

CHAPTER 2

Immigrants and the American Dream



Shop in Chinatown © Bob Krist/CORBIS.

How far my little grass-roofed, hill-wrapped village from this gigantic rebellion which was New York! And New York's rebellion called to me excitedly, this savagery which piled great concrete block on concrete block, topping at the last moment as in an afterthought, with crowns as delicate as pinnacled ice; this lavishness which, without a prayer, pillaged coal mines and waterfalls for light, festooning the great nature-severed city with diamonds of frozen electrical phenomena—it fascinated me . . .

Younghill Kang From *East Meets West* (1937)

Immigrants and the American Dream

“Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . .” Ever since these words were inscribed at the foot of the Statue of Liberty over a century ago, many have responded and made their passage to New York, their land of promise. This chapter presents a historical and cultural cross section of these numerous crossings, each of which depicts a unique experience and an extravagant vision that contribute to the greatness of New York. These nine readings chronicle the dreams and sacrifices, struggles and fulfillment of individuals in their process of becoming New Yorkers.

“The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus, is a welcoming invitation that echoes the promise of the American Dream. Her poem speaks of hope and a power that transforms and delivers new lives. Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, is one of them. “America and I” is an intimate account of her personal journey from a sweatshop worker on the Lower East Side to a notable writer. The invaluable lesson she learns from the first Pilgrims inspires and empowers her to create her own America.

Langston Hughes’ poem “Good Morning” voices the discontents of those who have had to struggle to make New York their home. Hughes communicates a skepticism that exposes the true features of the American Dream, which is merely an unattainable fable for those who have been victims of racism and discrimination. Along with Hughes, Claude McKay, who is an Harlem Renaissance poet, reaches out to the past. His “The Tropics in New York” expresses a deep longing and nostalgia for his homeland triggered by looking at a New York storefront.

Frances Chung presents two different scenarios in her poems, “Yo Vivo En El Barrio Chino” and “Riding the Subway Is an Adventure.” The former depicts the speaker’s ambivalence towards her neighborhood in Chinatown, and the latter describes an unsettling subway trip taken by a newly arrived immigrant who faces a language barrier.

In “The Money,” Junot Díaz learns important lessons in his humorous and ironic story about being part of the Dominican diaspora. One lesson involves family trust and the other reveals the duplicity of his “best” friends. Articulating a different experience of the American Dream is Edwidge Danticat’s “New York Was My City on the Hill.” In her essay, Danticat traces the footsteps of her parents from Haiti to New York and recounts their labor and sacrifices that have inspired her own intellectual pilgrimage in what used to be her “city on the hill.” Suki Kim’s “Facing Poverty with a Rich Girl’s Habits” explores another set of challenges that young immigrants face today. She expresses her dilemma relating to cultural identity, class difference, and generational prejudice growing up as a young Korean in New York.

The New Colossus

Emma Lazarus

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) was of German-Jewish descent. In 1883 a committee was formed to raise funds for a pedestal for “Liberty Enlightening the People,” a gift from the French to be installed on Ellis Island. “The New Colossus” was written as part of this fund-raising effort.

Pre-Reading

What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,	1
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	5
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand	
Glowes 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,	10
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,	
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.	
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,	
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”	

Emma Lazarus, The Poems of Emma Lazarus, Vol. 1, 1889.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the title?
2. What distinguishes Lady Liberty from her Greek predecessor?
3. Can you determine what the “twin cities” refers to? What bridge is referred to in the poem?
4. What do you think Lazarus and the committee who commissioned her work wanted to communicate? Do you think her promise still holds true?

Writing Tasks

- Write a response that compares the message of the poem to your own experiences or observations.
- Write an explication of this poem that fully analyzes the meaning of each line.



Welcome to the Land of Freedom Illustration © Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis.

Good Morning

Langston Hughes

Pre-Reading

Can you think of any significant lessons you have learned from your parents about your heritage?

Good Morning

Good morning daddy!	1
I was born here, he said,	
watched Harlem grow	
until colored folks spread	
from river to river	5
across the middle of Manhattan	
out of Penn Station	
dark tenth of a nation,	
planes from Puerto Rico,	
and holds of boats, chico,	10
up from Cuba Haiti Jamaica,	
in buses marked New York	
from Georgia Florida Louisiana	
to Harlem Brooklyn the Bronx	
but most of all to Harlem	15
dusky sash across Manhattan	
I've seen them come dark	
wondering	
wide-eyed	
dreaming	20
out of Penn Station—	
but the trains are late.	

“Good Morning”, from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor, copyright © 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

The gates open—
Yet there're bars
at each gate.

25

What happens
to a dream deferred?
Daddy, ain't you heard?

Discussion Questions

1. In the time when the poem was written, what ethnic groups comprised the population in Harlem?
2. Why do you think Hughes titled the poem "Good Morning"?
3. What is the main idea of the poem?
4. What does Hughes imply in lines 20–25. "out of Penn Station—/ but the trains are late./ The gates open—/ Yet there are bars/ at each gate"?
5. What do you think the phrase "a dream deferred" in line 26 means?

Writing Tasks

- Analyze the literary elements of this poem that help convey its theme and power. Consider, for example, the author's use of rhythm, tone, imagery, and/or irony.
- The key to understanding poetry is in listening to the spoken and unspoken words and reading for details. Try to transform this poem into a short story, focusing on probable dialogue, descriptions, and actions that are beneath the surface of the poem.

America and I

Anzia Yezierska

Anzia Yezierska (1881–1970) was born in the Russian-Polish ghetto of Plotsk, and emigrated to New York City with her family in 1890. She worked as a servant, a laundress, and a button sewer in sweatshops on the Lower East Side. She also attended night school and in 1904 graduated from Columbia Teachers College. She is the author of five novels and two volumes of short stories, *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and *Children of Loneliness* (1923).

Pre-Reading

What is required for success in America?

As one of the dumb, voiceless ones I speak. One of the millions of immigrants beating, beating out their hearts at your gates for a breath of understanding. 1

Ach! America! From the other end of the earth from where I came, America was a land of living hope, woven of dreams, aflame with longing and desire.

Choked for ages in the airless oppression of Russia, the Promised Land rose up—wings for my stifled spirit—sunlight burning through my darkness—freedom singing to me in my prison—deathless songs tuning prison-bars into strings of a beautiful violin.

I arrived in America. My young, strong body, my heart and soul pregnant with the un-lived lives of generations clamoring for expression.

What my mother and father and their mother and father never had a chance to give out in Russia, I would give out in America. The hidden sap of centuries would find release; colors that never saw light—songs that died unvoiced—romance that never had a chance to blossom in the black life of the Old World. 5

In the golden land of flowing opportunity I was to find my work that was denied me in the sterile village of my forefathers. Here I was to be free from the dead drudgery for bread that held me down in Russia. For the first time in America, I'd cease to be a slave of the belly. I'd be a creator, a giver, a human being! My work would be the living job of fullest self-expression.

Originally appeared in *CHILDREN OF LONELINESS*, 1923.



But from my high visions, my golden hopes, I had to put my feet down on earth. I had to have food and shelter. I had to have the money to pay for it.

I was in America, among the Americans, but not *of* them. No speech, no common language, no way to win a smile of understanding from them, only my young, strong body and my untried faith. Only my eager, empty hands, and my full heart shining from my eyes!

God from the world! Here I was with so much richness in me, but my mind was not wanted without the language. And my body, unskilled, untrained, was not even wanted in the factory. Only one of two chances was left open to me: the kitchen, or minding babies.

My first job was as a servant in an Americanized family. Once, long ago, they came from the same village from where I came. But they were so well-dressed, so well-fed, so successful in America, that they were ashamed to remember their mother tongue. 10

“What were to be my wages?” I ventured timidly, as I looked up to the well-fed, well-dressed “American” man and woman.

They looked at me with a sudden coldness. What have I said to draw away from me their warmth? Was it so low from me to talk of wages? I shrank back into myself like a low-down bargainer. Maybe they’re so high up in well-being they can’t any more understand my low thoughts for money.

From his rich height the man preached down to me that I must not be so grabbing for wages. Only just landed from the ship and already thinking about money when I should be thankful to associate with “Americans.”

The woman, out of her smooth, smiling fatness assured me that this was my chance for a summer vacation in the country with her two lovely children. My great chance to learn to be a civilized being, to become an American by living with them.

So, made to feel that I was in the hands of American friends, invited to share with them their home, their plenty, their happiness, I pushed out from my head the worry for wages. Here was my first chance to begin my life in the sunshine, after my long darkness. My laugh was all over my face as I said to them: “I’ll trust myself to you. What I’m worth you’ll give me.” And I entered their house like a child by the hand. 15

The best of me I gave them. Their house cares were my house cares. I got up early. I worked till late. All that my soul hungered to give I put into the passion with which I scrubbed floors, scoured pots, and washed clothes. I was so grateful to mingle with the American people, to hear the music of the American language, that I never knew tiredness.

There was such a freshness in my brains and such a willingness in my heart that I could go on and on—not only with the work of the house, but



work with my head—learning new words from the children, the grocer, the butcher, the iceman. I was not even afraid to ask for words from the policeman on the street. And every new word made me see new American things with American eyes. I felt like a Columbus, finding new worlds through every new word.

But words alone were only for the inside of me. The outside of me still branded me for a steerage immigrant. I had to have clothes to forget myself that I'm a stranger yet. And so I had to have money to buy these clothes.

The month was up. I was so happy! Now I'd have money. *My own, earned* money. Money to buy a new shirt on my back—shoes on my feet. Maybe yet an American dress and hat!

Ach! How high rose my dreams! How plainly I saw all that I would do with my visionary wages shining like a light over my head! 20

In my imagination I already walked in my new American clothes. How beautiful I looked as I saw myself like a picture before my eyes! I saw how I would throw away my immigrant rags tied up in my immigrant shawl. With money to buy—free money in my hands—I'd show them that I could look like an American in a day.

Like a prisoner in his last night in prison, counting the seconds that will free him from his chains, I trembled breathlessly for the minute I'd get the wages in my hand.

Before dawn I rose.

I shined up the house like a jewel-box.

I prepared breakfast and waited with my heart in my mouth for my lady and gentleman to rise. At last I heard them stirring. My eyes were jumping out of my head to them when I saw them coming in and seating themselves by the table. 25

Like a hungry cat rubbing up to its boss for meat, so I edged and simpered around them as I passed them the food. Without my will, like a beggar, my hand reached out to them.

The breakfast was over. And no word yet from my wages.

"*Gottuniu!*" I thought to myself. "Maybe they're so busy with their own things they forgot it's the day for my wages. Could they who have everything know what I was to do with my first American dollars? How could they, soaking in plenty, how could they feel the longing and the fierce hunger in me, pressing up through each visionary dollar? How could they know the gnawing ache of my avid fingers for the feel of my own, earned dollars? My dollars that I could spend like a free person. *My* dollars that would make me feel with everybody alike!"

Lunch came. Lunch past.

Oi-i weh! Not a word yet about my money. 30

It was near dinner. And not a word yet about my wages.



I began to set the table. But my head—it swam away from me. I broke a glass. The silver dropped from my nervous fingers. I couldn't stand it any longer. I dropped everything and rushed over to my American lady and gentleman.

"Oi weh! The money—my money—my wages!" I cried breathlessly.

Four cold eyes turned on me.

"Wages? Money?" The four eyes turned into hard stone as they looked me up and down. "Haven't you a comfortable bed to sleep, and three good meals a day? You're only a month here. Just came to America. And you already think about money. Wait till you're worth any money. What use are you without knowing English? You should be glad we keep you here. It's like a vacation for you. Other girls pay money yet to be in the country." 35

It went black for my eyes. I was so choked no words came to my lips. Even the tears went dry in my throat.

I left. Not a dollar for all my work.

For a long, long time my heart ached and ached like a sore wound. If murderers would have robbed me and killed me it wouldn't have hurt me so much. I couldn't think through my pain. The minute I'd see before me how they looked at me, the words they said to me—then everything began to bleed in me. And I was helpless.

For a long, long time the thought of ever working in an "American" family made me tremble with fear, like the fear of wild wolves. No—never again would I trust myself to an "American" family, no matter how fine their language and how sweet their smile. 40

It was blotted out in me all trust in friendship from "Americans." But the life in me still burned to live. The hope in me still craved to hope. In darkness, in dirt, in hunger and want, but only to live on!

There had been no end to my day—working for the "American" family.

Now rejecting false friendships from higher-ups in America, I turned back to the Ghetto. I worked on a hard bench with my own kind on either side of me. I knew before I began what my wages were to be. I knew what my hours were to be. And I knew the feeling of the end of the day.

From the outside my second job seemed worse than the first. It was in a sweat-shop of a Delancey Street basement, kept up by an old, wrinkled woman that looked like a black witch of greed. My work was sewing on buttons. While the morning was still dark I walked into a dark basement. And darkness met me when I turned out of the basement.

Day after day, week after week, all the contact I got with America was handling dead buttons. The money I earned was hardly enough to pay for bread and rent. I didn't have a room to myself. I didn't even have a bed. I slept on a mattress on the floor in a rat-hole of a room occupied by a dozen other immigrants. I was always hungry—oh, so hungry! The scant meals



I could afford only sharpened my appetite for real food. But I felt myself better off than working in the “American” family, where I had three good meals a day and a bed to myself. With all the hunger and darkness of the sweat-shop, I had at least the evening to myself. And all night was mine. When all were asleep, I used to creep up on the roof of the tenement and talk out my heart in silence to the stars in the sky.



Interior of Tenement House © CORBIS.

“Who am I? What am I? What do I want with my life? Where is America? Is there an America? What is this wilderness in which I’m lost?” 45

I’d hurl my questions and then think and think. And I could not tear it out of me, the feeling that America must be somewhere, somehow—only I couldn’t find it—*My America*, where I would work for love and not for a living. I was like a thing following blindly after something far off in the dark!

“*Oi weh!*” I’d stretch out my hand up in the air. “My head is so lost in America! What’s the use of all my working if I’m not in it? Dead buttons is not me.”

Then the busy season started in the shop. The mounds of buttons grew and grew. The long day stretched out longer. I had to begin with the buttons earlier and stay with them till later in the night. The old witch turned into a huge greedy maw for wanting more and more buttons.

For a glass of tea, for a slice of herring over black bread, she would buy us up to stay another and another hour, till there seemed no end to her demands.

One day, the light of self-assertion broke into my cellar darkness.

50

"I don't want the tea. I don't want your herring," I said with terrible boldness. "I only want to go home. I only want the evening to myself!"

"You fresh mouth, you!" cried the old witch. "You learned already too much in America. I want no clock-watchers in my shop. Out you go!"

I was driven out to cold and hunger. I could no longer pay for my mattress on the floor. I no longer could buy the bite in my mouth. I walked the streets. I knew what it is to be alone in a strange city, among strangers.

But I laughed through my tears. So I learned too much already in America because I wanted the whole evening to myself? Well America has yet to teach me still more: how to get not only the whole evening to myself, but a whole day a week like the American workers.

55

That sweat-shop was a bitter memory but a good school. It fitted me for a regular factory. I could walk in boldly and say I could work at something, even if it was only sewing on buttons.

Gradually, I became a trained worker. I worked in a light, airy factory, only eight hours a day. My boss was no longer a sweater and a blood-squeezer. The first freshness of the morning was mine. And the whole evening was mine. All day Sunday was mine.

Now I had better food to eat. I slept on a better bed. Now, I even looked dressed up like the American-born. But inside of me I knew that I was not yet an American. I choked with longing when I met an American-born, and I could say nothing.

Something cried dumb in me. I couldn't help it. I didn't know what it was I wanted. I only knew I wanted. I wanted. Like the hunger in the heart that never gets food.

An English class for foreigners started in our factory. The teacher had such a good, friendly face, her eyes looked so understanding, as if she could see right into my heart. So I went to her one day for advice:

"I don't know what is with me the matter," I began. "I have no rest in me. I never yet done what I want."

60

"What is it you want to do, child?" she asked me.

"I want to do something with my head, my feelings. All day long, only with my hands I work."

"First you must learn English." She patted me as if I was not yet grown up. "Put your mind on that, and then we'll see."

So for a time I learned the language. I could almost begin to think with English words in my head. But in my heart the emptiness still hurt. I burned to give, to give something, to do something, to be something. The dead work with my hands was killing me. My work left only hard stones on my heart.

Again I went to our factory teacher and cried out to her: “I know already to read and write the English language, but I can’t put it into words what I want. What is it in me so different that can’t come out?” 65

She smiled at me down from her calmness as if I were a little bit out of my head. “What *do you want* to do?”

“I feel. I see. I hear. And I want to think it out. But I’m like dumb in me. I only feel I’m different—different from everybody.”

She looked at me close and said nothing for a minute. “You ought to join one of the social clubs of the Women’s Association,” she advised.

“What’s the Women’s Association?” I implored greedily.

“A group of American women who are trying to help the working-girl find herself. They have a special department for immigrant girls like you.” 70

I joined the Women’s Association. On my first evening there they announced a lecture: “The Happy Worker and His Work,” by the Welfare director of the United Mills Corporation.

“Is there such a thing as a happy worker at his work?” I wondered. Happiness is only by working at what you love. And what poor girl can ever find it to work at what she loves? My old dreams about my America rushed through my mind. Once I thought that in America everybody works for love. Nobody has to worry for a living. Maybe this welfare man came to show me the *real* America that till now I sought in vain.

With a lot of polite words the head lady of the Women’s Association introduced a higher-up that looked like the king of kings of business. Never before in my life did I ever see a man with such a sureness in his step, such power in his face, such friendly positiveness in his eye as when he smiled upon us.

“Efficiency is the new religion of business,” he began. “In big business houses, even in up-to-date factories, they no longer take the first comer and give him any job that happens to stand empty. Efficiency begins at the employment office. Experts are hired for the one purpose, to find out how best to fit the worker to his work. It’s economy for the boss to make the worker happy.” And then he talked a lot more on efficiency in educated language that was over my head.

I didn’t know exactly what it meant—efficiency—but if it was to make the worker happy at his work, then that’s what I had been looking for since I came to America. I only felt from watching him that he was happy by his job. And as I looked on this clean, well-dressed, successful one, who wasn’t ashamed to say he rose from an office-boy, it made me feel that I, too, could lift myself up for a person. 75

He finished his lecture, telling us about the Vocational-Guidance Center that the Women’s Association started.

The very next evening I was at the Vocational-Guidance Center. There I found a young, college-looking woman. Smartness and health



shining from her eyes! She, too, looked as if she knew her way in America. I could tell at the first glance: here is a person that is happy by what she does.

"I feel you'll understand me," I said right away.

She leaned over with pleasure in her face: "I hope I can."

"I want to work by what's in me. Only, I don't know what's in me. I only feel I'm different." 80

She gave me a quick, puzzled look from the corner of her eyes. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm the quickest shirtwaist hand on the floor. But my heart wastes away by such work. I think and think, and my thoughts can't come out."

"Why don't you think out your thoughts in shirtwaists? You could learn to be a designer. Earn more money."

"I don't want to look on waists. If my hands are sick from waists, how could my head learn to put beauty into them?" 85

"But you must earn your living at what you know, and rise slowly from job to job."

I looked at her office sign: "Vocational Guidance." "What's your vocational guidance?" I asked, "How to rise from job to job—how to earn more money?"

The smile went out from her eyes. But she tried to be kind yet. "What do you want?" she asked, with a sigh of last patience.

"I want America to want me."

She fell back in her chair, thunderstruck with my boldness. But yet, in a low voice of educated self-control, she tried to reason with me:

"You have to *show* that you have something special for America before America has need of you." 90

"But I never had a chance to find out what's in me, because I always had to work for a living. Only, I feel it's efficiency for America to find out what's in me so different, so I could give it out by my work."

Her eyes half closed as they bored through me. Her mouth opened to speak, but no words came from her lips. So I flamed up with all that was choking in me like a house on fire:

"America gives free bread and rent to criminals in prison. They got grand houses with sunshine, fresh air, doctors and teachers, even for the crazy ones. Why don't they have free boarding-schools for immigrants—strong people—willing people? Here you see us burning up with something different, and America turns her head away from us."

Her brows lifted and dropped down. She shrugged her shoulders away from me with the look of pity we give to cripples and hopeless lunatics.

"America is no Utopia. First you must become efficient in earning a living before you can indulge in your poetic dreams." 95



I went away from the vocational-guidance office with all the air out of my lungs. All the light out of my eyes. My feet dragged after me like dead wood.

Till now there had always lingered a rosy veil of hope over my emptiness, a hope that a miracle would happen. I would open up my eyes some day and suddenly find the America of my dreams. As a young girl hungry for love sees always before her eyes the picture of lover's arms around her, so I saw always in my heart the vision of Utopian America.

But now I felt that the America of my dreams never was and never could be. Reality had hit me on the head as with a club. I felt that the America that I sought was nothing but a shadow—an echo—a chimera of lunatics and crazy immigrants.

Stripped of all illusion, I looked about me. The long desert of wasting days of drudgery stared me in the face. The drudgery that I had lived through, and the endless drudgery still ahead of me rose over me like a withering wilderness of sand. In vain were all my cryings, in vain were all frantic efforts of my spirit to find the living waters of understanding for my perishing lips. Sand, sand was everywhere. With every seeking, every reaching out I only lost myself deeper and deeper in a vast sea of sand.

I knew now the American language. And I knew now, if I talked to the Americans from morning till night, they could not understand what the Russian soul of me wanted. They could not understand *me* any more than if I talked to them in Chinese. Between my soul and the American soul were worlds of difference that no words could bridge over. What was that difference? What made the Americans so far apart from me? 100

I began to read the American history. I found from the first pages that America started with a band of Courageous Pilgrims. They had left their native country as I had left mine. They had crossed an unknown ocean and landed in an unknown country, as I.

But the great difference between the first Pilgrims and me was that they expected to make America, build America, create their own world of liberty. I wanted to find it ready made.

I read on. I delved deeper down into the American history. I saw how the Pilgrim Fathers came to a rocky desert country, surrounded by Indian savages on all sides. But undaunted, they pressed on—through danger—through famine, pestilence, and want—they pressed on. They did not ask the Indians for sympathy, for understanding. They made no demands on anybody, but on their own indomitable spirit of persistence.

And I—I was forever begging a crumb of sympathy, a gleam of understanding from strangers who could not understand.

I, when I encountered a few savage Indian scalpers, like the old witch of the sweat-shop, like my "Americanized" countryman, who cheated me of 105

my wages—I, when I found myself on the lonely, untrodden path through which all seekers of the new world must pass, I lost heart and said: “There is no America!”

Then came a light—a great revelation! I saw America—a big idea—a deathless hope—a world still in the making. I saw that it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished. And I, the last comer, had her share to give, small or great, to the making of America, like those Pilgrims who came in the *Mayflower*.

Fired up by this revealing light, I began to build a bridge of understanding between the American-born and myself. Since their life was shut out from such as me, I began to open up my life and the lives of my people to them. And life draws life. In only writing about the Ghetto I found America.

Great chances have come to me. But in my heart is always a deep sadness. I feel like a man who is sitting down to a secret table of plenty, while his near ones and dear ones are perishing before his eyes. My very joy in doing the work I love hurts me like secret guilt, because all about me I see so many with my longings, my burning eagerness, to do and to be, wasting their days in drudgery they hate, merely to buy bread and pay rent. And America is losing all that richness of the soul.

The Americans of tomorrow, the America that is every day nearer coming to be, will be too wise, too open-hearted, too friendly-handed, to let the least lastcomer at their gates knock in vain with his gifts unwanted.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Yeziarska’s initial impression of America? How does she compare it to her life in Russia?
2. What does she aspire to do when she first arrives in America? What must she do first?
3. Do you think her “Americanized family” treats her fairly? Why or why not?
4. What was the best part of her second job on Delancey Street? Why did she end up losing it?
5. What kind of work does Anzia prefer to do? What is stopping her?
6. Do you agree with the author’s argument that immigrants should receive free room and board? Why or why not?
7. What lessons did she learn from the Pilgrims? How did this knowledge transform her idea of what it takes to succeed in America? Do you agree with her assessment?
8. How does the author utilize the concepts of “hunger” and “appetite” to bring out her thesis?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay arguing whether immigrants should have the right to receive preferential treatments. Give examples from Yezierska's essay and your own experience to support your argument.
- Write an essay explaining your dreams and expectations of living in New York. What obstacles do you foresee in your pursuit of the American Dream?
- Write an essay in which you explain how living in New York has transformed you. Provide examples of specific learning experiences.

The Money

Junot Díaz

Junot Díaz was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and is the author of *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *African Voices*, and *Best American Short Stories*. He is currently a professor of creative writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Pre-Reading:

What is the most courageous thing that you have ever done?

All the Dominicans I knew in those days sent money home. My mother didn't have a regular job besides caring for us five kids, so she scrimped the loot together from whatever came her way. My father was always losing his forklift jobs, so it wasn't like she ever had a steady flow. But my grandparents were alone in Santo Domingo, and those remittances, beyond material support, were a way, I suspect, for Mami to negotiate the absence, the distance, caused by our diaspora. She chipped dollars off the cash Papi gave her for our daily expenses, forced our already broke family to live even broker. That was how she built the nut—two, maybe three hundred dollars—that she sent home every six months or so.

We kids knew where the money was hidden, but we also knew that to touch it would have meant a violent punishment approaching death. I, who could take the change out of my mother's purse without thinking, couldn't have brought myself even to look at that forbidden stash.

So what happened? Exactly what you'd think. The summer I was twelve, my family went away on a "vacation"—one of my father's half-baked get-to-know-our-country-better-by-sleeping-in-the-van extravaganzas—and when we returned to Jersey, exhausted, battered, we found our front door unlocked. My parents' room, which was where the thieves had concentrated their search, looked as if it had been tornado-tossed. The thieves had kept it simple; they'd snatched a portable radio, some of my Dungeons & Dragons hardcovers, and, of course, Mami's remittances.

It's not as if the robbery came as a huge surprise. In our neighborhood, cars and apartments were always getting jacked, and the kid stupid enough

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to leave a bike unattended for more than a tenth of a second was the kid who was never going to see that bike again. Everybody got hit; no matter who you were, eventually it would be your turn.

And that summer it was ours. 5

Still, we took the burglary pretty hard. When you're a recent immigrant, it's easy to feel targeted. Like it wasn't just a couple of assholes that had it in for you but the whole neighborhood—hell, maybe the whole country.

No one took the robbery as hard as my mom, though. She cursed the neighborhood, she cursed the country, she cursed my father, and of course she cursed us kids, swore that we had run our gums to our idiot friends and they had done it.

And this is where the tale should end, right? Wasn't as if there was going to be any "C.S.I."-style investigation or anything. Except that a couple of days later I was moaning about the robbery to these guys I was hanging with at that time and they were cursing sympathetically, and out of nowhere it struck me. You know when you get one of those moments of mental clarity? When the nictitating membrane obscuring the world suddenly lifts? That's what happened. I realized that these two dopes I called my friends had done it. They were shaking their heads, mouthing all the right words, but I could see the way they looked at each other, the Raskolnikov glances.* *I knew.*

Now, it wasn't like I could publicly denounce these dolts or go to the police. That would have been about as useless as crying. Here's what I did: I asked the main dope to let me use his bathroom (we were in front of his apartment) and while I pretended to piss I unlatched the window. Then we all headed to the park as usual, but I pretended that I'd forgotten something back home. Ran to the dope's apartment, slid open the bathroom window, and in broad daylight wriggled my skinny ass in.

Where the hell did I get these ideas? I have not a clue. I guess I was reading way too much Encyclopedia Brown and the Three Investigators in those days. And if mine had been a normal neighborhood this is when the cops would have been called and my ass would have been caught *burglarizing.* 10

The dolt and his family had been in the U.S. all their lives and they had a ton of stuff, a TV in every room, but I didn't have to do much searching. I popped up the dolt's mattress and underneath I found my D. & D. books and most of my mother's money. He had thoughtfully kept it in the same envelope.

*Raskolnikov is the name of the main character in the novel **Crime and Punishment** (1866) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In the novel, Raskolnikov commits murder but ultimately is overwhelmed by guilt over his act.

And that was how I solved the Case of the Stupid Morons. My one and only case.

The next day at the park, the dolt announced that someone had broken into *his* apartment and stolen all his savings. This place is full of thieves, he complained bitterly, and I was, like, No kidding.

It took me two days to return the money to my mother. The truth was I was seriously considering keeping it. But in the end the guilt got to me. I guess I was expecting my mother to run around with joy, to crown me her favorite son, to cook me my favorite meal. Nada. I'd wanted a party or at least to see her happy, but there was nothing. Just two hundred and some dollars and fifteen hundred or so miles—that's all there was.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the author's mother come up with enough money to send to her parents?
2. How would you describe the parent-children relationship in Díaz's family?
3. In your opinion, what elements in the story appear to be typical in immigrant families?
4. How does Díaz find out about the stolen money? Do you think he did the right thing in retrieving the money? If not, what could he have done instead?
5. How does Díaz's mother react when he returns the money? Why do you think she does not give her son some sort of reward? What do the concluding lines of the story imply?
6. Identify some of the comic moments in the story. What exactly makes those moments amusing?

Writing Task

- The transaction of money, whether legitimate or not, remains at the center of Díaz's story. Write an essay that discusses how money affects the behavior of the different characters.

The Tropics in New York

Claude McKay

Claude McKay (1890–1948) grew up in Jamaica, and his poems often express nostalgia for life there. After leaving Jamaica in 1912, he studied at Tuskegee Institute and then came to New York, where he established himself as a poet, novelist, and radical spokesman. He is the author of the poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* and the novel *Home to Harlem*.

Pre-Reading

 call a time when something or someone you saw brought back past memories.

The Tropics In New York

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,	1
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,	
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,	
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,	
Set in the window, bringing memories	5
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,	
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies	
In benediction over nun-like hills.	
My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;	
A wave of longing through my body swept,	10
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,	
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.	

From *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay*, Harcourt Brace, 1922.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the title of the poem imply?
2. Read the visual imagery in the poem carefully and explain how the author's emotions shift from one stanza to another.
3. What foods, events, or sights evoke memories for you?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay that focuses on the ethnic characteristics of a neighborhood in New York. Make sure you include as many sensory details as you can.
- Write an essay that discusses the unique challenges that immigrants face coming to a new land and culture.

Riding the Subway Is an Adventure

Frances Chung

Frances Chung (1950–1990) published her poetry in several anthologies and journals, including *The Portable Lower East Side* and *IKON*. Chung’s poetry perceptively depicts New York’s Chinatown and the Lower East Side. She incorporates Spanish and Chinese into her English to evoke feelings about the fantasies, commerce, and hardships of these neighborhoods. Her work is published in *Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple* (2000).

Pre-Reading

Have you ever been in a foreign country where you couldn’t understand the language? How did you get around?

Riding The Subway Is An Adventure

Riding the subway is an adventure especially if you cannot read the signs.	1
One gets lost. One becomes anxious and does not know whether to get off when the other Chinese person in your car does. (Your crazy logic tells you that the both of you must be headed for the same stop.) One woman has discovered the secret of one-to-one correspondence.	5
She keeps the right amount of pennies in one pocket and upon arriving in each new station along the way she shifts one penny to her other pocket. When all the pennies in the first pocket have disappeared, she knows that she is home.	10
	15

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Discussion Questions

1. Why does the woman in the poem have such difficulties in the subway? What other challenges do you anticipate she faces when she ventures out into the city?
2. What is the tone of the poem?
3. What do you think the poet wants to show us in lines 3–5?

Writing Tasks

- Write an essay that captures an adventure you have recently experienced on the subway.
- Write an essay in which you suggest ways in which the MTA can improve travel in the subway system for all New Yorkers.

Yo Vivo En El Barrio Chino

Frances Chung

Pre-Reading

What is your impression of the Chinatown in New York?

YO VIVO EN EL BARRIO CHINO

Yo vivo en el barrio chino de Neuva York . . . I live in New York's Chinatown. Some call it a ghetto, some call it a slum, some call it home.	1 5
Little Italy or Northern Chinatown, to my mind, the boundaries have become fluid. I have two Chinatown moods. Time when Chinatown is a terrible place to live in. Time when Chinatown is the <i>only</i> place to live . . .	10

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the author write in two languages in this poem?
2. What does the author hope to convey about places some people refer to as slums?
3. Elaborate on the two Chinatown moods the author feels in the poem.

Writing Task

- Take a walk through Chinatown or another ethnic enclave and record your experiences.

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New York Was Our City on the Hill

Edwidge Danticat

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince Haiti in 1969. Her father immigrated to the United States in 1971. Her mother followed him in 1973. Danticat remained in Haiti eight more years, raised by her aunt. At age twelve she reunited with her parents in a predominantly Haitian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Two short years later, Danticat published an article that inspired her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. She has also published *Krik? Krak!* (1996), *The Farming of Bones* (1998), *The Dew Breaker* (2004), *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), and a collection of essays *Create Dangerously: Immigrant Writers at work* (2010).

Pre-Reading

Have you ever been disillusioned by a place before?

If you are an immigrant in New York, there are some things you inevitably share. For one, if you're a new immigrant, you probably left behind someone you love in the country of your birth. In my case, I was the person left in Haiti when my mother and father escaped the brutal regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier in the early 1970's and fled the extreme poverty caused by the Duvaliers' mismanagement and excesses.

The plan was for my parents to send for me and my younger brother, André, who were 4 and 2 years old at the time of their departure, when they found jobs and got settled in New York. But because of United States immigration red tape, our family separation lasted eight years. The near decade we were apart was filled with long letters, lengthy voice messages on cassette tapes and tearful phone calls, all brimming with the promise that one day my brother and I would be united not only with our parents but with our two Brooklyn-born brothers whom we didn't know at all.

Still André and I were constantly reminded by our Aunt Denise and Uncle Joseph, who were caring for us in an impoverished and politically volatile neighborhood in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, that we were lucky our parents were in New York. If we dared to disagree with that idea, the Faustian bargain our parents had faced would be clearly laid out

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for us. They could have stayed behind with us and we could have all gone without a great many necessary things, or they could have gone to New York to work so that we could have not only clothes and food and school fees but also a future.

As my Uncle Joseph liked to say, for people like us, the *malere*, the poor, the future was not a given. It was something to be clawed from the edge of despair with sweat and blood. At least in New York, our parents would be rewarded for their efforts.

If living in one of the richest cities in the world did not guarantee a struggle-free life, my brother and I didn't realize it. New York was our city on the hill, the imaginary haven of our lives. When we fantasized, we saw ourselves walking the penny-gilded streets and buying all the candies we could stuff into ourselves. Eventually we grew to embrace the idea that New York was where we were meant to be, as soon as the all-powerful gatekeepers saw fit to let us in, and if we could help it, we would never leave once we were again at our parents' side. 5

Our parents might have had utopian fantasies of their own when they sold most of their belongings to pay for passports, visas and plane fares to New York. I can't imagine making the choices they made without being forced, mapping out a whole life in a place that they'd seen only in one picture, a snow-covered street taken by my mother's brother, who lived there.

Later my parents would tell me that what kept them trudging through that snow to their factory jobs was their visions of their two New York-born children playing with the children they'd left in Haiti and the future that we might all forge as individuals and as a family.

When I finally joined my parents in Brooklyn, in 1981, at age 12, I became acutely aware of something else that New York immigrants shared. If they were poor, they were likely to be working more hours than anyone else, for less money, and with few if any benefits.

For years my father had worked two minimum-wage jobs to support two households in two countries. One job was in a textile factory, where my mother also worked, and another in a night car wash. Tired of intermittent layoffs and humiliating immigration raids, my father finally quit both jobs when André and I arrived so he could accompany my brothers and me to and from school.

That same year, our family car also became a gypsy cab, a term that, when I first heard and researched it, led me to think that we were part of a small clan of nomads whose leader, my father, chauffeured other people around when he was not driving us. 10

Though my brothers and I weren't aware of it at the time, our financial situation was precarious at best. Once my parents paid the rent and utility bills and bought a week's worth of groceries, there was little left for much

else. My father never knew from day to day or week to week how much he would collect in fares.

Winter mornings were more profitable than summer afternoons. But in the winter, our needs were greater: coats and boots for four growing children, and regular hospital trips for my youngest brother, Karl, who was prone to ear infections and, as one doctor pointed out to us, might have suffered through 25 different colds one long winter.

We had no health insurance, of course, and each of Karl's visits to the doctor, or those for my brother Kelly—the only child I knew who got migraines, which we later discovered were a result of some kind of pressure on his optic nerve—were negotiated down at Cumberland Hospital's payment services department when my father took in my parents' joint tax return.

I remember going to the same hospital's women's clinic with my mother for one of her regular checkups when I was 16. She had a headache, her blood pressure was high, and the doctor told her that she'd have to be hospitalized that day if she wanted to avoid a stroke.

"Doctor, I have children at home and work tomorrow," my mother said, before signing papers declaring that she'd been advised of the treatment for her condition but had refused it. On the bus home, I watched her carefully, fearful that she would keel over and die for our sake, but she made it home, and despite the persistent headache, she went to work the next day. 15

I don't know what a catastrophic illness might have cost our family financially. But it was something my parents always had in mind. My father tried to pay all his bills religiously so that if we ever needed a bank loan for a sudden emergency, we would have no trouble getting it.

What we would eventually need a loan for was our house, which my parents purchased 18 years ago in East Flatbush. The day we moved in was one of the scariest and most exhilarating of our lives. My parents invited groups of church friends over to celebrate and bless our new home, but at the same time, they warned my brothers and me that the biggest battle they'd face from then on would be to try to keep it. The mortgage was nearly double the amount they'd paid in rent, and some months my father drove his cab both at night and during the day to make the payment, which he then took to the bank, in person, during the final hours of the grace period.

It is the burden of each generation to embrace or reject the dreams set out by those who came before.

In my family it was no different. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, and when I wasn't accepted by a Brooklyn high school specializing in the health professions, my father met with the principal and persuaded him to reverse the decision.

When I decided, after a brief school-sponsored internship at Kings County Hospital Center, that medicine was not for me, my parents were disappointed, but accepted my decision. My brother André has never forgotten the day he turned 14 and my father took him to the post office to buy a money order for the application fee for his first summer job. And over time we have all nearly wept when tallying small loans and advances from Mom and Dad on salaries spent way before they were collected. 20

Over the years, I have also come to understand my parents' intense desire to see my brothers and me financially stable. They had sacrificed so much that to watch us struggle as they had would have been, to quote a Creole expression, like *lave men siye atè*—washing one's hands only to dry them in the dirt.

These days, if you're an immigrant in New York, you might not consider yourself an immigrant at all, but a transnational, someone with voting privileges and living quarters not just in one country but in two. This was my parents' dream until they reached middle age and realized that with their decade-long friendships and community ties in Brooklyn, they didn't want to live anywhere else.

Last year, when my father became ill with pulmonary fibrosis—a result, some doctors say, of environmental pollution, to which he was especially vulnerable from working such long hours in his cab—he began to have long talks with my brothers and me, fearing that as the disease progressed, it might become harder and harder for him to speak. While I was writing this, we talked a little about how New York had changed from the time he arrived.

The most striking difference, he observed, is that these days, like most New Yorkers, he has to worry about terrorism, both becoming a victim and being blamed for it. He also worries about the high cost of everything from food to housing, about doors closing behind him, and thousands of families never having the kind of opportunities that we've enjoyed. When he first got to New York, all he did was work nonstop and pray to see his children and grandchildren grow up. Looking back, it feels like a simpler time, but maybe it wasn't. Then and now, he whispered wistfully, one can only hope that the journey was worthwhile.

On Nov. 3, after this essay was submitted, my Uncle Joseph died at age 81. More formally known as the Rev. Joseph N. Danti, he died in Miami after fleeing gang violence and death threats in Haiti. He was detained by Department of Homeland Security officials after requesting asylum in the United States and died in their custody. The department said the cause was pancreatitis. 25

Discussion Questions

1. Why was life so hard in America for Danticat's parents at first?
2. Explain the "Faustian bargain" offered to the children. Do you think it was a fair offer?
3. How did Uncle Joseph and the children differ in their views of America? What contributes to their respective points of view?
4. What is the first lesson that Danticat learns about life in New York? Do you think this lesson is commonly shared by immigrants? Is it fair?
5. Discuss the quote: "it is the burden of each generation to embrace or reject the dreams set out by those who came before." What do children owe their parents when many sacrifices have been made?
6. What is the difference between an immigrant and a "transnational"? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Which label do Danticat's parents ultimately choose? Why?
7. How does Danticat's father's American experience worsen after 9/11? Why do you think this treatment of him occurred?
8. What is the connection of Uncle Joseph's death to the beginning of the essay?
9. Why do you think the past tense is used in the title of the essay?

Writing Task

- Write an essay in which you discuss the many challenges someone you know has gone through to achieve a particular goal. What lessons did they learn along the way?

Facing Poverty with a Rich Girl's Habits

Suki Kim

Kim was born in Seoul, South Korea. She emigrated to the United States with her family when she was 13. Kim graduated from Barnard College in 1992, with a BA in English and a minor in East Asian Literature. Her novel *The Interpreter* (2003) won the PEN Beyond Margins Award and the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award. It was translated into Dutch, French, Korean, and Japanese. Kim currently lives in New York City.

Pre-Reading

When did you first become conscious of your ethnicity or class?

Queens in the early 80's struck me as the Wild West. Our first home there was the upstairs of a two-family brownstone in Woodside. It was a cramped, ugly place, I thought, because in South Korea I had been raised in a hilltop mansion with an orchard and a pond and peacocks until I entered the seventh grade, when my millionaire father lost everything overnight. Gone in an instant was my small world, made possible by my father's shipping company, mining business and hotels. Because bankruptcy was punishable by a jail term, we fled, penniless, to America.

The ugly house was owned by a Korean family that ran a dry cleaner in Harlem. Their sons, Andy and Billy, became my first playmates in America, though playmate was a loose term, largely because they spoke English and I didn't. The first English word I learned at the junior high near Queens Boulevard was F.O.B., short for "fresh off the boat." It was a mystery why some kids called me that when I'd actually flown Korean Air to Kennedy Airport.

At 13, I took public transportation to school for the first time instead of being driven by a chauffeur. I had never done homework without a governess helping me. I also noticed that things became seriously messy if no maids were around. Each week, I found it humiliating to wheel our dirty clothes to a bleak place called Laundromat.

One new fact that took more time to absorb was that I was now Asian, a term that I had heard mentioned only in a social studies class. In Korea,

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yellow was the color of the forsythia that bloomed every spring along the fence that separated our estate from the houses down the hill. I certainly never thought of my skin as being the same shade.

Unlike students in Korean schools, who were taught to bow to teachers at every turn, no one batted an eye when a teacher entered a classroom. Once I saw a teacher struggle to pronounce foreign-sounding names from the attendance list while a boy in the front row French-kissed a girl wearing skintight turquoise Jordache jeans. In Korea, we wore slippers to keep the school floor clean, but here the walls were covered with graffiti, and some mornings, policemen guarded the gate and checked bags.

My consolation was the English as a Second Language class where I could speak Korean with others like me. Yet it did not take me long to realize that the other students and I had little in common. The wealthier Korean immigrants had settled in Westchester or Manhattan, where their children attended private schools. In Queens, most of my E.S.L. classmates came from poor families who had escaped Korea's rigid class hierarchy, one dictated by education level, family background and financial status.

Immigration is meant to be the great equalizer, yet it is not easy to eradicate the class divisions of the old country. What I recall, at 13, is an acute awareness of the distance between me and my fellow F.O.B.'s, and another, more palpable one between those of us in E.S.L. and the occasional English-speaking Korean-American kids, who avoided us as though we brought them certain undefined shame.

It was not until years later that I learned that we were, in fact, separated from them by generations.

We who sat huddled in that E.S.L. class grew up to represent the so-called 1.5 generation. Many of us came to America in our teens, already rooted in Korean ways and language. We often clashed with the first generation, whose minimal command of English traps them in a time-warped immigrant ghetto, but we identified even less with the second generation, who, with their Asian-American angst and anchorman English, struck us as even more foreign than the rest of America.

Even today, we, the 1.5 generation, can just about maneuver our anchor. We hip-hop to Usher with as much enthusiasm as we have for belting out Korean pop songs at a karaoke. We celebrate the lunar Korean thanksgiving as well as the American one, although our choice of food would most likely be the moon-shaped rice cake instead of turkey. We appreciate eggs Benedict for brunch, but on hung-over mornings, we cannot do without a bowl of thick ox-bone soup and a plate of fresh kimchi. We are 100 percent American on paper but not quite in our soul.

In Queens of the early 80's, I did not yet understand the layers of division that existed within an immigrant group. I preferred my Hello Kitty



backpack to the ones with pictures of the Menudo boys, and I cried for weeks because my parents would not let me get my ears pierced. I watched reruns of “Three’s Company” in an attempt to learn English, thinking the whole time that John Ritter was running a firm called Three’s. I stayed up until dawn to make sense of *Great Expectations*, flipping through the dictionary for the definition of words like “Pip.”

More brutal than learning English was facing poverty with a rich girl’s habits and memory. In my neighborhood, a girl who grew up with a governess and a chauffeur belonged to a fairy tale. This was no Paris Hilton’s “Simple Life,” but the beginning of my sobering, often-terrifying, never simple American journey. I soon discovered that I had no choice but to adjust. I had watched my glamorous mother, not long ago a society lady who lunched, taking on a job as a fish filleter at a market.

Before the year was over, my parents moved us out of the neighborhood in search of better jobs, housing and education. As for the family who owned the house in Woodside, I did not see any of them again until the fall of 2001, when Billy walked into the Family Assistance Center at Pier 94, where I was volunteering as an interpreter. He was looking for his brother, Andy, who had been working on the 93rd floor when the first plane crashed into the north tower.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the author and her family immigrate to America?
2. What was Kim’s initial experience as a new immigrant in New York like? Do you think her experience is common among most new immigrants?
3. What does the term “F.O.B.” imply?
4. How does the author react to the racial prescriptions imposed on her?
5. Why do you think the English-speaking Korean-American kids avoided their newly immigrated Korean classmates? Do you think this division is typical also in other immigrant communities?
6. How are the schools in New York different from those in Korea?
7. What defines the “1.5 generation” immigrants? What are the challenges they face?
8. What does the author want us to reflect on in the final paragraph?

Writing Task

- Write an essay exploring the causes of division between different generations of immigrants (or different ethnic groups).

Making Connections

1. Several pieces in this chapter deal, more or less directly, with the different aspects of cultivating and living the American Dream. Discuss what America has meant to one or more of these authors and the disparity with what they experienced here. Connect these episodes to your own aspirations and experiences.
2. Review the works in this chapter and discuss with classmates the broad issues they raise (longing, struggle, family, freedom, work, language, education, disillusionment, generational conflict, etc.). Choose one or more of these themes and examine how they are presented in two of the selections. Write a paper in which you compare, contrast, and evaluate the pieces and how you feel about the issues they raise. Feel free to bring in your personal experience and/or observations.
3. Do you think immigrants are treated fairly in America? Write an essay that draws from the readings in this section, other sources, and/or your own experiences.

