



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2026 Volume III: Asian American History and the Making of the U.S. Immigration System

Immigration Narratives: A Literary Journey

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Introduction

"The road is far for the traveler." –Island 129[1]

Middle school students are on a journey, moving from childhood toward adulthood, goofiness toward maturity, and parental control toward autonomy. Many of my students also traverse cultures, living in multicultural communities and attending a diverse school. Relating to people with different backgrounds and experiences is a critical skill in these contexts. My students need to encounter stories of people from varied nations and cultures to approach classmates and community members empathetically. They deserve to explore their own identities and the ways politics and economics shaped their families' journeys. By learning about the history of the United States immigration system through the lens of Asian immigration, reading immigrant memoirs, and discussing how government policies impact people's lives, my students will gain confidence and compassion to navigate their life's journey.

Background and Rationale

Student Demographics

I teach seventh- and eighth-grade English/Language Arts at P.S. duPont Middle School, a public school in Wilmington, Delaware's Brandywine School District serving students in grades six through eight. P.S. houses the district's middle school Gifted Services. As one of the building's two certified Gifted ELA teachers, I teach all the eighth graders and about half of the seventh graders who receive Gifted Services. According to the Delaware Department of Education, in 2025, students who received Gifted Services made up about one-third of the school's 657 enrollment students. 28% of students at P.S. were identified as low income, and 19.94% received special education services, including some of my students. In the 2025-2026 school year, I taught 122 students, with 82 in my eighth-grade sections and 40 in my seventh-grade sections. Based on the Delaware Department of Education's data and identity categories, 65.5% of my students were White, 10.6% were African American, and 23.8% were Asian American including students of Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Bengali descent.[2] Because Asian American students make up a sizeable proportion of my classes, I wanted

to learn more about Asian American history to ensure that my Asian American students see their and their families' stories represented accurately and respectfully in the curriculum.

This unit builds on my seventh-grade students' prior knowledge. They were introduced to Chinese immigration in sixth grade through reading the novel *Dragonwings* by Chinese American author Laurence Yep. To expand their understanding of the development of the United States immigration apparatus, I want students to explore the experiences of other immigrant groups. Through a narrative writing unit which uses the Literature Circle format to organize reading and discussion, this unit empowers students to forge personal connections to texts and take responsibility for their learning.

Literature Circles

Literature Circles lend themselves to immigration narratives because there are so many different stories to tell. They vary depending on the individual's age, country of origin, and time. In the Teaching Strategies section, I describe Literature Circles in more depth, but a primer on the structure and roles is helpful because they inform the organization of the Content Objectives.

In this unit, I provide students with a list of memoirs authored by first generation immigrants and their 1.5 or second-generation children and form small groups based on students' book preferences. Ideally, each group reads a different memoir. Within groups, members rotate through four to five roles guiding their responses to the text in preparation for in-class discussions. The roles are Context Director, Analyst, Discussion Facilitator, and Illustrator and/or Poet. The Context Director selects and researches a topic mentioned in the reading which the group needs more information to understand. The Analyst examines the author's style, calling out elements like figurative language, imagery, and text structure. The Discussion Facilitator creates text-based higher-order thinking questions, prepares an answer, and records their group's responses. The Illustrator represents an important scene or concept in the reading through visual art, while the Poet does the same through poetry.

In the Content Objectives section, I organize the content for each memoir around these roles. For educators, I also highlight any content in the books they might want to consider before assigning books to student groups. Before diving into the memoirs, students need a grounding in the history of the United States immigration system. I plan to introduce this topic through readings and discussions about the history of Asian immigration to the U.S. and government's attempts to control it. I will explain this in more depth in the Classroom Activities section.

Content Objectives

Asian Exclusion Era (1875-1943)

China

According to Pennee Bender, writing for the American Social History Project, Chinese migration to the U.S. spiked after gold was discovered in California in 1848. Chinese laborers worked grueling, dangerous jobs in mining, railroad construction, agriculture, and other industries.[3] Some workers intended to stay in the U.S. However, backlash from white labor unions, politicians, and newspapers led to the passage of laws explicitly

restricting immigration based on race, class and gender. The first of these was the 1875 Page Law, which prohibited entry of Asian male laborers and female prostitutes.[4] Efforts to rein in Chinese immigration continued in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was expanded in 1888 and renewed in 1892, 1902, and 1904.[5] This legislation was the first solely race-based exclusionary immigration law in the United States, and it placed immigration policies, procedures, and regulations under the control of federal immigration officials, according to Erika Lee and Judy Yung in their introduction to *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*. [6]

Under the Chinese Exclusion Act, the government carved out exemptions for specific professions. Chinese students, teachers, merchants, and diplomats could travel to the U.S., despite being barred from becoming citizens.[7] Immigration officials had to establish whether each traveler fell into one of those categories, and migrants had to prove their status with documentation. In Heather Ruth Lee’s article “In Pursuit of Merchant Status: The Migration Strategy of Early Twentieth Chinese Restaurant Owners under Chinese Exclusion,” Lee describes the lengths Chan Wah, a managing partner of Chin Lee’s Restaurant, had to go to secure his lawful return to the U.S. after visiting China in the 1920s. Chan Wah filed for a re-entry permit, which entailed paying a fee, submitting paperwork, appearing in two in-person interviews, and providing the names of two white witnesses who could vouch for him.[8] Chan Wah, a legitimate merchant with proper documentation and cordial relationships with white business associates, re-entered the country successfully. However, the increased reliance on documentation in immigration decisions contributed to the creation of a black market for false documents and interrogation coaching books to help savvy travelers skirt restrictions.

According to Lee and Yung, as many as 90 percent of all Chinese immigrants to the U.S. during the exclusion period were “paper sons,” traveling with false documentation claiming to be U.S. citizens or members of an exempted group.[9] Immigration officials conducted long, intense interviews with new arrivals, attempting to root out fraud. These interviews were particularly tricky for married couples, whose answers had to be identical to seem credible to inspectors. Some couples, like Jew Law Ying and Tom Yip Jing, a paper son, used coaching books to ensure that both spouses told the same story with enough detail to be convincing, but not enough to reveal the husband’s false identity.[10] Even lawfully wedded couples without false papers risked saying the wrong thing in an interview, leading to detention and/or deportation.

Although the Chinese Exclusion Act slowed Chinese immigration into the United States, a significant number of Chinese immigrants were already in the country. The need for documentation ramped up with the passage of the Geary Act in 1892, which required all Chinese laborers living in the U.S. to carry a certificate of residence or face imprisonment, hard labor, and deportation.[11] This law distinguished documented from undocumented immigrants and allowed for deportation of immigrants living in the United States, as opposed to barring entry as the Chinese Exclusion Act did.

When students read immigrant memoirs, they observe echoes of these policies. Examining the Chinese Exclusion Era enables students to see how our current immigration system was formed around the use of interrogations, paper documents, and medical examinations, and how those choices played out for different immigrant groups across time.

Japan

Japanese immigrants’ experiences in America differed from those of Chinese immigrants because of a period of collaboration between the American and Japanese governments. After Japan won the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Western nations saw Japan as a major diplomatic power.[12] To avoid conflict with Japan, the U.S. negotiated a “Gentlemen’s Agreement” with Japan from 1907-1908 which shifted the immigration control

mechanism from arrival to departure: instead of American immigration inspectors rejecting migrants at the border, Japan refused to issue passports to U.S.-bound laborers.[13] These events showcase the U.S. government's more conciliatory approach to Japan over China. Consequently, the agreement limited Japanese labor migration but allowed women and children to enter the country legally until 1924. Even when the 1917 Immigration Act established the "Asiatic Barred Zone" and excluded most Asian immigrants, Japan remained an exception.[14] This is a testament to the value the U.S. government placed on its diplomatic relationship with Japan in the early 1900s.

Another important distinction between Chinese and Japanese immigrants made possible by the Gentlemen's Agreement was that Japanese immigrants living in the United States could bring family to the U.S. legally.[15] Japanese immigrants attempted to distinguish themselves from Chinese immigrants by assimilating to American culture,[16] and matrimony was part of that project. Japanese men living in America entered arranged marriages with "picture brides" in Japan, sight unseen. When Americans criticized this practice, the governments cooperated on a resolution. According to Lee and Yung, Japan stipulated that the bride live with her in-laws for six months before immigrating, and the United States required that couples remarry under U.S. laws.[17] This reduced time spent in detention for Japanese women traveling to meet their husbands, provided they passed a health inspection. The presence of wives and children contributed to Japanese immigrants' comparative respectability.

Despite their efforts, cultural assimilation did not lead to acceptance for Japanese immigrants. Both the first generation, or issei, and second generation, nisei, faced impediments to living fully integrated lives in the United States. For the issei, state and federal laws hampered their ability to marry, acquire land, and eventually enter the country legally. In the 1919 "Ladies Agreement," the U.S. government persuaded Japan to stop issuing passports to picture brides, leaving thousands of issei men priced out of returning home for marriage and prohibited from marrying white women by state and local anti-miscegenation laws.[18] If a Japanese man in California at this time hoped to finance a trip home through property investments or farming, he was out of luck. California's Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 prevented Asian immigrants, defined as "aliens ineligible to citizenship," from owning or leasing property. Although the 1913 law allowed issei to buy land in their American-born children's names, the 1920 update closed that loophole.[19] The final blow was the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which effectively ended Japanese immigration to the U.S.[20] This restrictive law established a national quota system. As Mae Ngai notes, even though 100 slots were nominally reserved for immigrants from Japan, they were earmarked for non-Japanese people living in Japan.[21] Taken together, these government actions limited opportunities for issei and their families.

Though American-born children of Japanese immigrants were U.S. citizens, their loyalty was considered suspect. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. government forced 110,000 Japanese Americans to enter internment camps.[22] This move affected the issei as well as their nisei children. The nisei may have hoped that their American citizenship would guarantee protection of their rights. However, despite the Wong Kim Ark decision in 1898, which confirmed that birthright citizenship applies to the children of immigrants born in the United States,[23] the federal government deprived these citizens of their liberty without due process. This is the context in which Monica Sone, author of the memoir *Nisei Daughter*, grew up. By examining the fluctuations in U.S.-Japan relations in the early 20th century, readers can better understand the experiences of Monica and her parents.

Korea

The complex dynamics among Korea, Japan, and the U.S. color the story of Korean immigration to the United

States. Both Japanese and Korean laborers worked on Hawaiian plantations: when Japanese workers demanded better conditions, plantations recruited Korean laborers to replace them between 1902 and 1905.[24] A small number of Koreans, among them the family of Mary Paik Lee, author of *Quiet Odyssey*, migrated to Hawaii and eventually to the United States during this period. Economic factors were not the Paik family's primary motive for leaving home. After the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the U.S. agreed to acknowledge Japan's control over Korea in return for Japan respecting America's colonization of the Philippines.[25] Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910.[26] Severe crackdowns on the press, religion, language, and gatherings followed.[27] This colonial oppression made life for Koreans miserable and dangerous. The Japanese authorities punished resistance with imprisonment, torture, execution, and rape.[28] An urgent need for safety and liberty, therefore, pushed Koreans like the Paik family to flee their homeland.

It was difficult for Koreans to immigrate to the United States, despite these dire circumstances. Suchen Chan explains that since the numbers of Chinese and Japanese immigrants dwarfed the number of Korean immigrants, Koreans were not targeted with the same hatred as those groups.[29] However, as Japanese colonial subjects they were swept up in regulations that restricted the Japanese and Asians broadly. For instance, Executive Order 589 signed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 prevented Japanese and Korean workers in Hawaii from gaining U.S. passports. It also banned Korean and Japanese workers in Canada and Mexico from entering the U.S.[30] Thus, Korean immigration to the U.S. was limited to a brief timespan and to specific groups, such as laborers, picture brides, and students.

Economic stability for these new arrivals was far from guaranteed. Like their Japanese counterparts, Korean agricultural workers in California who hoped to buy their own land or enter cropping contracts were stymied by Alien Land Laws. The 1920 law was strengthened again in 1923 so Asian farmers could not form corporations to buy land. Other states followed suit, passing similar laws through the early 1920s.[31] The deck was stacked against a family like Mary Paik Lee's entering the United States, let alone clawing their way to financial security. Awareness of the myriad obstacles they faced makes Paik's memoir even more poignant.

India

South Asians immigrated to the United States in smaller numbers, making up only approximately 8,000 of the 341,000 aliens processed through the Angel Island between 1910 and 1940.[32] They faced racial discrimination both during the immigration process and afterwards. American exclusionist groups lobbied against hiring South Asian workers, so even those who were able to enter the country had difficulty finding work. As a result of these groups' efforts, Angel Island officials deemed many South Asians "likely to become a public charge" and refused them entry.[33] South Asians were more explicitly excluded from entry into the United States by the 1917 Immigration Act. The "Asiatic Barred Zone" included India, but students, teachers, and merchants were exempted.[34] Indians with greater wealth and education could enter the U.S., and a small number of laborers who immigrated before 1917 were already present. However, like other Asian groups, South Asians were considered unassimilable and threatening to American culture. Indian immigrants living in the United States were ineligible to naturalize due to their skin color.

The Nationality Act of 1790 articulated who had the right to become naturalized citizens. Eligibility for citizenship, according to the 1790 law, only extended to "a free white person." [35] A post-Civil War update allowed formerly enslaved Africans and their descendants to naturalize.[36] However, society debated who counted as "white." Indian immigrant Bhagat Singh Thind litigated his race in his 1923 Supreme Court case using anthropological scholarship to show that Aryans and Indians had similar features.[37] The Supreme Court rejected his explanations and denaturalized him.[38] By revoking South Asians' citizenship eligibility,

the court allowed for them to be stripped of their property in multiple states under the Alien Land Laws. The decision in the Thind case remained in place until after World War II.

De-Exclusion (1943-1965)

New geopolitical realities of World War II and the Cold War led to changes in U.S. immigration laws. The 1943 Magnuson Act repealed Chinese exclusion yet imposed an ethnic quota.[39] Progress continued in 1946, when the Luce-Celler Bill allowed South Asians to naturalize and immigrate under the existing quota of 100 people per year.[40]

Political upheaval in India during the mid-twentieth century contributed to greater travel and migration to the U.S. in 1947, India's independence from Britain spurred increased emigration out of India, sometimes via other countries like Aarti Namdev Shahani's parents in her memoir *Here We Are*. According to Rebecca Kulik's article on *Britannica Academic*, when Britain passed the Indian Independence Act, it divided its former colony into two separate countries, Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. However, partition was complicated and bloody. People living in religiously diverse locations along the new borders were suddenly in hostile territory. Violence and a refugee crisis ensued. While Kulik acknowledges the inadequate documentation from this period, she states that some sources estimate as many as 2,000,000 people were killed.[41] These horrific events pushed many Indians to seek safety abroad.

Although the 1952 Walter-McCarran Act maintained the strict national quota system, it replaced the "Asiatic Barred Zone" with the "Asia-Pacific Triangle," imposing a quota on immigrants from this part of the world rather than an outright ban. It also removed "free white persons" as a qualification for citizenship, allowing Asian immigrants to naturalize.[42] The Walter-McCarran Act also introduced prioritized categories of immigrants, creating a system that emphasized family reunification and employment.[43] Later legislation set the stage for an influx of immigrants from other areas of the world including the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Post-1965

Iran

After the de-exclusion era, immigration to the United States flowed more freely. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act finally abolished national quota system. This act outlawed racial discrimination in immigration law and created a preference category for professionals like the engineer father of Firoozeh Dumas, in her memoir *Funny in Farsi*. [44] Jill Wilson writes that the federal government distinguished between temporary and permanent immigration and created separate categories for nonimmigrant visas and lawful permanent residents. Students, tourists, diplomats, and temporary workers are issued temporary visas for a specific purpose and duration. Lawful permanent residents (LPRs) are admitted to the United States to live permanently but do not yet have full citizenship.[45] In *Funny in Farsi*, Firoozeh Dumas's family traveled to the U.S. from Iran on her father's temporary work visa and later returned as permanent residents. Political turmoil in 1970s Iran persuaded the family to remain in the U.S.

Beginning in 1978, the Iranian Revolution provoked sweeping and long-lasting changes for the country and its people. According to Janet Afary, writing for *Britannica Academic*, prior to the revolution Shah Mohamed Reza Pahlavi controlled Iran.[46] He capitalized on Iran's oil wealth and embarked on a modernization campaign, but critics protested government corruption, oppression of racial and political minorities, and violent backlash against peaceful demonstrations.[47] Until this point, the U.S. considered Iran an important ally, but with the

fall of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, relations deteriorated. Things came to a head in 1979 with the Iran hostage crisis. According to *Britannica Academic*, the U.S. had instigated the Shah's reign and allowed him to seek medical treatment in New York after his exile. In protest, militants in Iran seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran along with 66 hostages, 52 of whom were held for over a year.[48] The overthrow of a U.S.-backed leader, creation of an Islamic state, and hostage crisis soured Americans' perceptions of Iran and of Iranian immigrants, as Dumas discusses in her memoir.

Mistrust of immigrants from Iran and other predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa has characterized U.S. immigration policy following the 9/11 attacks and continuing through both Trump administrations. In January 2017, Trump issued Executive Order 13769 which imposed a 90-day ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, from entering the U.S.[49] The resulting legal battle lasted through 2018, as the administration tinkered with the list of countries and federal judges struck down or upheld parts of the order. It revisited the expansion of federal powers to regulate immigration achieved during the Chinese Exclusion era.[50] The Supreme Court upheld ban's final version in June 2018, and it remained in effect for the rest of Trump's first term before being rescinded by the Biden administration in 2021.[51] Upon Trump's reelection, a new travel ban was issued in June 2025 whose reach expanded to 19 countries, including Iran.[52] These fluctuations demonstrate the often-arbitrary nature of the immigration system. Understanding Iran's situation also highlights how international relations impact individuals and families. Because Dumas and her family immigrated before the revolution and hostage crisis at a time when the U.S. and Iran were allied, her journey was easier than it would have been had they attempted it today.

Somalia

Much of the immigration apparatus built over decades of Asian exclusion remains in place, impacting migrants from around the world. Even as American immigration policies grow more inclusive, progress is not guaranteed. For instance, the 1990 Immigration Act created two openings for increased migration from sub-Saharan African nations like Somalia: Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and the Diversity Visa program.[53] The Diversity Visa program provided a route to citizenship for Abdi Nor Iftin, author of *Call Me American*. Unfortunately, these programs are now unavailable to immigrants like Iftin.

According to the American Immigration Council, TPS was created to allow immigrants from war-torn or disaster ravaged countries to work in the U.S. without deportation. Although TPS does not confer citizenship, recipients can apply for lawful permanent residence if they have passed through inspection.[54] Somalian migrants were granted TPS beginning in 1991, shortly after the beginning of Somalia's civil war.[55] The conflict began in 1990 with the collapse of Said Barre's government, according to Cheeseman, Bertrand, and Husaini.[56] The authors explain that rival factions clamored for power after Barre's downfall. The Islamic Courts Union tried to assert control in the mid-2000s, but they were defeated and splintered into smaller groups, among them the militant group al-Shabaab. In spring 2026, the U.S. government decided to revoke Somalia's TPS status. The Trump administration argued that it is safe for Somalians to return because the new government has largely eliminated the threat of al-Shabaab, while simultaneously claiming that Somalians living in the U.S. imperil American national security because of suspected al-Shabaab ties.[57] While TPS provided a lifeline for many Somalians fleeing conflict, different measures are needed for Somalians wishing to remain in the U.S. permanently.

A new pathway to U.S. citizenship for countries with low amounts of existing immigration to the U.S., like Somalia, was created in 1990 with the Diversity Visa program. Jill Wilson explains that it was intended to correct biases in the existing system, which prioritized family connections and employment. Due to these

preferences, new entrants typically came from the same countries as the existing immigrant population.[58] The application process, called “the green card lottery,” is arduous and capricious. Eligibility requirements include a high school education or two years of job training or experience, and not all countries qualify.[59] In fiscal year 2018, 14.7 million individuals entered the lottery. Just 100,000 selectees were chosen to complete the application process, including an in-person interview and expensive, time-sensitive security and medical screenings.[60] Of those applicants, only 48,578 visas were issued for fiscal year 2018, meaning entrants had a 0.33% chance of winning the Diversity Visa lottery.[61] Even though the chances of success are slim, the Diversity Visa program offers an option to immigrants lacking family connections or guaranteed employment, like Iftin.

After TPS and the Diversity Visa created more opportunities for migration to the U.S., the pendulum swung the opposite way. The 1996 immigration laws, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform & Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), made it easier to deport immigrants with criminal convictions by expanding the list of deportable offenses and bypassing the immigration court system.[62] Aarti Shahani, author of *Here We Are: American Dreams, American Nightmares*, protested these laws when her father ran afoul of them. Other federal actions targeted Somalia specifically. Somalia fell under the 2025 travel ban.[63] In January 2026, the Trump administration stopped processing visas indefinitely for 75 countries, including Somalia and Iran.[64] Like the white exclusionists trying to halt Asian immigration in the nineteenth century, the current administration views immigrants with suspicion and hostility. Now, as always, it is vital for American students to expand their perspectives on who belongs.

Immigrant Memoirs

Nisei Daughter: Japan, 1904 - 1940s

Monica Sone was an American child of Japanese parents. Her memoir depicts the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, an often-omitted chapter of American history. Sone’s father immigrated to the U.S. in 1904 and operated a hotel on Seattle’s skid row, a poor and working-class neighborhood.[65] Monica was born Kazuko Itoi in 1919. Despite her happy childhood,[66] Sone experienced brushes with racism. For instance, police falsely accused her father of bootlegging and attempted to extort him.[67] Later, white landlords refused to rent to the family.[68] After the Pearl Harbor bombing, Monica and her family were incarcerated in Camp Minidoka.[69] In 1943, Monica left the camp to find work.[70] Later, she attended college.[71] In the end, she felt that her Japanese and American sides “were now blended into one.”[72]

The Context Director’s contributions are crucial for this early twentieth century text. Students need background on Japanese culture and customs. Sone describes Japanese clothing,[73] but visuals would benefit students. Additionally, Japanese food and drink are central to the Itoi family’s identity. In one humorous passage, Sone’s mother defies authorities by sneaking a jug of *shoyu* (soy sauce) into camp.[74] Sone also details Japanese sports, poetry, and theatre as sources of cultural pride.[75] In the later chapters, world events impact Sone’s narrative. She recalls the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and the attack on Pearl Harbor,[76] which sparked backlash against Japanese Americans. Crucially, Executive Order No. 9066 resulted in the family’s incarceration.[77] Although my students have learned about the Holocaust and concentration camps, they may be shocked to learn that American citizens like the Itoi children were incarcerated by their government concurrently.

The Analyst can explore Sone’s descriptive imagery and figurative language. She uses imagery to set the scene in the Itoi kitchen: “the oblong table covered with an indestructible black oilcloth; but if more than Mother stood up and fussed around, there was a serious traffic jam – soy sauce splattered on the floor and

elbows jabbed into the pot of rice.”[78] This passage illustrates their close-knit family. Later, she uses hyperbole to describe her first crush: “I was so thrilled I could have floated right off into space.”[79] Teens and pre-teens experiencing their own strong feelings will relate to this passage. More seriously, Sone expresses pain using simile. Reflecting on her dual identity, she writes, “It was like being born with two heads.”[80] In this passage, Sone resents being treated as freakish, and her language reveals how insults stung.

Nisei Daughter provides ample material for the Discussion Facilitator, Poet, and Illustrator. The Discussion Facilitator should prompt debate about Sone’s father’s choices, like his decision to confront the corrupt cop in court.[81] Such an unfair experience can provoke rich discussions and nuanced artistic expression. Another key event is the Itoi family’s imprisonment.[82] My students should compare this event with descriptions of Nazi concentration camps they have read earlier in the year. On a lighter note, students may discuss and represent the differences between the issei and nisei. The generations butt heads when older guests throw Monica’s brother’s American-style wedding reception off-kilter.[83] The different social norms add comedy and create space for conversations about generational differences.

Originally published in 1953, *Nisei Daughter*’s objectionable content is minimal. Teachers should explain that some words’ meanings have changed, like “queer” meaning odd and “gay” meaning cheerful.[84] The only swear words are “hell” and “goddamn,”[85] and the only racial slur in the book is directed toward Japanese people,[86] which reflects the book’s setting and conflict. In the few references to alcohol, Sone describes drunken characters disapprovingly.[87] Her childhood on skid row provides some colorful characters, like the “bootleggers, drug peddlers, perverts, alcoholics”[88] and a burlesque house decorated with “paintings of half-naked girls,”[89] but these references do not detract from her story.

Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America: Korea, 1905 - 1987

Mary Paik Lee was born Paik Kuang Sun in Pyongyang in 1900.[90] Menaced by occupying Japanese soldiers, her father moved the family to Hawaii and worked on a plantation.[91] Lee, her older brother, and their parents traveled to California, following the father’s work from Riverside to Claremont, to Colusa where the family nearly starved, to a Roberts Island farm, to the mines of Idria.[92] Eight additional siblings stretched the family to capacity.[93] Despite their poverty, Lee emphasizes her father’s gratitude, resourcefulness, and positivity.[94] She achieved some independence by leaving home to attend high school but had to work as a domestic servant for room and board.[95] At 19, she met and married Hung Man (H.M.) Lee, who grew rice as a tenant farmer.[96] They had three sons.[97] The Lees worked in a variety of industries: produce sales, farming, and real estate.[98] She and H.M. naturalized in 1960, and she cared for him until his death in 1975.[99] Lee concludes that the sacrifices made by the first generations of “pioneers” benefitted later generations of Asian Americans.[100]

Lee’s narrative features several aspects of the U.S. immigration system’s development which the Context Director can clarify. Lee describes Japan’s colonization of Korea and references the Alien Land Laws.[101] She also comments on Japanese incarceration during World War II and the racism that spilled into Korean communities.[102] Additionally, agricultural and mining work provides further avenues for student research. Lee’s father worked in hazardous conditions at a quicksilver mine,[103] and H.M. farmed rice.[104] Both jobs involve techniques and consequences which would be unfamiliar to students. Notably, this text offers less detail about Korean food, dress, and culture than the other immigrant memoirs do about their home cultures, perhaps reflecting Lee’s desire to assimilate into American society.

One hallmark of Lee’s writing is her love of nature. The Analyst can mine Lee’s descriptions for imagery, as when she writes about seeing huge carp in the rice fields: “Their beautiful rainbow-colored bodies were

shining and glistening in the light.”[105] Lee also casts her eye for detail on nature’s dark side, describing a frightening childhood experience: “Then I woke up one night feeling a sharp pain on my nose and found myself staring at two black, beady eyes. [...] A big rat about the size of a baby kitten had tried to eat my nose.”[106] Dialogue is spare, but when present it highlights Lee’s experiences of racism. In one example, she argues with a teacher about his inaccurate history lesson,[107] and later she confronts a customer who stereotypes Asian women.[108] Clearly, these conversations angered Lee enough that she recalled them decades later.

The Discussion Facilitator, Illustrator, and Poet have plenty of topics to consider. The Discussion Facilitator will likely pick up on important themes of the book, such as Lee’s father’s faith and positive attitude, her feisty pushback against discrimination, and her loving partnership with her husband. The Illustrator and the Poet can take cues from Lee’s vivid imagery and represent her many homes. They might also represent the book’s gender dynamics, contrasting Lee’s parents’ relationship with her partnership with H.M. There are no significant content considerations.

Falling Leaves: China, 1930 - 1980s

Adeline Yen Mah, author of *Falling Leaves*, was born in China in 1937, and her mother died shortly after.[109] Mah’s older brother physically abused her.[110] Her father married a woman called Niang who emotionally and financially manipulated her stepchildren and who beat her biological daughter.[111] Despite her rocky upbringing, Mah’s intellect won accolades.[112] She rode her academic success into medical school in London, where she faced racism and sexism.[113] She then pursued a medical career in the U.S. in 1964.[114] Unfortunately for Mah, her childhood abuse was repeated in her own marriage. Her first husband, Byron, lied about his financial and immigration status.[115] He abandoned her right before their son’s birth, beat her, and drained their joint bank account.[116] Her love life resolved happily: she divorced Byron and had a daughter with her second husband.[117] In the emotional final chapters, Mah learned that Niang had emptied her father’s accounts, leaving her no inheritance.[118] Later, Mah discovered her father’s original will which divided his property among her and her siblings.[119] Mah concludes with a sense of fulfillment derived from her stable, loving family and posthumous paternal appreciation.

Falling Leaves contains abundant cultural and historical references for the Context Director to investigate. Early chapters note Chinese customs like foot binding, wedding traditions, and hair queues.[120] Events that occurred before Mah’s lifetime, like the Western colonization of Shanghai, Second Opium War, and Boxer Rebellion contextualize relations between China and Western countries.[121] Mah’s family experienced the Chinese Civil War and the Cultural Revolution,[122] and these moments need more fleshing out through student research. Finally, Mah’s career in medicine introduces opportunities for scientifically minded students to research topics like puerperal fever, Erb’s palsy, and *ma huang*. [123] These historical, cultural, and scientific subjects give students varied entry points into the text.

For the Analyst, this text’s structure looms large. The book begins with the reading of Mah’s father’s will and uses flashbacks extensively.[124] The first 18 chapters follow Mah’s life chronologically, but chapter 19 jumps back in time to outline Mah’s family’s lives during her sojourns in England and the U.S. Later flashbacks excavate Mah’s trauma. In one, when she learns that Niang disinherited her, she recalls her brothers tricking her into drinking urine.[125] This flashback shows how childhood experiences can cast long shadows. Despite the book’s inventive structure, Mah’s prose is unemotional even in painful moments. For example, her response to verbal abuse is, “I disliked being called dumb and ignorant.”[126] Readers interested in languages will appreciate the use of Chinese characters and recurring motif “*Suan le*” (let it be). This phrase is

repeated as Mah endures and perseveres through trauma.

The Discussion Facilitator, Illustrator, and Poet have much to represent and discuss. The Poet and Illustrator should focus on Mah's emotional roller-coaster moments, such as when she learns self-reliance through neglect, raises a doomed duckling, and is elected class president, only to be shouted at and slapped at home.[127] Students can exercise empathy by imagining what Mah felt in those moments. The Discussion Facilitator has juicy gossip to consider, with Mah's brief relationship with her university lecturer and her later marriages.[128] Middle school students love relationship drama, and this book includes plenty.

In addition to the violence described above, the text mentions opium and children being kidnapped and sold into slavery or sex work.[129] However, Mah and her family do not experience these harms. They are rumored and feared in the same way students might hear about opioid addiction and human trafficking today. One offensive moment in the book depicts a crude prank played on Mah and the one other female student in their medical school class: their male classmates attach a severed penis to the light switch in a dark lab, so one of the women mistakenly grabs it when attempting to turn on the lights. This "joke" is gross, but it affords an opportunity for frank discussions about sexism.

Funny in Farsi: Iran, 1972 - 2003

Firoozeh Dumas, author of *Funny in Farsi*, visited the United States in 1972 and returned permanently in 1976.[130] Her father, an engineer for the National Iranian Oil Company, consulted with American corporations.[131] In her early years in America, neighbors treated Dumas's family with kindness and curiosity, but after the hostage crisis, Americans' mood toward Iranians darkened.[132] As the title implies, Dumas does not dwell on Islamophobia. Instead, she pokes fun at her family and herself. The book is a collection of essays, not a cohesive narrative. In one, Dumas describes her childhood attempts to be her mother's interpreter.[133] In another, sixth-grade Firoozeh changed her name to Julie to fit in. Later, she realized that "Julie" on her resume improved her job prospects.[134] Her dad also assimilated, fully embracing the American lifestyle through trips to Las Vegas, eating ham, and voting.[135] However, he lost his job after the hostage crisis.[136] Dumas won a trip to Paris through a speech contest.[137] She later married a Frenchman named François.[138] Overall, the book is upbeat and warm with middle school appropriate humor.

Because of Dumas's memoir's setting, Iran's history and political situation are relevant for the Context Director. The hostage crisis warped Dumas's experience as an Iranian immigrant in America,[139] and she cites British colonization, the Shah, and the nationalization of Iran's oil industry.[140] Dumas and her husband grew up in different religions, and students can explore Muslim and Catholic funerals and weddings.[141] For pop-culture-obsessed readers, Dumas namechecks numerous 1970s TV shows.[142] Understanding Dumas's adolescent TV diet can help readers understand the humor in her writing.

Dumas constantly ribs her mother's English and her father's American obsessions. The Analyst should note that Dumas represents her mother's speech phonetically, writing, "Dees eez from my countay-ree." [143] She mocks her mother's grammar with sentences like, "Shop so good very happy at Sears." [144] Dumas also targets her father with hyperbole, claiming his "devotion to Denny's restaurants approached religious fervor." [145] Dumas's word choice deftly disarms any Islamophobia directed at her dad. In this slim volume, Dumas skillfully employs figurative language. Her father is "Fred Astaire with words," meaning he is a skillful conversationalist when he knows the topic.[146] A later metaphor is heart-warming: "Without my relatives, I am but a thread; together, we form a colorful and elaborate Persian carpet." [147] All in all, Dumas uses humor and figurative language to humanize her relatives for an American audience.

For the Discussion Facilitator, Poet, and Illustrator, the chaotic crossing of cultural wires affords opportunities for discussion and interpretation. The Discussion Facilitator can prompt classmates to compare and contrast Dumas's father's method of learning English with her mother's and the Iranian celebration of Nowruz with American holidays.[148] The Poet and Illustrator should focus on higher-stakes events, such as when Dumas and her family traveled to Washington, D.C. to welcome the Shah on his presidential visit, but protesters ruined the event.[149] The later chapters of the book describe Dumas's relationship with François, and the Poet and Illustrator may represent her parents' approval of her engagement and the unhinged beauty pageant they reluctantly judged on a Bahamas vacation.[150]

The section on the Bahamas trip contains some objectionable content. Firoozeh and François arrived during spring break, and Dumas reproachfully observed tourists consuming beer and coke.[151] The essay on Dumas's Paris trip also includes risqué material, as she found nude magazines in her host apartment.[152] Nudity recurs when Dumas describes seeing a nudist acquaintance being interviewed on TV.[153] Instead of being prurient, Dumas reflects on finding comfort in one's own skin. There is some crude humor too. Dumas complains that classmates deliberately mispronounced her and her brothers' names: "Farthead" and "Fartshit" for Farbod and Farshid; "Fritzzy DumbAss" for Firoozeh.[154] Using mild swear words, Dumas shows how kids can be cruel to those who are different.

Here We Are: American Dreams, American Nightmares: India, 1981 - 2010s

If Dumas family foibles are comedy, Aarti Shahani's family in *Here We Are* is pure drama. They moved from India to the United States via Morocco in 1981, fleeing partition violence and Shanai's controlling grandmother.[155] In the U.S. they overstayed their visas while her father battled unemployment.[156] He found work abroad but returned after an accident injured Aarti's mother.[157] Life stabilized for the family: they secured green cards and a scholarship to a swanky private school for Aarti.[158] Mr. Shahani and his brother opened a business.[159] They moved to the suburbs and got a dog.[160] However, they soon faced thorny legal problems: Shahani's father was caught laundering drug cartel profits,[161] and her brother's wife kidnapped their infant.[162] The final chapters trace Shahani's path to activism through these legal battles. The protracted fight over baby Akshay ends bittersweetly. Shahani father's case is also a qualified victory. After serving his prison sentence, he risked deportation because of the 1996 immigration laws. Shahani hired a lawyer to defend him.[163] He was released and eventually gained citizenship.[164] In the end, Shahani acknowledges her dad's imperfections and recognizes that her experience fighting in the judicial and immigration systems pushed her to advocate for other immigrants.

The Context Director has a plethora of topics to research. While the memoir mainly takes place in the U.S., there are aspects of Indian history and life that will enrich students' reading. The partition of India and Pakistan was a formative experience for Shahani's parents,[165] and Shahani references political figures like Gandhi.[166] Students may be surprised to learn about colorism and skin lightening in India.[167] The book mentions Indian celebrations like a Hindu wedding ceremony and the holiday Diwali.[168] Recent American history is presented, too. Shahani lived through events that influenced U.S. immigration policy: the 9/11 attacks, Iraq War, and creation of ICE.[169] Researching these topics gives students a deeper understanding of the immigration landscape in the U.S. over the last 30 years.

The Analyst should notice the book's unique organization. Shahani structures it like a play, with a prologue and epilogue, six acts, and an intermission. Her father plays the tragic hero; the acts chart his rise and downfall. The intermission flashes forward to Aarti investigating her father's case as a reporter. Despite her journalistic chops, Shahani uses figurative language to express feelings. She reflects, "All the shame that had

built up over the years—of my family holding me back, of my parents not being enough, of my father being arrested—it shattered and cracked like glass from a windowpane.”[170] The simile helps readers connect with Shahani’s exhausted breakdown. Yet, there are moments of levity. Shahani jokes about Americans mispronouncing Indian names like D-Pak for her brother, Deepak and R-D for Aarti.[171] Shahani’s ability to experiment with structure while balancing emotional range exhibits her writing skill.

The Poet, Illustrator, and Discussion Facilitator have major themes, characters, events, and decisions to depict. Shahani claims America’s greatest promise is reinvention.[172] This could spark discussion about how Shahani’s family members re-create themselves. Students may discuss the personality contrasts between Shahani’s parents or Shahani and her sister.[173] Vital moments that students may represent creatively are Shahani’s mother sewing to earn money or Richard Rust’s death in immigration detention.[174] Both Aarti and her father made pivotal choices, and students can discuss their motivations. Shahani’s father pled guilty, facing imprisonment,[175] and Shahani made a difficult career decision.[176] Students can put themselves in these individuals’ shoes and debate how they would have handled these situations.

Because of this book’s content, I would recommend it only for a particularly mature group of middle schoolers. Shahani uses provocative language, including profanity and racial slurs. She bluntly explains that “*Behnchod* means sister fucker. It’s equivalent to ‘motherfucker.’”[177] She also quotes someone using the n-word but clarifies that his comments and beliefs are racist and unacceptable. Shahani fears that her father and uncle might be raped in prison.[178] She alludes to eating disorders among the girls in her high school,[179] and she and her father drink alcohol and gamble together.[180] Teachers planning to use this memoir with young readers should prepare to discuss the language and the serious topics raised.

Call Me American (Young Readers’ Edition): Somalia, 1985 - 2014

Abdi Nor Iftin was born in Somalia approximately 1985 and immigrated to the United States in 2009.[181] When civil war erupted, his father separated from Iftin, his siblings, and their mother.[182] Iftin vowed to be a survivor like her.[183] Amid water scarcity and violence in Mogadishu, Iftin developed a love of American popular culture.[184] His safety grew perilous as Islamic militant groups dominated Somalia. Fortunately, Iftin met American journalist Paul Salopek.[185] Salopek interviewed Iftin and published his story in *The Atlantic*. [186] This led to a diary recording project with *The Story*. [187] After hearing about Iftin’s plight on *The Story*, American professor Sharon McDonnell contacted him to offer help.[188] Through McDonnell’s financial and logistical assistance, he left Somalia.[189] Iftin’s good luck continued when he won a Diversity Visa, which permitted his entry to the U.S.[190] With support from McDonnell and her family, he found employment in Maine and connected with other Somalis.[191]

The Context Director will find varied research topics, from life in Mogadishu to Iftin’s journey to America. Iftin mentions people and events like Siad Barre and Operation Restore Hope, the U.S.-led effort to bring Somalis humanitarian aid.[192] These topics contextualize the choices Iftin and his family made. Cultural elements in the memoir also enrich the text. Some are qat leaves, the holiday Eid, polygamy, and a *dirac* dress.[193] Although most of my students have heard of Eid, they are likely unfamiliar with other aspects of Somali culture. Finally, Iftin’s immigration process provides intriguing topics. Iftin describes his protection interview and the Test of English as a Foreign Language.[194] In the final chapter, Iftin expresses his concern about the 2018 Muslim ban.[195] These details will inform whole-class discussions about different immigration pathways.

The Analyst should notice the simple diction and short sentence structure of the young readers’ edition. The text contrasts Iftin’s clear, direct style, with more formal language from a State Department email.[196] Iftin

represents emails and voice recordings in different fonts, giving the later chapters an epistolary quality.[197] In earlier chapters, Iftin uses imagery to describe violence, writing, “Blood has a smell, metallic and musty like the smell of coins in a dirty pocket.”[198] Some figurative language is notable. While waiting for his green card, Iftin wishes, “the embassy would read my heart instead of all these pieces of paper.”[199] This comment shows Iftin’s longing for consideration of his intrinsic merit as a human being.

The Discussion Facilitator, Poet, and Illustrator will find a wealth of scenes to discuss and interpret. The Discussion Facilitator can pose debates on the difficult decisions Iftin and his family must make, such as his father’s choice to leave the family, the ethics of stealing qat leaves to sell to soldiers, and his mother’s decision to send her sons to madrasa.[200] The Illustrator and Poet can represent emotional moments, including the death of Iftin’s baby sister, the religious authorities smashing Iftin’s boom box, and his last goodbye to his mother.[201] Even in the sections set in the United States, students can discuss and respond to Iftin’s feelings of isolation and incidents of tribalism and/or racism.[202]

Although this memoir is uplifting, even the young readers’ edition contains violence, alcohol and drugs, and cursing. “Shit” appears twice.[203] Though Iftin’s Maine coworkers use alcohol and marijuana, he abstains.[204] Before the war, Iftin’s madrasa teacher beat him,[205] and his first date resulted in lashes.[206] Rape is mentioned but no details are given.[207] During the war, Iftin witnessed “piles of corpses.”[208] The most brutal passage describes a hastily dug mass grave: “These corpses weren’t even rotting yet. We saw dogs tugging at bare feet. There was flesh everywhere. It looked like roadkill on a highway.”[209] Despite this distressing imagery, it is pared down from the book’s adult version and powerfully conveys Iftin’s struggle for survival.

Teaching Strategies

Literature Circles

In my classroom, Literature Circles are student-driven as much as possible. Although Harvey Daniels emphasizes “a spirit of playfulness and fun,”[210] I have found that students need structure for groups to function. I begin by giving students a list of books to choose from. Students identify the two books they are most interested in reading, and then I create groups informed by student choice with consideration for potential conflicts. Each group reads a different book. Initially, students meet with their Literature Circle groups to create a reading schedule across eight discussion sessions. Some groups divide the reading evenly, while others read longer sections over weekends. Once groups establish their schedules, students decide on the order in which they will rotate through the four or five roles. Each student takes each role at least once, and the roles guide how the students respond to the text in preparation for the discussion. Because class sizes vary, some groups have four members with students choosing between Illustrator or Poet, and other groups have five students with Poet and Illustrator as separate roles.

Before class, students complete the assigned reading and task for their role. I provide instructions for each role and exemplars based on a novel read earlier in the year. If a student comes to class unprepared, it hamstrings the group’s conversation. Therefore, I communicate with students and families in advance about the importance of being prepared for discussion. I inform stakeholders that if a student misses two of the eight literature circles in the unit, they will be removed from the group and given an alternative assignment. I allow

at least one day between each Literature Circle discussion, so students have at least two nights to complete their reading and role.

On a discussion day, the Discussion Facilitator begins the conversation. They read the higher-order thinking questions they created and take notes on their group members' answers. Then, they share their response to the question they chose to answer. The order is purposeful; if the Discussion Facilitator reads their answer first, the other group members will simply agree. Next, the Analyst shares their work. The Analyst has chosen a passage from the text that demonstrates the author's style and has written a bullet-point list commenting on some elements of style. Again, the Analyst shares their style elements first, takes notes on the group's observations, and finally shares their own ideas. The Discussion Facilitator and Analyst share first because these roles are required to take notes. Speaking first ensures that they have enough time to do so.

Next, the Context Director, Illustrator, and Poet share their work in any order. The Context Director has chosen a topic from the text to research and has written a paragraph about it, along with a citation. They share their findings and explain how their research helped them understand the text. The Illustrator has created an image (drawing, painting, collage, etc.) representing an important scene or aspect of the reading and has written a paragraph explaining how their artistic choices connect to the text. The Illustrator shows their visual representation to the group and shares their paragraph. The Poet has written a poem of six to ten lines representing an important scene or aspect of the reading and has written a paragraph about how their poetic choices relate to the text. The Poet reads their poem to the group and then shares their paragraph.

Socratic Seminar

Like Literature Circles, Socratic Seminars are student-led discussions with the teacher as facilitator. Students read texts and prepare questions before class. During class, they use the questions they created to guide their conversation. In my classroom, I arrange desks in two concentric circles. Students are paired so one partner sits in the inner circle to participate in the conversation and the other partner sits in the outer circle observing and coaching. After a few minutes, partners switch places so each gets a chance to speak and observe.

The teacher's role is to reinforce the procedures and expectations and to monitor time, but the students choose which questions to discuss, how long to spend on each question, and when to move on to a new question. For this unit, I might guide students to frame their questions around broad themes common across all the memoirs, such as reinvention, identity and belonging, language, generational differences, racism, kindness, or family. During the discussion, I track each student's participation. I observe how often they ask or answer a question, refer to text evidence, and justify their thinking. I also look for collegial behavior like inviting a quiet classmate to speak and avoiding side conversations.

Classroom Activities

Visual Timeline

To kickstart the unit, students will collaborate with their Literature Circle groups to build a timeline of Asian American history. I will provide students with a list of essential laws and court cases, and students will research their dates and impacts. Then, students will select a visual symbol to pair with each moment on the timeline. For example, students might represent the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act with an image of China with

an X over it. Students can refer to these timelines throughout the unit to help them understand how the U.S. immigration apparatus impacted the memoir authors and their families

One-Pagers

As students read each section of their memoirs, I want them to stop and reflect on what they have read and discussed. I do this through one-pagers, in which students use a combination of words, images, and symbols to depict key takeaways from their reading and conversation. I design one-pagers with boxes and direct students to fill in each box with words, images, and symbols that represent specific elements from their reading such as conflicts, overarching themes, and important relationships. My structured one-pagers prompt students to use quotations from the text that are relevant to the literary elements they are representing. At the conclusion of the unit, when students participate in the whole-class Socratic Seminar, they will be able to use their one-pagers as resources to aid their discussions. Students' one-pagers, timelines, and Literature Circle work function as maps, tracing students' journeys to a deeper understanding of the United States immigration system, how it came to be, and how it impacts real people.

In the Resources section below, I provide a list of the historical sources I used as well as citations for each middle school memoir. I have also included a list of memoirs that would be more appropriate for high school readers. These texts were all powerfully written and informative but include content that I felt was too mature for a middle school audience. They would be useful for teachers of older students, or for teachers themselves.

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Appendix on Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.1: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

When students are composing their written Literature Circle responses, they will need to cite and paraphrase text evidence to support their ideas. They will also do this through Literature Circle discussions during the unit and a Socratic Seminar at the conclusion of the unit.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

This standard has four sub-standards that are addressed and assessed when students participate in Literature Circles and Socratic Seminars. Students must come to class having read the text and refer to the text during discussion, follow rules of collegial discourse, pose and respond to questions, and qualify or justify their ideas in response to new information.

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