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Reclaiming Comparative Ethnic Studies: A Collaborative Course in Asian American and Latinx Literature and Film

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Abstract

The field of ethnic studies grew from alliances of different minoritized groups working towards liberation. Despite this original emphasis on solidarity, today classes in ethnic literature and history are usually taught separately within their own programs in African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native American studies. While it is crucial to recognize the incommensurability of these histories and experiences, the separation of fields risks losing opportunities for solidarity and a deeper understanding of how U.S. imperialism, militarism, and racial policies have shaped minoritized populations in relation to and with each other. This article describes a new, co-taught class for Duke University that bridged two fields: "Asian American and Latinx Literature and Film." We designed the course to highlight significant connections and intersections in the histories and identities of these communities and to foster solidarity among students through collaborative assignments. We drew our pedagogical aims from Paulo Freire's call for collaborative learning as a tool of resistance. Despite institutional barriers that often prevent collaboratively designed and co-taught classes, comments from our end-of-semester evaluations indicate that students see a need for courses that study and build solidarity, especially in an increasingly hostile political climate.

Keywords: Asian American, Latinx, Collaborative Learning, Solidarity

The ongoing project of ethnic studies constitutes a critical intervention into intellectual structures rooted in colonization, racism, empire, and state violence. Its pedagogical vision grew from the alliance of minoritized groups united as the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State College in 1968 and the following year at the University of California at Berkeley. During this movement, Black, Latin American, Filipino, Asian American, and Mexican American student groups demanded the formation of Ethnic Studies schools or "Third World Colleges," recognizing that community empowerment relied on solidarity between groups experiencing oppression and marginalization worldwide. After the longest student strike in U.S. higher education, San Francisco State opened the first College of Ethnic Studies in 1969, which included provisions for each group with its own program (Okihiro, 2016, pp. 29–30).

Despite this original emphasis on solidarity, today classes in African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native American studies are usually taught separately. In fact, this separation constitutes an important acknowledgement of each group's unique histories and experiences within the United States. As Gary Y. Okihiro (2016) notes, self-determination was a "key demand" (p. 2) of the Third World Liberation Front from the start, meaning that every group reserved the right to speak for itself. Even as student groups formed strategic alliances, their solidarities relied on what Nadia Elia et al. (2016) call a "changing, often vexed set of rationalizations, arguments, and stories regarding the necessity and propriety of convening different epistemic-institutional formations within a political-intellectual housing" (p. 1). However, while it is crucial to organize knowledge in a way that acknowledges the incommensurability of these histories and experiences, the separation of fields risks losing new opportunities for solidarity, as well as a deeper understanding of how U.S. imperialism, militarism, and racial policies have shaped minoritized populations in relation to and with each other.

We posit that Asian American and Latinx Studies benefit from being explored together in the classroom, in addition to the in-depth exploration that occurs within each field. Relational, multiethnic, and intersectional approaches have found proponents in Afro-Latinx scholarship and studies of Latinx approaches to indigeneity (Torres-Saillant, 2012, 2018), comparative African American and Latinx histories (Ortiz, 2018), Asian American/Black studies (Kim, 2023), and studies of Asian American settler-colonialism (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008). They have also been foundational to women of color feminism, as in the groundbreaking *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). However, examining Asian American and Latinx experiences together may seem counterintuitive to many students. In public discourse, Asian Americans are often racialized as "model minorities," in opposition to the racial branding of Latinxs as "illegal immigrants" (Le-Khac, 2020). These tropes seem to work against one another, casting groups into the familiar form of desirable/undesirable immigrants. Yet, as several scholars have observed, Asian and Latinxs have faced and continue to face structural similarities in their racialization as perpetual foreigners outside the Black/white binary of U.S. racial formations (De Genova, 2006; Ngai, 2004; O'Brien, 2008). The construction of the United States as a nation-state has relied historically on excluding both groups from full civic participation, both through legal exclusion and through targeted anti-immigration rhetoric. At the same time, US military interventions in Asia and Latin America have brought Asians and Latin Americans to the United States as refugees, (post)colonial subjects, and Cold War allies. Literary scholars have traced common threads in cultural productions by these groups, including tropes of betrayal (Parikh, 2009); negotiations of bilingualism (Lim, 2017); elided histories of U.S. imperialism, nativistic racism, and Cold War militarism (Thananopavarn, 2018); and the "transfictional" forms of multivocal texts (Le-Khac, 2020). All of these scholars draw attention to the intersections of these fields with the idea of coalition-building in mind.

Now more than ever, we see this coalition-building as urgent. As the fastest growing ethnoracial groups in the United States, Asian Americans and Latinxs have become targets of white supremacist backlash. Throughout the twenty-first century, we have seen a rise in anti-immigration sentiment, increased policing and deportation of Latinx and Asian Americans, and an increase in hate crimes and violence against these groups. The rising power of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) during the second Trump administration affects both groups in ways that often violate civil and human rights. At the same time, fields within ethnic studies are being delegitimized and dismantled, at both the university and the K-12 level. At the

university level, the "academic containment" that Pia Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira (2014) identified has only accelerated, stifling academics who "cross the line" through cancelling programs, devaluing scholarship, and outsourcing teaching to adjunct labor. At the K-12 level, laws banning "DEI" and "critical race theory" have often meant banning ethnic studies entirely. Efforts by Florida legislators to mandate Asian American studies while rejecting the AP African American History curriculum show that fields may even be pitted against one another as part of this effort (Association for Asian American Studies, 2023). In this context, we see solidarity between groups as an urgent project to counter an ongoing hostile political climate.

With these issues in mind, we developed and co-taught "Asian American and Latinx Literature and Film," a new class at Duke University in Spring 2025. This seminar course had seventeen students enrolled out of a cap of eighteen. It sought to answer the following questions: What is Asian American? What is Latinx? What can Asian American and Latinx perspectives show us about dominant constructions of "America" and its historical and contemporary power structures? Through it, we wanted to explore literary and film productions that express some of the fundamental issues affecting Asian American and Latinx communities, focusing on how they have been shaped in mutual relation with each other and with common histories of imperialism, militarism, labor, and immigration law. Duke University's Asian American and Diaspora Studies program, established in 2018 after over twenty years of student activism, sponsored our class. It was cross-listed with Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, English, and Duke's program in Latino/a Studies in the Global South. We also benefited from our participation in Duke's Collaborative Project Courses Faculty Fellows Program, which allowed us space, time, and funding to develop the course during the summer of 2024.

Our goals for organizing class materials were threefold. First, we wanted to help students understand the histories of U.S. occupation and interventions in Asia and Latin America that are integral to Asian American and Latinx stories and experiences. Ethnic studies, as it has stemmed from Third World studies, has always been about "universal liberation (self-determination) against all forms of oppression, material and discursive" (Okihiro, 2016, p. 14). Understanding how Asian American and Latinx populations have been shaped by U.S. actions abroad is key to identifying these forms of oppression. Second, we aimed to uncover alliances between Asian American and Latinx groups that have formed historical bases for solidarity that we can learn from today. A key example of these alliances includes the formation of the United Farm Workers, a movement led by Mexican and Filipinx workers. Finally, we wanted to acknowledge and prioritize hybrid, multilayered, and intersectional identities. Woman of color feminism and queer activist texts help us understand that Asian Americans and Latinxs are negotiating multiple identities. Even ethnic identities may not always be mutually exclusive, as there is a long history of Asians throughout Latin America. Literature about and by Asian Latinxs can help us break down and interrogate our separation of fields that may not always grapple with identities beyond a single hyphen.

Our organization of assignments encouraged students to work together across differences. Students responded to class materials via an online discussion board that required them to compose their reactions and respond to other students' ideas. Outside of this, we facilitated the formation of teams of 3 to 4 students, which were responsible for leading one class session and for conducting a semester-long research project into a topic involving the intersection of Asian American and Latinx studies. The research project culminated in the production of a 20-minute informative podcast for public consumption.

Inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy, we built this course with collaboration as a pillar of learning and as a way to encourage solidarity in our class space. In *Pedagogy of Solidarity*, Freire expands on what it means to work towards social justice in 21st-century education by highlighting the importance of hope and solidarity in teaching and learning. In his Forward to the book, Henry Giroux (2014) explains that ". . . (h)ope for Freire is a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination that encourages progressive educators and others to stand at the edge of society, to think beyond existing configurations of power in order to imagine the unthinkable in terms of how they might live with dignity, justice, and freedom." Most of the students in this class were Asian American and/or Latinx. In designing this class for them, we aimed to honor the experiences, voices, and beliefs that they brought to the classroom. By affirming their voices, helping them expand the knowledge they brought to the classroom, and broadening their sense of community and solidarity, we hoped to instill a broader sense of responsibility to others.

From U.S. Imperialism to Intersectional Identities: Shaping the Curriculum

In organizing the texts for the course, our first goal was to highlight the United States' imperialism, military interventions, and militarized capitalism in Asia and Latin America that have directly shaped Asian American and Latinx populations in the United States. This connection is important historically and as a corrective to dominant narratives that view both groups as immigrants outside the United States' history. The film *Harvest of Empire* (2012), which we assigned early in the semester, emphasizes the connections between the United States' imperialist actions in Latin America and the subsequent movement of Latin American refugees and migrants north. Meanwhile, Carlos Bulosan's memoir *America Is in the Heart* (1946) depicts the impoverishment and dispossession of Filipino farmers that occurred with the U.S. colonization of the Philippines, as well as the subsequent migration of tens of thousands of Filipinos to the colonial center as laborers during the early twentieth century. We began the class by placing these texts in conversation as part of our class's project to decolonize American history, breaking through narratives that reify national boundaries to show how so many Asian Americans and Latinx people have directly experienced the postcolonial slogan: "we are here because you were there." We continued exploring this theme throughout the class as we placed in conversation texts about U.S. covert operations in Guatemala and Laos, as well as texts about the effects of neoliberalist economic policies on Asian and Latinx labor.

Our course also explored the consequences of dominant constructions of Latinx and Asian Americans as outsiders. Both groups have faced nativistic racism based on this construction, which we studied through our unit on World War II in its extreme form of patriotic racism. The incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans solely based on their race was documented in Mine Okubo's (1946) extraordinary eyewitness graphic novel, *Citizen 13660*. We assigned this text alongside Luis Valdez's film *Zoot Suit* (1981), a literary critique of the infamously racist 1942 Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and subsequent "zoot suit riots," which consisted of violence against Mexican Americans by white U.S. naval servicemen. In a class activity, we asked students to place these texts in creative conversation, with the result that they penned pitches for children's books, YA romance novels, and dramatic dialogues that realistically depicted Japanese American and Mexican American young people confronting nativistic racism in World War II.

In addition to highlighting historical similarities, our course aimed to uncover alliances and solidarities between Asian Americans and Latinxs, which, as one student noted, are often elided by "differing existing stereotypes today." Particularly within elite institutions of higher education, Asian American and Latinx students have been positioned against each other by affirmative action debates; student affinity groups are also often isolated in different spaces on campus, taking on different social issues and celebrating different cultural events. However, this separation belies a long history of alliances, not only through student Third World activism but also in labor histories. To highlight these, we taught the film *César Chávez* (Luna, 2014) alongside *Delano Manongs: Forgotten Heroes of the United Farm Workers* (2016) as an introduction to the extraordinary alliance between Mexican American and Filipino American farmworkers that resulted in the formation of the UFW. We found that few students were aware of either Chávez's or Larry Itliong's leadership, let alone how the two groups joined forces to counter the strikebreaking tactics of white American growers. We also highlighted more intimate alliances, such as the early twentieth century marriages between Mexican and Punjabi farmworkers in the California Imperial Valley featured in Rishi Reddy's novel *Passage West* (2020).

We brought the idea of solidarity to the present day through the issue of undocumented immigration. Jose Antonio Vargas's activism and writing address the largely hidden presence of Asian undocumented migration to the United States. Vargas's *Dear America* (2018) and the short film *Halmoni* (2017), featuring a Korean American DACA recipient, made the problem of undocumented status and deportation for Asian Americans visible to our students. Meanwhile, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) shattered familiar narratives about everyday undocumented people, highlighting the hardship, uncertainty, and mental and physical duress of living in the shadows. During this unit, a student from the organization "Duke Beyond Borders" discussed organizing at Duke, including students from Latinx, Asian American, and other communities on campus fighting for immigration rights.

Finally, we wanted our curriculum to emphasize the hybrid, overlapping, and intersectional identities of Latinx and Asian Americans. As Erika Lee (2005) and others have noted, Asian American history is "hemispheric," not simply U.S.-based; there have been people of Asian descent in Latin America for hundreds of years. Their presence means that Asian American and Latinx are not mutually exclusive identities. To explore the traces of empire that have created what Lisa Lowe (2015) calls the "intimacies of four continents," we assigned Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting* (2003), which follows a Chinese Afro-Cuban family through multiple generations. We also featured several Asian Latin American writers, including a story by Chinese Peruvian writer Siu Kam Wen, a literary blog post by Korean Chilean poet Moisés Park, and a short play by Korean Chilean playwright Kyoung H. Park. As one student noted, "a lot of the texts included both Asian Americans and Latinx individuals, people with multiple identities, or Asians living in Latin America/vice versa, which directly helped me make connections between the two studies."

Asian American and Latinx individuals not only negotiate hybrid and multiple identities; they also deal with intersectional identities of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and disability. We introduced students to the idea of queer and intersectional identities through the foundational text *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), where women of color address these issues in solidarity across differences. What does it mean, asks Cherríe Moraga, to be "brown," a woman, queer, *and* "just plain poor"? Too often, diversity within groups means exclusion along one or more lines; instead, Moraga calls for developing an "authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed

groups" and acknowledging intersecting oppressions (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 29). In our course, we continued this conversation with the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), which addresses what it means to be Chinese American, a woman, and queer through the fantastical conceit of a metaverse of possibilities. Students responded enthusiastically to these texts, with several mentioning that they wished we had placed them earlier in the semester to better consider intersectionality in all our texts.

Overall, students felt that the curriculum opened their eyes to historical similarities, shared experiences, and possible solidarities. As one student wrote, "this helped me to see how Asian American and Latinx Studies are deeply interconnected via histories of immigration, labor, intersectional challenges, movements/organizing, etc. [while] also look[ing] at the distinct stories of people within each broad (and sometimes overlapping) label." Another student wrote, "not only does it bring the communities together, but it allowed marginalized intersectional identities to be given a voice in public discourse where they are routinely undermined or masked." We hope students can carry these ideas into their future solidarity to counter popular discourses of suppression, hostility, and political opposition.

Class Assignments: Students Working Together across Differences

When we planned this class, we knew that exploring the intersecting paths and histories between Asian American and Latinx communities would be powerful, and we designed our class assignments to put that power into practice through collaboration. We agree with Freire that, as long as we make sure to preserve their existing diversity when we study them, drawing lines and bridges of solidarity between minorities in the U.S. can "make a world of a difference" (Chapter 3). These bridges help us understand the complex and diverse ways in which different groups can connect and support each other. We wanted students to explore this theme a step further by challenging them to work together across differences and practice collaboration to produce two public facing assignments that put their knowledge to the test.

Duke's Collaborative Project Courses Faculty Fellows Program gave us the time and space to craft a class centering projects where teams engaged in research to introduce and lead discussions on major texts we assigned, as well as create a podcast for public consumption. We wanted students to bring their interests, academic knowledge, and skills to bear on the broad and complex ways these two diasporic communities connected. We also wanted them to experiment with the difficulties and challenges of working together and the satisfaction that comes with achieving something as a team.

Through the fellowship, we discovered that in order to teach collaboration successfully we needed to dedicate time practicing these skills in class. We planned class sessions for groups to meet and formulate a Team Charter, where students established the norms and values they would abide by throughout the semester. They also sketched out a working calendar and established soft deadlines to work on various elements of the assignments. Midsemester, students checked-in to reflect on team functioning and individual contributions and created a plan to move forward to meet their goals. We also planned multiple workshops for students to learn about podcasting by bringing experts to speak to them about storytelling techniques or to learn and practice leading and recording interviews. Though we were hesitant to take away opportunities to discuss content,

we were certain that the skills, relationships, and final products they created would foster deep critical thinking, storytelling, and collaboration skills they could take with them beyond the class.

We take our pedagogical aims from Freire et al.'s (2014) vision, which counters the "divide and rule" ethos of dominant society through dialogic action in which "Subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world" (p. 148). We see collaboration as a tool of resistance against students' increasing pressure, especially at Duke, to compete and outperform each other. It goes against the individualism permeating much of their experience and that of academia in general. We see collaboration as a liberatory practice that emphasizes the importance of moving together, especially when making complex connections with others. To this end, the major assignments in the class highlighted collaboration and collective learning as a key pillar.

For the first collaborative assignment, the Context Report and Discussion, students presented background information and led the class discussion on one of the major texts we looked at in class (book or film). This assignment prompted students to plan a careful exploration of the text, focusing on the elements that stood out to them the most. We wanted the teams to feel ownership around what felt most relevant to discuss and how we explored those elements as a class. Though we had some basic parameters, students went further in creating activities they thought would help us reflect on the text more carefully. For example, during the discussion of the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), the group in charge brought crafting materials for each of us to make an "everything bagel"-one of the most important symbols in the film- that we decorated with googly eyes, words, stickers, and jewels that represented how each individual connected to the film. Through this activity the team was able to highlight what made this film impactful. It opened a careful reflection on the theme of intersecting and clashing identities that can exist within one person which they then connected to the experiences Moraga and Anzaldúa explored in the essays they wrote in the 1980s for *This Bridge Called My Back*, centering their experiences as queer, Chicana, women.

Overall, our class benefited from having multiple perspectives guiding our conversations instead of only relying on our perspectives as the class instructors. Through this assignment, students became architects of their lesson, and also how to work together to decide on division of labor, what direction to take in the discussion, and brainstorm activities to enrich it. Because their work would directly impact our exploration of the text, they took this responsibility seriously and led us into revealing journeys into the films or books we discussed.

On the other hand, the semester-long Team Research and Podcast assignment meant to give students the opportunity to explore voices, themes, and perspectives that we could not include in our class because of time. As long as their project centered the intersection of Asian American and Latinx histories, communities, literature, and/or experiences, we invited them to explore what interested them the most. Working in the same groups, they conducted extensive research, including at least one interview with an expert in their topic. They also learned about the podcast genre and edited and produced a podcast episode for public consumption. In our first semester teaching the course, our students chose to present on issues including affirmative action in college admissions, political shifts during the 2024 election, racial misattribution of South Asian and Latinxs, depictions of Asian American and Latinx women in film and popular media, and Japanese communities in Brazil. These episodes showcased how we can bridge the fields of Asian American and Latinx studies while acknowledging the differences between them.

The public-facing nature of the project encouraged them to treat their work as meaningful, not just a class assignment, but something worthy of real attention and effort. Students were deeply aware of their responsibility in telling these stories. They thought carefully about conveying voices and perspectives with care, particularly when their audience might not be familiar with the histories and issues discussed. While some students expressed disappointment about things like sound quality or time constraints, many shared their pride in the episodes they produced. They understood the stakes of representing others' stories truthfully and contextually, and they rose to the challenge.

At the end of the semester, they were invited to release their episode for publication on Duke's Asian American and Diaspora Studies program website. Unfortunately, we only got permission to publish from three out of the five groups in our class. Of those three groups, one group requested to be published pseudonymously. This speaks to the fear and uncertainty that the current political climate has created for some interviewees and our students. All of the episodes were current, relevant, and fresh. It is a shame that they would shy away from claiming a project they worked so hard to make. It is also a loss for any listeners who could have connected to these stories. This signals a real feeling of danger, especially for our international student community. To us, it also reaffirms the importance and relevance of student work. These are topics and stories worth learning about and digging into. We plan to keep this podcast channel alive and growing in hopes that in future classes, the episodes reach all who want to hear these stories and join in, becoming bridges themselves.

Institutional Barriers and Future Considerations

Freire et al.'s (2014) emphasis on cooperation "as a characteristic of dialogic action" (p. 149) informed our decision to co-develop and co-teach this course. Working together enabled us to learn from each other and to model the kind of cooperation we hoped to encourage among our students. Sandra's expertise encompasses Latin American and Latinx studies, and she has been teaching courses in these areas for nine years through Duke's program in first-year writing. Susan has conducted comparative research in Asian American and Latinx studies and has been teaching Asian American and ethnic studies-related courses for ten years in Duke's writing program. She is a core faculty member in the Asian American and Diaspora Studies program at Duke, where she has taught Asian American literature courses. Teaching together enabled us to draw deeply from Latinx and Asian American studies and our experience in these communities. We consider teaching across disciplines an important aspect of solidarity in the classroom that builds on the strengths of each field.

Studies show that relational, thematic approaches to ethnic studies have benefits not only for higher education, but also in the K-12 classroom. A 2010–2014 study following the adoption of a comparative ethnic studies curriculum for the ninth grade in nineteen San Francisco schools found significant increases in student attendance, average grades, and credits earned, with the largest gains among males, Latinx students, and Asian Americans (Dee & Penner, 2017). The curriculum did not focus on one group but centered multiple racial and ethnic groups, emphasizing social justice, discrimination, and social movements. In some cases, ethnic studies classes have become mandated parts of the curriculum, although state laws often specify particular groups' histories that must be taught. Following a spate of anti-Asian violence in 2021, a number of states and

municipalities passed laws mandating Asian American studies as part of the K-12 curriculum. Other states have required African American, Native American, or Latinx histories to be taught; very few recommend this as part of a relational ethnic studies curriculum.

Unfortunately, institutional trends in K-12 and higher education work against both team-taught and comparative ethnic studies curricula. Massive defunding of public education, as well as the adjunctification of higher education, often prevent faculty or teacher collaborations in pedagogy. As unionized, non-regular rank faculty ourselves, we are part of the 67.7 percent of faculty in US higher education that now hold contingent or adjunct appointments (American Association of University Professors, 2024). Our faculty union won for us the three-year renewable contracts that enabled us to build a working relationship with each other and with programs like Duke's Asian American and Diaspora Studies program, which sponsored the development and teaching of this course. However, with many contingent faculty teaching on a year-to-year contract basis, there is little opportunity to develop the relationships needed to design a course collaboratively. The adjunctification of higher education may be understood as part of the academic containment increasingly experienced by all instructors, especially in the humanities and critical theoretical fields like ethnic studies and women's, gender, and sexuality studies (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). Worse, in public institutions, including at the K-12 level, a majority of states now have laws banning so-called critical race theory, creating a culture of fear around discussions of race and racism, foundational concepts in critical ethnic studies.

These attacks on education, combined with increasing hostility and violence towards immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities, make comparative and relational ethnic studies classes more important than ever. As part of their own resistance to this climate, many students are hungry for classes that give them the theoretical, historical, and creative basis for forging solidarities between groups. In November, the *Duke Chronicle* named "Asian American and Latinx Literature and Film" one of the "5 Interesting Classes for Spring 2025," recommending it in a feature written by a sophomore highlighting a handful of exciting classes for which students could register for the spring semester (Qian, 2024). Comments from our end-of-semester evaluations indicate that students welcomed the class as a way of building solidarity in an ongoing and increasingly hostile political climate. As one student wrote: "Inter-minority solidarity is super important, especially at this moment of American politics and placing these works in conversation with each other was really helpful to expanding empathy in this way." This student's comments speak to the urgency of relational, intersectional ethnic studies courses as a mode of resistance in a divisive and hostile political climate. By fostering cross-cultural connections and critical thinking around minority experiences, we expand our understanding of the American experience as a whole.

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