Immigration

The following selections explore the experience of immigrants and immigrant families while raising questions about cultural identity, belonging, and assimilation.

“The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning” – Amma Ababio, pg. 15
“Finding the Perfect American Model” – Ang Li, pg. 117
“The Definition of Who I am” – Adam Saad, pg. 162
“My Mother Speaks” – Ashley Smith, pg. 171
“Tobacco and Curry Leaves” – Indhu Sekar, pg. 170
“some assembly required” – Javier Spivey, pg. 176

In “The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning,” Amma Ababio shares her experience emigrating to the U.S. from Ghana and details her efforts to learn about each of these cultures at different points in her life. Similarly, Ang Li’s “Finding the Perfect American Model,” describes her attempts fit into American culture and as an ongoing process of learning and assimilation. In “My Mother Speaks,” Ashley Smith questions what might be lost in the process of assimilation and stakes a claim for retaining original cultural knowledge. In “some assembly required,” Javier Spivey expresses an anxiety over the loss of one culture in pursuit of acceptance in another, portraying assimilation as multigenerational process demanded by cultural and political pressures. Adam Saad’s “The Definition of Who I am” literalizes those political pressures by discussing his Egyptian-born father’s attempts to avoid harassment and discrimination by claiming to be Greek instead of Arabic. Conversely, Indhu Sekar’s “Tobacco and Curry Leaves” portrays an embodied multiculturalism, opening a conceptual space in which the reconciliation of multiple cultures is possible.
Questions for Group Discussion

• What is the difference between nationality and culture? How do national and cultural identities compare to other forms of identity (racial, gender, class, etc.)?
• How do these works describe the process of assimilation? What are the benefits of assimilation? What about the drawbacks?
• What does can these works tell us about what it means to “be” American?
• What are the continuities and differences in the experiences of first-generation immigrants and their descendants?
• How do politics shape immigrant experiences? Do immigrants for different parts of the world have the same experiences? What commonalities might they share; what might be different?

Writing Prompt

Everyone in America, except for Native Americans, at some point in their family history came from somewhere else. Slaves were forcibly shipped to the United States, while others came pursuing the "American Dream." If you or your parents are immigrants, do you have personal stories dealing with specific situations in which you were treated differently due to others' perceptions of you as a "foreigner"? If your family has been in this country for generations, what has your experience been in encountering and dealing with more recent immigrants? Write about one specific occasion in which you have had to deal with differences—cultural, economic, political, etc.—that arise from issues connected to immigration.