

Race and Ethnicity in Asian America

Bakirathi Mani

Department of English

Swarthmore College

exeasmail@columbia.edu

Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Audience
2. Section 1A: Histories of Asian America: Asian American Literature
3. Section 1B: Histories of Asian America: Asian American Popular Culture
4. Section 2A: Asian Americans Today: New Literary Formations
5. Section 2B: Asian Americans Today: Race and Multiculturalism in Asian America
6. Additional Online Resources

Introduction and Audience

How do Asian Americans in the United States define their ethnic and national identity? In what ways are Asian Americans represented as both “insiders” and “outsiders” in the United States? This unit provides a general introduction to Asian immigration to the United States, with a specific focus on issues of racial, national, and cultural identity.

The unit can be used in a wide range of mid-level undergraduate courses in English, Sociology, Cultural Anthropology, and History departments, particularly courses that fulfill university diversity requirements, or survey classes on immigration, U.S. multi-ethnic literatures, and Asian American studies.

The unit is divided into two sections: Histories of Asian America, and Asian Americans Today. Within each section, Option A and Option B suggest two ways to address relevant topics, listing recommended student readings and sample discussion questions. Each option is designed to take two class periods (50 – 75 minutes each) to complete. Both sections may be combined for a sequence of study on Asian Americans, or individual options (A or B) may be inserted into general curricula.

For additional related units, see “Not Color Blind: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in East Asia.”

Section One: Histories of Asian America

Option A: Histories of Asian America: Asian American Literature

Student Readings: Histories of Asian America

Frank CHIN. *AIIEEEEE!*

New York: Doubleday, 1975.

Washington: Howard University Press, 1974.

New York: Mentor, 1991.

Assign the Preface (pages vii-xvi in the 1974 and 1991 editions) only.

In his preface to *AIIEEEE!*, the first published anthology of Asian American literature, Chin illustrates the location of Asian American movements in the United States within the larger history of the U.S. civil rights movement. Chin argues that Asian Americans must be considered part of the social and racial fabric of the United States, not as “treacherous subjects”.

Frank CHIN. *Chickencoop Chinaman*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981.

This play is an early example of literary formations of Asian American identity. Chin argues for a masculinist, nationalist prototype of “Asian American” – though the play constructs the prototype at the expense of misogynist and sexist representations of Asian American women. Chin’s play “The Year of the Dragon” is also featured in this volume.

Discussion Questions: Histories of Asian America

1. In his preface to *AIIEEEE!* how does Frank Chin describe the ways in which Asian American authors belong to the United States?
2. What do you feel are the reasons for the characters in *Chickencoop Chinaman* to identify as Asian, American, neither, or both? Are there differences in the ways in which men or women identify as Asian American?

Option B: Histories of Asian America: Asian American Popular Culture

Student Readings: Asian American Popular Culture

Robert Lee. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.

Any chapter from this book serves as an excellent introduction to representations of Asian Americans in U.S. popular media from the late 19th century to the present day. Chapter Five includes a brief discussion of *Flower Drum Song*.

Flower Drum Song (feature film). Directed by Henry Koster. Universal Pictures, 1961. 133 minutes. VHS.

This film version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical was one of the first (and only) Hollywood productions with an entirely Asian American cast. *Flower Drum Song* focuses on a romance between second-generation Chinese Americans in San Francisco and recent immigrants from China. The musical is notable for

its endorsement of an assimilationist vision of multicultural America, achieved through a series of spectacular dance numbers.

Discussion Questions: Asian American Popular Culture

1. How have Asian Americans been represented in U.S. popular culture? Are there any consistent images or patterns that you can identify? Use examples from *Flower Drum Song*.
2. Are specific groups of Asian Americans represented differently over time? For example, compare Robert Lee's discussion of the representation of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans during World War Two; and again during the Communist Revolution in China. (See Chapter Five in *Orientalism*.)

Section Two: Asian Americans Today

Option A: Asian Americans Today: New Literary Formations

Student Readings: Asian Americans Today

Chang-Rae LEE. *Native Speaker*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

Korean-American Henry Park is a "surreptitious, B+ student of life, illegal alien, emotional alien, Yellow peril: neo-American, stranger, follower, traitor, spy ..." or so says his wife, in the list she writes upon leaving him. Henry is forever uncertain of his place, a perpetual outsider looking at American culture from a distance. As a man of two worlds, he is beginning to fear that he has betrayed both — and belongs to neither.

***Note: This novel is 368 pages; ideally it should be discussed over three class periods.

Jhumpa LAHIRI. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

This Pulitzer-Prize winning collection of short stories begins to chart a new way of belonging in Asian America. With one foot in the multicultural framework of the United States, and another foot in the South Asian diaspora, the characters of Lahiri's stories depict new racial, ethnic, and national communities.

The stories are brief and quick to read, so instructors can assign any or all in combination (except for "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," which are both set in India and do not address the Asian American experience.)

Lisa LOWE. *Immigrant Acts*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

See Chapters One and Two. For advanced undergraduate students, Lowe's focus on hybridity, multiplicity, and difference as ways to define ideas of race and ethnicity is extraordinarily useful. Unlike Frank Chin (see Section One above), Lowe argues for new multicultural frameworks in the United States, that go beyond assimilationist visions of America.

Discussion Questions: Asian Americans Today

1. Compare and contrast Henry Park in *Native Speaker* to Tam in *Chickencoop Chinaman*. How does contemporary literature create new ethnic and national identities for Asian Americans?
2. Using Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories as a point of reference, in what ways are new immigrants from South Asia challenging established notions of what it means to be "Asian American"? How are South Asian Americans similar or different to other Asian Americans? What new immigrant groups can you think of that challenge established definitions of Asian Americans?
3. In your opinion, what does the new "hybrid", multicultural America that Lowe argues for look like?

Option B: Asian Americans Today: Race and Multiculturalism in Asian America

Student Readings: Race and Multiculturalism in Asian America

Lois-Ann YAMANAKA. *Blu's Hanging*.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.
New York: Bard, 1998.

Yamanaka's controversial novel depicts the multiracial, multicultural society of present-day Hawaii. Stricken with poverty and isolation, the protagonist Blu's character is a metaphor for the marginalization of Asian Americans from mainland United States. Though there are depictions of sexual violence and animal abuse in the novel, undergraduate students find this novel compelling precisely because of the ways in which it addresses the complexity of our everyday lives.

David PALUMBO-LIU. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999.

See Part III, Chapter 6, (Pages 182-213) for Palumbo-Liu's seminal discussion of the new race relations that emerged in the United States during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. For students interested in inter-ethnic group relation, Palumbo-Liu's discussion of Asian American-African American relations will be especially

important. (This text is suitable for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses.)

Daughter from Danang (documentary film). Directed by Gail Dolgin and Vincent Franco. 2002. 81 minutes. VHS and DVD. Available for purchase from PBS Home Video (VHS: \$19.99, DVD: \$29.98). Available for rental from Netflix. Official website: www.daughterfromdanang.com.

This moving documentary follows the life of Heidi Bub, a Vietnamese-American woman in search of her birth mother. Adopted by a single mother in Pulaski, Tennessee (birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan), Heidi's removal from Vietnam to the United States was conducted through Operation Babylift during the last years of the Vietnam War. Now an adult, Heidi returns to Vietnam to meet her birth mother, but discovers much more than the family she left behind.

See also: [Grace, link to Grace Mitchell's unit once it is up.]

Discussion Questions: Race and Multiculturalism in Asian America

1. Examine images of sexual and animal violence in Lois Ann Yamanaka's book, *Blu's Hanging*. Can we read these images as metaphors for Yamanaka's description of Hawaii? If so, what are the ways in which Yamanaka describes Hawaii (a former colony of the United States) and Hawaiians (as both similar and different from mainland Americans)?
2. Focusing on David Palumbo-Liu's argument in *Asian/American*, can you think of ways in which Asian Americans can build solidarity with other minority racial groups in the United States?
3. Examine how the history of the Vietnam War comes to life in the story of Heidi Bub in *Daughter from Danang*. In what ways does Heidi define herself as Asian American? If not, why not? Compare and contrast the visual representations of Pulaski, Tennessee with those of Danang, Vietnam.

Additional Online Resources

National Asian American Telecommunications Association: www.naatanet.org

Constructing Identity in Narratives of Asian America (teaching unit): <http://www.exeas.org/resources/constructing-identity-asian-america.html>

Introduction to Asian American Literature (syllabus): <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/intro-asian-american-literature.html>

The Short Story in East Asia and Beyond (syllabus): <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/short-story.html>

Grace, add links to other units from the Race & Ethnicity group once they are up