

# Course Design

## Re-Orienting Rhetorical Theory in an Asian American Rhetorics Seminar

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### Course Description

Asian American Rhetoric and Representation was a graduate-level course taught at Virginia Tech in Spring 2019. The course overviewed disciplinary conversations and concerns in and around Asian American rhetorical studies over time, with a focus on the affordances of Asian American rhetorical theory for the study of rhetoric and writing more broadly. Understanding that established disciplinary and formal/genre divisions within academia are often the result of Eurowestern canonical and institutional histories, the course included readings from varied fields. We discussed academic scholarship in ancient and contemporary rhetoric and writing studies, Asian American studies, Asian American literature, and Asian philosophy alongside literary and artistic works, including Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, the film *Better Luck Tomorrow*, and R. Zamora Linmark's *Rolling the R's*. In addition, students dialogued with virtual guest speakers in the field, including Haivan Hoang, Terese Guinsatao Monberg, Mira Shimabukuro, and Morris Young.

### Institutional Context

Virginia Tech is a large, research-intensive, public, land-grant, state university and former all-white, all-male military institution in Blacksburg, Virginia. Blacksburg is located in Appalachia as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission ("About the Appalachian Region"). This is notable because Appalachia as a region is predominantly white. In such spaces, it can be easy for white university administrators and faculty in particular to underestimate the value of a course like this in their curriculum. Yet as is the case at many other universities, Asians were—and are—the largest group of racialized minorities on campus at 9% of the student enrollment when I taught this course in 2019 ("Enrollments"). Despite this fact, there was virtually no attention to Asian American histories, theories, and ways of knowing at the time that I proposed this course in 2016. There were no faculty or courses in Asian American literature or rhetorics in the English department where this course was taught, though that would change several years later. These details matter because the availability of such courses in the humanities affect how members across the university community recognize the history, intellectual traditions, and,

ultimately, the humanity of Asian/Asian Americans on and off campus. At the same time, there were several Asian student organizations under the Asian American Student Union (AASU). I had just started the Asian/Asian American Faculty and Staff Caucus (now the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American, or APIDA, Caucus), and undergraduate students Anu Sharma and Sora Ko had just started the Asian American Coalition. Since that time, the Asian Cultural Engagement Center was established (in 2017), and a director for the center was hired two years later. In short, the university landscape for Asian Americans was quite different between the time I proposed the course and the time I taught it, and these changes were in many ways driven by the efforts of Asian students and faculty advocating for representation on campus.

The English department at Virginia Tech offers a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing and MA in English. Although I was hired to teach primarily within the PhD program in rhetoric and writing and in the undergraduate professional and technical writing program, I proposed the course for the MA program, mostly because there were limited opportunities to teach such a course within the PhD program. On the other hand, the MA program invited applications and proposals from all graduate faculty to teach variable topics courses—a more equity-oriented practice. I initially proposed a course called “Asian American Rhetoric”; however, MA committee members suggested adding “and Representation” to the title, so as to draw in more students and to reflect the range of texts I would assign for the course.

Probably largely a result of these institutional and geographical factors, half of the six students in the course were MA students, and the other half were PhD students. Enrollment in the course was impacted by a scheduling conflict that semester with a required course in the Rhetoric and Writing PhD program; as a result, a few other students expressed interest in the course but were unable to take it. Five of the six students’ primary area of study was rhetoric and writing while one was in literature. Five students were visibly white American students, while one was an Asian international student. In addition, the white American students were differently positioned in relation to Asian culture, where some had very limited experience with Asian people and culture, at the same time that others had conducted previous research on Asian American issues, or were familiar with Asian popular culture. In some ways, this was an ideal demographic for interrogating the above question of why everyone (including non-Asians) should read and engage with Asian and Asian American rhetorics. Moreover, too often, people dismiss work that they see as “identity-based” as not relevant to them if they are not of that same identity (Wu). As a result, I considered that students might need explicit guidance in terms of how to allow the works and ideas we were reading and discussing to reshape their own thinking about rhetoric and writing more generally.

Looking to the larger institutional context that is our discipline of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies, a recurring conversation within the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Asian/Asian American Caucus has been the systematized othering of Asian American scholarship—as well as scholarship by other Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars—in the discipline. Hui Wu spoke to this issue when she wrote,

I aim to dispel the mystery of the minority Other who is supposed to cling to marginality and the majority Other who is supposed to stick to mainstream. If I am supposed only to speak for post-Mao Chinese women whose identity and history I share, then my points and theories would be safely and naturally ignored by everybody else. If those who are said to represent mainstream Euro-American culture only spoke for their own people, they would be considered as observers who look at the challenges that minority poses to mainstream theories with indifference. (82–83)

Likewise, in an interview with Kate Firestone, as part of Firestone's *enculturation* book review of *Writing against Racial Injury*, Haivan Hoang mentioned that a challenge when it came to publishing her book about Asian American rhetoric was convincing publishers that the work would be relevant to non-Asian/white scholars. Too often, areas such as Asian American rhetorics, literatures, and studies are framed as being irrelevant to dominant conceptions of the field. This is reflected as faculty often teach courses in rhetorical and writing studies without assigning any works by Asian authors that are not positioned in the "Other" or "Ethnic" unit. This question of what Asian American rhetoric has to do with rhetoric and composition in general is often raised but less often explicitly answered.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

This course is innovative in that although Asian and Asian American rhetorics are at times included within rhetoric courses—especially courses on global, comparative, and cross-cultural rhetorics—I have yet to encounter documentation of another standalone graduate course entirely focused on Asian American rhetoric. In 1987, J. Vernon Jensen proposed a 10-week course that could be taught "at the junior-senior-graduate level in East Asian rhetoric," (139) which he says had been "regretfully overlooked" (135) in rhetoric studies. Jensen's course focuses on rhetoric in East Asia and India; it takes a primarily nation-based approach with separate units on Japan, Korea, and China; and foregrounds the white male perspectives that were legible in the profession at

the time to frame the course in weeks 1 and 10. An online search also shows that Iswari Pandey taught an upper-level undergraduate course called “Studies in Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy—Asian American Rhetoric and Writing” at Syracuse University in Spring 2012. Yet, it is notable that in this case as well as with the current course under discussion in this course design, both were offered as one-time variable topics courses, meaning there is very likely still no course on this topic that is regularly offered within a program’s curricular rotation. In addition, Asian American rhetoric has been discussed among other areas of inquiry in courses on comparative, contrastive, and cultural rhetorics, “ethnic rhetorics,” global rhetorics, and “world rhetorics,” including one described in a 2016 *Composition Studies* Course Design by Shyam Sharma; however, seldom do courses do the kind of focused study of Asian American rhetorical theory that would allow for deep understanding of the significance and complexity of this work. There continues to be an urgent need for courses and curricular changes that highlight the diverse knowledges, intellectual expressions, and rhetorics of diasporic Asians in the U.S. and beyond.

The design of the course was influenced not only by my own reading, study, and research on Asian American rhetoric and the community of Asian American rhetoric scholars who work in the discipline, but also by a graduate course I took as a MA student titled “Rhetoric East and West,” taught by Dr. Jeffrey Carroll at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in Spring 2008. This course took a comparative approach as we studied ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric vis-a-vis Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, alongside ancient and contemporary Asian (mostly Chinese) rhetoric, including the *Tao Te Ching*, *The Analects*, *Han Feizi*, *Mencius*, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.* by Xing Lu, *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie* by LuMing Mao and *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship* by Morris Young. It was in this course where I first struggled to theorize elements of Korean American rhetoric, and it was also where I began to see my own experience and knowledges familiar to me—that felt like home—reflected in rhetoric and composition scholarship.

The Asian American Rhetoric and Representation course I taught was broadly arranged into four units, stitched together with Asian American rhetorical practice through artistic and literary works:

- **Introductions & Historicizing Asian America** (1.5 weeks) introduced students to the course and to the question of “What is Asian American rhetoric?” We watched and discussed the documentary film *Vincent Who?* which speaks to “Asian American” as a political term, and we read an excerpt from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and

Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, which draws on archival research to bring together "the often obscured connections between the emergence of European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and the East Indies and China trades in the late 18th and early 19th centuries" (1). These collective works help situate ourselves in relation to Asian American history, broadly speaking.

- **Re-orienting Classical Rhetoric** (2.5 weeks) included discussions of Hui Wu's translation of *Guiguzi*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and excerpts from *The Analects* alongside scholarship on ancient Chinese rhetoric.
- *Pachinko* (1.5 weeks) is a 2017 epic historical novel by Min Jin Lee spanning four generations of a Korean family as they lived during—and were affected by—Japanese colonization of Korea. I selected this book because of how it speaks to the importance of history and for understanding its after effects, and because it can teach readers about the complexities of Asian history with a focus on the example of Japanese imperialism in Korea.
- **Early Articulations** (3.5 weeks) included discussions of some of the earliest work in the discipline about Asian American rhetoric that worked to theorize the concept, including LuMing Mao's *Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie*, Morris Young's *Minor Re/Visions*, and Mao and Young's edited collection, *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, alongside works about comparative rhetoric as a framework that has been developed in ways that are informed by Asian and Asian American rhetoric.
- *Better Luck Tomorrow* (0.5 wks) is a 2002 Asian American film and coming of age story directed by Justin Lin that challenges the model minority stereotype, complicates Asian American masculinities, and highlights the lack of representation of Asian American stories in popular media
- **Contemporary Issues** (4 weeks) is when we read three recently published monographs on Asian American rhetoric: Haivan Hoang's *Writing against Racial Injury*, Mira Shimabukuro's *Relocating Authority*, and Iswari Pandey's *South Asian in the Mid-South*, all published in 2015, alongside Terese Guinsatao Monberg and Morris Young's 2018 special issue of *enculturation* on Asian American Rhetorical Trans/formations.
- *Rolling the R's* (0.5 weeks) is a 1995 book of poetry by R. Zamora Linmark on queer Filipino youth coming of age in Kalihi, Hawai'i. I selected this book because of its experimental style and as it speaks to gender and sexuality in Hawai'i through poetic form.

- Excerpts from *Open in Emergency and 6 Years of Where Arts Meets Community* (0.5 weeks), by the Asian American Literary Review (AALR) speaks to issues of Asian American mental health and community organizing.

In this way, the course opened with discussion of the rhetorics and writing of history before going into a somewhat chronological organization, as we studied ancient Chinese rhetorics as context and foundation not only for more contemporary forms of Chinese and Asian/Asian American rhetoric more generally, but also for re-orienting ourselves in relation to the classical Greco-Roman rhetorical canon. Although linear chronologies can be limited for understanding the reaches of a field of inquiry, for this course I thought it would be helpful for students who are new to Asian American rhetoric as an area of study to gain a sense of how certain conversations within the field built upon one another and unfolded over time. The syllabus for this course is available open-access at the *Composition Studies* website

Finally, although I do not usually assign exams within graduate courses, I did so for this course for several reasons. Because identity-based areas of rhetoric are often too easily and quickly dismissed and/or forgotten, I wanted students to take the time to reflect on how the works we had been reading might re-shape former assumptions about rhetoric, writing methodology and pedagogy. It was an effort to help make some of the ideas we were thinking about stick. The mid-semester exam questions are included as a supplemental material to this course design.

### **Critical Reflection**

To return to the question of what Asian American rhetoric can contribute to the study of rhetoric and writing more generally, because I was concerned about this question from the beginning, I took many notes on this question over the course of the semester. Here's what I learned.

First, some things that are probably unsurprising to most people in our discipline but that are important to acknowledge nonetheless. The study of Asian American rhetoric provides an understanding of what Asian and Asian American rhetorical activity looks like, and it thus offers an understanding of how minoritized subjects position, envision, and realize themselves through narrative, language, and symbolic action, as well as how they work as active agents to contribute to conceptualizations of citizenship, language, culture, and other ideas important to rhetoric and composition. In addition, Asian American rhetoric enriches our understanding of American identity, not only in the sense that it provides a more inclusive and thorough understanding of what it means to be an American, but also in that it highlights and provides

context for issues related to migration, citizenship, and the use of “model minority” rhetoric to affirm anti-Blackness and white supremacy in this country (Lowe, *Intimacies*; Poon et al.; Yoon; Young).

Asian American rhetoric also furthers our understanding of the rhetorical work of institutions by unpacking and interrogating the model minority trope. Interrogation of the model minority stereotype shows us the problems of so-called “positive” stereotypes, and it demonstrates that inclusion in a quantitative sense is not enough. It is additionally an example of how in current racist capitalist structures, being provisionally accepted or “overrepresented” does not protect one from racism and racist violence. It also demonstrates how white supremacy sustains itself by pitting communities of color against one another, which it has done time and time again since at least the early 1800s, in discussions of coercive and indentured Asian labor as a supplement and later, replacement for slavery in the U.S. and its territories in the Caribbean (Lowe, *Intimacies*). It also teaches us about the rhetorical functions of provisional acceptance into oppressive structures, or what Lowe has referred to elsewhere as “the unassimilable alterity of racialized cultural difference”, and as reflected by the perpetual foreigner trope (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 44). In other words, Asian American rhetorics demonstrate a case in point of what Sara Ahmed has referred to as “inclusion as a technology of governance: not only as a way of bringing those who have been recognized as strangers into the nation, but also of making strangers into subjects, those who in being included are also willing to consent to the terms of inclusion” (163).

In addition, Asian American rhetoric demands a de-centering and re-contextualization of Eurowestern ways of knowing, and it demonstrates the limits of Eurowestern approaches to knowledge and rhetoric. As a result, Asian American rhetoric visualizes whiteness and the problems of race-neutral and universalist approaches to rhetorical theory. Relatedly, Asian American rhetoric unsettles understandings of rhetoric, philosophy and meaning-making more generally that assume a Eurowestern center. For instance, it frames understandings of silence, non-speech, non-action, and listening as rhetorically active, thus opening up understandings of what rhetoric is and can do (Laozi; Lu; Lyon; Monberg; Xu). It also shifts rhetorical spatial orientations from West-as-center to what are oftentimes between-spaces as sites of inquiry; for instance, focusing on migration, transnational flows, reciprocity, and interdependence- and togetherness-in-difference over binary, dichotomous or individualistic thinking (Mao, “Returning”; Mao, “Thinking through Difference”). In doing so, Asian American rhetoric challenges notions of individualism, freedom, and independence that dominate Euroamerican ways of thinking. One compelling example of Asian American scholarship that focuses on these in-between spaces, or rather, “intimacies,” is Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, which

shows how “liberalism’s abstract promises of human freedom, rational progress, and social equality” are intimately connected to and dependent on colonialism, conquest, racist violence—and the forgetting of these very relations (2–3).

With that being said, methodologically, Asian American rhetoric highlights the importance of historicization and contextualization, demanding that we treat our accounts as perspectives within a larger context of possibilities. It encourages the cultivation of transnational literacy and attention to between spaces as sites of inquiry. And several scholars in Asian American rhetoric have articulated methodological approaches from which we all can learn, including those of “recontextualization” (Mao, “Writing the Other”), “rhetorical attendance” in archival research (Shimabukuro), “feminist historiographical approach to listening” (Monberg, “Listening”), “recursive spatial movement” (Monberg, “Writing Home”), to provide just a few examples.

Asian American rhetoric opens up understandings of rhetoric, pedagogy, history (including histories of the discipline), literature, aesthetics, religion, philosophy, methodology, affect, voice, difference, anger. Hoang makes this point in relation to our disciplinary histories in *Writing against Racial Injury* when she said, “The story of the emergence of composition studies as a research field is still troubled by a stubborn slippage, an alchemy by which racial minority student activists are alluded to in the ‘protests of that decade’ but then quickly fade into the backdrop” of our histories (62). These reframings have significant methodological and pedagogical implications. For instance, Asian American rhetoric demonstrates the need for reflexivity with regard to our theories, assumptions, and the colonizing reach of research, and it provides a way of more accurately and more honestly situating ourselves and our knowledges as well as where our motivations for learning and research come from.

This became visible for me when I worked with a few students—including two from this course on Asian American Rhetoric and Representation—to design and facilitate a multimodal discussion and listening event titled “Sounding Asian America” for Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Heritage Month. Through our collaboration and conversations after the event, we discussed how although the white students were unsure of what their participation might look like in this event on Asian American rhetoric, the process of working this question out helped them to rethink their pedagogies, including the need to move away from expectations of expertise and more toward sensibilities of facilitators as co-learner—and this shift being particularly important for inclusive pedagogies (Sano-Franchini, Fernandes, and Adams).

Finally, Asian American rhetoric can lead us toward concrete ways to *re/vision* postsecondary writing programs with Asian American rhetoric in mind. First, Asian American rhetoric should be used to interrogate and interrupt teacher stereotypes about Asian students, both domestic and international. In addition, programs should incorporate Asian American rhetoric as a founda-



tional part of rhetoric and writing studies curricula. They can do so through themed undergraduate writing courses, including first-year writing courses, through the development of upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, but also by rethinking the organization, themes, terms, and reading lists within existing courses. When teachers introduce students to the idea of rhetoric, how might that be reshaped with Asian American rhetoric in mind? In addition, Asian American rhetoric can be drawn from to inform community or institutional undergraduate research projects, such as through partnerships with Asian American university or community organizations, i.e., collaborating with the library on an exhibit for Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Heritage Month (Fralin et al.).

### **Future Possibilities**

A challenge when it came to designing this course was the broad scope of “Asian America,” and the impossibility of having a comprehensive course on Asian American rhetoric—not that any course would truly be comprehensive. Still, some important issues and perspectives were inevitably left out. For example, although I did make an effort to avoid presenting East Asian American experience and ways of knowing as representative of Asian America as a whole, the course still skewed toward East Asian perspectives, due in part to much of the existing scholarship in the field at the time having an East Asian focus.

In future iterations of this course, I would consider foregrounding Asian American feminisms. Gender issues came up many times throughout the course—in discussions of history, and in our conversations about *Pachinko*, *Rolling the Rs*, and Monberg’s “Listening for Legacies,” to name a few examples. Moreover, ongoing acts of anti-Asian violence against Asian women in particular have brought to the fore of my mind the role of gender and the hypersexualization of Asian women throughout history as a significant part of Asian American history and rhetorics. Along these lines, Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan’s *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics* would be an excellent text for framing a course on Asian American rhetoric through a feminist perspective, alongside the works of rhetorical scholars like Bo Wang and Hui Wu in addition to Terese Guinsatao Monberg. Another approach that would be interesting is a focus on Asian American coalitional rhetorics, as it has taken place both across Asian ethnic groups, as well as across racial lines (King). Such a course might take up works on histories of Asian labor movements, Asian contributions to the discipline (Sano-Franchini, Monberg, and Yoon), and Asian settler colonialism (Okamura and Fujikane), while still focusing primarily on an Asian American perspective—yet one that is situated in relation to other minoritized groups in the U.S. and abroad as well.

Another revision I would consider making to the course, depending on the context in which it is taught, is incorporating an assignment on researching and enacting local Asian American histories and rhetorics through an Asian American feminist historiographical lens. Many people still have little knowledge about Asian American history, let alone Asian American history specific to their institution or region. This is understandable to some degree, as Asian American histories and issues are given very little attention in K–12 education. Although this is especially true for those of us who are located in areas without a large and highly visible Asian American community, like Appalachia or the U.S. South, even as someone who grew up in Hawai‘i, a place where Asians are the demographic majority, I still had little knowledge about the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. For me, this is an issue because Asian contributions to our institutions and to our society more generally are erased and invisibilized by regimes of whiteness. In a later semester, I was able to co-facilitate an independent study with a group of Asian American undergraduate students who used oral history and archival research to shed light on the long history of Asians at our university, who, to our surprise, had been attending the university since 1914, more than a century ago.

Future iterations of the course could certainly include more recent publications relevant to Asian American rhetoric. There has also been an abundance of excellent Asian American books, music, television series, movies that have been released in just the past few years, such as Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020); Don Mee Choi’s *DMZ Colony* (2020); PBS’ *Asian Americans* (2020), a five-part historical documentary film series; the television series *Warrior* (2019), based on the writings of Bruce Lee and directed by Shannon Lee and Justin Lin; the video performance of “Racist Sexist Boy” by the Linda Lindas (2022); and *Rise: A Pop History of Asian America from the Nineties to Now* by Jeff Yang, Phil Yu, and Phillip Wang (2022), to name just a few examples.

Although some readers may not have the opportunity to teach a course like this at their own institutions, I encourage all rhetoricians to consider how they might include Asian American rhetorical work in their curricula, assignments, exam reading lists, and literature reviews on rhetorical historiography, cultural rhetorics, research methodologies, and contemporary issues of transnationalism, citizenship, migration, and language issues, amongst other topics. I encourage all readers to take the time to read, engage with, teach, and cite works in Asian and Asian American rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies. I hope that my discussion of the affordances of engaging with this area of inquiry will inspire others to develop curricula that can support not only Asian and Asian American students sense of belonging, but also all students’ understanding of their own situatedness in relation to Asian and Asian American histories, rhetorics, and peoples.

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## Appendix: Mid-semester Exam Questions

*Students were instructed to respond to one of the following.*

1. Describe the historical and conceptual relationship between Guigucian, Daoist, and Confucian rhetorics. What similarities exist across these areas of thought, and what are some key distinctions? How does understanding these examples of classical Chinese rhetoric help us to better understand rhetoric in our own contemporary context? Provide examples to illustrate your points.
2. Analyze *Pachinko* using either Guigucian rhetoric, Daoism, Confucianism, or comparative rhetorics. First describe key themes and ideas from the selected approach. Then explain: What does the chosen approach afford? What is highlighted that might not have been noticeable otherwise? For instance, how does *Pachinko* dialogue with some of the key themes of classical Chinese rhetoric? How does the term take new shape within *Pachinko*, and/or how does it diverge from what was previously articulated?
3. In "Canon, Institutionalization, Memory," Lowe offers a way of conceptualizing Asian American literatures as engaging in rhetorical work. How does *Pachinko* illustrate, dialogue with, and perhaps even extend upon the claims made in this essay?
4. Based on our readings thus far, in what ways do Asian/American rhetorics and theories have much wider resonances than many tend to assume? For instance:
  - How do the readings speak to issues of methodology? Describe a set of methodological lessons that come from our collective readings, and apply the framework that emerges to *Pachinko*.

OR

- How do the readings speak to issues of pedagogy? Describe a set of pedagogical lessons that come from our collective readings, and apply the framework that emerges to a more general course like classical rhetoric, modern rhetoric, composition studies, or first-year composition. How and why might some of the readings and/or concepts fit in such foundational courses? What would the inclusion of such readings and/or ideas enable? Finally, what are some considerations for appropriately incorporating such texts within such courses?

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