

Supporting  
ARTICLE

# ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY

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I still remember my stomach clenching, losing my breath, horrified by such violence in the community I call home. On March 16, 2021, a mere twelve miles from my school's campus, several Asian American women were shot point-blank and killed (Shivaram 2022). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate had been on the rise, but this tragedy literally hit home—and I found myself jolted into action. I knew our school and community had to do something, and I began searching for ideas.

Several months later, I read the article "Why a New Law Requiring Asian American History in Schools Is So Significant" by Li Zhou (2021). The article centered on how Illinois would be the first state to require Asian American history to be taught in schools. Why is this revolutionary? As librarians, we understand how knowledge is powerful. In the poignant words of the article's author:

Without such lessons, there's little awareness not only about how Asian Americans have been discriminated against in the past—and how that continues to inform current biases—but also about how Asian Americans have helped to build the country.

The omission, and limited portrayals, of Asian Americans in history lessons establishes and reinforces the message that they aren't part of this country's narrative. (Zhou 2021)

By making sure all voices are heard, especially those who are underrepresented, librarians can be agents of civic engagement. I knew then how my elementary students could bring about justice through awareness and, I hope, prevent further senseless violence spawned from prejudice and ignorance. Collaborating with Emma O'Connor, our school's social studies department head and fourth-grade social studies and English language arts teacher, we began brainstorming how we could include Asian American history in the curriculum.

About the same time I read Li Zhou's article, I finished reading Linda Sue Park's *Prairie Lotus* (Clarion 2020), a middle-grade novel set during the westward expansion in the United States and with a half-Asian girl as the protagonist. I lent my copy to Emma O'Connor, and she and I both agreed that our students needed to read this. In fourth grade, social studies standards include westward expansion. However, there is no requirement to teach the Asian American experience, despite the

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facts that one-fourth of people involved in the Gold Rush were Asian, and thousands of Asians contributed to the transcontinental railroad being built to successfully link the eastern and western U.S. This situation needed to be remedied, and *Prairie Lotus* became the cornerstone of our collaborative unit.

We gathered supplemental material to round out students' learning. Ultimately, our goal was for our learners to see and value the Asian American experience and how it contributes to the overall tapestry of American history. Because the students were studying westward expansion, I chose two historical-fiction picture books by Yin: *Coolies* (Philomel 2001) and its sequel *Brothers* (Philomel 2006). *Coolies* is about the hard work contributed by Chinese immigrants to create the transcontinental railroad—and



Students were thrilled to share their project with their family, friends, and neighbors.



Sarah Sansbury holds up her students' interactive StoryWalk pages.

how they received no credit or gratitude once it was completed. *Brothers* continues the story and gives further depth to the Chinese immigrant experience during westward expansion. After we read the books, I explained how they were historical fiction, but they were based on the experiences of real people. We then watched California Museum's "Gold Mountain: Chinese Californian Stories," a 2020 exhibit video (available on YouTube) about Lim Lip Hong, a Chinese immigrant who worked on the railroad and whose life was almost an exact parallel of that of the older brother protagonist in *Coolies*.

Beyond teaching Asian American history, we wanted to foster within our students empathy and an appreciation for diversity. Because of this, we included Joanna Ho's beautiful picture book *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* (HarperCollins 2021) with illustrations by Dung Ho. It concludes with

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these empowering lines, describing the protagonist's almond-shaped eyes:

My eyes crinkle into crescent moons  
and sparkle like the stars.  
Gold flecks dance and twirl  
while stories whirl  
in their oolong pools,  
carrying tales of the past  
and hope for the future.

My lashes curve like the  
swords of warriors  
and, through them, I see  
kingdoms in the clouds.

My eyes that kiss in the corners  
and glow like warm tea  
are a revolution. (2021, 14–16)

We paired *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* with chapters three and four in *Prairie Lotus*. In these chapters, the main character Hanna tries to hide her almond-shaped eyes behind her bonnet when she goes to school because she frequently experiences negative reactions from strangers (children and adults) when they find out that she is Chinese. Students were asked to explore the thought: If Hanna could read *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, how do you think this book would make her feel? Our fourth-graders told us that Hanna wouldn't feel alone anymore and she wouldn't want to hide her eyes anymore because she would be proud of them. In this simple exercise, our students recognized how powerful and





Librarian Sarah Sansbury and Social Studies Teacher Emma O'Connor collaborated on social-justice-focused StoryWalk®.

necessary it is to have diverse books in our school library—how a book can be a lifeline for someone else.

We also wanted our students to engage personally with the text, to have them “thinking from within the stories” and “thinking beyond the stories” (Read 2021). One of the corresponding activities was students responding to the prompt: “What would you do if you were Hanna’s classmate?” This activity was intended to grow their empathy and allow students a chance to practice the role of an upstander. My favorite response was these kind, sincere words: “I would try and make her feel welcomed. ‘Cause I don’t want anyone to feel left out at a new school. So I’ll try and help someone feel happy about where they are. Make them feel confident. And joyful. So if Hanna was here at this school right now, I [would] try and help her feel so happy and joyful...I’d make her feel welcome.” Our fourth-grader recognized that what Hanna was feeling is what many new students

feel, especially students who may feel like they are “different” or “don’t fit in.”

In addition, we wanted students to appreciate the diversity and uniqueness within themselves. In *Prairie Lotus*, Hanna vacillates back and forth from being ashamed of her appearance to being proud of her almond-shaped black eyes with matching black hair, which matches her recently deceased Chinese-Korean mother. For this reason, we included the book *The Best Part of Me* by Wendy Ewald (Little, Brown 2002) and compared it to *Prairie Lotus* and *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*. At the end of *Prairie Lotus*, Hanna looks at a reflection of herself in a mirror and sees beauty in her unique features. Her shame has been replaced with pride. Furthermore, like the protagonist in the *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, she recognizes that her almond-shaped eyes are more than just beautiful. They connect her to her mother, to her heritage. The students then completed a *The*





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*Best Part of Me* activity in which the students explored what they believed was the best part of them and then shared that reflection with each other. A variety of parts were described with pride and appreciation. One student chose her hair describing it as a “crown on their head.” Another selected her hands which “move so gracefully when I dance,” while another picked his brain “because it holds all of the memories in my life.”

For a culminating project, we wanted to go beyond our school walls, to empower our students and engage our community. We decided to have our students create a StoryWalk of Yin’s picture book *Coolies* to be set up in our local community park.

Librarian Sarah Sansbury and Social Studies Teacher Emma O’Connor collaborated on social-justice-focused StoryWalk®.

After reading *Coolies*, the students discussed what they had learned. The book describes the hard and dangerous work contributed by Chinese immigrants to create the transcontinental railroad—and how they received no praise or acknowledgment once it was completed. In *Coolies* Chris Soentpiet has illustrated a moving scene, based on a real photograph, of the culminating celebration of the railroad’s completion. The book and photo show a group of white men proudly smiling, one holding a champagne bottle. The Chinese workers are depicted on the sidelines, literally marginalized, watching the celebration as outsiders. My students were so moved by this. They all agreed that the treatment of the Chinese workers was completely unfair. This transcontinental railroad had an extremely great influence on the development of the United States we know today, and the hard work and contributions need to be recognized and celebrated—hence the book choice for the StoryWalk project.



Additionally, we wanted the students to contribute to the StoryWalk in a personal way and make it interactive for our community. Two QR codes were attached to every StoryWalk page. When the first QR code was scanned, a video would be pulled up of one of our students reading that page aloud. To give the students even more ownership of the project, the second QR code pulled up a video of the student sharing why they chose that page to read, why that particular page was important to them, or what they personally learned from that page.

However, it would be remiss not to mention our community partners. This project would not have been successful without our collaboration with the local public library and the city's Parks and Recreation Department. I reached out to the public library's head of youth services for help and received an enthusiastic "Yes!" They were thrilled to collaborate with us. Not only did they let us borrow their StoryWalk display stands, but the Friends of the Library also surprised us by generously supplying a hardcover copy of *Prairie Lotus* for every fourth-grader. Likewise, the Parks and Recreation Department were excited to host our StoryWalk. When we installed it, people from three different community organizations came to work together to bring our StoryWalk to life. At that point, it was more than just my school's StoryWalk, it was our community's StoryWalk.

In May 2022 our StoryWalk was recreated and featured at our city's Asian-American Heritage Festival. Then in June, in the same park where we had our original *Coolies* StoryWalk, our city installed not just one, but three StoryWalks scattered throughout that park and another community park. They expanded their reach to honor and celebrate Juneteenth (City of Dunwoody

2022). Each of these new StoryWalks featured the picture book *All Different Now*, written by Angela Johnson and illustrated by E. B. Lewis (Simon & Schuster 2014). I spoke to Lynn Deutsch, our city's mayor, to talk about the StoryWalk. She told me that my students' StoryWalk presented a whole new opportunity to showcase historical events as well as another way the City of Dunwoody could partner with the library to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity in our community. "Everyone needs to feel seen," she explained, "...and when you involve children, that gets parents involved, and then they bring their friends, the grandparents, aunts, uncles...and it just grows from there" (Deutsch 2022).

The ultimate goal was for my students to see and value the Asian American experience that contributes to the overall tapestry of American history. They empathized with the main character Hanna in *Prairie Lotus*, who felt alone and ostracized because of prejudiced interactions versus feeling accepted and proud of her Asian identity. Additionally, the students were outraged that Chinese workers



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were not invited to or recognized during the celebration of the railroad being finished. Their study of the westward expansion went beyond learning the standards: It fostered an urge for social justice. Empowered with knowledge and given an avenue to share that knowledge, our students were able to expose injustices committed and to have the contributions of Asian Americans be acknowledged and appreciated.

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