

**Invisibility is Not a Natural State for Anyone: (Re)Constructing
Narratives of Japanese American Incarceration in Elementary Classrooms**

Abstract

Difficult histories that may contradict national values are rarely taught in elementary schools. This comparative study of two elementary educators examines their pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Japanese American incarceration as difficult history. Framed by Asian American critical race theory, the teachers' practices revealed challenges in teaching Japanese American incarceration as an example of a difficult history. The author interrogates the role of counternarratives and empathy in teaching difficult histories, particularly with young children, and offers suggestions for pedagogies of discomfort that reveal difficult histories while fostering critical hope.

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To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone. (Yamada, 1981, p. 35)

How and when to teach students about difficult histories has long been a subject of contention in social studies education. Difficult histories are those historical narratives of the nation-state that may seem to contradict purported values and ideals and/or may cause controversy or conflict. In the United States, most research on difficult histories has focused on the secondary learning of enslavement and the Holocaust through racial and religious binaries, with the scant scholarship on elementary education featuring resources and pedagogical approaches rather than empirical classroom examples. While US history curriculum at all levels tends to avoid racial conflict in favor of progressive narratives centered on US exceptionalism and individualism (Brown & Brown, 2015), narratives often become even more sanitized and simplistic with younger learners and teachers may intentionally avoid the teaching of histories that disrupt idyllic notions of the United States as the land of the free and the home of the brave.

In this paper, I draw from scholarship on difficult histories and counternarratives to examine the pedagogical roles of hope and empathy in the teaching of Japanese American incarceration, a difficult history often omitted from PK-12 curriculum. This study centers on the teaching of the difficult history of Japanese American incarcerationⁱ through a comparative case study of two elementary teachers. First, I review the scholarship on teaching difficult histories in school settings and explore Japanese American incarceration as a difficult history in need of greater curricular attention. Second, I situate this work on difficult histories in Asian American critical race theory

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and describe the teacher participants and their classroom contexts. Third, I describe how the teachers taught Japanese American incarceration, beginning with the same piece of children's literature but implementing starkly different approaches toward this difficult history. Lastly, I consider how the teachers might have approached the teaching of incarceration differently through a pedagogy of discomfort with the ultimate goal of critical hope.

Teaching Difficult Histories

In this paper, difficult histories are defined as historical narratives central to a nation's history, often involving collective or state-sanctioned violence, that tend to refute broadly accepted versions of the past and/or stated national values, may connect with contemporary problems, and create disequilibria that challenge existing historical understandings (Gross & Terra, 2018a). How educators should approach the teaching of difficult histories in public schools and other educational settings has been the subject of worldwide study (Gross & Terra, 2018b). In US history, discussions around difficult history often center on two examples: the transatlantic slave trade and the Holocaust. The historical significance of enslavement and the Holocaust are rarely disputed; what remains unclear is how the horrific violence of these and other difficult histories should be described in the classroom, particularly with young learners (Davies, 2000).

Many scholars have explored representations of enslavement and the Holocaust in secondary curriculum (Brown & Brown, 2010; Davies, 2000; Eckmann, 2010). Far less scholarship has been devoted to the study of these and other difficult histories at the elementary level. The research that does exist is concentrated on theoretical approaches to instruction and curriculum, such as recommended trade books and pedagogical

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practices (Groce, 2009; Shuster, 2018; Thomas et al., 2016), rather than empirical study. Given the notable decline in the amount of instructional time dedicated to the general teaching of social studies (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012), elementary social studies educators may be less inclined to pursue the teaching of difficult histories for myriad reasons, including a lack of content knowledge and/or developmentally appropriate resources, fear of upsetting parents, and limited time to teach substantive social studies on a regular basis.

Some scholars have argued that difficult histories should deliberately be avoided, as children cannot handle the uncomfortable truths of history and should be allowed to remain innocent (Darvin, 2008). White adults more frequently believe that young children are incapable of understanding the implications of race and racism central to such histories (Epstein, 2010; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001) and therefore may conclude that histories without happy endings would distress and even traumatize youth. This perspective is evident in most popular texts and trade books, which contain sanitized narratives devoid of conflict that avoid any examination of systemic and active oppression. Instead, these books depict neatly resolved injustices that have led to racial harmony in the present (Ching, 2005; Keenan, 2019), often directly contradicting the ongoing acts of violence and discrimination that persist in US society and are particularly salient in the experiences of marginalized groups. Another argument for avoidance is that histories like the Holocaust are too horrific and complex for children to adequately understand, so they should not be introduced at all (Totten, 1999).

In contrast, supporters of teaching difficult histories to children have often argued for their instructive nature: to learn lessons from the past, so that we do not forget and do

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not repeat our mistakes (Rodríguez, 2019). In the words of philosopher George Santayana (1906), “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 284).

However, some historians have critiqued this “Santayanan purpose” (VanSledright, 1997). The histories which are considered most difficult to broach with young children (enslavement, genocide, denial of civil rights) are often addressed in their most extreme form and with little historical or sociopolitical context. Novick (2000) has argued that ordinary life lessons are not likely to be drawn from such extraordinary events; in fact, there is more to learn about the ease with which people can become victimizers “from the behavior of normal Americans in normal times than from the behavior of the SS in wartime” (p. 13). Other historians have argued that history should not be searched for practical lessons due to “the inexhaustible novelty of circumstances and combination of causes” (Geyl, 1955, p. 84), since no two situations in human history are ever identical. Nonetheless, drawing from the optimism of the Santayanan purpose of history and its aspirations for positive change in the future, difficult histories such as the Holocaust are often viewed by educators as a form of moral and social justice education that help students develop a deeper understanding of human rights (Donnelly, 2006; Lindquist, 2011). Some educators of young learners believe that teaching difficult histories may inspire students to be “upstanders” or advocates who actively fight against the injustices they witness rather than being passive bystanders (Eckmann, 2010; Marks, 2017).

Children's literature is a common curricular tool for the teaching of difficult histories to young children. Indeed, one of the functions of children's literature is "to explain and interpret national histories - histories that involve invasion, conquest, violence, and assimilation" (Bradford, 2007, p. 97). The last 25 years have witnessed a

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significant increase in the number of multicultural picture books that offer elementary educators a range of perspectives that are missing from traditional elementary social studies curriculum. However, like their textbook predecessors, many of these books contain happy, uncomplicated endings that continue to downplay racism, discrimination, and injustice (Clark, 2003; Rodríguez, 2018; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018; Thomas et al., 2016).

The Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration

Japanese American incarceration is a difficult history that continues to elicit polarized perspectives. After Japanese forces bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan. However, in anticipation of a possible war with Japan, the Office of Naval Intelligence and the Federal Bureau of Investigation had already been conducting surveillance on Japanese American communities for nearly a decade. Consequently, within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US government consulted prepared lists of possible “enemy aliens” and rapidly apprehended the mostly male community leaders included on these lists (Lee, 2015). In spite of this early intervention, President Roosevelt was pressured to take more drastic measures against Japanese American communities. Fomented by decades of anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast of the United States, he issued Executive Order 9066 (EO 9066) on February 19, 1942.

EO 9066 (1942) gave the secretary of war and his military commanders the power to exclude any and all persons, citizens, and aliens from designated areas to provide security against sabotage and espionage out of military necessity. Shortly thereafter, US

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citizens of Japanese descent were prohibited from living, working, or traveling on the West Coast (Nakanishi, 1993). Approximately 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were US citizens, were forced to leave their homes and belongings and board buses that eventually took them to isolated prison camps surrounded by barbed wire. Most of these Japanese Americans went to one of 10 War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps, all located in extremely inhospitable areas ranging from swampland to deserts (Lee, 2015). The dehumanizing conditions in these camps have been detailed by a range of individuals, from historians to survivors.

While the economic and racist motivations for Japanese American incarceration were clear from the outset, revelations in the decades since demonstrate why teachers may experience difficulty teaching this content. For example, 19 US citizens were discovered to be agents of Japan and were arrested during World War II (WWII); all of these individuals were white. Although Hawai'i was the site of Japan's attack, less than two percent of Hawai'i's Japanese population was deprived of their liberty due to the impact such removal would have had on the islands' economy (Daniels, 1971). The perceived threat and subsequent removal of West Coast Japanese Americans while Japanese Hawaiians were allowed to stay in their homes (albeit with substantial restrictions) seems illogical in this context. Moreover, the Supreme Court decisions of *Ex parte Endo* (1944) and *Korematsu v. United States* (1944) reveal the basic constitutional violations faced by incarcerated Japanese Americans. Additionally, the report submitted by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) (appointed by the US Congress in 1980 to conduct an official study of EO 9066) determined in no uncertain terms that the actions of the US government "were motivated

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by racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership” (Civil Liberties Act, 1987). Yet many teachers, and particularly elementary educators whose traditional teacher preparation programs offer few opportunities to learn social studies content (Bolick et al., 2010), may be unaware of the many contradictions of Japanese American incarceration.

Like the Holocaust and enslavement, Japanese American incarceration was considered “a distant and past tragedy” (Nakanishi, 1993, p. 10). However, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, parallels were made between the treatment of Arabs and Muslims and Japanese Americans during WWII (Saito, 2001; Volpp, 2005). In 2015, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested a ban against Muslim immigrants, citing EO 9066 as a legal precedent for extreme measures in the name of national security (Keneally, 2015). As president, Trump’s “Muslim Ban” drew renewed comparisons to Japanese American incarceration, resulting in public condemnations from the children of Japanese American prisoners (Korematsu, 2017; Takei, 2016). Such comparisons echo Gross and Terra’s (2018a) assertion that difficult histories connect with problems in the present.

Although the United States government has taken multiple steps to acknowledge the unconstitutionality of EO 9066 (e.g., the Civil Liberties Act of 1987), the incarceration-as-precedent stance upheld by the Trump administration demonstrates the persistent discourse of Japanese American incarceration as justified. Even in sites with direct ties to Japanese American incarceration, this history may be perceived as difficult or controversial rather than plainly unconstitutional; for example, Camicia (2008) described the tensions in a Northwestern US town that was the first site of Japanese

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American removal and is home to a federal memorial park in remembrance of incarceration. Despite the community's longstanding connections to and activism against Japanese American incarceration, some community members claimed that local schools' curriculum indoctrinated students to "hate America" (Camicia, 2008, p. 310).

Consequently, some teachers may avoid incarceration histories that make US actors look like the "bad guys" (Rodríguez, 2017, p. 19) in favor of narratives that spotlight Japanese American resiliency or military accomplishments (An, 2016).

Further complicating instructional approaches to Japanese American incarceration for young learners is the avoidance of blame found in children's literature about the topic. Many children's books utilize techniques such as the passive voice to avoid identifying the US government as the perpetrator of injustice and violence against its own citizens (Rodríguez, 2018; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018) or describe Japanese Americans as silently and passively accepting the violations of their civil rights (Wee et al., 2018). Although a few texts are overtly political in their exploration of racial politics, most picture books juxtapose the normalized lives of children in prison camps against the undoubtedly abnormal experience of EO 9066 and its aftermath (Streamas, 1997) without deeply exploring the motivations behind EO 9066.

Asian Critical Race Theory

This study is undergirded by Asian American critical race theory (AsianCrit), both in theory and in method. AsianCrit is one of several extensions of critical race theory (CRT), initially a legal studies framework founded on the understanding that racism is a normal part of US society and racial inequality is ever-present in a range of

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US institutions (Bell, 1992), including schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Chang (1993) critiqued CRT's Black/white paradigm for failing to acknowledge the complexity of the United States' racial hierarchy (Gotanda, 1995) and the unique nativistic racism and discrimination faced by Asian Americans (Ancheta, 1998). In recognition of CRT's failure to address Asian American issues, Chang (1993) proposed an AsianCrit approach to legal scholarship that attended to the particularities of Asian American histories and experiences. In education, AsianCrit can reveal the invisibility of Asian Americans in the curriculum and historical narrative, as well as their tenuous relationship with citizenship (An, 2016; Rodríguez, 2018, 2019).

Drawing from CRT applications in educational scholarship, Iftikar and Museus (2018) created an AsianCrit framework in education comprised of seven interrelated tenets that demonstrate

how White supremacy maintains ideological tropes that structure racialized experiences and identities, interacts with global colonial and imperial projects to influence Asian American experiences, and shapes how racially marginalized people navigate, engage with, and utilize the racial categories through which White supremacy attempts to homogenize and essentialize them. (p. 940)

This study highlights the AsianCrit tenets of (re)constructive history and story, theory, and praxis in regard to the teaching of Japanese American incarceration.

(Re)constructive history aims to transcend the invisibility of Asian Americans in the US historical narrative through the creation of a collective narrative that emphasizes their own voices and experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Japanese American incarceration and Chinese exclusion are the two events in Asian American history that are most often addressed in US history curriculum and educational standards (An, 2016; Harada, 2000). However, the teaching of these histories often follows the archetypal

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narrative template of US progress (Suh et al., 2015), highlighting male narratives and relegating women and children to supporting if not invisible roles bound by the home (Okimoto, 1997). These and other Asian American historical narratives are often limited in scope, perpetuate the model minority stereotype through an emphasis on economic and academic success, and portray Asian Americans as passive rather than active agents who did not resist inhumane working conditions or wartime imprisonment. These narratives simultaneously ignore how white business owners benefitted economically from the exploitation of and discrimination against Asian American laborers.

Additionally, this study engages the AsianCrit tenet of *story, theory, and praxis*. CRT recognizes stories as an essential tool for the survival and liberation of oppressed groups; within CRT, stories are often used as a means of psychic self-preservation and/or to lessen members of oppressed groups' own subordination. Furthermore, when members of oppressed groups share their stories, such storytelling may shatter complacency, challenge the status quo, and engage conscience (Delgado, 1989). Story, theory, and praxis are three important and interconnected elements in analysis and advocacy, as "stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes" (Ifitkar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). Counterstories are "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32) that expose, analyze, and challenge master narratives. In the US history taught in schools, the master narrative is almost exclusively Eurocentric and centered on the United States' supposed legacy of expanding democracy (Epstein, 2010), distorting, omitting, and stereotyping the experiences of people of color (Yosso, 2002).

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As an AsianCrit scholar who focuses on the teaching of Asian American and other marginalized histories, forefronting the work and voices of Asian American teachers is central to my research. As an intraracially mixed Asian American, I consider myself especially attuned to the diversity of Asian America as well as to the range of sociopolitical engagement and critical consciousness present in Asian American communities. Seeking out participants for my broader study of Asian American elementary teachers involved many long conversations about our respective immigrant families, cultural and ethnic experiences, and identities, which often brought our similarities and differences to the fore (Rodríguez, 2019; Rodríguez & Kim, 2019). In this article, I highlight two Asian American elementary teachers' motivations and pedagogical decisions regarding the teaching of Japanese American incarceration.

Elyse & Virginia: A Comparative Case Study

This case study examines how Elyse and Virginia, two teachers who self-identified as Asian American, taught Japanese American incarceration to young learners, using the same children's book as a starting point. Both were experienced elementary educators who committed to the teaching of Asian American histories during the spring of 2016. AsianCrit was imperative in the selection of participants, in the formulation of interview questions, in our interactions throughout the study, and in the analysis of data, as I sought to center racial realities at the core of Asian American experiences while also attempting to understand how these teachers' cultural identities and personal histories impacted how they (re)constructed Asian American narratives in whitestream curriculum.

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Elyse Huynh was a Vietnamese American third grade teacher. Her parents fled Vietnam during the fall of Saigon in 1975 and were rescued by a German naval ship; Elyse was born soon afterward in Germany, where she grew up speaking German and Vietnamese. After kindergarten, her family immigrated to the East Coast of the United States, where she learned English. Elyse received her bachelor's degree in sociology from a Texas public university, then completed a post-baccalaureate program in elementary education. At the time of this study, she had taught elementary students for 10 years.

Virginia Ye was a Chinese American second grade teacher. She was born in the suburb of a Texas metropolis to parents who immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong. Virginia's family was part of a tight-knit Chinese American community and she recalled a substantial population of Chinese Americans in the schools she attended. She graduated from a traditional teacher preparation program and had recently completed a literacy master's degree. At the time of this study, she had taught elementary students for eight years.

Elyse and Virginia taught in the same urban school district in Texas and had a great deal of curricular freedom. Elyse taught at a small elementary campus embedded in a centrally located, wealthy, and largely white neighborhood. Her school had a disproportionately large percentage of Asian/Asian American students due to university graduate student housing located within the school's boundaries. In contrast, Virginia taught at a sprawling Title I school comprised exclusively of Latinx and Black students in a part of the city with more affordable housing. Both Elyse and Virginia were the only Asian American teachers on their respective campuses.

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In their initial interviews, Elyse and Virginia revealed that they never learned Asian American histories in school. Their willingness to embark upon the teaching of these histories regardless of their limited content knowledge was essential to their selection for participation in this study, yet also presented a challenge in terms of their pedagogical approaches to topics with which they were unfamiliar. They had limited instructional resources at hand as these histories were not a part of district-provided curriculum. Consequently, they relied heavily on children's literature and primary sources to support student learning of Japanese American incarceration.

Data collection included three semi-structured interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the spring 2016 academic semester. The first interview focused on the participants' ethnic and cultural backgrounds and racialized experiences growing up. The second interview explored their lives as educators, to learn about their journeys to the classroom and to establish school contexts and teaching philosophies. The third interview occurred at the end of the school year, providing an opportunity to reflect on their teaching of Asian American history and the personal impact of such work. Each interview lasted one to three hours and was recorded and transcribed; transcriptions were provided to the participants afterward for member checking. Multiple classroom observations occurred during lessons related to Asian American history; these observations were typically followed by informal debrief interviews as the teachers' schedules permitted and included the collection of teacher- and student-generated classroom artifacts. Observations and informal interviews were recorded, transcribed, and provided to the participants for feedback. This paper focuses on the teachers' instructional

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units on Japanese American incarceration, which began with the same piece of children's literature: Yoshida Uchida's (1996) *The Bracelet*.

Teaching the Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration

The Bracelet is one of the first picture books about Japanese American incarceration to be used widely in US public schools, largely due to its inclusion in basal textbooks by national publishers. The author, Yoshiko Uchida, was a second-generation Japanese American (*nisei*) who wrote nearly 30 books about the Japanese American experience (Harada, 1996). *The Bracelet* is a piece of historical fiction about a Japanese American family that lives in California and is forced to leave their home to go to the Tanforan Assembly Center. Tanforan and 15 other temporary “assembly centers” were built in 1942 to transition Japanese Americans to restricted zones still under construction (Yang Murray, 2000). *The Bracelet* was provided to Elyse and Virginia by their school district to promote Asian Pacific Heritage Month in May, but the lessons used by each teacher were self-designed with no district influence.

During their lessons with *The Bracelet*, classroom observations exposed the teachers' level of dis/comfort with difficult histories. Elyse avoided issues related to discrimination and racism by instead emphasizing social and emotional learning (SEL), a popular educational intervention that was the subject of a districtwide initiative focused on developing skills to understand and manage emotions in an effort to increase responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). In contrast, Virginia was more explicit in her attention to the race-based nature of WWII incarceration and encouraged her students to deeply examine the

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motivations behind incarceration, its impact on those affected, and connections to other groups in the past and present. Both teachers ended their units on Japanese American incarceration with highly engaging small group projects that showcased student learning and agency. However, in spite of their distinct approaches to the text and final projects, both teachers tread lightly on the aspects of Japanese American incarceration that comprise difficult history.

The Bracelet as a Social-Emotional Story

Before teaching her first lesson about Japanese American incarceration, Elyse described the detachment she felt from US history in her own K-12 schooling: “I just didn’t connect with it.” As a teacher, she had little experience teaching social studies and didn’t consider herself to be strong in the subject area; the year this study took place was her third year teaching social studies in her self-contained third grade classroom, and her instructional focus was typically limited to local communities. Nonetheless, Elyse described herself as “personally invested” in teaching Japanese American incarceration and other Asian American histories because of her racial identity, and was enthusiastic about her Asian American history lessons throughout the semester.

The lesson in which Elyse read *The Bracelet* was her first lesson related to Asian American history. However, she did not highlight this new Asian American perspective. As she introduced the book, she explained, “Today’s story is going to conjure up some (social-emotional learning) types of ideas on what a friend is, how we should treat people, how we should treat strangers, and judging others.” Although she would later explicitly refer to this lesson as the beginning of her Asian American history unit, Elyse

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did not describe the book to her students as based on historical events nor did she introduce the government as the entity responsible for the injustices the book depicted. Consequently, her first Asian American history lesson did not address the wartime context nor the rationale for incarceration. Instead, she framed the text as a story rather than historical fiction based on real life events and directed student thinking toward friendship and judgments.

During the read aloud, Elyse paused occasionally to check student understanding and to pose questions that drew from the events in the text. The moments she selected for these informal comprehension assessments were often tied to the emotions experienced by the main character, a Japanese American girl named Emi. Several pages into *The Bracelet*, after Emi says goodbye to her friend Laurie before leaving for Tanforan, she slams the door shut. Elyse summarized, “Her action is slamming the door. She went from feeling one way to a different way. How is she feeling now?” Students responded that Emi was mad, and rather than inquire *why* Emi was mad, Elyse asked students to raise their hands if they had ever slammed a door. “Is it okay to feel mad?” she probed. Students answered affirmatively and she reminded them,

It’s the choices we make when we’re feeling that way... it’s okay to have strong feelings, but when you are feeling very sad or very angry, one thing that won’t hurt anyone is you can go scream into a pillow.

Elyse made connections between her students’ daily lives and the emotional responses expressed in the book without delving into the reasons behind the story’s events.

Moreover, she did not explicate or paraphrase anything related to the historical events of the book. By avoiding the cause of Emi’s frustration and focusing solely on its expression, Elyse eluded precisely what makes Japanese American incarceration a

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difficult history: innocent Japanese Americans, including children like Emi, were forced by the government to leave their homes due to unfounded racist wartime hysteria.

Furthermore, as a group, Elyse's students did not appear to relate to Emi's character nor empathize with the experiences of Emi's family. After reading about Emi's family's arrival to the Tanforan stables, Elyse attempted to propose a similar situation for her students to consider. "What if I said, 'All the kids with blonde hair, pack up your bags and move to the horse stables!'" Most students replied with excitement as some students volunteered, "Can I go, too?" and "I want to go!" Unexpectedly, the students' dialogue focused on adventure and fun, rather than reflection on the book's events. Elyse redirected some rambunctious students but did not reiterate the dehumanizing treatment of Japanese Americans suddenly housed in abandoned horse stables, and instead resumed reading. She paused several pages later when Emi loses the bracelet given to her by Laurie in the opening scene of the book and asked her students, "How is [Emi] feeling?" After one student replied, "Sad," Elyse followed up with, "Have you ever lost anything that's important to you?" Responses ranged widely, as some students described material losses like tablets and gift cards while others described familial losses.

Shortly afterward, Elyse concluded the primary text of *The Bracelet*. Reflecting the discomfort with history she expressed in her initial interview, she read the afterword quickly, providing no clarification and asking no questions to check for student understanding, a noticeable change from her preceding interactions with the book. "So how does the government feel now, looking back on history, about what they did?" she concluded. "Sad, really, really sad," several students answered. Elyse did not prompt them for further description and ended the lesson by assigning small-group projects that

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asked students to consider what objects they might take with them if they had to leave home suddenly. Students' projects demonstrated a shallow understanding about EO 9066, as some students described bringing bombs and computers while others listed sentimental and practical objects, with little critique from Elyse regarding objects that would not be allowed or feasible for travel.

In spite of Elyse's admitted focus on SEL over historical content, her students' conversations addressed emotions only superficially. Elyse did not probe students for further explanation beyond the limited emotional adjectives they volunteered, and students rarely explored the causes of the emotions expressed by Emi in *The Bracelet*. Ultimately, Elyse's lack of content knowledge and avoidance of explanations regarding Japanese American removal resulted in an erasure of the difficult history described in the book. Elyse and her students focused on their own affective responses, remaining emotionally comfortable and failing to emphasize the institutional injustice of Japanese American removal and incarceration.

The Bracelet as Part of the Ongoing Fight for Civil Rights

Virginia began her unit on Japanese American incarceration shortly after finishing a month-long unit on the long African American civil rights movement (Hall, 2005) with her second grade students. Virginia considered her inclusion of Asian American history to be a natural extension of the work she had already been doing with her class: "We had talked about discrimination and segregation in a lot of different contexts. I feel like [Japanese American incarceration] was a really good example of how discrimination went horribly wrong." Unlike Elyse, Virginia had experience teaching Japanese American incarceration. The previous schoolyear, she taught the chapter book *Sylvia &*

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Aki (Conkling, 2011), which is about a Japanese American family imprisoned in Poston, Arizona, to her third grade class and had a small collection of resources about Japanese American incarceration. Subsequently, she was relatively knowledgeable about the historical content and context regarding this event and therefore added *Sylvia & Aki* to her curriculum as the final whole-class read aloud book for the school year.

Virginia described wanting her students to recognize that the fight for civil rights was “not just a Black and white issue.” Before reading aloud *The Bracelet*, she summarized the bombing of Pearl Harbor and provided students with a brief overview of WWII before presenting her students with a “picture flood” of Library of Congress primary sources of Japanese Americans during EO 9066. These primary sources included posters of the exclusion order, a storefront sign declaring “I am an American,” and a picture of a family in their section of the barracks at the Manzanar camp. She told her students to examine the images closely and think aloud; as they moved around the room and murmured questions to themselves and their peers, she recorded their questions on sticky notes. The next day, prior to reading *The Bracelet*, she reviewed the student-generated questions and posted them adjacent to the carpet where students gathered for read alouds. As she read, she called attention to sections of text related to students’ questions: “Listen carefully to this part. This is gonna help us answer some of our questions.”

Virginia's forefronting of students’ curiosities and questions prior to reading *The Bracelet* engaged them deeply with the text. For example, in response to the question, “Who made them go to the camp?” generated during the previous day’s picture flood, a student murmured to herself, “The *government* made them go to the camp” as Virginia

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read aloud. This observation resulted in a long series of student comments: “They’re going to a prison camp for no reason!” “And because how their faces look!” “They’re being sent to other places just ‘cause how they look and they can’t go to places cause of how they look!” Students concluded that the Japanese American family in the story “didn’t do nothing wrong” and the US government was “just taking them ‘cause of the way they look.” As she continued reading, Virginia's students made connections to the government’s differential treatment of African and Native Americans, demonstrating their temporal understanding of discrimination in the United States. These conversations demonstrated a level of historical depth absent in Elyse's classroom, as Virginia's students empathized deeply with Emi and her family and recognized that similar injustices had occurred with other groups across space and place.

At the close of her lesson with *The Bracelet*, Virginia urged her students to speak out against injustice:

I want you to realize that you have a voice and you can say something about all of these things that you see are unfair. You can talk about what you see with Japanese Americans...your words matter, your voices matter.

Virginia clearly positioned her students as agents of change in their communities and urged them to speak out against injustice, moving from the identification of injustice directly to hope and action. Virginia's purpose in teaching multiple difficult histories was to inspire students to become changemakers; such inscription of hope is one of the most common idealized outcomes of learning (Britzman, 2000). However, as Freire (1994) reminded us, though hope is a necessary ontological need, hope alone is not enough to overcome centuries of injustice and oppression, particularly when those injustices and oppressions are mechanisms of the state during times of war.

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The End of the Units and the Disappearance of the Counternarrative

Both Elyse and Virginia ended their units on Japanese American incarceration with engaging small group projects: Elyse's students conducted WWII research that culminated in the creation of stop-motion animations while Virginia's students scripted and recorded podcasts. A week after reading *The Bracelet*, Elyse's students brainstormed topics of interest related to WWII on which to conduct further research, three of which were directly related to *The Bracelet*: life for kids in WRA camps, EO 9066, and general information about the WRA camps. Elyse provided each group of students with a list of guiding questions and a set of resources to direct their research. Over three days, group members took notes and followed detailed instructions to create their stop-motion animations, including the creation of characters in charge of narration, background and prop design, and providing answers to the guiding questions.

The final stop-motion animations ranged widely in content and presentation. Students delivered information inconsistently during their presentations: some animations were driven by silly character action while others presented information more directly and with a somber tone. The stop-motion animation about general WRA camp information, for example, was narrated by mermaids, with camp life depicted underwater. In contrast, the group that researched EO 9066 drew heavily from the readings provided, as cartoon narrators repeated much of the content verbatim amidst drawings and actions related to displacement and forced removal. As students focused on the stop-motion product and narrative creativity, the voices and experiences of Japanese Americans became subdued.

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In an interview a few days later, Elyse stated that most of the groups addressed the guiding questions. However, she noted some groups "didn't present [their research] visually...When it was time to create it, it didn't come together the way I wanted it [to)]" While Elyse was not fully satisfied with all of the project outcomes in terms of content, she felt that each group demonstrated emerging understandings about WWII and mastery of the stop-animation process, and blamed her lack of regular check-ins for the varied quality of the final products.

Virginia's unit on Japanese American incarceration lasted substantially longer than Elyse's. She read the chapter book *Sylvia & Aki* daily for the remainder of the school year to mark the end of what she called her "social change unit." *Sylvia & Aki* takes place immediately after EO 9066, as Aki Munemitsu's Japanese American family is forced to leave their California farm for a WRA camp in Arizona. During a planning session, Virginia said she wanted students "to realize that there were a lot of different things that happened to different people and these are ways that they stood up for it, these are ways that people pushed back." Ultimately, Virginia hoped students would understand the "ideals of what it means to be American" and that "justice for one is not justice for all." As she neared the end of *Sylvia & Aki*, she asked students to brainstorm social change topics for podcasts they would script and audio-record to present on the last day of school. Students chose a range of topics, from animal cruelty to civil rights activists. The latter topic included Fred Korematsu, an individual highlighted during Virginia's extended instruction about Japanese American incarceration.

Virginia screened an excerpt from a documentary about Korematsu while reading *Sylvia & Aki*. Unlike the pre-adolescent characters featured in *The Bracelet* and *Sylvia &*

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Aki, Korematsu was a young man at the time of EO 9066 and refused to report to camp. He was jailed and forcibly moved to a WRA camp but later challenged his conviction, which was eventually voided (Lee, 2015). The video was narrated by Korematsu as an elderly man, and one quote was particularly powerful to Virginia's students. "He thought that jail was better than [the WRA camp]!" a student paraphrased while others murmured in agreement. This comparison between the WRA camp and jail stunned Virginia's students, and several students recalled this comment in subsequent lessons. Their references to Korematsu for the remainder of the school year, coupled with one student group's decision to include Korematsu in their podcast about civil rights leaders, demonstrated how much Korematsu's story resonated with them. As a result of Virginia's students' in-depth study of Japanese American incarceration, Korematsu became just as important a figure in US civil rights history as traditional heroes like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. In contrast to Elyse's students, the second graders in Virginia's class maintained a clear focus on Japanese American voices and experiences.

Both teachers emphasized student agency and action throughout these units. Elyse's students' stop-motion animations demonstrated basic understandings about Japanese American incarceration and WWII; agency and action were the subject of student conversations but were not essential themes in their projects. Virginia's students' podcasts used their knowledge of Japanese American incarceration as a launching pad for present-day application and action; their understandings of incarceration developed over several weeks and resulted in an action- and awareness-based podcast. However, while Elyse and Virginia engaged in the rare AsianCrit task of (re)constructing Japanese

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American incarceration historical narratives with young children, the historical narratives they constructed did not counter majoritarian stories.

AsianCrit aims to illustrate "how majoritarian narratives about Asian Americans shape perspectives, policies, practices, and experiences in education" (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). However, for the reasons that follow, the narratives of Japanese American incarceration constructed in Elyse's and Virginia's classrooms did not challenge the dominant white historical narrative. First, Elyse avoided discussions about race, justice, and civil rights violations as she centered her questions solely on SEL topics like emotional self-control. This approach relegated classroom conversations to individual experiences that paralleled the emotions depicted in the book without interrogating the racialized and political causes of the characters' deep emotional frustration; it also neglected how EO 9066 impacted generations of Japanese Americans afterward. Virginia talked explicitly about unfair treatment and discrimination based on appearance and ancestry both in the past and present, yet never uttered the words race or racism, nor did she discuss how the perpetrators of such injustices benefitted from their actions and were part of state institutions. Further, Virginia's inattention to economic and political motivations shifted the narrative toward a fair/unfair binary that made Japanese American incarceration appear to be the result of "bad men doing bad things" (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 60) rather than exposing how racism is weaponized differently across racial groups. Their distinct pedagogical approaches notwithstanding, neither Elyse nor Virginia directly addressed the roles of race and racism in Japanese American incarceration, ultimately emphasizing empathy over responsibility.

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Second, it is unlikely that most students possessed a substantial WWII master narrative against which they could juxtapose Japanese American incarceration. The teachers in this study taught in Texas, where WWII is not listed in second or third grade state standards and is reserved for fifth grade. Counterstorytelling functions as a means to challenge grand narratives of whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 2000); when there is no master narrative to counter, there is no story to challenge. Given the curricular absence of WWII, it is likely that the children in Virginia's and Elyse's classrooms possessed only informal, if any, knowledge of WWII prior to these lessons, provided unevenly by family and popular culture. Both teachers briefly summarized the war in class (Virginia prior to reading *The Bracelet* and Elyse as she read the afterword of the book), without attention to factors leading up to it, discussion of the European theater, or the war's resolution. Thus, the master narrative provided was so thin that it did not provide a foundation against which the teachers' lessons could contrast and disrupt. If students lack the master narrative of Japanese American incarceration as an act of military necessity, the counternarrative has little to push back against and reiterates this event as an example of unfair treatment. From an AsianCrit perspective, such an approach belies the racial realities of Asian Americans broadly, and Japanese Americans specifically, historically and contemporarily perceived as perpetual foreigners subjected to nativistic racism in the United States (Ancheta, 1998; Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Third, instead of exploring the topic of Japanese American incarceration as part of a larger historical narrative of racism against Asian Americans or as a counternarrative to virtuous master narratives of the United States during WWII, the teaching of these events fit neatly into the common narrative arc of US progress and resilience in the face of

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adversity, the very narrative AsianCrit aims to disrupt. Comparatively, Virginia's approach was more effective than Elyse's in teaching incarceration as a historical event. However, neither teacher addressed an essential component of this difficult history: creating disequilibria that challenges historical understandings (Gross & Terra, 2018a). Rather than juxtaposing Japanese American perspectives against governmental rationales, their historical narratives fell victim to the happy endings trope, in which difficult circumstances are overcome and justice is restored by the end of the story (Rodríguez & Vickery, 2020). Yet, Virginia's students were poised to more deeply engage with the difficult history of Japanese American incarceration, and Elyse's students could have been steered toward it had she chosen to underscore historical narratives instead of SEL. In the section that follows, I explore how educators of young children might delve more deeply into this notion of creating disequilibria in the teaching of difficult histories.

Engaging Young Children in Difficult Histories and Critical Hope

The teaching of Japanese American incarceration through children's literature can have multiple instructional purposes and goals related to difficult history. Children's and young adult literature about Japanese American incarceration can problematize the US's segregated, hierarchical society; help young learners recognize and disrupt ethnoracial preconceptions and representations; describe the pain of dehumanization and social alienation; and celebrate Japanese American humanity and heritage (Teorey, 2008). Often, elementary educators focus solely on the latter purpose, centering organized youth baseball at WRA camps (Harada, 1996; Moss, 2013) or Japanese American military participation, rather than including acts of resistance (An, 2016). However, such patriotic accounts uphold master narratives of US progress and tenacity that operate in

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dichotomies and dualisms, such as the good versus bad citizen trope. Vaught (2011) contended that the transformative potential of counternarratives "lies in complexity, in uncertainty and multiplicity, in unmasking the steel face of domination" (p. 19). In the second and third grade classrooms described in this study, the "steel face of domination" remained obscured.

For the students in this study, master narratives of WWII had not yet been established beyond broader understandings of the US as the land of the free and the home of the brave. Historical counternarratives should "expose the relationship between power, privilege, and the historical narratives found and not found in the school curricula" (Salinas et al., 2016, p. 436). While both teachers' instructional units attended to some degree of discrimination and injustice, they avoided direct conversations about racism and oppression. Vaught (2011) argued that counterstories delivered in the spirit of changing hearts and minds will more likely be absorbed into the master narrative. This belief that sheer exposure to an ennobling narrative is enough to deepen empathy, broaden one's experience, and achieve new levels of sensitivity is what Delgado and Stefancic (1991) called empathic fallacy. Delgado and Stefancic (1991) deemed speech insufficient in the correction of racism; simply reading and discussing books about Japanese American incarceration does not ensure that the racism inherent in EO 9066 will be wrestled with in any substantive way. Instead, when empathic fallacy occurs, empathy exists within a white supremacist framework which it cannot disrupt, and "seemingly empathic ideas can in fact do more to solidify the most damaging of racist stereotypes and structures" (Vaught, 2011, p. 22), a phenomenon pervasive in US society.

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At the end of the units on Japanese American incarceration, the teachers emphasized the need for student action and hope, as is typical in many classrooms. Yet the kind of hope that was observed in this study was most similar to optimism—what Boler (2004) considered to be naïve hope, platitudes that ultimately maintain the status quo. While hope is certainly a necessary component in the teaching of history, particularly if one holds to the Santayanan purpose described previously, hope alone is not enough to overcome the centuries of injustice and oppression on which the United States was built and which the US government still maintains. Such notions are not beyond the grasp of young children: children as young as three years old may demonstrate awareness of the cultural and/or political significance of events and symbols (Connolly et al., 2002). Hence, this is work children are absolutely capable of engaging with if they are supported by educators who can bolster their understanding of both historical content *and* the emotional complexities involved. This teaching of difficult histories with young learners requires a pedagogy of discomfort alongside critical hope.

A pedagogy of discomfort "invites not only members of the dominant culture but also members of marginalized cultures to reexamine the hegemonic values inevitably internalized in the process of being exposed to curricula and media that serve the interests of the ruling class" (Boler, 2004, p. 118). Specific to the difficult history of Japanese American incarceration, pedagogies of discomfort might utilize AsianCrit to interrogate what it means to be a US citizen (particularly given the selective application of EO 9066 to Japanese Americans rather than Italian and German Americans) as the US citizen has historically been defined in juxtaposition to the Asian immigrant (Lowe, 1996) and the perceived foreignness of Japanese Americans was central in their targeted removal and

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imprisonment (Lee, 2015). Moreover, an AsianCrit treatment of Japanese American incarceration "cannot be removed from its pre-war historical context...camps were a logical extension of the established pattern of interaction between White Americans and Yellow immigrants" (Okiihiro, 1977, p. 72). Presenting Japanese Americans as a threat to national security allowed white business owners to benefit economically from their removal without scrutiny; this fact is one of the most invisible aspects of Japanese American incarceration history.

Pedagogies of discomfort can create openings for disruption that allow teachers and students to "imagine altered possibilities and relations with the other" (Zembylas, 2017, p. 671). These openings can then foster critical hope, which recognizes the systems of inequality in which we live while also demanding that participants engage in the responsibility of constant change and becoming to build relationality and solidarity with others (Boler, 2004; Freire, 1994; Zembylas, 2017). Such responsibility "is the transformational alternative to liberal and oppressive empathy" (Vaught, 2011, p. 23). Early childhood classrooms are often centered on building community and fostering social and emotional growth and connectedness, making them ideal sites for the development of critical hope.

Loyalty, patriotism, and citizenship are central themes in teaching Japanese American incarceration through an AsianCrit pedagogy of discomfort. Comparisons illustrating the relevance of Japanese American incarceration to the racialized experiences of US Muslims and people of color more than 75 years after EO 9066 recognize Japanese American incarceration as a difficult history that connects to the present (Gross & Terra, 2018a). At the same time, these comparisons lay bare the truth

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that racism and discrimination are not problems that the United States has overcome but are instead ongoing struggles. Presenting young children with this uneasy fact defies traditional sanitized elementary narratives that are neatly resolved and present a harmonious, post-racial society while transcending the invisibility of Asian Americans and contemporary racism in the historical narrative.

While some might consider the teaching of such disequilibria-inducing content to be potentially traumatic for young children, it is important to recognize that the very positioning of some students "within the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic discourses that permeate the institution of public schooling in the United States, as well as the material impacts of social inequities in communities, *constitutes* a trauma" (Dutro & Bien, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, Ma (2000) argued that racial healing must first begin with the remembrance of the nightmarish trauma of incarceration. Indeed, the trauma experienced by Japanese Americans during and after WWII is an inextricable part of incarceration; many imprisoned Japanese Americans refused to share stories of their experiences with subsequent generations due to trauma and shame (Yang Murray, 2000). The historical invisibility of incarceration narratives within Japanese American communities makes their (re)construction all the more imperative.

Farley (2009) urged educators to recognize that history education is "fundamentally, a psychical labour of symbolizing the internal conflicts that both complicate and constitute our attachments to the world" (p. 551). The insistence on empathic fallacy, happy endings, and uncomplicated resolutions to social issues that are often presented in elementary school curriculum deny the ongoing inequities and injustices that persist across the globe; such denials fail to attend to the racist systems

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within which marginalized children and their families struggle daily (Rodríguez & Vickery, 2020). Explicit attention to difficult histories with young children allows them to critically think and reflect about the world around them and better understand how the past affects their present. Rather than confuse or scare young learners, explorations of difficult history through pedagogies of discomfort might instead prepare youth for responsibility in a world that often presents more problems than solutions by recognizing that sheer empathy and naïve hope for change are not enough.

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ⁱ Difficult histories that may contradict national values are rarely taught in elementary schools. This comparative study of two elementary educators examines their pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Japanese American incarceration as difficult history. Framed by Asian American critical race theory, the teachers' practices revealed challenges in teaching Japanese American incarceration as an example of a difficult history. The author interrogates the role of discomfort and counternarratives in teaching difficult

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histories, particularly with young children, and offers suggestions for pedagogies of discomfort that reveal difficult histories while fostering critical hope.