The GW Philosophy Department proudly presents the 2015 Thacher Lecture

“Pejoratives as Fiction”
(with Robert May) featuring

Dr. Christopher Hom
Associate Professor at Texas Tech University

Abstract: Fictional terms are terms that have null extensions, and in this regard pejorative terms are a species of fictional terms: although there are Chinese, there are no chinks. That pejoratives are fictions is the central consequence of the Moral and Semantic Innocence (MSI) view of Hom et al. (2013). There it is shown that for pejoratives, null extensionality is the semantic realization of the moral fact that no one ought to be the target of negative moral evaluation solely in virtue of their group membership. In having null extensions, pejorative terms are much like mythological terms like ‘unicorn horn’ that express concepts with empty extensions, even though it was thought otherwise: people who falsely believed the mythology were mislead into thinking that ordinary objects (i.e. whale tusks) were magical objects, and pejoratives terms work likewise. For example, the term ‘chink’ is supported by the ideology of racism, and speakers who fall prey to its influence (perniciously or not) are mislead into thinking that ordinary people (i.e. Chinese) are inherently worthy of contempt. In this paper, we discuss the role of fictional truth in understanding pejorative sentences and the relation of the semantics of pejoratives to offensive use of language. We conclude with meta-semantic reflections on the origins of word meanings.

Dr. Hom (Ph.D., University of California, Irvine LPS), primarily works in philosophy of language and metaethics, in particular, issues surrounding racial epithets, expressive meaning, and moral expressivism. He also has interests in philosophy of mind, philosophy of race, and philosophical logic. His work has appeared in such venues as Journal of Philosophy, Philosophical Studies, and Noûs. He was formerly a faculty fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center. He is currently working on a book about racial epithets.