



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## **A Nation of Dreamers: Examining American Immigration and Race through *Esperanza Rising***

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### **Content Objectives**

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#### **Introduction**

Immigration has a long and complicated role in American history. America prides itself in being an “immigrant nation” or a mixing bowl of races, religions, and cultures. The nation ingrained language of equality and opportunity into its founding documents. National symbols, like the Statue of Liberty have long stood as a welcoming beacon to anyone looking to pursue their ‘American Dream’ within this democracy. And yet, the United States has a long list of policies and practices making acceptance easier for some immigrants, while others struggle. My students were first exposed to the unequal treatment and selective acceptance of immigrants through our novel study of *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan.

While reading *Esperanza Rising*, it was clear my students lacked the historical background knowledge of immigration in America. However, they were able to empathize with the characters by connecting the story’s events to other periods of inequality in America, such as the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement, as well as their personal experiences while living through riots, peaceful protests, incidences of police brutality, and the removal of the Confederate monuments during the Black Lives Matters movement in the summer of 2020.

I was inspired by my students' thoughtful discussions on racism in the past and present. My goal in this unit is to broaden my students' historical knowledge of immigration in America, and the role race has played in the acceptance of immigrants. In my unit, students will read the novel *Esperanza Rising*, and pair significant events in the stories to historical moments when race played a key role in America’s immigration policies and practices.

#### **Rationale**

Too often schools with struggling reading scores pour extensive amounts of time and effort into the teaching of targeted reading skills. However, very little evidence supports that placing an emphasis on teaching these skills has any effect on shrinking the achievement gaps. In the 1990s, “no excuses” charter schools saw an increase in their end of the year reading assessments through this skill-focused approach to reading

instruction. However, the long-term data showed that these schools found it more difficult “to get their students through high school and college.”<sup>1</sup> The long-term data indicated that the emphasis on skill-based instruction creates test-ready students, but not life-long, college and career ready readers. In response, many teachers and education researchers are looking for a more authentic approach to reading instruction, which takes the emphasis off the idea of “learning to read,” and instead focuses on developing readers that “read to learn.”

Over the past five years, my school district has underperformed in reading and writing scores. The district’s average 5th grader proficiency scores in reading dropped to “below proficient” during middle school. This shows that Richmond is not unlike other school systems that have fallen into the trap of increasing reading instruction of skills, rather than providing students with authentic reading opportunities. In addition, science and social studies instruction is being marginalized or disappearing altogether from elementary classrooms.

Rather than teach this curriculum within a nonexistent or limited history block, I plan on implementing this unit during my reading and writing block. I intend to provide my students with opportunities to “read to learn” about immigration in America. The historical background presented in this unit is designed to provide a more rounded look at how America became an immigrant nation. The historical knowledge will prepare my students in their comprehension, interpretation, and analysis of the events that inspired the novel *Esperanza Rising*.

## Content Background

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America’s society and government represents freedom, democracy, and opportunity. For many, coming to America is a chance to pursue the dreams that might be impossible to pursue in their homeland. The Statue of Liberty remains a symbol of this American ideology. The words of Emma Lazarus’s poem *The New Colossus* inscribed onto the welcoming monument imply that America is welcoming to even the most desperate of outsiders who wish to immigrate here.

The United States is known as the “immigrant nation,” but its policies and attitudes towards these newcomers have not always been as welcoming as Lazarus’s poem implies. Nativism, the belief that immigration should be limited or denied to those who pose a threat to native born or established citizens, has often played a role in the anti-immigration rhetoric common throughout the Nation’s history. Unfortunately, the line between nativism and racism has also blurred since the founding of the nation, when nativists favored those of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant descent. In this section I will separate *Esperanza Rising* into the following three sections which draw the connection between race and America’s acceptance of immigrants: Why People Immigrate, Entry into America, and Life in an Immigrant Nation. I summarize the chapters’ key events, then provide detailed accounts of the common practice, policies, and the public perceptions towards immigrants during a specific time in America history. I focus mostly on four major immigration moments: the first major wave of immigration during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, comparing the entry points of Ellis Island and Angel Island, the racial alliance of Mexicans and Filipino farm workers to unionize, and Japanese internment camps.

### Why People Immigrate

The beginning of the *Esperanza Rising* establishes that the main character, Esperanza Ortega, lives a privileged, wealthy life on her father’s ranch in Aguascalientes, Mexico in 1930. However, the Mexican

Revolution has created social unrest throughout her country, and by the end of the first chapter, Esperanza's father, targeted for his wealth, has been murdered by bandits. This event becomes the catalyst that leads Esperanza's family to immigrate to America. Esperanza's mother cannot own the ranch without a husband, so Esperanza's uncles, greedy to take over the prosperous ranch, pressure her mother to marry one of them or else they will "make things difficult for" her.<sup>2</sup> Eventually Esperanza's home is burned down as a warning to comply. By chapter 4, "Los Higos," Esperanza's mother decides to seek refuge in America with a family of beloved servants, Alfonso, Hortensia, and their son Miguel, who also fear working for the uncles.

Like any force that enacts change, the factors that cause migration and immigration can be categorized two ways: a push or a pull. Insecurities within a society cause a push which motivates people to leave their home. For example, violence, poverty, natural disasters, or limited opportunities are just some of the factors that push individuals and their families away from their homeland. Securities, such as freedoms, financial opportunities, stability, and safety, pull these same individuals to a chosen new, more desirable location.<sup>3</sup> All too often, there are simultaneous pushes and pulls that motivate immigrants. The murder of Esperanza's father and threats from her uncles become the pushing factors, and the belief that "in the United States, you do not need *una palanca*... even the poorest man can become rich if he works hard enough,"<sup>4</sup> pulls Esperanza, her mother, Alfonso, Hortensia, and Miguel to America.

The first great wave of immigration in America took place in the 1800s. Between the years of 1820 and 1860 fifteen million immigrants entered the United States. Two immigrant populations that can be compared to the push and pull factors within *Esperanza Rising* are Irish and Chinese. The main reason millions of Irish were immigrating to the United States was because of the Irish Potato Famine. The Irish, already marginalized by the British, were given very little resource to combat the famine. To escape starvation, the Irish immigrated across the Atlantic, accepting a wide variety of labor-intensive jobs in the United States, such as building canals and railroads, working in textile mills, and becoming longshoreman along port cities.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Irish found opportunities for work in America, these new arrivals were not welcomed. By 1860, twelve percent of the U.S. population was Catholic, many of them being Irish Catholic. The predominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant America felt the growing presence of Irish and Catholicism as a threat to the integrity of American society.<sup>6</sup> From this xenophobia arose a new political party in America, the Native American Party, also known as the Know Nothing Party. The rhetoric from this party heightened the discrimination of Irish immigrants. Believing that the Irish were lazy, uncivilized, uneducated, dirty, and inferior, many businesses placed signs outside their stores "No Irish Need Apply" and were not even considered part of "white" America.<sup>7</sup>

Abraham Lincoln commented on the racist rhetoric spewed by the Know Nothing party, pointing out the irony, by stating that in America "all men are created equal, except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics."<sup>8</sup> Lincoln's opposition towards the Know Nothing Party won him many votes from the Irish and German population.<sup>9</sup> Other notable political figures look to the Irish for alliance in racial progression in America. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass and Irish Nationalist Daniel O'Connell both openly opposed American slavery and the treatment of the Irish in England and America.<sup>10</sup> And yet, their alliance failed to unite Irish immigrants and Irish Americans behind the abolitionist movement. Many Irish Americans ended up siding with the pro-slavery South, and eventually the Confederacy, aligning themselves closer to white American and moving higher up the social hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> After the Civil War, white southerners were not eager to employ former slaves. Instead, they looked to immigrants, whom they could demand long hours of work, unsafe working conditions, and pay lower wages. With technological advances in steamboats, more foreigners began to arrive

on America's shore. The new arrivals from Eastern and Southern Europe became the new targets of nativist ridicule, and even the "newly assimilated Germans and Irish felt superior."<sup>12</sup> The increase in new immigrants and labor-intensive jobs created the emergence of unions. The Irish and European immigrants were able to achieve more suitable pay and working conditions, essentially rights and privileges still not bestowed on Asian immigrants, Latino immigrants, and African Americans, securing the Irish's, and other Europeans', trajectory into being more accepted by white America.<sup>13</sup>

The California Gold Rush of 1848 pulled immigrants to the United States from Latin America, Australia, Europe, and Asia. The Chinese made up a large portion of these immigrants. Unlike the Irish, the Chinese suffered more political backlash during the 1800s surge of immigration. China was overpopulated and much of its population was living in poverty, so the pull of the gold rush was especially alluring to the Chinese, looking for economic opportunities.<sup>14</sup> Chinese immigrants brought with them their cultures and traditions. Their practice of Buddhism was found to be far more frightening than Catholicism to nativists. White Americans reacted by looting Chinese businesses, often causing riots. During one riot in Los Angeles, seventeen Chinese immigrants were lynched. More killings of Chinese immigrants followed in other communities when authorities refused to respond to the murders.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the European immigrants, Chinese immigrants did not just battle racial violence and community discrimination. They also faced racist laws passed barring them from work in America. Denis Kearney (an Irish immigrant and naturalized American citizen) founded the Workingmen's Party of California and was the pioneering voice of the "Chinese Must Go" movement. He blamed unemployment on Chinese laborers stealing jobs from white citizens. His movement led to barring Chinese from working in the mining or fishing industry.<sup>16</sup>

Without those options, the Chinese looked for work in other places like the construction of the transcontinental railroads.<sup>17</sup> Despite worksite accounts describing the Chinese railroad workers as people who "kept to themselves, and other than gambling, enjoyed few vice,"<sup>18</sup> the Chinese were deemed a threat to America by nativists. On May 6th, 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed prohibiting the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten year and prohibiting all Chinese from naturalized citizenship. This landmark legislation became the first restrictive immigration law, as well as the first restrictive immigration policy based on race.<sup>19</sup> It is known as an example of "watershed" legislation, paving the way for other restrictive measures to immigration like the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and Immigration Act of 1924, which also implemented quotas on immigration based on nationality.

## **Entry into America**

In the chapters "Los Higos" to "Los Cebollas," Esperanza experiences her journey to and into America. The death of her father and her mother's inability to take over the ranch changed her social and economic status. For the first time Esperanza experiences the disadvantages faced by those with less financial security. Esperanza's family is forced to sit in the back cars of the train, overcrowded with other passengers and animal livestock. When they arrived at the Mexicali border, she noticed "the people in the first [class train] cars were escorted to the shortest lines and passed through quickly,"<sup>20</sup> while her family must wait in longer lines. There are also accounts of people being put back on the train back to Mexico for "many reasons. They had no papers, false ones or no proof of work."<sup>21</sup> Esperanza's experience can be compared to the development of systematic entry points during the 20<sup>th</sup> century's surge of immigration to the United States.

America's most famous entry point, Ellis Island, was founded in 1892, and by the time it was closed in 1954, nearly 12 million immigrants passed through this entry point.<sup>22</sup> The industrialization and urbanization of

America saw a rise in immigration, mostly from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe.<sup>23</sup> Just as students see in *Esperanza Rising*, class and wealth played a role in the entry process through Ellis Island. Those who had the money to purchase first and second-class tickets could bypass the island altogether.<sup>24</sup> Those who could not, made the journey in cramped below deck steerage areas with little privacy, minimal sanitation, and no fresh air. These immigrants were scrutinized by processing workers who looked for signs of illness, lice, physical disabilities, and even intellectual or mental illnesses. In addition, women and girls could not pass through alone unless a male relative could claim them as family. These inspections usually lasted three to five hours.<sup>25</sup> While the deportation guidelines were unforgiving to anyone deemed unacceptable, the rate of denial was relatively low, with 0.5-1.5 percent of Ellis Island immigrants being rejected from entry.<sup>26</sup>

When comparing Esperanza's experience to that of Ellis Island, it is important to not fall into the subconscious historical narrative that Ellis Island represents all entry experience for immigrants during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Angel Island, the western entry point for immigrants is "often described as the 'Ellis Island of the West'... or viewed as a bookend model of Ellis Island."<sup>27</sup> While the construction of the island mirrored the design of Ellis Island, Angel Island was created to serve an entirely different purpose. Often called the "Guardian of the Western Gate," Angel Island "served to accommodate the legal requirements of the Chinese Exclusion Act" as it processed over one million Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, Russian, Filipino, and Australian immigrants.<sup>28</sup> Immigrants who entered through Angel Island could be held as detainees for anywhere between a few days to years before making it to the shores of America.<sup>29</sup> On average 20 percent of Ellis Island immigrants were detained for further inspection, with only the 0.5 to 1.5 percent being deported. In comparison, on Angel Island 60 percent of the immigrants were detained for inspection, and 14 percent were deported, mostly Chinese.

During the comparison of Ellis and Angel Island, it may be appropriate to shift from reading *Esperanza Rising*, and allow students to examine the poetry associated with each entry point. Emma Lazarus's *The New Colossus* is memorialized on a plaque at Ellis Island. Lazarus was a descendant of Jewish and Portuguese immigrants and could trace her lineage back to colonial America. She worked with refugees in New York City, and was particularly moved by the stories of Russian Jews who fled their homeland for America. In 1883, lawyer William Maxwell Evart and author Constance Cary Harrison asked Lazarus to write a poem for the Art Loan Fund Exhibition in Aid of the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund for the Statue of Liberty.<sup>30</sup> Lazarus combined what she knew of her own Jewish heritage, with the experiences of the refugees she worked with, and wrote the poem *The New Colossus*. The poem was engraved onto a plaque and placed on the Statue of Liberty in 1903, nineteen years after her death.<sup>31</sup>

Within her poem, Lazarus describes the Statue of Liberty as the "Mother of Exiles,"<sup>32</sup> with a "beacon hand/ glows world-wide welcome."<sup>33</sup> Towards the end of the poem Lazarus uses descriptive language to list characteristics of people welcomed into the country. She states, "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"<sup>34</sup> and later to send the "homeless, tempest-tost."<sup>35</sup> This implies that America will be welcoming to all, even of low social or economic class, refugees, and weathered individuals. Lazarus' poem has been used as an anthem towards America's immigrant narrative, as its language paints a picture of a nation of acceptance and inclusion; a nation that provides security for those who come.

In comparison, no poems were asked to be written about Angel Island. Instead, the detainees who were held for days, weeks, months, and years, etched poetry directly into the wooden walls that imprisoned them.

According to the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, it is believed that these poems came to be out of a combination of boredom and frustration in being detained for long periods of time. As immigrants passed through the cells, they found inspiration from the poems written on the walls and added poetry of their own.<sup>36</sup> These poems have been translated. "Sitting alone in the customs office,/ How could my heart not ache?/ Had my family not been poor/ I would not have traveled far away from home"<sup>37</sup> and "America has power, but not justice./ In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty./ Given no opportunity to explain, it was really brutal./ I bow my head in reflection but there is nothing I can do,"<sup>3839</sup> are just two examples of poems, written in forms of classical Chinese poetry, that paint a very different picture of America's welcome of immigrants through Angel Island than Ellis Island.

### **Life in an Immigrant Nation: Makers of Progress and Detainees**

The final seven chapters of *Esperanza Rising* deal with the themes of acceptance and oppression. In the text there are instances of immigrant populations working together to support each other, alongside native, white populations opposing both the immigrant and second-generation immigrant population's existence. There is also the development of acceptance and recognized oppression within the main character. For Esperanza, life in the United States is not what she expects. She comes to terms with her new social status and the assumptions others make of her as a Mexican immigrant, at one point reflecting on the fact that she "has a better education than most people's children in this country. But no one is likely to recognize that or take the time to learn it."<sup>40</sup> Events and details like the racial segregation of the work camps, the unequal pay between immigrant and American workers, an immigration raid, and Isabel unfair treatment at school can be used to examine how immigrations are treated after entrance into American.

For the millions of immigrants who crossed through Ellis Island, many remained in New York City. By only 1869, sixty-nine percent of New York City was foreign born.<sup>41</sup> Although there was abundant opportunities for economic success in New York City, nativism and racism was still prevalent, leading immigrants to stick together in safety with the languages, customs, and people they were most familiar with. These cultural pocket communities, such as Little Italy and Chinatown, popped up in New York City and other major cities immigrants settled.<sup>42</sup> Although there was security living with those from the same homeland, little policy or policing was put into place to ensure immigrants had safe and suitable home and work life. Landlords could charge high rent, cramming multiple families into one room. Buildings lacked proper construction, sewage, and air ventilation, which often led to dangerous accidents and disease spreading rapidly.<sup>43</sup> Immigrants began to fight these inhuman treatments. In 1890, a Danish immigrant and journalist named Jacob Riis, utilized the invention of flash photography to document the inhuman conditions of New York tenements in a book called *How the Other Half Lives*. His efforts created a wave of sympathy resulting in the Tenement House Act of 1901.<sup>44</sup>

Another example of immigrants and second-generation immigrants working to correct inhuman labor practices took place in the 1940s to 1970s when Mexican and Filipino immigrants played a crucial role in one of the most historical labor movements in American history. One of the major farm worker organizations at the time was composed of mostly Filipino workers, called the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC).<sup>45</sup> Cesar Chavez, a second-generation Mexican American and founder of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), wanted to confront the racial pay gap and unequal working conditions in the agricultural industry. He understood that historically, "Filipinos and Mexicans had often been segregated into different picking crews; this separation was often exploited by ranchers to pit one group against another in a labor dispute."<sup>46</sup> The successful merging of both migrant groups inspired and motivated a long-standing worker's strike, the Delano

grape strike, which demanded the improvement of working conditions for farm workers. Some of the historical achievements of this movement were the first collective bargaining agreement between workers and growers, union contracts, health benefits for farm workers and their families, pensions and retirement plans, and contracts regulating safety and sanitary conditions for workers.<sup>47</sup>

Despite their involvement in the historical progress Mexican immigrants have made for the American workforce, modern political rhetoric demonizes immigrants who enter from our southern border as a “Latino threat.”<sup>48</sup> Mexican and Latin American immigrants have faced an ongoing pattern of being welcomed as a cheap source of labor in times of need, but seen as foreign invaders, stealing American jobs when America no longer deems them desirable. However, the ebb and flow of Hispanic and Latin American immigrants at the southern border is nothing new. The Spanish colonized South, Central, and North America nearly a hundred years before the English founded any colonies in North America.<sup>49</sup> Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. Given its relative weakness as a newly formed nation, Mexican territory became the target of the United States expansionist agenda. The Mexican American war lasted from 1846 to 1848 and resulted in Mexico losing half of its land to the United States. The residents living in the newly acquired territory were given a choice to relocate back to Mexico or stay. Most stayed to become the nation’s first Mexican Americans. From here, the nation’s southern border has seen various waves of Mexican and Latin American immigrants and laborers crossing in and out of the country.<sup>50</sup>

Historically, Mexicans worked alongside the Chinese, Native Americans, African Americans, and other immigrants in mineral mines, agricultural fields, and railroads during the 1800s. The need for Mexican immigrant laborers grew in the 1920s, then fell with the Great Depression, when millions of Mexicans were deported. Then again, when World War II brought a large labor shortage, the United States looked to Mexican immigrants to fill the void through the Bracero Program. After the war, when American workers returned home, Operation Wetback was developed, “- an outdated, insulting, and racist term referring to workers literally getting their backs wet as they crossed the Rio Grande.”<sup>51</sup> This program used war-time rhetoric claiming that Mexican and Latin American immigrants had “invaded by an ‘alarming, ever-increasing flood tide.”<sup>52</sup> Even with the increase in Border Patrol in the 1950s, immigration at the southern border never ceased.<sup>53</sup> This mirrors present day southern border policies where despite a massive increase in officers and funding in Border Patrol from \$83 million in 1980 to \$1.1 billion in 2000, “the number of migrants entering the United States without authorization changed little.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, over the past decade, illegal immigration from Mexico has actually decreased and immigrants leaving has increased, mainly due to more economic improvements and opportunities in home countries.<sup>55</sup>

Filipino workers are often referenced in *Esperanza Rising*, where they work in segregated fields and live in segregated camps. The introduction of Marta, a second-generation Mexican immigrant and worker’s rights activist would lend a direct comparison to notable leaders of the Delano grape strike like Cesar Chavez, Larry Itliong, Lupe Martinez, and Dolores Huerta. Another example of minority racial alliance within *Esperanza Rising* is seen through Mr. Yakota, a Japanese store owner in town. The Mexican workers at Esperanza’s camp travel farther to this store because he caters to their needs and does not discriminate within his store. Miguel notes that Mr. Yakota is “a very smart businessman. He is getting rich on other people’s bad manners.”<sup>56</sup> This final section of *Esperanza Rising* allows opportunities for students to also learn about another immigrant population that was not accepted by American society and government, the Japanese.

Before the aftermath of the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans had already faced racist and discriminatory practices in America. A large wave of Japanese immigrants arrived in

America around the 1880s, and they faced similar treatment as the Chinese. “Oriental” schools were created to segregate Japanese students from whites.<sup>57</sup> Organizations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League created an agenda to pass discriminatory laws, trying to protect white laborers from Japanese immigrants. By 1907, the flow of Japanese immigrants slowed, then came to a stop with the immigrant quotas of 1924.<sup>58</sup> First generation Japanese immigrants were known as Issei, were considered non-white and could not become American citizens. However, their children, second-generation, were known as Nisei, and had automatic citizenship by being born in the United States. “Most Nisei actively embraced America, thought of themselves as proud Americans, spoke English, and preferred American food and customs.”<sup>59</sup>

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, fearing that Japanese immigrants were spies for their homeland, issued Executive Order 9066 allowing the military to relocate 120,000 Japanese to internment camps indefinitely. This included Nisei, despite being American citizens. They were only allowed to take what they could carry. The internment camps, many located on Indigenous American land in western and southwest America were unfit for living with average temperatures reaching 125 degrees during the day and dropping significantly at night. While families were permitted to stay together, there was little privacy. Multiple families shared barracks, outhouses, and shower stalls. Disease was prevalent, and arm guards monitored the camps with orders to kill anyone who tried to escape. The California internment camp at Manzanar is one of the most notable camps, having held eleven thousand internees.<sup>60</sup> It is documented that 1,826 Japanese died due to the conditions of the camps. Of the 120,000 Issei and Nisei brought to the internment camps, not a single instance of spying or treason was ever prosecuted or proven.

War can expose the shocking cruelty humans impose on one another, but also be a catalyst for change. After World War II, 50 nations from around the world met in San Francisco, California and signed the UN Charter in hopes that the organization of the United Nations would prevent another world war and atrocities that went along with it.<sup>61</sup> Twenty years later, much spurred on by the growing Civil Rights movement in the United States, the Immigration Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, was passed ending the racial quota systems that disproportionately favored Western Europeans over the Asia-Pacific Triangle. Instead, the United States adopted a maximum limit on immigration based on hemisphere. The Western hemisphere’s maximum was 120,000 per year, and the Eastern hemisphere was 170,000 per year.<sup>62</sup> The end of these quotas saw a rise in immigration from areas historically marginalized, such Italy, Greece, Poland, Korea, China, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, many African nations, Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean.<sup>63</sup> In 1980, the United States adopted the Refugee Act, which accepted the UN’s definition of the word *refugee*, and created a systematic procedure of accepting refugees into the United States. The effects of the Vietnam War, Cambodian Genocide, Cuban Revolution, and Iranian Revolution are just a few conflicts that played a part in American intake of refugees.<sup>64</sup>

### **Teaching with Historical Consciousness**

History is only as accurate as those who record it. Whenever discussing the history of immigration in America, it is important to be cautious of how the historical narrative can misrepresent groups or individuals, or completely ignore individuals. Historically, textbooks have been a common place for only certain information being presented to students. For example, in 1926, George Stephenson’s *The History of American Immigration*, described how Europeans and Asians arrived and were processed through Ellis Island, but failed to provide any detail on these immigrants’ lives in America.<sup>65</sup> A few years later, a 1928 book by Charles Beard, *History of the American People*, characterized Southern and Eastern Europeans as invading the country. While including poetry contributed by this group of immigrants, he concluded that these immigrants “left their



families behind them and remained loyal in heart to their native land... having no lasting interest in this country or love for it.”<sup>66</sup> In addition, this book made absolutely no mention of Asian immigrants and their contributions except for the mention of the Chinese Exclusion Act.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately, this misinformation, or omission of information, occurs today as well. Sam Wineburge’s book *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)* describes a Virginia history textbook used in Richmond City Schools, *Our Virginia, Past and Present*, stating that “thousands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson” and even provided photos of African Americans in Confederate uniforms.<sup>68</sup> Wineburg describes that despite the photos, this claim has been disputed by every reputable historians, mainly because the only war-time documentation, General Order #14 of enlisting African American soldiers by the Confederacy was done during the last days of the war, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1865. When the Washington Post interviewed the author and publisher, it was revealed the source of the information and photos was not found through primary source, but an online website owned by the Sons of the Confederate Veterans.<sup>69</sup> While the photos published in the textbook could be real, the website’s and textbook’s claim that thousands of African Americans fought at a time in the war when two battalions could fight under Stonewall Jackson does not align with the Confederacy’s own documentation.

Other racist attempts to eliminate or diminish African American history through misinformation have been made within America’s immigration narrative. “In recent years rumors have cropped up that the biggest percentage of enslaved people forced to the New World were actually white - people from Ireland sold in the 1640s and 50s.”<sup>70</sup> A photograph of young Irish laborers has circulated claiming to be “Irish slaves.” When the claim was investigated further, it was discovered the myth was created by a racist organization to undermine the horrors of slavery with the goal that modern day white America need not feel guilt over the country’s racist history.<sup>71</sup> While the photos and story it implies were deemed fake, comparing any immigrant experience to the experience of the African American slave is wrong. The descendants of early European immigration do not feel the effects or face challenges that the legacy of racism has imposed on African American in America.<sup>72</sup>

An important narrative to not engage in, is wording or description of enslaved Africans as immigrants. Textbooks in America have been published under the section “Patterns of Immigration” describes the Atlantic slave trade bringing “millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantation.”<sup>73</sup> The grouping of enslaved Africans in the same category as the millions of immigrants who choose to journey to the United States implies that enslaved Africans were in pursuit of economic opportunity and freedoms. This language does not pay proper respect to horrors of slavery, because African and their African American descendants did not come to America out of choice.

To ensure classroom conversations are conscious of a more equitable exploration of American immigration, it is important to start with the first truth: The only people that can be truly considered “native” to America are Indigenous Americans. However, like so many other groups that came to America’s shores, the Indigenous American population was marginalized and not given the privilege of citizenship until 1924 and right to vote until 1965. Prior to colonization, the Americas were home to complex cultures and societies, where about 1,200 languages were spoken. When Christopher Columbus arrived, there were 15million indigenous people living in America, but by 1900 the population had reduced to 250,000.<sup>74</sup> When students build their historical background knowledge of immigration, it is important to make sure students learn that, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, “our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race.”<sup>75</sup>

The term “melting pot” is commonly used in America’s immigrant stories. I reference this term earlier as a staple expression in America’s identity as an immigration nation. However, many have argued this language is problematic, arguing the term implies that to be accepted into the American immigrant nation narrative, one must melt together into one American beliefs, ideals, and cultures. In other words, assimilate. This mentality has been weaponized by racist and nativist rhetoric. Early on, to be American one must be Anglo-Saxon Protestant, not Irish-Catholic or Chinese-Buddhist. Kathleen Kroll’s “The Food Chapter” in *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories* sheds light on the fact that throughout America’s immigrant history, generation after generation, and culture after culture has not let go of their beliefs and cultures to blend into one.

“Immigrants have made one key contribution to America after another. You might listen to reggae from Jamaica or K-pop from South Korea, or read Japanese manga, or practice yoga from India. Or you might have gone to kindergarten or gotten gifts from Santa Clause (both German ideas).”<sup>76</sup>

Many are suggesting a new metaphor to summarize America as an immigrant nation. A common suggestion is a salad bowl or a flower garden. Both imply a mixture of various ingredients or plants, that when combined do not lose their valuable characteristic, but create something stronger or more beautiful when together. Presenting both terms and ideologies to students and allowing them to pick the metaphor they believe should best represent America, using historical evidence they have acquired through the novel study, would lead to interesting class discussions.

## Teaching Strategies

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### Authentic Reading

Reading instruction often becomes mundane and repetitive to struggling readers or those reading on accelerated levels. This is because reading instruction is often approached in a systemic implementation of teaching a skill, practicing said skill, then offering short passages to test the mastery of said skill. And yet, almost no adults or professionals read in this format authentically, asking themselves: What is the main idea? What is the author’s purpose? Or what inference can I make? Rather, in college and career, reading is done to learn material, not to practice or acquire skills.

The text students will receive will not be stand-alone passages. Rather, they will use authentic reading material such those published books like *Esperanza Rising* or *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, and news articles and primary source documentation of historical events. This is meant to help students build historical background knowledge, rather than reading a selective passage designed to practice a skill. Through authentic reading and teacher modeling, students will naturally develop the skills to comprehend material, make inferences based on their background knowledge, and critically think about the material they are presented with.

### International Baccalaureate PYP Integration

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Year Program (PYP) units of study “Where We Are in Place and Time,” allows students to explore the themes of historical persons and discoveries, relationships between

individuals and civilizations, and connections between local and global perspectives. This PYP unit of study fits perfectly into this unit's focus on historical empathy, historical inequities, and character vs. personal dreams.

For students who have traditionally participated in limited historical instruction, understanding events of the past may be difficult to conceptualize, leading to historical misconceptions. The IB approach of inquiry-based instruction can assist in helping overcome these misconceptions. Throughout the unit, teachers should engage students in multiple mediums of information, such as pictures, political cartoons, timelines, graphs, and maps. Focus on concepts of causation, change, perspective, responsibility, and reflection when students utilize critical thinking. Through the intentional design of the IB PYP approach the emphasis is put on student communication, research, and critical thinking skills.

## Classroom Activities

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### Close Reading of Paired Passages

Close reading is a strategy used to develop comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary skills. In daily life, if a reader does not understand the topic of a magazine article, novel's chapter, or directions in a recipe, they may go back and reread sections of the text again to obtain whatever knowledge they need. Students will use close reading techniques to better understand the historical information needed to conceptualize the events of *Esperanza Rising*.

I create a weekly schedule for students to follow that fosters critical thinking about the text. Each day, students and I will read a chapter of *Esperanza Rising*. In my district, each student receives their own individual copies of the novel, so students are encouraged to write directly in their book or use sticky notes. Using an anchor chart as a reference, I encourage students to underline important sentences, number sequencing events, circle keywords, dates, or names, highlight unknown words, and draw emojis in the margins to track character development and mood. From here, nonfiction excerpts, news articles, or primary sources about immigration will be paired with the chapters. In addition, students will be encouraged to annotate their nonfiction passages.

During the close readings, I guide students in their annotations by providing graphic organizers. These graphic organizers can be more or less structured depending on student needs. The graphic organizers I utilize will promote a close and critical examination of equal treatment, racism, and opportunities for different immigrant groups.

### Evidence-Based Critical Thinking through Guided and Essential Questions

Throughout the reading of *Esperanza Rising*, students will build their historical background knowledge of American immigration through these essential questions: 1) Why do people immigrate? 2) Why is America known as an Immigrant Nation? 3) How are immigrants accepted in America? By the end of the novel study, each student should not be able to recite a singular answer to each question. Instead, they should be able to formulate a unique evidence-based response to each question.

In order to achieve this, the essential questions will be presented to students before the novel study begins. Then, students will reflect on daily guiding questions that can be relevant to either or both the novel and

nonfiction texts. Making inferences is both a required and difficult skill for my 5<sup>th</sup> graders to master. The daily guiding questions, which will be open-ended in nature, help students use the information within the text to support an inference they make. Graphic organizers will be used to assist students in organizing their inferences, observations, and evidence. At the end of every week, students will be assigned an open-ended writing prompt, designed for students to summarize their understanding of historical events or events in the novel through evidence-based claims.

### **Informative and Creative Writing**

Writing in the English and Language Arts classroom is severely neglected. For example, in *The Knowledge Gap*, Natalie Wexler explains that regarding the writing assessments given to eighth graders, “the percentage below proficient are about 90 and 65, respectively, with 32 percent of low-income students scoring below the basic level.”<sup>77</sup> My elementary classroom schedule incorporates writing into stations or centers, but rarely allows the time for teachers and students to conference or to participate in the complete writing process. Combined with the data provided in Wexler’s book, this shows that students are not given enough opportunity to build proficiency in writing before the eighth-grade exam.

Last year, my district began implementing two writing focused units after the completion of the *Esperanza Rising* novel study. The first writing unit is focused on informational writing. Students are taught to use literature and texts as a source to write to inform. The second unit is a creative writing unit which involves writing and reciting a monologue with a focus on voice. I plan to follow the guide of first writing to inform, then writing with voice. By utilizing my classroom and school’s library, students will select a biography of any famous American, immigrant or not. Students will read the biography during their independent reading block and write an informative essay on America’s characteristics and achievements.

During the second writing unit, students will write a monologue through poetry about their personal “American Dream.” The final words of *Esperanza Rising* are spoken by a much wiser Esperanza, envisioning the life and opportunity she has in America ahead of her. She states “do not ever be afraid to start over.”<sup>78</sup> I believe it is essential for students to be given a space to envision their own futures and use their voice to declare their own dreams. Through the use of poetry, students can explore voice, figurative language, and the writing process. I intend to use the following poems, “I Too” by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” as an example of authors who use voice to recognize prejudice and racism and use both as tools to highlight their empowering qualities and characteristics. Students will be given a format and graphic organizers to follow in assisting their writing of a “My American Dream” poem.

## **Annotated List of Resources**

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Here I will provide a list of sources that are authentic nonfiction and informational texts which accurately and equitably inform students about America’s immigration history.

- Kathleen Kroll’s *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories* provides detailed chapters about American immigration that range from America’s colonization to the present-day Immigration debate. Each chapter focuses on one theme, and highlights immigrant stories and primary source documents.

- A search on NEWSELA will provide current event news articles about present day immigration topics. Each article can be formatted to match different reading levels.
- When focusing on the topic of Japanese internment camps, the picture book *The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida and graphic novel memoir *They Call Us Enemy* by George Takei provide narrative fiction and nonfiction of the Japanese internment camps.
- Social Justice Books provide lists of children’s picture books to young adult books that are designed to provide anti-bias, anti-racist, and multicultural text to students and educators.
- George W. Bush’s *Out of Many, One: Portraits of America’s Immigrants* pairs his portraits of real Americans as well as their first-hand accounts of coming to America, contributions, and dreams. Students can hear directly from real immigrants why they came to America and what their American Dreams are.

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## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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Richmond City Public Schools use the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). The K-5 standards build on each other, resulting in skills being introduced in earlier grade levels. However, Virginia's standards were updated in 2017, and through the transitioning crosswalk, the comparison of paired passages was only introduced to 3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2020 school year. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in this group of students receiving less exposure to this brand-new standard. Therefore, the majority of this unit focuses on the use of paired passages.

5.5 The students will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, literary nonfiction, and poetry. Key concepts include:

- a) Summarize plot events using details from text.
- b) Discuss the impact of setting on plot development.
- c) Describe character development.
- j) Draw conclusions and make inferences with support from the text.
- k) Identify cause and effect relationships.
- l) Compare/contrast details in literary and informational nonfiction texts.

5.6 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of nonfiction texts. Key concepts include:

- d) Summarize supporting details.
- g) Locate information from the text to support opinions, inferences, and conclusions.
- j) Compare and contrast details and ideas within and between texts.

During the writing portion of the unit, students will be using and exploring voice to describe their American Dream. As the first writing assignment of the school year, this will serve an important role in reintroducing students to the writing process.

5.7 The student will write in a variety of forms to include narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive.

- a) Engage in writing as a process.
- b) Select audience and purpose.
- c) Use a variety of prewriting strategies.
- d) Introduce and develop a topic, incorporating evidence and supporting details.
- l) Revise writing for c

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System - And How to Fix it*, 37

<sup>2</sup> Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*, 32

- <sup>3</sup> "Why Do People Migrate? - Migration Trends," <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z8x6wxs>
- <sup>4</sup> Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*, 75
- <sup>5</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 52
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- <sup>7</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 52
- <sup>8</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 54
- <sup>9</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 54
- <sup>10</sup> Gleeson, "Failing to 'Unite with the Abolitionists,'" 622-623
- <sup>11</sup> Gleeson, "Failing to 'Unite with the Abolitionists,'" 629
- <sup>12</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 58
- <sup>13</sup> Negra, "The Stakes of Whiteness," 111
- <sup>14</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 75
- <sup>15</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 82
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- <sup>20</sup> Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*, 81
- <sup>21</sup> Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*, 83
- <sup>22</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 61
- <sup>23</sup> Stockman, "Coming to America: Regulatory Oversight of United States Immigration Policies," 528
- <sup>24</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 64
- <sup>25</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 63-66
- <sup>26</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 67



- 27 Ciardiello, "Is Angel Island the Ellis Island of the West? Teaching Multiple Perspective-Taking in American Immigration History,"171
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- 41 Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 70
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<sup>75</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories*, 3-4

<sup>76</sup> Krull, *American Immigration: Our History, Our Stories* 117

<sup>77</sup> Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System - And How to Fix it*, 20

<sup>78</sup> Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*, 253

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