



Why and How Should We Teach Asian American History? An Interview with Dr. Erika Lee

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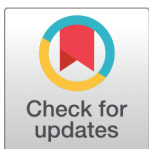
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sohyun An

I serve as Professor of social studies education at Kennesaw State University. I originally came from South Korea and taught social studies in middle and high schools in Korea. In US, I have been teaching and researching in the field of social studies teacher education. My work is informed by scholarship on critical race theories, social justice education, and global citizenship. As a critical race scholar, social studies teacher educator, and immigrant mother of Asian American children, I study, teach, and parent with a hope for anti-racist, anti-oppressive school and society for all children. My current research project is a parentcrit/critical race parenting research in which I as a parent-researcher seek to learn from my child-participants regarding how children make sense of and respond to race/ism and white supremacy in school and society.

Ritu Radhakrishnan

I serve as Associate Professor, SUNY Oswego, Oswego, NY. My ultimate goal is to foster activist teachers who seek to be agents of change and to expand K-12 social studies curricula to include representation, agency, and voice. This comes from teaching both 9-12 grade and 5-6th grade social studies/language arts. My own professional development efforts have been focused on expanding the social studies curricula to promote equity and justice. I examine how an intersection of aesthetics, art education, and children's and young adult literature connect to K-12 students' identities, and development of their agency and voice through various learning experiences. This includes after school/extracurricular programming. Outside of my professional pursuits, I enjoy all forms of dance and movement, art galleries and exhibits (especially



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upcoming artists), tennis, and being a Chicago Bulls and Bears fan.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Erika Lee is a Professor of History and Asian American Studies and Director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Currently serving as President-Elect of the Organization of American Historians, she recently testified before Congress in its historic hearings on anti-Asian discrimination and violence. She is the author of award-winning books including *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (2003), *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (2010), and *The Making of Asian America: A History* (2015). She recently published *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (2019).

Dr. Lee is an active public scholar. She launched and oversees the National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Immigrant Stories Project; this project works with recent immigrants and refugees to collect, preserve, and share their experiences with a new multilingual digital story-telling website (immigrantstories.umn.edu). She also founded and directs the Immigrants in COVID America project, documenting the impact of the pandemic on immigrants and refugees (<https://immigrantcovid.umn.edu/>) and founded and co-organized the #ImmigrationSyllabus project (www.immigrationsyllabus.umn.edu), a digital educational resource offering historical perspectives to contemporary immigration debates.

We, Sohyun An and Ritu Radhakrishnan, interviewed Dr. Erika Lee to gain insight regarding researching and teaching about Asian American history. The interview was conducted on February 11, 2021. Here, we summarize the interview with four themes emerged from our conversation.

RESEARCHING ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY

For me, the study of history is a means to better understand not just how we got here but also what we can do. It is a form of advocacy, antiracism, and activism. For example, my research on Angel Island [the immigration station that processed 1 million immigrants entering the U.S. through San Francisco from 1910 to 1940,] started as part family history and part of my trying to rectify the absence and the invisibility of Asian Americans, like my family members, in the larger narrative of American history.

I had grown up in the Bay area but did not know anything about Angel Island. Driving past it every time we would go into San Francisco Chinatown, I wondered “What is that big island out there?” How many history classes have I taken? Yet I didn’t learn anything about Angel Island in school. Also, as a family, we weren’t supposed to talk about it because we had been conditioned to understand that experience as (a) not important or (b) shameful.

So, one of the motivations around researching and writing about Angel Island was to change that for future generations. I was just joining with many other historians, commu-



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nity scholars and activists who had been doing this for decades, so I was not doing anything new. But what was new was that I was able to access newly-released government files relating to Angel Island which helped me tell a new story. This was not just about Chinese immigrants who were unjustly detained at the immigration station. When I was going through these records, I would come across not a Chinese name, but someone from the Philippines, someone from India, someone from Mexico, so I knew that there was this much greater story out there. And the motivation was to continue to uplift and amplify these community histories as well.

RESEARCHING HISTORY OF XENOPHOBIA IN THE UNITED STATES

Xenophobia is very American. It is also very human. My new book, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*, is about these very dark chapters in American history. Yet I wrote this book with a belief that if we know this history and if we do the work needed to not just understand it but understand how the root causes continue to shape our society today, then we can conquer it.

With this book, I had trouble figuring out how to end. While identifying the continuation of root causes and legacies of xenophobia is important, I also wanted to identify hope. I was witnessing, for example, a really important development that happened during the Trump years. That was in my view the expansion of interfaith, cross-racial, interracial — all sorts of coalitions. When I participated in Stop the Muslim Ban protests, for example, I could see a huge range of people. Similarly, in the protests against family separation, the Muslim ban people were there, as well as many others. And I think that has been incredibly important. I don't think that there'd be all of these changes that we're seeing with the Biden administration without that activism. So, there is hope!

But then again, after Biden was elected, there was the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Biden has proposed many policy changes, but the magnitude of what's in place is much greater than even those of us who were keeping track of all of this ever knew. Even though Trump is not president anymore, Trumpism — which is white supremacist and racist and xenophobic—is alive and well. It is spreading across to non-whites, and it is very, very vibrant amongst the younger generation. Unfortunately, it is not going to “die out.”

I remember historian and author Ibram X. Kendi once described how racism and anti-racism are happening on parallel tracks. I think the same thing is true with xenophobia. That is, the nation-of-immigrants' ideals coexist with nativist, xenophobic ideals of how immigrants are a threat and we need to stop them.

ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Biden explicitly condemned anti-Asian xenophobia and racism. It's quite historic because there has not been any other president who has so explicitly condemned anti-Asian xenophobia at a time when it was ongoing. Of course, President Reagan and Clinton were



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involved in the [Japanese. American] Redress Movement, signing official proclamations that apologized for Japanese American incarceration.¹ But that was after several decades of anti-Asian violence. President George W. Bush had his famous “Islam is Peace” speech where he condemned anti-Muslim hatred.² But his government’s policies put in place a whole slew of surveillance and arrests. So, it’s quite a new and positive change.

Yet even though President Trump has gone, the anti-Asian and, specifically, anti-Chinese racism that he and his conservative allies and his followers promoted in the wake of pandemic, are not going to go away anytime soon. It is because they predated him. So now, we need to see if the administration can and will do anything other than the statement.

TEACHING AGAINST XENOPHOBIA INCLUDING ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

K-12 teachers are at the front lines of doing so much, too much, that society is asking them to do. So, I feel very torn talking about what teachers “should” do. What I want to underscore though is that we can’t understand American history without “other” histories. Absolutely African American history and slavery, American Indian history, also the stories of workers, women, migration, and the LGBTQ+ community. Obviously, we can’t teach all of different groups and experiences for every time period. But we can make choices to include BIPOC histories whenever and wherever possible, integrate them into the core subjects rather than treating them as something “extra.” If at all possible, we’d better teach history from and rooting it in ethnic studies, instead of the presidents.

LESSONS WE LEARNED

After our discussion with Dr. Lee, we realized the lack of experiences and perspectives of people with Asian descent in the social studies curriculum is not only a pervasive and continued issue but has present day consequences. Anti-Asian rhetoric did not begin with COVID-19; it just highlighted it. Recent attention to the works of Dr. Sues depicting Asians through negative and offensive stereotypes has finally received a public condemnation. Initiated by the Dr. Sues Enterprise, six books depicting offensive stereotypes to Africans and Asians will no longer be published. Dr. Lee’s words suggest that current and future social studies teachers need more background and support regarding Asian ethnic studies in our nation’s history. K-16 social studies curriculum needs to be continually re-envisioned. We’ve witnessed the token monthly acknowledgement of marginalized groups; February is Black History Month; May is Asian Heritage Month. These monthly recognitions are tacit agreements to remove histories of BIPOC from “U.S. History” or “Canadian history.” Asian American history is U.S. History. Asian Canadian history is Canadian history. Social Studies is Ethnic Studies; we should acknowledge this as we look to the future of Social Studies Education.

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NOTES

1. The Redress Movement refers to efforts to obtain the restitution of civil rights, an apology, and/or monetary compensation from the U.S. government during the six decades that followed the World War II mass removal and confinement of Japanese Americans. Early campaigns emphasized the violation of constitutional rights, lost property, and the repeal of anti-Japanese legislation. 1960s activists linked the wartime detention camps to contemporary racist and colonial policies. In the late 1970s three organizations pursued redress in court and in Congress, culminating in the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, providing a national apology and individual payments of \$20,000 to surviving detainees.

2. On September 17, 2001, less than a week following the September 11th terrorist attacks, then-President George W. Bush gave a speech at the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C. addressing the treatment of Muslims in the United States. There he stated, “Islam is Peace.”