

Educational Resources & Teaching Suggestions

Final Bow for Yellowface: Between Intention and Impact (Chan, 2020)



Example course learning outcomes that may be achieved, in part, by assigning *Final Bow for Yellowface* in high school, college, and university courses: (Sample activities on the following pages.):

- Students will be able to demonstrate that they understand social and historical contexts and movements within which art forms (such as ballet) have been created and performed, and be able to interpret works in terms of them.
- Students will be able to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving in creating works in their art forms.
- Students will be able to make compelling artistic choices on stage that encourage participation by diverse audiences.
- Students will be able to demonstrate self-reflection and awareness of how background and personal life experience shape responses to art.
- Students will be able to express and communicate ideas and opinions through clear and cogent writing and effective verbal presentations.
- Students will be able to demonstrate a sense of civic identity and professional purpose, founded on convictions about the role performance occupies in society.
- Students will be able to collaborate with artists in related disciplines.

Possible Courses:

Most texts feature either sociological analysis (for impacts on groups) or memoirs of personal experiences. *Final Bow for Yellowface* includes both *inside* experience of life as a minority group member and the impacts of artistic choices (memoir) and also talks about the larger history of Asians in America and as presented in ballet. The book promotes the need for both inside and outside perspectives and for historical grounding—and performs it also.

While the most obvious courses this book would apply to would be those in the performing arts and arts management, the text is also applicable to sociology, history, anthropology, and Asian American/ethnic studies.

It is also a great reference and resource for individual students diving deeper into issues of yellowface, race, and the classical Western arts, cultural appropriation, cross-cultural studies, or work in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Teaching Suggestions:

Introduction: More Than Political Correctness

Writing activity: Students can be asked to write about an experience where someone may have said something to them but the impact on them was very different from what was intended. They might consider what was the dynamic at play and how they felt. What was the resolution?

The Nutcracker: Caricature Versus Character

Chapter 1: History Lessons

Supplemental video clips:

Asian as Object

Joseph Hassreiter's "The Fairy Doll" (1888):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J76TV4JU2wQ>

"Chinese" at 27:00, "Japanese" at 30:30

Asian as Threat

Ugo Dell'Ara's *Excelsior* (1967):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w47rw3B_tKI&t=48m40s

George Balanchine's "The Nutcracker" (1958 for CBS):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auXtfG-vv4Y&t=54m57s>

Asian as Us

Mikhail Baryshnikov's "The Nutcracker" (1892/1977)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSerfyejJNk&t=48m57s

Helgi Tomasson's "The Nutcracker: (1892/2010)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNRtBcaDhyE&t=65m40s>

The National Ballet of China in *The Chinese New Year* (The Nutcracker):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ETLlviwV3E>

Supplemental Reading: *Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* by Jennifer Fisher

Writing assignment or group activity: Ask students to choose two productions of *The Nutcracker* and focus on one or more nationalities in Act Two to compare and contrast how they are represented, in the context of both performance history and the history of how those groups have been represented in Western society.

Chapter 2: Charming to Whom

Supplemental video clip:

Asian American Perspective On Mickey Rooney's Yellow-Face Portrayal in *Breakfast At Tiffany's*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAafI9w7CY8>

Excerpt from *Topsy Turvey*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S647is8rvvM>

Writing assignment or group activity: Ask students to investigate the roots of a specific caricature in popular culture, using the four aspects mentioned in the chapter: exaggeration, distinction, attribution, context. Ask them to discuss possible impacts. They should make sure to consider whether their choice is an example of punching down or punching up. Students might choose a specific character like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* Mr. Yunioshi, or a broader caricatured trait related to how a certain group is perceived.

Writing assignment or group activity: On working with caricature, ask students to create a "punching up/down worksheet" full of examples from popular culture or performing arts. They should be prepared to explain why their choices are examples of punching up or punching down. And/or teachers could generate their own list of caricatures and have students identify punching up or punching down as a class.

Writing assignment or group activity: (dance/theater/opera) Students might be asked to watch particular performances and identify movements, gestures, voices, music, or actions that are intended to express different cultures (for example, "the fingers" in *Nutcracker* "tea" dances). Students might consider why those were chosen to represent a culture: is there a history behind it? Who chose those to represent members of a culture, and were they insiders to the culture or not? What specific consequences might result in these movements or gestures coming to be associated with members of a group? Would members of cultures represented

find these stylized expressions to be accurate? Are there any specific ways the presentation of these might have an “othering” impact on members of those cultures?

Group activity: Create a collage of images, words, and symbols that represent or signal the essence of a culture—as if you were opening a culturally-themed restaurant in an American food court. Consider fonts, colors, static objects, artifacts, or historical facts that inform a visual depiction of a culture. Question where each element of the collage originates, and what does it say about the larger culture and people it is meant to represent.

Class activity: Ask students to act out, dance, sing, or draw (costume, make up) characters who have these qualities: sinister, alluring, lazy, cunning, innocent, exotic, good-natured, regal, etc. They should then explain to others how these representations express those traits. Where did their ideas about those representations come from? Do any of them turn out to be caricatures we might not want to use? Why?

Chapter 6: Sugar and Spice of Living Art

Supplemental video clips:

Dance Theatre of Harlem’s “Creole Giselle”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kBXDhmUkr8>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY4SPqFrISE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn2p-BtmIOY>

The National Ballet of China in *The Chinese New Year* (The Nutcracker):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ETLlvivV3E>

Writing Assignment or Group activity: Ask students to pick a favorite film or performing art work, and create a new setting that allows for a fresh perspective on the work while retaining the spirit, appropriate context, and original intention of the work. For this exercise it might be best not to pick a problematic work but simply explore is there some “essence” that can be carried forward, without loss, bringing something new in the process. Students might be asked to detail why their reimagining of this opera, Indonesian shadow puppet show, Broadway musical, Indian dance drama, Shakespearean play, or ballet works artistically, and the relevance for that interpretation for audiences today.

Le Chant du Rossignol: Appropriation Versus Appreciation

Supplemental video clip:

1999 Le Chant du Rossignol for Le Ballet de Monte Carlo:
<https://vimeo.com/14292064>

Chapter 7: Balancing Outsider Knowledge with Insider Experience

Class or group discussion: *Final Bow for Yellowface* presents one harm of “cultural appropriation”—presentations of cultures by outsiders to those cultures negatively impacts members by making them feel like outsiders in the larger American context. An interesting recent article by the son of the American Indian artist who drew the Land O’Lakes box cover (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/29/my-ojibwe-father-drew-land-olakes-maiden-she-was-never-stereotype/>) raises questions related to intention and impact. In this case, the artist and members of the culture depicted are sad to lose this image, that may also have promoted racial stereotypes. Issues related to cultural appropriation may be interestingly discussed with specific cases.

Writing/discussion/classroom activity: After watching *The Problem of Apu* (<https://newrepublic.com/article/147980/epiphany-problem-apu-simpsons>) discuss the various ways “The Simpsons” could proceed as a show with (or without) the character of Apu, and what is lost and gained in each scenario. This could become a debate as well; students could discuss in pairs or as a whole class how they would proceed if they were the producers of the show.

Out-of-Class Assignment: Ask students to create their own resource lists for finding out more about the experience of various groups within our diverse country. The Museum of Chinese in America should be on it, and also the The National Museum of African American History and Culture. What scholars have collected (outsider knowledge) is useful, as well as sources of authentic artistic expression from those cultures, and memoirs or personal experience accounts. In class students might share what they’ve found and update their lists with ideas from classmates.

Chapter 9: Dreams of the Orient

Supplemental reading:

Chinese–Americans Join Other Groups. In Campaign Against Opium Perfume:
<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/24/archives/chineseamericans-join-other-groups-in-campaign-against-opium.html>

Writing assignment or group activity: Ask students to write the section of a business plan for a fashion company for how they should market and produce a _____-inspired clothing and fragrance line. They can be asked to choose their own heritage, or draw suggestions of other cultures to work with from a hat. A variation on this might be to have students create two versions: one relating to a culture not their own, and one relating to their own culture, with results shared with classmates for discussion of how the process is and isn’t similar, and what the impacts of these products might be.

Class or group activity: Ask students to consider the Cultural Integrity Grid and to apply it for analyzing works the teacher supplies. Where would each work fall on the grid, as usually presented, or as in the original?

Class or Group Activity: Ask students to consider the suggestions for rescuing problematic works and apply the three possibilities to the issue of what to do with monuments to Confederate heroes. Then discuss the three possibilities and how they might apply to works in works in dance, drama, or opera.

Writing assignment or group activity: Ask students to choose a work from a dominant culture that represents an “other” culture (e.g. “Chinese” in “Le Chant”), and discuss what the “other” setting accomplishes for the sake of the work. What can only be said through the “other” context, that otherwise might be taboo in the dominant culture? For example, *The Mikado* Japanese setting allows it to critique native British politics, or *Scheherazade* allows for the expression of sexuality that otherwise wouldn’t have been allowed.

Writing assignment: Re-write the libretto of a work from the classical Western performing arts canon that involves outdated or problematic representation, specifically of race, gender, or ability, but keeps the integrity of the work intact.

Conclusion: Balanchine Belongs to All of Us

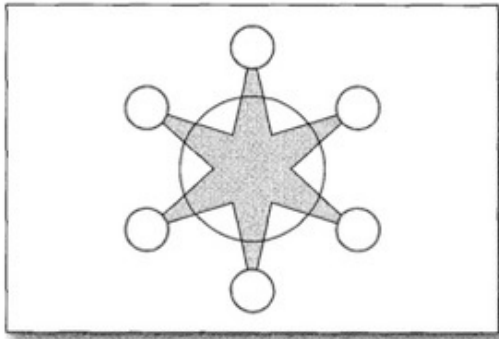
Writing assignment or group work: What is “American” ballet/theater/opera, etc.? Teachers might create a hypothetical situation where students, as professionals, have been asked (as Americans) to consult on a presentation of a new ballet/play/opera set in America, to be staged by a Chinese arts group for an audience in China. What sorts of movements, dance steps, eras for setting, themes, images, types of dramas would best represent “American culture” for a Chinese audience?

Writing Assignment or group work: Ask students to imagine that a really offensive “Nutcracker” production is being presented in their community and to write two versions of a letter to the director about it. For the first, students imagine they are offended Asian American audience members, and the situation is like that of Figure 19.2.

[From *The Handbook of Community Practice* https://books.google.com/books?id=pcM5DQAAQBAJ&pg=PA433&lpg=PA433&dq=circle+dominant+culture&source=bl&ots=sET9DtPUtP&sig=ACfU3U09fS4Xr_pKZpnNZ6FIVJ8pgq6Xqw&hl=en&ppis=_e&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjmyaOXmM_oAhVqIDQIHsjRAYgQ6AEwEHoECA0QKQ#v=onepage&q=circle%20dominant%20culture&f=false]

The largest circle is the circle of dominant culture, with arms radiating out to smaller circles of sub-cultures (a dynamic of mainstream versus marginal/minority). In this framing, the only games Asian advocates can play are “let’s burn it down and replace it with our version” or “knock knock White people, please let us in.” (And sometimes the groups in the little circles

Figure 19.2 Diagram of *Power-Over*

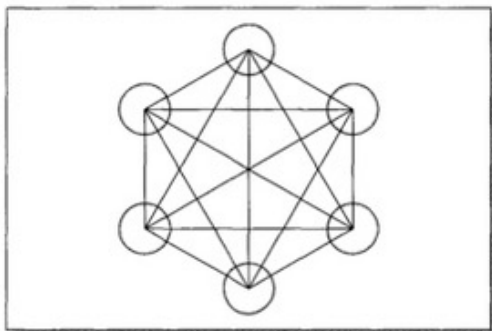


can be turned against one another, competing for scarce resources or seen as problems by each other.)

For self-identified outsiders to dominant culture—those in the satellite circles—the possible strategies if they don't like their place include *attacking*, from an adversarial perspective (us and them)—calling out, identifying people's privilege, and looking for causes of structural inequalities. Gadfly. Nasty reviewer. Angry, frustrated, hateful. Or *accommodating* (still us and them), from a placating, "why can't we all get along?" stance. Humble. *Like a guest*. Not rocking the boat. Model minority. [See two ways of addressing racism against Asians: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/01/andrew-yang-coronavirus-discrimination/AND> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/03/andrew-yang-was-wrong-showing-our-american-ness-is-not-how-asian-americans-stop-racism/>]

The second letter should be written from the perspective of America as a "diversity culture," or not a culture, but a space or context within which our arts are performed, regardless of culture (all having a place). Neither adversarial nor seeking assimilation. One might write as fellow ballet lover or fellow American, and the assumptions and frame for commenting are radically different. There will be use of "we" and "our." Mention of shared values, etc.

Figure 19.3 Diagram of *Power-With*



Throughout the reading of *Final Bow for Yellowface* students might be encouraged to respond to any of the shared experiences of dancers, performers, and others that have been highlighted throughout the book. Have the students also felt that or been seen that way? What was the impact? How might things be different? There may also be many issues to be discussed related to the current coronavirus crisis and how Asians and Asian Americans are seen and treated because of it being seen as originating in China. [Perhaps of interest: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/opinion/coronavirus-chinese-asian-racism.html>]

Supplemental Resources:

The Japan of Pure Invention by Josephine Lee: <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-japan-of-pure-invention>

Nutcracker Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World by Jennifer Fisher: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300105995/nutcracker-nation>

PBS's *Asian Americans*: <https://www.pbs.org/show/asian-americans/>

Final Bow for Yellowface's What's the Tea? Series: daily interviews during May 2020 with dancers of Asian descent to celebrate Asian Pacific Heritage Month: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlh9EXpUVVYN5v-rz1TURmDvO9FKMNWUD>