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### A Critical Pedagogy for Love and Healing Toward Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia

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Several days after the 45th president of the United States (U.S.) referred to COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus” in March 2020, my daughter Letao, a 6-year-old first grader, came to me after her online schooling in a New York City public school. She looked perplexed and asked if I knew why one of her classmates in Zoom called the Coronavirus a “Chinese virus.” I was concerned that the racialized labeling made by the former president would begin to hit the daily lives of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (APIs) in this country. However, I didn’t predict that it could spread to my daughter’s school life at such a speed. Without any hesitation, I explained to Letao how the former president and some government officials coined and criticized “the Chinese virus” and “Kung Flu” in public (Chen, 2020). The little girl was furious. One of her beloved stories was *I Dissent*, a picture book featuring the life story of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (RBG). Being brave to show her dissent to anything unfair, just like RBG, became her “thing.” She asked, “Mom, I want to send my dissent to the president. Would you help me make a video and post it on your Facebook? So your friends and everyone can see it!” This request drove me to assist Letao in producing her video dissent toward the former president. In the Facebook video posted on March 21, 2020, she chose to stand in front of her upright piano, her favorite space at home, and shouted out the following:

“I dissent with President Donald Trump. Because the Coronavirus started in China, it does not mean he needed to call it the Chinese virus. And he is being mean to the Chinese people. And he is hurting their feelings. And the name of the virus is actually the Coronavirus!”

#### Critical Pedagogies during Difficult Times

In the two years since the former president used a racist term to describe COVID-19, there has been a terrifying surge in Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism across the country. History repeats itself on how phenomena of infectious diseases are used to produce racist stigma toward particular racial groups (Markel & Stern, 2002). Today, fueled by the pandemic-related “rhetoric of blame,” the Sinophobic stigma “was in tune with a long history of state-sanctioned racial bias against Asian communities from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to Japanese American wartime incarceration and, more recently, the immigrant bans” (Viladrich, 2021, p. 878). The Center for Study of Hate and Extremism (2021) found that anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339 percent last year compared to the year before, mostly against Asian women. Until December 2021, there were 10,905 hate incidents reported from around the country, which included a variety of physical, verbal, and online assaults (AAPI Equity Alliance, 2022). AAPI families in this country have developed a new routine (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2022), walking daily

in caution, fear, and trauma. In particular, hate violence targeted at Asian elders still happens in subways and local Chinatowns today (Shanahan, 2022). As a transnational Chinese educator and motherscholar teaching in an early childhood education program at an urban public university, I sorrowed, resisted, and reflected on Freire's critical pedagogies to guide my childcare and teaching practices during the depressing time.

In Freire's (2004) writing, he delved into the profound role of education in individual development and insisted on the use of love as a "radical" act of freedom to resist oppression:

I have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as my motivation to fight; just I have the right to love and to express my love for the world, to hold it as my motivation to fight, because while a historical being, I live history as time of possibility, not of predetermination. (...) My right, my justice is based on my disgust towards the denial of the right to "be more", which is etched in the nature of human beings (Freire, 2004, p. 58-59).

Freire's "radical" love served as the foundation to guide my childcare practices at home and my online teaching of undergraduate preservice teachers in understanding and enacting critical literacy. Three days after the massacre in Atlanta, Georgia on March 16, 2021 that killed eight people, including six Asian women, Haeny Yoon and Tran Templeton, representing the AERA SIG Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education made their statement on anti-Asian racism and terrorism (2021). Their timely statement critiques "school curriculum and policies that invoke white nationalism and supremacy," calling for every teacher, researcher, and educator to take responsibility for making people of Color visible through anti-racist work in different sectors. I shared Haeny and Tran's statement with my students, who are preservice teachers. Embedding in Freire's critical pedagogies, my students and I discussed the racialized discourses on COVID-19, then we reflected on how to include and sustain the linguistic and cultural repertoires of students of Color and their

families in classroom curriculum. I further shared the story of a #StopAsianHate rally in which my daughter and I participated. In spring 2021, Letao and I joined our AAPI friends in the rally, which was held on a Sunday morning right after the massacre in Atlanta, Georgia. As shown by Figure 1, Letao was holding a sign with a handwritten message: "#StopAsianHate: Stop killing and bullying Asian!" She volunteered to stand at the spot shown in the photo, hoping more people could see her sign. She was seriously "on duty" for one hour and a half. In the process, we were angry but calm, serious but (still) loving, proud (to be Asian) but heartbroken for all the racism and crime incidents toward AAPIs. We came across many rally attendants and journalists who showed Letao their warmth and affirmation.



Figure 1. Letao was "on duty" in the #StopAsianHate Manhattan Rally on March 21, 2021 (Photo by Ting Yuan)

### Critical Literacy Through Children's Literature

Freire's conceptualization of critical literacy, with the pretext of radical love, challenges individuals to examine power relations and inequalities in real life (1970, 2004). Critical literacy can be enacted in both daily life and with the everyday literature used

in the classroom. Having a diverse classroom library that includes the authentic stories of children of Color is a stepping stone for enacting critical literacy and cultivating self-affirmation (Bishop, 1990). Children's picture book author and illustrator Grace Lin (2016), who continues to use Bishop's analogy on using books as "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" for children, elaborates her own childhood experience of feeling invisible in a classroom that lacked books on AAPI children's authentic life stories. Nowadays, there are children's book authors, such as Livia Blackburne, Andrea Cheng, Yumi Heo, Joanna Ho, Sanae Ishida, Aram Kim, Lenore Look, Bao Phi, and Janet Wong, who have written prolifically to feature AAPI children and families. In August 2020, Joyce Lee, Emily Ku, and Maggie Chen published *Young, Proud, and Sung-jee* online (<http://www.youngproudsungjee.com/>). It was the first children's picture book written on fighting anti-Asian racism during the pandemic. The book has been translated into more than 10 languages. My students and I read the book synchronously in class. We discussed our individual experiences during the pandemic in local neighborhoods and shared moments of anxiety, fear, and isolation. One Chinese preservice teacher sent an emotional message after class:

...reading this book [Young, Proud, and Sung-jee] made me teary and I'm still currently crying. I didn't even know that it will affect me this much. I have been seeing these hate crimes happening on social media but this book made me feel really upset. I haven't thought the book would [have] made me feel so emotional but I'm glad to have read it. I really like this message from the book, "it's not your fault." (Email Correspondence, March 22, 2021)

I could feel the trauma experienced by the Chinese student, because I was part of the traumatized anti-Asian phenomena. I believe that critical literacy through children's literature should start with "an archaeology of self" (Sealey-Ruiz, 2022), with the following questions: Who am I? Where am I from? Who are/were my families? Where are/were

they from? And what were their experiences? The self-awareness leads to the sustenance and affirmation of every student's racial, cultural, and linguistic identities in a culturally sustaining classroom (Paris & Alim, 2014). In November 2021, to honor and bring visibility of Chinese American history to children's literature, Martha Brockenbrough, Grace Lin, and Julia Kuo authored/illustrated *I Am an American. The Wong Kim Ark Story*. The picture book documents Wong Kim Ark and his battle with the U.S. Supreme Court for birthright citizenship. During the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943) that barred immigration of Chinese laborers, Wong, who was born in the U.S., was detained after re-entering the U.S. from his trip to China. Wong's triumph over his case in the Supreme Court in 1898 made history for all people of Color to have their legal right as birthright citizens. Wong's individual story of fighting for social justice, which is invisible in the White, mainstream school curricula, adds significantly to U.S. history and needs to be addressed in today's K-12 school curricula. Witnessing the pioneer work of Illinois, the first state to require the teaching of Asian American history in U.S. public schools (Illinois Board of Education, 2022), teacher educators across the country can make the first step of change by explicitly including the text in the college classroom.

### **Lighting the Fire for Social Justice**

Following Freire's notion, one vital way to fight against racism is through the unity of love and critical pedagogies in education. In the current post-pandemic era, for AAPI communities, it is a time to continue to fight and heal. As a teacher educator and motherscholar, teaching my daughter at home and my preservice teachers in the college classroom has been my critical literacy practices for love and healing. As reminded by an old Chinese saying, only when all contribute their firewood can they build up a strong fire (众人拾柴火焰高).|The "fire" for social justice needs to be lit up by all and persistently maintained. It cannot happen without the active actions made by everyone in all the fields of education.

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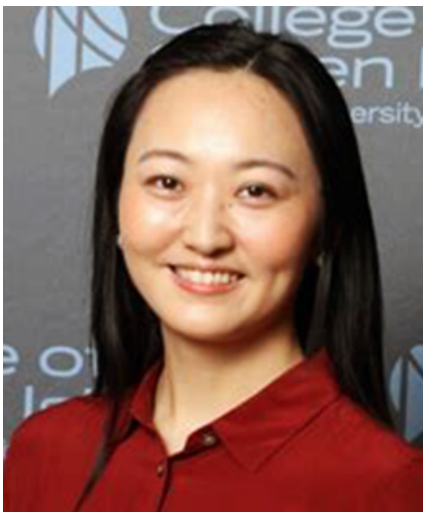
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