TEACHING UNVARNISHED

STUDENT ARTICLE 3

IMMIGRATION, MIGRATION, DISCRIMINATION

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

WORDS TO KNOW

Chinese Exclusion Act

California Alien Land Law of 1913

white supremacists

Great Migration

infrastructure

anti-miscegenation

THINK BEFORE YOU READ

What reasons might someone have for choosing to immigrate to the United States?

What do you believe are the advantages or disadvantages for a person or family that moves from their place of origin, even within the same country?

How might you treat someone new moving into your neighborhood?

Cover: Back yard of tenement neighborhood in New York City, New York, between 1900 and 1910.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

UP FROM THE SOUTH

Walter Gay was 15 when his parents decided to move the family from their home in Georgia to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1916. Though the family was prospering in Georgia—Walter's father was a storekeeper, landlord, and real-estate salesman, and his mother a schoolteacher—Walter's parents were concerned for their children's safety.

> *"We had had trouble with the majority, the Caucasian majority," Walter remembered. "My sister had been beat, I had been beaten, over trifles. Well, my sister was beat because she refused to ride or walk on the side of the street reserved for blacks....My beating was relative to getting a bicycle," a luxury that even few White children could afford.*

Gay's family was not alone in making the choice to leave the southern states. Between 1915 and 1970, six million Black Americans moved from the South to industrial cities in the North and West. This movement is known as the **Great Migration**. Many people moved hoping to escape the constant threat of racial violence. They were also looking forward to better opportunities in school and work. Jobs were few in the small, rural towns of the South, but plenty of jobs were available in booming northern cities. In many cities, thriving Black business districts arose where many Black residents were living together.

Even so, Black migrants still faced hiring discrimination and segregation in jobs and housing. As Black people from the South arrived in their new cities, they sometimes met resistance from the people already there. New arrivals often faced poor housing choices and declining neighborhoods. Many found that by law they were confined to certain areas or prevented entirely from living in some towns. By the 1940s, Black residents had largely been forced into a few dense neighborhoods. By 1970, for the first time in history, more Black people lived outside of the South than in it, and over 70% lived in majority-Black neighborhoods.

The Perfect Eat Shop, a cafe founded by Ernest Norris, who came to Chicago during the Great Migration. Chicago, Illinois, 1942.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

The Great Migration was just one of the mass migrations taking place in the late 1800s and early 1900s. People were on the move all over the U.S. New communities popped up almost overnight. Manufacturing jobs were abundant in the cities of the North and West. During both world wars, war production jobs increased work opportunities. Following the promise of a good living, people from around the globe moved into America's growing cities.

IMMIGRANTS FROM EUROPE

Immigration from Europe transformed America's industrial cities. From 1880 to World War I, more than 20 million European immigrants moved to the United States. Many were from eastern and southern Europe. They came to escape hunger, war, poverty, and persecution. Their new American neighbors were not always welcoming. Harsh discrimination made it difficult to get jobs and apartments. Many immigrants endured harassment, intimidation, and violence.

Some of this discrimination was based on religion. Many European migrants belonged to religious groups that were not Protestant, the dominant religious tradition in the U.S. at the time. New immigrants were often Catholic, Jewish, or Orthodox Christian. Their beliefs were sometimes misunderstood or unwelcome. One way immigrants could feel more secure was to settle in ethnic neighborhoods, such as New York City's Jewish Lower East Side, the Italian South Philadelphia, the Czech Pilsen in Chicago, and the Polish Little Warsaw in Cleveland. Those places were magnets for new immigrants, allowing them to connect with people who spoke their language, shared their background, worshiped in similar ways, and ate similar foods. They also generally provided some kind of mutual aid or job assistance.

ASIAN IMMIGRANTS ON THE WEST COAST

Thousands of Chinese people first arrived in California to work during the Gold Rush and build the cross-country railroad system. They were met with discrimination and fear. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, which stopped all immigration from China for decades and made Chinese residents unable to apply for citizenship. At least 40 California cities evicted all of their Chinese residents after this law was passed.

Immigrants from Japan with farming skills helped turn California into a food-producing powerhouse. But the **California Alien Land Law of 1913** prevented them from owning farmland or renting it for longer than three years. To work around the law, *issei* (immigrants born in Japan) purchased land in the names of their American-born children.

Punjabi Sikh immigrants faced the same barrier. Some gained access to farmland when they married Mexican American women they met while working the fields. **Anti-miscegenation** laws prohibited Punjabi men from marrying White women, but the rule did not apply to Mexican American women, who were allowed to own land. By the 1920s, 76% of Sikh men in central California were married to Mexican American women.

Chinese Merchants in Front of Dry-Goods Store, Arizona Territory, 1894.
Courtesy of the National Archives

NEGLECTED NEIGHBORHOODS

Growing city populations put new pressure on city buildings, streets, and services. But investment in **infrastructure** did not keep up, especially in neighborhoods made up of Black people, immigrants, and other minorities. As long as newcomers kept arriving, landlords saw little reason to spend money improving old, worn-down properties. Evictions became common. City services, such as garbage pickup, street cleaning, mail delivery, electricity, and policing, were often inferior. Over time, these neighborhoods were allowed to become dilapidated and unsafe.

PRESERVING POWER

In established White communities, many people saw the overlapping migrations of European immigrants and Black American migrants as a kind of invasion. In this era of rapid social change, powerful **white supremacists** pushed to preserve their dominant position. To maintain control and political power, they developed tools to exclude and contain non-White residents. Some used violence or the threat of violence. Others relied on policy or business practice. All of them had the same effect: intensifying segregation.

The Violet and Scott Arthur family, from Paris, Texas, came to Chicago in 1920 after two of their sons, Irving and Herman, had been burned alive during a lynching. 1920.
Courtesy of *The Chicago Defender*

Men and women with bikes on Alameda Avenue Bridge in Denver, 1904-10. History Colorado #90.152.199
Courtesy of History Colorado-Denver, Colorado

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- In your opinion, what is the most difficult part of migrating to a new place?
- What are some words that you would use to describe people who made the choice to migrate?
- How could people in the past have been more welcoming to migrants and immigrants?