

Social Justice, Inclusion, and Diversity in Asian American Literature for High School

Valerie Ooka Pang, Audrey Hokoda, and Yoon K. Pak

Teaching high school students critical thinking, decision making, and participation skills are paramount to their development as citizens in a democracy.¹ We believe it is the responsibility of teachers to encourage students to participate in critical discussions of controversial problems while working in collaboration to solve public issues.² Topics might include colonialism, patriotism, racism, cultural assimilation, cultural imperialism, and ethnic identity. We believe integrating difficult issues in the classroom through Asian American literature can encourage students to review and challenge their assumptions and knowledge of diverse communities. Asian Americans are extremely diverse with ancestors from many global regions. These include South Asia (e.g., Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (e.g., Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam), and East Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan). For this piece, since the indigenous and colonial histories of Pacific Islanders are quite distinct, we have not included the Pacific Islands in this categorization.³

Issues-centered Approach to Learning

An advantage of using an issues-centered approach to learning requires students to develop abilities to examine, analyze, criticize, and function as agents of change.⁴ Often, problems suggested need information from several disciplines (e.g., literature, history, civics) for a thorough study.

Many historical materials provide little information and documentation about the

involvement of Asian Americans (AA) in U.S. history.⁵ Teachers may find the historical timeline of Asian American history in the March/April 2022 issue of *Social Education* to be an excellent resource.⁶ Additionally, historical fiction, memoirs, and nonfiction texts by Asian American authors can provide a broad perspective on the range of Asian American experiences.⁷

Counternarratives

History is often a narrative that presents the chronological account of the victor and those in power.⁸ Counternarratives provide additional viewpoints from marginalized voices whose experiences have not been included in traditional American history textbooks.

Historical events can be difficult for students to relate to, and literature helps history, civics, and governmental issues come alive for readers.⁹ It is through literature that people learn about the culture, history, and life experiences of others.¹⁰ For example, one of the four books we explore in this article, the classic *No-No Boy* by John Okada, can help students consider the complicated historical context of Japanese American incarceration during World War II, the denial of citizenship rights, the loyalty oath that many refused to sign, and the shame of not fitting into the image of a “good American.”¹¹ Cannon, who teaches American literature, includes *No-No Boy* in her curriculum, and asks her students how a historically marginalized group recovers from community trauma as extensive as the Japanese

American incarceration during World War II.¹²

Recommended Asian American Literature

Due to space limitations, in this article we focus on only four Asian American books—from historical fiction to nonfiction and memoir—and provide suggested lessons. However, there is a vast collection of Asian American literature that can be included in high school curriculums.

We chose the following books first and foremost because they convey Asian American viewpoints. Culture is multifaceted and includes much more than specific foods and the celebration of holidays, as the lives of characters in these resources demonstrate. Culture includes history, interactions with others, opportunities in society, conflicts among people in the same ethnic group, and many other aspects of life. This is evident in Okada's *No-No Boy*. Secondly, these books present understudied events in U.S. history. For example, Stacey Lee's novel *The Downstairs Girl* takes place in the historical context of Southern recruitment of Chinese and Chinese Americans to fill labor voids in the late 1800s following the emancipation of African Americans. Third, the books explore individual and institutional racism, such as Paula Yoo's *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement*. Peter Bacho's *Uncle Rico's Encore* also examines racism while highlighting Filipino American culture and the history of Filipino American laborers. We included this memoir because Filipino sailors were the first Asians to land in America, in 1587, at Morro Bay, California, and despite being the third largest single community (i.e., 4.1 million out of a total of 24 million Asian Americans in the U.S.), Filipino Americans are often overlooked.¹³

Using the Inquiry Model and NCSS Standards

In the lessons we designed, guided by the NCSS social studies standards, we use the inquiry model and incorporate rich, compelling questions and tasks with which students build their contextual knowledge of democratic and cultural issues.¹⁴ The highlighted books present the voices of Asian Americans, their strengths and struggles, and describe their collaborative, civic activism. The lessons emphasize the following social studies

themes: ⑦ **CULTURE**; ⑥ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**; and ⑩ **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**.

We suggest the following format for these lessons: (1) identify the overarching questions to focus student attention and study; (2) present the book summary; (3) have students identify historical events relevant to the issues and circumstances facing the characters; (4) describe inquiry questions for class discussion or essay assignment; and (5) references to extend the historical context of the book.

Recommended Literature for High School and Beyond

We present the full inquiry format only for the first book, *No-No Boy*, and provide book summaries and discussion/essay inquiry questions for the other three books. (Note: Teachers should read books before assigning them to determine appropriateness for their students.)

Historical Fiction

Okada, John. *No-No Boy* (Du Sonneur, 2020, originally pub. 1957)

Part I. Overarching Questions

What are the major themes in Okada's novel? How do these themes connect with issues related to anti-Asian violence and hatred?

Part II. Summary (see p. 156)

Part III. Historical events (see p. 156)

The table depicts historical events that impacted Ichiro's life. Students may add other events from his life to elucidate the complexities that face Ichiro, his family, and their community.

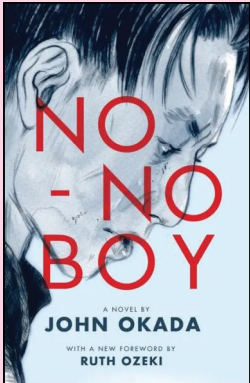
Part IV. Inquiry Questions

For small group discussions in class or essay assignments, here are suggestions for inquiry questions.

1. Describe the diverse perspectives Ichiro, his parents, friends, and others had about what it meant to be Japanese and American. To what extent were these dual identity issues (Were they American or Japanese?) a forced binary?

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No-No Boy Summary



The protagonist of the novel is Ichiro Yamada, a Japanese American born of immigrant parents (*Nisei*), who returned home to Seattle after World War II. He had spent two years with his family in an incarceration camp and then prison for an additional two years for refusing draft orders (i.e., answering “no” on Questions 27 and 28 on the Application for Leave Clearance—known as the loyalty questionnaire). Young men, like Ichiro, who answered “no” on these two questions—whether they were willing to serve in combat duty (Q27) and whether they would swear unqualified allegiance to the United States and, also forswear allegiance to the Emperor of Japan (Q28)—became known as “No-No Boys.”

Ichiro’s parents lived between two worlds, their present home in the United States and the history they left behind in Japan. They had to adjust to a U.S. society marked by persistent racism and legal restrictions to become *bona fide* citizens. For Ichiro, readjustment to life in Seattle was intertwined with needing to please his immigrant parents while also being ostracized by peers for being a “No-No Boy,” especially those who served in the segregated, all-*Nisei* 442nd Regimental Combat Unit. The unit was the most decorated regimental unit in World War II. To those veterans, who felt they had proved their loyalty and allegiance to the United States, Ichiro was viewed as a traitor. Though Ichiro believed that by being a draft resister, he had upheld his American heritage, even his younger brother, Taro, was ashamed of this act of protest.

John Okada’s deft treatment of the many layers of “being” Japanese American reveals the currency of issues surrounding immigrant families, global warfare, (re)adjustment in society, and racism. Okada’s stand for social justice and the rights of Japanese Americans showed a democratic orientation that was far ahead of his time.

U. S. History	Events in Ichiro Yamada’s Life
Nationality Act of 1790: Only free white people of good standing could become citizens through naturalization.	Ichiro Yamada’s parents and other first-generation Asian immigrants could not become naturalized U.S. citizens because they were not “free white persons.”
Immigration Act of 1924: Banned immigration of Asians	The distinct generational identification of <i>Issei</i> and <i>Nisei</i> is a byproduct of anti-Asian/Japanese immigration policies.
Attack of Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941	Immediate impact on Ichiro’s family and fellow Japanese Americans as targets of racial hatred and violence. Also arrests of <i>Issei</i> men by the FBI and police as suspected spies.
Executive Order 9066, Feb. 19, 1942	EO 9066 forced Ichiro and his family, along with 120,000 fellow Japanese Americans on the West Coast to detention camps prior to permanent relocation.
Segregated armed force unit formed: 442 nd Regimental Combat team, March 23, 1943, with volunteers from Hawaii and Continental U.S.	Ichiro’s decision not to join the military.
Loyalty Oath given to all people in incarceration camps, 1943	Tension and challenges within Ichiro’s family and the larger Japanese American community in the incarceration camps regarding the so-called Loyalty Oath.
McCarran-Walter Act of 1952: Japanese and fellow Asian immigrants could become naturalized citizens.	Although this event is beyond the timeline of the book, encourage students to think of the implications this would have had for Ichiro’s parents and other <i>Isseis</i> at the time.

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2. Describe structural, institutional, and individual racism that Ichiro, his friends and family faced.
3. What is most important during wartime, securing constitutional rights of citizens or protecting the wartime powers of the United States? Why?
4. How is the protest of Ichiro against the elimination of his constitutional and civil rights similar to the anti-Asian bias protests of today?

Part V. Additional Resource

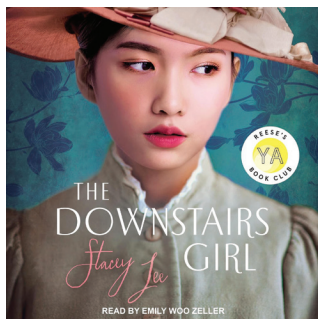
Abe, F., Robinson, G., and Cheung, F (eds.), *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Work of the Author of No-No Boy* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018).

Historical Fiction

Lee, Stacy. *The Downstairs Girl* (Penguin, 2019).

Summary

In 1890, 17-year-old Jo Kuan struggled to fit into Southern society despite being treated as invisible. Born in Georgia of Chinese immigrant parents and abandoned as a baby, Jo Kuan was raised by an adoptive father, Old Gin. Though she loved Old Gin, Jo longed to learn about her father and mother.



The book is set during a time when Chinese immigrants were encouraged to move to the South as a form of cheap labor following the Emancipation Proclamation when many formerly enslaved Blacks migrated North. Like Black people, Chinese immigrants were treated as second class citizens. Segregation was the law; Chinese had difficulty finding housing and

employment. Though Jo was born in Georgia, birthright citizenship for Chinese people was not established by the Supreme Court until the Wong Kim Ark case of 1898. Until 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 barred most Chinese from entering the United States. As a poor, Chinese American woman, Jo Kuan suffers the effects of racism, classism, and sexism. Under a pseudonym, she uses her writing skills, personal confidence, and wit to get the general community to talk about these issues through a newspaper advice column.

Inquiry Questions for Discussion/Essay

1. How was segregation against Chinese immigrants and people of color legal?
2. Did people during this time period generally support equality for all individuals? Did governmental agencies support social justice? Why or why not?
3. How was inequality tied to race, class, and gender in the South during this period?
4. How did Jo Kuan use her skills to fight discrimination and encourage people to talk about discrimination and equality?
5. How were Jo and Old Gin able to find enough work to financially sustain themselves?

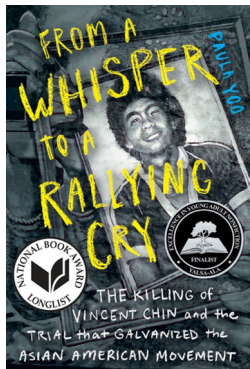
Nonfiction

Yoo, Paula. *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement* (Norton Young Readers, 2021).

Summary

In 1982, 27-year-old Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered by Ronald Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz, two white Detroit auto workers. Chin had been celebrating his upcoming wedding with friends at a bar when a fight broke out involving Chin, Ebens, and Nitz. After being

kicked out of the bar, Ebens and Nitz searched for Chin and chased him down. Nitz held Chin down while Eben swung at Chin’s head with a baseball bat.



At the time of Chin’s murder, the United States was facing a recession. More fuel-efficient and cheaper cars imported from Japan and Germany were impacting the Detroit auto industry, which was suffering from massive layoffs. Anti-Asian hate was on the rise. “It was not uncommon to see American-made cars in Detroit sporting red-white-

and-blue-colored bumper stickers with the words “Datsun, Toyota, Nissan, Remember Pearl Harbor!” (Yoo, 2021, p. 43). At that time, journalist Helen Zia wrote, “It felt dangerous to have an Asian face.”

Judge Kaufman found Ebens and Nitz guilty of manslaughter and sentenced them to three years probation and a \$3,000 fine, but no jail time. The lenient sentence shocked and outraged Asian Americans and galvanized the movement for civil rights, as the title of Yoo’s book highlights. Asian American leaders and others banded together, speaking out against racism and injustice, which culminated in the first federal civil rights trial for a crime against an Asian American.

Possible Inquiry Questions for Discussion/Essay

1. How did the murder of Vincent Chin “galvanize the Asian American movement” for civil rights?
2. Despite the brutal attack against Vincent Chin with a baseball bat, a white police detective released Ebens from prison that evening claiming, “it sounded like a fair fight” and that Ebens was “an outstanding citizen” and a foreman at Chrysler.

In defending his lenient sentencing of Ebens (i.e., 3 years probation, \$3000 fine), Judge Kaufman said, “They weren’t the kind of people you send to prison”

and “You don’t make the punishment fit the crime; you make the punishment fit the criminal.”

How do these statements demonstrate a violation of Vincent Chin’s civil rights by law enforcement and the courts? What assumptions does the judge appear to be making about who constitutes a “criminal”?

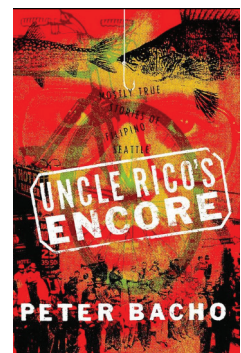
3. During the early 1980s, rhetoric by politicians, journalists and others fueled anti-Asian hate. During the early 2020s, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians and social media again incited hate towards Asians (e.g., calling the virus the “kung flu”). Should racist speech be protected by the First Amendment? What can individuals do to teach about the harmful effects of hateful speech and racist rhetoric by politicians or journalists?

Memoir

Bacho, Peter. *Uncle Rico’s Encore: Mostly True Stories About Filipino Seattle* (University of Washington Press, 2022).

Summary

In his memoir, Peter Bacho describes life growing up as a proud Pinoy (Filipino American) in Seattle, Washington. He shared stories about his family members, relatives, and many older Pinoys, “Manongs,” the backbone of their community. In 1898, the United States gained possession of the Philippines through the Treaty of Paris. Many Filipinos were recruited to the United States to provide inexpensive labor. However, following the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act, which established a 10-year process for Philippines independence, Filipinos lost the ability to move freely between the countries. They were no longer U.S. “nationals,” but “aliens.”



They could no longer be naturalized. Within this difficult context, Bacho's stories described how Filipino culture and families created a powerful neighborhood of hard-working people where some became labor activists fighting for civil rights in agriculture and Alaskan canneries.

Bacho describes gaining a strong academic foundation from the Catholic school he attended, where instructors saw promise in him, mentored him, and encouraged him to attend the University of Washington. In contrast, his friends (both Filipinos and other students of color) who attended public school were undervalued by their teachers and were not encouraged to go to college. Instead, they were drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. Bacho went on to law school and worked as an attorney for the Ninth Circuit of Appeals. He was also a journalist in the Philippines reporting on the revolution against then-dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

As an activist, Bacho fought against labor inequalities. Currently as a professor, he teaches AA history and writing where he shares stories about civil rights activists like Filipino American labor leader Larry Itliong.

Possible Inquiry Discussion/Essay Questions

1. How have Filipino Americans stood up against discrimination from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (former INS) and other governmental institutions? What values did they hold that guided their activism?
2. In what way, according to Bacho, did racism in public schools impact the future of countless Pinoy and other students of color after high school?
3. Poor Pinoy families and students of color also were more likely to be drafted during the Vietnam War period than those from high-income families. How did class impact the lives and futures of the young people at this time?
4. Bacho's parents were discriminated against when they tried to purchase a home in a white neighborhood in 1967 Seattle. How are housing patterns in a city impacted by racism and classism and institutional discrimination such as redlining?
5. Many Filipino Americans (e.g., Larry Itliong, Chris Mensalvas) stood up for the civil rights of workers at California farms and Alaska canneries, as well as those living in low-income communities. How did they work to ensure social justice in labor and housing in Seattle's Chinatown? What factors encouraged their advocacy and leadership? ■

Notes

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13. U.S. Census Bureau, "Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2022," (April 18, 2022), www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2022/asian-american-pacific-islander.html; AA subpopulations: (1) 5.1 million Chinese Americans not including Taiwanese Americans; (2) 4.5 million Asian Indian Americans; (3) 4.1 million Filipina/o Americans; (4) 2.2 million Vietnamese Americans; (5) 1.9 million Korean Americans; (6) 1.6 million Japanese Americans; personal email with Peter Bacho who indicated that Filipino Americans may be considered AA, Pacific Islander American, and sometimes Hispanic, Jan. 9, 2023.
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