Is there anything more American than the musical? Since its beginnings in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and comic operetta, this hybrid mass cultural form has been asking that question by grappling with race, gender, and immigration in the United States and beyond. This course follows up with the question: how do musicals discursively and materially construct the United States? That is, on the one hand, what can we learn from the plots of these musicals, filled with state building, tales of diaspora, and interracial love stories? And on the other hand, what can we learn from the means of their production: how to find 150 Asian-American extras in LA, how to match the perfect face with the perfect voice, and how to turn Margarita Cansino into All-American bombshell Rita Hayworth? These approaches intersect and are in conversation; however, each calls upon the strength of a different field. In this course we will challenge our students to interrogate these familiar films, to dwell in the trouble of mass culture’s repressions, appropriations, and utopian imaginaries, but also to figure why it is so easy to mindlessly hum those tunes.
COURSE POLICIES

Grading:
Primary Source Paper – 30 %
Final Project – 30 %
Participation -- 20 %
Responses -- 15 %
Final Presentation -- 5 %

Participation: Absences (including excessive tardiness) will affect your grade negatively, while active participation will affect your grade positively. Penalty for late work: We can grant deadline extensions, but only if you send us an email explaining extenuating circumstances in advance of the official due date. Work submitted later than the deadlines listed above will lose half a letter grade per day.

Screenings: Screenings will be held Wednesday evenings, and we want to cultivate critical and interactive viewing, so we encourage observations, laughter, questions, and of course, singing along. These films were made with the intention of immersing their audiences in a Technicolor fantasy world. We are not the contemporary audiences of these musicals, however. We are approaching these films as cultural texts that we want to decipher together.

Academic Honesty Policy: Yale has a zero-tolerance policy regarding cheating and plagiarism. All work you submit for this class must be your own. No one else may write your papers and assignments for you. Additionally, if you are quoting from another text or relying on another author’s ideas, you must CITE them. Failure to cite or quote the ideas of others will be considered an instance of plagiarism. You will receive a failing grade on the assignment and may be expelled from the class depending on the gravity of the case. If you are not sure how to quote from a text or cite another’s ideas properly, do not hesitate to meet with me, and we can go over it together.

ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Responses: (1 page single-spaced) Students will be responsible for turning in three reading responses throughout the course. The first response must be turned in during the first two weeks of class, so that we can read a sample of your writing before you turn in your first paper. These responses should include at least two readings, or one reading and one film.
Responses should include

1. Main argument of the author/synopsis of the movie
2. How the pieces are in conversation
3. Critical questions for further reading/viewing
Paper assignment 1 (6-8 pages): Using at least 1 reading and 1 film we have assigned so far (The Jazz Singer, Stormy Weather, Oklahoma, or The Harvey Girls), either 1) conduct a close reading of a musical number or 2) make a claim about how Americanness is constructed in one of these films, providing historical, visual, and narrative support for your argument.

Final Paper: (6-8 pages): Choose a movie musical we have watched /read about for class so far or from a list we provide and write about a few different levels (industrial, historical, creative, representational, generic, musical) at which it engages themes we have begun to address together. For example: assimilation, otherness, passing and masquerade, cultural appropriation, gender and technology, opposed binaries united in song, segregated screens, cold war containment, and orientalism. For this paper, we encourage you to seek outside sources. You will present in class on your final project during week 5.

Major Deadlines:

- Paper assignment 1: Sunday, July 15, by 5pm (sent as pdf to both of us by email)
- Paper assignment 2: Thursday, August 2, by noon (sent as pdf to both of us by email)

Weekly Meetings

**Week 1: Introduction. America is a Musical**

**Tuesday July 3rd**
What are the best ways to study cultural objects, and what is the point of studying the American Musical? How has the musical as a cultural form and historical object engaged with taboos, history, politics, and identity?

**Screening:** The Jazz Singer (1927, 89 minutes)

**Readings:**
- Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia”
- Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice”

**Thursday July 5th: Musicals in Black and White**
How did musicals in Hollywood walk the color-line? In a segregated society with strict racial codes, did musicals in Hollywood reinforce the color line or challenge it? How did segregation affect the development of the Hollywood musical? And how did US entry into World War II force these questions to the surface?

**Screening:** The Negro Soldier (1944, 43 min) + Stormy Weather (1943, 78 min)

**Reading assignments:**
Week 2: Westward Expansion

Tuesday July 10: Settler Dreams on the Hollywood Lot
How have Hollywood Musicals participated in Settler Colonialism discursively and materially? How is whiteness created through representations of the West? How are women figured in this battle? We will examine how these musicals show them “civilizing” the American West.

Screening: *Harvey Girls* (1946, 107 min)

Readings:
- Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”

Thursday July 12: Stars and extras - Women’s Voices I
How has Hollywood manufactured dreams of success and identity-formation through its star system? What do actors have to shed and add to their bodies, voices, accents and performance styles in order to become All-American stars? Does the popular “Cinderella story” trope in musicals whitewash a fantasy balancing act of assimilation and exceptionalism?

Screening: *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952, 103 min)

Readings:

Weekend (home) screening: *Kismet* (1956, 133 min)

First paper due Sunday by 5pm

Week 3

Tuesday July 17: The Dawn of The American Century Part 1: Orientalism Abroad and the American Musical Abroad
American writers, artists and scholars have held created fantasies about the “Orient” throughout US history. This week, we will explore this long history of Orientalism in American musical theater, and explore how orientalism ideology changes as US interests in the Middle East grow over time. As oil becomes a desired commodity, and the US begins its interventions in the region, how do musicals allow the public to participate in this political endeavor?

Screening: *The King and I* (1956, 113 min)

Readings:
- Edward Said, *Orientalism* (segment)
• Christina Klein, Chapter 5: “Musicals and Modernization: The King and I,” *Cold War Orientalism*
• Caren Kaplan, “Getting to Know You: Travel, Gender, and the Politics of Postcolonial Representation in Anna and the King of Siam and The King and I” in *Late Imperial Culture*

**Thursday July 19: The Dawn of the American Century: Orientalism at Home and the American Musical**

How do musicals imagine “Asia” and the Asian-American citizen? Do Asian-Americans get to be citizens? How do musicals allow every-day white Americans to feel authority over Asia?

**Screening:** *Flower Drum Song* (1961, 132 min)

**Readings:**

**Weekend screening:** *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* (1961, 101 min)

**Week 4**

**Tuesday July 24: Cold War on the Hot Beach: American Teenagers and Hawaiian Dreams**

Where do Americans teens go to have fun and not get into trouble? As the Islands of Hawaii are made into an American state, how do American anxieties of containment, exoticism, and teenage rebellion get absorbed into that state that is being absorbed into the nation? What part do musicals play in this?

**Screening:** *Blue Hawaii*

- **Readings:** Delia Konzett, “South Seas Fantasies: Settler Colonialism, Race and the National Imaginary,” *Hollywood’s Hawaii: Race, Nation, and War*

**Thursday July 26: Technology and the Musical: The Telephone - Women’s Voices II**

How does the musical advertise and spectacularize different sound and image technologies in order to draw attention to its own spectacular use of music, color, and form? For this day, we will use the telephone as a case study, from its industrial history to domestic use.

**Screening:** *Bells Are Ringing* (1960)
Readings:


Viewing assignments: 3 short industrial films

1. “Long Distance!” (ca. 1941, 15 min) www.archive.org/details/long_distance
3. AT&T Archives: Operator! (1969, 15 min) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAC4MvP_C-I

Weekend assignment: Listen to *Hamilton* soundtrack

**Week 5: Broadway rewrites; Hollywood remembers**

**Tuesday July 31**
Students will present on the subjects of their final papers. Give an example or summary of your paper’s argument by applying it to a clip of the musical you are writing about.

**Screening:** *Illusions* (1982, 60 min)

**Thursday August 2**

**Final paper due.** We will discuss two recent musicals that have been credited with revitalizing the genre and have inspired heated debates about race and what it means to be American: *La La Land* and *Hamilton*. Engaging these musicals through the many problematic musical traditions they have inherited as well as their innovations, we will re-examine themes we have addressed throughout the class, including the blurred lines between stage and screen, orientalist opulence, whiteness defined by racial musical appropriation, technological reflexivity, Hollywood as migration mecca, and immigration as the origin of national formation.

**Screening:** *La La Land* (2016, 128 min)

Readings: TBD

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**List of possible films for paper assignment 2**

Racial masquerade and Code-era color lines:

*The Jazz Singer* (1927); *The Littlest Rebel* (1934); *Show Boat* (1937); *Shall We Dance?* (1937); *Babes in Arms* (1939)

All black cast musicals:
Cabin in the Sky (1943); Stormy Weather (1943); Carmen Jones (1954)

Settler dreams and westward expansion:

The Wizard of Oz (1939); Harvey Girls (1946); Annie Get Your Gun (1950); Calamity Jane (1953); Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954); Oklahoma! (1955)

Stardom / star construction:

Cover Girl (1946); Singin’ in the Rain (1952); A Star is Born (1953); My Fair Lady (1964); Funny Girl (1968); A Star is Born (1978)

Cold War Orientalism:

Kismet (1955); The King and I (1956); South Pacific (1958); Flower Drum Song (1961)

Teenagers and Telephones:

Bells Are Ringing (1960); Gidget (1959); Bye Bye Birdie (1963)

Imagining Hawaii:

Gidget Goes Hawaiian (1961); Blue Hawaii (1961)