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Dr. Sammy Lee (1920-2016)

I've designed and proposed two sets of lesson plans based on the life of Dr. Sammy Lee, one of the most prominent and distinguished Asian Americans of the 20th century. I hope that the Advisory Committee for the Ethnic Studies Standards in the State of California might endorse these lesson plans, such that teachers in California can incorporate them in the History and Social Studies standards—toward the end of the 8th grade curriculum, when students are studying late 19th and early 20th century United States history, as well as in the last third of the 11th grade curriculum, when students examine themes in 20th century United States history.

Professor Grace Cho at Cal State Fullerton and Ms. Eunjee Kang of the San Lorenzo Unified School District helped me to identify and to apply the biographical materials into the History and Social Science Standards for the State of California. My brother, Professor Edward J.W. Park of Loyola Marymount University, helped to prepare this document, and I also received helpful suggestions and corrections from Professor Jennifer Jung-Kim of UCLA and Professor Grace Cho at Cal State Fullerton.

This document contains the following sections:

A Biographical Overview of Dr. Sammy Lee

Dr. Sammy Lee had a remarkable life. He was born in Fresno, California, when the state was still heavily segregated by race, but he nevertheless became an officer in the United States Army, and then a distinguished Olympic athlete as an elite diver, first in the Summer games in London in 1948 and again in Helsinki in 1952. He went on to a notable career as a surgeon and physician, as well as an influential diving coach based in Orange County, California. Dr. Lee would serve as an important representative for the United States during the Cold War, and he would also identify and coach other elite Olympic divers over several decades. His life unfolded during the expansion of American military power in the Pacific, and although he experienced white supremacist discrimination throughout his life, he became a new kind of American citizen, one who represented a more progressive and inclusive multiracial nation.

Even before he was born, American citizens had re-shaped the lives of his parents and of his ancestral country. His father, Soon Kee Rhee, had been working as a translator for an American engineering firm engaged in railroad construction—the sovereign monarch of Korea, King Kojong, had granted these "concessions" to foreign companies to strengthen and to develop his country, as other great powers, including Russia, Japan, and China, continued to compete for influence in the Korean court. King Kojong received American missionaries, businessmen, and diplomats to develop ties between Korea and the United States, and this was how Soon Kee Rhee became an indirect beneficiary of these policies to "open" Korea to foreign influence and to strengthen it through modernization.[1]

Rhee used this position to leave Korea, just like many hundreds of thousands of Koreans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike many Korean Christians who went to Hawaii during this period, Mr. Rhee had asked his American employer to sponsor him to study engineering at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Mr. Rhee had married Eun Kee Rhee in Korea before migrating to the United States in 1905, the same year that Korea became a protectorate of the Empire of Japan. Although he'd planned to return to Korea, Mr. Rhee feared that his country would soon cease to exist, and so he eventually decided to ask his wife to join him in California. And Mr. Rhee never completed his engineering degree—instead, he and Ms. Rhee relocated to the California Central Valley, where they would work on a farm over several years. Their two daughters, Dolly and Mary, were born in 1914 and 1915; Sammy was born in 1920.[2]

The Rhee children were born during a period of intense hostility against persons of Asian ancestry, a period that began in California three decades before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Immigration exclusions against Asians had expanded over the next four decades: in 1907, for example, under the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and the Empire of Japan, both countries agreed to restrict emigration to the other; and under the Immigration Act of 1917, the United States Congress declared all immigration from Asia

unlawful, and it defined as "Asiatic Barred Zone" to map, visually, all persons excluded under the law. In the state of California, legislators approved of a wide range of discriminatory rules, including the Alien Land Laws, first in 1913 by statute, and then in 1920 through a statewide referendum. These rules barred "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning or leasing land—the provisions in 1920 allowed public officials the right to seize lands from any Asian immigrant found in violation of the rule. And since 1878, under federal precedents, Asian immigrants were "non-white," and thus ineligible to apply for American citizenship. Moreover, in 1927, the United States Supreme Court said again that Asians were "yellow," and thus "colored" and "non-white," and subject to segregation in public services, including public school systems. California had long been a center for this kind of anti-Asian white supremacy since the mid 19th century, and so it's no wonder that Sammy Lee felt this animosity even as a child.[3]

By 1932, the family had relocated to Highland Park in Los Angeles. The Rhee family changed their surnames to Lee, and Mr. Lee ran a grocery store while Mrs. Lee prepared meals to augment the family's income. Her cooking proved popular, the family experienced some financial stability, but the young man did not transition well to the urban environment: Sammy described his older sisters as "good students," and he described himself as a "spoiled brat." He preferred sports over school, and in school, he was prone to fighting and to other behavioral issues. He recalled a number of instances when he'd attacked and denigrated Japanese kids his own age, for "stealing my country." Many years later, Dr. Lee recalled several racial discriminations and slights that were common against people of color in Los Angeles at that time: he had enjoyed swimming and diving with his African American friend, Hart Crum, for example, but the boys could only use the public pool on Wednesdays, as the pool was to be drained and cleaned just afterwards; Sammy learned that some of his white classmates had parents who did not want "a chink" or an "Oriental" coming into their homes; and at the family store, he overheard his father endure racial slurs and other forms of abuse.[4]

As he grew older, he learned of more systemic legal disabilities that his parents had faced. Although he and his sisters were born in the United States, and thus American citizens by birth, he also learned from his father that his own parents could not naturalize into American citizens—being from Asia, they remained "aliens ineligible for citizenship." They could not buy or lease land. Sammy learned that even though they'd attended public schools that were not segregated, his parents worried if or how their children could attend college. All of this could feel overwhelming: Dr. Lee recalled how, when he was in junior high school, he'd once confessed to his father that he had been ashamed of his Korean ancestry. "I wish that I could be white," he said, if just to be able to avoid the racial slights and discriminations all around them. Even though he became popular and athletic in his teens, he was reminded in multiple ways that white people did not regard him and other people of color, including many of his friends, as "full" American citizens, perhaps not even as fully persons.[5]

Nativism and racism were not just problems in southern California. Issues of race, identity, and citizenship dominated national politics in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1930s, when the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, and as several European nations were devolving into authoritarian regimes, either into fascism or into communism, American citizens were debating the broader role of the United States in such a world. Some Americans favored a greater role for the United States in global affairs, as an exemplar of an inclusive, liberal democracy; they felt that racial discrimination and white supremacy were harmful of American leadership toward those ends. Still other Americans preferred "American First," a United States that would be unto itself, one that would pursue its own narrow self-interests without getting embroiled in global affairs and especially not in yet another world war.[6]

Americans were torn, divided over these issues: since at least 1907, nativists and white supremacists had supported race-based exclusions in the immigration law and in other areas of American life, even as progressive leaders in the federal government and in the states were becoming more vocal and critical of these same rules in the 1930s. Prominent families divided. The First Lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, had spoken openly against racial segregation, quite often more bluntly than her husband, and when she was visiting states like Alabama, she disregarded the local custom by sitting next to African Americans. Yet when Jesse Owens won four Olympic gold medals in the Summer Games in Berlin in 1936, under the resentful eyes of the Nazi Party, President Franklin Roosevelt sent no congratulatory telegram or public acknowledgment to Owens, even though he'd sent many to white athletes on similar occasions. Roosevelt revealed later that he was fearful of losing support from the Southern Democrats, the so-called "Dixiecrats," who also happened to be white supremacists. Throughout the 1930s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had informed the First Lady more than once that the Ku Klux Klan was calling for her assassination, not so much his.[7]

As a teenager, when Sammy Lee was participating in diving competitions in southern California in the late 1930s, the United States was on the brink of another world war, and it was also a nation divided about its very character and trajectory. Sammy Lee was shaped by these contradictions: having caught the eye of Jim Ryan, a distinguished, semi-retired diving coach during a regional diving competition in 1938, Ryan trained Lee toward greater strength and precision over the next several years. A gruff and profane Irish American, Ryan coached Lee for free that entire time. Not only did Lee attend racially integrated public schools, Lee was also the first non-white student body president at the Benjamin Franklin High School in Highland Park. And yet he could not attend the prom, as it was held in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium, which did not allow people of color. These old patterns of white supremacy existed alongside new opportunities for people like Lee. Lee went to Occidental College in Los Angeles on a full scholarship, and when was he applying for medical school, he was eligible for a program financed through the United States Army, one that would pay for medical school in exchange for military service afterwards. Such programs were emphatically

not available to people of color through the military prior to World War II, but President Roosevelt had changed that policy in the months after the United States had declared war on December 8, 1941.

And so, in 1942, when all of his Japanese American and Japanese immigrant neighbors were being evacuated and incarcerated into internment camps as "enemy aliens," Lee's Korean identity now moved him toward a different fate altogether. He and his family were not interned, his education was not disrupted. Indeed, with Jim Ryan as his coach, Lee won his first National Diving Championship in 1942, becoming the first person of color to achieve that feat. They were disappointed that Lee could not be compete in the Summer Olympic Games in 1940 or in 1944—both had been cancelled because of the war. Lee's father passed away unexpectedly in 1943, but as Lee had promised his father to study medicine, he matriculated at the University of Southern California Medical School later that year. His mother and sisters relocated close to that campus to support him, and he finished his medical degree in 1946. Because the Army had paid for medical school, he was commissioned as a First Lieutenant within the Medical Corp of the United States Army, and he served as a medical officer through the Summer Games in London in 1948, and in Helsinki in 1952. Senior Army officers supported him whenever Lee had requested time to train for both of these Olympic games—they ensured that he had access to excellent diving facilities for his practices.[8]

All of that support paid off. Sammy Lee was the first American to win multiple Olympic medals in the diving competitions over two different Summer Games: he won the bronze medal in the three-meter springboard, and the gold medal in the ten-meter platform, both at the London games in 1948. In the Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952, when he was thirty-two years old, Lee won the gold medal again for the ten-meter platform, becoming the first American diver to defend an Olympic championship in diving. That he accomplished these feats *after* finishing medical school, in his late twenties and early thirties, and during his service in the United States Army—these circumstances make his achievements all the more remarkable.

As an Olympic champion and as an Asian American, Sammy Lee was in a unique position as a goodwill ambassador for the United States in the postwar period. By 1949, the United States was indisputably a global power—the American military presence was obvious in Western Europe, in Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, as well as in the Far East, in Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and in the South China Sea, between communist China and Taiwan. The postwar peace had devolved into a tense Cold War, with the Soviet Union and Communist China becoming fierce critics of the United States and its allies. These communists adversaries had pointed out that white Americans had never cared for "people of color," the people of Africa, Latin America, or Asia, whom they'd enslaved, excluded, degraded, and segregated for many, many decades, ever since the founding of the United States itself. Even as American diplomats insisted that this was not true, or even if it was true, that it was no longer reflective of the kind of inclusive country that the United States was

aspiring to become, they all realized that race-based segregation at home was becoming a significant liability for leaders of the United States as they sought to exercise global leadership abroad.[9]

Thus, when Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower met with Sammy Lee, when they asked him, through representatives of the State Department, to serve as a goodwill ambassador for the United States, he agreed to join other prominent people of color, including Jade Snow Wong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Rafer Johnson, to offer themselves as examples of what an inclusive American citizenship could mean. His very presence and accomplishments were to serve as visible, tangible counterarguments to the "communist propaganda" critical of the United States: Lee was of Korean ancestry, his parents had been "aliens ineligible for citizenship," and yet he had represented the United States in the Olympic Games, he had served honorably in its military, and he was a practicing physician whose medical training had been financed by the American government. In short, his very life suggested that the Americans were not like the Nazis.

In photographs from this period, Dr. Sammy Lee appears with political leaders throughout Europe, South American, and Asia, including President Syngman Rhee, the American ally in South Korea before, during, and after the Korean War. In South Korea, thousands of Koreans regarded Sammy Lee as a national treasure, even though, by his own admission, he could not quite understand the accolades and words of praise coming from so many Koreans, in Korean. He served in the United States Army Medical Corp in South Korea from 1953 to 1955. In interviews from this period, his mother, Mrs. Lee, had explained how Dr. Lee's father had come to America to pursue the American Dream, and then how Dr. Lee himself came to fulfill that dream. All three of her children were college graduates, she said, all three were living fulfilling lives, and yet Sammy's life was well beyond any mother's expectations.

In her essay about Sammy Lee during this period, Professor Mary Lui of Yale explained how Dr. Lee presented as a visually stunning person—as a champion diver, he often wore swim trunks in exhibitions and in other public occasions. Dr. Lee had, by all accounts, an excellent physique well into his forties: that American diplomats and public officials were presenting him for over a decade as an American citizen was itself a striking example of how the "American body politic" was altering, to be inclusive of Asian Americans, which, at the very least, implied that the United States was no longer committed to white supremacist notions of white racial purity or white race-based citizenship. Throughout the history of the United States, the "American citizen" had been a white person, and so Lee's body became yet another symbol of how that wasn't necessarily going to be part of the American future. As American diplomats featured these people of color as American citizens, they implied that other people of color in Africa, Asia, and Latin America could trust the Americans to be fair and impartial, should they also fold themselves into the American sphere.

And it wasn't all just for public display. Progressives in Congress and activists across the country saw this moment as an occasion to change American public law: in 1952, for example, Congress amended federal citizenship laws to allow Asian immigrants to apply for naturalized citizenship, a change that would allow people like Dr. Lee's mother to apply for American citizenship for the first time in American history. Broader immigration reforms, however, would prove less politically popular: over President Truman's veto, Congress chose to retain the National Origins system that continued to restrict immigration from Asia, and Congress would not repeal those restrictive policies until Lyndon Johnson's presidency in 1965. White supremacists still held considerable political power. In 1954, when the United States Supreme Court announced its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, United States Senators would take to wearing simple buttons that said "NEVER" on the floor of the Senate, as in they would never comply with *Brown*.[10]

Indeed, even after the Olympic medals, Dr. Lee and his family continued to encounter white supremacist resistance in unsettling ways. In 1955, when Dr. Lee and his wife Rosalind were looking for homes in Orange County, they were turned away twice, in Garden Grove and in Anaheim, because even the newer subdivisions were still segregating by race. Despite the ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer,* yet another influential United States Supreme Court precedent against such race-based segregation in 1948, real estate agents told Dr. and Mrs. Lee that they could not help "non-whites." The couple drew attention to this problem, local politicians for the County agreed to form a Council for Equal Opportunity, and even Richard Nixon said that he'd been "shocked" by how the Lees had been treated. They eventually did buy a house in Garden Grove, albeit not in *that* neighborhood, and Dr. Lee ran a successful medical practice in Orange County as an ear, nose, and throat specialist until his retirement in 1990.[11]

Throughout that period, Dr. Lee continued to represent the United States at the request of successive American Presidents, including Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. And he coached: he worked with several Olympic divers, including Pat McCormick, Bob Webster, and Greg Louganis. During a time when some had encouraged female divers not to perform complex, acrobatic dives, Lee trained McCormick as she became the first American woman to win four gold medals over two consecutive Summer Games, in Helsinki in 1952 and in Melbourne in 1956. Dr. Lee trained Bob Webster using a sand pit that he'd built in his own backyard, a technique inspired by Jim Ryan's own unconventional methods. Webster won gold medals in diving in Rome in 1960 and then again in Tokyo in 1964, becoming the first American diver after Sammy Lee to win gold medals in two consecutive Summer Games. After the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Dr. Lee had invited several members of the Japanese national team to his home in Orange County, to practice and to coach all of them; he suggested that he did this "to atone" for his own "poor behavior" toward those Japanese kids of his youth. In the early 1970s, Sammy Lee coached Greg Louganis, and the young man eventually moved into the Lee family home to use the pool and that sand pit. Louganis would become one of the most decorated American Olympians ever—Louganis won five Olympic

medals, including four gold medals, over three consecutive Summer Games, in Montreal in 1976, in Los Angeles in 1984, and in Seoul in 1988.

Toward the end of his life, after he stopped practicing medicine in 1990, Dr. Sammy Lee suffered from dementia and heart disease, and he retired from public life in his mid-seventies. He was by then among the most distinguished and decorated athletes of the 20th century: Sammy Lee won the James E. Sullivan Award in 1953, given to the most distinguished amateur athlete in the United States, and he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1968 and into the United States Olympic Hall of Fame in 1990. The City of Los Angeles dedicated a corner of Koreatown—on Olympic and Normandie—the Sammy Lee Square in 2010, and the Los Angeles Unified School District named an elementary school after him in 2013. He passed away at his home in Newport Beach in December 2016, when he was ninety-six years old.

Lesson Plans

Because his life traversed that period of American history characterized by race-based segregation against people of color—including persons of Korean ancestry like Dr. Lee—and because of his remarkable record of accomplishments, we ought to integrate his biography into 20th century United States history. New lesson plans based on his life would be most appropriate, I think, for students in 8th grade and in 11th grade, according to the History-Social Science Framework as it was approved in California in 2016.

For Eighth Grade Students

Toward the end of the 8th grade curriculum in California, students study American history in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when California itself becomes an important part of the national economy, and when the United States projects its power across the Pacific even as Congress approves new and influential restrictions against Asian immigrants. A core part of the 8th grade curriculum focuses on issues of citizenship and belonging—even after the abolition of slavery, white Americans still supported race-based segregation throughout the states, and public officials in all three branches of the federal government supported similar discriminatory rules and policies. New immigration rules—including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1917—identified Asians as "unassimilable," as "aliens ineligible for citizenship," and Congress drew a line over Asia itself, as a "Barred Zone" from which no one should come to the United States. Over this same period, discriminatory rules against Asian immigrants were common and politically popular among large majorities of the white electorate, during a period when people of color themselves couldn't vote.

Under the **History and Social Science standard, 8.12.7**, students should: "identify new sources of large-scale immigration and the contributions of immigrants to the building of cities and the economy; explain the ways in which new social and economic patterns encouraged assimilation of newcomers into the mainstream amidst growing cultural diversity; and discuss the new wave of nativism."

Based on the templates that Ms. Eunjee Kang has shared with us, I would propose the following:

The Lesson Title should be "Dr. Sammy Lee." This Lesson aligns with **HSS 8.12.7**. ***The Disciplinary Area*** is primarily in Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies. ***The Essential Question*** should be: "How did people of color, including immigrants from Asia, cope with white supremacist rules in the early 20th century?" The length of this lesson would be approximately **one hour**.

The Content Learning Objective should focus on the ***Biographical Overview*** presented in this document. Teachers should focus on the public law in the United States, both at the federal level, with special focus on immigration rules, and then on state rules like the Alien Land Laws in California. Students should learn how, since 1852, Asian immigrants were considered "non-white" and "aliens ineligible for citizenship," and that they were thus subjected to a wide range of race-based rules consigning them to segregated schools, restricting them from public employment, and making land ownership unlawful. These practices persisted well into the first half of the 20th century, and significant majorities of white Americans continued to vote in favor of these rules over many decades. In terms of the biographical elements for this lesson, teachers should focus on Dr. Lee's parents, their migration to the United States, and then the family's life in Los Angeles through 1940.

The Historical Thinking Learning Objective should focus on these rules from the perspective of people of color. The ***Essential Questions*** for this lesson should be as follows: what did it feel like to live in such a white supremacist political environment if you were a family of color? What specific rules circumscribed his family, and how did these lead to prejudiced behavior against Sammy Lee? (In this portion of the lesson, teachers may wish to ask their students, especially the students of color, whether they *still* feel as though they are second-class citizens, and whether that might be a legacy of white supremacist public rules and attitudes.) Sammy Lee's early biography is replete with race-based discriminations and insults, both against him and his family. His parents suffered significant legal disabilities as well: they could not apply for American citizenship, nor could they own property in California. Mr. Rhee had come to the United States because the Americans had come to his country first—the Americans were becoming a Pacific power, they already held the Philippines and Hawaii as territories, and yet when Mr. Rhee arrived in the United States, he learned rather quickly that he and even his native-born American children would not be regarded as a "full" American citizens.

As a child and as a teen, Sammy experienced forms of discrimination that caused him to hate himself and his heritage, which was, unfortunately, a rather common response among children of color throughout American history. Students should also learn a very important lesson—that some white Americans did not embrace white supremacist attitudes, and that a significant fraction of white folks were rather moving away from them. Sammy's teachers, his coaches, and his friends treated him with respect and dignity, and through high school, college, medical school, and military service, Sammy Lee experienced new opportunities that were possible for people of color after 1930. Race-based segregation and white supremacy were weakening in critical ways during the course of his life, and Sammy Lee was thus "assimilating" into American citizenship through pathways that were not possible for persons of Asian ancestry in the late 19th century.

Through a study of Sammy Lee's early life, students will learn how the American presence in Asia could stimulate migration from Asia to the United States, and then how Asian immigrants faced tremendous legal and social barriers to their integration after they arrived

here. Those barriers then weakened over time, such that by the late 1940s, white military leaders, white coaches, white teachers, white professors, white classmates, and his entire family were all supporting the aspirations of an Asian American diver and Olympian. All of these lessons address the standards for students in eighth grade, as they appear in **8.12.7**.

I would be open to creating an hour-long presentation based on the materials collected for this project, one that would integrate photographs and other visual materials about Sammy Lee. In studying his early life, even before the Olympic Games in 1948, students would appreciate, I think, the story of a young man who'd faced considerable adversity, but who excelled in no small part because so many people had supported him, many of whom were, in fact, white. He benefitted from the progressive turn in American politics in the middle of the 20th century. In addition, his early life also offers sobering lessons about the vagaries of race and identity: had he been of Japanese ancestry, he and his family would have been interned in 1942. It's hard to imagine how he would have become an Olympic medalist if he'd been forced to endure that hardship. Lee's life thus illustrates an important lesson from the late historian Ronald Takaki—World War II represented a catastrophe for Japanese Americans, but it also represented a tremendous opening of opportunities for other Asian Americans.

For Eleventh Grade Students

In the last third of the 11th grade History and Social Science Standards, "students should analyze United States foreign policy since World War II" (**HSS 11.9**), and students should also "analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights." (**HSS 11.10**).

Although these topics are (still) taught separately in high school, professors in college teach these two together—that is, American foreign policy in the postwar period was intimately related to American race relations and to the broader Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Race-based discrimination was embarrassing to the United States. The communists in the Soviet Union and in China pointed out that American law looked a lot like Nazi law, that American law had *inspired* Nazi law, including the Nuremburg Laws, and that no person of color anywhere in the world should trust Americans when they were presenting themselves as examples for the rest of the world. The communist critique was simply true: American law *was* openly white supremacist, it had been that way for decades, and when American diplomats were attempting to exercise American leadership, they knew that this criticism was both very true and quite devastating for American foreign policy. Successive Secretaries of State, including George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and John Foster Dulles, warned Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy that civil rights reforms domestically would be essential for American diplomacy abroad.

In that context, it's difficult, even now, to assess the global impact of people like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, or Sammy Lee. White supremacist had long held that people of color were not only intellectually inferior but physically inferior as well—people of color were like animals, they said, and under the elaborate rules of competitive, "civilized" sports, people of color were unfit to compete. And even if they did, they were unsuited to win. So, when Jesse Owens dominated the track and field events in the 1936 Summer Olympics, white supremacists struggled to explain how they had been so wrong. Sammy Lee did not have the taller, "conventional" body of an Olympic diver—his coach, Jim Ryan, told him as much—and yet when he performed acrobat, stunning, and precise dives from the springboard and from the platform, his very performances also undermined one of the singular tenets of white supremacist thinking. White people were not, in fact, physically superior, nor did they have a monopoly on physical or athletic perfection. For many younger students now, so accustomed to seeing people of color in sports, these physical and aesthetic dimensions of white supremacy might seem especially ridiculous, and yet in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many white supremacists pointed to these purportedly "innate" differences between "races" to justify race-based exclusions and discriminations, and to insist on the inferiority of people of color.

The Lesson Title should remain "Dr. Sammy Lee." This Lesson aligns with **HSS 11.9 and 11.10**. ***The Disciplinary Area*** is primarily in Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies. ***The Essential Question*** should be: "How did people of color, including distinguished athletes like Dr. Sammy Lee, help to reshape opinions about the United States, and how did their diplomacy help to persuade people of color throughout the world that the United States was no longer committed to white supremacist by the middle of the 20th century?" The length of this lesson would be approximately **one hour**.

For eleventh grade students, the ***Content Learning Objective*** for this lesson should involve the emerging Cold War after World War II, the unique problems facing American diplomats, and the struggles of a new, rising middle class in the United States, one consisting of people of color in no mood to tolerate race-based segregation any longer. Those activist people of color found in American diplomats their strangest and most unlikely allies: all of a sudden, top diplomats in the State Department were looking for prominent people of color to tour the world, to say to *other* people of color that the Americans were not, or at least no longer, total racists. By bringing Olympic athletes like Dr. Sammy Lee to Southeast Asia, Europe, and South Korea, the American diplomats were trying to improve the image of the United States throughout the world. Dr. Lee was a willing participant in these efforts—he'd spent many months meeting with dignitaries everywhere, and he gave diving performances in every conceivable venue. Professor Lui is right: there *was* something physically striking about the man, this Asian American diver, his movements and flight into the water were so precise and spectacular that everyone could *see* and acknowledge his skill and perfection. In Korea, he was a national hero, not just because of the Olympics, but because he was also a doctor.

In late high school, and in the first years of college, we often ask students to take an empathetic point of view toward historical subjects. Thus, the ***Essential Questions*** and the ***Historical Thinking Exercises*** for 11th grade students might include the following: How would you behave, if you were to take the position and perspective of the historical actors that we're studying, including the people of color who were being asked to defend the United States during the Cold War? That is, we should ask students how *they* might behave in Lee's position. He grew up facing all kinds of white supremacist slights and insults, his parents faced all manner of abuse and discrimination; and yet, after winning the Olympics, would *you* travel the world and state how wonderful the Americans were? I think that like so many other prominent people of color, Dr. Sammy Lee was torn between an honesty about the United States as well as its promise, embodied in his own life. Many white folks in his life had been rude, insulting, and racist, and still many others had been giving, supportive, and generous. For white students, this portion of the lesson might involve considering what kind of white person they might have been in California before 1950. For students of color, Sammy Lee's own admission that he "wished to be white" could become an important occasion to consider their own internalized racism, to reflect upon how racism can "teach" children of color to hate themselves. For all students, Lee's life overall can serve as a reminder that a multiracial American citizenship remains a rather recent development, a mere fraction within the longer arc of American history.

Students in late high school would appreciate the contradictions of the United States, and many would find Lee's insights helpful and relevant. In one interview, he reportedly said: "Whenever I was asked by those people in the Far East how America treated Oriental people, I told them the truth. I said Americans had their shortcomings, but they had the guts enough to advertise them, whereas others tried to cover them up." That he persisted as a physician and as a coach to other Olympians, including a woman, Pat McCormick, and a gay man, Greg Louganis, demonstrates the depth to which his life had captured the fundamental shifts in the meaning of American citizenship throughout the 20th century. We still live in a time when Americans still divide over these issues, which might be all the more reason why this particular life is worth studying.

References for Dr. Lee

There are already at least two decent children's book—with illustrations—for younger students based on Dr. Lee's life. The larger picture book, by Paula Yoo, is appropriate for children in grades 2 to 4; Ms. Yoo has published a version for older children in grades 6 to 8. Erika Fernbach interviewed Dr. Lee and in 2012, she produced a book told from his first-person perspective—this book is also most appropriate for children, perhaps in the 4th and 5th grades. Professor Mary Lui of Yale University published a scholarly article about Dr. Lee in the years after he'd won his Olympic medals, when the State Department had asked him to be a "goodwill" ambassador. But Professor Lui's essay seems to be the only scholarly work about Dr. Lee, which is unfortunate, in light of how Dr. Lee's life touches upon so many important central themes in American history throughout the 20th century.

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Ryan Reft, "Sammy Lee: A Life That Shaped the Currents of California and U.S. History," *KCET: History and Society* (December 6, 2016).

"Sammy Lee Gets Home," *New York Times* (September 2, 1955).

Ned Stafford, "Sammy Lee," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* (January 3, 2017).

Books for Children

Erika Fernbach, *Sammy Lee: Promises to Keep* (2012).

Paula Yoo, *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* (2005). [Illustrated by Dom Lee.]

Paula Yoo, *The Story of Olympic Diver Sammy Lee* (2020). [Illustrated by Dom Lee.]

Oral Interviews, Transcripts, and Online Sources

Sammy Lee Oral History, Oral Histories Project, Young Oak Center, UC Riverside
Interview with Professor Edward Chang (March 24, 2015)
https://yokcenter.ucr.edu/viewer/render.php?cachefile=Sammy_Lee.xml

Sammy Lee Video Interview, Occidental Athletics (April 19, 2012)
https://www.oxyathletics.com/sports/mswimdive/2011-12/videos/20120419-wptgx7xp

Sammy Lee: An Olympian's Oral History, LA84 Foundation
Transcript of Interview with Dr. Margaret Costa (1999).

The Korean American Digital Archive at USC offers a searchable database that contains many archival photos of Dr. Sammy Lee. That site is here:
http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15799coll126

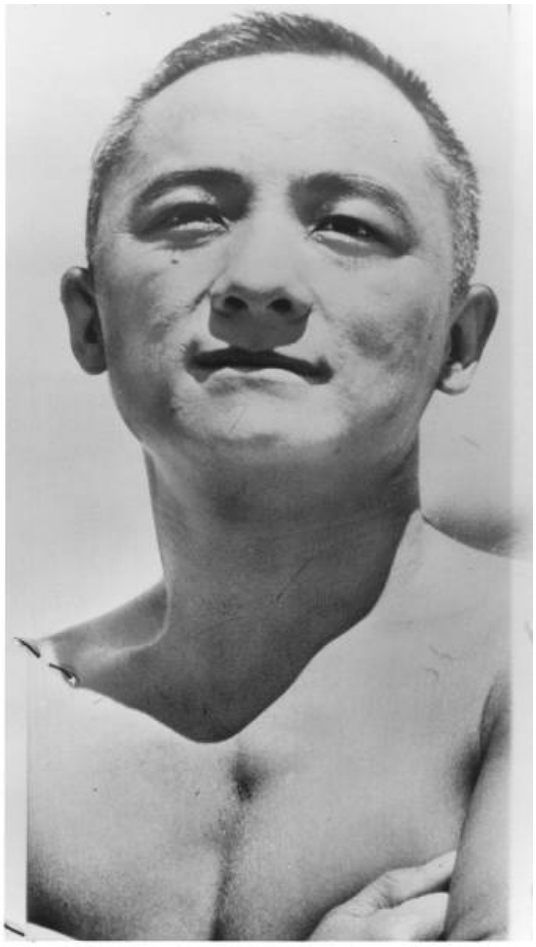
Timeline for Dr. Sammy Lee

1905	Mr. Soon Kee Rhee migrates to California to study engineering at Occidental College. During this year, following its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, the Empire of Japan had declared Korea a protectorate, thus depriving the Korean monarchy of diplomatic sovereignty. Mr. Rhee will send for his wife, Soon Kee Rhee, and the couple will work on a farm in the California Central Valley.
1910	The Empire of Japan annexes Korea, it declares Korea a colony of Japan, and it creates a General Government to rule the entire Korean peninsula. Seoul is renamed Keijo.
1913, 1920	The California state legislature approves the Alien Land Law, and then the second version, passed by a statewide referendum, affirms that "aliens ineligible for citizenship" shall be prohibited from owning or leasing land. The second version also provides for seizures of land for those found in violation of the rule.
August 1, 1920	Sammy Lee was born in Fresno, California. He is the youngest of three surviving children of Mr. and Mrs. Rhee.
1924	The United States Congress passes the Immigration Act of 1924, which re-affirms Asia as a "barred zone" for purposes of immigration.
1927	In *Gong Lum v. Rice*, the United States Supreme Court holds that a child of Chinese ancestry is "yellow," and thus "colored." Public officials throughout the United States would rely on this case to segregate children of Asian ancestry across several public school systems.
c. 1932	The Lee family moves to Highland Park, in Los Angeles.
1938	Lee begins to attend regional diving competitions, and he meets Jim Ryan, a distinguished diving coach, who coaches him for free.
1939	Lee graduates from Franklin High School in Los Angeles, he matriculates at Occidental College, and he competes in intercollegiate diving competitions.

1941 to 1942	Following the declaration of war by the United States against the Empire of Japan, the United States organizes the evacuation and internment of all persons of Japanese ancestry from Oregon, Washington, and California.
1942	Lee takes first place in springboard diving and in platform diving at the United States National Diving Championships. He is the first person of color to achieve this feat.
1943	Lee graduates from Occidental, and he matriculates at the University of Southern California Medical School.
1945	Following the unconditional surrender of the Empire of Japan, Korea regains its independence. The Americans and the Soviets agree to a temporary partition of the peninsula across the 38th parallel.
1946	In the United States National Diving Championships, Lee wins first place in platform diving and third place in the springboard event.
1947	Lee graduates from medical school and he is commissioned as a First Lieutenant within the Medical Corp of the United States Army.
1948	Dr. Lee competes in the Olympic Summer Games in London. He won the bronze medal in the three-meter springboard competition, and he won the gold medal in the ten-meter platform event. In this same year, in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the United States Supreme Court rules unconstitutional the enforcement of racially restrictive covenants in private real estate markets, and in *Oyama v. California,* the Court also invalidated the Alien Land Laws in California, as well as similar rules in several other states.
1950	Dr. Lee marries Rosalind Wong. In June, the Korean War begins.
1952	Lee is now a Major in the United States Army. He competes in the Olympic Summer Games in Helsinki, Finland, and he wins the gold medal in the ten-meter platform event. He is the first American Olympic diver to defend a championship in two consecutive Summer Games.

1953	Lee wins the James E. Sullivan Award, given by the Amateur Athletic Union, and widely regarded as the most prestigious award for amateur athletes in the United States. The Korean War concludes with an armistice, and South Korea will remain an ally of the United States under President Syngman Rhee.
1953 to 1955	Lee serves as a Senior Medical Officer in the United States Army in South Korea. He also tours Asia, South America, and Europe as a goodwill ambassador, through programs organized through the United States Department of State.
1954	The United States Supreme Court announces its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education,* declaring unconstitutional racial segregation in public schools.
1955	Dr. Sammy Lee opens a medical practice in Orange County, California. He and his wife, though, encounter racial discrimination in the local housing market. They eventually buy a home in Garden Grove.
1956 to 1976	Lee continues to coach Olympic divers, including Pat McCormick, Bob Webster, and Greg Louganis. McCormick won gold medals over two consecutive Summer Games (1952 and 1956), becoming the first American woman to do so. Webster defended an Olympic diving championship over two consecutive Summer Games (1960 and 1964), and Louganis won Olympic medals in diving over three consecutive Summer Games (1976, 1984, and 1988).
1990	Dr. Lee retires from his medical practice.
December 2016	Dr. Lee passed away in his home in Newport Beach, California.

Selected Images

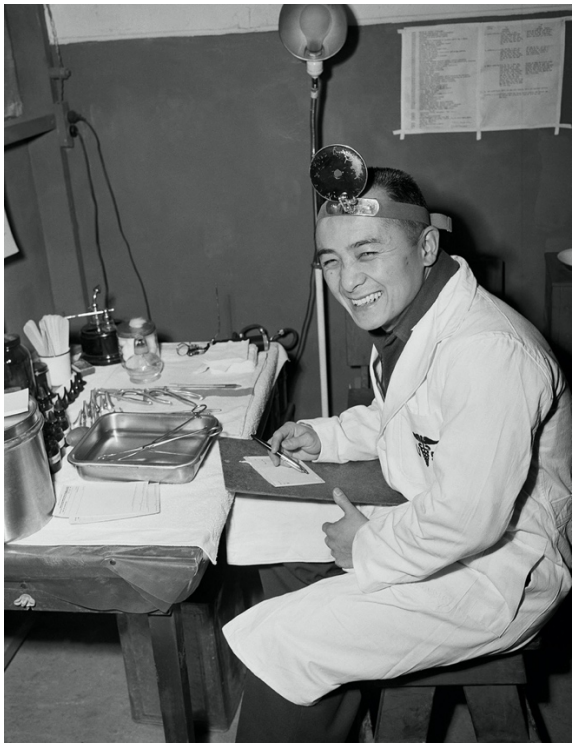


Sammy Lee, from the USC Korean American Heritage Digital Collections.

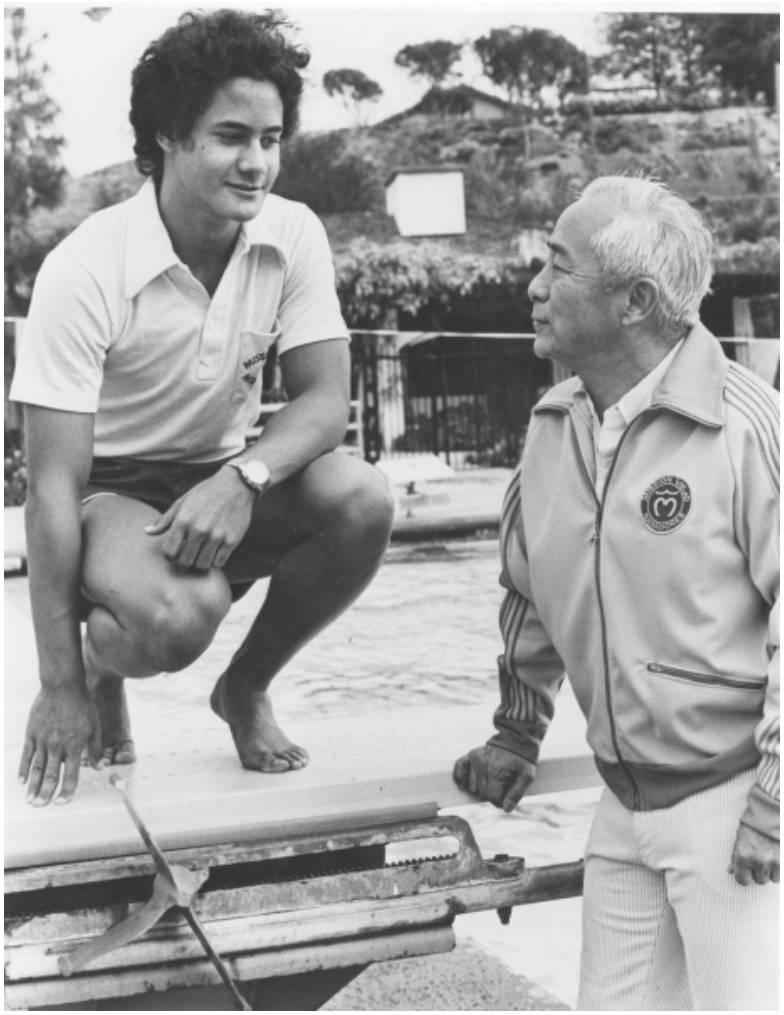
Sammy Lee and Pat McCormick, c. 1952. USC Korean American Heritage Digital Collections.

Dr. Lee, left, and his wife, Rosalind, in June 1952 at a pool in Astoria Park in Queens.
Credit...Jacob Harris/Associated Press

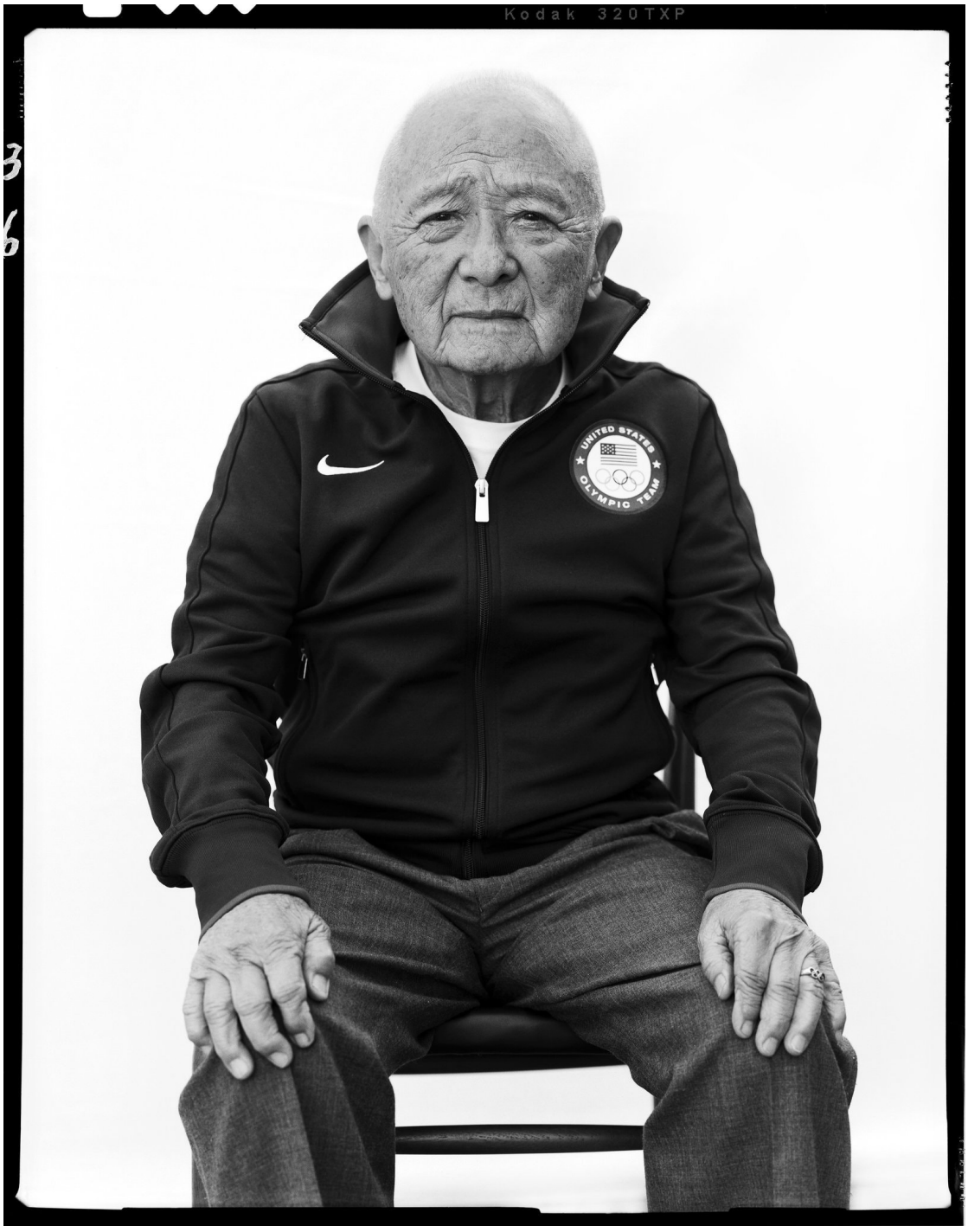
Sammy Lee, with Dwight Eisenhower, and with Syngman Rhee, c. 1953,
USC Korean American Heritage Digital Collections.



Dr. Lee, while serving in a United States Army hospital,
learned he was named the outstanding amateur athlete of 1953
by the Amateur Athletic Union.
Credit...George Sweers/Associated Press; reprinted in the *New York Times*.



Greg Louganis and Sammy Lee, c. 1974; from the *Orange County Register*.



Sammy Lee before the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.
Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

Endnotes

[1] For a history of Korea during this period, see Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (2005).

[2] In the interview with Professor Edward Chang of UC Riverside, recorded in 2015, Sammy Lee alluded to an older brother who'd died as a child, but he did not mention his late brother's name or other details about his life.

[3] For overviews of American public law and of Asian immigrants during this period, see: Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1990), and Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (2016).

[4] In so many ways, the details of Sammy Lee's life resemble the lives of other important Asian Americans of this era. See, for example, Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (2014), and Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1989).

[5] The sociologists would say that Sammy Lee suffered from "internalized racism," the idea being that within white supremacy, non-white persons often feel worthless, and they often wish to be white, even to pass as white. We see the impact of internalized racism in public law during this period, as when Kenneth and Mamie Clark presented their "doll studies" as part of the *Brown* case in 1952; Kluger explains these studies in *Simple Justice*, in note 10, below. The idea also appears in influential pieces of literature, as in Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eyes* (2007). Teachers may wish to review and to reference these other texts in both of the lesson plans outlined in this document.

[6] For influential histories of the United States before World War II that explore these themes, see Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself* (2014) and Charles Kupchan, *Isolationism* (2020).

[7] In American history, the Roosevelts are their own genre. For two recent works, see Hazel Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor* (2011), and Joseph Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (2014). The biographers tend to disagree who was the more influential in the marriage and even in public affairs, especially with regard to American race relations. For a history of the 1936 Summer Games, see David Clay Large, *Nazi Games* (2007).

[8] For general, accessible histories of the Japanese American internment, see: Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial* (2004); Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy* (2009); and Richard Reeves, *Infamy* (2016).

[9] For influential histories that discuss these themes, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2003), and Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (2011).

[10] For immigration reforms after World War II, see John S.W. Park, *Immigration Law and Society* (2018). For influential histories of the *Brown* decision, see James Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education* (2002), and Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (2004).

[11] In many jurisdictions, residential segregation grew worse in the United States after 1950. See, generally, Charles Lamb, *Housing Segregation in Suburban America Since 1960* (2005).