Course texts


Screening Asian Americans, edited by Peter X. Feng. Rutgers University Press, 2002


Course description and objective

The official catalogue description of CES 413 says, “Examines the racial politics that have developed around the representation of Asian Pacific Americans in US popular culture.” This is important, because the course does not exist to celebrate popular culture. The most important word in the official description is “politics”—popular culture here in the US and elsewhere is an expression of politics, even if unintentionally. If I could change one word in the official description, I would replace “representation” with “construction,” for issues of racial representation have been unfortunately reduced to issues of numbers: the number of Asian Americans who appear in leading film roles, for example. Representation has been a battleground since the late 1960s, and the dominant culture has, in the past decade, reduced its resolution to a question of “diversity.” The current Bush presidency has been reviled by leaders of civil rights organizations for policies harmful to communities of color, but the administration praises itself for promoting more individuals of color to prominent and powerful positions than any previous leadership. The key question is: Has the elevation to prominence of such individuals as Colin Powell, Alberto Gonzalez, and Elaine Chao benefited communities of color and reduced racism? If the answer is no, then representation is not enough.

But merely to study popular culture is controversial. Conservatives in education insist that students in American universities should study the “classics” of Western civilization. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in their argument is an assumption that the only “civilization” worth studying is Western. Nobel-winning novelist Saul Bellow once openly claimed that we would be reading an African Shakespeare, if only Africa could produce its own Shakespeare.

Yet the study of popular culture is no mere dismissal of the “dead white men” of a “classic” Western canon. If anything, popular culture threatens to overrepresent the politics of white men even more than any canon full of classics. Popular culture makes money, after all, and it not only reflects but probably even escalates the power differentials that create and reinforce white male supremacy.
We need to ask, then, whether popular culture is necessarily tainted by its origins in a profit-making incentive. If it is, then why would peoples of color ever want to create and participate in popular culture, except to hope for luck and a chance to “beat whitey at his own game”? If not, then what cultural alternatives exist for peoples of color? Meanwhile, we need to monitor popular culture for any gaps into which we might insert alternative perspectives.

Course requirements

Reading journals. The course will be divided into five units keyed to the five texts. At the end of each unit you will submit a Reading Journal, a two-page paper on the unit’s readings and films. Your Journals should respond to the texts. They will count toward 10 percent of your course grade. Note that they will receive no individual grades. If you turn them in on time and explain your views of the assigned texts, you will receive full credit for them. Note, however, that no late journals will be accepted unless you have cleared their lateness in advance.

Attendance and participation. Attendance is expected and required. An attendance sheet will be distributed at the beginning of each class period after the first week. More than three unexcused absences will result in reduced course grades. After the third absence, each new absence will shave one-half letter from your course grade. If you know in advance that you will be unable to attend on a given day, let me know in advance. Participation is also expected. Successful and useful discussions are possible only when you participate. Your attendance and participation will count toward 20 percent of your course grade.

Final examination. This will be a take-home test and will require a few short essay answers. If you keep up with assignments and discussions, you should do well on it. It will count toward 20 percent of your course grade.

Presentation. During the semester you will make a Text Presentation before the class. A Text Presentation requires only that you lead a discussion of a text assigned for the day. You should briefly summarize the author’s main points and then offer your own views of the text’s strengths and weaknesses, and finally you should prepare two questions for the class. This should take 10 to 15 minutes and will count toward 10 percent of your course grade.

Please note that your presentation will not be graded for your diction and poise. This is not a course in public speaking, and you will not be penalized for nervousness or other problems.

Paper. You will write a paper of roughly 10 to 12 pages on a topic of your choice that is relevant to the material we cover during the term. I will distribute an assignment sheet with specific instructions and several suggested topics, but feel free to devise your own topic, as long as you discuss it with me in advance. The paper should argue for a position on an issue for Asian Pacific Americans and popular culture. You will be required to do some research—a bibliography citing four or five sources will suffice. As this will be a formal paper, all the standards of formal writing will apply as I grade. The paper is due at the end of the fourteenth week, and it will count toward 40 percent of your course grade.

Note

WSU recognizes a category called “Asian American Pacific Islander American.” Though this is fairly common, we will discuss its value and its limitations. Many Pacific Islander Americans want to be separated from Asian Americans. Some argue for categorization with other indigenous peoples, some for an entirely separate category called “Pacific Islander” or “Oceanic.” The department of Comparative Ethnic Studies has not yet recognized a distinction, and so we will speak of “Asian Pacific Americans” or “Asian American Pacific Islander
Americans.” But we must always be aware of the contradictions and problems inherent in any categorizations of peoples, and we must remain open to change.

**Students with Disabilities**

Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. Please visit the Disability Resource Center (DRC) during the first two weeks of every semester to seek information or to qualify for accommodations. All accommodations **MUST** be approved through the DRC (Admin Annex Bldg, Room 205). Call 509-335-3417 to make an appointment with a disability counselor.

**The schedule**

Please note that all assignments below are subject to change. You will be responsible for noting and adjusting to any changes.

The collection edited by Davé, Nishime, and Oren is listed below as *East*. All other texts are indicated by author’s or editor’s surnames.

Aug 21: Introduction to the course and to each other. Distribute and discuss syllabus.

Aug 28: Lee, Chapter 1.

Sept 4: Lee, Chapter 3.
Sept 6: Lee, Chapter 4.

Sept 11: Lee, Chapter 5.

Sept 18: Lee, Chapters 7 and 8.
Sept 20: Prashad, Preface and “Of India.” FIRST READING JOURNAL DUE (on Lee).

Sept 25: Prashad, 11-68.

Oct 4: Prashad, 185-203.


Oct 25: Feng: Tolentino, 111-32. PAPER ASSIGNED.

Nov 1: Feng: Mehta, 217-34.

Nov 8: *East*: Chapter 5.

Nov 13: *East*: Chapters 2 and 15.
Nov 15: *East*: Chapter TBA.

Nov 27: *East*: Chapter 12.
Nov 29: PAPER DUE.

Dec 4: *East*: Chapters 3 and 4. FINAL EXAM DISTRIBUTED.
Dec 6: *East*: Chapter 17. FIFTH READING JOURNAL DUE (on *East*). Conclusion to the course.

Dec 12: Final exam due in my office by 4:00 PM.