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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2014 Volume III: Immigration and Migration and the Making of a Modern American City

Introduction

by Mary Lui, Professor of History and of American Studies

Immigration reform and urban revitalization remain some of the most urgent and vexing policy questions and debates in our current time. This seminar provided seven teachers from around the country the opportunity to study the complicated processes of U.S. urban formation through the histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration and migration patterns. We moved both geographically and chronologically through New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles to anchor our examinations of migration, settlement, and urban/metropolitan formation across time and space. The seminar also aimed to introduce teachers to a range of primary sources that would enrich the histories of migration and urban formation: autobiography, literary fiction, census, photography, painting, film, newspaper articles, cartoons, and maps.

The seminar began by working through Jacob Riis's classic, *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890 as ethnic and racial mixing, tenement overcrowding, poverty, and economic exploitation came to typify life in New York and other nineteenth-century U.S. cities. The text helped to bring many of the seminar's key historical problems associated with immigration and migration and urban formation into focus. Riis's text also allowed participants to begin wrestling with one of the central challenges of the seminar – how to understand the histories of different immigrant and migrant groups as constantly overlapping, intersecting, and diverging as they move through and settle into the city. We also noted the ways in which immigration policy – or lack thereof – in this period shaped migration in ways that would be different from the twentieth century. At the same time, the emphasis on the images and text allowed us to consider how literary and visual forms convey historical information and cultural meaning differently. We also read academic articles on the uses and interpretations of Riis's seminal work by scholars and the public in the last century to begin to engage the theme of historiography and understand the writing of history as the result of academic debates and contestations over how to interpret historical sources and narrate the past.

As we prepared to gather back at Yale in July, the national media focused the public's attention on the plight of young Latino migrants stranded at the U.S./Mexico border. Our historic investigations became even more relevant to our understanding of pressing current issues and events. We started the intensive session examining the growth of antebellum New York City located at the southern end of Manhattan Island. Western European immigration along with regional rural to urban migration that included the harrowing escapes of fugitive slaves such as Harriet Jacobs in search of freedom fueled the city's growth. We paid particular attention to the Five Points neighborhood in Lower Manhattan as a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood that would change following the violent expulsion of African Americans following the 1863 Draft Riots. Yet, the city continued to offer diverse groups of European immigrants and African American migrants opportunities to encounter one another in public spaces such as Central Park as well as popular cultural amusements such as Coney Island and dances halls. We examined the ways in which these men and women

responded to the challenges of urban life and fashioned new identities through their participation in urban commercial culture. We also studied the responses of social reformers to deal with the rising numbers of migrants and wide range of social, political, and economic concerns.

Following our study of New York City, we moved to Chicago to examine more closely the First Great Migration of African Americans from the South from the 1890s to the end of the First World War that occurred at the same time of large scale Eastern European immigration and settlement to that city. Looking at the business practices of Chicago employers and real estate agents helped make clear the ways in which European immigrants and African American migrants experienced the City of Big Shoulders differently. As the former found opportunities for socioeconomic mobility in the cities industries over time, the latter experienced racial discrimination and violence as evidenced by the 1919 Chicago Riot.

Moving to twentieth-century Los Angeles brought attention to the histories of Asian and Latino migration. We paused to remember that the nation grew dramatically throughout the nineteenth-century through imperial conquest and considered the dramatic changes in immigration policies throughout the twentieth century that turned the U.S.-Mexico border into a geopolitical reality that would profoundly reshape the lives of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the region even to this day. Our study of the twentieth-century formation of the Los Angeles metropolitan area also made clear the ways in which this city developed differently from the older U.S. cities we had studied. The automobile and, more importantly, the freeway systems that enabled car travel created exclusive suburbs throughout Greater Los Angeles that practiced new forms of class- and race-based exclusion and segregation that came into stark relief with the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

The seminar emphasized the importance of understanding how the migration histories of the groups of people studied varied greatly as a result of policies, laws, and social and cultural practices that offered some groups opportunities for social and economic mobility while excluding others. In particular, we examined the ways in which racial difference codified in laws and concretized in daily practices created structures of exclusion that shaped the migration histories of African Americans, Asians, and Latinos differently from European immigrants. The readings also featured the voices of immigrants and migrants that allowed participants to consider the ways in which these historic subjects were not just victims of racial exclusion or economic exploitation but also active agents who quickly learned forms of individual and collective resistance. For example, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Asian exclusion such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement greatly limited the migration of Asians to the U.S. By reading about the life histories and experiences of Koreans and Mexicans in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century, participants began to see the ways in which the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans intersected. At times economic barriers created intergroup competition while in other instances similar conditions resulted in collective political mobilization for better housing or work opportunities.

The seven curriculum units that grew out of the seminar reflect the hard work of the impressive group of teachers in the seminar. They range from grades 1 through 12 specializing in varied subjects: Spanish, History, Geography, English, and Visual Art. These teachers felt drawn to this unit specifically because of their own passion and commitment to their students and the urban neighborhoods that their schools serve. Their participation in the seminar discussions and readings allowed many to make connections back to their home cities and neighborhoods to better understand the historic struggles for racial and economic justice. Although many of the assigned seminar texts were not always immediately applicable to the elementary or middle school grades, these teachers nonetheless took away key pedagogical tools and methods as well as central analytical concepts needed to interpret and understand these materials.

The rich conversations generated from the seminar meetings supported the growth and development of the seven curriculum units presented. They cover a wide range of topics: family and neighborhood history, food and migration, work and migration in the global city, visual representations and immigration laws and policies, the construction of race and the making of juridical and geographic borders, and urban youth culture and rites of passage.

Together these units bring to life the city as a historic site of encounter for immigrants and migrants. And the everyday world of migrants whether on the intimate scale of the family or neighborhood is always shaped by larger social, economic and political forces in the city or nation at large. The units all aim to teach students the ways in which these historic subjects have aimed to shape their lives in the U.S. through individual and collective struggle. We hope that these units will help diversify, deepen, and broaden the ways students will engage with U.S. urban history and immigration and migration history.

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