

Freedom's Pattern: Immigration's Cultural Quilt

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INTRODUCTION

Quilts are made up of unique bits and pieces that, when sewn together, create an embracing cover. By studying the characteristic patchwork pieces that define our American character, we can achieve a more realistic picture of our country's culture and history. Being an American can mean different things to different people. How do new immigrants adjust to this complex society? Is being an American a cultural experience, or does it relate to our government and the ideals that it holds forth? Looking at our history in the context of these questions, we can embrace diversity and celebrate our unity as a nation. This, in turn, allows us to decide if being an American is determined by a set of cultural and/or idealistic parameters.

How do we see ourselves and how do others see us around the world? These are questions to be considered in this unit. What draws newcomers to our country? The answer to this question can be found in the chapter titles from *Destination America*, by Chuck Wills: freedom. People have immigrated to the USA because they desired the "Freedom to Worship" and "Freedom to Create." They also arrived and continue to come because they want "Freedom from Oppression," "Freedom from Want," and "Freedom from Fear." Once here they participate in the "Freedom to Protest" and "Freedom for Women" (Wills 5).

While the population of Jane Long Middle School in Houston, Texas is largely Hispanic, our student body is usually comprised of students from 30 or 40 countries. The majority of our students belong to immigrant families. This has resulted in a student body which do not always see themselves as Americans. For the students whose families have been here for generations, they sometimes feel like the outsiders. The objective of this unit, designed for my 7th grade Texas History classes, will be to help them understand how they all blend into the pattern of a diverse, yet united, American quilt.

OBJECTIVES

- SS.8.16A,D Summarize key ideas in the *Declaration of Independence* and analyze how the *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* reflect the principals of ...individual rights.
- SS.8.24A Examine reasons for immigration and the settlement patterns of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups.
- SS.8.27C Identify examples of American...literature that transcend American culture and convey universal themes.
- SS.7.19B Describe how people from selected racial, ethnic and religious groups attempt to maintain their cultural heritage while also adapting and contributing to the larger Texas culture.
- 110.21.15A The students write to express, discover, record, develop, reflect, and to problem solve.

RATIONALE

Immigration and the issue of adjusting to life in the United States is a topic of high interest among the students in my Texas History classes. A comparison of contemporary and historical

periods of immigration, especially here in Texas, will be a major objective of this unit. I would like my classes to have a better insight into the hopes of their parents and to see that coming to America has provided both difficulties and rewards for the various groups that have contributed to the unique cultural pattern of our society. Literary sources, both fictional and non-fictional, will be used to achieve this goal. Because our school is endeavoring to improve writing skills, lesson plans in this unit will focus on the creation of original essays, stories, and poems. While issues of discrimination and arguments as to the merits of immigration laws will undoubtedly become a part of our discussion, they do not constitute the main context of this unit. Please note that the main focus is a study of what, in this diverse world, links all of us as Americans.

Immigrants have been attracted to the United States from around the world. We will study some of those groups who have made their homes in contemporary Houston. The hopes and desires that brought them here will be compared to those of the people who immigrated to Texas in the 1800s. This will provide a continuum between the past and present and hopefully shed a more realistic light on the curriculum of our Texas History classes. In preparation for this unit we will review political and philosophical ideals and how they relate to my students' lives. They will have already studied the *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*. The promises made in these two documents have held out a hand of hope to people around the world. It is in this arena that Americans can find a common uniting ground which covers the many diverse groups which make up the American experience.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Ideals of Freedom

Before commencing with this unit, my students will have studied the *Declaration of Independence* and the American *Constitution*. These documents contain some pretty powerful words, especially when one considers the times in which they were written. In the *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson wrote "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Wills 102). The Preamble to the *United States Constitution* states the following:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this *Constitution* for the United States of America. (Cayton 59)

Of course, these words did not always apply to everyone. Some of our most famous Founding Fathers, Washington and Jefferson for example, benefited from the institution of slavery. Women were denied suffrage. In fact, not all white men could vote in the early years. That privilege was restricted to land owners. Yet, those words held out the promise of freedom and dignity, and, with time, the nation was forced into living up to and extending those promises to all who would reside here.

Even before the American Revolution, Jefferson made the assumption that "those willing to make the journey to America [possess] a right, which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country which chance, not choice, has placed them" (Wills 100). Following this vein of thought, people of other nations have looked to the United States as the land of opportunity. Similar words from the sonnet, *The New Colossus*, written by Emma Lazarus in 1883, are found on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!' ("For Teachers")

We have not always lived up to these statements of promise and freedom. Slavery, the *Sedition Acts* of the late 1700s and early 1900s, the internment of the Japanese during World War II, and the *Patriot Act* passed in the aftermath of 9/11 have contradicted our stated ideals of an open door policy, providing freedom and opportunity to all. But the ideals and philosophy have always existed as the backbone of our nation and, in time, have stood to correct errors of judgment. In this seminar we have been asked "What does it mean to be an American?" What is the framework that unites us? It is within the words of these documents and the inherent promise of various freedoms that we can discover our unifying character, and that is what makes us American.

Destination America by Chuck Wills focuses on the freedoms and values that have attracted immigrants to the United States. What are the "push" and "pull" factors that cause people to make change? Wills states in the introduction "I share with all these people a common identity as an American. Our desire to make a decent living while living in a free society unites us across superficial barriers of ethnicity, culture, and language. They came here for much the same reasons that brought my own forebears, many years ago" (Wills 8). We will explore the idea that those freedoms and values are the uniting threads that bring Americans together. I want my students to understand that they can maintain a cultural identity and still consider themselves as Americans practicing the ideals which define our nation.

Texas History –The 1800s

My students will be asked to relate our contemporary studies to Texas History and the problems faced by Americans, Europeans, Asians and Africans who immigrated to Texas throughout the 19th Century. This will allow my students to see that there is a continuum throughout history and that their experiences are also a part of the historical context of life in America. The background information about 19th Century Texas and that related to contemporary immigrants which follows, will be of use to my students when creating children's stories in Lesson II.

Texas has the distinction of having belonged to Mexico, followed by a ten year stint as an independent republic, before being annexed to the United States in 1846. Starting in the 1820s Americans immigrated legally and illegally into Mexican Texas. Most came in search of a better life. Inexpensive, fertile land held out the promise of freedom from poverty. For enslaved African Americans, another freedom offered itself: freedom from oppression. Texas was the only Mexican state where the practice of slavery was allowed. Slaves soon learned that if they could cross the Rio Grande into Mexico proper, they would be granted freedom. From the 1820s until the American Civil War, Texas slaves escaped to freedom in Mexico. Does any of this sound familiar? In the 1800s, Americans immigrated to Mexico to better their lives. Today, Mexicans immigrate north of the Rio Grande for the same reasons.

My classes will be asked to compare the preparations for and experience of immigrating to a new country. What is the contemporary experience and how would they have planned for a

journey in the past? Do they think that students one hundred years from now will be able to relate to their own personal experiences? How would they write about 21st century immigration in a textbook of the future? Hopefully my students will see that they have already established themselves in the fabric of American history.

New groups of immigrants have brought new traditions and ideas which seemed strange and exotic at first and now are accepted as a normal part of American life. In Lesson I, students will be asked to search out those traditions and to look at new cultural infusion which they or their classmates are introducing into American culture. In the following sections, brief descriptions will be given for several groups from the 19th Century. Students will be asked to explore other immigrant groups from the cultural information provided in materials created by the Institute of Texan Cultures in Lesson IV.

Anglo-American Texans

In the past, Anglo-American referred to people of English, Scottish, Irish, or Welch descent. Today it is used to describe people of European background (“Gone” 30). When Anglo-Americans first came to Texas it was ruled by Spain and later became a part of the independent Republic of Mexico. Land in the United States was too expensive for some and others had gone into debt in their attempts to improve their lives. Mexican Texas pulled the Americans by offering the opportunity of inexpensive land and freedom from debt and poverty. Mary Austin Holley was the cousin of Stephen F. Austin. After her husband died, she traveled to Texas on several occasions in preparation for moving her family there. Her impressions of the land and its possibilities have been published in several books. In *The Far Western Frontier*, through a series of letters, she describes the benefits and freedoms to be gained by immigrating to Texas:

Two Irish gentlemen have contracted with the [Mexican] government to settle an Irish colony on this tract...this is a very valuable part of Texas, and there can be no doubt but that many thousands of oppressed sons of Erin, if they possessed the information and means of emigration, would joyfully exchange their ‘cows grass’ and ‘potato lots’ for rich farms in this colony. Here are no tithes, no poor rates, not burthensome exactions, nor vexatious restrictions. Here enterprise and energy may unfold themselves to their fullest extent, in all the various pursuits of honest industry, without fear and without reproach. (Holley 70)

African-American Texans

African Americans who migrated to the United States through forced enslavement in the 18th and 19th centuries represent a unique group in this discussion. Rather than rushing towards freedom’s promise, they were hurled into a life of lost independence and self-determination. African traditions were discouraged and degraded. In spite of this, American slaves endeavored to maintain their cultural identities out of the sight of their oppressors. Traditional African religions were practiced in secrecy, as the Christian religion was accepted in full view. Today, Black churches are not just centers of worship; they also represent strong unity and community involvement: an expression of freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Historically, there were free people of African descent in early nineteenth century Texas, but their numbers were few. An example would be the Ashworth family who ranched along the coastal plains near the Sabine River (“Gone” 6). In general, African-Americans coming to Texas in the early 1800s were enslaved. They too were immigrants, but they were not being pushed or pulled towards any type of freedom. For some, the desire for personal freedom would push them into escaping to Mexico where slavery was forbidden.

Sarah, Sissy Weed and the Ships of the Desert, by Paula G. Paul, offers a fictional account of a young girl’s escape to Mexico that is based on historical events. While fun to read, this short

novel introduces some interesting aspects of Texas history and should stir students' desire to further investigate the efforts of Texas slaves to reach freedom in Mexico. Prior to the American Civil War, the U.S. Army imported camels from Africa to Texas for use in the American southwest. It was suspected that the camel deliveries decoyed efforts to illegally import African slaves (Paul v). The port of Indianola, Texas experienced the delivery of these camels and that is where the fictional story of Sarah and Sissy Weed unfolds.

Twelve year old Sarah lives in Indianola and describes the arrival of the camels. "Major Wayne...said the army was trying the camels out as beasts of burden in the desert country of Texas, and all the way across to California. Ships of the desert, he called them" (3). Late at night the ship that delivered the camels unloads an illegal cargo of slaves down the coast. Sissy Weed, a member of this group, is later sold to the town's mayor (65). Sarah and her friend R.J. endeavor to help Sissy Weed escape. A plan is hatched when rides are offered to the town's children, before the camels are sent to West Texas. Sissy Weed is disguised as Sarah. With the help of Hi Jolly, an Arab camel handler, and Mendez, his Mexican assistant, Sissy Weed will take Sarah's ride and simply leave town with the camels as they head towards West Texas, the Mexican border and freedom (128). Sarah describes the escape:

It was just before sundown. Papa was still over at the church and Mama was still in her sewing room, and I sat in my room watching the street from my window. In a little while I saw R.J. walking along the street. It looked like Sarah McCluster in a pink gingham dress, white gloves and a bonnet that covered her face was walking along with him. My plan was to stay in my room, because it wouldn't do for people to see *two* of me out on the streets...My heart jumped when they met Willie Barlow and his mama on the sidewalk. But R.J. just nodded his head in a polite greeting to Mrs. Barlow and "Sarah" kept her head down so the bonnet would hide her black face. (Paul 127)

Upon reaching the staging area for the camels' departure, R.J. turns Sissy Weed over to Mendez who is disguised as Hi Jolly, the person in charge of the children's rides (128):

R.J. handed Mendez a packet...the money I [Sarah] had taken from the box I kept under my bed. He would need it more than I needed high button shoes...When Sissy Weed was in the saddle, Mendez...got the beast to its feet and led it toward the south. They would have to pass along one edge of town where it was likely people would look out their windows and see 'Hi Jolly' giving 'Sarah McCluster' that camel ride she'd wanted for so long. 'Mendez says he'll see she gets to his family in Mexico,' R.J. said. 'The he cimmel [sic] will be the best way for crossing the Mexican desert,' Hi Jolly said...I [Sarah] watched Sissy Weed disappearing over the horizon on her ship of the desert (Paul 128).

After reading *Sarah, Sissy Weed and the Ships of the Desert*, students will read the following historical account and then be asked to compare the experience of a nineteenth century enslaved person to that of a contemporary illegal immigrant attempting to enter the United States on foot after crossing the Rio Grande. In both cases freedom is the desired outcome. The following describes an escape attempt in nineteenth century Texas:

A black figure darted behind a clump of bushes; another sprawled, face down, into the dirt – the bloodhounds could almost smell the panic. The Negroes' chances of escaping grew immeasurably smaller as the dogs came near. If discovered, the unarmed blacks could offer only passive resistance, if taken, they faced harsh words, harsher handcuffs, a long, hot walk, and severe punishment. But this time the dogs did not pick up the scent and the hunters passed on. Immensely relieved, the fugitives perhaps now would make it to freedom, although danger was ever present. Forced to travel by night, and to exist on the barren scrub land, they could depend only upon themselves. (Tyler 1)

This passage came to mind a few months ago while watching the local municipal access cable channel. Unfortunately, I missed the opening credits for a contemporary look at the dangers experienced by people attempting to enter the United States without documentation. An independent film maker followed a group of men illegally crossing the Rio Grande into the United States. They hid from view in the daytime under squat trees and bushes and pushed northward at night. It was hot and their water bottles soon became empty. Agents of the INS (La Migra) and unofficial vigilante type groups patrolled the area looking for “wetbacks.” Enslaved Americans were hunted by slave patrols along the Rio Grande as they sought freedom in Mexico in the period prior to the American Civil War. Yet, there were also those who aided the runaways with offers of food and water. Today, local ranchers leave stocks of water in barren areas traversed by those crossing the border. A good number of my students have either experienced this type of journey or know someone who has crossed in this manner. This comparison should bring history to life for my students and help them to realize that the desire for freedom is an ongoing theme in human history.

German Texans

Beer (for the adults) and sausage, Christmas trees, and dyeing Easter eggs may all seem like ordinary practices in the daily fabric of our lives. But they were considered to be very German (and Czech) by the Americans who were already in Texas in the mid 1800s. People of German descent are one of the largest cultural groups in Texas (“Gone” 16). Overpopulation, crop failures, and a series of revolutions aimed at an ever changing German government caused many to leave in 1848 (Wills 108 - 109). Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels obtained land grants and opened the port town of Indianola. German immigrants arrived at this port and moved into central Texas, establishing New Braunfels, Fredericksburg, Comfort, Round Top, and Giddings (“Gone” 16). The Germans were pushed from their war-torn country. A desire for land and the possibility of a more prosperous life pulled them to Texas. Others were attracted by the freedom of expression which was denied under a powerful German monarchy. Germans known as “freethinkers” came to Texas where they later practiced their freedom of speech by opposing slavery (16).

“Freedom is not free – It is costly” (Meletio 115). John O. Meusebach (formerly Baron Ottfried Hans, Freiherrn von Mewsebach) made this statement after bringing 7,400 German immigrants to Texas in the mid 1840s. In addition to the reasons listed above, they came for freedom of religion and to escape laws of primogeniture. After two years, 62% were dead from cholera and Penateka Comanche attacks (116). Members of this group settled around Fredericksburg. In an effort to stop the Native Texan attacks, all of the men arranged a meeting with the Comanches at San Saba to work out a peace treaty in the spring of 1847. Comanche leaders, wary of a surprise attack during the meeting, sent scouts to watch the town and look out for the American army (117). If the army showed, they were to attack the town. The Comanches built fires in the hills around the town. As long as the fires burned, the Comanche leaders knew all was well.

These fires scared the German children. Their mothers “put an American twist on older German folk tales of fairies who light fires on the hillside forests to celebrate the new birth of spring” (Meletio 118). A new story was created to appease the fears of the children. The fires were built by the Easter rabbit who was heating huge pots of water to boil Easter eggs. Bunnies were searching the countryside for wild flowers to be used in creating dye for the eggs. The story worked and the treaty was successful (117). Today the Easter Fire Pageant is a much anticipated annual event in Fredericksburg.

Fire on the Hillside, by Melinda Rice, gives a fictional account of this event. Thirteen year old Katherine Haufmann and her family are German immigrants living in the newly established

Fredericksburg, Texas in 1847. It has become dangerous for free-thinkers to stay in Germany and her father moved the family to Texas. She misses her homeland, but her father appreciates the new freedoms:

Papa liked it here. He liked the great open expanses of land. He liked his little cabin and his field and his spotted cow and his team of oxen. Most of all, he said, he liked being able to do what he pleased. 'Texas is a land of freedom and opportunity,' he would say. 'You will see Katherine, my sad little Katherina. You will grow up and learn to love this wonderful place, this Texas.' (Rice 2)

When the men leave to meet with the Comanches, the mysterious fires appear on the hillsides surrounding the town. Rumors abound and the children become frightened. Katherine's mother gathers the young ones and claims to have encountered a huge Easter bunny in the hills. She tells the following story:

I heard a great commotion in the bushes so I went to investigate and saw this huge rabbit...All the young children were wide-eyed. 'It said, why hello, little Bettina. I did not know you had moved to Texas.'... 'How did the rabbit know your name?' asked Martin. 'That is what I wondered,' said Mama. 'Then it hit me quite suddenly...Only the Easter Bunny would have known my name...and it is close to Easter, you know...It is quite obvious. The Easter Bunny and his helpers are building those fires so they can boil and dye all the Easter eggs'...The Easter Bunny story had banished all the little ones' fears. There were no bad dreams that night. (Rice 52, 53)

This story brought freedom from fear to the children and the successful treaty with the Comanches brought the same freedom to the adults. This, in turn, allowed the German-Texans to stay in their new homes and experience the freedoms that had been denied under an oppressive German government.

Chinese Texans

During the 1870s and 1880s a small group of Chinese men came to Texas to help build the railroads. They had originally come from China via California in a quest for economic freedom. In 1882 the *Chinese Exclusion Laws* stopped the immigration of Chinese for 60 years ("Gone" 24). An exception to these laws occurred when General John J. Pershing brought 527 Chinese from Mexico to Texas. Pershing had been attempting to capture Pancho Villa. The Chinese, who had worked as shipbuilders and servants for several generations on the Pacific coast of Mexico, were suffering from anti-Chinese feelings during revolutionary times (24). A desire for, and the opportunity of, freedom from persecution pushed the Chinese to American Texas, where most settled in San Antonio (24).

Chinese immigrants brought the practice of shooting off firecrackers to our shores. Today, we would think it un-American not to have a fireworks display on the 4th of July. "Fire Crystals," a poem by Roger W. Hancock, conjures up memories of Independence Day celebrations, picnics, and culminating displays meant to remind us of the "rockets red glare" depicted in the "Star Spangled Banner" and the freedoms associated with being an American:

"Fire Crystals"

People gather in the park,
lay their blankets on the ground.
for the nightfall spark,
and blast of booming rebound.
Oohs, aahs of evening dark,
fire crystals splash the sky. (Hancock)

For Chinese Americans, fireworks provide a link between ancient culture when viewed at Chinese New Year celebrations and modern day expressions of freedoms gained on the 4th of July.

Contemporary Immigrant Stories

Events half a world away are reflected in my classroom. At the end of the Viet Nam War we saw an influx of students from that country and Cambodia. There have always been large numbers of Mexican students due to a poor economy and the proximity of their country to Texas. We experienced a surge of students from El Salvador and Guatemala during periods of civil war in the 1980s. Approximately ten years ago Bosnian and Croatian students began to enroll. Recently it seems we are receiving more newcomers from African countries as people displaced into refugee camps by civil wars are admitted as residents to our country. The tenuous situation in southern Asia has introduced families from Pakistan and Bangladesh into our school's community.

Viet Nam

Viet Nam became a colony of France in the late 1800s. In 1945, the Vietnamese started a revolution to free themselves from French rule. They won their independence in 1954, but a civil war ensued between the south and communist north that lasted until 1975 when the south was defeated (Garland 27). As the communists took power in the south, about one million people were pushed from their homeland in a desire for freedom from oppression, persecution and the poverty that followed the war. The United States, which had supported the south in the war, became the new home for the majority of Vietnamese refugees (27).

Today, Houston has a thriving Vietnamese community which was pulled here by a strong economy that offered freedom from poverty. Freedom of religion and the freedom to express oneself were among the rights that the South Vietnamese hoped to protect when fighting against communist rule. These refugees were forced to flee their homeland, leaving everything behind, as they ventured into a culture that was very different from their own.

The Lotus Seed, by Sherry Garland, looks at how a simple possession, passed on in a family, can help maintain cultural roots no matter where a family finds itself relocated. The importance of maintaining family traditions is explored in Lesson I. In *The Lotus Seed*, the grandmother, Ba, took a lotus seed from the emperor's garden. It became her good luck piece and reminded her of the emperor. She carried it in her pocket when she married and left home (3, 7). "One day the bombs fell all around and soldiers clamored door to door. She took the time to grab the seed, but left her mother-of-pearl hair combs lying on the floor" (9). Her family escaped Vietnam in an overcrowded boat:

One terrible day her family scrambled into a crowded boat and set out on a stormy sea...She held the seed in her shaking fingers and silently said good-bye (11). She arrived in a strange new land with blinking lights and speeding cars and towering buildings that scraped the sky and a language she didn't understand (13). [The seed was planted in the new country]. It is the flower of life and hope...No matter how ugly the mud or how long the seed lies dormant, the bloom will be beautiful. It is the flower of my country [Ba said] (22). When the lotus blossom faded and turned into a pod, Ba gave each of her grandchildren a seed to remember her by. (Garland 23)

One of the granddaughters wrapped her seed in silk and promised to plant it and pass new seeds on to her children (Garland 25). Such traditions can pass on a feeling of belonging and purpose within a family. The diversity of such stories can serve to enlighten us all as we strive to maintain the freedoms that allow such diversity to exist.

Mexico

Texas was a part of Mexico for a longer period of time than it has been in the United States. We are surrounded by Mexican culture in the place names, food and traditions of our state. Each year, Houston hosts one of the largest rodeos in the world. Today, Mexicans look north of the border for work that they feel Americans do not always want. These menial, low paying jobs are a pull to people wishing to escape the poverty of an unstable economy.

In his novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, T. Coraghessan Boyle compares the dreams and aspirations of Mexicans who immigrate to the United States with the harsh realities of life without a green card. Candido has entered the United States illegally with his new wife, America. They have been driven or pushed to the U.S. by the desire to acquire freedom from poverty and by the promise of the bounty found north of the border. Due to unforeseen circumstances they are forced into secretly camping in the hills as they have not found enough work to provide money for an apartment:

He'd taken America from her father so they could have a better life, so they could live in the North, where it was green and lush the year round and the avocados rotted on the ground, and everyone, even the poorest, had a house, a car and a TV – and now he couldn't even put food in her mouth (Boyle 26)...She wanted. Of course she wanted. Everybody who'd stayed behind to dry up and die in Tepoztlan wanted too – hell, all of Morelos, all of Mexico and the Indian countries to the south, they all wanted, what else was new? A house, a yard, maybe a TV and a car too – nothing fancy, no palaces like the *gringos* built – just four walls and a roof. Was that so much to ask?...He'd promised. Sure he had. He'd held up the lure of all those things, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, the glitter of the North like a second Eden...what else was he going to tell her? That they would get robbed at the border and live under two boards at the dump till he could make enough on the street corner to get them across: That they'd hide out like rats in a hole and live on a blanket beside a stream that would run dry in a month? (Boyle 29)

Their experiences show the risks they accepted in their effort to provide a better life for themselves and a future family. They were willing to work hard to achieve freedom from severe poverty. Candido was willing to take a chance that La Migra might appear when he stood on a street corner, hoping to be chosen for a day's work:

And then the contractors began to arrive, the white men with their big bleached faces and soulless eyes, enthroned in their trucks...no questions asked, no wage stipulated, no conditions or terms of employment (129)...He couldn't go back to Mexico, a country with forty percent unemployment and a million (199) people a year entering the labor force, a country that was corrupt and bankrupt and so pinched by inflation that the farmers were burning their crops and nobody but the rich had enough to eat. He couldn't go back to his aunt, couldn't live off her again, butt of the entire village, couldn't face America's parents...And what was it all about? Work, that was all. The right to work, to have a job, earn our daily bread and a roof over our head. He was a criminal for daring to want it, daring to risk everything for the basic human necessities, and now [because La Migra was rumored to be in the area] even those were to be denied him. It stank. It did. These people, these *norteamericanos*: what gave them the right to all the riches of the world?...They lived in their glass palaces, with their gates and fences and security systems, they left half-eaten lobsters and beefsteaks on their plates when the rest of the world was starving, spend enough to feed and clothe a whole country on their exercise equipment, their swimming pools...and all of them, even the poorest, had two cars. Where was the justice in that? (Boyle 200)

These lines illustrate not only the hopes and desires of immigrants who come to our country; they also give us a glimpse into how others in the world regard us.

Balkan Refugees

After World War II the various territories and countries of the Balkan Peninsula were united under suppressive communist rule as the country of Yugoslavia. Various religious and ethnic groups lived peacefully under this regime. With the fall of communism these diverse groups began a series of civil wars that “collectively killed between 200,000 and 300,000 people and made 2 million others refugees” (Wills 232). These were a difficult series of conflicts to follow. The entire area suffered from economic problems, high unemployment and ethnic fighting between Croatian Christians and Serbian Christians, and Christians and Bosnian Muslims.

Croatia and Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia after Slobodan Milosevic, a Serb, took power in 1989. Fighting then broke out in Croatia between Croats and the region’s Serbian minority. “Around the same time, Serbs in Bosnia began fighting with their Muslim neighbors and with Bosnian Croats. With the support of federal troops, Serb militias embarked on an ethnic-cleansing campaign, burning villages, besieging cities, and killing thousands...In 1997, the Kosovo Liberation Army began a guerilla campaign for independence” (Wills 231). Refugees from the Balkans were pushed away by a desire for freedom from oppression and pulled towards the United States by the desire for freedom from poverty (after losing everything) and freedom of religion.

Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo by Zlata Filipovic provides an intimate look at what it was like to experience the trauma of that conflict from 1991 to 1994. International journalist and war correspondent Janine Di Giovanni wrote of thirteen year old Zlata’s experiences for the *London Sunday Times* in 1994. “I spoke to psychiatrists who talked of post-traumatic stress syndrome and the effect of the war on all these children. Zlata was different: she was suffering, but because she was recording the events taking place around her, she tended to see the world from a slightly detached viewpoint” (Filipovic xii). Di Giovanni refers to Zlata as the “Anne Frank of Sarajevo” (v). A comparison of the two diaries would make an excellent lesson for both history and literature classes. Because of artillery attacks, the family is forced to move out of several rooms in their apartment into one protected from shrapnel by sandbags (vi). Venturing outside is dangerous:

Today a shell fell on the park...where I used to play...A lot of people were hurt...Selma lost a kidney...AND NINA IS DEAD. A piece of shrapnel lodged in her brain and she died. She was such a sweet, nice little girl...Nina, an innocent eleven-year-old little girl—the victim of a stupid war. I feel sad. I cry and wonder why? (Filipovic 45)

While it is not safe to go out, sometimes it is necessary. Food is scarce and wood must be gathered for a stove since the utilities are not dependable. It is with fear that Zlata awaits her mother’s return:

It’s especially dangerous to cross our bridge, because snipers shoot at you. You have to run across. Every time she goes out, Daddy and I go to the window to watch her run. Mommy says: ‘I didn’t know the Miljacka (our river) was so wide. You run, and you run, and you run, and there’s no end to the bridge.’ That’s fear...fear that you’ll be hit by something. (Filipovic 67)

Zlata also chronicles the day to day attempts at a normal life. The family celebrates birthdays and she endeavors to keep up with her school work. Through it all they await the opportunity to evacuate to a place offering freedom from fear, freedom from war induced poverty and freedom from oppression.

Central America

The 1980s and 1990s saw an influx of immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala as civil wars plagued those Central American nations. Poor economies also pushed Central Americans toward the United States in search of income to support their families back home. The nonfiction book *Enrique's Journey* will be used in my classes to focus on an area of study which relates to a large number of my students: immigration and adjusting to life as a new American. This book describes the journey of a young Honduran boy who leaves his country to find his mother who is working in the United States to support her children whom she left with relatives. This Pulitzer Prize winning book was written by Sonia Nazario who actually followed his path, rode the rails through Mexico, and witnessed the danger and despair of his journey. As Nazario discovered, thousands of children make this journey; not everyone makes it to the border. Sarah Wildman, writing for the *International Herald Tribune*, describes the journey taken by Nazario in her desire to authenticate her reporting:

[Nazario integrates] herself into the world of the migrants who ride atop northbound Central American trains – "el tren de la muerte," the train of death, as one is called...Nazario and her fellow passengers fear rape, robbery and death at the hands of gangs, bandits and Mexican immigration authorities. She illustrates the horror by bringing in stories of other migrants she encountered, like Wendy, a 17-year-old raped by five gangsters, and Carlos Roberto Díaz Osorto, also 17, who lost a leg and a foot trying to jump a moving train. (Wildman 1)

Why do the children make such a long and perilous journey? They are lonely for their mothers. The women may go north in search of freedom from poverty for their children. The children desire a freedom from loneliness and a feeling of rejection. "A University of Southern California study showed that 82% of live-in nannies and one in four housecleaners are mothers who still have at least one child in their home country" (Nazario xiv). Enrique last saw his mother when he was five. At age sixteen he decides to travel north. While on el tren de la muerte, he is beaten and robbed (54). Days later he glimpses his reflection:

Enrique glances into a store window and sees his reflection. It is the first time he has looked at his face since he was beaten. He recoils from what he sees. Scars and bruises. Black and blue. One eyelid droops...In the window glass, he sees a battered young man, scrawny and disfigured. It angers him, and it steels his determination to push northward. (Nazario 100)

When Enrique finds his mother, his life does not come together in the way he had hoped. Their relationship is strained after years of separation. Many of the problems he encounters mirror the problems I see on a daily basis at my school. The parents come to America to provide a better life. The children, who sometimes join them later, feel neglected and turn to what they see as the American life of the streets in their neighborhoods. Our class discussions in Lesson III will focus on the freedoms that were sought by Enrique's mother and if they were worth the sacrifices the family had to make. Hopefully this will then lead to a discussion as to whether my students are appreciative of the freedoms their parents' and forebears' efforts have afforded them. This is a discussion for all students, not just those who are immigrants.

Pakistan/Bangladesh

This unit deals with the question "What does it mean to be an American?" Especially for young immigrants, this can result in an effort to fit in. Does one have to change their values or traditions to be an American? We seem to take pride in being a nation of individualists, yet conformity instills a sense of belonging. Should this be what makes us American?

Ask Me No Questions by Marina Budhos is a novel about a Bengali family living and working illegally in the USA on expired visas. The daughters are more willing to adopt American attitudes than their parents:

Aisha began to study the other kids – especially the American ones [at school]. She figured out how they walked, what slang they used. Sometimes she'd stand in front of the mirror practicing phrases like 'my mom' or 'awesome.' The next day she'd come back from school turning the phrase a little differently, shrugging her shoulders in that way that American kids do to show nothing has ruffled them. In sixth grade she figured out which clique of girls she wanted to join. She studied what they wore, their flare-leg pants, their macramé bracelets, and she begged Ma to take her shopping to buy exactly the same things. At first Ma was hurt. Then she figured Aisha's changes might be a good thing if she was going to really make it here. (Budhos, *Ask* 24)

A cousin is even dating a non-Muslim American. For the young women this is what it means to be an American. For the parents it is the freedom from repression and poverty and the freedom to educate their daughters that constitutes the American experience.

An American Quilt

The preceding sections provide examples of the diversity that is found in American history and culture. In following the theme of this unit, we might refer to them as the patchwork pieces of the American experience. Patchwork quilting has been a common practice in the United States from colonial times to the present. This art form is not limited to the United States. Quilts are practical, and for many people, an inexpensive way to provide warmth and protection from the elements. The abstract beauty and utilitarianism found in quilts is the theme that I have chosen to express the unity that can be accomplished by embracing the diversity found in the United States.

The children's book *Show Way*, by Jacqueline Woodson, focuses on a quilting tradition that brings the message of this unit full circle. Her story illustrates the importance of maintaining traditions and the quest for freedom that is essential to the fabric of American life. Ms. Woodson, an African American, has written the true story of a quilting tradition that has been handed down through the generations of her family. Persons escaping slavery in the American south would sometimes create quilts that held secret symbols and maps to assist in escape plans. While all Americans can embrace their historical significance, these quilts represent an experience and tradition which was unique to African Americans. There is a thread of common recognition and usage for all Americans when we think of quilts. For African Americans, quilts have also represented a path to freedom.

Jacqueline Woodson goes back eight generations to tell the story of her family's quilting history and heritage. A young enslaved girl is sold away from her parents. Her mother gives her a piece of muslin, two needles, and thread dyed from chokecherry berries (Woodson 3). At her new home, an old woman, Big Mama, tells the children about "growing up and getting themselves free" (4):

And in the daytime when there was some few minutes for a slave to rest a bit, Big Mama taught [her] to sew colored thread into stars and moons and roads that slave children grew up and followed late in the night, a piece of quilt and the true moon leading them. (Woodson 6, 7)

The tradition is carried into the next generation, when at age 7, Mathis May was sold away. She began to make "show way" quilts that could map out and show the way to freedom:

Took a star from her mama's blanket, took a little piece of the road. Pressed it to her face when she wanted to remember back home. Held it to her heart to feel back home.

Got herself a piece of muslin and some thread somewhere and kept up her sewing. Sewed so fine, she was making clothes for everyone in the big house and slaves too. And at night, she sewed stars and moons and roads – tiny patch pieces of stars and moons and roads. Slaves whispered what no one was allowed to say: *That Mathis know how to make...a Show Way...* came to her for patch pieces just before they disappeared into the night. (Woodson 10, 12 - 14)

The story continues down through Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement to the current generation. Ms. Woodson concludes:

And when I was seven, I didn't have to work in a field or walk in any Freedom lines...I sewed stars and moons and roads into quilts and curtains and clothes because Mama said, *All the stuff that happened before you were born is your own kind of Show Way. There's a road, girl, my mama said. There's a road.* (Woodson 34)

Now these stories and traditions, cast out of a desire for freedom, are being passed on to the author's baby girl.

Maintaining Our Traditions

Show Way was a featured book on the PBS series *Reading Rainbow*. Show host LeVar Burton suggested to viewers that items, such as the Woodson family quilts, help to unite families by maintaining their traditions and history. His family treasures a saddle blanket and heirloom ring which carry stories from the past into future generations. Burton stated that tracing one's family history brings one's history to life and "you discover you" (*Show Way*). If we all consider the roles our families have played in history, then it should follow that all of that history, no matter how varied, is a part of the American experience. Tracing roots back to ancestors who came to America as enslaved persons from Africa is not always possible. Yet, we all can construct our American family histories and insert those experiences into the American quilt. Burton went on to say that not everyone has a famous ancestor. But, "all of your relatives' stories have value" (*Show Way*).

Burton, an African American, demonstrated how his family created a family tree. The Burtons reproduced family photos which were hung from a decorative metal tree. Creating the tree stimulated discussions, curiosity, and finally, family pride and a sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. We are all a part of the fabric of history and when our stories are united, we can discover a common bond. Family stories can be related to the larger context of American tradition and history. This concept will be explored in Lesson I.

Discovering Our Unity

Two major projects will result from this unit. My students will be asked to trace their immigrant roots and to record family stories. They will then take these bits and pieces and show their relationships to past history and contemporary events. As a group they will also create a Freedom Quilt. Each student will create a cloth piece that shows off something of the family's history, culture or American experience. The freedoms that attracted the families to this country will be the unifying design at the center of the quilt.

As a result of these projects, I want my students to understand what it means to be an American. Whether they have been "Americans" for centuries, or newly arrived to our nation, I hope they will see that those family members who came to this part of the world possessed traits of strength and endurance. I want them to examine the reasons for coming here. A desire for freedom, safety, and economic advantage are common threads in American history. They are the same reasons which allowed those brought against their will to persevere. The cultural and

historical stories may differ, but the desired outcomes are the same. These are the common threads which bind us together in the American quilt.

CONCLUSION

As immigrants, old or new, we all have come to the United States with varying stories and habits. We have the unique privilege of living in a society capable of enjoying the diversity of the world's traditions. As I write this, I reflect on yesterday's experiences. I drank a protein smoothie, probably an American creation. On the way to work I listened to music from the Congo. During 2nd period, my classes discussed Spanish place names in Texas. For lunch, I ate Italian pizza. A fellow teacher from Thailand ate his Japanese lunch that he had prepared in a beautiful wooden bento box. I admired a sari worn by a Muslim teacher from India. At the end of the day I called my primary care physician. I am guessing that her family has been in this country for several generations; she appears to be of Scandinavian descent. She referred me to a doctor from Iran. The Friday afternoon "choir practice" included a popular Mexican libation before heading to my favorite Middle Eastern restaurant for dinner. On the drive home, the radio played good old rock and roll. There are some who consider the blues, gospel, jazz, and rock as the only original art forms contributed to the world from the United States. But, of course, they have their roots in the songs of African American enslaved persons. There was a message on my answering machine from my Filipino brother-in-law. Finally, I fell asleep after reading a couple chapters in Chinese American author, Amy Tan's novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife*. None of this seemed exotic to me. It was a typical day in my American life. I am blessed with the freedom to indulge and enjoy.

My ancestry is English, Scottish, Irish, and French. There seems to be a little Swedish thrown in there, too. The English side came early in the colonial period. I am guessing they came for economic reasons; no one has researched this. I do know that some sailed on flat boats up the Ohio River to the Northwest Territory, probably in search of cheap land. The French side arrived around 1900 after jumping ship in Philadelphia. So, they were either looking for adventure, a better life, or running away from trouble. This is a seam that holds us all together in the American experience. I may not be an expert on life in Mexico, Eritrea, Viet Nam, or Pakistan, but I know that my ancestors probably came to this continent for the same reasons as those of my students' families: the possibility to explore new freedoms.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan I: Create a Family Survey and Collect Family Stories

Objectives: Perform an interview and collect data. Create a chart using collected data. SS.8.24A, SS.7.19B, and 110.21.15A

Concept Development and Student Practice

As a nation of immigrants, either recent or removed by generations, we all have ancestors who came from somewhere else. Students will interview family members to discover their family histories. This information will be helpful in creating the stories for Lesson II and a family graph as a culminating activity for this lesson. A teacher created survey form will ask:

- Where is your family from? Two forms may be needed for the maternal and paternal sides of the family.
- Why did they decide to come to the United States? If the family immigrated a long time ago, the students should look at the history of the times to make an educated guess as to why the family members came. What were the historical "push" and "pull" factors? If their ancestors were enslaved, then include an historical look at those times which allowed the practice of slavery to exist.

- What languages are/were spoken? Do you speak another language?
- What traditions did they practice from the old country? Which ones do you still practice? For those who are not newly arrived, this may offer an opportunity for self discovery as they research the culture of their ancestors.
- Do you have any family heirlooms which have been handed down? Or, have you brought items from your country of origin?
- How did the family get here?
- What traditional foods do you eat from the countries of origin?
- Are your names reflective of your ancestry?
- Do you have any family stories?

PLEASE NOTE: For some students this may be a difficult assignment. Those who have just endured warfare, and/or time spent in refugee camps, may find this a painful exercise. Illegal immigrants may not wish to share information. An alternate assignment should be considered for those students.

Assessment and Closure

Students will turn in a completed survey and graph or timeline describing the history of their family. Unique family stories should be written as a separate essay.

Resources

Teacher made survey, posters, and *The Kid's Family Tree Book* by Caroline Leavitt.

Lesson Plan II: Create a Children's Book

Objectives: Write two children's books showing what it is like to adjust to living in a new country. SS.8.24A, SS.8.27C, SS.7.19B, and 110.21.15A

Concept Development and Student Practice

This assignment will be cross-curricular. Art classes will assist with illustration and the language arts and technology departments will assist with the Digital Book Fair entries.

Short children's stories, such as the *Lotus Seed*, *Show Way*, *Grandfather's Journey* and excerpts from novels such as *Funny in Farsi* will be read to my students to give them an idea of how to write for a younger audience. Groups of four will be asked to create two illustrated books aimed at the elementary level. Most students will want to work on a story about their own country of origin. The teacher will assign the other country. The stories may be fictional or draw from the information obtained in Lesson I. Each story should include:

- A title.
- A description of the causes for the characters' immigration to the USA.
- An account of the journey.
- What it is like to adjust to a new country. They should include something that was new and unusual to the main character.
- How did the characters maintain their culture and adjust to life in the USA?
- Illustrations.

Assessment and Closure

The teacher will use a rubric based on the above elements for each story. For those desiring extra credit, the books will be produced digitally and submitted to the district's Digital Book Fair.

Resources

Children's stories, colors, papers, maps, computer time, and surveys from Lesson I.

Lesson Plan III – *Enrique’s Journey*: a forum for discussion and self examination.

Objectives: Compare and contrast family dynamics and values to understand the values that can unify a nation. SS.8.24A, and 110.21.15A

Concept Development

I will read several pages of *Enrique’s Journey* to my students at the end of each class period. Each reading will be followed by discussions as to the reasons for, and consequences of his, and his mother’s, actions. The study of Enrique’s personal journey will be related to the experiences of other nationalities that have come to the United States and to 19th Century immigrants to Texas.

Student Practice

Students will keep a personal journal of their reactions to what they hear after each reading. After 5 minutes of writing they will discuss their reactions. Topics to be considered will relate to the current course of study in Texas History as well as relating Enrique’s experience to their own lives.

Sample topics:

- How did Americans and Europeans prepare for their journeys to Mexican Texas? What personal items did they bring? What difficulties would they encounter during their journeys? Compare this to the plans Enrique and his mother made when they decided to come to the United States.
- What drove people in the nineteenth century to come to Texas? What drove Enrique and his mother to come to the United States?
- What difficulties did these two historical periods offer when the new immigrants arrived?
- What sacrifices were made and were they worth it? What was the outcome of the journey? What freedoms were pursued during each time period?
- What were the immigrants to 19th Century Texas hoping to provide for their children? What did Enrique’s mother want to provide for her children? Was she successful and do you agree with her actions? Would you do the same: leave your children in search of work to provide the necessities of life for them?
- How have your parents sacrificed for you? What types of freedom do they wish for you to have? Are you working towards these goals?

Similar questions will be interspersed throughout this lesson asking about the experiences of other nationalities which are immigrating into 21st Century Houston.

Assessment and Closure

After finishing the book, students will be asked to write a two-page essay analyzing the reasons people have come to contemporary Texas. They should give examples of the risks people take to improve their lives and of the difficulties in adjusting to a new environment. What are their goals and those of each student’s family when considering future achievement? A key component of the essay must be a discussion of the role that the entire family plays in accomplishing the goals which provide security and freedom to each family.

Resources

Enrique’s Journal, by Sonia Nazario, map of North America, and a journaling notebook.

Lesson Plan IV: Institute of Texas Cultures

Objectives: Determine reasons for immigration to Texas. SS.8.24A

Concept Development

Our Texas History curriculum includes the study of various groups that immigrated to Texas in the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries. Students will be asked to determine the reasons for that immigration. What was the “push” and “pull” for these groups? Students will be asked to compare immigrants from the past and present using materials obtainable through the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio. By doing so they will be able to make connections between the past and present and put a more human face on the people they read about in their text books. The end result of their lessons will be to see that they are the newest participants in our ongoing history. They will learn that theirs is a diverse community that incorporates the practices of newcomers into our everyday life.

Student Practice

The class will be separated into groups of three. Each group will be assigned an immigrant group that has made Texas their home. They will use cards from the *Gone to Texas* kit to assist in the research of their group.

Assessment and Closure

Each group will produce a poster showing country of origin, language spoken, cultural traditions, foods, reasons for, and time period of immigration. After giving an oral report to the class, they will place a replica of that country’s flag on the area of occupation on the Texas map.

Resources

Gone to Texas: The Immigration of Cultures from the Institute of Texan Cultures, a map of Texas, a large blank wall map of Texas created by students using an overhead projector for tracing, posters, and student made flags.

Lesson Plan V: Freedom’s Pattern: A Cultural Quilt

Objectives

Artistically display the diversity that defines the American character. SS.7.19B and 110.21.15A

Concept Development and Student Practice

Each student will be asked to make a quilt piece that shows a trait of his or her family’s heritage and/or history, or something valued by each family. I suggest that students make two identical squares, so they may keep one for themselves. In their math class the students will arrange the geometrical pattern for their quilt. The center of the quilt will be designed by the class to display the ideals of the nation as a unifying center piece. Examples for this could be words from the Statue of Liberty or *Constitution*, the American flag, a photograph of the class, or a collage of synonyms, such as freedom, liberty, and independence. The quilt will be sewn together by the teacher.

Assessment and Closure

Each student must complete a quilt square and turn it in with a short essay explaining its relevance to that child’s family. We will present the quilts made by each class as an artistic gift to the school. They could also be auctioned off for fund raisers.

Resources

Pieces of cloth and attachments (thread, sequins, buttons, beads, fabric paint, etc.) collected during the year.

Lesson Plan VI: What Does It Mean To Be An American?

Objectives: Determine what it means to be an American. SS.7.19B and 110.21.15A

Concept Development and Student Practice

What does it mean to be an American? This is a question I want my students to answer at the end of this unit. Groups of three or four will be given a selection to read from the books listed below. They will summarize each reading and then discuss if they have had experiences similar to those of the young teen immigrant in each reading. One does not have to be an immigrant to experience feelings of separation or alienation. How does one “fit in?” Does one need to? In the end each group will answer the question “What does it mean to be an American?” They are to decide if being an American is cultural or if it involves something else such as a national philosophy based on individual freedoms. Each group will make a summarization and presentation of their conclusions to the class.

Assessment and Closure

Each group will make a presentation to the class. Each student will write a poem expressing the experiences of the teen they read about or a poem based on their group’s conclusions.

Resources

The following readings about, and written by, young teen immigrants will be used for this assignment: *New Kids in Town: Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens* and *The Colors of Freedom: Immigrant Stories* by Janet Bode; *Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers*, by Marina Budhos; *Children of Immigration* by Carola and Maricelo M. Suarez-Orozco; and *Funny in Farsi* by Firoozeh Dumas.

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The New Americans. Directed by Allen Blumberg. PBS: Kartemquin Films, 2002.

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Nine year old Carlitos takes off to cross the US/Mexican border hoping to reunite with his mother who left to work in Los Angeles four years ago. This is a sweeter, fictional story similar to that found in *Enrique's Journey*. It has stirred the desire to discuss immigration issues amongst my students who have seen it.