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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2020 Volume I: American History through American Lives

“Boxing” Asian American History

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by Lisa Yuk Kuen Yau

In teaching American history, students are often “boxed in” with ideas from antiquated textbooks featuring Presidents, heroes, dates and facts. Teachers understand the urgent needs to repair how social studies is taught with innovations. This K to 8th grade unit is designed with an easy-to-use “boxing” framework to include primary sources from Asian American history to challenge students to “historicize” our past and present. Students will discuss “hard history” and discrimination relating to hair, race, gender, hate, and the misinformed discourses of “America’s minority problems.” Hairstyles like queue and dreadlocks are loaded with a long political history in the forms of resistance. The Chinese Exclusion Act and Jim Crow laws were examples of legalized racism. Our current crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified racial disparities and hatred inflicted on our Black and Asian American communities. Students will analyze American lives in purposeful pairings: the activism of Saum Song Bo and Robert Leon Bacon, public struggles of Afong Moy and Henry “Box” Brown, and murders of Vincent Chin and George Floyd. The ultimate goal is to assist teachers in preparing students to use historical thinking to analyze critical moments in our shared history, and act responsibly for social justice.

Key Words: Asian American History, American History, Chinese Americans, Hair Discrimination, Anti-Racist Lessons, Intersectionality, Hate Crimes, Model Minority Myth

(Developed for Social Studies and ELA, grade 4; recommended for Social Studies and ELA, grades K-8)

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