

Constructing Identity in Narratives of Asian America

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1. Themes and Goals

This unit provides an introduction to how identity is negotiated in Asian American narratives. Included are a selection of texts that portray and comment on the "Othering" of Asians, offering constructions of identity that may mirror, undermine, or otherwise transcend racial and cultural stereotypes. By focusing on the ways in which dominant North American discourses present Asians as minorities and permanent Others, the unit highlights the various patterns of discrimination faced by Asians well into the twentieth century.

"Asia" is not treated as a monolithic entity in this unit. Primary texts include short stories, poems, and drama from a variety of perspectives. These readings include works by and representations of Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Filipino Americans, Chinese Canadians, and Japanese Canadians. While this in no sense represents the full diversity of the Asian experience in North America, it does attempt to present both a sense of this diversity and how it may be overlooked or suppressed by the dominant white culture. Also included is a 19th century story by Pierre Loti, "A Ball in Edo." This brief story provides a historical snapshot of stereotypes of Asians at the height of Western imperialism, through which students may discover the resilience of many stereotypes more than 100 years later.

In each of the texts other than Loti's, the narrating subject tackles the issue of representation and identity formation against a variety of stereotypes that serve both to construct the Asian American subject as exotic, inscrutable, or "perpetually foreign," and to erase diversity within the Asian and Asian American communities. The narrating subjects in many of the included texts suggest their ambivalence regarding their status as Others, commenting on topics ranging from the injustice of discrimination to the high price of assimilation.

Possible themes for exploration include:

- Stereotypes of Asian men and women
- Tendency to exoticize Asia and Asians
- Competing models of gender, race, and sexuality
- The price of assimilation — problems related to not living up to self, family, or societal expectations
- Myth of the "perpetual foreigner"
- Mutability of identity
- Performance and identity
- Voice and storytelling

This unit has been designed to challenge students to think critically about the following issues:

- how nation, race, and sexuality are implicated in identity-formation and mainstream discourse on Asian Americans
- how certain attitudes effect mainstream constructions of Asian and Asian American identity, both positively and negatively
- how the assigned narrative texts portray and comment on stereotypes and their effects, or offer notions of identity that undermine or transcend stereotypes

This unit also offers an excellent accompaniment for or introduction to discussions of "Orientalism." Themes which might be addressed in such courses include:

- Orientalist discourse vs. self-Orientalizing discourse
- Gender and Orientalist discourse
- The malleability and historical durability of Orientalism
- Occidentalism vs. Orientalism
- Racism and ethnocentrism vs. Orientalism
- The applicability of Orientalism to East Asian, Pacific Rim, and North American contexts

2. Audience and Uses

This unit is designed to be useful to a wide variety of undergraduate courses, including but not limited to:

- World Literature
- Asian American Literature (and Film)
- Diasporic Literatures
- Asian American History
- American History
- Twentieth Century History
- Diasporas in the Americas
- Ethnic Studies
- Asian American Studies
- History of the Pacific Rim

3. Instructor's Introduction and Readings

The readings below provide the instructor with a social, political, and historical understanding of the representation and treatment of Asians in North America. This material will help instructors (and potential student readers) conceptualize the diverse experience of Asian Americans, and thus grasp more fully the contexts in which authors, poets, and playwrights are commenting on Asian American identity within their texts. Following a summary of the readings are links to timelines outlining significant legislation pertaining to Asian Americans.

- *** Most Important
- ** Recommended
- * Optional

A. Theoretical Context

** DOWER, John. "Patterns of a Race War" (Chapter 1). *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 3-14. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

- In this chapter, Dower argues that WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War were fought particularly bitterly because of East-West racial prejudices. Most useful for the unit are pages 4-11 (starting with the second full paragraph on 4, "Apart from the genocide of the Jews, racism remains one of the great neglected subjects . . ." and ending at "a war without mercy" in the top half of 11) and 13 (starting with "In these various ways . . .").
- Dower's powerful account delineates the ways in which both the Japanese and the American governments manipulated public sentiment in their home countries by demonizing each other as hopelessly subhuman Others.

*** SAID, Edward. Excerpt from “Introduction,” plus final paragraph of book. *Orientalism*, 1-15 and 328. London: Routledge, 1978. (Stop at end of second paragraph on 15, before “2. The methodological question,” then skip to final paragraph on 328)

- Said argues that colonizing Western powers have, since the eighteenth century, constructed the people of the so-called Orient (comprised of what is today known as Asia, the Middle East, and northern Africa) as primitive, inscrutable, exotic Others. He therefore defines Orientalism, not only as a concept that categorizes the Orient as Other to the Occident, and as an academic set of discourses that reinforces that view of essential and unbridgeable difference, but also as a “network of interests” that allowed Europe to “manage—even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively” (3).

*** PORTER, Dennis. “*Orientalism* and its Problems (1983).” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 150-61. Patrick WILLIAMS and Laura CHRISMAN, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

- This article is brilliant but at times somewhat dense and theoretical. The most helpful passages for the unit are the second paragraph on page 150, starting with sentence three—“Said makes it clear that he is concerned with the way in which the so-called Orient . . .” (150)—and the final half-dozen pages of the article (155-160, ending with the penultimate paragraph: “an altogether unthinkable thought within the discourse of Orientalism as defined by Said.”)
- Porter’s aim is to summarize and critique Said’s discussion of “Orientalism” through an analysis of colonial travel literature. Identifying in Said an inability to perceive alternative discourses that resist Orientalism, Porter offers a comprehensive and persuasive explication of the ambivalence expressed, toward imperialist notions of Occidental superiority, by an apparently hegemonic text such as T.E. LAWRENCE’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

** SARDAR, Ziauddin. Excerpt from “Theory and Criticism.” *Orientalism: Concepts in the Social Sciences*, 65-76 (70-76 if strapped for time). Buckingham, England and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1999.

- Sardar summarizes the claims that Said makes in *Orientalism*, situates them within prior scholarship on the subject, and interweaves the major strands of criticism (including Porter’s) that have been leveled against Said.

** ONG, Aihwa. Excerpts from “The Pacific Shuttle: Family, Citizenship, and Capital Circuits.” In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationalism*, 110-36. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. (Skip pg. 120, par. 2, and the “Plotting Family Itineraries” and “Families in America, Fathers in Midair” sections, 124-129)

- Ong rejects as essentialist the orthodox scholarship that portrays Chineseness as a static and timeless quality; she also critiques Said’s contention that Asians are

submissive objects of Anglo-European discourses of Orientalism. She claims, instead, that Chinese transnationals today subvert conventional notions of citizenship and national identity through their pursuit of capital and markets in the expanding global economy.

B. Background on Asian and Asian American History

*** FONG, Timothy. “The History of Asians in America” (Chapter 1). *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*, 10-35. New York: Prentice Hall, 1998.

- This chapter offers a historical overview of the struggles that East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian immigrants have faced in the United States. Fong outlines the major immigration patterns of Asian laborers and refugees from the mid-1800s onward, describing the prejudice faced by them, as well as their perseverance in the face of discrimination, violence, and oppression (including the Chinese Exclusion Act and Executive Order 9066).
- This reading will enable instructors to situate the student readings within a broader understanding of both the difficulties that Asians have encountered in the United States, and the contributions they have made in diverse fields of work.

[Timeline 1: Major Anti-Asian Legislation in the United States and Canada](#)

[Timeline 2: History of Asians in the United States and Canada](#) [History of Asians to the United States and Canada](#)

[Tables: Asian Immigration to the United States and Canada](#)

Review the timelines and tables above for a general background on Asian immigration to North America during the 19th and 20th centuries. A familiarity with the history of Asian immigration can help instructors place this unit’s readings and discussions in a historical context and correct some misperceptions students might have about Asian immigrants.

4. Student Readings and Discussion Questions

- *** Most Important
- ** Recommended
- * Optional

Some instructors may wish to assign critical readings in addition to the literary texts recommended below. Most accessible for this two-week unit are the first chapter of Timothy FONG’s *The Contemporary Asian American Experience*, the documentary film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, and the cogent “Afterword” to David Henry HWANG’s play, *M. Butterfly*. However, the literary texts themselves provide ample material for nuanced discussion and analysis.

A. Short Stories

*** **LOTI, Pierre.** “A Ball in Yedo” (1889). Trans. David ROSENFELD. Electronic publication, 2001. (17 pp.)

This story presents a Frenchman’s patronizing impressions of a ball he attends in Edo (Tokyo) in 1888 at the height of British and French colonialism in Africa and Asia. Start with this reading to establish some of the stereotypes perpetuated during the late 19th Century.

Discussion Questions:

- The narrator comments on the appearance and behavior of rickshaw drivers, of women in western dress at the ball, and of some members of the high aristocracy in traditional Japanese garb. What is the narrator’s attitude toward the Japanese people generally, and toward his dancing partner in particular? Does his admiration of the Chinese delegation at the ball complicate his view of Asians as human beings?
- What is the source of the narrator’s authority to judge his hosts as he does?

*** **YANG, June Unjoo.** “Compassion.” *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*. 14:2 (Winter 2002-03): 197-213. Available from Project Muse: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mamoa/v014/14.2yang.html>.

A Korean American social worker in Manhattan confronts her self-centeredness when dealing with a young Latino client.

Discussion Questions:

- Why is Sandra ill-equipped to succeed at her job as a case worker?
- What does the scar on her cheek represent?
- Sandra herself is unable to explain why she left the office in the middle of an appointment with a client. What motivation does the story suggest?
- In what ways does Nano fit the stereotype of an inner-city Latino youth? In what ways is he humanized?
- Does the story empathize more with Nano than with Sandra? Why or why not?
- In what ways does the story reinforce the myth of the “model minority”? In what ways does it problematize it?

*** **UMEZAWA, Rui.** “Symbiosis.” *Descant* 89, 26:2 (Summer 1995): 180-184.

A Japanese Canadian tour guide in western Canada loses self-control when he reflects on his ambivalent racial and national identity as he addresses a busload of Japanese tourists.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the stereotypes the tour guide has internalized?
- The protagonist and the narrator are one and the same in this story. Who is recording the first-person narration for the implied reader? Does this writing narrator identify completely with the protagonist?
- What kind of emotional state is the protagonist in at the end of the story? Does he achieve a new understanding of himself as a transnational subject?
- Imagine that you are one of the tourists on the bus. Write a postcard home about the people you see in Calgary. Better yet, write a postcard where you try to explain your tour guide's breakdown.

** LEE, Don. "Voir Dire." *Yellow: Stories*, 49-77. New York: Norton, 2001.

A Korean American lawyer in San Vicente, California defends a Chinese American drug addict against charges of child abuse and murder. The lawyer's discomfort over his probable victory at court, when he is certain of the defendant's guilt, is compounded by his Caucasian girlfriend's unplanned pregnancy. This story is one of eight in a volume of interlinked narratives, all set in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, California. The protagonists mostly grew up in Hawaii and belong to a variety of Asian ethnic groups.

Discussion Questions:

- This story presents a diverse range of Asian American characters. What bonds do these characters share? What differences among them does the plot highlight?
- Hank, a Korean American public defender, is divorced from Allison, a Korean American corporate attorney, and is in a long-term relationship with Molly, a Caucasian diving coach. He is currently defending Lam, a Cantonese-born cocaine addict, on charges of child abuse and murder. How does racial similarity or difference affect Hank in his daily life?

B. Poetry

*** QUAN, Andy. "Mr. Wong's Children." In *Slant*. Roberts Creek, British Columbia: Nightwood Editions, 2001.

Quan's poem explores the psychological cost for Asians of comprising a model minority.

*** TSUI, Kitty. "A Chinese Banquet, for the one who was not invited." In *The Very Inside*, ed. Sharon LIM-HING. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994.

Tsui's poem is addressed to the poet-persona's lesbian partner, and dwells on homophobia and the repressiveness of silence.

*** TAN, Joël B. “queer pilipino rebolusiyon: with ms. nikki giovanni to thank for.” *Amerasia Journal*. 20:1 (1994): 179-81.

Tan’s poem examines the social and political marginalization of gays and non-whites through the gaze of an urban, Filipino American poet-persona. (Nikki GIOVANNI is an African American poet-activist-scholar.)

Discussion questions on the above poems:

- Compare and contrast the images of Asian American identity as presented in the poems by Andy QUAN, Joël TAN, and Kitty TSUI. How do the poems thematize such issues as intergenerational connections/conflict, problems of prejudice, and the intersection of cultural, racial, and sexual identities, etc.?
- Choose one of the poems and examine how its form and content are related. What in the poems identifies the poetic context as Asian American; how else are the poetic speakers and subjects identified?

C. Drama

*** HWANG, David Henry. *M. Butterfly* and “Afterword.” New York: Penguin, 1990 (first edition 1988). (100 pp.)

* -----, screenplay. *M. Butterfly*. Warner Studios, 1993. Dir. David CRONENBERG. Starring Jeremy IRONS and John LONE. Running time: 101 minutes.

This provocative, searingly witty play features a French diplomat recalling his long-term relationship with a Peking opera performer who turns out, contrary to the Frenchman’s expectations, to have been a gay male spy. It may help students to view the first scene of the 1904 Puccini opera that Hwang is parodying in his play.

Hwang’s “Afterword” eloquently analyzes the mindset that makes credible the Frenchman’s capacity to live in delusion. Even though the playwright himself adapted the screenplay for the movie, the film version is uniformly considered inferior to the play.

Discussion Questions:

- Jeffery Paul CHAN, co-editor of the first anthology of Asian American fiction, condemns playwright David Henry HWANG and novelist Maxine Hong KINGSTON as sell-outs who cater to the tastes of the mainstream American public by depicting Asian characters that reinforce western stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans. However, Hwang notes in his “Afterword” to *M. Butterfly* that his play is a “deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*” (Hwang 95). To what extent does Hwang’s critique of stereotypes succeed or fail in *M. Butterfly*?
- Compare the theatrical and cinematic versions of *M. Butterfly*. How do the two media differ in their construction of time, space, narrative perspective, and

dialogue? How do these differences affect the message communicated to the viewer?

** PUCCINI, Giacomo. *Madame Butterfly*. [Videorecording] Dir. Frederic MITTERAND. Columbia/Tristar Studios, 1995. Starring Ying Huang as Cio-Cio-san and Richard Troxell as Captain Pinkerton. Sung in Italian with English subtitles. Running time: approx. 130 minutes. Available on VHS and DVD.

Puccini's opera was based on a story by John Luther Long and first opened at La Scala in 1904. The story tells of the tragic affair between Captain Pinkerton, of the U.S. Navy, and Butterfly (Cio-Cio-san, a former geisha). While in Nagasaki, Pinkerton pursues the young Butterfly, "Even if I must damage her wings." In Act I, Pinkerton and Butterfly get "married," though Pinkerton is in fact planning to marry an American woman when he returns to the United States. Puccini's opera presents an early twentieth-century ambivalent view of Asia and Asians from the Western perspective.

Discussion Question:

- Compare Hwang's and Puccini's treatments of Pinkerton and Butterfly's wedding scene. How do the two texts differ in their attitudes regarding each character's subjectivity? What kind of messages do they convey regarding gender, race, and national identity?

*** HWANG, David Henry. *F.O.B.* (1978). *Trying to Find Chinatown: The Selected Plays of David Henry Hwang*, 1-52. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000.

Characters in Hwang's play *F.O.B.* confront a number of conflicting feelings about being Asian in America. Two of the characters, Grace and Dale, are cousins. Dale is fully Americanized while his cousin Grace, a first generation immigrant, is less assimilated. When they meet Steve, an exchange student recently arrived from China ("fresh off the boat" or F.O.B.) their conflict escalates, as each, in various ways deals with issues of identity and authenticity. The play mixes myth and reality, and characters frequently break the fourth wall of the stage to speak directly to the audience.

D. Documentary

** CHOY, Christine, Director and Renee TAIMA, Producer. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* 1988. Running time: 82 minutes. Distributed by Filmmakers Library (<http://www.filmmakers.com>), \$395 Purchase/\$95 Rental

This documentary examines the brutal death in 1982 of a 27-year old Chinese American man named Vincent Chin. Chin got into an argument with Ron Ebens, a supervisor at Chrysler Motors, in a Detroit bar. Chin was accused of being responsible for the loss of jobs in the American auto industry. Once outside the bar, Ebens and his stepson beat the young man to death with a baseball bat. The

assailants received only probation and a light fine for the brutal death. This enraged Asian Americans, who charged that racism and discrimination had contributed to Chin's death and his assailants' light sentences. The film explores this issue, but also how Chin's mother spearheaded a nationwide protest for justice, which led to federal civil rights charges for the two men. The film also examines how competition from Japanese auto manufacturers at that time had contributed to the collapse of the American auto industry.

5. Further Reading

asian-nation.org

C.N. LE's excellent website is dedicated to mapping "The Landscape of Asian America." This informative resource offers a history of Asians in the United States, identifies political issues important to Asian Americans, hosts a discussion forum and job bank, and provides links to census sites and relevant Asian American sites. Accessible, comprehensive, and well organized.

DING, Loni. *Ancestors in the Americas*. PBS. 1993. Part I: Coolies, Sailors, Settlers. Part II: Chinese in the frontier West. Part III: Pioneers to the American West (forthcoming.) 57 min. each. Available for purchase through the Center of Educational Telecommunications (CET): <http://www.cetel.org/>.

A three-part documentary film about Asian immigration to the Americas. The film includes discussions on a variety of Asian communities in the Americas and their varied experiences with immigration. Narrated by Sab SHIMONO and Pat MORITA.

FONG, Timothy. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1998.

This book provides good background reading on the history of Asian immigration to North America, discussion of the particular patterns of discrimination faced by Asian immigrants, and investigation into the socio-economic and educational profile of Asian Americans today. Chapter 1 is included in "The Instructor's Crib"; other chapters useful for this unit are the Introduction (esp. 1-5), Ch. 2 "Emerging Communities, Changing Realities" (esp. 36-40, 56-57, 65-68) and Ch. 3 "The Right to Excel: Asian Americans and Educational Opportunity" (esp. 75 and 84-103).

KINGSTON, Maxine Hong. "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, 95-106. New York: G. K. Hall, 1998.

Kingston wittily unpacks the racist and sexist assumptions held by many reviewers of her autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts*.

KONDO, Dorinne. K. "M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity." *Cultural Critique* 16 (Fall 1990): 5-29.

Kondo analyzes David Henry HWANG's play in terms of its exploration of identity as a complex, shifting product of intersecting historical particularities that are shaped by global politics, gender hierarchies, and racial ideologies. Read 5-12 and 26-29 if strapped for time (15-21 and 23-25 are also helpful).

LI, Peter S., ed. *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada*. Second Edition. Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The twelve chapters of this informative book are divided into three major sections: "Introduction," "Race, Ethnicity, and the State," and "Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity." The chapters most useful for this unit are Ch. 1 "Race and Ethnicity," Ch. 6 "The Multiculturalism Debate," and Ch. 10 "Intergroup Competition in the Symbolic Construction of Canadian Society."

ROSENFELD, David. "Counter-Orientalism and Textual Play in Akutagawa's 'The Ball (Butôkai).'" *Japan Forum* 12: 1 (2000): 53-63. Available from Ingenta Select.

Rosenfeld presents a lucid, accessible analysis of Loti's story (and of a story that Ryunosuke AKUTAGAWA wrote in 1920 as a post-colonialist response to Loti's) as an Orientalist artifact. See especially 55-57.

WELCH, Patricia. "Confronting Orientalism and Racialism: The Discursive Formation of Race and Nationality in Rui Umezawa's 'Symbiosis.'" Forthcoming.

Welch analyzes Umezawa's story in terms of its problematization of race, gender, and national identity.