STARTING A TEEN JOURNAL OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Teen Voices as Critical Pedagogical Method

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Brazilian educator Paulo Freire stated that pedagogy—an approach to teaching and a method/practice of teaching different theories—is a reciprocal process of learning.[1] Rather than a teacher spoon-feeding knowledge into the mouths of their students, learning should be a mutual process of knowledge acquisition on both sides. This does not mean that students "teach" as much as the teacher; however, the hierarchical banking method of education is "bankrupt."[2] The overall structures of K–12 education in the United States have largely remained bankrupt, in that young people are expected to memorize, regurgitate through tests, and spit out facts. Hierarchy and power structures have largely ignored our differences and the many facets of our individual identities—such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, sexual identity, and age, among many others—and how these differences shape knowledge production.

I have appreciated the *JAAS* as a pedagogical tool that aims to dismantle the oppressive forces that silence the marginalized voices of Asian Americans and our myriad intersectional identities. While this approach is undeniably a step in the liberatory direction of a more justice-oriented society, it, too, is limited in that only certain voices and identities have been uplifted or heard. An entire group of Asian Americans have remained largely unheard or ignored. For example, why have there not been any teen voices—or teen writing—included in the *JAAS*? If critical pedagogies have sought to uproot the dehumanization and suppression of marginalized communities, I point out that youth voices have been largely repressed or oppressed. I understand that we do not have

the same rights as adults, but we are not empty vessels into which knowledge needs to be poured. Our voices and stories *can be a method* of critical pedagogy.

Regarding critical pedagogy, Freire argued that it is the oppressors who do not have enough strength to liberate themselves or those whom they have oppressed. Paradoxically, it is the oppressed who possess the strength to liberate *both* parties.[3] Similarly, I believe that this theory of liberation can be loosely applied to the concept of educating youth. What can give us—students and teachers alike—critical and vast knowledge is the willingness to allow the hierarchy to be deconstructed, allowing for an open, unrepressed channel of knowledge exchange, communication, and pedagogical production. When there is less of a division between us and more of a desire to learn from the other, we can contribute to more humane critical pedagogies.

While I do believe that teens and young adults have much to contribute to various fields of study when we are given sufficient opportunity, I do not want readers to conflate this belief with ignorance or arrogance. I firmly acknowledge that young people need an adult teacher's experience in managing classrooms, guidance on how to think more critically, and skills in how to write academically. However, it is a student's engagement with the teacher that helps support the teacher to develop the specific tools needed to teach effectively. When there is mutual respect for learning and trust of the other, the learning will happen on both sides.

Another critical pedagogical tool that organically emerges when we support teen voices is intergenerational knowledge production and transmission. Teens have wisdom through their families, communities, and from one another. I have been told stories about Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, US occupation of South Korea, and other important histories from my parents, who took classes in college and graduate school. Some stories were not in the textbooks and were told to my parents by my grandparents. The stories I heard have helped me to see that the textbook versions that students in American high schools are reading are not all truthful—some stories are whitewashed versions, or what the dominant white society wants us to believe. I have treasured listening to my parents' stories of growing up in the deep South among only a handful of Asian Americans. I have equally respected my friends' histories of their families and upbringing in different parts of the country, whose lives were vastly different from that of my parents. These stories have helped me to delve more deeply into the textbook stories and to be more critical of what I read.

I believe a teen Asian American academic and creative journal publication could be a critical pedagogical tool for classroom or community use, as well as a platform for community-building among teens across the United States. The journal itself would become a critical pedagogical method. I propose this new

educational tool because I have tried to read the prominent *JAAS*, but in all honesty, I have struggled to understand the theories and language being used. I think more teens would read a journal produced by them and for them. In fact, sometimes difficult academic jargon can impede how communities are able to contribute to this knowledge production and critical pedagogical methodology.

The teen journal I envision would highlight not only our stories and our critical essays regarding history and sciences, but it would also support us in creating wider networks and communities that shape knowledge and cultural production. I believe this is crucial if we care about liberation and democracy for our generation. We do not need to wait until college to *learn* truths or wait to become professors to *teach* truths. More Asian American teens would later go on to read the *JAAS* if we had opportunities in our teen years to have agency to write about topics of importance for us. It would be a natural segue for us to read the *JAAS* in college. In addition, most high schools do not subscribe to the *JAAS*, so most students do not even know about it. An online teen journal (open access) would hopefully have wide readership and expose teens to the work of the *JAAS*.

Below, I have included a research paper that I wrote for my tenth grade US History class on American involvement in the Korean War. It illustrates how Asian and Asian American histories are not separate from the dominant American history taught in schools across the United States. What was occurring in the United States in the days before *Brown v. Board of Education* was directly influenced by the country's negative image abroad and how it wanted to prevent further damage to its reputation during the Cold War.

My history teacher, Dr. Barrington Edwards, does his best to practice critical pedagogical methods in the classroom. He received his PhD from Harvard University (Graduate School of Arts & Sciences) in history and African American studies (we call him Barrington, not Dr. Edwards). While I know he is brilliant and an excellent teacher, I am less intimidated by his stature since he listens to our perspectives and has allowed us to speak our voices in the classroom. We "practice" and exercise our agency in the classroom. He encourages critical thinking and academic rigor. For our EARP (Extended Analytical Research Paper), we were given wide latitude on what we could research. After studying and reading critical race theory and Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* for a different research project, I chose to write about US involvement in the Korean War, using critical race theory as a methodology. I received much feedback from Barrington while writing the paper. It has gone through multiple revisions, yet the ideas are my own, and, of course, I am responsible for any mistakes. I did hold my ground on several of the ideas and, through much supervision and support from Barrington, I was able to better articulate my arguments. I feel like

other high school students can write—or have written—similar critical research papers. I envision a platform whereby we can share such work with one another and build a virtual community of support since I attend a school without many Asian American faculty or students (and zero Asian American history or literature courses) with whom to explore such knowledge production.

We, as a society, must find new pedagogical methods to teach students and educators alike in ways that examine historiography, or how history has been written, and that include family histories. If students are allowed to share their personal stories and engage in more critical writing and thinking, I believe more complex US histories can be taught that dismantle the traditional, exclusive, and prevailing narratives that continue to feed the path of violence and hate staining our country's historical image.

For example, my *halmoni* (grandmother in Korean) escaped the North when she was three—one year after liberation from Japanese colonial rule (1910–45). My grandmother's view on American involvement during the Korean War is full of mixed feelings: deep appreciation due to the encounters with US military personnel who would toss chocolate rations from their military trucks, and simultaneous understanding of the deep racism and dehumanization behind their actions. In other words, on a larger scale, the history of the Korean War and what role the United States played in shaping it is not so simple or binary. I have learned from listening to my family's stories and reading more critical, complex histories within the larger global historiography that it was instead one of many façades, behind which were racism and dehumanization, greedy political intentions, and extreme violence. What I want to emphasize is that stories—our personal stories—do matter in how they can shape histories and what gets counted as knowledge.

To reiterate, there have been many efforts toward dismantling power structures and the methods of knowledge production in other fields, but in terms of the education system for teens, many of the hierarchies remain largely intact. I believe a teen journal can help to combat this. I have wondered if adults think our journal would be too "watered down" and less academic, so they would not want to read it. Paradoxically, however, this is the lacuna within critical pedagogies of Asian American studies that needs to be filled. This void points to Paulo Freire's theory of divide and rule,[4] and the gaps that grow between oppressor and oppressed. He stated, "As the oppressor [minority] subordinates and dominates the [majority], it must divide it and keep it divided in order to remain in power."[5] This is the reality we must face in disarming age-old methods of marginalization and oppression. We should/must see the importance of both teen and adult voices in the field of Asian American studies. Only uplifting some voices means that no one can be truly liberated.

I believe that a *Teen Journal of Asian American Studies* itself becomes a critical pedagogical method for educators, students, parents, and community organizers. I worry about the upcoming presidential election and what will happen to our democracy, as well as what will happen in other countries if we allow democracy to crumble here in the United States. Teens are key prospective voters, and I believe this is a crucial time to ensure that our voices can impact critical pedagogies. I hope I have convinced you, the reader, to listen to teen voices. Below is the essay that I wrote for Dr. Barrington Edwards. This would be one type of writing for a prospective teen journal.

Debatable question: To what extent did the Korean War shape American geopolitical positioning in the early period of the Cold War of the 1950s and its further expansion as a looming political power on the world stage?

THE KOREAN WAR'S GIFT TO THE UNITED STATES: GLOBAL SUPERPOWER STATUS

In the early 1950s, the Korean War (1950–53)[6] became foundational in shaping American foreign policy during the Cold War, as well as in producing US global political power. More specifically, it monumentally increased American militarism abroad.[7] While the Korean War—often referred to as the "Forgotten War"—was unlike the Vietnam War in its influence on the American public,[8] it profoundly altered the trajectory of the United States as a global superpower, both internally and abroad. For the United States, intervention in Korea proved to be less about protecting Korea from communism and more about promoting the state of America's own image of political superiority abroad. While the Korean War has been critically examined in its connection to the Cold War and geopolitics, critical pedagogies can further explore how US foreign policy operated within the context of its racist domestic political, economic, and social landscape.

The United States became involved with the division of Korea and the subsequent war between the North and South due to Korea's geopolitical importance and the ensuing fear of the rise of communism abroad. From the start, the arbitrary division of Korea along the thirty-eighth parallel was purely an American idea of the Truman administration, first conjured after Soviet presence in Manchuria at the end of World War II.[9] The United States was afraid that the Soviet army would assume control of the entire Korean peninsula.[10] Additionally, President Truman stated, "the attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt

that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations."[11] Truman's threatened tone regarding the invasion of Korea, and the fact that Koreans had no say in the division of their own land, highlights the way in which America had entered to secure its own political interests abroad against what it saw to be a communist threat. What is more, the American fear of Soviet control over Korea suggests overlying political imperatives on both sides, each seeking to prevent the other ideology—whether democracy or communism—from dominating one's own. Furthermore, the United States' division of Korea was a strategic geopolitical move. Between two globally influential countries, China and Japan, Korea was valuable land to both the United States and to those Asian powers. US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, said, "[Korea] came along and saved us."[12] In a time of ideological competition, the United States' occupation of Korea proved to be a critical and beneficial action, a move reliant on Korea, to prevent the expansion of the spheres of communism the United States felt would harm the trajectory of democracy. Therefore, Acheson effectively admitted to the United States' dependence on Korea for its prime geopolitical positioning, dispelling the dominant historiographical narrative in which Americans were portrayed as heroes to South Koreans by illustrating how the United States was instead a beneficiary of Korea's geopolitical placement. The need to protect its own political interests, rather than those of Korea, was what fueled the United States to justify the violence it perpetrated on the Korean peninsula.

The US occupation of South Korea helped solidify its political and military presence and strengthen its status as a rising global power. For example, the United States implemented its own strategic leadership in the years leading up to and during the Korean War. US intelligence officers intentionally selected a South Korean president who would act in accordance with America's own interests,[13] becoming not an agent of South Korean power, but rather a mere figurehead leader behind which America would continue to administer its own political influence over South Korea. Historian Bruce Cumings writes, "[The United States] wanted native governments strong enough to maintain independence but not strong enough to throw off Western influence."[14] The reality of the United States' subversive goals was that it wanted a dependent country to manipulate as an instrument for its global reach in Asia. Additionally, the way American officials chose Syngman Rhee despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that "his intellect [was] a shallow one"[15] sheds light on his position as an American puppet-president. This strategy was part of a master plan for the United States to maintain power in East Asia, further underscoring the ways in which the Korean War was a leveraging tool for US security interests.

What is more, historian Michael Pembroke states that the corrupt division of the nation was the result of a "scramble for Korea" due to its geopolitically important position between the two warring superpowers vying for ideological dominance.[16] To better understand the self-serving nature of the United States' intervention in this conflict, an ideological "scramble" suggests a parallel to the "scramble for Africa" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which several European countries avariciously disregarded the cultural and linguistic complexities of Africa. Instead, they thoughtlessly split the continent up for their individual benefits, each in an attempt to be the dominant European power.[17] Similarly, in this way, despite American presence in South Korea being labeled a "military occupation,"[18] that term is arguably a euphemism for what were really US imperialist, as well as ideological, intentions of global political dominance against communist competition. Thus, the division of Korea—and the subsequent US military occupation in South Korea—greatly influenced the United States' position as a powerful political bulwark in Asia against the forces of communism in a period of global ideological tension.

The Korean War further influenced the United States' global military presence in the decades to follow. As Cumings writes, Americans "thoughtlessly divided Korea and then reestablished the colonial government machinery [of Japan]."[19] In this way, Koreans were not liberated after the end of Japanese colonialism in 1945 by their own struggles. Instead, after the end of World War II, Korea was almost immediately occupied by the United States, merely replacing Japanese authority with American power. South Korea had become an extension of the United States in Asia—a source for the United States to continue its own political hold on the Eastern sphere. However, the opinions and perspectives of Korea's supposed "liberation" differs largely, depending on individual experiences. For example, many Koreans who directly experienced the Korean War express gratitude not only for what they consider to be their liberation from Japanese colonialism, but also for US imperialism. As Pembroke notes, "The Korean people, desperate for liberation from the tyranny of Japanese rule, clamored for the Americans' attention."[20] Additionally, Kim Heebok, a survivor of the Korean War, talks about her memory of the day Japan left: "I went around marching all day shouting, 'we're liberated!'"[21]

Alternatively, public opinion has shifted to acknowledging the startling realities of American violence and racism rampant during the Korean War and US occupation in the subsequent years. For example, in July of 1950, American GI soldiers shot and killed several hundred South Korean civilians under the No Gun Ri bridge. The US military, as well as the South Korean government, have denied the citizens' accounts for nearly fifty years,[22] illustrating the extent to which the United States disregarded Korea, valuing it solely for its importance

to US geopolitical strategy. Despite the atrocities it has committed and the armistice of 1953, the United States has remained in South Korea, and as of 2010, still has 30,000 troops on military bases there.[23] That number has not declined much, as the most recent statistic of 2023 shows that there are 28,500 US troops.[24] Since the arrival of American forces in 1945, the continued presence of US Army personnel—despite the violence during the war—has become the hallmark of increasing global US militarism, paving the path for future wars in this area involving the United States.[25]

US DOMESTIC POLICIES FOLLOWING THE KOREAN WAR

While US actions abroad were seemingly unconnected to what was happening back at home, proxy wars such as the Korean War influenced racial and political policies within the domestic landscape of the United States as well. Legal scholar Mary Dudziak, in arguing that *Brown v. Board of Education* was a Cold War case, provides evidence of US officials saying the following: "racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our [American] devotion to the democratic faith."[26] The United States used the guise of freedom and of the superiority of democracy to justify the fight for political dominance in Korea at the time of the war. However, the discrepancy of military actions abroad and the racial discrimination and segregation within the United States itself allowed the Soviet Union to call out the hypocrisy of American ideologies contradicting its actions. The Korean War, therefore, can be seen as a signifier of Cold War ideological tensions abroad. There has been limited discussion in how the Korean War *and* the Cold War provided an opportunity for American legislators to gain hegemonic power, using the language of freedom and justice. At the same time, the reality of racism, segregation, and lack of equality on the domestic front needed to be addressed if America would have any credibility abroad. This set the stage for legislators needing to address civil rights and desegregation at home.[27] In this regard, the Korean War can also be seen as an indirect—but related—marker in charting a path toward ending legal segregation in the United States.

On July 12, 1950, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a statement to the Peace Information Center on the conflict in Korea and racial discrimination in the United States. He passionately wrote, "nor is this nation justified in leading the world to war in order to make men accept our economic systems which millions

of Americans know is itself in desperate need of betterment and reform."[28] Du Bois recognized the inconsistencies in the façade of democratic superiority, juxtaposed with the civil injustice and racial discrimination rampant throughout the United States. He vehemently argued that the country did not have a reason to inject itself into a war in which the United States sought to prove what was a false notion of political superiority.

Thus, with both domestic and international critique of America's political positioning in the Korean War and the Cold War, *Brown* became a convenient case for American lawmakers to clean up its image, both abroad and within, and to restore international credibility to the United States' argument in its alleged supremacy of democracy. Furthermore, the NAACP wrote of the *Brown* decision that, "steady progress towards integration undermined the charge of hypocrisy" and "lessened pressures of world opinion."[29] *Brown* as a Cold War case would hopefully restore a more positive international opinion of US democracy.[30] This effect of *Brown* strategically bolstered the argument that social change benefited not only the NAACP, but also the United States' own agenda of foreign relations and image abroad. Ultimately, because the United States had to maintain its international relations for its continued status as a global power, the civil rights movement in America was partially impacted by the converging interests[31] of social equality and the desire to maintain America's moral face of democracy. This suggests a connective tissue between American military involvement during the Korean War and the subsequent politically motivated choices of socio-legal intervention within its domestic borders.

The Korean War fundamentally changed the United States' approach to global militarism for decades to follow. Most of America's 800 foreign military bases exist in Asia, and the dozens of US military encampments that remain in South Korea are known as "islands of American culture."[32] The extent of American influence saturated in Asia illustrates how the Korean War was not only foundational in further establishing the American global reach for economic and political power, but also in perpetuating American cultural imperialism. In turn, the United States has irrevocably altered the course of Korean history. No longer is Korea one nation, but rather split—unforgettably—due to American political motives.

South Korea still harbors America within its borders.[33] This prevailing influence suggests that the effects of occupation go both ways, shaping both the occupier and occupied in a binding relationship of interconnecting influences. The interest convergence[34] of alleged social equality and the political motives behind the *Brown* decision demonstrate the internal battle the United States simultaneously engaged in during the Korean War as it fought to protect its image of democracy abroad by progressing toward the mirage of equality it

strived for within. This relationship reveals how movements and events, even when continents apart, should not be studied in isolation, but rather in the context of a larger historical narrative. In this way, the Korean War highlights the ways in which an underlying political imperative dictated how the United States approached its domestic and foreign policies with ulterior motives, and how those choices were often weighed through the intricacies of power, strategy, and duplicity in a time of global political competition.

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I shared my paper with the hope that you, the adult scholar, will appreciate the scholarly endeavors of a tenth grader. I believe more complex US histories can be taught that dismantle the traditional narratives that show racism as aberrant in our histories. Critical race theories and personal stories reveal the much more complex histories of oppression, power struggles, classism, sexism, homophobia, and racism. Our job as students is to continually reveal how pasts are still operative today so that we can have a more liberatory future. When we, as students, write from our own perspectives, we can add to the emancipatory work that adult scholars and activists are doing.

As a junior this coming academic year (2024–25), I will be taking a seminar on Black history with Dr. Barrington Edwards. I look forward to deepening my research, writing, and classroom speaking skills. I know I have a lot to learn. At the same time, I believe it is important for teens to learn from one another and engage in peer review, as well as have adults learn from us. Our work and writing are critical pedagogical methods. I do hope I can gain your support in starting a teen journal, a place where we can share the research and writing we have done, creative stories we have written, and the dreams we continue to have for justice and for a better future for all people.

NOTES

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Penguin Books), 1993.
2. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, cited in Gary Y. Okihiro, *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press), 93.
3. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 26.
4. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 122.

5. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 122.
6. A cease-fire armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953. Technically, the war has never ended.
7. Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 211.
8. Cumings, *The Korean War*, 209.
9. Michael Pembroke, *Korea: Where the American Century Began* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018), 25.
10. Pembroke, *Korea*, 26.
11. Quoted in Hong-Kyu Park, "American Involvement in the Korean War," *The History Teacher* 16, no. 2 (1983): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/493313.
12. Quoted in Cumings, *The Korean War*, 210.
13. Pembroke, *Korea*, 32.
14. Quoted in Cumings, *The Korean War*, 210.
15. Quoted in Pembroke, *Korea*, 32.
16. Quoted in Pembroke, *Korea*, 28.
17. Ieuan Griffiths, "The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries," *The Geographical Journal* 152, no. 2 (1986): 2, https://doi.org/10.2307/634762.
18. Because the South Korean president and subsequent government were merely figureheads of US power.
19. Quoted in Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 238.
20. Quoted in Pembroke, *Korea*, 29.
21. Quoted in *Memory of Forgotten War*, directed by Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem, Mu Films, 2013.
22. The Associated Press, "G.I.'s Tell of a U.S. Massacre in Korean War: American Veterans of the Korean War Tell of Massacre of Civilians by U.S. Soldiers," *New York Times*, 1999, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/g-i-s-tell-u-massacre-korean-war/docview/110046977/se-2?accountid=36629.
23. Cumings, *The Korean War*, 231.
24. Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress." September 12, 2023, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11388, accessed July 9, 2024.
25. Cumings, *The Korean War*, 231.
26. Quoted in Mary L. Dudziak, "*Brown* as a Cold War Case," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 34, https://doi.org/10.2307/3659611.
27. Dudziak, "*Brown* as a Cold War Case."
28. Quoted in W. E. B. Du Bois, "Statement by W. E. B. Du Bois," July 12, 1950, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Amherst, MA.

29. Quoted in Dudziak, "*Brown* as a Cold War Case."
30. Dudziak, "*Brown* as a Cold War Case," 3.
31. Derrick A. Bell, "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518–33, https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546.
32. Quoted in Pembroke, *Korea*, 215.
33. *Memory of Forgotten War*, dir. Liem and Liem.
34. Bell, "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma," 523.