

Emily Balch Seminar Sec. 14:
Asian American Popular Culture
Mon/Wed 2:40-4:00PM
Course location: English House II

FALL 2026

Instructor: Professor Sophia J. Mao (she/hers)

E-mail: sjmao@brynmawr.edu

Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 9:30-10:30AM; in-person English House 212 OR via Zoom;

Office hours sign-ups here: <https://calendly.com/sophiajmao-bmc/15min>



Photo credit: "Vanitas No. 2" by Felicia Liang

Course Description:

This course gives an overview of notable Asian American cultural works (including prose, plays, graphic novels, and films) from the 19th through the 21st century. What is Asian America, a term that was coined in the late sixties? What features and themes define Asian American stories, and what makes a work "popular"? Finally, how do artists navigate longstanding issues around racial stereotype and representation? Throughout the semester, we will ask how Asian American cultural works have utilized, contested, and expanded conventions around both racial forms and artistic forms. Authors will include Thi Bui, David Henry Hwang, Hua Hsu, and Karen Tei Yamashita, among others.

As an Emily Balch seminar, class time will be discussion-based and teach the fundamentals of college-level writing through critical, close analysis of Asian American popular cultural works. Writing assignments will focus on the process of drafting, writing, and revising short analytical essays. Students will have the opportunity to engage with the Bryn Mawr College Archives and have the option to attend a screening at the 2026 Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival.

Course Objectives:

- Read, listen to, and view significant works in Asian American culture and learn how to discuss them critically with your classmates
 - **A note on course content:** Our readings and class discussions will necessarily cover difficult topics. If you anticipate that certain themes or moments will be hard for you to engage with, please do not hesitate to reach out to me privately, and we can find alternative modes of engagement.
- Learn the fundamentals of college-level writing through short writing assignments, one-on-one writing conferences, and a peer review workshop
- Learn the MLA citation style for different kinds of sources

Course Assignment Breakdown:

- 10% - Regular class attendance and participation
- 10% - Class care web (collective class note-taking)
- 40% (10% each): Four short writing assignments throughout the semester uploaded to Moodle by 5:00PM:
 - Paper One (**Th, 09/24**): 1-2-page close reading
 - Paper Two (**Th, 10/22**): 3-4-page comparative paper
 - Paper Three (**Th, 11/19**): 4-5-page draft of final paper with argumentative claim on Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*
 - Paper Four (**Th, 12/10**): 5-6-page final paper, revision of paper three
- 20% (5% each): Four one-on-one conferences between the student and course instructor to support you in the writing process (**Wed 09/16, Wed 10/07, Mon 11/09, and Mon 11/30**)
- 10%: Event write-up: 2-3-page summary/presentation reflection on any public event you choose to attend on or around Bryn Mawr related to ethnic studies (**Due by 12/11**)
- 10%: Final presentation (**Mon, 12/07 and Wed 12/09**): Short presentations to your peers that places an item in Bryn Mawr's Special Collections alongside a personal photograph that commemorates your first semester at Bryn Mawr

*****Further guidelines about each of the assignments will be shared in class and on Moodle*****

Course Policies:

E-mail policy: I typically respond to e-mail within 24 hours, Monday-Friday from 9AM-5PM. Weekends are my time to recharge (and I also encourage you to cultivate a healthy relationship to school and work obligations)! so I am much slower in responding to messages.

Office hours: Outside of our four, one-on-one writing meetings during the semester, I am always available to meet you during my regular office hours (listed above). If these times do not work for you, please e-mail me directly to set up a separate meeting. **Please note that I do not read entire drafts of essays in office hours OR via e-mail in which I “pre-grade” papers, generating substantive feedback on the spot.** If we are discussing your writing, please plan to present your questions and concerns to me orally, identifying specific passages of note.

Letters of recommendation: Writing students letters of recommendation to support them in their continued career development is an important part of my job as faculty member. However, please review my letter of recommendation guidelines (found on Moodle) before requesting a letter from me. Please note that I will not be able to provide recommendations before the end of the Fall 2026 semester – it takes time to get to know you!

Attendance and participation: Weekly attendance and active participation are essential to a successful course. Please arrive to each class on time and be ready to discuss the readings with your classmates. You are allowed **two excused absences** during the semester for life events. Additional absences will impact your participation grade or will necessitate special circumstances that should be discussed with me in advance. As much as possible, please let me know *before* class meets if you need to be absent from class, as we will all miss you!

Tech use: No laptops or phones are allowed in class unless otherwise stated, except for tech use for accessibility reasons. Please bring **hard copies** of all the readings to class.

Late assignments: I am generous with extension requests due to life circumstances. **All writing assignments have an automatic 3-day grace period after the official deadline.** After that, you will need to e-mail me for additional extension requests. Late assignments without an extension will be docked 1/3 a letter grade a day.

Writing Resources: I encourage you to make use of the Writing Center to discuss, plan, and revise drafts of your writing assignment. You can schedule an appointment by going to www.brynmawr.edu/writingcenter or clicking on “Make a Writing Center Appt” from the Library and Academic Support dropdown menu at the top of every Moodle page. For multilingual writers, I highly encourage you to reach out to the Director of Multilingual Writing, Kelly Franz: kfrantz@brynmawr.edu

Accessibility: Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class must first be found eligible to do so by Access Services and must share this eligibility with me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Academic integrity and collaboration: You are more than encouraged to collaborate with others over the course content and assignments. However, all individual assignments must reflect your own work and all outside sources (including content from class discussions)! must be properly cited. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any doubts about the academic integrity of an assignment, please speak to me before you submit it. You can review Bryn Mawr College's Honor Code here: <https://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/>

Generative AI: AI may be consulted as a source of initial inspiration, for summaries of topics and texts, and for help with editing papers, but it should never be a complete substitute for your own thinking process or for engaging with your faculty and peers. We will discuss more about the benefits and drawbacks of AI use in class.

Course Reading Schedule:

- Readings are listed on the day they are “due.” You can generally expect around 30-50 pages of reading each week.
- Readings can be found on Moodle (PDF excerpts and online links), as course reserves at Canaday Library, and at the campus bookstore (hard and some electronic copies of full texts).
 - There are three texts I recommend you purchase, and both can be found at the campus bookstore. If there are financial barriers that prevent you from purchasing these texts, please do not hesitate to reach out to me via e-mail.
 - David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (1988)
 - Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (2017)
 - Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (1997)
- There may be slight adjustments on the readings throughout the semester. Watch out for any e-mail announcements!

Week 1—What is Asian American Popular Culture?

Skill: Note-taking and reading skills

Mon 08/31 Introduction

In class: Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes* (2021) [images]

Wed 09/02 Read: Franny Choi, "[Choi Jeong Min](#)" (2016) [poem]

Assignment: Review the information on the Moodle site (syllabus, assignment sheets, readings) and come to class with two questions you have about the course

Week 2—Immigration and Labor

Skill: Literary close reading, annotation, and AI

Mon 09/07 Labor Day, no class meeting

Wed 09/09 Read: Carlos Bulosan, *On Becoming Filipino* (1995), "Life and Death of a Filipino in America" [short story]; "The Writer as Worker" [essay]

Week 3—Chinese Exclusion and Yellow Peril

Skill: Summary and secondary sources

Mon 09/14 Read: Beth Lew-Williams, *John Doe Chinaman: A Forgotten History of Chinese Life Under American Racial Law* (2025), "Introduction" [secondary source]

Wed 09/16 **One-on-one meeting #1: Getting to know you!**

Due by the end of the semester, 12/11 on Moodle by 5:00PM: 2–3-page event summary/public presentation reflection

OPTIONAL: Ju Yon Kim book talk, Th 09/17 from 11:30AM-1:00PM in the Quita Woodward Room, Old Library; see also the [Africana Studies Fall 2026 Speaker Series](#)

Week 4—Chinese Exclusion cont.; Orientalism

Skill: Asking a debatable question

Mon 09/21 Read: Paisley Rekdal, *West: A Translation* (2023) <https://westtrain.org>, "Thousand," "Antiquity" [poems] *Optional: Explore the website if you have time

Wed 09/23 Read/listen: David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (1988) [play]; also available online as a recording: https://exchange.prx.org/pieces/96084-m-%20butterfly/floating_piece
In class: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978) [theory]

DUE Th 09/24 on Moodle by 5:00PM: 1–2-page close reading diagnostic

Week 5—WWII and Japanese Internment

Skill: Thesis statements and introductions

Mon 09/28 Read: Lawson Fusao Inada, *Legends from Camp* (1992), "Instructions to All Persons" [poem]

In-class: Finish discussion of *M. Butterfly*

Wed 09/30 Watch: Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991) [short film]

In-class: Marianne Hirsh, *postmemory* (2012), [theory]

Week 6—The Vietnam War

Skill: Quotations and paraphrasing

- Mon 10/05 **Read:** Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* (2017), Chapters 1-5 [graphic memoir]
 In-class: Gordon Harvey, *Writing with Sources Third Edition* (2017), “Integrating Sources”
- Wed 10/07 **Read:** Consider finishing Thi Bui, Chapters 6-10 on your own
 One-on-one meeting #2: Paper #2 planning

Week 7—FALL BREAK (Use this time to work on your comparative analysis paper and/or get ahead on the readings)

- Mon 10/12 **Fall Break, no class meeting**
- Wed 10/14 **Fall Break, no class meeting**

Week 8—Bryn Mawr’s Library System

Skill: Citational practices and topic sentences

- Mon 10/19 Special Collections Visit on Bryn Mawr College’s History + citation practices
- Wed 10/21 **In-class: topic sentence workshop**

DUE Thursday, 10/22 on Moodle by 5:00PM: 3–4-page comparative paper

Week 9—Pacific Islands & Racial Geographies

- Mon 10/26 **Read:** Megan Kamalei Kakimoto, *Every Drop Is a Man’s Nightmare* (2023), “Story of Men” [short story]
- Wed 10/28 **Read:** Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, Chapters 1-7 “Monday: Summer Solstice” (1997) [novel]

Week 10—*Tropic of Orange* P1

- Mon 11/02 **Read:** Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, Chapters 8-21, “Tuesday” and “Wednesday”
 In-class: Gloria Anzaldúa, *borderlands* (1987) [theory]
- Wed 11/04 **Read:** Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, Chapters 22-35, “Thursday and Friday”

Week 11—*Tropic of Orange* P2

- Mon 11/09 **One-on-one meeting #3: for final paper planning**
- Wed 11/11 **Read:** Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, Chapters 36-49, “Saturday and Sunday”

Week 12—Asian American Popular Culture Today

Skill: Utilizing college resources

- Mon 11/16 **No class meeting, schedule a meeting with the Writing Center**
- Wed 11/18 **Read:** Hua Hsu, *Stay True* (2022), excerpts
 In-class: Roland Barthes, *studium and punctum* (1980), [theory]

DUE Thursday, 11/19 on Moodle by 5:00PM: draft final paper on *Tropic of Orange*

Week 13—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Skill: End-of-semester planning

Mon 11/23 In-class: Final project discussion

Wed 11/25 Thanksgiving Break, no class meeting

Week 14—Final paper revisions

Skill: Revision

Mon 11/30 **One-on-one meeting #4: for paper revision**

Wed 12/02 In-class: peer review workshop

Week 15 Wrapping Up

Skill: Public speaking

Mon 12/07 In-class: final oral presentations

Wed 12/09 In-class: final oral presentations and gratitudes

DUE Thursday, 12/10 on Moodle by 5:00PM: Revised final paper