

## **Asian American Activism**

Williams Hall Room 24, Wednesdays 5:15-8:15PM

### **Professor**

Rob Buscher [buscherr@sas.upenn.edu](mailto: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Lectures will combine historical content and discussion of various activists and movements, sometimes featuring guest speakers whose advocacy work relates to the current week's topic.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.

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

### **Jan 24, 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 ethnicity. We will also delve into the anti-Chinese legislation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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: 19<sup>th</sup>-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 31, 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 7, Week 3 – 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 14, Week 4 – Save Chinatown and Anti-gentrification Movements**

**\*Guest Speaker Mary Yee**

Mary Yee is an educational researcher and community activist. She grew up in Boston Chinatown as the child of first-generation working-class Chinese immigrant parents. In Philadelphia, she has worked extensively with immigrant and refugee communities for over 35 years. A founder of Asian Americans United (AAU) an organizing and advocacy organizations, she is currently a board member of the Asian Arts Initiative (AAI). As a former officer of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, she was involved in community struggles to oppose the destruction of Chinatown by large public works projects such as the Vine Street Expressway and the Phillies baseball stadium. Before working in the central administration of the School District of Philadelphia, Dr. Yee collaborated with the Education Law Center to remediate a civil rights class action filed on behalf of limited English proficient Southeast Asian refugee students. Subsequently, she worked for over a dozen years in various district capacities to provide equitable opportunities for students and families. As Director of Family Engagement and Language Equity Services, she created the infrastructure for translation and interpretation services and partnered with community-based organizations across the city to engage families in their children’s education. Dr. Yee holds an A.B. degree from Princeton University, two master’s degrees from Penn, an Ed.D from Penn’s Graduate School of Education. Mary is a leader of the No Arena in Chinatown movement.

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 21, Week 5 – Japanese American Resistance: From Incarceration to Redress**

**\*Guest Lecturer Frank Abe**

FRANK ABE most recently edited an anthology with Floyd Cheung on *The Literature of Japanese American Incarceration* (Penguin Classics, May 14, 2024).

He is lead author of a graphic novel on Japanese American resistance to wartime incarceration, [We Hereby Refuse](#), a Finalist in Creative Nonfiction for the Washington State Book Awards, in collaboration with Tamiko Nimura, Ross Ishikawa, and Matt Sasaki. He won an American Book Award for [JOHN OKADA: The Life & Rediscovered Work of the Author of No-No Boy](#) (University of Washington Press, 2018), co-edited with Greg Robinson and Floyd Cheung, and with Shannon Gee made the award-winning PBS documentary, [Conscience and the Constitution](#), on the largest organized camp resistance. [Abe's own father](#) was incarcerated at Heart Mountain. Only after making this film did he learn that his father donated \$2 to the Fair Play Committee and subscribed to the Rocky Shimpo newspaper where James Omura's editorials appeared.

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 28, Week 6 – Interethnic Solidarity and Tensions in the Civil Rights Era and Beyond**

**\*Paper 1 Due\***

Topics will include Asian American contributions to the civil rights movement and highlight important activists such as Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, and Larry Itliong. We will also engage in an in-depth discussion of the model minority myth that was designed by conservative elements in American society to pit racial minorities against one another. This lecture will also examine the deterioration of inter-minority relations in the lead up to the LA Uprising and how mainstream media framed the looting of Koreatown.

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/>)

**Mar 6, NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK**

**March 13, Week 7 – Refugee Resettlement and Southeast Asian Advocacy**

**\*Guest Speaker Rorng Sorn**

Sarong (Rorng) Sorn is the Director of Immigrant/Refugee Affairs and Language Access Services for the City of Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disability Services (DBHIDS). Her pronouns are she/her/hers. In her role, Rorng works to develop strategies and policies to increase access to behavioral health and intellectual disability services for immigrant/refugee and special population communities. Rorng is a former refugee from Cambodia and the first in her family to earn a college degree. Rorng has over 30 years of combined experience in public, private, and nonprofit sectors working to address the challenges of refugee and immigrant communities throughout Philadelphia. Through her dedication to serving marginalized communities, she has received multiple awards including the Special Achievement Award for Dedicated Service in Support of Human Rights of the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service, 6ABC’s Outstanding Community Service Award, an honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Gwynedd Mercy University in 2019, and the Government winner of the Health and Wellness Achievement Award for the 2023 Philadelphia Welcoming Awards. Sarong received a master’s degree in Nonprofit/NGO Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania, in 2008.

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, Huffington Post 11/21/2018

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/southeast-asian-immigrant-deportation\\_us\\_5bf43252e4b0d9e7283d855f](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 20, Week 8** – 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 27, Week 9** – Asian American Labor Movements

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 3, Week 10** - 9/11 Islamophobia, and Anti-Muslim Policy

**\*Paper 2 Due\***

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 10, Week 11 – Asian Americans in Politics**

### **\*Guest Speaker Councilmember Nina Ahmad**

When Nina was just eleven years old, she witnessed the carnage during the birth of Bangladesh. Every day she remembers that the ultimate sacrifice of 3 million people allows her to be alive today. At only 21, Nina came to the United States, worked hard and eventually earned a Ph.D. in Chemistry from the University of Pennsylvania and completed a medical fellowship at Thomas Jefferson University. Nina is a strong advocate for women and communities of color. As a catalyst for change, she recently served as the President of the Pennsylvania chapter National Organization for Women (NOW), having previously served as the President of the Philadelphia Chapter and as a national board member. Nina served as a Deputy Mayor for Public Engagement under Mayor Kenney, where she was responsible for launching the Office of Public Engagement to bring government closer to the people. Nina has also worked closely with Mayor Michael Nutter and Governor Tom Wolf. Nina also proudly served President Barack Obama as a member of the National Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, advising on key issues affecting the health, employment, and well-being of these communities.

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 17, Week 12 - Authenticity, Appropriation, and Advocacy in Entertainment Industry**  
This week’s lecture will provide a primer on the complex conversation around authenticity and appropriation through the lens of Asian American media advocacy. Topics will include the history of yellowface on stage and screen, negative stereotyping, Hollywood whitewashing, cultural appropriation, and media activism.

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 24, Week 13 – Asian American Internet Activism and Commercialization of Protest**  
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.

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/1fOwjRIVqM>)

**May 1, Week 14 - Miscellaneous Activist Causes**

**\*Reflection Journal Due\***

This week will 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.

**May 8, Week 15 - Final Presentations**

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](#).