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The Literature of Immigration and the Lives of Adolescents: Finding Common Ground

Joan Brodsky Schur

America has always been a nation of immigrants, and never more so than today. Yet, in the great desire to include multicultural literature in today's English curricula, the very source of America's ethnic diversity—the immigrant experience—is often overlooked.

There are many reasons for teaching immigrant literature. The most compelling of these is that it provides a unifying theme, a prism through which students can empathize with a diversity of American voices, past and present. If one criticism of multicultural literature has been its lack of focus and organizing principles, immigrant literature has its own great saga to tell, its own recurring symbols, metaphors, and themes. These can become useful literary tools as students analyze, compare, and contrast a wide array of poems, stories, memoirs, plays, and novels of high literary merit. Finally, immigrant literature lends itself to cross-disciplinary units in which students can investigate their own family histories and neighborhoods.

The themes in immigrant literature transcend time and place and speak powerfully to adolescents. Teenagers, like immigrants, are in search of a new identity. Both know what it feels like to be the outsider who tries to figure out the new rules, fit in, and conform. Yet for both immigrant

and adolescent, a quite contrary wish exists at the same time—the desire to preserve one's own identity, hold fast to what makes one unique. The immigrant and adolescent also share a familiarity with the intergenerational conflicts that can result from these very quests for personal fulfillment.

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At all stages of the immigrant's experience, the search for a new self is at the core of the journey. Through the ability of adolescents to empathize with this quest, its anguish and hopes, the literature of immigration has the power to take students out of the self and into the lives of the many diverse cultures which have created and continue to create America. Teachers of immigrant children or the children of immigrants can draw directly on their students' experiences to enrich classroom discussion. Here I hope to suggest ways the non-immigrant student can

identify with the recurring patterns of the immigrant experience through literature.

The Literary Impact of the Mythic First Arrival

The immigrant experience begins with the moment of arrival, full of wonder and anticipation, awe and anxiety. Symbols of the great arrival—Plymouth Rock, Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty—all lie at the edge of the sea and beginning of land, marking the moment when one journey ends and a new one begins. There is no turning back; only the optimism of the immigrant, the overriding belief that he or she has reached the “Promised Land,” carries him or her through initial hardships.

Native Americans were the first immigrants to the continent, Spanish explorers preceded the English, and many English reached America before William Bradford wrote of the arrival of the Mayflower in 1620. Yet it is Bradford in *Of Plymouth Plantation* who gave us the archetype of the first arrival. His images come directly from the Bible. The Pilgrims, like the Jews, are seen as God’s Chosen People. Persecuted in a land of strangers, God has brought them to the Promised Land, America. “Ought not the children of their fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen who came over the great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice...” writes Bradford (87).

In the account of the former slave Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavas Vassa), we have the mirror image of the Pilgrim’s journey. The slave castle, not Plymouth Rock, becomes its symbol. The sea transported Equiano into slavery, not freedom. If Bradford’s account is the American Dream, Vassa’s is the American nightmare.

Yet 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial and drew again on Biblical images of a Promised Land. He defined anew a shared dream for all Americans which, if not a reality, was a promise that had come due.

Images of the mythic first arrival still inhabit the imaginations of immigrants today. In Ja-

maica Kincaid’s novel *Lucy*, a teenage girl travels not by boat, but by airplane from Antigua to America. Yet she writes of American places as “lifeboats to my small soul” and describes a “flow of water...creating two banks, one of which is my past”(5). And in the later epic journeys across the Great Plains, we still speak of the **sea** of grass.

Fresh Off the Boat

The first immigrant experience with which adolescents can identify is coming “fresh-off-the-boat.” The trusting innocence and naive optimism of the immigrant is like the naive idealism of childhood itself, a necessary protection against life’s harsh realities. This adult, so competent in his or her homeland, becomes childlike in the new—prone to ridicule and easily taken advantage of.

In Vilhelm Moberg’s four-part saga *The Emigrants*, a group of Swedes land at Ellis Island headed for Minnesota. When they learn that after a tortuous journey at sea they must travel another 1500 miles by land, they are overcome by dismay. But the captain of their ship, in his eagerness to get rid of them, tells them that 1500 English miles translates into only 250 **Swedish** miles. “Two-hundred and fifty miles! It isn’t exactly next door,” replies Karl Oskar (15). But greatly relieved, unsuspecting of the truth, and ever the optimist, he leads his party West.

Every student will have known what it felt like, at some time in life, to be the newcomer, the outsider. Help students to identify with the immigrant experience by asking them to write personal accounts which draw on their own memories. For example, students could write about their first day at their present school, focusing on fears and worries. Ask students to complete the sentence, “Being new means...” or “The first time I...” as the opening sentence of an autobiographical account. Share their stories in class and discuss the various ways students reacted to new situations. Were they afraid of ridicule, optimistic about the outcome? Did they persevere? When in their lives did their vulnerability as children enable adults to manipulate them? Ask students to write about times adults duped them, whether it be about the existence of Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. As students hear about one another’s experience as

the “outsider” and the “innocent” they should bring to their reading of immigrant literature a deeper empathy.

David Henry Hwang’s play *FOB* opens with Dale, a teenage Chinese American saying, “FOB. Fresh off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB. Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Like Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. Someone you wouldn’t want your sister to marry” (2). In Kincaid’s novel, Lucy arrives to work as an *au pair* for an American couple. Lucy recounts, “One day the maid who said she did not like me because of the way I talked told me that she was sure I could not dance. She said that I spoke like a nun, walked like one also, and that everything about me was so pious it made her feel at once sick to her stomach and sick with pity just to look at me” (11).

Show students photographs of fresh-off-the-boat immigrants at Ellis Island, and ask them what they think identifies the newcomers as being different, naive yet proud? Manners, dress, broken English—all of these could be signifiers. Old photographs by Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis can provide inspiration for a variety of writing assignments. Ask students to pretend they **are** the immigrant in one of the photos and then have them write monologues based on what they imagine that person would be thinking and feeling. Or, ask them to pretend they have just met the person in the photo. What words of advice could they write to the newcomer? Whom do your students consider to be insiders in their social worlds? What is the silent language of dress and manners that conveys that insiders belong?

Ask half the class to write about a time they had to attend a formal adult-oriented event, such as a wedding, Christening, funeral, Bar Mitzvah. What were their concerns about being dressed properly, or knowing the rules of etiquette? Ask the other half of the class to write about the same worries when they attended a teenage event such as a prom, slumber party, rock concert. Then compare accounts, focussing on how the “in-group” of parents or savvy teenagers subtly but powerfully conveyed its control over each situation. How did it feel to be the subject of potential ridicule? Recalling these events in their immedi-

ate lives will help students empathize with the ordeals faced by immigrants in literature.

Learning a New Language

Nothing made immigrants as vulnerable as not knowing the language, and learning English became the initial task. Issues to discuss with students about this process could include:

- whether America has or should have a national language.
- whether students should be taught in their native language or English, or both.
- whether in acquiring a new language one acquires a new identity.

Leo Rosten’s *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* is the quintessential story of the adult immigrant who attends night school. There Hyman Kaplan utterly charms his teacher, Mr. Parkhill, even as he baffles him and amuses us, no end. Kaplan’s undaunted optimism is captured in the last sentence, “p.s. I dont care if I dont pass, I **love** the class” (sic, 144). The frustration, the small but consequential misunderstandings that may arise from learning a new language, can be evoked for students by asking them to recall their own early childhood acquisition of English. What mistakes in pronunciation or comprehension did they make? Did these lead to misunderstandings that were funny or painful? Which of these memories have come down as family folklore, which have remained private because of embarrassment?

Richard Rodriguez in *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* writes about how different members of his Mexican family faced the learning of English. He speaks about the need for the acquisition of a public language, a public self: “Without question, it would have pleased me to hear my teachers address me in Spanish when I entered the classroom. I would have felt much less afraid.... But...I would have evaded... learning the great lesson of school, that I had a public identity” (19). Ask students if they have different languages for different occasions. Do they communicate among themselves in ways outsiders would not understand? How are their different selves reflected in language?

The divide between first and second generation immigrants is another underlying theme of the immigrant experience. Language acquisition is its initial cause. My American-born father still remembers learning English faster than his Russian-born parents. He became the mediator for them in their new environment. What tensions arise when parent and child find their roles reversed?

The World Left Behind

As the newly-arrived immigrant learns English and begins to adjust to a new world, memories remain of the world left behind. How to overcome homesickness? On viewing fruits from his native homeland, Claude McKay writes in "The Tropics in New York," "And, hungry for the old, familiar ways/I turned aside and bowed my head and wept." In "A Moving Day" by Susan Nunes, a Japanese-American family must decide what to do with its last mementos of Japan. What to discard of the old life, the old self, what to preserve?

The literature of remembrance is especially accessible to adolescents. Every student has left something or someone behind in life. And regardless of life stories, teenagers are leaving the world of childhood itself behind. Writing—for immigrants, and for students—can be a means of capturing and preserving this elusive past. Ask students to write a poem or short story about a sudden encounter with homesickness. In what way is the feeling both emotional and physical? Objects can hold great symbolic and personal meaning in our lives. Ask students to write about an object which holds memories for them, such as a family memento, childhood toy, gift, or prize. How and when did they receive it? What events are associated with the object? In what way has their object taken on symbolic meaning in their lives? Students can bring in their mementos as well as share what they have written about them.

Another way to preserve the past is through oral history. African slaves, forbidden by law to read and write, turned to a rich oral tradition to recapture their past and inspire resistance. The retelling of the story, "The People Could Fly," by Virginia Hamilton is a powerful example, as are

many folksongs. Encourage students to interview their relatives for family stories, folklore, and recipes.

Start by asking students to find out how they acquired their own names. What is the ethnic origin of their last name? Was it ever changed to sound more "American"? Were they given first names in memory of a great-grandmother or other relative? How has family history been preserved through names? Students can also write about family recipes that have been handed down over time, interviewing the cook for family anecdotes or special "tips." What is the ethnic origin of the recipe? How "American" has this food become over time? How can different generations be connected through oral history, in what different ways can the past be preserved? Consider having students cook recipes for one another and share family stories at an ethnic food festival.

Memories can also divide the generations. In Jerome Weidman's story, "My Father Sits in the Dark," a father lives emotionally in his memories of Austria, a world his American-born son cannot understand. What historical memories do students think define the "older generation" of today? (The proverbial parental expression "in **my** day" comes to mind.) In what ways can these memories separate the generations? Ask students to interview their parents about a historical event that happened before the youth of today was born. Have students probe into how that event shaped his or her parent's understanding of the world today.

American Dream/American Reality

The immigrant's quest for a new identity is also the hope of attaining the American Dream. Adolescence itself is a time of dreaming, hoping, becoming. Through the reading of immigrant literature, students can discuss the following questions about the American Dream and what it means to them:

- Is it social justice, personal freedom?
- Is it the acquisition of wealth and material possessions?
- Have Hollywood and the media made our dreams for us?

- Is it the freedom to become an artist or writer?
- Does America admire artists as much as entrepreneurs?
- Are there no hopes left for some Americans?
- Are dreams worth having, even if they are not likely to be attained?

In reading about the female immigrant experience, look for the subtle ways women often negotiate a better life for themselves in America than in the homeland. In Yoshiko Uchida's story, "Tears of Autumn," Hana Omiya **chooses** to come to America as a picture bride rather than remain in Japan. Women, seemingly passive, were often astute manipulators of their own rising status. In *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, a young girl shrewdly watches the oppression of women around her and vows she will not follow their fate.

What happens when immigrants, male or female, are confronted with racism, sexism, religious intolerance, or political prejudices? What happens when the dream confronts the reality? In the peak years of nineteenth century immigration, the outpouring of literature about immigrants encompasses the dream and the reality in both the newly-expanding cities and yet-to-be-settled Great Plains. Ask students to write essays about their views of the success or failure of the American Dream today, personal accounts about their encounters with prejudice, or dreams for the future.

In his autobiography, Andrew Carnegie gives us another great American archetype—the ladder of success. As a young immigrant from Scotland, Carnegie mastered the city and its new technology to further his own dreams. The railroads, telegraph, and steel factories became rungs on the ladder. Do students have imaginary ladders of success they hope to climb—and what are the steps needed to reach the top?

The burgeoning city also brought a new reality—the exploitation of workers, especially immigrants, as they struggled in tenements, sweatshops, and factories. The family in Henry Roth's classic novel *Call It Sleep* struggles on New York's Lower East Side. For Michael Gold's father in *Jews Without Money*, slum life brings failure and he is reduced to selling bananas, years after his

arrival. In Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*, Italians in the construction industry confront the brutalities of discrimination and dangerous work.

The prairies were the locus of another great struggle for immigrants. The Swedes in Moberg's saga *The Emigrants* suffer great hardships on the Minnesota plains, but not without rich rewards. But for O.E. Rolvaag's Norwegians in *Giants in the Earth* and for Bohemians in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, we see the hardships for some as insurmountable.

The greater the sacrifice made by the immigrant parents, the greater the need to see their American-born children succeed. Michael Gold's father says, "I am a greenhorn, but you are an American! You will have it easier than I; you will have luck in America" (302). In Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Waverly Jong's mother pushes her to become the Great American Hope of chessplayers. Waverly becomes a pawn of her mother's dream and, naturally, she rebels. In John Van Druten's play, "I Remember Mama," Mama helps her daughter achieve her own dream of becoming a writer, and the daughter succeeds.

Ask students to consider the positive and negative aspects of parents wishing to fulfill their American Dreams through their children. When are parents being supportive, helpful, optimistic? Why are children sometimes cruelly ungrateful? How do students define their own dreams, apart from their parents' dreams for them? Because conflict is the essence of drama, ask students to write a dialogue or short one-act play, based on a parent-child confrontation, keeping these issues in mind. Or, have students write self-reflective essays in which they discuss their own dreams in relation to their parents' dreams for them.

Transplanting

Acceptance of who you are is at the heart of a successful transplanting of the immigrant to America as well as a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. As part of a group discussion, or for an essay assignment, ask students for the criteria they would use in deciding when an adolescent has become an adult, when an immigrant has become an American. What are the attributes they see as being essential to taking

root, or maturing, in a new environment? If possible, find adults who would be willing to come to your class to talk about the process of becoming an American and what it was like for them. What qualities and customs do your students consider to be American which were brought here originally by immigrants?

In Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, the Norwegian wife Beret is unable to take root in America. Psychologically she withers away, unable to establish a new self in a new landscape. In "I Remember Mama," Mama is the quintessential successful immigrant. She overcomes her longing for her homeland which is symbolized by a child she has buried in Norway. She is able to graft what is useful and best about her past—symbolized by a Norwegian recipe—into her American present. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Langston Hughes writes of the identities that have accrued to the Negro across continents and through suffering. He seems to accept his identity as both African and American as his "soul has grown deep like the rivers."

Separating

The final step in finding a new self belongs to the second generation who must separate from their immigrant parents to find their own American identities. We have already discussed the antagonism that can arise between immigrants and their American-born offspring: the role reversals that occur when children learn English and "American ways" faster than their parents, the claims of parents who remember the old ways and want the younger generation to adhere to them, the eagerness of parents to live the American Dream vicariously through their offspring.

In Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, a Chinese American boy's last name is spelled "Duk" rather than "Duck." He nonetheless suffers from being ridiculed as an American cartoon character. Yet, in the beginning of the novel, he is unable to take pride in his Chinese heritage; his idol is Fred Astaire. In *Sound-Shadows of the New World*, Ved Mehta arrives from India on his own to attend the Arkansas School for the Blind. He struggles to define his own values when his father writes admonishing him not to succumb to American

sexual mores. In Mary Gordon's story, "Delia," an Irish-American family resents a younger sister's marriage to an American Protestant, and the family is torn apart.

In Paule Marshall's beautiful novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina struggles under a mother who is fiercely determined to succeed in America. Against her husband's wishes (and at the cost of both his spiritual and physical existence), she sells his land in Barbados to finance the purchase of their Brooklyn brownstone.

Yet the mother is equally determined to hold on to her Barbadian identity; she wants her daughter to date only fellow Barbadians and not American blacks. In the daughter's struggle to separate from her mother, and to define for herself who she is, is a story with which all adolescents can identify.

The immigrant's quest for selfhood is thus both political and personal. The epic journey is physical, but also psychological. Through reading and writing about the transformations of the self which apply to both immigrant and adolescent, we hope that students will undertake their own journeys, thereby seeing themselves and other Americans in new ways.

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Activities for Teaching Immigration

1. "Blessed Be the Ties That Bind": A Family Folklore Activity. Order from the Public Information Office, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560. This packet is full of teaching ideas that are interesting and easy to implement.

2. The Constitutional Rights Foundation has put out several *Bill of Rights in Action* pamphlets on immigration. See especially:

"Educating European Immigrant Children Before World War I." Winter 1992, Vol. 8, no. 2.

"United States Immigration Policy and Hitler's Holocaust," "Haiti and the Boat People," and "Seeking Asylum in the U.S.," Spring, 1994, Vol 10, no. 2.

Order from Constitutional Rights Foundation, 601 South Kingsley Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90005 (213-487-5590).

3. *Family History: Coming Face-to-Face with the Past* by Dennis J. Thavenet is part of the "How To Do It Series" published by the National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016-3199.

4. *Gateway: A Simulation of Immigrant Issues in Past and Present America*. Interact. Interaction Publishers, Inc. 1825 Gillespie Way # 101, El Cajon, CA 92020-1095 (1-800-0961).

5. *Immigration: Opposing Viewpoints*. The Opposing Viewpoint Series, Greenhaven Press, 2275 West Conty Rd. C2, STE 100, Roseville, MN 55113 (619-485-7424).

Opposing Viewpoints has several books on immigration designed for both high school and middle school levels. Their books present controversial issues about immigration and then provide articles which support opposing sides of each argument. Excellent for debates.

6. "Immigration," *Organization of American Historians, Magazine of History*, Spring, 1990. Organization of American Historians, 112 North Bryan Street, Bloomington, Indiana 47408-4199. Many ideas and sources suggested in this issue devoted to immigration.

7. "Rediscovering America Through Literature," *English Journal*, September 1992, Vol. 81, No. 5, National Council of Teachers of English. NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.