

Asian 320.05: Asian American Memoir*
Hunter College, Fall 2008
Tu & F, 11:10am – 12:25pm in TH 412

(*Asian 320 is cross-listed with English 318.55)

Instructor: Dana Liu
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Office: Room 1037, Hunter East
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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 1-2 pm

Course Description

In this course, will examine constructions of Asian American identity and self-representations in memoir, film, writing, literature, and critical essays by contemporary Asian Americans. The readings will cover a diverse range of experiences that push the boundaries of what we define as Asian American memoir, and examine the formation of subjective identities across axes of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and national identity. Texts include both domesticated narratives of immigrant assimilation, as well as transnational categories of homeland and identity to explore questions of:

- Homeland, migration, exile and transformation
- Transnational and multicultural identities
- History, memory, myth and imagination
- Form and silence in contested narratives
- Language, identity and constructions of self
- Gendered narratives and the politics of desire

Required texts

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (also at Reserve Desk, Main Library, 2nd Floor, 2 hour check out)
Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*
Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*
Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*
Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*
Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*

- * **Required texts available at Shakespeare & Co. on 939 Lexington Avenue**
- * ***Essays and criticism* (posted on Blackboard or on E-Reserves)**
- * **Syllabus is subject to change--check Blackboard *daily* for announcements and changes to reading schedule. Print, read and bring these to class!**

Course format

8 Reading / Response Journal entries (1-2 pages)
Online Discussion Board entries
In-class Presentation
Midterm Exam (3 take home exam essays, 6-8 pages)
Final Paper (12 pages) - due on last class, Friday, December 16

We will be reading one literary text every 3 weeks, on average, for this class, with supplementary criticism and discussions each week for that week's section of text. Critical essays and supplementary articles will either be posted on Blackboard or available on E-reserves (see Blackboard Course Information for instructions on how to access E-Reserve articles). Required literary texts should be purchased at Shakespeare & Co (see above). Always print, read and bring required readings to class! Please check Blackboard daily for announcements and changes to the syllabus!

Each Tuesday, I will begin our discussion of the novel or critical essays, etc with a brief synopsis and provide topics for discussion. Each Friday, we will conclude our discussion of a section of the novel with a class discussion facilitated by a student. As such, your oral participation in class is as equally important as your written assignments.

In-class presentations

Each of you will be required to make at least one in-class presentation during the course of the semester. In addition to a brief synopsis of the readings, you are responsible for generating questions for discussion and, if you'd like, organizing a group project (small group discussions, role-playing, etc). Your presentation should be 20 - 30 minutes long. Use this opportunity to extend some of the conversations that we have been having in class, or raise new topics of discussion. Please feel free to come by my office hours to discuss your presentation further.

Reading / Response Journal Prompts and Online Discussion Board entries: (See attachment)

Grading

Emphasis is on attendance, participation in discussion, close readings of texts and journal writings

You will do presentations, a group project and reading response journals.

Your ideas and speaking in class is emphasized. Just showing up without doing the reading assignments and active discussion will not help you pass the class!

Grade Breakdown

Attendance:	100 points
Presentation & Participation:	100 points
Journals & Online Discussion:	100 points
Mid-term Exam:	100 points
Final Paper:	100 points
Total Possible Points:	500 points

Mid-term exam

I will provide 3 questions for the mid-term exam, from which you should respond to 1. The mid-term will be a take-home essay exam, of 6-8 pages in length.

Final Essay

The final 12 page paper will be a personal essay or the beginning of your own personal memoir. While this is a creative exercise, you may draw on literary forms and styles discussed in class to shape your voice. You may use material from in-class journaling exercises, but the paper should contain fresh material and should be shaped into a first chapter and/or feel like an ‘aesthetic whole’. Please see me towards the end of the semester to discuss your proposed topics with me.

Attendance and Late Papers

All written assignments are due at the beginning of each class. All deadlines are strictly adhered to; *no extensions or incompletes* will be given. Late papers will be marked down *each day* that they are late (thus, a B instead of a B+).

If you miss a workshop, your responsibility includes making up for the week's assignments, as well as obtaining the following week's work. (You will exchange email addresses/phone numbers with fellow students for this purpose.) The final project will be due at the last workshop; anything submitted later will be automatically downgraded one letter grade. **No email submissions will be accepted.**

How can you do well in this course?

Attendance. In order to do well in this course, you can miss or be late for *no more than TWO class meetings*. For each additional class that you are absent, five points will be deducted from your final attendance grade.

It is your responsibility to email me if you miss class or have any questions about upcoming readings or classes

Participation. Active participation is a key component of the class, and I hope that all of you will feel comfortable incorporating experiences and ideas from other classes as well as from your own lives.

Please check Blackboard before each class for changes in the reading schedule and class meetings, *especially* if you have missed class. You should come to class with printed reading assignments and be prepared to talk about what you have read.

We will have regular screenings of film- and video-based work that expand upon course materials and ideas. For this reason, attendance is crucial to your success in this class, and all screenings can appear on the final exam.

Syllabus is subject to change. Check Blackboard daily for changes to class meetings and the reading schedule.

How can you get a bad grade in Asian 220?

Plagiarism. If you plagiarize you will immediately fail this class. There are no exceptions to this policy. Hunter College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The

College is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty according to the Hunter College Academic Integrity Procedure.

If you sit in class without participating in class discussion.

If you miss more than two classes, your final grade will be lowered by one point (e.g. from a B to a B-). If you miss more than two classes, your grade will be lowered by an additional point (from a B- to a C+), and so on. There will be no excused absences for this course.

Resources:

Reading and Writing Center

If you need help with writing the mid-term essay, please feel free to use the resources at Hunter College and refer to the grading rubric I have handed out in class.

Incompletes in Final Grade will not be accepted.

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Accessibility information:

In compliance with the American Disability Act of 1990 (ADA) and with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Hunter College is committed to ensuring educational parity and accommodations for all students with documented disabilities and/or medical conditions. It is recommended that all students with documented disabilities (Emotional, Medical, Physical, and/or Learning) consult the Office of AccessABILITY, located in Room E1124, to secure necessary academic accommodations. For further information and assistance, please call: (212) 772- 4857 or (212) 650-3230.

COURSE SCHEDULE

• Friday, August 29

Introduction

Reading

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, Chapter 1

Week One

• Tuesday, September 2 - Journal # 1 due

What is Memoir? We will look at examples from a range of famous writers and their memoirs.

Reading:

Srikanth and Iwanaga, Introduction: The Voice That Passes through Me: An Interview with Meena Alexander, in *Bold Words*, Ed. Srikanth and Iwanaga, p. 3-9

AND

David Leiwei Li, “Can Maxine Hong Kingston Speak? The Contingency of The Woman Warrior” in *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*, p. 44-62

• **Friday, September 5**

Reading:

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, From *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands*, in *Bold Words*, Ed. Srikanth and Iwanaga, p. 29-37

AND

David Mura, From *Where the Body Meets Memory*, in *Bold Words*, Ed. Srikanth and Iwanaga, p. 46-51

Screening

Maxine Hong Kingston Interview with Kay Bonetti (cassette, 53 min.)

Week Two

• **Tuesday, September 9**

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, p. 1-60

AND

Patti Duncan, “Discursive Silence in internment Writings: Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*” in *Tell This Silence*, p. 102-128

Screening

History and Memory (Dir. Director Rea Tajiri, 1991. 31 min)

• **Friday, September 12**

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, p. 61-120

AND

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, “Japanese American Women’s Life Stories: Maternity in Monica Stone’s Nisei Daughter and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” p. 89-107
In *Asian-American Writers*, Ed. Harold Bloom

Screening

Time of Fear (Dir. PBS, 2004. 60 min.)

Week Three

• **Tuesday, September 16**

Reading

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, p. 121-180

AND

King-kok Cheung, "Attentive Silence: Obasan" in *Articulate Silences*, p. 126-167

• **Friday, September 19**

Reading

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, p. 181-240

AND

King-kok Cheung, "Coda" in *Articulate Silences*, p. 168-172

Week Four

• **Tuesday, September 23 - Journal # 2 due**

Reading

Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*, p. 241-300

• **Friday, September 26 - Journal # 3 due**

Reading

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, p. 1-60

Week Five

• **Tuesday, September 30**

Reading

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, p. 61-120

• **Wednesday, October 1 - EVENT**

1:10pm - 3:00pm

Lang Recital Hall, 424 Hunter North Building

Asian American Voting Rights and Political Participation

Presented by the Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund

Asian Americans have had to overcome a series of obstacles to exercise their right to vote. Although more and more Asian Americans are voting, candidates as well as the news media have overlooked the Asian American vote. This workshop will examine Asian American political success and political opinions, discuss legal protections and voters' rights to bilingual ballots and interpreters, and explore ways that students can defend against anti-Asian voter disenfranchisement.

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

REFRESHMENTS & SNACKS WILL BE SERVED.

Presenter:

Glenn D. Magpantay
Staff Attorney
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund

• **Friday, October 3**

Reading

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, p. 121-180

Week Six

• **Tuesday, October 7 - Journal # 3 due**

Reading

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, p. 181-240

• **Friday, October 10**

Week Seven

• **Tuesday, October 14**

Reading

Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*, p. 1-60

AND

Interviews [TK]

• **Friday, October 17**

Reading

Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*, p. 61-120

AND

Wenying Xu, “Agency vs. Guilt in Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*” (on Blackboard)

Week Eight

• **Tuesday, October 21**

Reading

Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*, p. 121-180

AND

Patti Duncan, “Silence and Public Discourse: Interventions into Dominant National and Sexual Narratives in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*” in *Tell This Silence*, p. 193-213

• **Friday, October 24**

Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*, p. 181-240

AND

Patti Duncan, "Conclusion: Tell This Silence: Asian American Women's Narratives, Gender, Nation and History" in *Tell This Silence*, p. 102-128

Screening:

Hiroshima Mon Amour

Week Nine

• **Tuesday, October 28 - Journal # 4 due**

Reading

Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*, p. 241-306

• **Friday, October 31 – Midterm Exam due!**

Reading

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, p. 1-60

AND

Marguerite Duras [TK]

Screening

[TBA]

Week Ten

• **Tuesday, November 4**

Reading

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, p. 1-60

Screening

[TBA]

• **Friday, November 7 - Journal # 5 due**

Reading

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, p. 61-120

Week Eleven

• **Tuesday, November 11**

Reading

Lê Thi Diem Thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, p. 121-176

• **Friday, November 15 - Journal # 6 due**

Reading

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*, Chapter [TK]

Week Twelve

• **Tuesday, November 19**

Reading

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*, Chapter [TK]

• **Friday, November 21**

Reading

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*, Chapter [TK]

• **Tuesday, November 25 - Journal #7 due**

Reading

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*, Chapter [TK]

• **Friday, November 28 - No Class!**

Reading

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*, p. 1-65

Week Thirteen

• **Tuesday, December 2**

Reading

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*, p. 66-130

AND

Carlos Bulosan, *How My Stories Were Written*, in *Bold Words*, Ed. Srikanth and Iwanaga, p. 10-13

Screening

Fall of the I Hotel

• **Friday, December 5 – Journal #8 due**

Reading

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*, p. 131-195

Week Fourteen

• **Tuesday, December 9**

Reading

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*, p. 196-260

Screening:

“Better Luck Tomorrow” (Dir. Justin Lu, 2003. 101 min.)

• **Friday, December 12**

Reading

Carlos Bulosan, *America Is In the Heart*, p. 261-327

Screening:

“Better Luck Tomorrow” (Dir. Justin Lu, 2003. 101 min.)

Week Fifteen - Review

• **Tuesday, December 16 - Last Class – Final Paper due!**

Asian 320 Asian American Memoir
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Reading/Response Journal Prompts

Journal #1 - due Tuesday, September 2

A) Your Personal Background

1. Where did you grow up? (country, region, & type of region—urban, suburban or rural)
2. What generation did your family come to America? (e.g. your parents, grandparents, yourself). From where?
3. Who influenced you most when you were a kid (e.g. parents/family members, grandparents, religious leaders)? What were their values?
4. What language(s) do you speak at home?
5. Who are your heroes and heroines?
6. What is your major at Hunter? When do you graduate?
7. What do you want to do and explore in this course? (ie writing, reading, talking)

B) Writing prompt given in handout in class [email me if you need it!]

Journal #2 - due Friday, September 23

What is the effect of Obasan's structure? How would the novel be different had Kogawa chosen to narrate its events chronologically?

How do form and silence contribute to the “contested” nature of this narrative against what Eileen Kim calls the “Grand Narrative” of American history?

Journal #3 - due Tuesday, October 7

What role does “haunting” play in the relationship between Soon Hyo, a former comfort woman, and her daughter, Beccah? Draw connections between *Comfort Woman* and other novels we've read in class, examining approaches to narrative structure, treatment of history in fiction, use of magical realism, and the presentation of two different time frames, one in flashback and in the present.

What influence does the past have on your present? Do you live your life fully in the present?

Journal #4 - due Tuesday, October 28

“To me, history meant how proletarians won over their reactionaries. Western history was a history of capitalist exploitation” - Red Azalea, p. 25

One of the most striking things about *Red Azalea* is that it is written without direct dialogue, in English, a new language that Min learned after coming to America as an adult. In a memoir, the author can select whatever he or she wants to tell about her or his own history. Why do you think Min tells this story, and why? How do politics influence desire? How do memory and language influence the construction of identity and self? For example, in what ways do you think that writing a memoir can be an enactment of transformation and self-empowerment?

Midterm exam - due Tuesday, November 4

I will provide 3 questions for the mid-term exam on **Friday, October 24**, from which you should respond to 1. The mid-term will be a take-home essay exam, of 6-8 pages in length. *See Grading Rubric for essay guidelines!*

Journal #5 - due Friday, November 7

Essay on Film! [TBA]

Journal #6 - due Friday, November 15

“The writer is responding to a question about the book's form. Why had she chosen to tell the story in this way, non-linear, fragmentary, jumping back and forth in time and place? She says, “The book is about three Vietnamese people: a man, his wife, and his daughter. They are living in one place and are haunted by memories of their life in another. The places are southern California and southern Vietnam. What lies between these two places is an entire ocean, both literally and metaphorically. The characters have crossed that ocean, but they haven't yet found the language to chart what has happened to them. By language, I don't necessarily mean English or Vietnamese. I am speaking of the words or forms we struggle to find to describe our lives to ourselves. As a writer, I struggled for many years to find a form that would be true to these character's lives, a form shaped as much by silence and absence, by time seeming to stop, to halt, as much as by it flowing on.” – Le Thi Diem Thuy, *Tear the Pages Out: Fragments from the Gangster Tour*

“The exiled knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.”

-- Edward Said, from *Reflections on Exile*

In what way does exile bring transformation for immigrants newly arrived in America? What process of cultural, personal loss and gains do you think are express in the form of this memoir? Do you think that the representation of human experience is most effectively portrayed in a linear fashion, or that the gaps in writing reflects the gaps in consciousness? Draw examples from the text and relate them to your own subjectivity as a writer recording experience and crossing boundaries.

Journal #7 - due Tuesday, November 25

“[In *Fault Lines*], gender is the unifying topos of the work, the fault line of the title is the difficulty of inhabiting a female body in a world where the female body is a site for unending struggles over meaning... Culture and its constructions of gender... constantly alter the terms of the mother-daughter relationship... Overtly stated through the text is the wish for a nostalgic recovery of self in the course of multiple migrations.”

- Nalini Natarajan, review of *Fault Lines* by Meena Alexander

How does gender shape your experiences and the ways you relate to the world? Are there conflicting expectations within your family or community and without? How do these shift over time, and in what ways are they altered by culture and its constructions of gender? Draw examples from your own life as well as from the literary texts *Fault Lines*, *Comfort Woman*, *Red Azalea* and *Obasan*.

Journal #8 – due Friday, December 5

America Is in the Heart is a narrative of the coming to class consciousness of the internally colonized Filipinos in the U.S. and the struggle of immigrants against racism and violence.

What gulfs does he represent between the ideals of America as the land of equality and opportunity and the often painful, violent reality? Can you relate this to other immigrant experiences in the films and readings?

Final Paper – due Tuesday, December 16 (last class!) (12 pages)

The final 12 page paper will be a personal essay or the beginning of your own personal memoir. While this is a creative exercise, you may draw on literary forms and styles discussed in class to shape your voice. You may use material from in-class journaling exercises, but the paper should contain fresh material and should be shaped into a first chapter and/or feel like an ‘aesthetic whole’. Please see me towards the end of the semester to discuss your proposed topics with me.

Online Discussion Board entries

Three one-page essays posted to the online Discussion Board during the semester. Submissions should respond to Discussion Questions posted online during the semester, and/or in response to other student’s comments posted on the Discussion Board. All essays posted on the Discussion Board will be discussed in class, and students will be required to follow up on their thoughts and dialogue with others about them.