



CHAPTER 20\*

# From Traditional to Critical

## Highlighting Issues of Injustice and Discrimination through Primary Sources

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### Introduction

Primary sources have long played a key role in the instruction offered by librarians. Traditionally, this form of instruction has focused on differentiating primary from secondary sources or conveying tactics for finding, handling, and citing primary sources. These approaches, and the literature that explores the use of primary sources in library instruction, focus on how primary source research helps achieve student success vis-à-vis the ACRL standards. J. Gordon Daines and Cory Nimer point to a recent shift towards process-oriented—over standards- or skills-oriented—thinking in teaching with primary sources;<sup>1</sup> however, this is still framed in service to disciplinary expectations and norms. Little is made of how an introduction to primary source material can be a liberatory encounter.

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When given the chance to develop a lesson to introduce students to primary sources, we saw an opportunity to attempt to produce just such an encounter. Our information literacy program is embedded in a set of classes that make up a common curriculum for our students. At our institution, we benefit from being able to craft a lesson such as this that reflects the course outcomes of this common learning experience; however, this lesson plan can be easily adapted to numerous circumstances, from introductory lessons to working with experienced students conducting more advanced research. Primary source instruction lends itself well to discussions of how information sources are produced, shared, received, used, and perpetuated through time. While, as librarians, we do not always have control over the content that we share with students, a lesson such as this can provide ample opportunity to incorporate perspectives that will expose the silence or silencing of nondominant groups, while still allowing students to explore and become familiar with primary sources.

For our lesson, we explored perspectives in the encounter between nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants and an increasingly hostile American legal system and drew explicit connection to the current debates around immigration, most notably the status of persons who have migrated from Mexico and Central America. The questions that drive this lesson, however, are not derived from these two moments specifically and can be applied to any number of circumstances of injustice or discrimination. We ask students to critically consider both the resources we rely on when trying to reach an understanding of the past and the way in which specific episodes fit into larger historical narratives. Do primary sources reinforce a prevailing narrative or offer a nuanced corrective? Does our knowledge of history include varied and competing perspectives? Or do uniform and narrow perspectives dominate? In the process of exploring these questions, we are raising students' consciousness of the ways in which voices of marginalized groups are cast aside or silenced in the rehearsing of history.

## Learning Outcomes

- Identify a variety of perspectives and representations within primary source documents in order to deconstruct the notion of Western identity
- Discover the perspectives of authors from nondominant groups in order to demonstrate how primary sources can incorporate marginalized voices into research
- Highlight themes and the language used to identify and discuss immigration and national identity in order to draw connections to ongoing debates

## Materials

This session uses reproductions of primary source materials that students are asked to read during class time. We specifically chose these primary sources to incorporate a variety of dominant and nondominant perspectives on the issue of Chinese immigration during the nineteenth century. This approach is flexible and can be adapted to fit the subject matter desired by the librarian or course instructor. Key to this lesson is choosing primary sources that represent varied perspectives on the issue as well as varied material types. In our delivery of this lesson, we have chosen two printed sources (representative of the dominant group and the marginalized group) and one manuscript source (the journal entry of a white worker describing his interactions with his Chinese neighbors):

- “An address to the people of the United States upon the evils of Chinese Immigration”
  - “The biography of a Chinaman (excerpt)”
  - “Thursday, December 26th 1850.” Timothy Coffin Osborn journal
- Additional materials include
- Reflective worksheets (included in appendix 20A)

## Preparation

We have used inquiry-based learning as a method of teaching this lesson. This student-centered pedagogical approach relies on using questions and discussion to build meaning and understanding of a topic. As a result, thoughtful preparation of guiding questions and discussion prompts is an important part of preparation for this lesson.

In addition, this lesson is intended to highlight oppression and exclusion, and in so doing requires sensitivity to how students will respond to historical injustices that have very real consequences in the present day. As instructors, we have the option of identifying and using alternative texts and sources, which perhaps might not contain insensitive or inappropriate language. This, however, may reduce the opportunity to highlight and discuss with students issues of racism and oppression found in primary source artifacts.

## Session Instructions

1. Discuss briefly the role of primary sources in undergraduate research and invite input from students who have encountered primary sources prior to this class.
2. Divide students into groups of three. Ask groups to divvy up the three primary source examples, which will provide an opportunity for them

to teach one another. Give students the opportunity to read the primary source documents.

3. Students share details of their reading with fellow group members. Provide the worksheet that asks guided and reflective questions and have students complete it. Throughout, move between groups, asking questions and prompt for further exploration.
4. Reconvene the class and open a group discussion around a series of broad questions. What surprises them? What did they notice as they read? What was the experience of encountering these primary sources? This broad discussion should illuminate what piqued students' interests and guide further, more pointed discussion. This is an opportunity for you to take note of what students miss and to fill in gaps in knowledge through additional inquiry-led discussion. When you are working with primary sources and a contested historical topic, themes related to information production, access, and subsequent knowledge-making can easily emerge.
5. Ask students to reflect on the reach of the various authors: who has the largest audience, the most power, the loudest voice? Ask students to identify whose voice is missing from the conversation, how the lack of that voice impacts their reading of the arguments at hand, and how the students' might seek to fill in that perspective. Women's perspectives, for example, are missing from our examples. How might that affect our understanding of this issue of oppression?
6. Conclude the session by re-emphasizing the role of primary sources in shaping understanding and knowledge-making; how they may help us recover lost perspectives or cut through received wisdom. By this point, connections to today's oppressive immigration regime should be apparent; if not, encourage students to make these connections.

## Assessment

Using the inquiry-based method allows the librarian to use formative assessment techniques during instruction. Consistently pose questions and probe students to demonstrate their understanding of the topic. Additionally, ask students to expand upon their observations and push them to connect these to the overall learning outcomes of the lesson. In our experience, students are particularly successful at identifying those perspectives present, but sometimes need guidance towards identifying those that are absent or marginalized.

However, students sometimes struggle to draw meaningful connections to contemporary events, and they have difficulty articulating how materials similar to those we shared with them could shape our understanding of current immigration policy.

Additionally, students also displayed less sensitivity to the language employed and policies put forth by the authors. In one passage, Lew Chew, a Chinese immigrant who detailed his persecution in a series of autobiographical sketches, attacks other immigrant groups; at first, students found humor in the passage, seeking to understand what motivated his descriptions only after getting guidance from the instructor. Or the very fact that Lew Chew (or perhaps, his editors) refers to himself “Chinaman,” has, for the most part, little impact on the majority of students. Though the term is little used today, it does “carry the weight of racial hatred,”<sup>2</sup> and we were surprised that it did not draw the attention of students.

Additionally, the reflection worksheet could act as a formative assessment tool to check for understanding.

## Reflections

This session attempts to move beyond a traditional approach to primary source instruction by asking students to think critically about how these types of materials will lead to a better understanding of the central theme of the course: the legacy of colonialism and the formation of Western identity. The rich discussions that we observed in delivering this lesson showcased students grappling with how witness accounts can offer confusing or contradictory narratives and working through the ways exclusion transforms but is maintained over time.

However, this is not to say that all aspects of this lesson have been a complete success. We have had a small number of sessions in which the chosen material has alienated a student who identified as Asian American. This response showed us that we had not appropriately prepared the classroom for discussing the topic with sensitivity. Instructors must always be attuned to the well-being of students, and this will be an ongoing part of the revision and preparation process.

## Final Questions

In assessing the narrative of immigration in American history, historian Mae Ngai writes, “The myth of the ‘immigrant America’ derives its power in large part from the labor that it performs for American exceptionalism.”<sup>3</sup> This myth persists, having had a profound impact in our thinking around notions of race, group identity, and state power, while continuing to shape the debate around immigration today. Addressing these issues through library instruction can be challenging; but being thoughtful about the examples and resources we draw on can inspire discussion around these topics. Think about an instructional session you’ve delivered in the past. How might you redesign this session in order to incorporate these social justice issues? What role does the instructional librarian have in highlighting issues of oppression and social injustice found in a variety of research resources?

## Appendix 20A: Reflective Worksheet

Primary sources provide first-hand testimony or evidence of the topic you are investigating. Primary sources can be visual, aural, or textual, and may be an actual artifact or a digitized, photographed, or otherwise copied version of that artifact.

Examples include:

- Autobiographies or memoirs
- Letters, diaries, or journals (manuscript or published)
- Interviews (audio or transcription)
- Newspapers, magazines, or leaflets
- Visual materials (photos, drawings, film, prints)
- Sound recordings (music, oral history)
- Maps
- Artifacts or realia

In this exercise, read the three documents that have been given to you as the testimony of people who had first-hand experience of Chinese immigration in nineteenth-century California. Then jot down answers to the following questions, keeping in mind the goals and themes of this course.

1. Who created these documents? Can you speculate on their status in society? How would you compare and contrast them?
2. What evidence do these documents give you? What evidence is absent? What additional primary sources would you seek out?
3. How do these primary documents help us understand a concept of the West?

## Notes

1. J. Gordon Daines III and Cory Nimer, "In Search of Primary Source Literacy: Opportunities and Challenges," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 16, no. 1 (2015): 19–34.
2. Frank W. Hu, "Is the Term 'Chinaman' Derogatory?" *Huffpost Arts and Culture* (blog), July 5, 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-h-wu/is-the-term-chinaman-chinese-americans\\_b\\_5560288.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-h-wu/is-the-term-chinaman-chinese-americans_b_5560288.html); Jenn Fang, "Yes, the Term 'Chinaman' Is Derogatory." *Reappropriate* (blog), July 9, 2014. <http://reappropriate.co/2014/07/yes-the-term-chinaman-is-derogatory>.
3. Mae Ngai, *Illegal Subjects* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

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