Asian diasporas: migration, memory, imagination

"Diaspora" provides a suggestive concept for the study of modern world histories of displacement and connection of peoples originating from a single region or location, like Asia, permitting analyses that highlight global processes usually left out of nation-based histories. “Diaspora” contains the contradictions of the impulse toward cultural unity, on the one hand, and the ruptures of separation and dislocation, on the other hand. From the Greek word meaning the sowing of seeds, diaspora had been primarily used to convey the integrity and homogeneity of the Jewish Diaspora, dispersed yet unified by religion, text, and culture; more recently, it has been expanded to refer to the projects of remaking the sociality of various peoples who were at one time unified, and then forcibly displaced. The study of “African diaspora” powerfully conceptualizes the global history of people of African descent living outside of the continent of Africa; it is both a unifying term enabling scholars to discuss centuries of African-descendant communities dispersed across national boundaries, as well as a way to discuss the recuperation of histories of captivity, enslavement, and forced labor in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. Scholars employ "Asian diaspora" to refer to the global migrations of peoples from various East, South, and Southeast Asian national origins. In this seminar, we will test the critical capacity of the concept of “Asian diaspora,” employing it to study both the displacements and connections of Asian peoples within a range of modern processes of dislocation, i.e., through colonialism, imperial trade, war, or labor immigration.

In the first week, we will consider the concept of “Asian diaspora” for the study of the nineteenth-century emigrations of Chinese and Indian workers that were so central to the emergence of the world system and expansion of the modern global economy; trades brought Asian workers to French and Dutch colonies in the Indian Ocean, Spanish Cuba and Peru, the British West Indies, Hawaii, and the United States and Canada. In these contexts, Asian workers were often part of multi-group workforces that included African slaves and other forms of coerced or unfree labor. We will also explore “Asian diaspora,” in the second week, to examine the explosion of migration and immigration from Asia to North America in the second half of the twentieth century, in relation to U.S. wars in Asia and the Pacific, particularly, in Korea and Vietnam. “Asian diaspora” may be a means to articulate the collective memory and retrieval of histories occluded by official nationalisms, whether of origin, or of the new nation in which the diaspora settles. Following captivity, war, colonialism, or persecution, “diaspora” may be a medium of collective unity through which the “trauma” of dispersal can be made legible, in which a collective reckoning, mourning, or reconstruction may be attempted. Yet if the concept stresses only collective cultural identifications, “diaspora” may itself obscure some of the political economic logics of colonial or imperial states that led to displacement or exploitation.
To counter this, in the third week, we will consider the possibility of rearticulating diaspora as a critique of national essentialism, or as means of forging new political imaginations of collaborative struggle across differences. This cultural studies seminar emphasizes interdisciplinary approaches – drawing from history, literature and anthropology – to assess the concept of Asian diaspora in a global framework.

Course Requirements

The seminar will be concentrated in eleven class meetings over three weeks, October 9-24, and will include the following course requirements:

Reading Responses: Students are asked to post short responses to the reading on the Blackboard website discussion board. These responses should be around 200 words each and should reflect critically on the assigned readings. The course requires that you post on the assigned readings for six of the eleven classes; e.g., one possible schedule would be that you write two posts each week during the three week course. Please observe the following suggested posting schedule, designed to keep you on top of the reading and enable timely feedback: post two responses for the first week of assigned readings before October 8th; post additional responses for week 2 assigned readings before Tuesday, October 16th; and post responses for week 3 assigned readings no later than Tuesday, October 23rd. You are encouraged to engage with one another in your responses. Weight: 30%

Collaborative Presentations: Students will take part in paired or small group collaborations, one for each week’s unit, ultimately sharing their perspectives with the class in a 20-minute presentation. Students will work outside class to discuss and identify the stakes, methods, and objectives of the assigned materials, and each week, student groups will lead and involve the class in a discussion of the interventions the works are making; e.g., What concept of “diaspora” does the reading uphold? Into what debates are the pieces intervening, how and why, and for what ends? Which disciplinary or theoretical concepts are being criticized, and which employed? Groups are welcome to bring in additional materials, if relevant. Weight: 30%

Final Paper: The final paper is to be 12-15 pages, and engaged with the course material. Further instructions will be available in class. Due Wednesday December 5th. Weight: 40%
Articles and documents will be posted and available on course website:
*Great Britain Colonial Office Correspondence* (selections)
Moon-Ho Jung, "Outlawing 'Coolies': Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 57:3 (Sept 2005): 677-701
Jodi Kim, Introduction, Chapter 1, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (U Minnesota, 2010), pp. 1-62
Yen Le Espiritu, "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the 25th Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58:2 (June 2006): 329-352
*U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952* (McCarran-Walter Act)
*U.K. Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962*
A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (Pluto, 1982), pp. 5-54

Books available for purchase at the University of Toronto Bookstore:
Lê Thị Diem Thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (Anchor, 2004)
### Schedule of assigned readings and discussions

#### Week 1  
diaspora and the intimacies of four continents

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| W Oct 10   | M. Kale, Chapters 1-2, from *Fragments of Empire*  
M.-H. Jung, “Outlawing”  
Selected colonial office documents |
First group presentation |

#### Week 2  
diaspora and the aftermaths of war

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| W Oct 17   | J. Kim, Introduction, Ch. 1, from *Ends*  
C.R. Lee, *A Gesture Life* |
| Th Oct 18  | Y. L. Espiritu, “We Win”;
le, *Gangster We Are All Looking For*  
Second group presentation |

#### Week 3  
diaspora, memory, transformation

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| W Oct 24   | M. Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost*  
Third group presentation |
| Th Oct 25  | class cancelled |