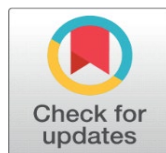


MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN R. F. KUANG'S YELLOWFACE

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ABSTRACT

The reach and influence of media are major factors in the dissemination, reception and availability of information. Different media forms exist to cater to the diverse demands of the people—and these demands also hold true for art and culture. Media plays an essential role in shaping perceptions of art and culture, functioning as both a platform for expression and a custodian of narratives. Stuart Hall's theory of representation emphasizes that media actively and consistently constructs meaning through dominant ideologies, often augmenting societal power imbalances. R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* illustrates how marginalized voices are commodified and modified for mainstream consumption, reflecting real-world experiences where minority cultures are sidelined for marketability. This paper uses Hall's framework to examine how the publishing industry, as part of the media, distorts or erases authentic cultural expressions, highlighting the ethical implications and the urgent need for systemic changes to ensure meaningful and authentic representation of diverse voices.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation, Marginalized Narrative, Commodification, Representation Theory, Media Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of minority cultures has become increasingly complex in the media world particularly in the publishing industry, where issues of cultural appropriation persist. These instances are clearly illustrated in R.F. Kuang's novel *Yellowface*, which presents a sharp example of how minority narratives are often appropriated and redesigned for mainstream consumption. The story's premise - a white author appropriating an Asian-American writer's work - mirrors real-world instances such as the controversial 'American Dirt' by Jeanine Cummins or Rachel Dolezal's memoir. *Yellowface* skilfully deals with serious, pressing topics. It offers an important analysis of the publishing world, where undermining authors' authority and exploiting minorities is widely prevalent. In the novel, readers see the authors of color forced by their publishing houses to write stories only about

their experiences as minorities and white authors complaining that those authors of color are just trendy instead of talented. Kuang clearly demonstrates sides of the book or the publishing world that readers often choose to ignore, including how publishing houses see authors of color only through the lens of diversity, the ways in which the industry

normalizes casual racism and the various excuses that white authors make for insensitivity and ignorance. Kuang does not refrain from holding publishing houses accountable for their treatment of writers of color, and *Yellowface* explores an underbelly of the writing world that few acknowledge (Gadway, 2023). Kuang fully intends to make readers uncomfortable in her exploration of the pervasiveness of cultural appropriation, racism, and tokenism in the publishing industry, based on her own experiences as a published author (Coleman, 23).

We can have a clearer understanding of how media institutions sustain these power imbalances/inequalities through Stuart Hall's theoretical framework of representation and his encoding/decoding model. When publishers market 'authentic' Asian stories written by non-Asian authors, they often prioritize commodifiability over cultural authenticity, which can be presented as similar to how Hollywood has historically and consistently whitewashed Asian characters. This study examines these patterns of cultural appropriation and media representation, analyzing how dominant groups maintain control over marginalized narratives while profiting from their cultural capital. This theory is particularly relevant to *Yellowface*, where June's portrayal of Asian American culture does not reflect reality or Athena's intent but rather a selective and deliberate construction designed to appeal to mainstream, Western audiences. Hall's constructionist approach, as a result, allows for an exploration of how June's commodification of Athena's identity is shaped by broader industry pressures and societal expectations. Thus, it is possible to examine how societal expectations and larger industry forces influence June's commercialization of Athena's identity through the use of Hall's constructionist approach. Hall's encoding/decoding model, which deals with how audiences understand media representations in ways that may support, modify, or oppose prevailing messages, is also utilized in the paper to further/enhance this approach.

This model enhances the representation framework by showing how many audiences decode June's redesigned narrative, each reacting and showing responses according to their own cultural background and beliefs, even though the primary purpose of the model is to comprehend audience reaction. Readers may take an opposing stance, acknowledging the exploitative character of June's behavior, or they may take a dominant reading, taking her representation at surface level. By examining these varied responses, the paper investigates the power dynamics at play in both media production and reception, highlighting how the publishing industry's commodification of cultural narratives often reinforces existing societal hierarchies. This paper also explores the ethical implications of cultural appropriation and selective representation, questioning how the publishing industry and media construct and reinforce dominant narratives. By employing Hall's theory of representation alongside the encoding/decoding model, it draws attention to the necessity of systemic change in media to ensure that minority voices are represented with authenticity and integrity rather than through the distorting and ingenuine lens of commercialized appeal. The theoretical framework is applied to analyze how the novel reflects dominant ideologies in media, as well as how audiences might interpret these themes differently. Supplementary sources on cultural appropriation, media influence, and literary criticism provide a scholarly context for this analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics at play in the commodification of minority narratives in media.

1.1. COMMODIFICATION OF MARGINALIZED VOICES IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

In *Yellowface*, R.F. Kuang critiques the publishing industry, exposing how dominant cultural narratives often sabotage authentic voices by redesigning minority stories for mainstream consumption. Kuang fully intends to make readers uncomfortable in her exploration of the pervasiveness of cultural appropriation, racism, and tokenism in the publishing industry based on her own experiences as a published author (Coleman, 2023). Through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, we see that the novel's portrayal of June's appropriation of Athena's work reflects a larger pattern in media. Narratives from marginalized communities are often modified to fit dominant tastes, changing their original meaning and value. Media representation often elevates individuals like Athena Liu, whose unique and combined possession of cultural backgrounds and physical features are seen as assets. Athena's "name—Athena Ling En Liu—is cool; well done, Mr. and Mrs. Liu, to choose a perfect combination of the classical and exotic," emphasizing how her identity is presented as desirable due to its 'foreign' and 'exotic' elements. This reflects a wider trend where media often commodifies and favours non-Western traits, valuing them for their perceived rarity and glamour.

Hall's constructionist approach, which asserts that representation is an active process of creating meaning rather than a passive reflection of reality, is instrumental in understanding how *Yellowface* critiques these dynamics. June's portrayal of Asian American culture is not an authentic reflection of Athena's voice but a modified product meant to appeal to a majority audience from whom lucrative attention is derived. Athena's power is not achieved from her writing

but from her 'star power' and 'coolness', which are credited to her physical appearance and international background. Described as "tall and razor-thin, graceful in the way all former ballet dancers are," she embodies how societal power often privileges those who conform to specific aesthetic ideals. Her "posh, unplaceable foreign accent" and striking appearance further highlight how power dynamics in media reward those who can navigate multiple cultures while maintaining an aura of sophistication. This reflects Hall's argument that those in positions of power shape cultural representations, allowing them to define and commodify minority identities to bolster hegemonic ideologies.

1.2. CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND REPRESENTATION

Erich Hatala Matthes defines the most important aspects of cultural appropriation as: "1) the representation of cultural practices or experiences by cultural 'outsiders' (...), 2) the use of artistic styles distinctive of cultural groups by non-members" (Matthes, as cited in Manderstedt, L., Palo, A., & Kokkola, L., 2021, P.89). Kuang's depiction of cultural appropriation in *Yellowface* aligns closely with Hall's constructionist theory, where dominant groups exert control over representation to maintain and sustain power. June's transformation of Athena's manuscript into a marketable product illustrates how minority cultures are commodified, stripped of their complexity and nuances, and recontextualized for commercial gain.

Cultural appropriation, a central theme, "galvanizes the entire story and at various angles challenges the idea of what kind of stories writers are allowed to write given their race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.," Williams said. "This type of interrogation of the co-opting of culture and stories for capital gain is well-received" (Coleman, 2023). When Athena, an Asian American author, creates a culturally rich narrative, it is reshaped to fit mainstream publishing standards, highlighting how authentic voices are often suppressed in favor of narratives perceived to have mass appeal. Athena's identity, blending "classical and exotic" elements, underscores how cultural appropriation often commodifies diverse backgrounds for aesthetic appeal. Her "massive, long-lashed brown eyes" and international upbringing are celebrated as 'cool', reflecting how non-Western features can be fetishized when they fit the mainstream beauty standards. Athena's "international, ambiguously queer woman of color" identity is considered as a marketable asset, reflecting how cultural elements are appropriated for their appeal in the publishing industry, where 'diverse' backgrounds are exploited for success regardless of artistic merit.

Athena's identity is fetishized and celebrated as a marketable asset, yet her authentic narratives are sidelined by mainstream publishing because they do not align with dominant tastes. This reflects the contradiction of valuing diversity superficially while rejecting its deeper, more complex expressions. Cultural appropriation simplifies complex identities into superficial, consumable traits, stripping them of their deeper context. Mainstream publishing disregards this depth, deeming it lacking in mass appeal. However, June's reworking of Athena's story to fit dominant expectations achieves commercial success. This manipulation exemplifies Hall's argument that representation is a tool of power used by dominant groups to control which narratives gain visibility and which remain sidelined. By adopting and altering Athena's work, June erases Athena's voice and constructs a representation that aligns with hegemonic tastes, highlighting how media industries often prioritize commercial viability over cultural authenticity.

Talking about her book, Kuang says, "Publishing this book is less like putting out a manifesto, and more being part of the conversation (Laing, 2023)", which highlights Kuang's view of *Yellowface* as a fictional yet participatory critique within ongoing discussions about diversity and representation in publishing.

1.3. ENCODING AND DECODING AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Hall's encoding/decoding model further illuminates *Yellowface*'s exploration of cultural appropriation by examining how different audiences interpret June's story. According to Hall, media producers encode messages with dominant cultural values, which are then interpreted by audiences in three ways: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional (Hall, 1980). "Judging from the largely ecstatic early responses to *Yellowface*, the literary world seems to enjoy being skewered (Alter, 2023)," demonstrates a dominant reading of Kuang's own encoded critique of the publishing industry. Others may engage in a negotiated reading, recognizing the story's appeal while feeling discomfort about its representation of Asian American identity. Meanwhile, those aware of Athena's authorship will likely take an oppositional stance, viewing June's work as exploitative and dishonest. Readers of June's work—both within and outside the narrative—are shown to decode her story differently based on their social and cultural backgrounds.

The varied responses to June's work highlight the different interpretations of audiences, as described in Hall's model. The audience produces new interpretations and feedback of meaning, or even create new texts (Xie, Y., Yasin, M.A., ShekhAlsagoff, S.A., & Ang, L.H. 2022). This reveals how representation and power are negotiated in public perception. Just as June's work received multiple reactions in the book, the novel has also garnered diverse responses. Kuang noted, "The main difference is that folks who are outside publishing are horrified that this is how the industry operates, while people on the inside just groan and chuckle because it is too real (Laing, 2023)". In this context, *Yellowface* exemplifies how the public can either reinforce or challenge media representations. It highlights the importance of audience awareness and cultural literacy in recognizing and resisting exploitative practices. The meaning of encoded information is open to interpretation and can be directed in multiple ways; it is largely influenced by social discourse rather than being entirely defined by cultural codes or linguistic symbols. Audiences decode information by relating to the form and meaning of the encoder's ideology (Xie, Y., Yasin, M.A., ShekhAlsagoff, S.A., & Ang, L.H. 2022).

2. MEDIA INFLUENCE AND SYSTEMIC BIAS

Media, particularly social media, is critical in reinforcing or challenging systemic biases in the publishing industry. As Kuang writes, "Twitter is real life; it's realer than real life," the digital realm becomes the platform where power structures are challenged, but also where they are perpetuated. The accessibility and visibility of online spaces allow for the amplification of diverse voices, but it can also reinforce systemic bias when certain groups or perspectives dominate the conversation. This illustrates how media influence can simultaneously empower marginalized voices and perpetuate existing biases, as reputations are "built and destroyed, constantly, online." The rapid, often superficial judgments made in online spaces can shape who gets attention and recognition in the publishing world, highlighting the industry's reliance on digital platforms to uphold or dismantle biases.

Kuang's *Yellowface* also serves as a commentary on the role of the publishing industry, part of the larger media ecosystem, in shaping public perceptions of minority cultures. By prioritizing June's reinterpreted narrative over Athena's original, the industry enforces a hegemonic view that prioritizes commercially successful narratives over culturally authentic ones. Ailin's statement, "It matters that we defy white supremacy, every day, bit by bit," underscores the systemic bias that permeates media and society, where non-Western names and identities are often dismissed or distorted. By emphasizing the importance of "getting our names right," she challenges the ingrained media influence that perpetuates white dominance, pushing back against the erasure of cultural specificity. This act of resistance reveals how systemic bias shapes public perception, where demanding respect for one's identity becomes a political act of defiance against a culture of normalization and exclusion. Hall's concept of hegemony explains how these power structures are reinforced, as media industries often benefit from commodifying marginalized cultures while marginalizing the creators themselves. June's success, despite her lack of genuine cultural insight, mirrors the real-world phenomenon of minority cultures being diluted for market appeal, reinforcing existing power dynamics and silencing minority voices.

3. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS AND THE NEED FOR CHANGE

The ethical implications of favoring certain cultures and ignoring others are significant, as selective representation not only distorts public perceptions of minority cultures but also contributes to cultural erasure. In one of her interviews, she expresses that Asian American writers are often told they can only write about immigrant trauma or the challenges of being Asian American in the U.S. She believes that this perspective is contrary to the essence of fiction. Fiction should allow us to imagine beyond our own experiences, enabling us to step into others' shoes and empathize with different viewpoints. She does not appreciate arguments that reduce individuals to their identities or impose strict limitations on what they can or cannot write about. Interestingly, she addresses this very argument by doing what June has been accused of—writing about an experience that is not her own.

June's lack of punishment throughout the novel suggests the personal and ethical blindness that often accompanies cultural appropriation. June is shown to be largely unreflective, justifying her theft of Athena's work as a way to 'honor' her or to advance her own career. Her failure to acknowledge and take accountability for the harm she causes to Athena, and the lack of societal consequences for her actions, reflect how often cultural appropriation is not seen as a crime in the eyes of the dominant group. This lack of accountability speaks of a broader societal failure to address and take action of the exploitation of marginalized cultures, reinforcing the ethical implications of cultural appropriation as something that can be easily dismissed or ignored, even when it involves a clear violation of trust and integrity.

As Hall suggests, representation influences the power relations in the society, and when media consistently favors inauthentic narratives, it risks devaluing the cultural contributions of minority communities. Kuang's portrayal of Athena's erasure is a powerful critique of these dynamics, highlighting the need for systemic changes within media and publishing to prioritize authentic representation over commodified versions of minority experiences. Hall's encoding/decoding model also draws attention to the role of the public in demanding accurate portrayals, suggesting that media literacy and critical awareness are crucial to resisting exploitative representations.

The novel argues for systemic change, suggesting that achieving authenticity requires structural reform in how media values and presents minority voices. This includes support for more opportunities for minority authors to share their perspectives and experiences without fear of misappropriation and for an industry that values cultural integrity over marketability. Hall's theories reinforce this, showing that media can either challenge or uphold hegemonic structures and that shifting representation to prioritize authentic voices requires industry-wide recognition of their responsibility in shaping public understanding. Resistance to this hegemonic structure is being carried out as "There are plenty of people agitating for change in publishing (Laing, 2023)".

By analyzing the novel through Hall's theories, we see how these dynamics are not confined to individual instances of cultural appropriation but are indicative of a larger, systemic issue within media representation. Kuang's work serves as a powerful commentary on the responsibility of both the media industry and audiences in fostering an environment where diverse voices are valued not for their market appeal but for their contribution to a richer, more complex understanding of culture. By applying Hall's representation theory and encoding/decoding model, *Yellowface* is revealed not only as a critique of cultural appropriation but also as a call for systemic reform. Kuang's novel draws attention to the need for a publishing industry that values authentic voices, one that not only reflects the diversity of cultural experiences accurately and meaningfully but also challenges the systems that have historically and consistently marginalized those voices.

4. CONCLUSION

In *Yellowface*, R.F. Kuang skilfully critiques the power dynamics within the publishing industry, exposing the systemic biases that prioritize commercially appealing narratives over authentic representations of minority voices. Through the lens of Stuart Hall's theories, particularly his constructionist approach to representation and the encoding/decoding model, the novel illustrates how dominant cultural groups manipulate narratives to maintain control and reinforce hegemonic ideologies. June Hayward's appropriation of Athena Liu's work serves as a powerful metaphor for the wider patterns of cultural commodification that silence authentic voices and weaken the richness of minority experiences. By depicting Athena's narrative's journey as redesigned to fit mainstream expectations, Kuang underscores the urgent need for an industry that values genuine cultural contributions over mere marketability.

Ultimately, *Yellowface* serves as both a call to action and a critique of systemic change in media representation. Kuang highlights the responsibility of both the publishing industry and its audience to create a landscape where diverse voices are not only acknowledged but celebrated for their unique contributions. Hall's insights into representation highlight the significance of media literacy and public awareness in challenging exploitative practices. By advocating for structural reforms that empower minority authors and promote authentic narratives, *Yellowface* encourages a turn towards a more impartial and inclusive cultural discourse, ultimately enriching our understanding of the complexities of identity and representation in contemporary society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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