad River Band of Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians
- Forest County Potawatomi Community
- Ho-Chunk Nation
- Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Menominee Nation
- Stockbridge Munsee Band of Mohican Indians
- Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin
- Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- St. Croix Band of Chippewa Indians
- Sokaogon Chippewa Community



Brothertown Nation is the only tribe in Wisconsin that is not federally recognized, since the tribe “petitioned the US federal government for individual land allotments and US citizenship” (in 1839) to resist displacement and, as a result, was stripped of their tribal status (Griffith). Although many of these nations have ancestral roots in what is today Wisconsin, other indigenous communities like the Stockbridge-Munsee, Oneida, and Brothertown were forcibly relocated to Wisconsin from the Northeast between the 1820s–1830s. Just as Hamid reveals how tricky ideas of nativeness and belonging are, so too can this trickiness be observed in local Wisconsin state history, which lays bare the power of governments to settle certain groups while unsettling others.

Wisconsin's Hmong population

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

While Wisconsin's indigenous nations were dispossessed of their larger territories and confined to reservations, those same ceded territories became the very land that thousands of resettled international refugees would call home. The first refugee group to arrive in Wisconsin were the Hmong, a stateless ethnic group originally from Southern China who were displaced in the late 18th century to the mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and some parts of Myanmar (Tapp). The Hmong first came to the US after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, when they fled persecution by the communist Pathet Lao government for their collaboration with the US and South Vietnam. According to the Migration Policy Institute, “approximately 90 percent of Hmong refugees have been resettled in the US,” although “France, Canada, and Australia” have also accepted Hmong refugees. Within the US, “California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were leaders in accepting Hmong refugees” (Behnke). To date, Wisconsin boasts the third largest Hmong population in the US, with significant populations in “Milwaukee, Wausau, Sheboygan, La Crosse, Madison, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Appleton, Oshkosh, Manitowoc, Stevens Point, Wisconsin Rapids, Menomonie and Fond du Lac” (Behnke; Im). Because the Hmong were the first modern refugee group to arrive in Wisconsin, they played a great role in shaping Wisconsin's current refugee resettlement infrastructure. For instance, due to the sudden, large presence of Hmong students in historically homogenous Wisconsin towns, public school systems began building stronger English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Moreover, “in response to the challenges experienced by refugees, Hmong community leaders emerged to serve as bridges between their communities and employers, sometimes through groups known as mutual assistance associations (MAAs),” which are “locally-based refugee service agencies” that provided services from employment training, housing assistance, translation services, and more (Vang). Today, the Hmong remain Wisconsin's largest refugee population.

TOP COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR REFUGEES RESETTLED IN THE LAST FISCAL YEAR

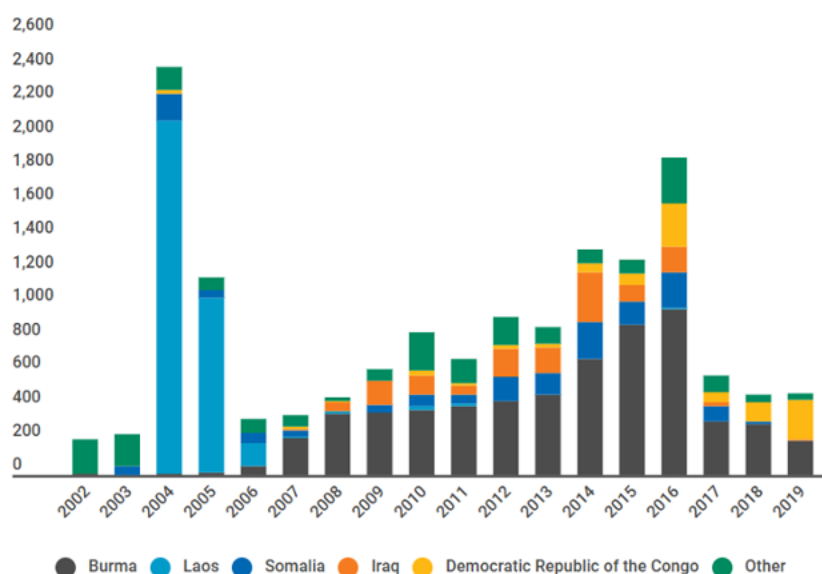


Top Countries of Origin for Refugees in WI in 2023 (American Immigration Council)

After the Hmong, the next major refugee population to come to Wisconsin were “people with Slavic and Illyrian ancestry” who fled “after the collapse of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia,” and whose numbers peaked by “the end of 1999” (Sanders et al. 1).

Up until this point, “well over 70% of Wisconsin’s annual refugee resettlement originated from just three regions: Southeast Asia, the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia Republic”¹ (Sanders et al. 1). After 2000, however, “trends in Wisconsin’s refugee resettlement began to show much more diversification in country of origin” (Sanders et al. 1). Today, Wisconsin has resettled “over 75,000” refugees “from 50 different countries” since the start of the state’s refugee resettlement program in the 1980s (ACLU of Wisconsin). As of 2023, the top countries of origin for refugees in Wisconsin are: Myanmar (also known as Burma), Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, Somalia, and Syria (American Immigration Council). The visual above displays the countries of origin for Wisconsin’s Refugee arrivals between 2002-2019. For a more extended history of refugee communities in Wisconsin, including their major cities of resettlement, please refer to the following chart.

Where Wisconsin's Refugees Have Come From, 2002-2019



Source: U.S. State Department Refugee Processing Center

Countries of Origin of Refugees in WI (Will Cushman for PBS Wisconsin)

¹ According to the Migration Policy Institute, “The former USSR includes the following present-day nations: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine” while “refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Kosovo, and Slovenia are all included in ‘Yugoslavia.’”

REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN WISCONSIN (1980–PRESENT)

DATES OF RESETTLEMENT	MAIN NATIONALITIES/ GROUPS	GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT	MAJOR SETTLEMENT AREAS IN WI
1980–2005	Hmong, Lao, & Vietnamese	End of the Vietnam War in 1975	Wausau, Sheboygan, Green Bay, Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Milwaukee.
1992–2001	Jewish & Christian minorities from Former Soviet Republics (Ukraine, Russia, Belarus)	Collapse of the USSR in 1991	Milwaukee, Madison, and surrounding suburbs
1993–Present	Somalis	Somali Civil War from 1990–92	Barron County, Milwaukee, Madison, and Green Bay
1997–2003	Former Yugoslavia (Bosnians, Croatians, Serbians, Kosovars) and Albania	The Balkan Wars (1991–1995)	Milwaukee, West Allis, Cudahy, and parts of Waukesha County.
2011–Present	Karen and Rohingya ethnic groups from Myanmar (Burma)	Rohingya Genocide in 2017 & Military Junta starting in 2021	Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Oshkosh, and Fox Valley cities
2011–2016	Syrians	Syrian Civil War starts in 2011	Milwaukee, Madison, Oshkosh, Sheboygan, Eau Claire
2014–Present	Congolese (DRC)	Civil & Regional Conflict due to aftermath of 1994 Rwandan Genocide & Resource Exploitation	Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Appleton, Oshkosh, and Fox Valley cities
2008–2017	Iraqis	End of War in Iraq in 2011	Milwaukee and Madison metropolitan areas.
2021–2022	Afghans	End of War in Afghanistan in 2021	Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Wausau, and the Fox Valley area
2020s–Present	Venezuelans & Nicaraguans*	Maduro’s Authoritarian Regime (2013–Present) & Ortega’s political repression (2018–Present)	Whitewater

*The majority of Venezuelan and Nicaraguans do not go through the U.S refugee process, because refugee status is granted while an applicant is still abroad, but most Venezuelan and Nicaraguan refugees arrive at the Southern U.S border, making them asylum seekers.

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Who Deserves Asylum?: Evaluating Asylum Applications

This activity is adapted from a lesson plan designed by immigrationhistory.org. In this exercise, students will learn the criteria for attaining asylum status in the United States by evaluating sample i-589 forms, the official document used by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to request asylum and withhold removal/deportation. Students will then be asked to research the claim and determine whether or not they believe the applicant fulfills the requirements to earn asylum and relocate to the U.S.

Preparation: Provide students with an overview of U.S. refugee/asylum policy (refer to Subunit 2 Refugee Studies: An Overview). For clarification, refugees are located abroad when they apply for refugee status. If an applicant is already within the U.S. or a U.S. port of entry, they are classified as asylum seekers. This activity focuses on asylum applications, *not* on applications for refugee status. To be eligible for asylum, applicants must prove that they have or will be persecuted on the basis of “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (USCIS). This application is only available for those who are physically present in the U.S. and do not have U.S. citizenship.

Divide the class into 4 groups. Assign one of the following i-589 forms to each group:

- [i-589 Honduras LGBT](#)
- [i-589 Tamil Nationality](#)
- [i-589 Eritrea PO](#)
- [i-589 Mexico Gang](#)

Instructions: Students must work together to assess whether the asylum application they received would likely be accepted or denied by the United States based on the above criteria. Advise students to look for trustworthy sources that describe these countries’ conditions. For example, students should look at US. Department of State Human Rights Reports for the year that the asylum seeker is claiming to be persecuted. Other sources might be: Amnesty International, the United Nations, national news from those countries, etc.

Regroup: Have each group share whether they believe their asylum seeker qualifies for asylum and their justification for why or why not. For assistance evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each application, please refer to the original lesson plan at immigrationhistory.org (use digital guide for access).

2. Essay Prompt on the Effectiveness of U.S Immigration Policy

The U.S. has historically been regarded as a haven for the persecuted and forlorn. This is exemplified by one of the most iconic American symbols, the Statue of Liberty, which displays the words of poet Emma Lazarus: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Despite this image of hospitality, however, the U.S. has a long history of practicing exclusionary immigration and refugee policies. What do you believe the U.S. represents and to what extent do you believe that current American immigration policies support or undermine these values? Write an essay about whether current U.S. refugee and asylum policies should be maintained, reformed, or completely overhauled to effectively handle global displacement.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite credible sources. These can range from international and U.S. immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

3. “Getting to Know our Neighbors:” Community Resource Directory

This summative project assignment is designed to connect the themes of *Exit West* to students’ own local context. Throughout the novel, Nadia and Saeed experience several cycles of uprooting and rebuilding. In London, the pair work in a labor camp called the London Halo, where “in exchange for their labor in clearing terrain and building infrastructure,” “they [are] promised...a home on forty square meters of land” (Hamid, 169–170). Evidently, as opposed to contemporary nativist rhetoric that refugees and migrants are a “drain” on national resources, Nadia, Saeed, and thousands like them prove that displaced people contribute greatly to the growth of the communities they join. Beyond highlighting the value, skills, and agency of refugees, however, *Exit West* is ultimately an investigation about how one maintains a sense of culture, identity, and belonging in an inevitably shifting landscape. In this project, students will be asked to choose one community from either category below:

Option A: Indigenous Nations of WI

- Bad River Band of Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians
- Forest County Potawatomi Community
- Ho-Chunk Nation
- Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Menominee Nation
- Stockbridge Munsee Band of Mohican Indians
- Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin
- Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- St. Croix Band of Chippewa Indians
- Sokaogon Chippewa Community

Option B: Refugee Communities in WI

- Afghan
- Bosnian/Former Yugoslavian
- Congolese
- Hmong
- Iraqi
- Lao
- Myanmar (Karen and Rohingya)
- Nicaraguan
- Somali
- Sudanese
- Syrian
- Ukrainian
- Venezuelan
- Vietnamese

Instructions: Create a resource guide for the community you selected that includes the following elements:

1. Origins/Connection to Wisconsin: If you selected an indigenous nation, where are their ancestral lands, historical territories, and modern reservations/tribal boundaries? If you selected a refugee community, what was the primary cause of their displacement and what years did most of this refugee group arrive in Wisconsin? Where in the state is this community concentrated? (specific counties, cities, tribal lands, etc.).
2. Culture/Ongoing Presence: How does the community maintain its culture, identity, and social structure in Wisconsin today? Please highlight at least one community organization, initiative, event, or cultural center to research.
3. Call to Action: What is one key issue or goal that is most central to this community today? How can Wisconsinites be better informed, hospitable neighbors?

The project may be presented in a variety of creative formats, including an infographic, short video, podcast, zine, or even a digital map.

UNIT 2. EXPLORING GENRE AND LITERARY DEVICES

Objectives

- To discuss *Exit West* as a magical realist novel
- To examine the metaphorical function of magical doors in the novel
- To explore the literary devices, organization, and characterization in *Exit West*

Preparatory and Recommended Readings

- [PBS News Hour. “Exit West author Mohsin Hamid answers Your Questions.” March 30, 2018.](#)
- Hong, Mai-Linh K. “Navigating the Global Refugee Regime: Law, Myth, Story.” *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 34-48, <https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/doi/abs/10.1080/00447471.2020.1776571>

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ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit examines *Exit West* as a magical realist novel and explores the implications that Mohsin’s generic and literary choices have on telling a refugee story. Magical realism is “a genre of art, literature, and film that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction” (Caffrey). Elements of magical realism are evident in *Exit West*’s reimagining of the refugee plight. In the novel, magical doors replace a complicated refugee resettlement bureaucracy so that Nadia and Saeed, as well as other refugee groups, are able to transport themselves to safety anywhere in the world without dealing with border authorities, red tape, or even the material concerns of the journey. In this unit, students will consider how the genre, literary devices, structure and organization, and characterization in *Exit West* comment on the global refugee regime and reveal how refugees negotiate their own identity and agency within the process of displacement.

The first subsection in this unit, “What is Magical Realism?” introduces students to the genre of *Exit West* and provides examples of other major magical realist works across literature, film, and art. The second subsection, “The Black Doors” evaluates the motif of the magical doors in the novel and how they represent a world without borders. The third subunit, “Narrative Style and Organization” explores how Mohsin’s writing style not only reflects the disorientation of the refugee journey, but also mirrors our changing ideas of place and belonging in a rapidly globalizing world. Subunit four, “Characterization” dives into Saeed and Nadia’s character development and their differing attitudes towards power, resistance, and morality. Suggested activities, assignments, and discussion questions are interspersed throughout.

WHAT IS MAGICAL REALISM?

In *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia’s country is splintered by civil war and, amid the militants’ takeover of the city, rumors begin to circulate of magic “doors that could take you elsewhere,” far from the danger that awaits those who remain in the country (Hamid, 72). The doors are the only fantastical element in an otherwise realist story of global migration, and they teleport Saeed and Nadia from their unnamed country of birth to Mykonos, Greece, London, England, and Marin, California. As opposed to pure fantasy, the hallmark of magical realist texts is that “the supernatural...is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Zamora & Faris, 3). In *Exit West*, the existence of these doors is not met with incredulity, shock, or awe, but is merely an accepted facet of the characters’ world.

By avoiding a detailed explanation of how the magical doors function, Hamid reorients the reader's attention towards the emotional and psychic experience of Saeed and Nadia, and of refugees more broadly. In other words, he does not spectacularize the dangerous journey that refugees must make to reach safety, but instead asks readers to consider in what ways these groups are not unlike us. For instance, in an interview with PBS News Hour, Hamid shares the following: "We have become so focused on the story of how somebody crosses the border, how did you cross the Mediterranean in a small boat, or how did you cross the US-Mexico border, crawl underneath the barbed wire? And we think that people who have done that are different from us...But once you take away that part of their story, you're left with people who are just like us, actually, that any of us can have this experience." In magical realist texts, supernatural and fantastic elements are used to illuminate some insight about our everyday reality that might otherwise go unnoticed. In the case of *Exit West*, Hamid critiques the way the suffering of refugees is naturalized in the news and media. By rendering mundane the journey towards refuge, Hamid allows readers to notice instead refugees' humanity. Below is a brief history of magical realism as a genre:

- **1925:** German art historian Franz Roh coins the term magical realism (*magischer Realismus*) to describe European art's turn away from the chaos of Expressionism towards a new style that highlighted the wonder and strangeness that can be found in the ordinary
- **1940's–50's The Latin American Movement:** Latin American authors like Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Arturo Uslar-Pietri adopted Roh's ideas of magical realism and "reformulated the concept to propose it as an aesthetic form derived...from the hybrid nature of Latin American culture and society" (qtd in Figlerowicz & Mertehikian, 6-7). Other prominent Latin American magical realists include Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isabel Allende.
- **1980's–90s Magical Realism & The Postcolonial:** Magical realism expands from its association with Latin American literature and begins to be considered a "postcolonial aesthetic formation" and "worldwide literary trend" exemplified by writers like Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, Franz Kafka, Haruki Murakami, and more (Figlerowicz & Mertehikian, 6-7). The coupling between magical realism and postcolonialism was primarily fostered by American universities that started to consider the genre across broader historical and geographic contexts.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. How does leaving the logistics of the magic doors unexplained change the focus of the story?
2. In standard realism, the journey of the immigrant or refugee—in boats, at borders, and over dangerous terrain—is a central feature of diaspora narratives. Why do you think Hamid uses magic to skip the physical journey entirely?

Suggested In-Class Activities

What's Magical Realist about this Sentence?

1. Display the following sentence, which can be found on page 160, on the board:
“Out of a black door in a nearby cantina, admittedly an atypical place for a young woman like herself to be found, a young woman was emerging. The owner made no fuss over it, for the times were such, and once this young woman had emerged she rose and strode to the orphanage.”
2. Give students a few minutes to dissect the sentence. Ask: What is mundane or normal about the sentence? What is magical about it?
3. The key to magical realism is the juxtaposition of fantasy against a flat, matter-of-fact tone. Magical realism is often deployed to literalize or make tangible some emotion or metaphor. In the book, doors literalize but also undermine the infrastructure of national borders. Provide a few common examples of human experiences of societal pressures on the board. Examples include:
 - Growing apart from a friend
 - The weight of carrying a secret
 - Social anxiety
 - Feeling infatuated with someone
4. Ask students to select from one of the above examples or make up their own. Direct students to think about this emotion or experience, and write a “magical rule” that externalizes the feeling. For instance, in a magical realist universe, perhaps physical distance always matches one’s emotional distance so that friends who have a fight cannot step closer than 10 feet from one another until they reconcile.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Close-Reading Activity

Ask students to read pages 29-31 that starts with the sentence, “He was surprised to hear a noise behind him,” which is the earliest mention of the magical doors. In this passage, a xenophobic young man in Tokyo notices two Filipina girls emerge from a door.

Encourage students to examine this passage with careful attention to tone and diction. Facilitate a class discussion where students can share their insights and interpretation of this passage. Some questions that may be a good starting point include:

1. Focus on Hamid's description of the door, "a disused door to the rear of the bar" that was "always kept locked" but was now "somehow open," and a "portal of complete blackness" (Hamid 30). What kind of language is used here? Why do you think the author chose to describe the doors in this way?
2. When the young man observes the two girls emerging out of the door, what is his immediate reaction? Is he amazed, terrified, or curious?
3. Why do you think the author focuses more on the man's dislike of Filipinos than describing the doors? What effect does this have?
4. Why do you think the author opens the passage by mentioning that the man's "whiskey came from Ireland, a place he had never been to but evinced mild fondness for?" How does this compare to his reaction to the Filipina girls?

THE BLACK DOORS

This subunit focuses on the magical black doors and the myriad metaphors they stand in for. Most notably, the doors in the novel transform the characters' ideas of nationality, territory, and belonging by facilitating a "world without borders." In this way, the doors represent the possibility of global citizenship. According to the United Nations, global citizenship refers to "the belief that individuals are members of multiple, diverse, local and non-local networks rather than single actors affecting isolated societies" ("Global Citizenship"). The idea that one's identity can transcend national borders and that rights and responsibilities can derive from a broader category of humanity than from citizenship to a nation is exemplified by the unexpected transnational alliances and intimacies that the characters form with one another. For instance, Nadia's acceptance into the Nigerian community in London, Saeed's marriage to the preacher's daughter, and even the romance that blossoms between the Dutch and Brazilian Portuguese men are all facilitated by the doors' weakening of national borders.

Significantly, however, the conceit of the magical doors does not lead to a utopian world united under a shared sense of cosmopolitanism. Nativist groups riot against the presence of refugees, urging for the fortification of walls, fences, and borders, and the doors themselves are heavily surveilled. This xenophobic reaction underscores the way that borders and walls are not just physical, but ideological as well. Furthermore, although access to the doors is coveted, passing through them is described "like dying and like being born," alluding to the painful price of crossing borders: the shedding of one's old life and the struggle of assimilation (Hamid, 104). Notably, too, the doors are unpredictable and those who enter cannot choose their destination. As Nadia and Saeed hope for a magic door to appear before them, they observe:

All their doors remained simple doors...but each of their doors, regarded thus with a twinge of irrational possibility, became partially animate as well, an object with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools. (Hamid, 73)

Here, the doors' "power to mock" those who wish to leave is a metaphor for a global refugee bureaucracy that arbitrarily determines who may go and who must stay (see Unit 1 Refugees & Resettlement, Subsection: Refugee Studies: A Brief Overview). As literary scholar Mai-Linh Hong writes, "By replacing the UNHCR with *magic*, the novel...leaps to an implied conclusion: refugees might as well wait for a magic door to open, if they are waiting on the United Nations to rescue them" (Hong, 46).

In critiquing the global refugee regime, Hamid makes clear that not all of the magical doors are equal. He writes:

...the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from...or perhaps because there were simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all. (Hamid, 106)

The limited number of doors leading to wealthier nations and the heightened security around them gestures at the West's investment in upholding impenetrable national boundaries. Indeed, as literary scholar Hadji Bakara writes, "the most visible narratives of the 'refugee experience' [tend] to be unidirectional 'stories of flight' from a single catastrophic event in the past towards safety and security in the West" (Bakara, 290). In reality, however, the majority of refugees flee to countries that neighbor their countries of birth, so that the countries that bear the greatest burden of hosting refugees are primarily located in the Global South.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine a world in which the magical doors are real. Who do you think has the most to gain from the dissolution of national borders? Who has the most to lose?
2. The doors effectively bypass physical boundaries like oceans, walls, and fences and even circumvent the need for complicated immigration and refugee resettlement processes. As you read the novel, however, do the boundaries between people actually disappear? Or do people just build new walls in their minds?

Suggested In-Class Activity

Mapping Global Migration Flows: From *Exit West* to the Real World

1. As an opening question, ask students: “Where in the world would most people go to feel safe in a crisis? What kinds of laws, infrastructure, or resources would a place need to be considered a refuge?”
2. Consider the title, *Exit West*. What meanings do you derive from it? Students may note that the title sounds like GPS directions. They may also observe that countries in the “West” are often considered a final destination where safety is finally achieved.
3. Refer to the passage on page 164, when Nadia and Saeed are discussing the violence of the nativist group in London:

“I can understand it,” she said. “Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.”

“Millions arrived in our country,” Saeed replied. “When there were wars nearby.”

“That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose.”

Ask students: “What distinction is Nadia trying to draw between their home country and the United Kingdom? If both countries hosted a large refugee population, why does there seem to be a stronger reaction against refugees in London than in their home city?”

It may be helpful to recall that the first line of the novel describes Nadia and Saeed’s city as “swollen by refugees” (Hamid, 3).

4. Direct students to the UNHCR’s [“Refugee Data Finder.”](#) Navigate to Figure 4 for the interactive map of “Neighboring Host Countries.” Allow students to select from various refugee groups to reveal a map of which countries accepted the most refugees from that group. As students will come to find, most refugees do not “exit West,” but remain close to their home country.

NARRATIVE STYLE & ORGANIZATION

Structurally and stylistically, *Exit West* employs several literary techniques that allow the reader to zoom out from Saeed and Nadia’s story to get a snapshot of larger geopolitical contexts. Throughout the novel, the main plot of Saeed and Nadia’s escape from their home country is interrupted by vignettes of various characters from other parts of the globe who also pass through the doors. A vignette is a “brief literary device that captures a specific moment, character, or scene without the structure of a full narrative... [vignettes] serve to enrich a larger work by providing descriptive insights that enhance the reader’s understanding of the context or characters” (Ungvarsky, 2023). As a whole, the vignettes paint a portrait of a world in transition, as they progress from expressing an initial fear of refugees to illustrating a more accepting international community made possible by the magical doors. For instance, the first vignette in the novel depicts a “dark” man in Australia entering through a door in the home of a “pale-

skinned woman” who is sleeping and unaware of his presence (Hamid, 5-6). Hamid’s descriptions of lightness and darkness draw upon prevailing rhetoric that casts refugees as intrinsically foreign threats to supposedly “pure” national identity. Conversely, in one of the later vignettes in the novel, an elderly Dutch man makes the acquaintance of another older Brazilian Portuguese gentleman, and they develop a romance, representing how human connection can transcend national borders.

In addition to the vignettes, Hamid’s use of lengthy, meandering sentence structures emulates the disorientation and endless experience of displacement that Saeed and Nadia must navigate. Take, for example, Hamid’s description of Nadia’s first time passing through one of the magic doors:

Saeed was emerging and Nadia crawled forward to give him space, and as she did so she noticed the sinks and mirrors for the first time, the tiles of the floor, the stalls behind her, all the doors of which save one were normal doors, all but the one through which she had come, and through which Saeed was now coming, which was black, and she understood that she was in the bathroom of some public place, and she listened intently but it was silent, the only noises emanating from her, from her breathing, and from Saeed, his quiet grunts like those of a man exercising, or having sex. (Hamid, 104)

Here, Hamid’s enumeration of different aspects of Nadia’s new location from the “tiles of the floor,” to the stalls and sinks, puts the reader in Nadia’s shoes as she slowly processes her surroundings. Although it is initially unclear where the setting is, by the end of the sentence, Nadia (and the reader) comes to realize that she is in a public restroom.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your experience reading the first few chapters of this novel? Were the lengthy sentences frustrating or confusing to follow? Did you get used to the writing style by the end?
2. How do you think your experience of the novel would change if Hamid had written in more standardized prose? Why do you think Hamid chose to write in this style?
3. Across the vignettes, none of the characters know each other and the novel never returns to the same character. If these characters are not connected by plot, what do you think they *are* connected by?
4. What do the vignettes illuminate about Saeed and Nadia’s story?

Suggested In-Class Activity

Vignette Jigsaw

1. Divide the class into small groups and assign a different vignette to each group. For reference, below are the page numbers of every vignette in the novel:
 - pg. 4-5: The Dark Man & the “Pale-skinned” Australian Woman
 - pg. 29-31: The Tokyo Man & the two Filipina Girls
 - pg. 48-50: The Old Man in San Diego
 - pg. 66-68: The Brave Man near Nadia’s neighborhood
 - pg. 90-93: The Tamil Family escaping to Dubai through Security Cameras
 - pg. 109-111: The Young Woman Activist in Vienna
 - pg. 129-131: The Accountant in Kentish Town who moves to Namibia
 - pg. 159-161: The Mother who Returns to a Tijuana Orphanage for her Daughter
 - pg. 173-176: The Dutch & Brazilian Portuguese Lovers
 - pg. 207-209: The Old Woman in Palo Alto
 - pg. 223-226: The Maid in Marrakesh
2. Give each group 5 minutes to discuss the following questions: What is happening in this snapshot? Are there any resonances between this vignette and Saeed and Nadia’s story?
3. Re-group the class. Calling on a representative from each group, ask students to share why they believe the inclusion of their assigned vignette is crucial to the story as a whole.
4. Takeaway: Saeed and Nadia’s journey is not exceptional. The process of (forced) migration and globalization is happening to everyone everywhere.

CHARACTERIZATION

In an interview with UC Berkeley News, Mohsin Hamid describes how Nadia and Saeed are foils of one another. In literature, a foil is defined as “a character designed to contrast with another character, typically to highlight specific traits and qualities of the latter” (Campbell, 2020). Hamid explains:

Saeed is more nostalgic in temperament: He looks back to his childhood, to the past, as a model of where he wants to be. Nadia is more resolutely future-looking: She looks ahead, and doesn’t want to look back...of course, Saeed and Nadia have both tendencies, too—neither is fully one nor the other. Bringing these two characters together was a chance for me to explore the tensions of these two views, tensions I feel myself.

Throughout the novel, Nadia and Saeed’s differences emerge in various ways, most notably in their opposing reactions to living in the refugee camps and shantytowns of London. While Saeed seeks to be in the company of his own countrymen, Nadia is more comfortable interacting with

other groups. For Saeed, comfort is found in restoring or preserving the homeland that he lost. This is especially clear when he suggests to Nadia that they move into the house in London where others from their country reside. They exchange the following back-and-forth:

“Why would we want to move?” she said.

“To be among our own kind.”

“What makes them our own kind?”

“They’re from our country”

“From the country we used to be from”

“Yes.” Saeed tried not to sound annoyed.

“We’ve left that place.”

“That doesn’t mean we have no connection” (Hamid, 153).

Here, Saeed defines belonging along national lines. Nadia, however, is more interested in exploring what kinship and community can mean beyond shared culture or nation, believing that what makes someone their “own kind” has nothing to do with where they came from.

Significantly, the tension between Nadia and Saeed extend beyond their differing understandings of belonging and also takes shape in the ways they view morality and resistance, especially as their circumstances throw into flux previously held beliefs about respectability and humanity. For instance, Saeed feels a sense of shame about how the refugees occupy and take food from the house in London, even scolding Nadia for taking a long shower in a house that is not theirs. Nadia, however, is insistent that they must use any means possible to not only survive in precarious conditions, but to do so with dignity. The two thus represent opposing views: Nadia sees her humanity as a given and claims cleanliness and comfort as inherent rights. Saeed, however, believes that humanity must be proven through behavior and action, even (or perhaps especially) when all else has been stripped from them.

The disintegration of Saeed and Nadia’s relationship over the course of the novel is not a failure of their love. Instead, it underscores how the primary factors binding the two together were trauma and survival. Thus, Saeed and Nadia parting ways is not a “sad ending,” but rather, emblematic of their success in achieving safety, for they now have the freedom to discover who they are and live accordingly to their needs and desires.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Inside Out: Characterization Exercise

1. On the board, draw two general human silhouettes: one that represents Nadia and one that represents Saeed. Assign half the class to Nadia and the other half to Saeed.
2. On the outside of the silhouette, ask students to write down characteristics of the characters’ external appearance. This may include physical features, clothing, mannerisms, associated objects, etc.

3. On the inside of the silhouette, ask students to write down the internal characteristics of each character. This may include personality traits, beliefs and values, direct quotes, etc.
4. Re-group the class for a discussion. Ask students, “Do the characters’ personalities align with the expectations you might have of them based on their external appearance?”
Students may notice: Nadia wears a conservative black robe but is rebellious and independent. Saeed looks like a modern city guy but is actually very traditional.
5. Ask students, “Why do you think their external descriptions don't match their true personalities? Why do you think Hamid chose to portray Nadia and Saeed this way?”

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Hamid tells a story of global migration through the intimate relationship of a couple?
2. Nadia adapts quickly into the Nigerian community in London, feeling more at home as she becomes familiar with them. Saeed, meanwhile, seeks out those from his own country who remind him of the home he lost. How do you think each of them defines belonging? In a strange country, do you think you would find more comfort among others who look and speak like you or by creating a new community with new people?
3. In what ways do you think Nadia and Saeed are changed after fleeing their country and experiencing displacement?
4. Do you consider the end of the novel a “happy” or “sad” ending and why? Why do you think Hamid did not have Nadia and Saeed stay together?

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Essay Prompt on Legality vs. Morality in *Exit West*

In times of crisis, one’s personal standards of right and wrong are transformed by the fight for survival. For refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence, war, and precarity, the question of how far one might go to secure one’s safety—even if it means crossing borders illegally—is especially fraught. In *Exit West*, this moral negotiation is exemplified by Saeed and Nadia. While Nadia views cleanliness, comfort, and safety as basic human rights that are essential to maintaining her dignity, Saeed believes that bypassing laws and taking what is not theirs is what degrades their moral character.

Write an essay analyzing the way that *Exit West* explores the tension between legality and morality, respectability and survival. Does the novel suggest that desperation and crisis push people to break or re-write their code of ethics? Or does it illustrate how fighting for the right to

take up space is itself an act of political resistance? Defend your argument using textual evidence.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite credible sources. These can range from international and U.S immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

2. Object Analysis: Evaluating the Symbols of *Exit West*

In this assignment, students will be asked to pay close attention to a recurring symbol in the novel and examine how its meanings shift as Saeed and Nadia enter new contexts. They will then present their analysis in the form of a tri-fold brochure.

Instructions: In literature a symbol is “an object, person, situation, or action that has a literal meaning in a story but suggests or represents other meanings” (“Symbolism”). Throughout *Exit West*, Hamid employs a variety of symbols to advance the story, whether that be to further the characterization of Saeed and Nadia, to gesture at universal themes of displacement and belonging, or to signal the changes in characters’ relationship to one another. Please select one recurring symbol in the novel, such as the magical doors, Nadia’s black robe, cell phones, drones/technology, the psychedelic mushrooms, etc. What do you think this symbol represents? How does this meaning change throughout the novel, if it does? You will display your analysis in the form of a tri-fold brochure.

Your brochure must include the following components:

- An illustration of the symbol and a title
- Part 1: Origin (in the Unnamed City): What was the object’s original function and what did it represent? What did it reveal about a character’s identity, safety, or status before or during the onset of war?
- Part 2: In Transit (in Mykonos/London): How does the meaning of the object change when the characters enter state of limbo or crisis? Is it an armor, tool, burden, or sense of friction between Nadia and Saeed?
- Part 3: Destination (Marin County/Beyond): What does the object represent by the end of the journey? Has it been altered, transformed, discarded, or re-signified? What larger meaning does the object reveal about the characters or novel as a whole?

UNIT 3. THE UNNAMED CITY: SPACES AND PLACES OF *EXIT WEST*

Objectives

- To analyze Hamid's choice to name or leave unnamed certain locations in the novel
- To investigate the real-world geopolitical contexts that the novel draws from
- To evaluate the various types of spaces in the novel, from refugee camps to squatter settlements and shanty towns

Preparatory and Recommended Readings

- [“From Refugees To Politics, Mohsin Hamid Writes The Change He Wants to See.” Fresh Air, NPR. 9 March 2018.](#)

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ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit explores the real-world influences of the spaces and places Nadia and Saeed migrate between throughout *Exit West*. Mohsin Hamid has frequently discussed how his own experiences have influenced the primary locations in the novel. In an interview with Anne Brice, Hamid comments, “Each of these places has been important to me in my own life. The unnamed city where Saeed and Nadia begin their story was based in many ways on Lahore, where I have lived half my life. I have been visiting the Greek islands since the summer I graduated from college, almost 30 years ago. London was my home for the better part of a decade, and so was the Bay Area in California” ([UC Berkeley News](#)).

The first subsection of this unit, “The Unnamed City” examines the implications of leaving Nadia and Saeed’s city of birth unnamed as well as the geopolitical contexts of the various countries that inspired it. The second subsection, “Mykonos, London, and Marin” provides a historical overview for each of these cities and unpacks the kinds of societies they each represent. This subsection also evaluates how the novel ultimately blends refugee and non-refugee space. Below is a table of contents for this unit. Suggested activities, assignments, and discussion questions are interspersed throughout.

THE UNNAMED CITY

Although *Exit West* jumps across several site-specific settings, Hamid leaves Nadia and Saeed’s city of birth unnamed. In this way, rather than confining tragedy to a specific, distant geopolitical context, the anonymity of the city allows readers to see how war and displacement could happen anywhere in the world. While Hamid primarily identifies Lahore, Pakistan as the “starting point” or “template” for the nameless city in *Exit West*, he notes [in a talk at Politics and Prose](#) that “the circumstances that occur in the city [of the novel]...are not the circumstances of Lahore but are more like the circumstances that have befallen Aleppo or Mosul” (Hamid, 7:53-8:16). Explaining his influences further, Hamid states, “I was living in Lahore...and I was watching other ancient cities in southwest Asia being consumed by violence and war: Kabul, Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo. I worried about something like that happening where I lived, being forced to flee” ([UC Berkeley News](#)). Evidently, *Exit West*’s unnamed city is a composite of urban, besieged cities across Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, which all suffered similar fates due to sectarian violence, infrastructural collapse, and mass displacement.

Hamid's decision to leave the city unnamed also stems from his fear of projecting upheaval onto his hometown. In an interview with LitHub, Hamid states:

...as for namelessness, it's partly because I can't bear to do to Lahore what happens to the city at the start of this novel, and partly because in a time of overwhelming censorship, drawing attention to one's silences can be more honest than other forms of expression

Hamid's interest in the power of silence, or the way that leaving certain things unsaid can amplify their meaning, plays a great role in enabling readers to become collaborators in imagining what the city might stand in for. Notably, although it is never explicitly stated, the unnamed city in *Exit West* is largely understood by readers and critics to be a Muslim country, especially given the mention of daily calls to prayer or the commonplaceness of women wearing head coverings.

Published in 2017, the same year that the Muslim Ban was signed into law in the US, *Exit West* makes a pointed political statement against the xenophobic restriction of migration from Muslim-majority countries by universalizing Nadia and Saeed's story through the convention of namelessness. Through this namelessness, Hamid refuses to label the Middle East or Islamic countries as endemically violent or war-torn. An executive order of the first Trump presidency, the Muslim Ban "prohibited citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries—Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen—from entering the United States for a period of 90 days. Additionally, it indefinitely suspended the entry of Syrian refugees and instituted a 120-day halt on refugee admissions from other nations" (Mohn). Asked if the novel addresses the Muslim Ban, Hamid responds:

In a sense, yes, because the ban is about trying to determine...who belongs and who doesn't belong in a place, above all . . . the notion that some people are deemed...less worthy of being able to move, to not have the right to cross borders – over time, that's going to seem to us as outmoded and as unfair, really, as racial discrimination. So, yes, the book does address that ban without specifically addressing the ban" (["From Refugees to Politics"](#)).

Although the Muslim ban was rescinded by executive order in 2021 by then President Joe Biden, it was reinstated and expanded in June 2025 following Trump's reelection. Rather than targeting just Muslim-majority countries, the latest iteration of the ban targets 19 countries total, including "Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Chad, Cuba, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Laos, Libya, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, and Yemen" and it is still in place today (O'Herron).

The disintegration of the unnamed city also mirrors the destruction caused by militant extremists in some Muslim majority countries. In the novel, the fighting between the militants and the government progresses block by block, directly paralleling news reports of the Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) moving neighborhood by neighborhood through cities like Aleppo and Mosul, where the terrorist organization employed car bombs and military checkpoints to reinforce their territory (Knights). The militants' extreme punishment of minor infractions is likewise evocative of how ISIS and the Taliban enforce "a strict interpretation of sharia law," the transgression of which could result in "public execution," flogging, and more (Ryan). In an [interview with Terry Gross, of NPR's "Fresh Air,"](#) Hamid comments that the violence and loss caused by extremism in Pakistan certainly influenced the moments of horror which occur early in *Exit West*, exemplifying how groups like ISIS or the Taliban negatively affect the people of a place like the unnamed city. For instance, one of the most graphic moments in the novel is when militants scour Saeed's apartment building "looking for people of a particular sect" and kill his neighbor, slitting his throat and hauling away his wife and daughter (Hamid, 85). This episode closely parallels how ISIS waged "extreme brutality against other ethnic and religious groups" particularly against Shiite Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis, a religious minority of Kurds (Auerbach). Importantly, however, Hamid avoids conflating extremist violence with the beliefs of the peoples in Muslim majority countries writ large, noting:

so often people say, well, you know, why don't Muslims...speak out?...I think people who say that have no idea what's going on in countries like Pakistan, where there are thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, millions speaking out [against extremism and extremist violence]" (["From Refugees to Politics"](#)).

Making a distinction between the Muslim majority in these countries from extremists is increasingly important as immigration bans target Muslim refugees and immigrants. More information on immigration bans targeting Muslims, such as the Muslim Ban, can be found in Unit 4: Xenophobic Sentiment, subsection "Dominant Perceptions of Refugees."

In addition to the Muslim Ban, *Exit West* is also a direct allegory for the 2015 European Migrant Crisis, during which "a significant increase in the number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees arriv[ed] in Europe...driven by conflicts and instability in regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan" (Goldmeier). The 2015 crisis "saw the highest levels of forced displacement worldwide since World War II" as "more than one million" displaced people fled to Europe, the majority of whom crossed the Mediterranean by boat (Goldmeier). Notably, the breakout of the Syrian Civil War was the primary driver of this large-scale displacement, and Syrian refugees "account[ed] for 29% of all of Europe's asylum seekers—the highest share of any nation" ("Number of Refugees"). During the crisis, there was widespread public disapproval about how the European Union (EU) and individual European nations handled the crisis on both sides of the political spectrum: on one hand, according to a Pew Research Center survey, "a majority of people in several European countries say they support taking in refugees who are fleeing violence and war," but felt that the EU was not handling refugee resettlement adequately (Connor). The crisis, after all, was characterized by abysmal conditions inside refugee camps and

resulted in the deaths of thousands of migrants who did not survive the perilous journey across the Mediterranean—2015 alone saw the deaths of 3,771 migrants (International Organization for Migration). Like Saeed and Nadia, who took great risks and paid a high sum to get access to one of the magical doors, these migrants’ desperation to reach safer shores were exploited by human traffickers and migrant smuggling networks that emerged to profit from the crisis. At the time, news headlines of capsized refugee boats or cargo containers carrying deceased asylum seekers abounded. Notably, on August 2015, 71 bodies of Iraqi, Afghan, and Syrian refugees were found in a refrigerated truck in a lorry in Austria. The truck was on its way to Germany, but never arrived. The incident marked a major turning point in the refugee crisis, inspiring much public sympathy for the plight of migrants.

Conversely, however, the historic number of refugees arriving in Europe during this period also triggered rampant xenophobic and nativist sentiment, which manifested as fears that a large refugee population would lead to increased terror attacks and pose a burden on national resources. Because European countries were unable to “allocate adequate resources or coordinate efforts to physically settle waves of migrants,” several countries “attempted to refuse or restrict entry to migrants, fearing threats to their treasuries, cultures, and legal systems” (Goldmeier). For instance, many “EU countries enacted border restrictions within the Schengen area, the European Union’s area of passport-free travel, in order to reduce the arrivals of migrants and refugees into their countries” (Goldmeier). In March 2016, the EU eventually signed a deal with Turkey in which the EU paid Turkey “6 billion euros” and promised to accept one Syrian refugee waiting within Turkey’s borders for every refugee that Turkey successfully prevented from crossing into Greece (Terry). Europe’s response to fortify and shore up its borders in the wake of the crisis is certainly resonant with the way, in *Exit West*, the doors that led to “richer destinations” were “heavily guarded,” to keep people like Saeed and Nadia out while the doors from “poorer places” were “mostly left unsecured” (Hamid, 106). Of course, the 2015 European Migrant Crisis has also been cited as a major impetus behind the Brexit movement, which certainly inspired the nativist violence that Saeed and Nadia suffered during their time in London. For more on nativist reactions against refugees and immigrants, please refer to Unit 4 Xenophobic Sentiment, subsection “Nativism and Nationalism.”

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Hamid chose not to name the city Saeed and Nadia live in? How would your experience of reading the book change if he had explicitly set the story in a real place?
2. As you were reading, did you find yourself trying to guess where this city might be? What countries came to mind and what details in the novel led you to think so?

3. Especially for a Western audience, do you think that naming a specific city like Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, or Lahore would have changed how readers understood Nadia and Saeed's story? If so, how?
4. Just as the city remains unnamed, Hamid also never attributes a specific group, organization, or political party to the militants who take over the city. Why do you think he keeps their identity anonymous?

Suggested In-Class Activity

“Re-Write the Paragraph”: Reverse Redaction Exercise

1. As a class, read the following passage together:

“Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to re-create the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg” (Hamid, 26).

2. Ask students, “When you read this passage, where in the world do you imagine this scene taking place?”
3. Notice how there are no place names, landmarks, or cultural cues that identify the city as belonging to any specific geographic location. If you associated the scene with a particular place, what made your mind assign a specific place or region of the world to it anyway? Students might name news, movies, or social media as influences.
4. Instruct students to re-write the paragraph as if this sudden displacement were happening in their own hometown. To do so, they must use proper nouns and be as specific as possible local streets and familiar landmarks.
5. Give students a moment to compare their paragraph to Hamid's. Ask a volunteer to share their paragraph out loud.
6. Ask students, “How does adding specific place names and explaining the situation change the tone of the paragraph?”
7. Takeaway: Students may note that replacing general terms with familiar places transforms a “distant” political problem into an unsettling reality. Placing the scene of displacement in their own hometown removes that distance and allows them to imagine what these refugees might be experiencing.

MYKONOS, LONDON, & MARIN

After Saeed and Nadia escape their home country, the majority of the novel takes place in three major settings: Mykonos, London, and Marin, which each represent how different societies respond and engage with refugees. Mykonos represents the primary site through which refugees enter [missing a noun?] and is more of a transitory stop rather than a final destination. London represents the imperial center, and the nativist backlash that Saeed and Nadia experience there touches upon a long history of postcolonial migration to the colonial metropole. Finally, Marin is the most speculative setting in the novel, representing an alternate, utopian world in which refugees are treated with dignity and respect, for it is only in Marin that “plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now” (Hamid, 217).

When Saeed and Nadia first arrive in Mykonos, “they [see] what look[s] like a refugee camp, with hundreds of tents and lean-tos” and, like others on the island, they negotiate for essentials, “[find] a patch of land at the edge of the camp,” and “set up their temporary home there” (Hamid, 106-107). The chaos and cacophony of the tent city is emblematic of the precarious conditions and provisional respite that refugees experience after entering refugee camps to be processed. Notably, these camps are liminal spaces and lack the infrastructure to provide a lasting home for anyone. In the novel, the inhabitants of the tent city are always seeking a path to more secure locations. For instance, one day in Mykonos, “without warning people began to rush out of the camp and Saeed and Nadia heard a rumor that a new door out had been found, a door to Germany, and so they ran too” (Hamid, 112).

In naming both Mykonos and Germany in this chapter, Hamid directly alludes to migrants’ pattern of movement during the 2015 European Migrant Crisis. During this period of mass flight from the Middle East and Africa to Europe, roughly “800,000 refugees and migrants” out of one million total arrived through Greece, “accounting for 80 per cent of the people arriving irregularly in Europe by sea” in 2015 (Clayton & Holland). At the time, both Greece and Italy were the “frontline states” that served as entry points where refugees’ asylum claims would be assessed. Hamid certainly invokes this history when describing Mykonos as “a great draw for tourists in the summer, and, it seemed, a great draw for migrants this winter,” a statement which echoes one alarmist Times headline announcing that [“Thousands of Refugees are Overwhelming Greek Tourist Islands”](#) (Hamid, 106). Just as hundreds of refugees in the novel rush towards doors leading to Germany, during the 2015 crisis Germany was a “primary destination country for asylum seekers in Europe” and “receiv[ed] 442,000 asylum applications in 2015 alone” (“Number of Refugees”).

If Mykonos represents the chaos and provisional safety of the refugee camp, then London represents the heart of empire, where Saeed and Nadia most directly experience the structural power of state control. In their early days in London, the most characteristic aspect about the city, especially compared to Mykonos or the unnamed city, is the disparity between the privileged native inhabitants of the city, and the vulnerable migrant population.

As Hamid writes:

Mykonos had not been well lit, but electricity had reached everywhere there were wires. In their own fled city, when the electricity had gone, it had gone for all. But in London there were parts as bright as ever, brighter than anyplace Saeed or Nadia had seen before...and in contrast the city's dark swaths seemed darker...From dark London, Saeed and Nadia wondered what life meant must be like in light London, where they imagined people dined in elegant restaurants and rode in shiny black cabs...In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed. (Hamid, 145-146).

The demarcation between “light London” and “dark London” gestures at the way spatiality is weaponized to contain migrant populations, relegating them to parts of the city with less infrastructure and resources. This process of ghettoization is exacerbated by the fact that in dark London, “drones and helicopters and surveillance balloons prowled intermittently overhead” to monitor and track the migrants’ movements (Hamid. 146). For more on the role of technology and surveillance in the novel, please refer to Unit 4 Xenophobic Sentiment, subunit 3. “Technology & Surveillance.”

Significantly, however, although the migrants are originally kept apart from the native Londoners, after a period of time, they begin to co-exist with them as developments crop up that offer migrants “forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity” in exchange for their labor (Hamid, 170). This worker’s camp is called the London Halo, but despite what its name implies, the London Halo is merely an illusion of acceptance that is nevertheless designed to keep migrants out of light London. After all, according to literary scholar Eli Jelly-Schapiro, the development’s promise to provide migrants “forty meters and a pipe” is “is an obvious evocation of the ‘forty acres and a mule’ promised (but never granted) to the formerly enslaved in the closing stages of the US Civil War. It summons, in other words, another deferred emancipation.” The London Halo, which is “bounded by a perimeter fence,” thus signifies the migrants’ conditional inclusion (Hamid, 170). So long as they are economically productive, they are tolerated—but never fully embraced in the U.K. In this way, London (and other Western, global cities like it) benefit from refugee labor, but never have to confront the harsh realities that refugees suffer since they are segregated from the urban center and thus, out of sight.

The final destination in *Exit West* is Marin, California, where Saeed and Nadia build a shanty from “a corrugated metal roof and discarded packing crate sides;” although their housing situation is not unlike the makeshift tents they had in Mykonos or in the workers’ camps in London, they do “have a view across and through the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco and the bay” (Hamid, 193). This section of the novel adopts a more hopeful tone, and indeed, the shanty town that Saeed and Nadia find themselves in is has strong “wireless data signals,” a “solar panel and battery set with a universal outlet,” and “a rainwater collector fashioned from

synthetic fabric and a bucket” so that “life, while basic, was not quite as rough, nor as cut off, as otherwise it might have been” (Hamid, 193-194). Here, the refugees’ own ingenuity, creativity, and skills is what transforms the shanties into a warm and inviting environment.

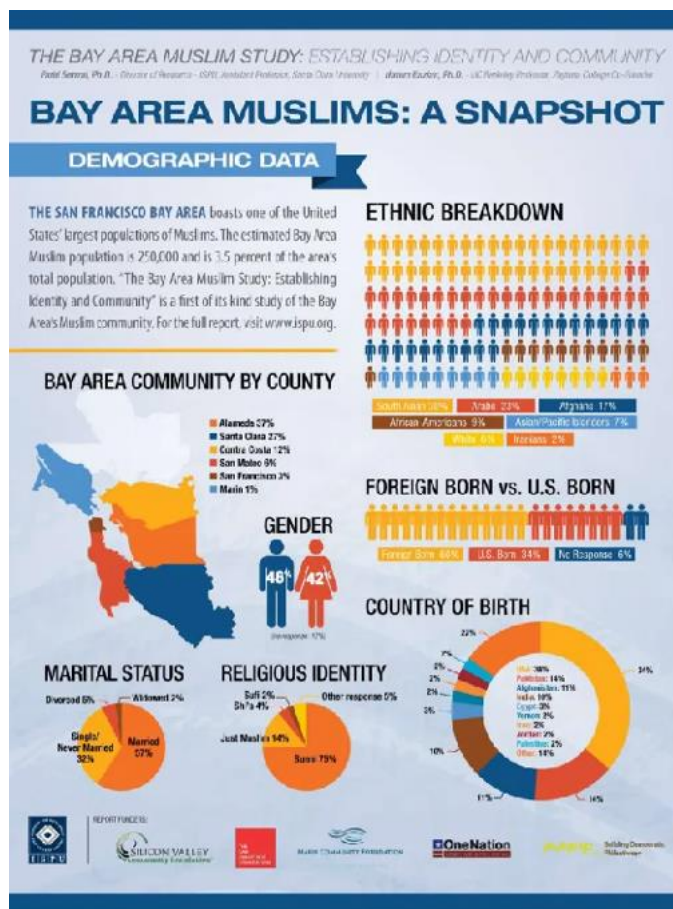
Unlike the previous cities they were in, Marin appears to welcome a large refugee population, as evident in “the mix of its people” (Hamid, 195). Although shanty towns are generally associated with poverty and developing nations, in the Marin chapters, the shanties are brimming with “a spirit of at least intermittent optimism” and it is here where Hamid imagines a post-national world in which refugees are equal participants in a society that does not tie human rights to citizenship (Hamid, 194). It is in Marin, after all, where there is a “plebiscite movement” that

“s[EEKS] a ballot on the question of the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from...unlike those other entities for which some humans were not human enough to exercise suffrage, this new assembly would speak from the will of all the people, and in the face of that will, it was hoped, greater justice might be less easily denied” (Hamid, 220).

In the utopian world of Marin, native and newcomer alike have an equal voice, and no one is treated as “not human enough.” Marin’s history, demographics, and diversity make it an effective destination for the novel’s themes of migration. Marin City, “an unincorporated community and census-designated place in Marin County, California, USA,” was formed beginning in 1942 to “accommodate wartime shipyard workers and other migrants to California. Many of these workers were Black Americans from the South, part of the Great Migration, which continued until 1970” (“[The Legacy of Marin City: A California Black History Story](#),” 4). Though it is unclear if the “newer city” within which Nadia and Saeed settle is connected to the very same historical black enclave of Marin City, Hamid nonetheless incorporates both Marin’s black history and the rich history of black Islam in the United States through the Muslim congregation that Saeed joins at the local mosque. Referencing the trans-Atlantic slave trade as one historical event of displacement unique from refugeehood, Hamid writes of “those who others thought direct descended from, even in the tiniest fraction of their genes, the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves” (Hamid, 198). Further complicating the notion of what it means to be forcibly displaced, Saeed finds himself particularly attached to African American communities “since at a place of worship where he had gone one Friday the communal prayer was led by a man who came from this tradition and spoke of this tradition, and Saeed had found, in the weeks he and Nadia been in Marin, this man’s words to be full of soul-soothing wisdom” (Hamid, 198).

Hamid’s choice of Marin is both emblematic of his own lived experience—he spent part of his childhood in San Francisco—but is also rooted in the Bay Area’s racially and culturally diverse Muslim population. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding estimates the Bay

Area to have “one of the largest Muslim populations in the United States: nearly 250,000 Muslims live in the six counties surrounding the city of San Francisco” (“[Bay Area Muslim Study](#)”, 2013). The Institute’s study on Bay Area Muslims, conducted in 2013, also notes the diversity of Muslims in the Bay Area: “More than 30% of its population are foreign-born, and close to two-thirds of its residents under the age of 18 are the children of immigrants” ([Bazian, “Executive Summary”](#)). The excerpted infographic below depicts demographics on the racial, national, and cultural diversity of Bay Area Muslims in more detail, including data pulled from Marin County. You can find the larger infographic, which additionally depicts statistics on socioeconomic status, education, and volunteerism on the ISPU website under “[Bay Area Muslim Study](#).”



Many Muslim congregations in the Bay Area are deeply influenced by different Islamic traditions from across African American, North African, and Southwest Asian and Asian cultural practices of Islam. When Saeed joins a predominantly African American Muslim congregation in the final chapters of *Exit West*, Hamid demonstrates how the diversity of Islamic practice in the Bay Area provides Saeed with a long-awaited sense of community and belonging. Indeed, as we learn, “[t]he preacher [of the congregation] was a widower, and his wife had come from the same

country as Saeed, and so the preacher knew some of Saeed’s language, and his approach to religion was partly familiar to Saeed, while at the same time partly novel, too” (Hamid, 199). While Saeed struggled to adapt to change in Mykonos and London, he finds both the familiar—his own language and some words of his language—alongside the news: a different mode of practicing Islam but which he nonetheless finds deep solace within. As Saeed volunteers with the congregation, made up of people who are “all Saeed’s color or darker,” we see how the histories of migration in Marin contribute to Saeed’s newfound sense of belonging, further symbolized through his falling in love with the preacher’s daughter.

More information on the diversity of Muslim religious practice, as well as the significance of prayer and community in the novel, can be found in Unit 5: Religion.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the atmosphere in Mykonos compare to the unnamed city that Saeed and Nadia left behind? Once you have physical safety, what else do you need to feel “at home?”
2. In London, Saeed and Nadia squat in a luxury mansion with other homeless refugees. Why do you think Hamid chose to draw such a sharp contrast between the characters and their setting?
3. Who do you believe has a greater right to the mansion: the person who owns it or the person who needs it?
4. Unlike in London, where refugees are met with violence, Marin is a community that embraces newcomers. What does Hamid’s characterization of Marin suggest about how host societies could respond to global migration?
5. By the time that Saeed and Nadia are settled in Marin, the world has come to accept the reality of the magical doors. Do you think Hamid is being too optimistic about what the future holds for refugees? Or is this acceptance a natural response to our ever-globalizing world?

Suggested In-Class Activity

Mapping Spaces in *Exit West*

1. Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the three major settings of the novel: Mykonos, London, and Marin.
2. Pass out the following chart to each group. Instruct the students to work together to fill out each of the quadrants for the city that they have been assigned.

1. Physical Environment -Describe the spaces and environments of this city. What kinds of places do Saeed and Nadia stay? -How are the borders and boundaries marked in this city? Are different populations segregated from one another or do they co-exist?	2. Reception of Refugees by Host Country -How are refugees treated in this city? -What are the official policies and local attitudes towards refugees?
3. Daily Life -How do people live, work, and acquire resources in this city? -What is the quality of life like here?	4. Community and Governance -How is law and order maintained in this city? -Do refugees have any rights or power here?

3. Re-group the class for large discussion. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share what they wrote for each of the quadrants. You may also hang up or display each group's chart side by side so that they are all visible to the class.
4. Instruct students to look at their responses for Box 2: Reception of Refugees by Host Country. Ask students:
 - How did the Mykonos and London groups respond differently to Box 2? In other words, why does the government treat refugees as a nuisance in Mykonos, but not in London? Students may note that refugees' labor in the worker's camp makes them useful to the city.
 - How did the Marin group respond to Box 2? Why do you think refugees were more accepted in Marin than elsewhere?
5. Instruct students to look at their responses for Box 3: Daily Life. Ask students:
 - How did all three groups respond to Box 3? How do Saeed and Nadia's means of survival change across Mykonos, London, and Marin? Students may note that in Mykonos, the Saeed and Nadia barter for goods but mostly wait for aid. In London, they exchange labor more aid and housing. In Marin, refugees build their own community and share resources.
6. Instruct students to look at their responses for Box 4. Ask students:
 - Across all three groups, do any of the responses to Box 4 stand out? Students may note that it is only in Marin where refugees become active participants in social and political life of the city.

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Essay Prompt Option 1

Safety & Spaces in *Exit West*

Instructions: Throughout *Exit West*, places and settings are not merely neutral backdrops for the events that unfold, but represent the unique power dynamics, histories of migration, and constantly shifting ideas of home that Saeed and Nadia encounter. Select one physical space in the novel (ex: Nadia's apartment, Saeed's family home, the refugee camp in Mykonos, the mansion or worker's camp in London, the shanty in Marin, etc.).

Write an essay that addresses the following:

- Briefly describe the space and its context in the novel. What does this space represent?
- Who holds power or authority within this space? Does migrant presence or movement within/through this site challenge or obey that authority?
- Is this space a home to Saeed and Nadia? What about it makes it a home?

Your essay should not be a simple summary. Rather, you should provide a close-reading analysis of your selected location, including textual evidence to support your claims. Overall, your essay should make a clear argument about the significance of this space to the novel.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite credible sources. These can range from international and U.S immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

2. Essay Prompt Option 2

From Mykonos to Marin: Tracking Themes in *Exit West*

Instructions: *Exit West* explores a number of themes, from borders/division to community and belonging, intimacy, surveillance, labor, and more. Select one central theme or concept and trace how it evolves as Saeed and Nadia move through the three primary sites of Mykonos, London, and Marin. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how your chosen theme is not static, but rather takes on new meanings in different geographic, social, political, and spatial contexts. For instance, if your theme is intimacy and desire, your paper should make clear how the nature of

Saeed and Nadia’s relationship *is shaped* by the conditions of their physical settings, whether that is in a refugee tent in Mykonos or a mansion in London.

Some example themes students might consider, include:

- Technology, virtual networks, and global connection
- Community and solidarity
- Social divides/ “Us” vs. “Them” dynamics
- Safety, shelter, and the meaning of home
- Intimacy and relationships
- Faith, ritual, and personal ethics
- Labor, self-sustenance, and survival
- Nostalgia and adaptation

Your essay should not be a simple summary. Rather, you should provide a close-reading analysis of your selected location, including textual evidence to support your claims. Overall, your essay should make a clear argument about the significance of these themes in the novel.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite credible sources. These can range from international and U.S immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

UNIT 4. XENOPHOBIC SENTIMENT

Objectives

- To analyze how media and political rhetoric shape public perceptions of refugees
- To examine how post-9/11 policies racialize Muslim refugees as “threats” to national security
- To connect contemporary anti-immigrant debates, like Brexit, to longer histories of nativism
- To contextualize the use of drones in warfare and as technologies of surveillance and control in host countries
- To examine the role of cell phones in Nadia and Saeed’s relationship and experiences of forced migration

Preparatory and Recommended Reading

- Alimahomed-Wilson, Sabrina. “When the FBI Knocks: Racialized State Surveillance of Muslims.” *Critical Sociology*, vol. 45 (6), 2019, pp. 871–887.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517750742>
- “[Frequently Asked Questions: International humanitarian law and the use of drones in armed conflict.](#)” International Committee of the Red Cross, 12 October 2025.
- [Ng, Rachel. "Pulitzer Prize Winner Reflects on Misconceptions About Refugees." USC Today, 30 Aug. 2016.](#)
- “[Global: New technology and AI used at borders increases inequalities and undermines human rights of migrants.](#)” Amnesty International, 21 May 2024.
- “[Muslim Ban Timeline.](#)” American Civil Liberties Union - Washington.
- [Taylor, Jessica. “Trump Calls for ‘Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering’ US” NPR News, 7 December 2015.](#)

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- August, Timothy K. *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian America*. Temple UP, 2021.
- “[Brexit: All You Need to Know About the UK Leaving the EU.](#)” *BBC News*, 29 Oct. 2019.
- [Damms, Richard V. “Nativism.” EBSCO Research Starter, 2018.](#)

- Espiritu, Yên Lê, et al. *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*. University of California Press, 2022.
- [Hafez, Farid. "Monitoring Islamophobia in Europe for Ten Years: Some Observations." The Bridge Initiative, 17 March 2026.](#)
- [Haughton, Tim. "It's the slogan, stupid: The Brexit Referendum." University of Birmingham.](#)
- ["Islamophobia is Racism Syllabus: Resource for Teaching & Learning About Anti-Muslim Racism in the United States."](#) Syllabus designed by Su'ad Abdul Khabeer et. al.
- [Photograph of British newspaper front pages. "How a photo of a drowned Syrian boy shamed the British tabloids," by Mark Fisher, Vox, 3 Sept. 2015.](#)
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- [Sheposh, Richard. "Make America Great Again \(slogan\)." Communication and Mass Media, EBSCO Research Starters, 2024.](#)
- Topka, Özgün E. "Drones: Robot eyes on racialized migrant bodies." *International Migration*, Vol. 61 Issue 5, 22 September 2023, pp. 313 – 317.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13183> Digital Object Identifier (DOI)
- Rana, Junaid. *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- [Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "Brexit". Encyclopedia Britannica, 14 Jul. 2026.](#)

ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit uses the term “Xenophobic Sentiment” to encapsulate the forms of hatred and fear that are often attached to both refugees and immigrants—and particularly to Muslim migrants.

A significant key term for both this unit and the novel is “nativism,” defined as “a negative form of ethnocentrism characterized by opposition to perceived foreign influences, particularly from minority and immigrant groups” ([Damms, “Nativism”](#)). Moreover, “nativist movements have influenced restrictive immigration policies, reflecting a complex ambivalence toward immigrants—who are sometimes seen as vital contributors to the economy while simultaneously feared as competitors for jobs and political power ([Damms, “Nativism”](#)).

Subsection 1 provides an overview of dominant perceptions of refugees, and how such negative perceptions contribute to xenophobia. This section also touches on dominant perceptions of Muslim refugees, who have often been racialized as threats to national security, thus “justifying” targeted immigration bans.

Subsection 2 offers information on both nativism and nationalism and covers the novel’s scenes of nativist violence that take place in London. This section covers historical and political contexts, discussing Brexit, the negative effects of counterterrorism tactics on refugee communities, and real-world nativist riots against Muslim refugees in the UK.

Subsection 3 contextualizes the role of drones as technologies of both surveillance and control against refugee and migrant communities seen as “threats” to the host country. Subsection 3 also considers the role of cell phones in Nadia and Saeed’s experiences of forced migration.

DOMINANT PERCEPTIONS OF REFUGEES

There are two prevailing ways that refugees are portrayed in mainstream media: as victims and as threats. Humanitarian organizations depict refugees as suffering and abject victims to elicit aid and pity from audiences. They often, however, propagate racist and xenophobic rhetoric, which present refugees as “problematic, damaged, and intrinsically foreign people” who threaten national identity and security (August, 3). Although these seem like inverse reactions, both humanitarian and xenophobic rhetorics towards refugees abide by the shared logic that refugees are less-than-human. As literary scholar and author Viet Thanh Nguyen explains, “The idea that refugees are victims simply becomes a way of not sympathizing with them. We continue to treat them as less than humans. If you see people only as victims and therefore as less than human, they’re still not the same as you are.” Y  n L   Espiritu further argues that refugees are both “hypervisible and invisible,” writing that although refugees are made a spectacle of through images of crisis and international emergency, they are nevertheless “rendered speechless...in well-trod narratives of ‘trauma porn’ in which they routinely appear in global media” (Espiritu et al., 110).



Against these dominant perceptions of refugees that have been reinforced through law, media, and culture, The Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CGRS), an interdisciplinary, transnational scholarly group, was founded in 2015 to promote “the recognition and appreciation of refugee epistemologies, creativity, and life-sustaining practices” (Espiritu, 17). As opposed to seeing refugees as either helpless victims or foreign threats, CGRS is committed to centering refugee experiences “*on refugees’ own terms*” and consider refugees to be knowledge-producers rather than passive objects of humanitarian aid (Espiritu et al., 14). After all, in surviving displacement and navigating a global refugee regime, refugees possess intimate knowledge of the systems designed to both contain and control their movement.

In *Exit West*, Hamid foregrounds Saeed and Nadia’s own savvy and the various strategies they employ to find safety on the run. In so doing, he pushes back against the impulse to cast refugees as one-dimensional victims by universalizing the refugee experience. Throughout the novel, it is clear that becoming a refugee is not an exceptional circumstance and that the plight of displacement can befall anyone. But even as Hamid universalizes the refugee experience, he also pluralizes it by refusing to prescribe a singular narrative as “the refugee story.” Indeed, several factors like race, gender, and religion can shape the way a refugee is treated.

Throughout *Exit West* the religious category of Nadia and Saeed is not explicitly named, though we know through context clues that they are Muslim. While we get descriptions of Saeed as of a “darker” skin tone common in his country, his race and ethnicity are not named as South Asian nor Pakistani. Yet, while reading the novel, our minds inevitably imagine “Muslim-looking” features onto our characters, their places of worship, and the sounds of their calls to prayer. In so doing, Hamid pushes us to consider how race is constructed for Muslims and Muslim refugees.

Since 2001, the racialization of Muslims under the global war on terror has contributed to the dominant perception of Muslim refugees as “terrorist” threats to national security. This stereotype of Muslims has had tangible negative effects on Muslim refugees and migrants. Restrictive immigration policies, such as the 2017 “Muslim Ban,” significantly impacted processes of migration and asylum-seeking from Muslim majority countries. Though the ban was repealed by the Biden administration, it was reinstated by the second Trump administration in 2025 (“[Muslim Ban Timeline](#),” ACLU Washington). Meanwhile, within the US and UK, Muslim community centers, like mosques, continue to find themselves the subject of suspicion from their neighbors, who increasingly see Muslim congregations with fear and hatred following 9/11 (see the “Prayer & Community” subsection in Unit 5 Religion). For more information on how the Muslim Ban influenced Hamid’s writing of *Exit West*, see the subsection titled “The Unnamed City” in Unit 3.

Racism plays a significant role in how refugees and migrants are discussed in politics and media, contributing to xenophobic sentiment. This guide uses the term “racialization” to describe the processes through which Muslim refugees become stereotyped as threats to the nation. The anti-Muslim rhetoric that negatively affects refugees from Muslim majority countries is not

simply Islamophobic but a distinct form of racism which often conflates the extremists from which refugees are fleeing with refugees themselves.

As a term, Islamophobia alone “does not accurately convey the making of racial and religious “others” that fuels the many forms of discrimination Muslims face,” by which “[t]he term Islamophobia frames these forms of discrimination and their roots solely as a problem of religious discrimination. Calling this a “phobia” suggests that this discrimination is solely a problem of individual bias, which obscures the structural and systemic production of anti-Muslim racism” ([“Islamophobia Is Racism Syllabus”](#)). Furthermore, as scholar and anthropologist Junaid Rana notes, “the process of racializing Islam through social identifications takes place through a kind of translations of the body and its comportment via a combination of identifiers, such as dress, behavior, and phenotypic expression” (*Terrifying Muslims*, 27), by which signifiers such as skin tone or hair texture become racial signs of the Muslim refugee and/or migrant who is presumed to be a potential threat. The negative dominant perceptions of Muslim refugees as “terrorists” are part of larger structural and systemic productions of race and racism in the US and UK.

Suggested In-Class Activity

How do News & Media Headlines Portray Refugees?

The objective of this activity is to enable students to recognize how language and media shape mainstream perceptions of refugees.

1. Divide the classroom into groups.
2. Print out the following headlines about refugees onto strips of paper and shuffle them. Make sure to print enough copies so that every group has a complete set of all the headlines. The full articles are linked in the digital guide for reference, though reading these is not required for the activity.
 - [Greek island of Lesbos struggles to cope with migrant influx \(BBC\)](#)
 - [Looming migrant caravan re-ignites Republican demands for changes at the border: 'Brace for the impact' \(Fox News\)](#)
 - [Spring could bring a fresh surge of refugees. But Europe isn't ready for them \(The Washington Post\)](#)
 - [The Next Wave of Climate Refugees \(The Atlantic\)](#)
 - [Tiny Victim of a Human Catastrophe \(Daily Mail\)](#)
 - [‘They Are Invisible People’: Hundreds of Rohingya Vanish at Sea \(The New York Times\)](#)
 - [Why Hundreds Drowned Off the Coast of Greece \(The New Yorker\)](#)
 - [Inside a Darfur refugee camp, there is so much need and a little bit of hope \(NPR\)](#)
3. Instruct students to read through each of the headlines and sort them into two categories based only on the emotion or impression that the headline evokes for them. Allow the

students to name what these categories are. Students may land on categories such as “threat,” “victim,” or “sympathy.” They may even be as simple as “positive” and “negative.” The categories do not necessarily need to be evenly divided. You can even assign different categories to different groups to encourage a more nuanced reading of the headlines across groups.

4. Re-group the class for large discussion. Go around the room and ask each group what the two categories they named were and why.
5. Ask students, “Do your two categories have anything in common? In other words, could you argue that *all* the headlines share a similarity?”
6. Takeaway: Literary scholar Timothy August has argued that when we think of refugees, we associate them with images of “boats, bodies, and masses” since news headlines and media images tend to “[focus] attention on masses and multitudes rather than individuals” (August, 28-29). As a result, refugees are not seen as complex, individuals, but as faceless hordes or needy objects of aid and rescue.

NATIVISM & NATIONALISM

When Saeed and Nadia are in London, they encounter violent nativist mobs that protest the increasing presence of refugees in the city. At this point in the novel, the magical doors are causing much panic and alarm, for “without borders, nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory, and people were questioning what role they had to play” (Hamid, 158). As a result of these disintegrating borders, the public begins to observe how a “nation was like a person with multiple personalities” (Hamid, 158). In London, Saeed and Nadia note:

Even Britain was not immune from this phenomenon, in fact some said Britain had already split, like a man whose head had been chopped off yet still stood, and others said Britain was an island, and islands endure, even if the people who come to them change... (Hamid, 158)

The observation that “Britain had already split” directly references the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union (EU) in 2020, an act that was originally decided by a 2016 public referendum in which 52% of the country voted to leave (Wallenfeldt). This separation is known as “Brexit,” a combination of the words “Britain” and “Exit,” and it was a result of anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK that emerged not only because of “the surge of immigration in 2015 that resulted from upheaval in the Middle East and Africa,” but also from “the influx of migrants from elsewhere in the EU who had arrived through the EU’s open borders” for years prior (Wallenfeldt). The xenophobia that defined the movement can be observed in the movement’s slogan, “Take Back Control,” which “suggest[s] a sense of rightful ownership” over the UK and a sense of nationalism that excludes immigrants (Haughton).

The primary effect of Brexit was that the “freedom to work and live between the UK and the EU [came] to an end” and since 2021, “UK nationals [need] a visa if they want to stay in the EU more than 90 days in 180-day period” (“Brexit”). With the end of free movement also came the end of free trade, or the “trade between two countries [in which] neither side charges taxes or duties on goods crossing borders,” as the UK now sets its own trade policies (“Brexit”).

Exit West additionally explores refugee and immigrant responses to nativist hatred. In the “house known to be a house of people from his country,” Saeed initially finds a sense of belonging as he “began to spend more time there, drawn by the familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking (Hamid, 151). In this house of Saeed’s “countryfolk,” the inhabitants begin to lean towards religious militancy in response to the growing violence and ostracization taking place in London against migrants; in the house, a man with a “white-marked beard” had “advocated a banding together of migrants along religious principles,” as divisions across other identities did not matter “now in a world full of doors” (Hamid, 155). The man then suggests that “the only division that mattered now were those who sought the right to passage and those who would deny them passage” (Hamid, 155). Here, Hamid roots the rise of religious militant groups as a *response* to nativist hatred against “those who sought the right to passage” (Hamid, 155). Hamid importantly avoids the common ahistorical approach to religious militancy in times of ongoing war, where imperial governments such as the US and UK frame such groups as “inexplicably” anti-Western, rather than as movements that arose in response precisely to Western involvement in the greater Middle East. Political and popular rhetoric which frames religious militancy to have appeared out of thin air, or to otherwise emerge from an inexplicable hatred of Western imperial powers, contributes to the racialization of Muslim refugees as inherently anti-Western.

Moreover, Hamid explores Saeed’s emotional response to the growing militant tendencies in the house of his countrymen, where “the man with the white-marked beard sporadically reminded him of the militants [of the Unnamed City], and when he thought this he felt something rancid in himself, like he was rotting from within” (Hamid, 156). Saeed’s desire for community comes to a head against the prospect of violence and militancy when he takes a gun from the house but, that same night, “realized he was being ridiculous, and must return it the very next day” (Hamid, 156). The religious militants in the house, the militants of the unnamed city, and the militants of the nativist mobs are all put on the same plane by the language in the text. When Nadia and Saeed first encounter the nativist mob, it is described as “a strange and violent tribe, intent on their destruction” (Hamid, 134). The language of tribalism recalls how Muslims are stereotyped to be savage and barbaric, yet Hamid applies the same language to the nativist mob in London, equating the nativist mob’s violence with terror and allowing the novel to blur “the line between state violence and the violence perpetrated by militants, suggesting that both forms of violence are driven by a desire for control rather than inherent differences in morality” (Alhaisony, 150). Ultimately, *Exit West* discusses the both the ideology and violence of nativist mobs through the same language of “barbarism” that is otherwise used to essentialize Muslim

refugees as violent. The novel critiques the dominant perception of Muslim refugees as “terrorists” while also highlighting the irony of the nativist terror to which the refugee and migrant communities in London are subjected.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Analyzing Brexit’s Slogan, “Take Back Control”

This activity is designed to encourage students to analyze a political slogan and understand how political campaigns wield nativist sentiments to win popular support and fuel movements like Brexit.

1. On the board, display the official campaign slogan for Brexit: “Take Back Control.” Do not provide any additional context.
2. Give students a moment to think about the phrase. Then ask, “If you are taking something *back*, what does that tell us about who supposedly owns it right now? What narrative does this paint about the past?”
3. Ask students, “If you are taking back control of something, who or what is the enemy that took it from you?”
4. Takeaway: The slogan “Take Back Control” paints a specific narrative. The word “back” implies that control was once yours and hearkens to the nostalgic idea that a nation was once glorious before outside forces ruined it. This kind of nostalgia is often used by conservative movements. Take for instance, Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” which implies that “the United States was in decline and needed to be restored to its former glory” (Sheposh). Notably, the slogan does not name *who* control must be taken back from. By leaving this vague, voters can project whatever enemy they fear most into the gap. In the context of Brexit, this enemy might represent the EU, which some might view as encroaching on the UK’s rights to determine who can come and go, or it might represent immigrants and refugees themselves, who threaten the “purity” of a nation.

TECHNOLOGY AND SURVEILLANCE

In *Exit West*, technology is crucial to the novel’s refugee narrative in two ways. First, cell phones provide a tool for connection. In multiple interviews, Mohsin Hamid has shared that cell phones inspired the teleportation enabled by the doors in the novel. Second, technology is a tool for controlling refugee populations through surveillance, limiting refugees’ ability to move freely through space. This subsection explores the role of technology in Nadia and Saeed’s journey and contextualizes how tools of surveillance, especially drones, emerge in *Exit West*.

Cell phones are “magical” tools for connection and teleportation at the beginning of Nadia and Saeed’s relationship. Hamid describes the “antennas” within their phones, “antennas

sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places that were distant and near” (Hamid, 39). As the unrest of unnamed city progresses, however, cell phone signals and internet connection are lost. This loss of connectivity is described as a deprivation, Nadia and Saeed losing their “portals to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones” (Hamid, 57). As cell phones are lost, Nadia and Saeed begin to hear of the doors appearing in their city, now the only means of transportation “to places that were distant and near” (Hamid, 39). Where at first Nadia and Saeed had access to and control over a form of both connection and travel, the upheaval of the unnamed city leads to them to instead find a new proximity to global connection and (forced) migration through the doors.

Drones are a persistent presence in *Exit West*, emerging as weapons and tools of control. As Nadia and Saeed lose their own technological means of control, drones begin to affect their movements. While in the unnamed city, “the flying robots” first appear during the militant takeover, Saeed beginning to walk cautiously, “cringing a tad at the thought of the bomb or missile at any moment one might dispatch” (Hamid, 88). Here, the novel is referring to the real-world forms of vertical warfare that drones enact, whether it be by the city’s own militant and governmental powers or by imperial occupying forces such as the US, that often end up physically maiming and psychologically affecting civilians.

Throughout the novel, drones, alongside security cameras, are also used to surveil the population’s accordance with new militant law as well as to abate migration to and from the doors. In one passage, for example, Hamid focuses on the arrival and removal of a Tamil family in the unnamed city, tracing the family’s movements through the eyes of cameras, agents, and aerial drones (90-93). In dark London, Nadia and Saeed’s migrant ghetto is heavily monitored, where “drones and helicopters and surveillance balloons prowled intermittently overhead” as discontent grows between the migrants and nativists (146). As scholar Özgün E. Topka notes, “drone surveillance typically results in targeting migrants as ‘threats’ along the borderzones, informing ground actors and pre-empting their entry, thus contributing to the neutralization of the ‘threat’ of migrants/migration. The data is also used for ‘risk’ assessment to understand migrant journeys and prepare future preemptive strategies” (“Drones”). This same logic of drone surveillance as a system of “risk” assessment of migrant’s “threat” levels to national security emerges in the novel, where, in any “ever more dense zone of migrants” of London, there “were soldiers and armored vehicles, and above it were Nadia and Saeed, who had run from war already, and did not know where next to run, and so were waiting, waiting, like so many others” (Hamid, 137). Here, drone surveillance and military presence extend the logics of war and population control from which Nadia and Saeed fled, illustrating how refugee populations in new countries are often treated as a threatening presence within the nation eliciting military force.

The perception of Nadia and Saeed’s migrant ghetto as a risk-prone security threat is of no coincidence. Though such forms of ghettoization and surveillance have their own long history in imperial countries, post-9/11 counterterrorism tactics have played their own role in marking

Muslim refugees as threats to national security. In the US, counterterrorism policies such as the Patriot Act and changes to FBI guidelines allowed the surveillance of groups “without any factual predicate,” and lead to the infiltration of mosques and Muslim community centers often based solely on forms of racial profiling ([Saher Khan and Vignesh Ramachandran, “Post-9/11 Surveillance,” PBS News](#)). Meanwhile, across Europe, wide sweeping policies have affected not only immigration and refugee resettlement from Muslim majority countries, but also increased surveillance of Muslim communities already residing within the UK. In *Exit West*, governmental surveillance goes hand in hand with stoking the fire of nativist hatred toward Muslim migrants and refugees. Literary critic A.G.M Alhaisony argues that it is precisely these state-backed systems of surveillance that “leads to nativist mobs attacking those perceived as threats, further complicating the relationship between security and state power” (“Suspicion,” 137). National security policies racialize Muslim refugees as threats, leading to targeted anti-Muslim violence such as that of the nativist mob.

Though Nadia and Saeed regain access to cell towers and the internet after leaving the unnamed city, phones become part of their surveillance. Right before leaving London, they find themselves “under the drone-crossed sky and in the invisible network of surveillance that radiated out from their phones, recording and capturing and logging everything” (Hamid, 188). It is in the same breath that “they abandon this place” for Marin (Hamid, 188). Here, Hamid illustrates how the surveillance of refugee populations permeates everyday life, drawing cell phones into the same larger network of governmental surveillance as the “drone-crossed sky” (Hamid, 188). In addition to news and media cycles which sensationalize refugee crises, such systems of surveillance persistently affect Nadia and Saeed’s access to privacy. It is in Marin that Nadia and Saeed begin to regain some sense of autonomy. After a drone “that kept a watch on their district” crashes into their shanty, Nadia and Saeed give the “motionless” drone a “burial,” joking together that they might offer the “departed automaton” a small prayer (Hamid, 205). It is as the novel closes—Nadia moving forward with her life and Saeed finding love and belonging with the preacher’s daughter in Marin—that such a moment of levity occurs, though the buried drone was nonetheless a part of a larger “swarm” (Hamid, 205).

Though technology, social media, and drone warfare has advanced significantly in the nearly ten years since *Exit West’s* publication in 2017, it is increasingly important to consider how technology not only affects refugee experiences, but also proliferates contemporary forms of nativist hatred. The rapid spread of disinformation enabled by social media gave rise to the Southport Riots in Summer 2024, a pertinent example of how nativism and technology together effect Muslim refugees in the UK. After a man committed a stabbing at a Taylor Swift-themed dance party, the culprit was falsely identified as a Muslim refugee on social media platform X (formerly Twitter). The misidentification of the man quickly led to the organization of nativist groups to riot in the streets of Southport, their first target was a mosque commonly used by Muslim refugees in the area (Edna Mohamed, [“Southport stabbing: What led to the spread of disinformation”](#)). The sheer scale and destruction of the Southport riots has left a mark on

Muslim migrant communities in the UK. Today, attacks of mosques, hate crimes, and other forms of targeted violence in Southport continue to be a source of fear and anxiety (Burhan Wazir, [“A place of worship should not look like a fortress”](#)). According to Gisella Lomax, UNHCR Senior Advisor on Information Integrity, online misinformation, continues to harm refugee communities,

Hate speech knows no borders and spreads rapidly. Communities that have been forced to flee their homes by persecution and violence, such as the Rhoyinga, continue to face dehumanizing narratives online, even in exile. Online hate fuels real-world harassment and intimidation, eroding social cohesion and deepening divisions between host communities and displaced populations ([Lomax, 7 July 2026, “Hate speech and misinformation are creating real world harm for displaced people”](#)).

While much of Hamid’s novel explores the role of “cell phones as portals through time,” through which modern era connection and social media collapses distance and borders, *Exit West*’s contemporary relevance nearly ten years after its publication nonetheless begs us to question what role the rapid spread of misinformation plays in driving nativist hatred towards immigrants and refugees. Though the novel does not point towards social media as the breeding ground of the nativist group in *Exit West*, Hamid’s prevailing emphasis on the role of media coverage and targeted governmental surveillance policies in aiding nativist discontent can offer one more venue for discussion: online discourses across social media platforms and misinformation in the media spread both fear and hatred towards vulnerable groups.

Suggested In-Class Activities

Questions for Discussion

In *Exit West*, cell phones are not only a “magical” form of connection, but also serve as a form of “radiat[ing] surveillance,” which track Nadia and Saeed’s movements. Ask students to read the following passages on cell phones: Passage 1 (38-39), Passage 2 (57), Passage 3 (188). Then ask the following discussion questions.

1. In the beginning of the novel, cell phones are described as “magical,” capable of transporting them to places that were distant and near” (39). Once their cellular and internet connections are lost due to upheaval in the unnamed city, Nadia and Saeed feel a sense of deprivation from both each other, and the world around them. In what ways do your cell phones connect you to the world and to your loved ones? How would you feel without access to telephone lines or to the internet in a time of crisis?
2. While cell phones offer us instant connection to the world around us, they can also pose problems precisely because of their ability to communicate with each other instantaneously. In what ways do you see cell phones and social media having a negative impact on how we see the world and each other? How might cell phones, social media,

and/or the internet effect how we understand marginalized groups such as refugees? This question can be framed as an extension of Subsection 1's discussion of news and media coverage's effect on how we view refugees.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Understanding Technology and Surveillance in *Exit West*

This close-reading encourages students to better understand how surveillance effects marginalized refugee and migrant communities in *Exit West*.

1. Divide the class into two groups. Ask Group 1 to look at the following passage on the surveillance and removal of a Tamil Family who migrates to the unnamed city: Passage 1 (90-93). Ask Group 2 to look at the role of drones, military presence, and surveillance and control of the migrant ghetto in London in the following passages: Passage 1 (137), Passage 2 (146) and Passage 3 (188).
2. While in small groups, students should consider the following questions:
 - What technology is mentioned in your passage and how is that technology used and/or impacts refugees in your passage?
 - What kind of language or literary devices are used to describe technology and/or the presence of military in your passages?
 - How does surveillance—in the form of drones, security cameras, cell phones, or other people—change how Nadia and Saeed navigate space in your assigned passages?
3. Ask each group to write bullet points of their observations on the board. Each group should then elaborate, sharing what they noticed.
4. Draw connections between topics or key themes you see emerging across groups.
5. At the end of the activity, push students to consider the larger role of technology in the refugee and migrant narrative of *Exit West*. Ask: When does technology assist Nadia and Saeed, and when does it restrict their ability to navigate the world as they wish?

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

Scenes of nativism in London occur in Chapter 7, Chapter 8, and Chapter 9 of *Exit West*. In Chapters 10 and 11, the novel directly challenges definitions of nativism and belonging in scenes set in Marin County, CA. The suggested projects for Unit 4 provide passages and guided discussion questions to help your students think critically about the language and literary devices Hamid uses to explore Nadia and Saeed's experiences of nearby nativist violence amidst their struggles to attain stability, refuge, and a sense of belonging. Project ideas for ascertaining the role of technology and surveillance on Nadia and Saeed's ability to move freely—a key theme of *Exit West*'s narrative of forced migration—are also offered.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

Divide the class into two groups. Assign the first group to close read the following two passages on the nativist mobs in London: Passage 1 (bottom of page 133 to the bottom of 135), Passage 2 (158-159), and Passage 3 (166). Assign the second group to close read the passages where the definition of nativism is complicated by histories of settler colonialism, enslavement, and immigration in the US, Passage 4 (197-199). Ask both Group 1 and Group 2: How is nativism described and defined in your passage? What kind of language and literary devices does Hamid use to explore nativism and why? What do these passages on nativism suggest about refugee and migrant belonging? For Group 2, ask: How does the text complicate what it means to be “native” to a country? Why do you think the text refers to the histories of Indigenous and African American communities in the US to complicate and/or expand its explorations of belonging?

Project Ideas

1. Based on the activity above, ask students to develop an informational pamphlet, zine, short video, or essay that traces how nativism is discussed throughout *Exit West*. The project should close read and analyze the passages and then offer a succinct argument about how *Exit West* critiques nativism and nativist hatred towards refugees and migrants.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite credible sources. These can range from international and U.S immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

Note: If students pursue a creative option, then the requirements above can be incorporated into a short artist’s statement.

2. Ask students to develop a zine, comic strip, short video, or essay that traces how technology affects Nadia and Saeed’s movements throughout *Exit West*. What kind of language or literary devices are used to describe drones, cameras, and cell phones? How do drones, security cameras, and/or cell phones change how Nadia and Saeed navigate space? When does technology assist Nadia and Saeed and when does it restrict their ability to navigate the world as they wish?

UNIT 5: RELIGION

Objectives

- To provide information on the Islamic religious practices referenced throughout *Exit West* and student appropriate resources and activities for learning about Islam
- To provide historical and cultural contexts of Muslim refugee and migrant placemaking in the US
- To contextualize Saeed's relationship to prayer and community
- To contextualize Nadia's "black robe," provide information on Muslim women's veiling, and dissuade the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about Muslim women as inherently oppressed or in need of "saving"

Preparatory and Recommended Reading

- ["Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity," American Civil Liberties Union.](#)
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 104 no. 3, September 2002, pp. 783-790.
- Video, ["The History and Practice of Islam on Earth and Beyond," Crash Course: Religions](#), PBS Digital Studios, 12 November 2024.
- Media Gallery, ["Is This One of America's First Mosques?," American Muslims: A History Revealed](#), PBS Wisconsin.
- Tazamal, Mobashra. ["On the Politicization of Muslim Women's Bodies."](#) The Bridge Initiative, 23 November 2022.

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- ["Boris Johnson's burka jibe: Why do some Muslim women wear the veil?" BBC](#), 8 August 2018.
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- [“Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity,” American Civil Liberties Union.](#)
- Pritchard, Josh. [“Hijab,”](#) EBSCO Research Starter, 2023.
- Tazamal, Mobashra. [“On the Politicization of Muslim Women’s Bodies.”](#) The Bridge Initiative, 23 November 2022.
- [“The adhān, the Muslim call to prayer.”](#) Audio clip with translation in English. Britannica.
- [“Rural Controversy: A Mosque in Sheboygan.”](#) *TIME*, 18 August 2010.
- [“Top EU court rules hijab can be banned at work.”](#) *Aljazeera*, 15 July 2021.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit has two key goals. The first is to provide context about the religion of Islam as it emerges in *Exit West* and influences its key themes of survival and human connection amidst upheaval. The second is to offer guidance on how to best discuss the anti-Muslim stereotypes Hamid critiques in a post-9/11 global context. Hamid subverts common anti-Muslim stereotypes through the characterization of Saeed and Nadia, most notably his handling of prayer and women’s veiling traditions. This unit explores how the characterization Saeed and Nadia’s religious practices subvert xenophobic stereotypes that are often assigned to Islam and Muslim migrants in the West.

The first subsection, “Orienting Students to Practices of Islam in *Exit West*,” offers brief information of Islam as a religion. The subsection focuses on the most relevant components of Islam that emerge in the plot and narrativization of the novel.

The second subsection, “Prayer and Community,” illustrates how Hamid depoliticizes Islam in *Exit West* by focusing on how Muslim prayer is a tool for both connection and survival. This section begins with an explanation of how stereotypes and xenophobia against Muslim migrants has historically been attached to Islamic prayer, offering a brief overview of recent controversies surrounding community mosques in the US and UK. The section ends with an in-class activity contextualizing the histories of Muslim migrants in the US and asking students to consider what prayer offers to Saeed as a form of immigrant placemaking in a new country.

The third and final subsection, “Nadia and the Black Robe,” contextualizes how xenophobic stereotypes of Muslim migrants are often fueled by Western discussions of Muslim women’s veiling as inherently oppressive. The subsection focuses on the politicization of Muslim women’s bodies through the enforcement by law of traditional dress in some Muslim majority countries as well as by Western feminist framings of Muslim women as needing to be “saved” from Muslim men. Hamid characterizes Nadia to subvert common stereotypes of Muslim women as passive figures. For Nadia, the black robe acts as a shield, which she chooses to wear so that she may move more freely through the world. The section ends with a discussion activity that asks students to close read Nadia’s relationship to the black robe.

The politicization of Islamic religious practice in the US and UK is intertwined with the novel's key themes of migration, asylum-seeking, and xenophobia. While this particular unit focuses on Islamic religious practices that are important to understanding *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed's identities as distinctly Muslim refugees seeking asylum from a Muslim majority country is a thread throughout this guide. For information on the real-world, Muslim-majority countries that influenced the novel's "Unnamed City," refer to Unit 3, "The Unnamed City: The Places and Spaces of *Exit West*." Much of Islam's recent history in the US and UK is wrapped up in post-9/11 policies and the global war on terror. In Unit 4, "Xenophobic Sentiment," you can find more information on the ways in which the demonization of Islam as a so-called "religion of violence" fuels immigration bans and contributes to scenes of nativist hatred in the novel. For more information about how Nadia's bisexuality and sexual desire subverts stereotypes of Muslim women as sexually repressed, as well as the larger purpose of sex in the novel, refer to Mini Unit 6, "Sex, Drugs, and Violence, in *Exit West*."

Finally, if you want to use *Exit West* to contextualize the history of Muslim migration to the US, you can find videos in the short and free PBS series, "American Muslims: A History Revealed," as a useful supplement for accessible, age-appropriate viewing in the high school classroom. One video from the series, "Is This One of America's First Mosques?" is recommended for the discussion activity in subsection 2 of this Unit.

ORIENTING STUDENTS TO PRACTICES OF ISLAM IN *EXIT WEST*

Islam, alongside Judaism and Christianity, is one the three Abrahamic religions. Monotheistic in practice, Islam believes in one God, Allah, and a primary prophet as God's messenger, Muhammad. The primary scripture of Islam is the Quran, which provides teachings and key stories of the religion. Islam has narratives of prominent Abrahamic figures such as Moses and Jesus, among others. While Islam has often been framed as distinctly backwards, inherently violent, or especially anti-progressive due to the political upheavals of the 20th and 21st centuries in the Middle East (and as caused by imperial involvement by the US), it nonetheless shares similarities with other Abrahamic religions. The *Crash Course: Religions* episode, "The History and Practice of Islam on Earth and Beyond," produced by PBS Digital Studios, introduces an age-appropriate, brief, and well-done contextualization of Islam as a religion for your high school classroom; this subsection closes with a discussion activity of the *Crash Course* video. Islam is a global religion spanning well beyond the Middle East into South Asia, North Africa, and East and South-East Asia. It is a religion that is both racially and culturally diverse. The three most popular denominations of Islam are Sunni, Shia, and Sufi. Globally, the Sunni denomination is the largest with Shia denominations following in place; the characters of *Exit West* could be interpreted to be from any of these predominant groups. The key practices of Islam followed by many Muslims are often referred to as "The Five Pillars of Islam:"

1. **Shahada:** a statement of faith
2. **Salat:** praying five times a day
3. **Zakat:** giving a portion of one's possessions to those in need
4. **Sawm:** fasting, especially during the holy month of Ramadan
5. **Hajj:** pilgrimage to the holy site of the Ka'bah in Mecca

While these “guidelines” carry across many followers of Islam, they can vary by denomination. The key practice of Islam that emerges as a significant theme in *Exit West* is *salat*, or prayer.

Throughout *Exit West*, there are several references to prayer, the call to prayer, and the place of prayer. An important context to best understand Saeed's character, is that Muslims pray five times a day: at dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset, and dusk. For Saeed, prayer offers a tool for both routine and meditation. While prayer can be performed alone when needed, it is an otherwise community-driven practice that occurs in the Mosque. The *adhān*, or call to prayer, is meant to alert local community members that it is once again time to pray, beckoning Muslims to return to the mosque to practice Islam in community. An [audio clip of the adhān](#) can be found on Britannica, in addition to translations of the Arabic. In Muslim countries such as “The Unnamed City” of *Exit West*, the call to prayer is often projected over loudspeakers so that it can be heard by all members of a mosque's surrounding neighborhood. A common refrain made by Imams, the leader of the prayer's recitation of religious scripture, is for members to “stand should-to-shoulder” as the congregation rises to begin religious prostration, emphasizing the importance of community and connection that prayer provides for Muslims.

Interpretations of the Quran's teachings on how Muslims might dress varies not only by a given denomination of Islam, but also by national, cultural, and political contexts. Because *Exit West* focuses on how and why Nadia chooses to wear the black robe, this guide does not parse the various interpretations of the Quran's dictations of Muslim dress. Rather, the guide contextualizes the politicization of Muslim women's bodies by both Islamic regimes and Western imperial countries to consider the symbolism of the black robe in the novel.

OPENING ACTIVITY

The History and Practice of Islam on Earth and Beyond”

Watch the short [Crash Course: Religions](#) episode titled “The History and Practice of Islam on Earth and Beyond” with your students. Use the guided discussion below to help students process this short introduction to Islam and contextualize Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.

1. John Green, the narrator of the video, notes a few of the core tenets of Islam, such as “the five pillars of Islam,” including prayer, donating of one's possessions to those in need, and pilgrimage. While prayer, donation, and pilgrimage may look a little different in Islam, these are common and core practices not only in many global religious traditions, but also of many community-centered movements, such as local efforts to help low-

income individuals such as community food drives. In what ways do you see core beliefs and values actualized—or put into action—in your own communities?

2. In the video, John Green notes, “When people in the West say ‘the Muslim World,’ they often picture a single culture in the Middle East. But Geography tells a different story.” Why is it important to know about Islam or other global religious traditions for their deep diversity in practices and beliefs?

Note: This question encourages students to discuss the danger of a single vision of Islam and Muslims. The focus of discussion could be on the racial and cultural diversity of Islam or how and why stereotypes are always reductive of the people it essentializes. You might elect to begin the conversation by thinking about stereotypes that are close to home for high school students before moving on to larger, more complex issues.

PRAYER AND COMMUNITY

Both in the US and UK, Muslim prayer has become a vexing site for political debates about migrant belonging. In the US, for example, the building of mosques has garnered negative reactions from local communities across the country, in part due to negative stereotypes of Islam as a “religion of violence.” As the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) states, “attacks on mosques directly take aim at religious freedom,” further noting, “existing and proposed mosque sites have been targeted for vandalism and other criminal acts, and there have been efforts to block or deny necessary zoning permits for the construction and expansion of other facilities” (“[Nationwide Anti-Mosque Activity](#)”). Since 2025, the ACLU’s interactive, comprehensive map of anti-mosque activity collects data of such hate crimes and zoning restrictions. The map includes instances of vandalism to mosques and Muslim prayer rooms on college campuses with religious slurs painted on buildings, set on fire, or otherwise physically destroyed. The map also includes examples of statements of distrust regarding Muslims, which often emerge around the prospect of building new mosques. In Sheboygan, Wisconsin, for example, a 2010 controversy about the building of a mosque gained national attention, many local residents expressed fears that the mosque was a sign of terrorism. This inappropriate assumption is just one way communities conflate Muslim religious practice with extremism (“[Rural Controversy](#),” *Time*).

In the UK, anti-Muslim sentiment is also often attached to prayer and places of worship. In 2024, for example, the Southport Riots, largely influenced by social media, targeted Muslim asylum seekers through attacks on community mosques. In June 2026, the Muslim Council of Britain advised mosques to conduct lockdown drills due to increased fears of hate crimes caused by race riots in Belfast (“[UK mosques](#),” *Aamna Mohdin*). In 2026, a political debate erupted in news outlets over a public prayer celebrating the holy month of Ramadan at Trafalgar Square in London, conservative politician Nick Timothy veered towards Islamophobic rhetoric on social media platform X by calling the prayer “an act of domination” and “straight out of the Islamist

playbook” (“[James Cleverly](#),” [Peter Walker](#)). While the Trafalgar Square event became a larger debate about whether any form of religious expression should be held in secular civic spaces, it’s worth noting that mass religious celebrations have been held at Trafalgar Square in the past; the public attention garnered by the Ramadan prayer points to how Muslim prayer is both deeply politicized and often conflated with anxieties of extremism.

In *Exit West*, Hamid side-steps prayer’s politicization and its conflation with extremist groups, and roots Muslim prayer in community, connection, and routine. Prayer repeatedly offers a means of hope and survival amidst the upheaval of Saeed’s life. For example, as militant violence rises in the unnamed city and a curfew is imposed, Saeed and his father go “to pray on the first Friday after the curfew’s commencement, and Saeed prayed for peace” (Hamid, 63). Saeed also “prayed a great deal” after his mother’s death, helping Saeed process grief (Hamid, 80). After leaving the unnamed city, it is through prayer that Saeed attempts to find community and belonging. At first, Saeed attempts to find community by praying with the house of people from his country in London, but he promptly stops attending the house as they become increasingly militant in response to nativism (see subsection “Nativism & Nationalism” in Unit 4). It is through prayer that Saeed finally finds a sense of belonging in Marin, falling in love with the preacher’s daughter while attending the local mosque (see subsection “Mykonos, London, Marin” in Unit 3). Both prayer and places of worship are central to Saeed’s character and his personal narrative of refugee and migrant placemaking in new places. While context clues suggest that Nadia and Saeed are clearly Muslim, Hamid does not reference the language of Islam at any point in the text. For example, the word “mosque” is not used, and instead is called “the place of prayer.” Part of the power in Hamid’s lack of naming is precisely an ability to strip the politically triggering and now deeply stereotyped practices of Islam away from religious practice, grounding Saeed’s attachment to religion as one of routine, meditation, and survival amidst upheaval.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

Prayer in Times of Crisis

These discussion questions encourage students to consider how and why characters pray during the upheaval of the unnamed city. To help students digest how prayer helps Saeed find community and belonging in new places, see the third in-class activity, “Prayer as Refugee and Migrant Placemaking,” below.

1. As upheaval and violence increase in the unnamed city, “Saeed’s mother prayed at home, newly particular about not missing a single one of her devotions, but she insisted on claiming that nothing had changed, that the city had seen similar crises before, though she could not say when, and that the local press and foreign media were exaggerating the

danger” (Hamid, 80). During this crisis, Saeed’s mother has trouble sleeping. Why does Saeed’s mother pray more? What does her prayer symbolize?

2. Nadia and Saeed grow increasingly fearful and anxious for their safety as nativist riots increase in the “migrant ghetto[s]” (Hamid, 162) in which they reside. Consider this moment in the text: “That night the electricity went out, cut off by authorities, and Kensington and Chelsea descended into darkness. A sharp fear descended also, and the call to prayer they had often heard in the distance from the park was silenced” (Hamid, 141). What is significant about the “call to prayer” being cut off in this passage about the loss of electricity? What does the loss of the “call to prayer” symbolize in the context of Nadia and Saeed’s London neighborhood coming under distress from nativist hatred of refugees? What role might such a moment play in Nadia and Saeed’s decision to leave London for Marin?

Suggested In-Class Activity

Prayer as Refugee and Migrant Placemaking

This activity asks students to think about how prayer intersects with forms of migrant placemaking and belonging in a new country. Students will first watch [“Is This One of America’s First Mosques?”](#), a series of three short videos that offer an early history of Syrian migrants homesteading in the Midwest and building a mosque to provide a space for gathering in community. At [the same link](#) (accessible in the digital guide), you will find PBS has shared teaching materials for the video series; consider referencing the resources titled “Teaching Tips: Is This One of America’s First Mosques?” and “Discussion Questions: Is This One of America’s First Mosques?” to supplement classroom discussion. Below, you will find a few questions that connect the PBS video series to refugee and immigrant placemaking in *Exit West*.

After students have watched the videos, ask the following questions:

1. In the video, one of the interviewees states: “In order to be a good American in the Midwest you have to have a religious congregation” (19 minutes). Beyond religious congregations, we can also think of the importance of gathering in community by shared beliefs, from a charity event for a cause you believe in to attending mass. In what ways does gathering in community occur for you? What does it contribute to your life? How does it shape the way you spend your time? Does it reflect certain values and/or priorities for you, your family, or your friends?
2. Direct students to read the following passage on Saeed discovering the mosque in Marin and falling in love with “the preacher’s daughter” at the end of the novel: Passage 1 (199), Passage 2 (203) and Passage 3 (219). Considering the details, language, and/or literary devices present in the passages, answer the following questions: Why does Saeed find a sense of belonging at the mosque in Marin? Why do you think Saeed falls in love

with the preacher's daughter? In what ways does the mosque in Marin provide Saeed with the community he has been longing for?

3. How does the context provided by the "Is This America's First Mosque?" videos change or influence your understanding of Saeed's own practices of placemaking?

Note: It may be useful to take a quick look at information on the mosque in Marin in the subsection titled "Mykonos, London, Marin" in Unit 3 for this question.

NADIA, "THE BLACK ROBE," AND MUSLIM WOMEN'S VEILING

This subsection discusses Muslim women and the veil, or, as it is referred to in the text, "the black robe." Much like Hamid's treatment of prayer, Nadia's relationship to "the black robe" depoliticizes Nadia's personal choice of donning the veil, focusing not on legal mandates of women's dress nor religious adherence but instead on how Nadia uses the robe as a tool for her own mobility and privacy. And not unlike the anonymity of the unnamed city, "the black robe" resists geographical, and thereby national and cultural, specificity. Indeed, across different Islamic cultures, the veil goes by different shapes and names. Most popularly recognizable among these, especially by Western audiences, are the hijab and the burqa.

Head coverings worn by Muslim women



From "Boris Johnson's Burqa Jibe: Why do some Muslim women wear the veil?" BBC, 8 August 2018.

Nadia's veil reveals her face, "always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe" (Hamid, 3). Yet in another passage, when Saeed uses the black

robe to sneak into Nadia's apartment so they can meet without arising suspicion nor judgement from neighbors and local militants, Saeed "furtively pulled [the black robe] over his own outfit, covering his head with its hood" (Hamid, 28). Since the black robe fully covers the body and has a "hood" which can cover the face, it is most likely a burka or the niqab (usually worn in combination with a full body covering such as the *chador* shown in the graphic above).

In the novel, militants begin to enforce codes of dress for both men and women, including mandatory veiling for women across the unnamed city. This enforcement mirrors how authoritative governments in some Muslim majority countries, such as in Saudi Arabia and Iran, "use religious texts to justify control, and command what women must wear" (Mobashra Tamazal, "On the Politicization of Muslim Women's Bodies"). In Afghanistan, the Taliban requires women to wear head-to-toe coverings, especially the traditional burqa, in public ("Afghanistan's Taliban order head-to-toe covering of women," *PBS News*). Refusal to follow such mandates can result in severe repercussions. For example, in 2022, Mahsa Amini was detained for "failing to 'properly wear the hijab,'" later dying in custody because she was allegedly beaten and tortured. Amini's death has since been met with protests in Iran (Tamazal, "Politicization"). Enforcements of the veil are a form of politicizing women's bodies, where a woman's body becomes "a political instrument and a central component of a narrative dictating control and national identity" (Tamazal, "Politicization").

It is important that the politicization of women's bodies by some Muslim majority countries does not overshadow the ways in which *Western* governments politicize Muslim women's bodies through bans on Islamic face and head coverings, such as the niqab, burqa, and hijab. For example, France banned the wearing of the hijab (which covers the hair and neck) from public schools in 2004 and, in 2024, banned wearing religious symbols in rugby matches, particularly targeting the hijab ([Josh Pritchard, "Hijab"](#)). In 2017, the European Union ruled that employers had the right to ban employees from wearing religious items at work, such as burqas and hijabs ("[Top EU court rules hijab can be banned at work](#)," *AlJazeera*). Beyond governmental bans, Muslim women wearing the hijab, burqa, or other forms of Islamic veils can face targeted forms of discrimination and racial profiling, such as being name-called "terrorists," harassed, or assaulted ([Angela Harmon, "Burqa"](#)). Indeed, the hypervisibility of the veil as a sign of one's Muslim identity can lead to targeted hate crimes and other forms of harassment by the public in countries such as the US (Aneesa A. Baboolal, "(Under)cover and Uncovered: Muslim Women's Resistance to Islamophobic Violence"). When teaching students about "the black robe", it is important to frame the conversation around women's right to choose how they dress, emphasizing the politicization of women's bodies not only in some Muslim majority countries, but also by Western governments.

When discussing Muslim women and the veil, it is critical to avoid discourses of Muslim women needing to be "saved" from oppressive regimes or Islamic religious practices. As anthropologist and scholar Lila Abu-Lughod notes, Western feminism since 9/11 has had an "obsession with the plight of Muslim women" that is part of the larger racial and racist

discourses that have emerged under the US's war on terror ("Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?: Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," 783). Indeed, justification for US intervention in Afghanistan has often been framed "in terms of liberating, or saving, Afghan women" (783). Abu-Lughod suggests that "rather than seeking to 'save' others," which implies a "superiority" and "violence" over Muslim women and their nations of origin, it is important to think of the "limits of 'cultural relativism' through a consideration of the burqa and the many meanings of the veil in the Muslim world" (783).

For Nadia, her choice to wear the black robe is neither religious nor due to political mandates by the militants. After learning that Nadia does not pray and is not especially adherent to religious practice, Saeed asks Nadia why she wears the robe; Nadia responds, straightforwardly, "So men don't fuck with me" (Hamid, 16). In other words, Nadia wears the robe to navigate space without being sexualized or harassed by men. Throughout *Exit West*, the robe symbolizes a form of opacity that allow Nadia to move through space with relative freedom and privacy. For example, when exploring social media, Nadia "left little trace of her passing . . . employing opaque usernames and avatars, the online equivalents of her black robes" (Hamid, 41). As Saeed and Nadia's relationship develops, Saeed uses the robe to hide himself and safely enter her apartment without raising suspicion or judgement; the robe is a tool for mobility. Nadia continues to wear the black robe even after she leaves the cultural and political pressures of the unnamed city. While for Nadia the robe continues to be a tool for privacy and mobility—a kind of a shield—her choice to wear the robe elicits different responses from the people around her in these new countries. In London, for example, Nadia "acquired a bit of a special status" of respect among the younger Nigerians, "perhaps because of her black robe" (Hamid, 149). As Saeed falls out of love with Nadia, it "was inexplicable" to him "that she continued to wear her black robes" and this "grated on him a bit, for she did not pray and she avoided speaking their language, and she avoided their people" (Hamid, 187). The veil therefore becomes a point of contention, for Saeed does not understand why Nadia wears the veil when she does not practice other aspects of Islam.

While working at a food cooperative in Marin, Nadia's black robe garners negative reactions from her coworkers, no one shares with Nadia how she can stay and live at the cooperative like her peers because "her black robe was thought by many to be off-putting, or self-segregating, or in any case vaguely menacing" (215). In the eyes of other characters, the black robe is seen as a political, religious, or "menacing" garment. For Nadia, however, it is a tool for both privacy and mobility.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Questions for Discussion

Why Does Nadia Choose to Wear the Black Robe?

These discussion questions encourage students to explore why Nadia chooses to wear the black robe.

1. At the beginning of the novel, before the militant group enforces a strict dress code in “The Unnamed City”, Saeed asks Nadia why she wears the black robe if she does not pray. In response, Nadia says simply, “So men don’t fuck with me” (Hamid, 16). Later, Saeed asks Nadia why she continues to wear the robe, Nadia replies that she wears the robe to “sen[d] a signal, and [that] she still wished to send this signal” (Hamid, 114). What do you think the “signal” Nadia wished to send might be? Why do you think Nadia chooses to wear the robe in the unnamed city? Why does she continue to wear the robe in London and Marin?
2. What do you think the robe is a symbol for in *Exit West*? Using your close-reading skills, develop your answer by referring to moments in the novel where the black robe is mentioned, including any of the following passages: Passage 1 (16), Passage 2 (28), and Passage 3 (149).

Note: The included passages here are not comprehensive but rather point students to moments where to robe allows Nadia the advantage of moving through space freely.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Thinking Critically About Muslim Women’s Veiling

This activity encourages students to think critically about Muslim women’s veiling with the aim of reducing harmful stereotypes. Sometimes the veil can appear to be a foreign religious symbol inciting anxiety, judgement, or fear in young people who have otherwise only encountered images of the veil alongside negative and hateful stereotypes of Islam. The activity will also help students develop skills for synthesizing information through EBSCO’s approachable and short research starter articles.

1. Open by explaining to students that the black robe references Muslim women’s veils. Project the visual aid on veils from earlier in this unit. Use the information provided above on the different kinds of veils Muslim women might wear.
2. Divide students into small groups. It will work best to make these groups beforehand, ensuring that there is a student with higher comprehension for research and reading in each. Ask half the groups to read *EBSCO’s* short research starter article on the hijab and the other half of the groups ([Pritchard, “Hijab”](#)) and the other half to read *EBSCO’s*

research starter article on the burqa ([Harmon, “Burqa”](#)). See direct links to articles in digital guide.

3. In their small groups, ask students the following questions:
 - a. What kind of veil is your article about?
 - b. What did you learn about the veil and Islam in your article? List 3 key points the article makes about the veil and Islam.
 - c. What did you learn about enforcements of the veil? List 3 key points from the article.
 - d. What did you learn about bans on the veil? List 3 key points the article makes.
 - e. In your own words, answer the following question: why and how are laws around the veil, both in the greater Middle East *and* in Western countries such as France, harmful or problematic?
4. Come back together for large group discussion and ask students to share why and how both enforcement and bans of the veil can be harmful. The focus of discussion should avoid harmful negative stereotypes, focusing on the right to religious freedoms and women having the right to choose how they dress (whether that be donning or not donning the veil).

Note: the discussion should not be on whether the veil or Islam itself are “anti-feminist” or “anti-western”—these are deeply harmful and common negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women. Rather, the focus should be on individual choice. You can also point back to *Exit West*’s descriptions of Nadia, who lives alone, moves freely through space on her motorcycle, and is sexually self-possessed and autonomous, all while choosing to wear the black robe. In the novel, freedom and the black robe are not mutually exclusive for Nadia.

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS & PROJECT IDEAS

1. Ask students to conduct a short research project and create a slideshow on American Muslim migrants and histories of Islam in the US. Direct students to [this interactive timeline, titled “Muslim in America”](#) from *PBS Wisconsin* and ask them to fill out [the accompanying worksheet](#) as a starting point (see digital guide for direct links). To make the project more substantial and to add a presentation component, ask students to pick one the media galleries from [the larger PBS Digital Studios series, “American Muslims: A History Revealed.”](#) Students should watch all of the content, including a few short videos, using the media gallery of their choosing to broaden their understanding of Muslims and Muslim migrants in the US. Ask students to synthesize and share key things they learned about Muslim migrants from the both timeline and videos. The final slide of their presentation should answer the question: How does what you learned change or broaden your understanding of Nadia and

Saeed's pursuit of belonging in *Exit West*? Use specific examples from each of the four cities (Unnamed, Mykonos, London, and Marin), with page numbers, to support your answer.

2. Ask students to write a literary analysis essay on the black robe in *Exit West*. They can answer any of the following questions in their essay: What does the black robe symbolize in the novel? Why does Nadia wear the black robe, if not for religious reasons nor because it is enforced?

You can add a research component to this paper by asking students to additionally incorporate either of the following EBSCO articles into their argument: [Josh Pritchard, "Hijab," 2023](#) and [Angela Harmon, "Burqa," 2020](#). If they pursue the research component, they should answer the following questions: While working at a food cooperative in Marin, her black robe garners negative reactions from her coworkers, no one willingly sharing with Nadia how she can stay and live at the cooperative like her peers because "her black robe was thought by many to be off-putting, or self-segregating, or in any case vaguely menacing" (Hamid, 215). How do negative stereotypes make the black robe seen as "menacing" and what comment do you think Hamid is trying to make by including this scene in the novel? In other words, why is this scene significant to include in a novel about refugee and migrant belonging?

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite both the novel and additional credible sources. These can range from international and U.S. immigration policies, data from government and nonpartisan research agencies, historical precedent, first-hand testimonials shared by refugees and asylum seekers, local case studies, and more.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

UNIT 6: SEX, DRUGS, AND VIOLENCE

Objectives

- To explain the literary purpose of sex, sexuality, drug use, bodily harm, and sexual violence in *Exit West*

Bibliography

- *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 1925.
- Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.
- Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West*. Riverhead Books, 2017.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- [“UN warns of steep rise in sexual violence during conflict.”](#) UN News, 14 August 2025.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

While teaching a contemporary novel with descriptions of sex, drugs, and violence can at first seem daunting, this mini unit offers context for the purpose of sex, drugs, and bodily violence to the narrative force of *Exit West*.

Sex and drugs offer forms of intimacy and connection in a novel about displacement, while the use of marijuana serves as a form of escape from the reality of violent upheaval taking place around Nadia and Saeed. Furthermore, sexuality—both in terms of sexual freedom and the spectrum of sexual identity—contributes to breaking stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed in the novel. Violence emerges in multiple forms, such as dismemberment, sexual assault, and destructive nativist mobs. This violence is central to the novel’s explorations of displacement from war, questions of what makes us leave home, and explorations of the difficulties of refugee experiences.

This mini unit ends with a brief overview of how sex, drugs, and violence are core components of classic literature often assigned as part of high school curriculums.

SEX, DRUGS, AND VIOLENCE

Sexual Intimacy

Exit West explores a refugee narrative through a romantic relationship. Nadia and Saeed’s relationship centers intimacy in a story of displacement, upheaval, and the loss of one’s loved ones. Significantly, emotional intimacy and connection is foregrounded over mere carnal pleasures, Nadia and Saeed’s early days of romance spent “growing hungry, touching each other, but without bodily adjacency” such that “[t]hey had begun, each of them, to be penetrated, but

they had not yet kissed” (Hamid, 41). Here, the language of penetration is used to describe not sexual intimacy but emotional intimacy, closeness, and desire, highlighting the role of sex in Nadia and Saeed’s relationship as a vehicle for connection. Throughout the novel, as Nadia and Saeed become more distant, sex offers moments of reconnection (page 156, for example), while the lack of touch or sex is used to indicate their mutual growing apart. In addition to helping us trace Nadia and Saeed’s relationship, sex is a key literary device for foregrounding intimacy and connection amongst upheaval.

The novel describes Saeed’s mom as “voracious in bed” in the early years of her and her husband’s marriage, but that, by the end of their marriage, “they had sex only thrice” (13-14). This detailed description of the sex life of Saeed’s parents acts as a foil to Nadia and Saeed’s own relationship. While the parents’ sex life has declined, “they never once changed their bed: their headboard like the posts of a banister, almost demanding to be gripped” (Hamid, 14). Here, the stasis and longevity of their marriage is attributed to a visible reminder of the early days of their relationship and, in part, the more “voracious” sexual intimacy they shared together at the start of their marriage. Conversely, Nadia and Saeed’s relationship is marked by constant change and instability, contributing to a narrative of how rapid change can also push us to grow and, resultingly, grow apart. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that *Exit West* ends with Nadia and Saeed not together, but with other people after being forced to leave the unnamed city. Of a piece with this growth is Nadia’s discovery of her bisexuality.

The female characters in the novel are sexually expressive and self-possessed, further contributing to Hamid’s strategic subversion of common stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed. While Saeed’s mother is described as sexually “voracious” (Hamid, 13), Nadia is described to be more sexually autonomous and comfortable with her desire. It is important to recognize the generational divide between Saeed’s relationship with Nadia and the relationship between his parents; the younger generation’s greater sexual autonomy is representative, in part, of how children differ in their approach to sex from their parents.

Drug Use

Drugs first emerge in the novel alongside sex when Nadia uses social media to order Shrooms on the same night that her and Saeed “first became physically intimate” (Hamid, 41). Psychoactive drugs such as shrooms and marijuana continue to foreground scenes of connection between Nadia and Saeed throughout the novel, even as their relationship has neared its end in Marin. Psychoactive drugs are also a literary device for escapism amidst violent. Hamid writes on the delivery of Nadia’s shrooms: “The Shrooms arrived first thing that following morning at Nadia’s office . . . round the same time, a group of militants was taking over the city’s stock exchange” (43). As violence begins to move from the streets to the larger economic and governmental powers of the unnamed city, Nadia’s shrooms become a vehicle not only for intimacy and connection, but also a distinct form of escapism amidst upheaval. Markedly, Nadia and Saeed

take the shrooms before any indication of the magical doors, which allowed for the physical escape from violence in the unnamed city. Drugs are pivotal to *Exit West*'s themes of intimacy, connection, and survival through escape (or, in the case of psychoactive substances, through escapism).

Bodily Violence

Given the sensitive nature of the topics *Exit West* addresses, it is important to proceed with care. Non-refugee, non-migrant, and non-Muslim educators should be aware that refugee, migrant, and/or Muslim students might find it difficult to address these potentially triggering topics in the classroom environment. *Refugee, migrant, and/or Muslim students should never be called upon to speak as representative of all peoples, nor should they be singled out to share their experiences or to compare their experiences with those fictionalized in the novel.* Non-refugee and non-migrant students might be troubled by the novel's descriptions of violence, Nativist hatred, and anti-Muslim racism. If educators find that students are struggling to make sense of narratives of displacement and resettlement, it will be useful to direct student attention back to primary sources under discussion and/or to direct attention back to the text of *Exit West*. Although the novel unflinchingly depicts the harsh realities that many refugee communities face today, it is important to contextualize these complicated issues within a long history refugee and immigration laws and nativist sentiment. Such context will help to avoid reliance on—and perpetuation of—damaging stereotypes. Unit 1, Unit 4 and Unit 5 will be especially helpful in this regard.

There are several detailed descriptions of bodily violence throughout *Exit West*, especially in the first few chapters. From the beheading of Nadia's drug dealer (Hamid, 41) to teenagers using the severed head of a man to play soccer (Hamid, 87), scenes of violence are meant to paint a picture of a city under militant takeover. These scenes are neither frivolous nor without purpose; they make clear why Nadia and Saeed must leave their city, even though Saeed, in particular, does not want to abandon his father. Through these extreme circumstances, Hamid does not shy away from describing the grim realities from which people seek refuge and safe passage.

Amongst such bodily violence, there is also a graphic scene of sexual assault, which may be triggering for student readers. While in a crowd, a man reaches beneath Nadia's black robe and attempts to assault her (62-64). This moment in the text reflects the reality of a city under upheaval and in times of ongoing war, when sexual violence tend to increase ("[UN warns of steep rise in sexual violence during conflict](#)"). Educators teaching this text may want to consult appropriate resources for discussing sexual violence in a classroom setting.

Instances of Sex, Drugs, and Violence in the Greater Literary Canon

While such detailed scenes of sex, drug use, bodily and sexual violence in a contemporary novel may at first seem unusual for the high school classroom, commonplace “classic” literature engages with similar themes. For example, in *Lord of the Flies*, violence is the central driving force of the novel’s explorations of boyhood, human nature, and the fragility of order and civilization. Or you can consider the persistent presence and use of alcohol in *The Great Gatsby* or wartime violence in *The Odyssey*. Talking about such topics in the safe environment of the classroom allows students to critically engage with the realities of the world around us in ways that reduce negative stereotypes, destigmatize traditionally “taboo” topics, and think critically about the experiences of refugee communities.

Suggested In-Class Activity

Discussing Violence and Drug Use in *Exit West*

The questions below can be used to help students process descriptions of violence and drug use. It is not suggested to conduct this as part of one class period or discussion activity. Rather, these are questions you can consider asking as these scenes arise in your classroom’s reading schedule.

Questions for Discussing Violence:

1. Why do you think Hamid chooses to set the beginning of Nadia and Saeed’s relationship against the scenes of violence take over by the militant group in the unnamed city? How would the novel change if Saeed and Nadia were not together until a later moment in the novel, or were not in a romantic relationship at all?
2. Point students to the passage where windows in the unnamed city become “the border through which death was possibly most likely to come” (70). The full passage from pages 70–72 describes in detail how and why windows are barricaded in the unnamed city.
 - a. How are windows described in the passage and why?
 - b. How and why do windows become the interface between the outside world of violence and one’s own home?
 - c. What effect does the potential of violence emerging in the home have on Nadia and Saeed?
3. If you would like to help students process the more descriptive scenes of bodily harm, murder, and violence, consider asking the following questions:
 - a. Why do you think Hamid describes the bodily violence experienced by citizens of the unnamed city in detail?
 - b. When these moments take place, what happens immediately before and after?

- c. How are the placement of these scenes meant to affect the reader?
- d. Is the placement of violence jarring, expected, or something else to you?
- e. How does Hamid's use of language and/or literary devices contribute to the reader's experience of scenes of violence?

Questions for Discussing Drug Use:

Point students to two passages where shrooms and marijuana are used by Nadia and Saeed: Passage 1 (43-47), which occurs at the start of Nadia and Saeed's relationship, and Passage 2 (196-197), which occurs as Nadia and Saeed's relationship nears its end.

1. What role do psychoactive drugs play in Nadia and Saeed's relationship?
2. In what moments of their lives do drugs appear and why?

Note: the goal of these questions is not to deem drug use negative nor to judge Nadia and Saeed's use of it, but to instead focus on a literary analytical perspective on the role of drugs—and what drugs allow Nadia and Saeed to access—in the novel.

Suggested In-Class Activity

The Purpose of Sex, Drugs, and Violence in Literature and Film

This activity encourages students to think about the purpose of sex, drugs, and/or violence across literature and film they have encountered in your classroom. Whether its fantasy, action, or romance, these topics play a critical role in both character and plot development.

1. List relevant texts involving sex, drugs, and violence from your curriculum on the board.
2. Give students a few minutes to free-write about how one or more of the relevant text's inclusion of sex, drugs and violence was critical to the development of the plot as a whole. Then tell students to pause once time is over.
3. Ask students to free-write again, this time about how sex, drugs, and violence are important to character development. How do these topics effect, challenge, or change the characters in the novel, tv, or film?
4. Divide students into groups based on the material they chose to write about (by medium, genre, etc.). Then, ask each group to make a Venn diagram on a sheet of paper (or the board) comparing and contrasting how sex, drugs, and violence are critical to *Exit West* and at least one other novel, tv, or film. Each bullet point should be about the purpose of sex, drugs, and violence to the story and character development of the text.
5. Ask each group to share their Venn diagrams with the class. Use large group discussion to guide students to pull out the similarities and differences between the purpose of sex, drugs, and violence across texts. Why and how do these topics similarly and differently effect, challenge, motivate, or change the characters?

UNIT ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. In the form of a comic strip or short graphic narrative, ask students to trace how windows change under the militant takeover of the unnamed city in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of *Exit West*. As the unnamed city is taken over, windows are described as the space through which death may come (Hamid, 71), “amorphous black works of contemporary art” (Hamid, 72), and as providing hints of blue sky through the gashes of wood boarding nailed to destroyed frames (Hamid, 83).

A short 1- or 2-page artist’s statement should accompany their project, explaining the significance of windows as a literary device in the novel. They might also consider how and why the windows are different from the magical doors. The statement should also explain how and why their artistic choices (medium, form, color, etc.) represents the critical purpose of windows as a literary device in *Exit West*.

2. In an essay or podcast (short-form audio project), ask students to trace the development of Nadia and Saeed’s relationship throughout the novel. Students should reflect on the growth and change the two characters undergo, thinking critically about how and why Nadia and Saeed do not end up together in a narrative about forced migration. In the development of their project, they should consider why a romantic relationship is centered in a narrative of forced migration by violent militant. They may also examine how cell phones, psychoactive drugs, and sex emerge at different phases of their relationship as forms of connection, intimacy, and/or escapism.

Requirements:

- **Thesis Statement:** Your paper should assert a clear, definitive stance in the introduction.
- **Evidence & Analysis:** To support your argument, please cite direct quotes from the novel.
- **Counterarguments & Rebuttal:** Explicitly address one major opposing viewpoint and explain why your position remains stronger.

Note: If students take a creative route, such as a short form audio project, ask them to incorporate the above requirements in a short artist’s statement.

3. Ask students to write a literary analysis essay about the purpose of violence in *Exit West*. What kind of language is used to describe violence? What purpose does violence serve the narrative? How does violence affect the characters in the text? How is violence connected to themes of forced migration? You may encourage them to compare and contrast how violence is used both similarly and differently in other texts they’ve read in class.

UNIT 7. PREPARING TO MEET THE AUTHOR

ABOUT THIS UNIT

This unit aims to prepare students to fully engage in the Annual Student Conference by fostering active participation and involvement. It focuses on equipping students with strategies to build their confidence, address any concerns they may have, and set clear expectations for their conference experience. Through this unit, students will be better prepared to contribute meaningfully to the conference and take full advantage of the opportunities it offers.

Keynote Speaker: Mohsin Hamid

This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome Mohsin Hamid, author of *Exit West* to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to converse with her about the novel. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

On Meeting a Writer

Meeting the writer will be a thrilling experience for some of your students, but it might also prove nerve-wracking for others. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference:

- What are the expectations for students' behavior?
- Considering that Mohsin Hamid will only be on campus for one day, what are the ground rules for interacting with the writer in a respectful and efficient way?
- What kind of questions should they ask, and how will they present their work?
- How can they best prepare for the poster sessions and speaking about their projects to viewers?
- What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive, or unprepared?

The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students develop a deeper sense of Mohsin Hamid, what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

Prepare your students for meeting Mohsin Hamid

Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips or articles of the writer doing interviews and show the class their photograph so they can think of them as individuals from the start.

Emphasize being courteous and respectful

Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Mohsin Hamid, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and then ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact and to be polite and confident!

Help students avoid feelings of anxiety

Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Hamid. Emphasize that they are coming to the conference, travelling long distance from overseas, precisely because they are interested in and excited about the ideas that students have developed as they’ve read *Exit West*. Know that they think students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. Hamid wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from them.

Encourage them to be specific

Ask students to avoid being superficial and say things like “I love this book!” or “I hate this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about the novel and *why*. In preparation, ask your class to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking, or challenging about the text.

Tips for asking questions

Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from.

Be prepared

Ask students to think about how Mohsin Hamid might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

On Decorum

This conference will be a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty, staff, etc. The people in attendance have spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous, or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove them from the room immediately.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- What questions do you most want to be answered? What do you want to know about *Exit West*? Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question-and-answer session. If your participating students are large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the official conference day.
- Role-play meeting Hamid. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?
- Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask the author. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad.” Hint: the least effective questions are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book. You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct clear, direct, and interesting questions.

INDEX: HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE CHRONOLOGICALLY

Please Note:

- **“Cultural and Historical Context Activity”** denotes any activities which introduce students to important histories or cultural sensitivities relevant to *Exit West*. Many of these activities utilize other forms of media, such as videos, news headlines, or interactive educational websites.
- **“Close-Reading Activity”** denotes any activities which rely primarily on textual analysis of *Exit West*. These activities utilize only the novel.

Introductory Contexts for Approaching the Novel

- Opening Activity: What Would Make You Leave? (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 1, pg. 14.
- The History and Practice of Islam on Earth and Beyond (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 5, Subsection: Orienting Students to Practices of Islam in *Exit West*, pg. 71.

Additional Activities (Up to Instructor Discretion)

- ***Exit West* Chapters 1 - 12** – The Purpose of Sex, Drugs and Violence in Literature and Film (Cultural and Historical Context Activity, Close-Reading Activity), Mini Unit 6, pg. 86.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 1-12** – Discussion Questions on Sentence Structures & Vignettes (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: Narrative Style & Organization, pg. 36.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 1, 7, 8** – Inside Out: Characterization Exercise (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: Characterization, pg. 38.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 8** – What’s Magical Realist About this Sentence? (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: What is Magical Realism? pg. 32.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 1-11** – Vignette Jigsaw (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection Narrative Style & Organization, pg. 37.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 1 and 2** – Why Does Nadia Choose to Wear the Black Robe? (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 5, Subsection: “Nadia, The Black Robe, and Muslim Women's Veiling,” pg. 79.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 1, 2, and 8** – Thinking Critically About Muslim Women’s Veiling (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 5, Subsection: Nadia, The Black Robe, and Muslim Women's Veiling, pg. 79.

- ***Exit West* Chapters 1-5** – Discussion Questions on the Unnamed City (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 3, Subsection: The Unnamed City, pg. 46.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 2** – Re-Write the Paragraph: Reverse Redaction Exercise (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 3, Subsection: The Unnamed City, pg. 47.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 2** – Passage Analysis of First Vignette (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: What is Magical Realism? pg. 36.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 3 and Chapter 9** – Discussing Cell Phones in *Exit West* (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 4, Subsection: Technology and Surveillance, pg. 66.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 5 and 8** – Prayer in Times of Crisis (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 5, Subsection: Prayer and Community, pg. 74.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 6, 7** – Discussion Questions on the Legal Process of Refugee Resettlement (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 1, Subsection: Refugee Studies: A Brief Overview, pg. 17.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 5, 7, 9** – Understanding Technology and Surveillance in *Exit West* (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 4, Subsection: Technology and Surveillance in *Exit West*, pg. 67.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 6** – Discussion Questions on Magical Realism and the Refugee Journey (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: What is Magical Realism? pg. 32.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7, 8** – Discussion Questions on Saeed and Nadia’s Relationship (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: Characterization, pg. 38-39.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7-11** – How do News and Media Headlines Portray Refugees? (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 4, Subsection: Dominant Perceptions of Refugees, pg. 60.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7-9** – Analyzing Brexit’s Slogan ‘Take Back Control’ (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 4, Subsection: Nativism & Nationalism, pg. 63.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7-11** – Discussion Questions on Mykonos, London, and Marin (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 3, Subsection: Mykonos, London & Marin, pg. 52.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7-11** – Mapping Spaces in *Exit West* (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 3, Subsection: Mykonos, London, & Marin, pg. 52-53.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7-11** – Discussion Questions on Nativism in *Exit West* (Close-Reading Activity), Subsection: Unit Activities and Project Ideas, pg. 67-68.

- ***Exit West* Chapter 8** – Mapping Global Migration Flows: From *Exit West* to the Real World (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 2, Subsection: The Black Doors, pg. 34.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 6, 7, 9** – Place-making & Definitions of Home (Close-Reading Activity), Unit 1, Subsection: Refugee Studies: A Brief Overview, pg. 17.
- ***Exit West* Chapters 7, 10, 11** – Discussion Questions on Indigeneity and (In)voluntary Migration, (Cultural and Historical Context Activity), Unit 1, Subsection: A Nation of Immigrants, pg. 19.
- ***Exit West* Chapter 10 and 11** – Prayer as Refugee and Migrant Placemaking (Cultural and Historical Context Activity, Close-Reading), Unit 5, Subsection: Prayer and Community, pg. 75.