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Book Review: Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms

Jenna Cushing-Leubner
University of Wisconsin - Whitewater, cushingj@uww.edu

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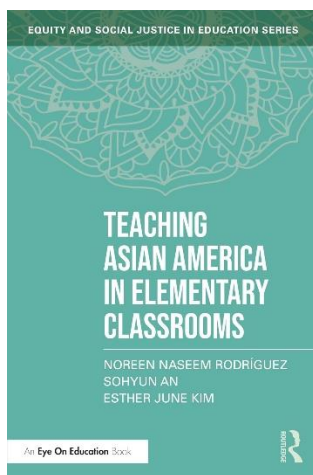
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Book Review: Rodríguez, N. N., An, S., & Kim, E. J. (2024). *Teaching Asian America in elementary classrooms*. 192 pp. Routledge. ISBN-13: 978-1032597157

Reviewed by
Jenna Cushing-Leubner
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater



Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms is a book for teachers wanting to bring Asian American Studies into their teaching; teacher educators; ethnic studies teachers in elementary grades; and ESL, bilingual, and dual immersion teachers with Asian American students who are thirsting for content knowledge to create more culturally sustaining curriculum. The three authors of *Teaching Asian America in Elementary Classrooms* are researchers in social studies education, former K-12 teachers, and current teacher educators. Their perspectives reflect immigrant, first-generation, adult international student, and U.S.-born Asian American understandings of the absenting of Asian American communities and histories in the U.S. curriculum. “Asian American” is used to reference a broader sociopolitical history (Lee, 2015). The authors themselves bring personal knowledge as

teachers and scholars from South Asian, Filipinx, Korean, and Chinese origin families in the United States. In general, there is a lack of resources and representation for Asian American Studies in K-12 and this is the first book of its kind for the elementary setting. There is also a lack of resources for elementary ethnic studies, which this book does good work to begin to offer. I’d also suggest this book to elementary teachers who recognize the absence of Asian American representation in their curriculum, regardless of the backgrounds of their students.

Book Summary

The book has an introductory chapter on teaching Asian American Studies across content areas (“Pedagogical Overview”) and six thematic chapters: “Identity and Stereotypes,” “Im/Migration,” “Citizenship,” “War and Displacement,” “Activism and Resistance,” and “Contention and Complexity.” The chapter descriptions below give a quick summary of each chapter and specifically talk about any ways that Southeast Asian Studies and communities show up in the chapters.

The Introduction situates the book within the overwhelming absence of Asian American representation in elementary curriculum—especially social studies. The authors also name the anti-Asian racism and violence that shape the lives and experiences of Asian American children



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in the United States and its schools and offer the teaching of Asian American curriculum as one way to interrupt these in the classroom. The book also includes suggested resources throughout and in an extensive Appendix, including many hyperlinks for teacher resources, guiding discussion questions, lists of suggested children's books, and suggestions for books and websites for teachers to deepen their own knowledge.

Chapter 1 encourages teachers to integrate Asian American Studies across the content areas. The authors offer specific, critical analysis of how content areas erase or are absent Asian American Studies and give suggestions for how to redesign these content areas to center or include Asian American Studies. This chapter is firm on teaching in interdisciplinary ways and using critically conscious approaches instead of casual multicultural representation, and gives teachers clear and supportive frameworks for how to do this.

The references to Southeast Asians in this chapter are a biographical picture book written by a Thai American author and a suggestion to include Hmong U.S. gymnast and Olympian Sunisa "Sunni" Lee in physical education teaching.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the many communities, ethnicities, and peoples that make up "Asian American" and the history of the term's creation to combat racist and colonial subjugation in the hopes of organizing a collective sociopolitical solidarity against racism and colonialism. It reviews hurtful stereotypes, including the myth of the model minority to pit communities of color against each other through anti-Black racism and erasure of diversity within Asian American communities. It shows how current anti-Asian hate violence has roots in hundreds of years of "Yellow Peril" and "Dusky Peril." It also includes ideas to understand and teach about nativism, the "forever foreigner," and narratives of Asian Americans as "terrorist threat"—especially when Asian American stereotypes intersect with Islamophobia. Not only does this chapter offer a very succinct history to teachers to strengthen their own knowledge, each section is paired with lists of books written and illustrated for elementary aged children to disrupt each area of stereotype.

The references to Southeast Asians in this chapter are as counterexamples to the model minority myth (that Southeast Asian communities have some of the lowest average income in the United States, and that Cambodian Americans and Lao Americans have far lower rates of obtaining bachelor's degrees compared to Taiwanese Americans and Indian Americans), as well as three suggested books by Vietnamese American/Canadian authors.

Chapter 3 offers key teaching points about immigration, specifically histories of Asian immigration to the United States, critical labor history, and Asia-specific immigration policies. As the chapter moves through these histories, the authors trace the emergence and solidification of anti-Asian sentiment, xenophobic policies, and violence against Asian origin communities. They cover a sweeping history from early Chinese immigration as miners and railroad workers, Angel Island's relationship with the (Chinese) Exclusion Act and mass detention of Chinese immigrants, and ongoing dynamics of Asian immigrant exclusion that are lifted based on the needs of the U.S. economy and defense strategy. This is followed by suggestions for how students can analyze immigration data to debunk the myth that the United States is a nation welcoming of immigrants, and how teachers can adapt typical immigration units with a more critical and Asian-centric lens. The chapter closes with a very brief section on Asian refugees that recognizes the extremely limited range of resources for teaching about refugee experiences and offers some suggestions for integrating refugee consciousness into existing units. This chapter also includes extensive resources, discussion questions, and recommendations for bringing this overarching history into the classroom across content areas. For people who have not had access to a strong background in

Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies in their teacher preparation, this chapter provides an incredible amount of necessary history and broader context that Southeast Asians are positioned as being a part of once they are in the United States.

The references to Southeast Asians in this chapter are in a subsection on Asian Refugees, as well as eight suggested reading books by Southeast Asian authors about becoming refugees and experiences as refugees: Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao.

Chapter 4 examines pathways to citizenship available and used by Asian Americans, and Asian American histories of legal battles to claim legitimacy and equal protections as U.S. citizens. It focuses heavily on Japanese American incarceration, the Dusky Peril, and Islamophobia. The authors ground this chapter with a critical and historicizing definition of citizenship that centers young people as actors and change makers and reminds teachers of the importance of wrestling with anti-Blackness; white supremacy; and immigrant, forced migrant, refugee, and settler identities and ways of being. This chapter offers teachers a tour through some key Asian American social, political, and legal histories, with teaching ideas and learner resources woven throughout. It is anchored by major questions around who can be a U.S. citizen (by birthright, naturalization, and legal documentation), the role of citizenship in the racialization of Asian Americans (including deeper consideration of Japanese internment), and the role of religion (with specific consideration for Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs).

This chapter does not discuss Southeast Asians specifically or include resources created by or reflecting Southeast Asian communities. In the section on “Religion in U.S. Citizenship,” the authors offer lesson suggestions for teaching religious diversity. However, there are no specific discussions or mentions of Shamanism, Ancestor Worship, conversion, or the meshing of Christianity and other major religions with these.

Chapter 5 urges educators to teach about war and displacement, and to remember that “Asian Americans have entered America as refugees, adoptees, brides, laborers, students, and immigrants largely because of U.S. wars and military involvement in Asia” (p. 115). This chapter aligns with aspects of critical refugee studies (Le Espiritu, et al., 2022) in offering a critical lens on the teaching about war, its human costs, those whose political and economic interests it serves, and the trauma and displacement of families and children it causes. This chapter urges educators to center those most harmed by militarized conflicts and their extended impacts. The authors are explicit with readers about educators’ responsibility to bring trauma-informed approaches that honor complex personal and intergenerational emotions. For deeper dive examples of how to do this, they describe teaching the Philippine-American War, the Korean War and partition, and the Vietnam War with its expansion across much of Southeast Asia. This chapter also includes a small section reflecting on the often largely transracial, and largely erased, system of adoption of children from Asian countries following U.S. militarized intervention (e.g., Korea and Vietnam) and as part of transnational adoption systems (e.g., China).

This chapter includes the most explicit discussion about Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian communities. All references are in the section “Critical Teaching of the Vietnam War.” This section highlights forced displacement, recolonization, occupation, and the making of some Southeast Asians into refugees. The authors specifically highlight links amongst Cambodian, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Lao people. It also includes references to the Secret War in Laos and United States. CIA recruitment of Hmong soldiers (though not specifically child soldiers). It provides an extensive list of suggested children’s books about Southeast Asian displacement and refugee experiences, and the authors remind educators to guide young people in reading these, too,

with a critical eye for absented narratives of U.S. involvement and intervention, specifically. The seven recommended children's books include Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian authors.

Chapter 6 provides readers with an expanded perspective on the “go to” stories and figures of activism and resistance that are usually taught about in U.S. schools, and highlights some of the many absented narratives of Asian and Asian American activists and relationships with larger resistance movements. The authors intentionally focus on cross-racial solidarity and movement work, specifically Asian, Black, and Latinx/Chicanx solidarity. The chapter weaves across Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, anti-War efforts, the Third World Liberation Front, a wide range of Labor and Workers' Rights, Delano Grape Strike, Detroit Summer, Queer/LGBTQIA+ Rights, and youth activism. It is written as a series of biographies of individuals and their roles in collective action movements: Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, Patsy Mink, Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, Larry Itliong, Bhairavi Desai, Ai Jen Poo, Kiyoshi Kuromiya, Helen Zia, and Sameer Jha. It also includes many suggested references and resources for further study and to teach young people about taking informed action against injustice and in struggles for liberation.

There are no specific references to Southeast Asian activists, organizations, or movement work in this chapter. However, a number of the suggested resources for further connection include current activist organizations that include Southeast Asian members. This chapter reveals the major impact and presence of Asian Americans across historical and ongoing struggles for freedom, and hopefully educators of Southeast Asian youth will feel empowered to locate current and local experiences and change efforts within this rich intersectional history and power base.

In Chapter 7, the authors move into discussions of contention within and between communities, and the importance of teaching this as part of a more complete story of Asian America. They discuss how historic and current solidarity with Black communities in struggles for justice and against police and state-sanctioned violence (e.g. #Asians4BlackLives) co-exists with pervasive anti-Blackness within Asian American communities and alignment with white supremacist policies. They also suggest discussing divisions between Asian American groups and offer examples that refer back to earlier chapters, along with suggestions for how to guide discussion to explore these with young learners. The chapter includes struggles for citizenship (i.e. *Ozawa v. United States* and *United States v. Thind*'s reliance on claims to legal whiteness and a legal distancing from Blackness in order to access citizenship rights for some Asian people), school desegregation, and civic rights. The authors guide educators to critique and analyze these cases with students from a place of critical love and understanding, and for the purpose of moving with intention closer to a shared solidarity for anti-racist justice.

Although this book does not center Southeast Asians and Southeast Asian communities in the United States, it is exciting and very much needed. This book can and should be seen as a “first-of-many” and not a “do-all, be-all.” Because the making of Asian America (Lee, 2015) is diverse and ongoing, it would be short-sighted to expect one book to do cover everything. What this book does incredibly well is to speak directly to educators, provide content knowledge for teachers that is sorely lacking in schools and teacher preparation programs, and offer a thick description of the field of Asian American and ethnic studies in elementary grades. Still, with so many Southeast Asian educators and teachers of Southeast Asian young people thirsting for resources that reflect Southeast Asian children and communities, I hope that this will be seen as a launching point for the writing of companion books (maybe by some of the readers of this journal) that explore these topics in ways that bring greater visibility to Southeast Asian Americans in the United States and their place in broader struggles for liberatory education and political freedom.

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About the Author



Jenna Cushing-Leubner is an Associate Professor in Curriculum & Instruction at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Her scholarship explores the practices, possibilities, and complexities of heritage language and knowledge system reclamation and collective healing of intergenerational traumas. She has been part of the participatory design research done by Lub Zej Zog Project's Hmong Educator Coalitions and organizes the Lub Zej Zog Emerging HMoob Scholars and Writing Fellows program.



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