

## Using Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire* to Develop a Critical Stance: Possibilities and Pitfalls

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UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTORS preparing prospective sixth- to twelfth-grade history teachers often realize it can be difficult to condense the extensive information these individuals need for their future profession into one or two courses. Teacher educators are responsible for helping pre-service teachers write educational objectives, identify appropriate standards to guide instruction, implement effective pedagogical strategies, develop techniques for successful classroom management, teach diverse learners, and reflect on internships in the school setting. Beyond these responsibilities, state departments of education throughout this nation often certify these teachers under the broad umbrella of “social studies” or “social science” rather than “history” or “geography.” Therefore, teacher preparation programs are forced to juggle requirements for program accreditation with their ethical commitment to introduce students to national and state content and professional standards.

Over the past seven years, I have worked as a social studies education methods instructor, across the Midwest and Southeast. The broad certification, Secondary Social Studies Education, is the only certification offered in the three states where I have worked; credentialing individuals to teach American and World History, as well as Political Science, Geography, Economics, and the Behavioral Sciences. As a result, my students are

required to take a range of courses, since these programs often sacrifice depth of understanding for breath of coverage. This means that many of the pre-service teachers I work with have not had the opportunity to engage in an in-depth analysis of historical content and historical issues. Meanwhile, those that have a strong grasp of content knowledge have not necessarily made connections between the content in their college courses and their future teaching practice.

In June 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) issued the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for K-12 instruction on behalf of 48 states. While the CCSS currently privileges competencies in reading and math, history and the social sciences are referenced as methods to teach literacy and numeracy. History instructors at all levels draw on a variety of written and visual texts, including non-fiction, autobiography, historical fiction, photographs, pictorial propaganda, and political cartoons, in order to help students contextualize historical events and facilitate the development of disciplinary knowledge. With the adoption of the CCSS, K-12 history teachers are now *mandated* to help students develop a variety of skills using informational texts; skills that include citing textual analysis of primary and secondary sources or evaluating authors' differing points of view.<sup>1</sup> Expectations for these future teachers require skills that go beyond pedagogical content knowledge. Secondary history teachers are now asked to be teachers of reading.

At my current university, I have had the opportunity to redesign our secondary social studies education program in an attempt to prepare our students better for the range of expectations they will face as professionals. One such modification is a new course that introduces the pre-service teachers to pedagogical approaches while strengthening their content knowledge. The following manuscript describes how I use Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle's graphic text, *A People's History of American Empire*, as a textbook for the course.<sup>2</sup> As an unanticipated consequence, students' reactions to the text helped inspire a unit of instruction that examines the history of U.S. foreign policy as we began to ask, "What role should the U.S. play in foreign affairs?"

### **Contextual Background**

There are a variety of theoretical perspectives on the role of literacy instruction that are applicable to the history discipline. For example, *functional literacy* focuses on instrumental and decontextualized skills for reading and writing. While this form remains prevalent in K-12

classrooms, the practice of drilling skills or asking students to memorize sight words, lamented by teachers as “drill and kill,” is often criticized for being perpetuated by neo-liberal market-driven goals for education.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of *disciplinary literacy* suggest that the process of reading and understanding information differs by subject area.<sup>4</sup> For example, when historians read primary source documents they need to examine bias and perspective, a document's main ideas, sourcing, contextualization, and cause-and-effect relationships.<sup>5</sup> Finally, *critical literacy* rests on the assumption that literacy is a process involving an act of consciousness, resistance, and action for social transformation.<sup>6</sup> This method involves reframing our views, bringing unconscious frames into awareness, and then using new language to modify previous assumptions. In critical literacy, disciplinary knowledge is used not as facts to be memorized, but as perspectives for interpreting the world. At the core, critical literacy urges students to develop a critical stance that requires individuals to consciously engage information, entertain alternative ways of being, take responsibility to inquire, and remain reflective.<sup>7</sup>

In order to model strategies for strengthening literacy in secondary classrooms, I incorporate at least one non-fiction and one historical fiction text into each social studies education course I teach.<sup>8</sup> In years past, I have selected resources representing what I refer to as transformative knowledge, or knowledge that modifies, challenges, or expands the mainstream western-centric paradigm.<sup>9</sup> These texts allow me to emphasize disciplinary and critical literacy skills simultaneously. Non-fiction secondary sources have included Peter Irons' *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision*, Charles C. Mann's *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, James W. Loewen's *Sundown Towns*, and Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*.<sup>10</sup> I have included historical fiction such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carry*, and autobiographies such as Melba Pattillo Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* or Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*.<sup>11</sup> Students discuss the texts in literature circles as they construct their understanding of the novels with their peers.<sup>12</sup> These activities are used to prepare individuals to teach reading while teaching historical content knowledge.

The current digital generation of K-12 students interacts on a daily basis with a range of print, visual, and auditory texts, which utilize skills to negotiate within and amongst such diverse text.<sup>13</sup> As individuals are saturated with multiple textual and visual images, in both online and offline settings, individuals must learn to decipher messages in a hypertextual world. Thus, in our visual society, it is also necessary to help students gain the skills needed to move between text and image in order to interpret information.

Five years ago, I was introduced to J. P. Stassen's *Deogratias*,<sup>14</sup> a graphic novel about the Rwandan genocide, by a colleague in library science. While reading this novel, I began to realize that graphic texts can be a powerful tool for teaching history and literacy in secondary classrooms.<sup>15</sup> Graphic texts—including graphic novels, comic books, and manga—are representations of intertextuality as they combine sequential art with short textual phrases. These resources are laden with symbolism, satire, and irony, and require readers to decode metaphoric and social nuances.<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that graphic novels serve as a literature genre that can help students practice intertextual and multimodal reading, forcing them to “unpack” images and use context clues to fill in the gaps.<sup>17</sup> I became convinced that graphic texts could serve as a way to foster visual literacy skills within history instruction.

The next semester, I was inspired to incorporate graphic novels in juxtaposition to the written text of previous historical fiction and autobiographical options; a trend that I have continued each subsequent semester. Over the years, I have incorporated *Deogratias*, as well as C. M. Butzer's *Gettysburg*, Brian K. Vaughn's *Pride of Baghdad*, Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Dwight Jon Zimmerman's *The Vietnam War*, and Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*.<sup>18</sup> My previous research indicates there are conflicting perceptions amongst pre-service teachers' in terms of their potential to use graphic novels in secondary classrooms. Some perceive the texts as an “easier read,” which can help struggling readers and English Language Learners (ELLs), mostly a result of the limited text paired with illustrations. Others realize these resources require complex textual and visual literacy skills to decipher information. Overall, most pre-service teachers are hesitant towards incorporating this genre into their instruction as they feel some illustrations compound the teaching of contentious issues when text is connected to controversial images.<sup>19</sup>

### *A People's History of American Empire*

As indicated above, during the Fall 2012 semester, I was assigned a new course in my secondary social studies education program, structured around teaching social studies content and pedagogy. In order to expose my students to content while modeling effective pedagogical strategies, I decided to adopt Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle's *A People's History of American Empire* as a required textbook for this course. The text displays lectures delivered by the late historian Howard Zinn in illustrations or graphic form and includes a combination of primary source documents, photographic images, maps, political cartoons, and visual representations.

There were a variety of rationales for incorporating this text in my course. I thought the breadth of information would introduce these pre-service teachers to historical events and issues that are not typically covered in secondary classrooms. This rationale was later supported as students responded they had never learned about the U.S. involvement in the Philippines, the African American 25th Infantry Regiment in the Spanish-American War, or the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles in the 1940s. While Zinn's critics question the historian's bias and deficient sourcing,<sup>20</sup> I saw this as an opportunity to reinforce the necessity to question *all* texts. Interrogating the textbook is especially crucial when considering the desensitized, watered-down content found in most high school history textbooks. Finally, I was drawn to this book as a multi-genre text with the potential to foster visual literacy, as readers must utilize a variety of skills to decode and interpret illustrations, photographs, and political cartoons.

The students in this course are asked to use the text for weekly reading assignments—a series of “Reader Responses” they complete after reading each section in the text. The writing prompt instructs them as follows:

For each reading assignment, you will interact with the author by writing and reacting to two quotations you felt were significant, affirming, and/or problematic. Then you will comment on each quotation (e.g., ask questions; offer opinions; work out ideas; or make connections with other readings, discussions, or your own experiences). You will bring these reflections to class as we will use them as the basis for discussion.

Over the semester, each student responds to five sections of the text, providing an opportunity for me to gauge each individual's interpretation of the readings.

As described above, Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle's *A People's History of American Empire* has the potential to promote disciplinary and visual literacy, yet the message in the text lends itself towards promoting critical literacy. The author and illustrators devote a majority of the text towards promoting a message that U.S. involvement in foreign affairs has historically been driven by imperialistic desires. Zinn's text satisfies my goal to incorporate transformative texts into my instruction as it problematizes the United States' historical involvement in foreign affairs, as well as domestic issues surrounding race, class, and gender.

The following section describes the evolution of a unit, used during the Fall 2012 semester, which was inspired by the aforementioned text. As presented below, classroom discussions and students' Reader Responses over the introduction of the text demonstrate the need to help students develop a critical stance by equipping them with skills to evaluate multiple

perspectives. The following section describes how teacher educators can use this resource, within a unit on historical U.S. foreign relations, to strengthen content knowledge while fostering disciplinary, visual, and critical literacy.

### Discussions of 9-11

The introduction of *A People's History of American Empire* begins with Howard Zinn's personal reflection on the events that took place in the United States on September 11, 2001. In this passage, Zinn states:

We could only imagine the terror among the passengers of the hijacked planes as they contemplated the crash, the fire, the end. Then our political leaders came on television, and I was horrified and sickened again. They spoke of retaliation, of vengeance, of punishment. We are at war, they said. And I thought... "***They have learned nothing, absolutely nothing***, from the history of the twentieth century, from a hundred years of retaliation, vengeance, war, a hundred years of terrorism and counterterrorism, of violence met with violence in an unending cycle of stupidity"... We are committing terrorism in order to "send a message" to terrorists.<sup>21</sup>

In their initial Readers Response assignments, the pre-service teachers were asked to read and reflect on the introduction to this text. All thirteen pre-service teachers wrote a reflection piece addressing one aspect of the aforementioned quotation.

Some students supported Zinn's equation of the war in Iraq as an act of terror and a contradiction of democracy. Frank,<sup>22</sup> a student who was born in Korea but attended high school in the U.S., wrote a reflection affirming Zinn's perspective.

**Frank:** This is quite ironic because the United States has criticized and openly condemned [the terrorists] for what they have done. Then, the United States takes the exact same type of action to send a message to the terrorists. The United States has been at war with terrorists for more than ten years, committing terrorism in the Middle East and putting the lives of innocent civilians in jeopardy. Have the terrorists been completely annihilated and wiped out from this world? The answer is no.

Another pre-service teacher, Amanda, also appreciated the author's stance on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**Amanda:** In schools students are taught to play nicely. Do not judge someone who is different than you. Yet the first thing that President Bush says is "we shall make no distinction" (p. 4). I think this was, and is, a very racial statement and very close minded. Zinn is trying to tell us in history we claim "they" are terrorists, but in reality we are just as much of terrorists as "they" are.

Finally, Jorge, a student who had twice been deployed to Iraq as part of the U.S. military, also supported Zinn's claim that America's response is in-and-of-itself an act of terror.

**Jorge:** I had the unique ability to witness this personally. It took a long time for me to actually digest my experiences overseas, but I came to believe that war is a horrible thing. After realizing this, I was certainly conflicted by the fact that what I was taught and trained to believe was, in many ways, a complete contradiction to what was actually happening. The excuse I was told was that we were liberating these countries from abusive regimes, which were safe havens for terrorist networks, and also training their armed forces to be able to eventually assume control of their countries. From my understanding, the U.S. perspective was to commit "terrorism" on a grander scale than the terrorists could, in order to break their will.

Of all the students in this class, these were the only individuals to echo Zinn's critique of the United States' response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center; that this response could be seen as an act of terror.

Jorge's classmate Anthony also enlisted in the military post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, and currently serves in the reserves of his particular branch. Unlike Jorge, Anthony spent his entire military experience in the United States and never experienced combat abroad. In his reflection, Anthony also referenced Zinn's claim that the U.S. was committing acts of terrorism abroad, acknowledging that the U.S. often uses "its superior technology and military to bully other nations into doing what it wants." While he agreed that the U.S. does not have the right to tell other nations how to govern, he also supports America's military response, and stated, "I don't agree with Zinn in that, as a nation, we should have sat back and done nothing."

Other students repeated similar notions—i.e., that it was necessary for the U.S. military, at that time, to enter Iraq and Afghanistan in order to stop terrorism.

**Hilary:** Zinn says, "We have done that before. It is the old way of thinking, the old way of acting. It has never worked" (p. 5). I find this interesting because I never thought of the war in Iraq in that perspective. I am sure many Americans would agree that someone needed to be paid back for the attacks, but also that the war would be a way to keep the nation safe... Howard Zinn also makes a point in his prologue to emphasize that the war is an excuse for another "Rampage of Empire." I disagree with that statement because I feel that the United States is simply defending itself.

Hilary was not the only student to challenge Zinn's statements in the introduction to *A People's History of American Empire*.

**Rachel:** As powerful as Dr. Howard Zinn's quote is, I can't help but disagree with his viewpoint. This was an attack on our homeland, something we hadn't experienced since the American Revolution...The thought of retaliation and vengeance was not something that was far-fetched and exaggerated in my opinion...This is something to think about in the aftermath but I find it hard to believe that at that time, in mid-September of 2001, he did not want to strike back as well.

Rachel's and Hilary's reflections mirror many Americans who agree with the government's retaliation after September 11, 2001. Therefore, while both pre-service teachers acknowledge Zinn's alternative viewpoint about these events, they suggest it is either extreme or unrealistic.

During one class discussion, many pre-service teachers voiced their opinions that criticizing U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is controversial because the event is recent and very close to our national consciousness. Many of these students can remember where they were on September 11, 2001 when they heard about the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Adriana summarized this, reflecting on the role of teaching history in secondary classrooms.

**Adriana:** Every year, on September 11, you hear the same words from people of my generation: "I remember *exactly* what I was doing when that happened..." I couldn't help but think how true this quote is. And it's just like I said in my earlier reflection, everyone's individual pasts mingle together to form one collective past.

Many pre-service teachers were hesitant to discuss September 11<sup>th</sup> in their future classrooms since they felt the topic might incite a negative or emotional response from students or their parents. They perceived a uniform national ideology and felt America's reaction to this event is a shared collective reaction. Many agreed that critiquing policies in response to September 11<sup>th</sup> is more politically charged than critiquing historical events from which we are removed; historical events such as dropping the atomic bomb during World War II or the My Lai Massacre.

The students' diverse reactions to Zinn's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> reflection reminded me of the complexity of public opinion, especially in regards to U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. Yet most of the written responses or oral comments were informed by the pre-service teachers' opinion that this event represents a "controversial issue" for Americans as a collective group. Students were not drawing from specific evidence, beyond personal experience, when making these claims. As a result, I felt it was important to help the students in this class realize that our nation's foreign policy reactions have historically been multifaceted and controversial. Using this as a stimulus, I developed a unit to introduce the class to historic foreign policy decisions as a way to examine the complexity of foreign relations.

## **What Role Should the U.S. Play in Foreign Affairs?: Variations of Literacy in Practice**

In order to help students understand the complicated reactions individuals have in times of war, I developed a unit centered on the perennial question, “What Role Should the U.S. Play in Foreign Affairs?” Two activities model the processes pre-service teachers can use to help their future students construct definitions around abstract terms necessary to understand history. The third activity helps students analyze political cartoons; a process that requires advanced visual literacy skills as well as a sophisticated understanding of historical and political knowledge. These goals are consistent with skills promoted in the CCSS.

I introduced this unit asking each pre-service teacher to define the term “imperialism” by writing their definition of the term on one side of an index card. I then drew a four-column chart on the board, writing the words “*examples*” in the first column, “*what it is*” in the second column, “*what it is not*” in the third column, and “*non-examples*” in the fourth column. We spent the class session filling in the appropriate columns of our graphic organizer, defining and redefining this term, as well as providing examples to support our classifications. In order to help the students refine their definition, I brought in additional “chunks” of information from a variety of different sources. For example, they read definitions of the term “imperialism” provided in the glossary section of high school textbooks and in online sources. I also referenced specific events in history to complicate the definition, such as the United States’ annexation of Hawaii and the nation’s involvement in Vietnam. In groups, the students needed to research these events and determine whether they felt they were examples or non-examples of imperialism.

### *Variations of Disciplinary Literacy*

At the beginning of the next class session, I introduced the students to three additional foreign policy options: 1) *Internationalism*, or when a country acts like the “the world’s policemen” to promote their own national interest or safeguard national security; 2) *Collective Security*, when a country acts like a “team player” and works with other countries to influence world affairs; and 3) *Isolationism*, the “loner” approach, or strict non-involvement in the affairs of other nations. Then, I presented the following list of foreign policy actions: Washington’s Farewell Address, The Monroe Doctrine, The Spanish-American War, Entry into World War I, Entry into World War II, The Truman Doctrine, The Vietnam War, The Persian Gulf War, U.S. Peacekeeping Missions in Bosnia, The War in Afghanistan, and The War in Iraq. In pairs, the pre-service teachers

were asked to classify each action as one of our four foreign policy options: imperialism, internationalism, collective security, or isolationism. They were required to provide evidence from sources to support their perspective.

While engaging in this activity, I realized that assigned course readings can help provide students the opportunity to wrestle with conflicting views of U.S. foreign policy responses. For example, when analyzing the Spanish-American War, students can compare José Martí's caution against U.S. involvement in Cuba and Enrique Dupuy de Lôme's criticism of William McKinley's leadership against Cuban rebels with Senator Redfield Proctor's condemnation of Spain's *Reconcentrado* Policy in 1898, Jane Addams' critique of American militarism, and William McKinley's request for Congress to authorize war on Spain.<sup>23</sup> The United States' foreign policy decisions in the period leading up to the country's involvement in World War II can also serve as a space to interrogate complex governmental actions and public opinion. While high school history textbooks often present the idea that the U.S. took an isolationist approach during the initial stages of World War II, I feel it is important for pre-service teachers to analyze documents that problematize this perspective. Students can compare Gerald Nye's radio address advocating for neutrality in 1936 with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1937 propositions to "quarantine aggressors."<sup>24</sup> In groups, students can also debate whether or not the U.S. should have imposed economic sanctions against Japan, from 1938-1939, drawing from Stanley Hornbeck's and Joseph Grew's arguments for and against using this response.<sup>25</sup> FDR's 1940 proposition of the Lend-Lease Act and his orders to the U.S. Navy to "Shoot on Sight" might be used to complicate the notion the government was committed towards isolation.<sup>26</sup> The students in this class were encouraged to use evidence from these primary source documents when placing their classification of foreign policy responses along our continuum of foreign policy responses.

Before our next class session began, I placed a sign representing one of the four foreign policy approaches in each corner of the room. I told students, "Each time I mention an action, you must move to the corner representing how you would categorize that event amongst our continuum of foreign policy approaches." Once they moved, the students were asked to synthesize their research with others in their respective corners and form a position statement to defend their perspective. Each group was allowed to present their case before individual students were allowed to challenge others' perspectives. After we had ample time to complete a discussion about that particular event, I called out another policy decision and asked students to move again to the corner that best represented their classification of this new example.

### *Variations of Visual Literacy*

The final activity for this unit utilized political cartoons that reference U.S. foreign policy issues in order to model skills needed to analyze political cartoons. I started the class session by projecting the cartoon "Invading New Markets," by Andy Singer.<sup>27</sup> Students were then directed to write down their thoughts while viewing this illustration. Opening up a discussion, I asked the students to focus only on what they initially saw in the projected image. This step forced the class to examine all of the details before trying to interpret the underlying message promoted by the artist. After we discussed what we saw on the surface, I then allowed students to offer their interpretation of Singer's message in this illustration. Jorge saw this as an example of globalization demonstrating that countries can control others through markets. Victoria admitted this image challenged her original notions of imperialism as she realized corporations can engage in this process, while Frank felt this image portrayed cultural imperialism. In order to debrief this activity, we developed a list of information that high school students would need to know before interpreting the symbolism within this political cartoon. Key concepts and ideas included: a reference to storming the beaches of Normandy, the raising of the American flag in Iwo Jima, and the various corporate symbols featured in the image.

After analyzing this visual, I gave the pre-service teachers a list of characteristics found in political cartoons. We discussed how illustrators incorporate caricatures, exaggerations, and distortions; embed stereotypes; and utilize satire and irony while creating this editorial and artistic genre. I reminded the prospective teachers that they will also need to help students analyze captions and written texts in order to interpret the image. Our discussion reinforced how important it is for readers to consider the source—e.g., author, publication, and date of publication—in order to interpret the artist's message.

As a whole class, we practiced analyzing two political cartoons that critique Theodore Roosevelt's Big Stick Policy: W. A. Roger's "The Big Stick in the Caribbean Sea" and Louis Dalrymple's "The World Constable."<sup>28</sup> I then distributed different political cartoons throughout the classroom, allowing students in pairs and groups to analyze and explain each different example. Additional examples of cartoons surrounding the Spanish-American War include "Miss Cuba Receives an Invitation" and "Ten Thousand Miles from Tip to Tip."<sup>29</sup> To discuss the Annexation of Hawaii, I distributed the political cartoons, "Who'll Get the Wish Bone," "The Only Way to Stop those Political Eruptions," and "Uncle Sam Catches the Ripe Fruit."<sup>30</sup> Each group presented their cartoon and interpretation to their peers at the end of the class session.

The proceeding lessons were developed to help pre-service teachers scaffold the skills necessary to construct definitions of abstract concepts, and model the importance of using evidence from primary source documents to support a political perspective. Political cartoons were utilized as a mechanism for highlighting bias and perspective as well as demonstrate skills for interpreting visual texts. After the conclusion of the third lesson, we returned our attention to reading and analyzing our course text, *A People's History of American Empire*. I hoped that after the pre-service teachers experienced the complexity of historical foreign policy decisions, within the context of the time, they would have stronger grounds to critique the graphic textbook. I also thought these examples would help my students compare Zinn's message with the sanitized versions of American history often included in high school textbooks. The following excerpts demonstrate a variety of reactions as the pre-service teachers continued to make sense of how this historian presented past events.

*Variations of Reading Critical Literacy: Ways of Reading Imperialism*

When reading the introduction to *A People's History of American Empire*, the majority of the students were either skeptical or antagonistic towards Howard Zinn's message; a message that U.S. involvement in Afghanistan represents a history of fighting "terrorism with terrorism."<sup>31</sup> As the text progresses, the late historian's lectures present a message that U.S. involvement in foreign nations has historically been imperialistic in nature. The first chapters cover the Massacre at Wounded Knee, U.S. interference in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, and the American invasion of the Philippines. I noticed it was easier for many pre-service teachers to examine historical conflicts critically and consider them acts of imperialism.

Often, the pre-service teachers saw examples in the text where America's "good-natured actions" masked a hidden agenda. For example, Christopher started his second Readers Response by writing:

**Christopher:** To be honest, I have never learned anything about the Philippines in any of my history classes...What I like about this text is how Zinn speaks about events that one would never hear about in a High School History class or History textbook. In this chapter Zinn talks about the Battle of Bud Dajo, which was a massacre of Philippine forces by American forces...Again Zinn is showing America's imperial side and the cruelty America took in order to advance and gain power.

This was one instance where a student confessed he learned new content while reading this book, content that was not covered in his secondary U.S. history textbook. In subsequent reflections, Christopher referenced additional occasions where he encountered new information, such as the

Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which he described as a “secret agreement to partition off lands from the Ottoman Empire.” This pre-service teacher additionally referred to these cases as evidence that demonstrated “Western nations only care about the economic and political power we can gain from ‘helping’ or ‘aiding’ these nations.”

Adriana also critiqued a perspective she felt implied that “We feel that it is our divine right and duty to ‘help’ others when, in truth, we Americans are greedy. There is a hunger for more power, for the expansion of democracy, and for manifest destiny.” She divulged that this notion became more apparent while she was analyzing the section of the text devoted towards the United States’ involvement in World War II. Adriana’s reflections communicated that she valued Zinn’s condemnation of America’s use of “sticky fire” and the atomic bomb as evidence of inhumane actions directed towards extending the nation’s sphere of power. She thought the author was presenting the information in order to “cause Americans to question our motives and the actions we take as a nation.”

Gladys’ reflection describes how the text disrupted her perception of America’s involvement in recent wars.

**Gladys:** Something that I found to be very interesting was the idea that the United States has not officially declared war on another country since World War II. Yes, there have been many wars since then, including the Cold War, the Vietnam War and, most recently, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet none of these wars have officially been declared under the procedures directed by the United States Constitution, Article One, Section Eight.

She wondered if other readers question whether or not these events could be considered legitimate declarations of war.

Other pre-service teachers examined the impact of imperialism within U.S. borders. Victoria focused on the implications of cultural imperialism highlighted in the sections of the text that describe the Battle of Wounded Knee.

**Victoria:** Chapter one starts off by stating “the massacre at Wounded Knee marked the domination of the continent by white men...but only certain white men” (p. 9). The statement represents the imperialism implemented by “white men”, when they arrived in the U.S., that they forced onto natives. It is interesting to see how our class discussions on cultural imperialism really brought to light all of the different forms of imperialism. If not for tonight’s class, I would not have interpreted Zinn’s comics in the way I have, especially a statement so bold like the one above about “white men” and the domination upon people.

Victoria connected our conversation about cultural imperialism, as a divergence from definitions that solely focus on economic rationales,

with America's history of manifest destiny. In her reflection, one can see how the pre-service teacher is beginning to connect imperialist action with efforts to rid a group of their culture, a connection that has racial implications as well.

Some pre-service teachers' reflections addressed Zinn's claims that the United States has instigated international war as leaders learned "that trouble and social unrest at home can be cured by the *prescription of foreign war*. Americans will unify against a foreign army."<sup>32</sup>

**Lucas:** Zinn questions, "Would not a foreign adventure deflect some of the rebellious energy from strikes and protest movements towards an external enemy? Would it not unite the people with government?"<sup>33</sup> I agree. There have been many cases in history where the government would engage in foreign affairs to unite the people under them.

By approving Zinn's statement, Lucas suggests that the U.S. may often have a hidden motivation for engaging in war; that hidden motivation might result in actions that create an external conflict to distract citizens from internal strife.

In Chapter 3, Zinn presents the reader with the following question: "Is the U.S. a republic or an empire?"<sup>34</sup> Pre-service teacher Frank addressed this rhetorical question in many of the reflections he developed throughout the semester.

**Frank:** This is an interesting question due to the fact that while the U.S. does not practice the system of monarchy, and is widely known for their democratic and republic government, they colonize and have other foreign nations subjected to their control.

In another assignment, Frank continued to address the question of whether the United States is an empire or a republic.

**Frank:** If we are an empire, the U.S. would only create foreign policy that would benefit the ruling class. However, if we are a true republic, then why is the U.S. still making laws and policies that would benefit neither the citizens of the United States or the relationship with other foreign nations?

In his final Reader Response, this pre-service teacher included his proposed ideas for improving U.S. relations in the international arena.

**Frank:** Rather than invading a foreign country and their market with unreasonable offers, if the United States would push for mutual cooperation, there would not be any rebellions or strikes against the policies of U.S. and it would ensure long-lasting relationships with other countries. The U.S. must realize that, while money is of importance and necessity, there are some things that are greater than money and that money can't buy: that is trust. I believe that trust will take the nation, and each individual, further than where money alone can take us.

Frank was the only pre-service teacher to propose a complex alternative to this nation's involvement in international affairs, indicating his ability to identify unconventional ways of being.

### **Implications for Using *A People's History of American Empire* to Model Content and Pedagogy**

Three pre-service teachers initially agreed with Zinn's critique of America's foreign policy response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that occurred on September 11, 2001. Frank, Amanda, and Jorge supported Zinn's notion that America was fighting terrorism with terrorism. These three prospective teachers continued to cite historical examples of U.S. imperialism they encountered in this book in each of the remaining four Reader Responses. Rather than finding these ideas incongruent to their previous perspectives, these students were able to incorporate incidents cited in the text into their previous view of U.S. global interactions. Frank was the only student to use his reflections on Zinn's text to introduce alternative approaches the U.S. could use when responding to current foreign policy issues.

Many of the other pre-service teachers' reflections demonstrate the complex processes individuals may go through as they develop a critical stance. For example, quotes from the Reader Responses of Christopher, Victoria, Adriana, and Gladys demonstrate how these individuals were wrestling with the material. They remained reflective about what they were learning and how they felt about this new information. When they referenced spheres of influence and manifest destiny, they recognize that imperialist desires may force countries to seek gains in political and economic power while "aiding" other nations. Victoria's reflection emphasized the connections between the information about cultural imperialism presented in the graphic text and classroom sessions devoted to defining and redefining the term "imperialism." This helped her reframe the way she viewed the historical treatment of Native Americans by "white men" as acts of cultural imperialism. It was easier for these four pre-service teachers to critique historical events than it was for them to accept Zinn's alternative reaction to September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Some pre-service teachers were never able to critique America's participation in foreign affairs. In one instance, Hilary indicated she felt that parents would "not appreciate if high school teachers implemented a text like this that was so critical of the United States," that this text offered "a nice story but clearly showed the author's bias," and that her role was "to present material in class without any commentary." This pre-service teacher's reflections mirror many, pre-service and in-service, high school

history teachers' concerns over the implication of using graphic novels to discuss controversial issues found within this content area.<sup>35</sup> These concerns can reproduce a sensitized, and often watered-down, version of our nation's history.

Overall, most of the prospective teachers in this class demonstrated the ability to engage with the graphic text and primary source material. Their in-class discussions and assignments indicated they were considering multiple perspectives as they examined new evidence about historical events. Finally, written pieces indicated these pre-service teachers were metacognitive as they reflected about what they learned while engaging with this text. These are three crucial aspects at the core of critical literacy.

When developing a critical stance, individuals are also asked to take responsibility to inquire. Historians demonstrate this process by sourcing (i.e., asking who wrote a document or determining the strengths and weaknesses of each type of source) and contextualizing (i.e., recognizing that events must be understood in a specific time and place).<sup>36</sup> They also do this by triangulating information using a variety of sources. Unfortunately, none of the pre-service teachers' responses questioned the sources or context of the visual and primary sources incorporated throughout this text. Although many acknowledged they acquired historical content while reading the book, none of the students made connections to outside sources or even implemented information from the primary source documents we read in class into their Reader Responses. This may have been a result of the pre-service teachers' interpretation of the Reader Response assignment—i.e., an editorial or reflection rather than scholarly essay. Yet, I wonder whether these students were able to make the connection between the skills we used when analyzing primary source documents in class and their role as future history and literacy instructors. Unfortunately, their reflections did not acknowledge the role of historical inquiry in preparing them for their future profession.

Finally, my overarching goal for using *A People's History of American Empire* was to choose a transformative and graphic text to model skills for visual literacy. Class discussions often indicated the pre-service teachers' enthusiasm towards incorporating visual images into their instruction. For example, the lesson on analyzing political cartoons produced the liveliest conversation that semester and all of the students were actively engaged. Many of the pre-service teachers felt the political cartoons, images, and photographs made *A People's History of American Empire* more accessible to English Language Learners (ELLs) and struggling or resistant readers. Yet the inclusion of controversial images was cited as the rationale against using this text within high school history course. The pre-service teachers' reflections on the images in this text echo concerns, featured in previous

research on the use of these texts in pedagogical contexts, reminding instructors of contentions that arise when combining print and visual texts with controversial topics.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the pre-service teachers in this course initially offered mixed reactions to Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle's graphic text, *A People's History of American Empire*. This reaction inspired a unit examining the public's opinion of various contentious U.S. foreign policy decisions over the past century. The lessons within this unit were developed in order to model disciplinary, visual, and critical literacy strategies. These mini-lessons were intended to help pre-service teachers gain both content and pedagogical content knowledge as they continued to read and analyze this graphic textbook. My instructional goals were supported through classroom discussions and written Reader Responses, demonstrating that this graphic text forced individuals to remain constantly engaged in the material as they reflected on new information. Unfortunately, the majority of pre-service teachers were reluctant to incorporate controversial images and content into their instruction and did not show evidence that they were engaging in responsible inquiry.

As an advocate for using transformative and visual texts in instruction, I offer this case as a platform to examine the potential possibilities and pitfalls for incorporating graphic texts in history courses. My experience watching pre-service teachers wrestle with this particular text prompts the following recommendations. 1) Teacher educators need to reinforce crucial aspects of disciplinary literacy while exposing pre-service teachers to primary source documents. Through this method, individuals learn that historians engage in a variety of processes, including sourcing and contextualization, as they compare and contrast a variety of sources pertaining to a specific event. 2) Teacher educators need to make the stages necessary for developing a critical stance more explicit. This practice should help student realize that critical literacy goes beyond simply considering multiple perspectives. Instead, readers must take the responsibility to check sources, critique bias, reflect on their own learning, and consider alternative ways of being. 3) Teacher educators need to help pre-service teachers embrace the discomfort one may experience when viewing controversial issues. Prospective teachers need the skills to help their future students become critical consumers of what they read and view, and teacher educators must develop lessons that simultaneously promote disciplinary and critical literacy.

## Notes

1. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center), *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, 2010*, <<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>>.

2. Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

3. For information about different approaches to literacy, see Karen Cadiero-Kaplan, "Literacy Ideologies: Critically Engaging the Language Arts Curriculum," *Language Arts* 79, no. 5 (May 2002): 372-381.

4. Elizabeth Moje, "Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Call for Change," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 2 (October 2008): 96-107.

5. For an overview of disciplinary literacy as it relates to history instruction, see Moje, 96-107; Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan, "Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy," *Harvard Educational Review* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2008); Sam Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert/Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Text," *Cognitive Science* 22, no. 3 (July 1998): 319-346; Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, eds., *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

6. The version of critical literacy incorporated into this text is inspired by Paulo Freire's work, particularly *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970/2000).

7. For an in-depth discussion of the goals and practical implications of incorporating critical literacy in the classroom, including the areas that need to be fostered in order to take a critical stance, see Christine Leland, Mitzi Lewison, and Jerome Harste, *Creating Critical Classrooms* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

8. The role of social studies teachers in fostering literacy skills is discussed in the following articles: Scott T. Barksdale, "Good Readers Make Good Historians: 'Can We Just Settle it on 'A Lot of People Died'?" *The History Teacher* 46, no. 2 (February 2013): 231-251; Samuel S. Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and the Academy," *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 515; and Jeffery D. Nokes, "Recognizing and Addressing the Barriers to Adolescents' 'Reading Like Historians,'" *The History Teacher* 44, no. 3 (May 2011): 379-404.

9. For a detailed discussion of different forms of knowledge, including the conceptualization of transformative knowledge that guides the framework of readings chosen for this course, see James Banks, "The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education," *Educational Researcher* 22, no. 5 (June-July 1993): 4-14.

10. Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the 'Brown' Decision* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002); James Loewen, *Sundown Towns* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

11. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994); Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004).

12. The model of literature circles used in this article is patterned after the literature circles featured in Harvey Daniels, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002).

13. For conversations about digital learners, see Henry Jenkins, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century" (Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation, 2007), <<http://www.macfound.org/press/publications/white-paper-confronting-the-challenges-of-participatory-culture-media-education-for-the-21st-century-by-henry-jenkins/>>; National Coalition Against Censorship, "Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians," The American Library Association, Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, <[http://www.ala.org/al/aboutala/offices/oif/ifissues/graphicnovels\\_1.pdf](http://www.ala.org/al/aboutala/offices/oif/ifissues/graphicnovels_1.pdf)>; John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital* (New York: Perseus, 2008).

14. Jean-Philippe Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (New York: First Second, 2006).

15. For examples of how graphic novels can be and have been used in history and social studies classrooms, see Alicia C. Decker and Mauricio Castro, "Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012): 169-188; Lila Christensen, "Graphic Global Conflict: Graphic Novels in the High School Social Studies Classroom," *The Social Studies* 97, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 227-230.

16. See Stephen Tabachnick, ed., *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009).

17. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, eds., *Teaching Visual Literacy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

18. C. M. Butzer, *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); Brian Vaughn, *Pride of Baghdad* (New York: Vertigo, 2006); Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2008); Dwight Jon Zimmerman, Chuck Horner, and Wayne Vansant, *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (New York: Pantheon, 2010).

19. Sarah Mathews, "Framing Preservice Teachers' Interpretations of Graphic Novels in the Social Studies Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 3 (2011): 416-446. For additional conversations about pre-service teachers' perceptions of graphic novels in the classroom, see J. Spencer Clark, "'Your Credibility Could Be Shot': Preservice Teachers' Thinking about Nonfiction Graphic Novels, Curriculum Decision Making, and Professional Acceptance," *The Social Studies* 104, no. 1 (2013): 38-45.

20. See Sam Wineburg's "Undue Certainty: Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short," *American Educator* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2012-2013): 27, for the critique of Zinn's sourcing. Also see Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), for lesson ideas to open up the textbook.

21. This quote starts on page 3 of Howard Zinn, Mike Konopacki, and Paul Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

22. All names are pseudonyms.

23. Jane Addams' Address can be found in Jeremi Suri, ed., *American Foreign Relations Since 1898: A Documentary Reader* (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). All additional documents referenced can be found in Dennis Merrill and Thomas Paterson, eds., *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume I: To 1920*, seventh ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010).

24. These documents can be found in Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*, seventh ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010).

25. These documents can be found in Merrill and Paterson, *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914*.
26. Ibid.
27. Andy Singer, "Invading New Markets" (cartoon), 2007, <<http://www.mnartists.org/work.do?rid=215822>>.
28. See W. A. Rogers, "The Big Stick in the Caribbean Sea" (cartoon), 1904, <<http://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0004384>>; Louis Dalrymple, "The World's Constable" (cartoon), 1905, <<http://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0008303&itemw=4&itemf=0001&itemstep=1&itemx=1>>.
29. "Miss Cuba Receives an Invitation" (cartoon), *Chicago Record-Herald*, 1901, see cartoon and student activity at <<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/spanishamericanwar/0/inquiry/main/resources/4/>>; "Ten Thousand Miles from Tip to Tip" (cartoon), *Philadelphia Press*, 1898.
30. "Historical Political Cartoons About Hawaii," Hawai'i Digital Newspaper Project, <<https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/ndnp-hawaii/Home/historical-feature-articles/political-cartoons>>.
31. Zinn, Konopacki, and Buhle, 4.
32. Ibid., 76.
33. This quote is written directly as the student wrote their reflection. The quotation marks do not represent a direct quote from the text, but summarize the quote included above found in Zinn, Konopacki, and Buhle, 76.
34. Zinn, Konopacki, and Buhle, 67.
35. Mathews, 416-446. For additional conversations about pre-service teachers' perceptions of graphic novels in the classroom, see Clark, 38-45.
36. Wineburg, Martin, and Monte-Sano.
37. Mathews, 416-446.