

Asian American Activism

Wednesdays 5:15-8:15PM

College Hall, Room 319

Professor

Rob Buscher buscherr@sas.upenn.edu

Course Description

Providing a broad introduction to the history of activism in the United States, this course will specifically examine the roles that Asian Americans & Pacific Islander Americans have fulfilled within both larger advocacy struggles, and the emergence of a distinctly Asian American activist movement.

Firmly rooted in a critical race studies approach toward history, this course will comprehensively assess factors contributing to the historical oppression of AAPIs in mainstream American society, exploring how different groups throughout history have found ways to advocate on their own behalf. Additionally, the course will provide a deeper context behind many of the major advocacy issues, providing a context for how contemporary activist framework evolved out of various movements over the past two hundred years.

Topics will include immigration and naturalization, America's role in empire, decolonization and postcolonial thought, inter-minority tensions and solidarity building practices, Pan-Asianism in the American context, socio-political divides within AAPI communities, Asian settler-colonialism in occupied Hawaii, the Hawaiian sovereignty movement, and media activism.

Lectures will combine historical content and discussion of various activists and movements, sometimes featuring guest speakers whose advocacy work relates to the current week's topic.

Additional out of class assignments will be given that involve participation in the virtual programs and in-person community events being offered by various Asian American advocacy groups. Students will be required to participate in at least two community events during the semester, providing an opportunity to engage with and learn from AAPI activists first-hand. Speakers listed in syllabus are subject to change based on speaker availability.

Assessment

There will be two assigned papers during this course, a reflection journal assignment, and one 8-10 minute Final Presentation. All sources must be properly cited. See syllabus for submission deadlines.

Paper 1 – 2,500 words	20%
Paper 2 – 2,500 words	20%
Reflection Journal 3,000-4,000 words	25%
Final Presentation	25%
Participation	10%

Attendance Policy

As this class will be held only once per week, students will be permitted **no more than 2 absences**. In the event that additional absences must be taken, a doctor's note must be provided.

Office Hours

Available by request only.

AI Policy (authored by Holly Fernandez-Lynch, BIOE 5540: Bioethics and the Law)

You may use AI programs, e.g., ChatGPT, to help generate ideas and brainstorm. However, you should note that the material generated by these programs may be inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise problematic. Beware that use may also stifle your own independent thinking and creativity.

You may not submit any work generated by an AI program as your own. If you include material generated by an AI program, it should be cited like any other reference material (with due consideration for the quality of the reference, which may be poor).

Any plagiarism or other form of cheating will be dealt with severely under relevant Penn policies.

Readings, Lecture Content, and Guest Speakers are subject to change

Jan 22, Week 1 – Citizenship and Naturalization

Serving as a broad introduction to the course and overview of topics to be explored in the curriculum, students will also be led through a series of icebreakers encouraging them to think critically about their own identities as they pertain to race/ethnicity and class. We will also delve into the anti-Chinese legislation of the late 19th century and the early Chinese American activists who fought for equal treatment under immigration law.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People

Helen Zia, pages 1-39

“Yellow Peril: 19th-Century Scapegoating”

John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats

<https://aaww.org/yellow-peril-scapegoating/>

Immigrant Voices Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/>

“Anti-Chinese Legislation and Court Cases Interactive Timeline”

<http://www.mocanyc.org/timeline/timeline.html>

Jan 29, Week 2 – America’s Role in Empire

This lecture will frame United States Pacific Expansionism within the larger context of European Imperialism and the colonization of Asia. Topics will include pseudoscientific applications to race, the annexation of Hawaii and the Philippines, and decolonization movements within the Asian American diaspora.

Readings:

Orientalism

Edward Said, Preface & Introduction

“Standing in Solidarity with Native Hawaiians: Japanese Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders”

Pacific Citizen, Rob Buscher

<https://www.pacificcitizen.org/standing-in-solidarity-with-native-hawaiians-japanese-hawaiians-and-pacific-islanders/>

Hawaiian Patriots Project

<https://www.kamakakoi.com/hawaiianpatriots/index.html>

Feb 5, Week 3 – Japanese American Resistance: From Barbed Wire to Reparations

Contrary to the dominant narrative that Japanese Americans submitted to the authority of the US government during WWII, many thousands actively protested the forced removal and mass incarceration. This lecture will explore various resistance movements during the wartime incarceration including the Supreme Court challenge cases, No-No Boys and other resisters of conscience, labor strikes in camp, and cultural activism. The lecture will also examine intergenerational trauma within the Japanese American community, and the Redress lobbying campaign that ended with a formal apology from the US government.

Readings:

Executive Order 9066 (<http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/history/eo9066.html>)

Blindsided: The Life and Times of Sam Mihara

Sam Mihara

“WWII Propaganda: The Influence of Racism”

Hannah Miles

<https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2012/03/wwii-propaganda-the-influence-of-racism/>

Buddha in the Attic

Julie Otsuka, *Traitors & Last Day*

Feb 12, Week 4 – Yellow Power, Ethnic Studies, and Postcolonial Thought

This week will focus on the origins of the first Pan Asian American movements on college campuses at UC Berkeley, SF State, and UCLA. Topics will include Third World Liberation Front, SF State campus strike, and Asian American Political Alliance. The lecture will also include a history of pioneering AAPI media organizations such as Los Angeles-based Visual Communications, and activist zine *Gidra*.

Readings:

“On Strike! San Francisco State College Strike 1968-1969”

Karen Umemoto, *Contemporary Asian American*, Chapter 1

Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties

Karen Ishizuka, Chapter 3 *Yellow Power*

Yellow Power: The Formation of Asian-American Nationalism in the Age of Black Power, 1966-1975

Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar

(<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/souls/vol3no3/vol3num3art3.pdf>)

Gidra Archives

Densho - <http://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-297/>

Feb 19, Week 5 – I-Hotel, Save Chinatown, and Anti-gentrification Movements

This week will provide a broad history of gentrification in the American city from early tenement reforms to contemporary activist struggles. Topics will include post-WWII urban renewal movements and their impact in displacing historically marginalized groups from inner-city ethnic enclaves, the anti-gentrification movements in SF Chinatown and Manilatown, and an in-depth analysis of the recently abandoned 76ers Arena project.

Readings:

“Transforming Student Elites into Community Activists”

Harvey Dong

“Bronzeville, Little Tokyo”

Pacific Citizen, Rob Buscher

<https://www.pacificcitizen.org/bronzeville-little-tokyo/>

“Transforming Asian America: Globalization and Contemporary Immigration to US”

Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, *Contemporary Asian American*, Chapter 4

Feb 26, Week 6 – Interracial Solidarity and Global Anti-Imperialist Movements

***Guest Lecturer Akemi Kochiyama**

Paper 1 Due

Akemi Kochiyama-Ladson is a Harlem-based scholar-activist, community builder, and non-profit consultant. The granddaughter of human rights activist Yuri Kochiyama, Akemi is co-director of the Yuri Kochiyama Solidarity Project and co-editor of *Passing It*

On: A Memoir by Yuri Kochiyama. Akemi's writing and work is focused on social justice, BIPOC solidarity and education.

<https://www.yurikochiyama.com/>

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 4 - To Market, to Market and New York Style, Chapter 7 – Lost and Found in L.A.

“Striving for the American Dream: Struggle, Success, and Intergroup Conflict among Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs”

Jennifer Lee, Contemporary Asian American, Chapter 10

Ktown 92 Interactive Documentary

Grace Lee (<http://ktown92.com/>)

March 5, Week 7 – Model Minority, Vincent Chin, and Socio-Economic Class Divide
Asian Americans suffered a major psychological trauma after the racially motivated murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin, but it became a rallying cry for a new age of Pan Asian American activism. This lecture will examine various movements that grew out of the Japan-bashing era of US manufacturing decline, and the growing socio-economic inequity between various groups of Asian Americans.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 3 – Detroit Blues and Chapter 8 – For Richer, For Poorer

“Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans Are on the Rise”

Time, Cady Lang <https://time.com/5938482/asian-american-attacks/>

“Asian Americans grapple with racism due to COVID-19”

WHYY, Rob Buscher <https://whyy.org/articles/reality-is-hitting-me-in-the-face-asian-americans-grapple-with-racism-due-to-covid-19/>

Film: *Vincent Who?* (2009) dir. Curtis Chin | 40 mins

Mar 12, Week 8 - NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

March 19, Week 9 - Refugee Resettlement, Community Services, and Intersectional Southeast Asian Advocacy

***Guest Speaker Rex Yin**

Raksmeymony ‘Rex’ Yin is a 1.5-generation Cambodian American queer educator passionate about education equity, social equality and community healing. He approaches his work with a critical consciousness of his personal history, community narratives, intersectionality framework, and ecological systems theory. Rex aspires to improve the quality of life of marginalized, vulnerable populations and contribute to systemic changes that have a long-term positive impact. He is a Philadelphia native and serves in numerous community organizations.

<https://epgn.com/2024/05/21/rex-raksmeymony-yin-creating-spaces-for-asian-and-queer-communities/>

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 10 - Reinventing Our Culture

“The Waves of War: Immigrants, Refugees, and New Americans from Southeast Asia”

Carl L. Bankston III and Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, Contemporary Asian American, Chapter 5

The Misrepresented Minority: New Insights on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Tracy Lachina Buenavista & Angela Chuan-Ru Chen, A Counter-Story of an Undocumented Asian American College Student (available via Google Books Preview)

“America is Ignoring a Huge Part of Trump’s Crackdown on Immigrants”

Melissa Hung, Huffinton Post 11/21/2018

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/southeast-asian-immigrant-deportation_us_5bf43252e4b0d9e7283d855f

“Fix ’96: End the Mass Criminalization of Immigrants”

<https://www.immigrantdefenseproject.org/fix-96-end-mass-criminalization-immigrants/>

Mar 26, Week 10 – NO CLASS – Asian American Labor Movements (Video Lecture)

This week will introduce the history of organized labor in the United States, and pivotal Asian American labor movements throughout the past century and a half. Topics will include sugar cane plantation workers in Hawaii, cannery workers in Seattle, farm workers in California, garment workers in NYC, and the current fights for education, healthcare, and more.

Readings:

“Carlos Bulosan and the Northwest”

O. Alan Weltzien, *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 1, pp. 12-22

“CaliMeXina or Bust, Cabrones! Learning to love our Latin-Asian-Pacific Future”

Gustavo Arellano, *Boom: A Journal of California*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 88-91

Film: Delano Manongs (26 mins) <https://vids.kvie.org/video/kvie-viewfinder-delano-manongs/>

April 2, Week 11 - Asian Americans in Politics

Paper 2 Due

***Guest Speaker State Senator Nikil Saval**

Senator Nikil Saval is a father, husband, writer, and organizer representing Pennsylvania’s First Senatorial District, which lies in the heart of Philadelphia. Saval’s commitment to solidarity and justice for working people, and his skill at coalition building, carried him from his roots as a labor organizer to the Pennsylvania General Assembly, where he currently serves as Democratic Chair of the Senate’s Urban Affairs & Housing Committee and Chair of the Senate’s Philadelphia Delegation. Saval has focused his legislative work on critical response to Pennsylvania’s ongoing housing, mass incarceration, wage, and climate crises, while simultaneously pushing for deep structural change so that communities across the Commonwealth have the resources and support they need to thrive. One of his important legislative victories is the groundbreaking Whole-Home Repairs Program, which establishes a one-stop shop for home repairs and weatherization in each county in Pennsylvania while building up a local workforce and creating new, family-sustaining jobs in a growing field.

<https://www.pasenatorsaval.com/about/>

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 6 - Welcome to Washington

“Foreshadowing Strategic Pan-Ethnic Politics: Asian American Campaign Finance Activity in Varying Multicultural Contexts”

Wendy K. Tam Cho, *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 273-294

Apr 9, Week 12 – Artist Activism and Advocacy in the Entertainment Industry

***Guest Speaker Aisha Fukushima**

Aisha Fukushima is an award-winning Public Speaker, Singer-Songwriter, and Facilitator who founded the global RAPtivism (Rap Activism) project in 2009. By challenging oppression with expression, Fukushima amplifies universal efforts for freedom and justice. A multilingual, mixed roots African American Japanese woman, she has conducted lectures and performances worldwide, including in the US, Sweden, Belarus, Nepal, Jerusalem, Kazakhstan, and beyond. With over two decades of cultural activism experience, Fukushima strategically operates at the crossroads of social justice and the arts. She has served as a Cultural Ambassador for the US State Department, guided major companies in advancing their justice practices, created liberatory spaces in prominent educational institutions, and collaborated with non-profits to amplify their changemaking efforts.

<https://aishafukushima.com/bio>

Readings:

“The Untold Story of Asian Americans in Hollywood”

Pacific Citizen, Rob Buscher

<https://www.pacificcitizen.org/the-untold-story-of-asian-americans-in-early-hollywood/>

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 5 - Gangsters, Gooks, Geishas, and Geeks

Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance

Krystyn R. Moon, Introduction & Imagining China: Early Nineteenth-Century Writings and Musicals (available via Google Books preview)

Screening Asian Americans

Stephen Gong, *A History in Progress: Asian American Media Centers, 1970-1990* (available via Google Books Preview)

Apr 16, Week 13 – 9/11 Islamophobia, and Anti-Muslim Policy

This week seeks to contextualize US-Middle Eastern relations within the framework of Orientalism and Exclusion, summarizing the history of US intervention in the region as both a legacy of British Imperialism and driven by economics of fossil fuel dependency. Topics will include the origins of Islamophobia within conservative think-tanks, contemporary advocacy efforts around Middle Eastern refugees and the Muslim Travel Ban, Asian Muslims, and solidarity between AAPI and Muslim American populations.

Reading:

“American Muslims, before and after September 11, 2001”

Karen Leonard, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 24

The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror

Sunaina Marr Maira, Chapter 2 *The New Civil Rights Movement*

Apr 23, Week 14 –Internet Activism and Miscellaneous Activist Causes

This week will explore the increasing presence of Asian American activists in online spaces, particularly with regards to reshaping racial discourse to move beyond a black-white binary, in addition to the and the toxicity that exists within Internet culture. Additional topics will include the role that capitalism plays in co-opting activist causes, effectively mainstreaming causes for the purpose of consumer consumption. This week will also serve as an opportunity to wrap up loose ends in the curriculum, discussing emerging activist causes and other subjects that have not been explored in depth. Topics may include AAPIs in the LGBTQ movement, Pacific Islanders contributions to environmental discourse, and AAPI intersectionality within the disability rights movement.

Readings:

“How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance”

Christine Bacareza Balance, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 1/2, pp. 138-152

The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media

Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian America Gone Viral: A Genealogy of Asian American YouTubers and Memes* (available via Google Books Preview)

Film: ***Uploaded: the Asian American Movement*** (2012) dir. Kane Diep | 72 mins

(<https://youtu.be/1fOwijRIVqM>)

April 30, Week 15 – Final Presentations

Reflection Journal Due

Students will take turns presenting their 8-10 minute final presentations.

Academic Freedom Statement

The policies of the University of Pennsylvania protect academic freedom, as defined in the [AAUP's 1940 Statement of Principles](#). This statement has been endorsed by over 250 scholarly and educational organizations in the United States, and its principles are written into faculty handbooks nationwide, including [Penn's](#). The principles of academic freedom were established to protect the integrity of research and teaching from interference by donors, trustees, politicians, and others who might seek to make universities serve private and political interests. They are founded on the idea that a university's purpose is to generate new knowledge that can serve the common good in a democratic society, and that generating new knowledge requires free and open inquiry. To safeguard the university's public mission, academic freedom entails the following rights for all faculty members—whether tenure-track or non-tenure track, and including graduate research and teaching assistants—and for students:

- The right of faculty members to full freedom in research, teaching, extramural speech (public speech on issues of general concern) and intramural speech (speech about the university itself, including criticism of it).
- The right of students to freedom in learning, which includes freedom of association and expression and freedom of inquiry in the classroom.

Academic freedom is only as strong as the institutions, procedures, and professional norms that faculty members established over the last century to protect it: institutions of faculty governance such as Faculty Senates and unions; the institution of tenure; and due process procedures that protect both tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty against unjust discipline or dismissal. For further information about academic freedom, see the [AAUP-Penn website](#).