High School Lesson Plan

Geographies of Exclusion: Transnational Asian Migration through Canada and Latin America

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Standards

SSUSH14 Explain America's evolving relationship with the world at the turn of the twentieth century.

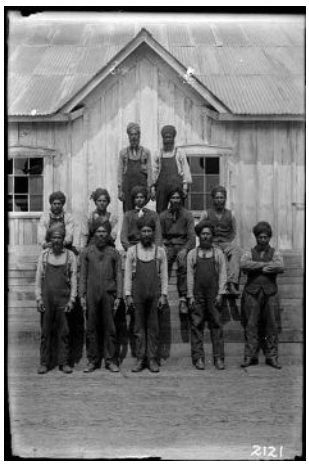
Background Information

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was shifting from a continental nation into a global empire. Standard history lessons (like SSUSH14) usually focus on the loud, military side of this shift: the Spanish-American War, the annexation of the Philippines, and the Open Door policy.

However, to really understand this era, students need to look at the internal flip-side of empire. At the exact same time the U.S. was expanding abroad, it was violently locking down its borders at home and creating a legally barred, racialized global labor class.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan didn't just stop immigration—they completely re-routed it. By closing traditional Pacific ports of entry like San Francisco and Seattle, the U.S. government forced global migrant networks to adapt. Immigrants began using the geography of America's neighbors to get in. As a result, Canada and Mexico quickly became intense, heavily policed transit zones where migrant workers were both deeply exploited and fiercely monitored.

The Canadian Corridor & Imperial Contradictions



Under SSUSH14, the U.S.'s relationship with Great Britain evolved into a cozy "Great Rapprochement." However, this relationship was complicated by the global mobility of British subjects.

Following the 1857 Indian Uprising, the British Raj engineered systemic poverty and exorbitant land taxation across the Punjab region of India. Desperate for economic survival, thousands of Punjabi Sikh men, many of them veterans of the British imperial military, leveraged their status as British subjects to migrate across the Pacific network.

They were pulled to British Columbia by the demands of racial capitalism. The Pacific Northwest's rainforests yielded massive timber, an indispensable natural resource for global industrial construction. White capital in Canada eagerly exploited South Asian labor in coastal sawmills, while systematically denying them political or social integration.

When domestic white supremacist violence and state anxieties for “diversity” culminated in Canada’s 1908 Continuous Journey Regulation, South Asian migrants used geographic proximity to survive. This “Continuous Journey” law was specifically designed to block Indian immigration without an explicit racial ban; it required all immigrants to travel to Canada via a continuous, uninterrupted voyage from their birth country: a practical impossibility for South Asians given that no shipping lines ran direct routes from India to Canada at the time.

Having already braved an arduous transpacific voyage only to be met with this systemic exclusion, South Asian travelers forged an alternate path to survival. Because the 49th parallel slicing through the Pacific Northwest was an unpoliced, invisible line cutting through thousands of miles of dense rainforest, Sikh migrants used the thick canopy as tactical cover. They bypassed early U.S. immigration checks to enter the US state of Washington, supplying critical labor to the U.S. transcontinental rail networks and the agricultural fields of the Central Valley.

The Mexican Transit & Porfirian Modernization

Simultaneously, U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America was dictated by economic hegemony. In Mexico, the regime of Porfirio Díaz (the Porfiriato) sought rapid industrialization via US capital. To extract northern Mexico's silver and copper, Díaz commissioned a massive rail infrastructure that connected Mexico City to U.S. border twin-cities (e.g., Nogales, Ciudad Juárez/El Paso).

This infrastructure became the premier trans-shipping pipeline for excluded Chinese migrants. Because the U.S. Bureau of Immigration tightly monitored Pacific ports, Chinese laborers and transnational smuggling rings shifted their routes to Mexico.

Chinese migrants arrived at Mexican ports like Mazatlán, instantly integrated into the northern Mexican rail labor market, and rode these railroad lines directly to the U.S. Southwest.

The borderlands of the U.S. Southwest presented an extreme environment: the hyper-arid, punishingly hot Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts. The U.S. government relied on this brutal climate as a natural barrier, employing a skeleton crew of "Chinese Inspectors" (the precursors to the U.S. Border Patrol). Migrants countered by organizing intricate underground staging networks in border cities like Tijuana and Juárez, moving on foot or hidden in freight cars. This created the modern infrastructure of undocumented land-border crossings into the United States.



Suggested Teaching Activity

When teaching SSUSH14, be sure to highlight the internal flip-side of American empire. While the U.S. was expanding abroad, it was locking down its borders at home and creating a legally barred, racialized global labor class. Share the resources below with students to explore Asian

migration through the borders of Canada and Mexico and to consider the larger structural forces driving it.

- The Origins of Border Crossing and Border Policing
- Canada's Continuous Journey Regulation Explanation
- "Chinese Inspectors" (the precursors to the U.S. Border Patrol)
- Between the US and Mexico, a Forgotten 'Desert of the Chinese'
- The Railroad as a Catalyst for Mexican Immigration

Images Used:

1. Sikh sawmill workers of the North Pacific Lumber Company at Barnet, photographed by Philip Timms, B.C., Canada, ca.1900's. Via Vancouver Public Library/Public domain https://localhistory.vpl.ca/link/photos6438
2. Frederic Remington's "Chinese immigrant dying of thirst in the Mohave Desert, 1800s." Racist cartoon via https://crossculturalsolidarity.com/the-origins-of-border-crossing-and-border-policing/