Afterlives of Bruce Lee: Asian-American Cool and its Queer Discontents

Talk by Glen Mimura, Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies and Asian American Studies, UC Irvine

Department of Communication
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During his brief life, Chinese-American martial artist Bruce Lee (1940-1973) scrupulously cultivated a dynamic, hybrid identity as warrior-philosopher, actor, and teacher. Supremely confident and intensely narcissistic, Lee was a consummate performer on-screen and in everyday life: his transnational experiences became the theater for the articulation of a diasporic, postcolonial subjectivity. While Lee’s career is emblematic of his era’s cultural politics, he is also its historical excess or surplus—indeed, his biography and legend have become increasingly and productively unsettled for Asian Americans, African Americans, and others in recent years, inspiring renewed, even obsessive, interest, including videos, movies, exhibits, a musical, fan homages, and irreverent tributes. This talk situates and examines two features of this post-civil rights, Asian-American revival in Lee: its racial triangulation of Asian Americans in relation to Black and White, and queer interventions into the normative, normalizing terms of the Bruce Lee legend. In other words, what are the gendered and sexualized investments in this post-racial imaginary of Bruce Lee?

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