Course description:
The history of the United States in the twentieth century has been
intimately related to East Asia. This course will present an understanding
of American culture and history in the contexts of U.S. involvement in the
Pacific, of Asian immigration to the United States, and of the cultural and
social changes that accompanied the production of "Asian America." We will
use films, literary texts, historical, anthropological, and sociological
materials. Much of the class will be lecture-style, but we will also have
discussion periods and small group work.

It is an interdisciplinary program with materials from history, cultural studies, literature,
film, anthropology, and sociology. Students will emerge from this course with a deep knowledge
of the role the Pacific played, and continues to play, in the development of America’s national
identity. They will obtain a background in American studies, Asian/Pacific studies, and Asian
American studies, as well as knowledge of the roles race and ethnicity have played in defining
America.

Responsibilities:
Students are responsible for coming to each class meeting with two written questions for
discussion; for writing one short midterm essay (about 5 pages); and one final essay (8-10
pages).

Readings:
The course draws heavily from my book, Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial

Each unit will refer to that text; I have also added these readings:


1989.

Jade Snow Wong, Fifth Chinese Daughter

M. Vassanji, No New Land.

Ruth Ozeki, My Year of Meats
April 3: Introduction to course, introduction to each other

April 10: Pacific America

In the opening, I discuss America's attempts at being an imperial world power, as exercised in the Pacific (Philippines, Hawai‘i, Guam). How are these annexations to be understood as part of America's westernward expansion, its Manifest Destiny? The importance of the Transcontinental Railroad on linking not only the East to the West, but the West as a stepping stone to Asia? Specific attention to the general reaction to Asians in America, in the context of 1920s and 1930s.

Reading: Palumbo-Liu, pp. 1-42; Chan 3-63; Takaki, 1-78; Murayama, *All I Asking for is My Body*.

Study Questions:

• What characterizes America’s development at the turn of the 20th century?

• What role did economic expansion play in America’s interest in the Pacific?

• How did Americans think of Asians in the early 20th century, how did that image become more complicated, and why?

• How does Murayama’s text illuminate the complex historical context of Hawai‘i at the border between Asia and America?

April 17: Asia in the Imagination (class may have to be cancelled. If so, we will extend the next two meetings by 30 minutes to one hour each, treating this material on April 24th plus about half of the material for that day)

Next we turn to early attempts in films and novels to understand the transformations occuring as Asia comes to America--how did the new roles of Asians in America, and America’s relations with East Asia, come to be imagined in national fantasies? How did Hollywood present such imaginings on the silver screen? How did creative writers imagine fictional encounters between Asia and America? Discussion of early Asian American literature.

Reading: Palumbo-Liu, 43-78; Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

View segments of “The Bitter Tea of General Yen.”

Study Questions:

• How did representations of Asians change in the American imagination during this period, and what is the significance of such changes?

• What was the connection between “romance” and social and political relations between
April 24: The Model Minority

One of the most prevalent images of Asian Americans is that of the “model minority.” In this segment we place this image in historical context and discover why and when did this term came about. I will explain how the term was produced within the contexts of both domestic and international politics (Japan-bashing, American imitation of Japanese business techniques, etc.). We thus learn a great deal about both domestic civil rights issues and international relations. I extend this discussion to the events of 1992 and the Rodney King verdict.


Study Questions:

• How did the “model minority” image come about? Discuss its genesis with relation to the civil rights movement.

• What was the equivalent of this image in foreign relations in the 1970s and 1980s?

• How did both these versions of the image reflect different senses of American identity?

May 1: Wars and Memory

Twentieth-century United States history is deeply marked by wars, in the Philippines, Hawai‘i, with Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. This segment concentrates on three issues: the specific role of Filipinos in American history; the efforts of the US to heal the wounds of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two, and the influx of refugees from Indochina. I will discuss the social issues involved in both, as well as address the basic question: how did these historical events force the United States to confront its ideals about itself?

Readings: Palumbo-Liu, 217-254; Chan 121-166; Takaki, 315-356; 357-405.

View excerpts from the film, “Japanese War Bride.”

Study Questions:

• What was the special status of Filipinos in the United States?

• How did the internment come about? What sorts of assumptions about assimilation did it
contradict? How did it re-instate the “racial frontier”??

• Compare and contrast the internment with the events surrounding the refugees of the wars in Indochina. How did both of these events create crises in American idealism?

**May 8: Rebuilding Space**

Many people looking over urban American spaces see a mixture of populations from abroad. They often remark upon the foreign-language store fronts and the behaviors and appearances of newer immigrant populations, and say that America has turned into a “Third World country.” Here we come to understand how this “Third World” in America was produced. I discuss the new global economy and foreign investment in the U.S., and the ways that American cities were rebuilt to receive and encourage that investment. How did New York Chinatown get rebuilt? How did Monterey, California, become the first "suburban Chinese town" and the birthplace of the English Only Movement? In this segment we learn a great deal about how the “global” has become manifested in the “local.”


View the documentary by Curtis Choy, “The Fall of the I-Hotel,” before class meeting.

Study Questions:

• What was “urban redevelopment” and how did it affect minority communities?

• How did foreign investment affect local communities?

• How did the “English Only Movement” bring to the fore longstanding tensions about ethnic communities?

**May 15: New Asian Subjectivities**

View the documentary, AKA Don Bonus and discuss the difference between such a biography and what we assume is the standard Asian American narrative.

**May 22: Transnational Movements**

This section brings us up to date by looking at how Asian American identity is now part of larger diasporic communities that may have an attachment to both the US and Asia. I will look at various versions of what some social scientists have called a "borderless world." We will come to understand how contemporary identities are shaped by new historical forces, and how new movements of people across borders have created new communities and multiple senses of “home.” We will also broaden our scope to discuss newer South Asian communities.

Study Questions:

- In what ways is the story of South Asian America similar to, and yet different from, that of groups from East Asia?

- How has the world at once become more “globalized” and yet retained certain national boundaries?

- What does the term “diaspora” mean?

May 29: No class

June 5: Transnational Affinities (can class meet 12-2 for lunch?)

Here we will read Ruth Ozeki’s marvelous novel, *My Year of Meats*, a vastly entertaining narrative of mass media, advertising, cross-cultural movements, and, yes, the meat industry.

Study Questions:

- What binds people living across the Pacific?

- How does Ozeki tie in issues of production and reproduction to culture and economics?

- How is “The Pacific” a region of identity, and how is this region attached to the interior of the US?