

VOIDING THE POPULAR: ASIAN AMERICA AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

PROFESSOR: RYAN CANLAS

The category of “the popular” is at once significant and vexing: as it pertains to the status of a given population, it is both a demographic and numerical indicator (as in the populace, the masses) and a qualification that oftentimes passes judgment on the veracity and validity of a given object or phenomenon (the popular versus the esoteric, mass production versus independent distribution, above-ground versus underground, low culture versus high culture). The popular thus points to the mutually enforcing status of demographic quantity and number and the culture to which it gives rise and belongs. It also has a negative connotation: in any consideration of popular culture, the idea of its negation, suppression, or eventual subsumption of any sub- or counter-cultural movement or niche that either passes below the radar of popular culture or explicitly defines itself against it will necessarily arise.

The concept of popular culture is made even more problematic when a series of attributes are attached to it, such as *American* popular culture, or, as the subject of this course indicates, *Asian American* popular culture. This course will follow through the problematic terrain in which the terms popular, culture, Asian, and American intersect, fuse, and diverge. In particular, we will ask what happens to the category of the popular as both a socio-political quantity and a cultural attribute when it is further qualified by its identification with an ethnic and racial group. How are Asians and Asian Americans represented in American popular culture (i.e. films, novels, tv, music)? How do Asian Americans represent themselves in relation to Asia and America, to Asians and Americans (of whatever ethnic group)?

These questions have a particular historical and political significance: if indeed popular culture serves to describe a given socio-political demographic’s means of expression, then interrogating Asian American representations involves interrogating the status of that which frames and encapsulates not only this culture, but the very term and identity “Asian”—it consists of interrogating the status of the “American,” especially as it pertains to the meaning and representation of the “Asian” that travels through and runs against it.

In this class, as we analyze the interplay between the so-called ethnic minority and the broader, “universal” category of the American, we will ask two basic questions: 1) does the American cultural *popularization* of a given ethnic minority—or at the very least the popularization of things attributable to that minority—involve the same normalizing and homogenizing forces as *Americanization*? and 2) can culture and cultural representation allow us to reconceptualize the popular as something that does not consist of the norm and the status quo but instead as something through which we can rethink the very notion of the masses and the people and in so doing rethink the very status of the American, as the cultural and national framework for American popular culture, itself?

This course will deploy the philosophical and political concept of “the void,” a process and instance that negates the normal way of thinking of things and brings about a new mode of thought, expression, and ultimately action. In particular, we will look at a potential series of voidings through the popular circulation of things considered Asian and Asian American, or at least pertinent to them: martial arts, the samurai ethic and code, the “image” of generational conflict and immigration, the Vietnam War, etc. Is there a way to conceive of Americanization as itself subject to voidings, and in so doing reconceptualize the very category of the nation as a milieu in which forms of racialization take place as violent processes of identification and instead as a site for reimagining the empowerment of marginal groups, where culture becomes the medium for the transformation and circulation of ideas, images, and practices that in their turns redefine the popular—the masses, the people—itsself.

FILMS:

Robert Clouse. *Enter the Dragon*

Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now Redux*

Jim Jarmusch. *Ghost Dog*

Mira Nair. *The Namesake*

Quentin Tarantino. *Kill Bill Vols. 1 & 2*

VIDEO/PERFORMANCE:

Fred Ho. *The Black Panther Suite: All Power to the People*

LITERATURE:

Frank Chin. *Gunga Din Highway*

Jumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation: 15%

10-minute presentation: 15%

Mid-semester paper (7 – 10 pages): 30%

Final paper (10 – 15 pages): 40%

REQUIRED TEXTS

—Course Reader

—Frank Chin. *Gunga Din Highway*

—M.T. Kato. *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture*

—Jumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake*

*All texts are available at the Campus Store

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION: ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES, POP CULTURE, AND THE CONCEPT OF “THE VOID”

Glenn Omatsu. “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and R.V. Gatewood.

M.T. Kato. “On Popular Cultural Revolution” from M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture*.

Alain Badiou.

WEEK 2

“BE WATER, MY FRIEND”

Robert Clouse. *Enter the Dragon*

M.T. Kato. “Mutiny in the Global Village: Bruce Lee Meets Jimi Hendrix” and “*Enter the Dragon*, Power, and Subversion in the World of Transnational Capital” from M.T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*.

WEEK 3

“ME LOVE YOU LONG TIME?:” EXPLOITATION, THE GRINDHOUSE SUBCULTURE, AND (ASIAN) WOMEN

Quentin Tarantino. *Kill Bill Vols. 1 & 2*

Thien-bao Thuc Phi. "Yellow Lines: Asian Americans and Hip Hop" from *AfroAsia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans*, eds. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen.

WEEK 4

JERSEY CITY RONIN: FILM GENRES AND RACIAL BOUNDARIES

Jim Jarmusch. *Ghost Dog*

WEEK 5

SUBJECTIVITY AS SELF-DEFENSE

Fred Ho. *The Black Panther Suite: All Power to the People*

Fred Ho. "Kickin' the White Man's Ass: Black Power, Aesthetics, and the Asian Martial Arts" from *Afro Asian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, eds. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen.

Fred Ho. "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Roots to the Black-Asian Conflict" and "The Inspiration of Mao and the Chinese Revolution on the Black Liberation Movement and the Asian Movement on the East Coast" from *AfroAsia*, eds. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen.

WEEK 7

HELL ON EARTH: VIETNAM AND THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now Redux*

WEEK 8 & 9

BURN, HOLLYWOOD, BURN....

Frank Chin. *Gunga Din Highway*

WEEK 10 & 11

NAMING AND VIOLENCE, PART I

Jumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake*

WEEK 12

NAMING AND VIOLENCE, PART II

Mira Nair. *The Namesake*

WEEK 13

SEMESTER WRAP-UP: IN WHOSE NAME DOES/CAN THE POPULAR SPEAK?