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Cultural Appropriation, Authorship Ethics, and Identity Politics in the Literary Marketplace: A Socio-Literary Analysis of R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface*

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ABSTRACT

R.F. Kuang's novel, Yellowface (2023), carries the issues related to plagiarism, cultural appropriation, and identity commodification. All of these problems are within the publishing industry. This paper discusses literary theft as a meeting point of structural racism, cancel culture and the commodification of "diversity" as evidenced by the novel's structural white first-person narrative (using the pseudonym June Hayward, renamed Juniper Song). With the help of Stuart Hall's conceptualization of the representational theory, Critical Race theory and Bourdieu's theory on Cultural Capital, the study confines itself to the investigation of authorship ethics by textual analysis of the novel. The findings of the study indicate that Yellowface "uncovers the industry gate keeping system, which allows white privilege to appropriate narratives and eradicates diverted voices of colour. In particular, the novel illustrates how social media magnifies (but does not solve) inequality through online harassment that leads to vengeance and reputational destruction. Implications include rethinking publishing practices in the real world and the practice of tokenistic diversity initiatives, and the importance of ethical storytelling. Restating the question of the "ownership" of stories in today's neoliberal marketplace, the analysis offers a valuable and relevant addition to the current debate in cultural sociology and literary studies.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation, Authorship Ethics, Publishing Industry, Racial Identity, Cancel Culture, Representation Theory, Literary Marketplace

Introduction

Rebecca F. Kuang is the New York Times' and Sunday Times' bestselling author of The Poppy War trilogy: Babel: An Arcane History, *Yellowface*, and the forthcoming *Katabasis*, several of which were honorees, and have now sold, internationally. Kuang is a Marshall Scholar, recipient of an MPhil in Chinese Studies from Cambridge and an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford, and a current PhD candidate at Yale where she is studying Sinophone and Asian American literature, having won the Nebula, Locus, Crawford and British Book awards. *Yellowface* (2023) is a conscious shift from speculative fiction to cynical realism in today's near-present-day, with Kuang giving an inside look at the business of publishing, from which she is both an insider and an outsider.

HarperCollins (2023) describes *Yellowface*, published by William Morrow, as "a chilling and hilariously cutting novel," that tears the "underbelly of the literary industry" apart" (HarperCollins, 2023). It's a story about a struggling white writer, Juniper "June" Hayward, and the notorious friend/foe of the literary world, Asian American literary darling, Athena Liu. In a collision of accident and chance, when Athena dies in a freak accident, June takes her unfinished manuscript, a new, experimental epic of the little-known contributions of China

labourers during the Great War, and finishes it off as her own. June hits the New York Times bestseller list and deals with a growing number of charges of plagiarism, cultural appropriation, and racial fraudulence, after her publisher changes her book's name to "Juniper Song" with an "ambiguously ethnic" photo of her on the cover. June's growing distortion of her voice as her narration of the novel, written in second person, makes the reader face unpleasant questions, such as who owns stories? What is a proper claim to authorship when the market is one in which literature is mass produced? How is literary success and failure defined by structural racism, tokenism and digital surveillance?

Interpretations of the novel's satirical effectiveness vary as contemporary reviews make clear an attitude of cultural resonance. In its "highly immersive satirical novel," *Yellowface* joins other works to fill "the literary zeitgeist" at a time of increased scrutiny of publishing gatekeeping, appropriation and exploitation of marginalized voices (Williams, 2023). In telling the story of June's journey into cyberbullying and into the destruction of her reputation, Williams calls Kuang's prose "sharp and poignant" in her "breathtaking examination of both sides of the racial divide as well as desire and greed." Kuang is an ironist, as her (Asian) voice is appropriated by the (white) protagonist to bring into question easy conclusions about victimhood and responsibility. However, Williams' depiction of June's family dynamic is still an area that isn't well-developed enough to leave her particularly company in her moral reckoning.

Kuang herself has been candid about her inner and outer motivations behind the writing. In a Rumpus interview in May 2023 with Amy Y. Q. Lin, she calls *Yellowface* a "gearshift" from Babel's maximalist Dickensian voice to the "loose, messy voice of the internet," a description that aptly captures the slapstick, often-toxic intersections of messages, memes and moral panic that define digital literary culture today (Lin, 2023). Much of this novel's trenchant comedy comes from real life struggles: that nerve racking first book experience, that of "diversity" being coopted into marketing slogans, and the constant tokenism of BIPOC authors. She shares her personal experience during her career, frustrated with not making it big at book events she held, of being afraid she could not make an advance, and of being a June, or becoming bitter at some success measurements she saw on social media. What is important, Kuang refuses binary concepts of morality, most significantly with respect to the way that many of Athenian's own moral choices are in effect "morbid" (morbid as in "magpie's eye for suffering", taking another person's pain and making something of it for fiction). The author is very pessimistic about the possibility of system reform, given that publishing scandals are used to create clickbait and entertainment but not system reform, "the people who were in power remain in power" (Lin, 2023).

The socio-literary approach to the analysis of *Yellowface* uses the theories of Stuart Hall (1997), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), postcolonial theory (Said, 1978), and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1984). Combining close textual analysis with the paratextual evidence, it poses three central research questions:

- (1) How does the novel demonstrate the working of the literary plagiarism and racial re-branding as a means of accruing cultural capital?
- (2) How do social media and cancel culture highlight and/or perpetuate inequities regarding authorship?
- (3) How does *Yellowface* interrogate and/or uphold discourses of who should tell which of the stories ethically?

The study thus highlights and reflects on these interactions and offers implications for ethical practice, reform of policies and future literary production in the context of global publishing discussions on diversity and representation as well as on power.

Literature Review

The issue of cultural appropriation in literature has been a subject of longstanding scholarship which is largely oriented towards the idea of power dynamics in who gets to tell whose stories, and which takes its inspiration from postcolonial theory and critical race theory. Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978) introduced the concept of representation of the East in Western discourse to the service of hegemonic interest, and other authors working on the theft of marginalised voices in literature (Rohwer, 2017). Critical race theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013) and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2000) also contend that the institutions of racism are pervasive in the cultural artifacts that are produced, and that authorship inevitably and inherently carries privilege. These dynamics in U.S. publishing can be seen as "literary yellowface", white authors using or benefiting from pseudonyms/aliases or stories from racialized performers (Nguyen, 2023; Devi & Panmei, 2024).

Empirical data on the publishing workforce demonstrate that some structural barriers persist. According to Lee & Low Books' Diversity Baseline Survey 3.0 (2024), which surveyed almost 200 North American publishers, literary agencies, and review journals, almost three-quarters (72.5%) of all staff identify as White/Caucasian, a decrease from 76 percent in 2019 and 79 percent in 2015. There are less than 1% Native American and Middle Eastern authors, 4.6% Hispanic/Latino authors, 5.3% Black/African American authors, and 7.8% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander authors. These conclusions are further confirmed by PEN America's *Reading Between the Lines* (2022), which also shows that more than 95% of fiction novels published in the U.S. between 1950 and 2018 were written by white authors. The homogeneity is linked to content biases, as gatekeepers are more inclined to prioritize stories that are marketable, as "diversifying," rather than authentic voices (Booth & Narayan, 2021; Koegler & Norrick-Rühl, 2023).

This analysis of R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) can make this novel a part of these discussions. Following Stuart Hall's (1997) idea of a media apparatus, Devi and Panmei (2024) theorises the publishing industry's role in creating a distorted version of marginalised story for the consumption of the mainstream, which is done by commodifying the manuscript of Athena Liu at the same time as canceling out her authorship. Sukma et al. (2025) also use a critical discourse analysis to understand the process of rebranding June Hayward to Juniper Song by deconstructing both racial capitalism and identity negotiation.

There is a literature on issues of authorship ethics and plagiarism, which further locates Kuang's satire by name-dropping the issue of authenticity. The cultural rationale of plagiarism issues is underscored by Rodrigues et al. (2023) and Shin et al. (2025). *Acidijor* method: unethical publications in the academic/literary field are discussed by Ashkenazi and Olsha (2023). Both the act of "canceling" and the use of social media in this phenomenon has been theorized as both being validating to marginalized groups and performative (Traversa et al., 2023). Further, there are analysis of the scholarship is focused on tokenism and the 'diversity elevator'. Mosley et al. (2025) discuss the diversity ideologies and their limitations in cultural production.

However, important gaps in this body of work exist as a few studies disclose analysis of the *Yellowface* text itself together with an analysis of the paratextual material offered in the form of author interviews, positioning by the publishers, and divergent reviews. Furthermore, the interaction between appropriation (see the use of the 'magpie's eye' by Athena) in both directions and the processes of 'Bourdieu' and 'Hall' haven't been fully integrated yet with a

view to changes in the publishing system. This paper attempts to fill these gaps with a material-centred, socio-literary reading of the document provided that helps to discuss the ethics of authorship, identity politics and the neoliberal book industry.

Theoretical Framework for Textual Analysis

This socio-literary analysis is based on a holistic interdisciplinary approach which integrates Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997), critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), Edward Said's post-colonial approach of the Orientalism (1978) and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural capital (1986). For the analysis of *Yellowface* such paradigms are particularly relevant, as they help shed light on the multilayering of significance, institutional racism, appropriation of narratives and commodity of identities that are relevant to the contemporary literary market. As a combination of forces, they offer a powerful prism for analyzing the nature of June Hayward's lootability, repackaging and damage to her reputation, along with how it illuminates inequities in our society and challenges an easy dichotomy of "bad guys" and "good guys" in the "good versus bad" framework.

According to Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, cultural creation is never just a mirror and is indeed a process of "circulation of culture" and "circulation of signification," "circulation of identity," and "circulation of power" that takes place through publishing, social media and other institutions. Representations are never innocent and they create and contain meanings that are legitimating, about races and about authorship (Hall, 1997). *Yellowface* brings to light the way that, in the publishing industry "Asianness" is a commodity, product, or thing being sold. The name changes to June the ship-Juniper Song, alongside a more enigmatically ethnic looking author photo, is part of the "encoding/decoding" model of Hall, where the editor 'encodes' for the market, and the reader and online critic are able to 'decode' as "fraudulent yellowface" (HarperCollins, 2023; Nguyen, 2023). Other examples of seemingly contested meanings on the novel are evident in the engagement with social media, with the 'thread' and the 'meme' networks seeing dominant representations of authorship challenged, subverted, reimagined or consolidated (Lin, 2023; Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

Critical race theory (CRT) adds to this analysis by stating that racism is not anomalous but rather is a major part of social structures and that color-blind ideologies can obfuscate material inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). In the world of publishing, CRT disrupts the ideology of the "meritocratic" industry by challenging "interest convergence" and how publishing "takes into account" "racial realism" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Booth & Narayan, 2021). June's successful appropriation of the manuscript of *Athena* demonstrates CRT's impression that white authors are able to appropriate "diverse" stories if it is profitable for the industry, while individuals trying to tell authentic Asian American stories are "tokenized" or erased (PEN America, 2022; Lee & Low Books, 2024). Victimization is complicated by the "magpie's eye for suffering" that belongs to *Athena* herself, and that can be comprehended by CRT's intersections, where the victimized can be made their own victimizer, but the victimization of all this impacts differently according to the structural power dynamics (Lin, 2023; Mosley et al., 2025).

The novel also deals with the issue of appropriation of individuals, history, and culture which is not only explored within the context of postcolonial theory in general but also through the lens of Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism. These constructions of the 'Other' in the West characterize the East as knowable, exotic and ripe for appropriation thus loaning imperial power relations (Said, 1978). This is literalized in *Yellowface* with June as the protagonist who steals the manuscript of a story on the Chinese in WW1, thereby turning it into a contemporary Orientalist text. Said's (1993) reminder that cultural appropriation obscures true histories while

benefiting the dominant actors, lines up with the industry's enthusiasm to sell this story under a racially vague veiled identity. S. reading 'Red Star Winter' necessarily acknowledges the ethical violence of speaking and writing on behalf of the Other, as June's narration is fundamentally unreliable, a periodical inversion of the Orientalist gaze through Kuang's narration.

Lastly, Bourdieu's (1986) notions of cultural capital and literary field theory account for the structural mechanisms which empowered June's ascendance and descent. Agents, editors, and reviewers are the gatekeepers in the publishing industry, who provide over the course of a career the gateway or access between money (advances, taxes, publishing budgets, etc.) and symbols (best-sellers status, prestige, etc.). Given the invisible cultural capital accorded to whiteness, it affords opportunities and networks to June that are not available to others (Kogler & Norrick-Rühl, 2023). As Bourdieu warned that the capital related to different fields is "relational and contestable" (Kuang, 2023), Athens literary triumph, three bestsellers, Netflix contracts, awards, remains at risk when challenged posthumously. As a new space of battle, social media can easily gain or lose reputational capital and ultimately equalize as a privilege of those already having structural privilege (Lin, 2023; Traversa et al., 2023).

The analysis brings together these frameworks and uncovers the complexity of the concept of Yellowface both as a theoretically sophisticated examination of the ethics of authorship and within a neoliberal literary economy. Hall brings the semiotic instruments of representation, CRT and Said bring with them the power critique and Bourdieu bring the economic sociology of the field. This synthesis subsequently informed the text and thematic analysis so as to examine the topic of plagiarism and racial passing, cancel culture and industry hypocrisy, in a sensitive and nuanced way, while taking into account the documents paratext (author bio, reviews and interview). The scheme eventually produces policy relevant insights on 'ethical authorship', 'diversity reforms' and 'digital boundaries in accountability'.

Textual Analysis

Complex Nature of Moral Ambiguity, Unreliable Narration and Narrative Voice

The fact that the whole novel is told from Juniper Hayward (or June's) first-person perspective is Kuang's brilliant use of unreliable narration, which is most exactly captured in Stuart Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding theory of representation. Bradford's own description of June is a "struggling white author that 'acts on impulse' to handwrite her own name onto Athena Liu's manuscript 'edits Athena's novel' and then sends it to her agent as 'Juniper Song'.". The story-prose format draws in the reader into June's ever more erratic and self-justifying consciousness, and must be deciphered as such. The latter psychological strategy is captured by the NPR review, because it gives June a voice, since she admits, "That's been the key to staying sane throughout all of this: holding the line, maintaining my innocence. In the face of it all, I've never once cracked, never admitted the theft to anyone. By now, I mostly believe the lie myself". This sample refers to the way for which Hall chooses to use her personal trauma as some thing to tear from, as a "reparation" paid to Athena for past appropriations, but which readers with a sensitivity to racial power dynamics also may read as "delusional" claims of entitlement.

It's not just technological, but is also a socio-politically charged unreliability. There is call for the prose "sophomoric and humorless," noting instances like "I shut the lid and push my laptop across the desk, breathless at my own audacity" and "the line at the campus Starbucks was crawling along". But within the context of Hall's construct, these pedestrian diary-like observations have a representational purpose: banalize June's moral lapse to make the extraordinary (stealing a dead friend's manuscript) into a mundain extension of writerly part-

of-the-peace. The Rumpus interview on its own provides an explanation for this stylistic decision, which Kuang describes as a kind of “gearshift” to “the loose, messy voice of the internet”, a “ballistic mingling of messages and memes” that would characterize contemporary literary discussion. This speech mirrors the same style of internet culture that eventually causes the ultimate downfall of June, the very same speech despite the fact that it mocks the very act of representation which it is participating in.

In the critical race theory framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), June’s moral ambiguity makes for an avoidance of simplified binaries with perpetrator and victim. The Cleveland Review suggests in its editorial that June’s plagiarism is driven by “puerile revenge”, as Athena allegedly took her sexual assault story idea for a short story in June. Kuang introduces adds and subtractions to the Code of the Code: Athena’s own ethical failings, her “magpie’s eye for suffering” which ‘took people’s pain and made it her own’, but overall, the inherent structural inequality remains, that which is white can attempt to be redeemed; June cannot, even posthumously. Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural capital helps to better understand the ways that June’s voice-of-the-narrative strategies are similarly attempts to generate what Nguyen calls, “reputational capital that is relational and always up for grabs”. June’s self-pitying rationalisations (“I am not the bad guy. I am the victim here”) are attempts to use personal grievance as means of creating symbolic capital, a prefiguration of how the writing marketplace’s reputational capital is relational and in contestation. These questions are directly addressed inherent in the choice of narrating the story as it occurred to Kuang: What did you think of the fact that Kuang has chosen to tell the story as June’s (unreliable) first-person perspective? providing a ‘hands on’ decoding of the story of racial identity in authorship.

This sub section is supplemented by Said’s (1978) Orientalism. In June’s narration of the story written by Athena detailing the Chinese workers during WWI, June becomes the Western character who is “knowing” and thus “claims” the Eastern story. Selectively and ironically the unreliable narrator’s voice gives Kuang the opportunity to allow June to voice her internal monologue, justifying her “profiting” on the “painful Chinese history” and simultaneously rebutting claims of racism. This forms what Hall (1997) calls a “contested site” of meaning which is also manifested in the novel’s form. Indeed, Kuang’s authorial biography mirrors that of the irony: as an Asian American scholar of Sinophone literature at Yale, she purposefully lets the appropriator, or fine das oni, take the lead in relating this tale, subjecting the reader to the moral dilemma of identifying with the master voice. What is created is unexplored moral murkiness: June simply isn’t the cartoonish villain or tragic anti-hero, but an all-too-uninteresting white writer whose entitlement is exposed in the very structure that publishers valorize.

Kuang’s intentional design are as she sought to create a feeling for the reader of “tracking a train crash and seeing it happen in slow motion” but still follow June “every step of the way”. This use of narrative strategy is good at involving the reader, and at the same time it echoes the complicity of the publishing industry who helps to put the works stolen by June into the bestsellers line. The unreliability of the narration does not just move the narrative along, but simultaneously engages in what Hall, CRT, Said and Bourdieu can bid for as theory, at the same time revealing how representation, structural racism, Orientalist appropriation and cultural capital combine in the white voice as author.

Plagiarism, Literary theft and the ethics of storytelling

Plagiarism becomes the main theme of the novel, the source of activity, and its most open debate about authorship ethics, in June’s transgression and fiddling with Athena’s manuscript. In this HarperCollins summary, it is explained that the inciting incident is presented very

clinically: “June witnesses, Athena’s death in a freak accident, and accidentally, or otherwise, steals, edits, and submits a just-completed masterpiece (experimental novel), about china laborers during World War I, that Athena himself wrote”. It is mentioning that June’s “cultural remix[ing]” of the appropriated material and then the lie continued in “a pathological manner”. It is indeed a plot device because it was the use of said historical event as a means to enact Said’s (1978) criticism of Orientalism, a white writer who owned and profited from an Asian history, wherein lived trauma was made palatable, presentable for sale as a fiction. Kuang thereby ends up creating a more than just satirical, but more of a description of the systemic appropriations of narratives.

CRT provides an analysis of the ways in which this theft is enabled structurally. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) contend that racism can be shown to function as “interest convergence”, namely that white institutions only tolerate marginal changes to the benefit of people of color when they are considered to be “in the interest of dominant white interests.” In the novel, the white editing team who acquires the manuscript focus on how its sales are going to do rather than its ethical issues with it adopting a racially ambiguous name with the aim of making it the most marketable. Such a convergence has profit motive; that is, Athene’s manuscript about Chinese labourers, which is becoming valuable, is the one that can easily be repackaged as ‘diverse’ content without needing to change anything in the authorship. This analysis is complemented by Bourdieu (1984) who theorized that publishing was a field and that the agents and editors ended up offering a kind of gatekeeping between money, in the form of advances and status, in the form of “bestseller status. The success of June’s theft is her understanding of the invisible cultural capital of whiteness, and her ability to exponentially move through the networks of submission and publicity after Athena’s manuscript had been unable to do so when she was alive.

Storytelling ethics come to be highly contentious. Kuang is clearly sifting “into the morals of the matter” and isn’t quite as innocent as it seems, by treating June’s sexual assault as material for “Cat Person”-style “mined” short story, though. The appropriation is a bi-directional one, which makes ideas of “who owns stories” difficult to defend. Kuang speaks about how she wanted to “detach that from race” and question “Athena is morally superior to June”. It is worth discussion questions convey this complexity: “Was Athena right in taking coopted June’s sexual assault or her fight with her ex-boyfriend? Or perhaps it’s just part of the job of an author? Tales of the question resonates with Rodrigues et al. (2023), who argue that plagiarism is culturally relativistic, but do not go far enough in their analysis of the consequences that are foundational in yellowface and are certainly racially stratified. May not face online harassment, like June, and possibly may be rehabilitated, but instead may be ‘posthumously ‘cancelled’”, like Athena, for her appropriations.

According to social theory, the representation theory of Hall (1997), the stolen manuscript is also a space of contestation of signification. The Chinese World War One workers’ story is ‘historical recovery’ for Athena but for June (and her publisher) it translates into ‘trauma porn’. June’s reply written by a Chinese American reader: “I don’t think it’s safe to begin policing what writers should or should not write, you know? Can a black writer not write a novel that has a white protagonist?”. This moment encapsulates Hall’s struggle with encoding and decoding: June tries to safeguard artistic freedom (i.e., be color blind about it), and by readerly decoding, is read as a classic case of white privilege. Kuang’s own status as an Asian writer working through a white narrator also ironically embodies the very freedom she is fighting to protect, leaving this mesa-layer neither brilliant nor without its nuance, but rather not “entirely” nuanced.

Manipulation of June's mother, Athena, is also a common trait of hers, as is her tendency to blackmail her former boyfriend, which goes on to her eventual consideration to kill him. All of these acts can be seen as a manifestation of the observation that, in the literary field, in an "important" zone, the agents will strive to amass capital at any cost. The lack of optimism in art publishing is evident; "publishing has been rocked by scandal after scandal... everything is still the same". So, in relation to the matter at hand, plagiarism in *Yellowface* cannot be merely attributed to an individual moral failing, it's really more of a symptom of a business structured in terms of profit, tokenism and racial capital. Analysis in this book reveals that ethical storytelling is aspirational rhetoric and material realities of publishing continue to reward appropriation being carried out by those already granted structural privilege.

Racial Passing, "Yellowface" Rebranding, and Authorship Commodification

In the novel, the rebranding of June Hayward as "Juniper Song" and inclusion of an "ambiguously ethnic author photo" and a "bad tan", amount to a "literary yellowface" both explicitly and intensely while simultaneously pointing to the problem of commodification of authorship. With Said's (1978) *Orientalism* rendered literally means that for-profit press publishing industry can create a "lived-less Asiana" that can be sold to a white author for profit. The publisher summary clarifies that the re-branding has been undertaken "The re-branding takes place 'at the behest of the white editors'", aimed at "a clean start" and is therefore a marketing strategy of "institutional investment in racial aesthetics". According to Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital theory, this is an example of a "strategic conversion" which is the act of the editors of taking the "whiteness" (invisible cultural capital) of the character of June, and converting it into a "racially ambiguous" signifier (symbolic capital) which is acceptable to the market, but does not destabilize the institutional power structure.

There was the physical absurdity of this passing, "a white girl from Philadelphia can physically pass as a part-Asian writer by assuming the surname Song and applying a bad tan", as the *Cleveland Review of Books* pointed out, and yet, it's held down by the novel as all too believable. A contested representation, as defined by Hall (1997) is the representation whose protagonist is not comfortable with the decoding of his/her identity and attempts to control it. This would aspire to regulate the "unpacking" of the "code" of her identity after being treated as "Asian" by a matured Chinese woman, but "old Asian is not complex Asian" is a denial of her own identity as a "female fast pretender", an inside denial which becomes a construction of a contested identity. This episode could fit into the historical background as Yi-Fen Chou was adopted by Michael Derrick Hudson and Kent Johnson hoaxed Yasusada, which were both cited by Nguyen (2023). Kuang therefore sets her satire in the context of a tradition of racial subterfuge for the sake of getting published.

In addition, critical race theory builds out, making evident how tokenism is an example of interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). It is a golden opportunity, just because June is white that the market all of a sudden is hungry for "Asian-sounding" authors, but she is not burdened with meeting that criterion.

'Crossing of the line' question: Of course, June doesn't just 'write' a novel about Chinese soldiers, she also gives the publishing company free rein on selling her as 'Juniper Song'... Do you think it's ok or the crossing of the line? The interrogative constructions the question poses readers in relation to the ethics of authorship as performance reflects Hall's (1997) point that representation is never neutral. In light of Kuang's writer biography, as a white law student holding a PhD from Yale on Chinese American literature, this situation is obvious as an ironic one, where the Asian character is dressed in a white suit and strangely addresses the Asian context in the Asian American story through the voice of the white writer.

But the novel also problematizes itself when seeking to reveal that indeed Aurora doesn't take its meats lightly when it comes to putting its own cultural icons to the knife and the knife was used on Aurora's body. Make a general assumption that readers are being invited to think the following questions: If Athena is not cancelled despite her being Chinese coloured, do you agree? This bi-directional examination indicates that racial passing and appropriation are not necessarily one-way processes: they can also be "anti-passing," however due to structural power there are different outcomes, and they disproportionately affect writers of color. This is because, as in Bourdieu's relational capital, the whiteness of goodness is an "accumulated advantage" that could be leveraged to "reputational risks" as in June rebranding vs Athena authenticity which may have been a bit harder to police. So, as the analysis shows, the satirical hyperbole of "Yellowface" is not only a hyperbole of the authorship commodification process through mimicry of race, but a perhaps literally accurate description of the process by which race is ambiguated in order to be shoveled along for economic and symbolic gain, and during which the very inequalities are reproduced which are asserted as celebrated.

Social Media, Dubbed Cancel Culture, Alienating Reputations.

The novel's main arena of reputational warfare is social media, which makes June's subterfuge public. The review from NPR recounts the story of Kuang's element of fear and the way it consumed June, which is the middle of on-line harassment and death threats, and "send[ing] her into a downward spiral," where Kuang's "best writing" is found within "tension-filled scenes" of the vitriol Twitter harbors. This depiction follows the empirical evidence from Traversa et al. (2023) of 'the performative validation in collective canceling against the marginalized populations. In her Rumpus interview, Kuang writes that social media was 'the internet that's fucked' referencing June's 'ballistic mingling of messages and memes'. It is a hyper-accelerated circuit of culture, as Hall (1997) would have it, and the memes, half truths and viral threads dominate as the technology to decode June's authorship as a fraudulent yellowface communicate in real time.

Bourdieu (1984) sees social media in the new arena of the literary field and reputation can be damaged in a matter of hours. Kaung wrote "It's the internet that's fucked, not me... I am not the bad guy. I am the victim here", she expresses her irritation and outrage about the scandal which is noted with little critical analysis, as accusations of racism are insinuated to be 'clout-chasing'. As the reviews and comments in the novel keep piling up it still does what the publisher claims, June "continually subconsciously reads its reviews and comments with agonizing detail". Notably, Kuang is negative in the interview about whether it has 'systemic effects' in the context of scandals: "But scandals only have a 'generates 'clickbait' effect' as well as an 'generates headlines' effect, they're not systemic".

The discussion questions will specifically ask about this, "-social media plays a large role in the story... What do you think the author is saying about the use of social media in our society? As with all novel genres, there are similarities that might suggest that "cancel culture" is the "solution" to this problem, as it provides the rapid (or near rapid) destruction of speed of reputation, but not justice or "friendship" to said authors, and actually creates a greater power imbalance and exacerbates alienation from those authors through said platforms as "digital vigilantism" focused on visibility rather than structural change. What Yellowface hints at, is that June's volute culminates in her conviction, either psychological or otherwise, that she is haunted by the ghost of Athena, a metaphor for the inescapable afterlife of reputation, in the digital realm, so it's a slightly Said's (1978) Orientalist return of the repressed theme, the kidnapping story (and writer) did not die.

It is social media that is the amplifier, and the alibi, says the analysis: They tell June she was fooled, and the publishing industry is given its alibi. It is the fallout of reputation, i.e. the return to 'cultural capital', that is important in June's eventual consideration of writing her own 'meta' story of the scandal. That is right: Cancel culture in the realm of Yellowface does not exist in the name of corrective justice, but rather a new type of circus in the material of the literary market.

Athena's Appropriations, Structural Racism in Publishing and Industry Hypocrisy

The subtlest type of insertion that the novel does concerns its refusal of Athena Liu as being an easy victim. Kaung also concedes that she was deliberate in casting June as "morally inferior" to Athena, specifying that she was given "Athena's magpie's eye for suffering" and "many flaws". The ethical appropriation of June's personal experiences is with sexual assault and her personal grievances, which were also treated as fiction, and Cohen aims to teach readers how to discern what is going on when they read Asian American stories; the discussion questions ask students to determine the ethics of the authorship. This kind of appropriation is a two-way street, and it's a story that makes itself more palatable thanks to the publishers' desire to buy narratives and represent the traditions of diversity and welcome to the traditionally "marginalized" voices of the world, even as it allows the traditionally privileged ones of the world, like June, to take delight in it. What this means is that it is a critical race theory and Bourdieu's field theory consolidated to come to an understanding of the ongoingness of racism in publications. The Lee & Low Books Diversity Baseline Survey (2024) and of course the PEN America (2022) survey results are dramatized with the white editors the Juniper Song rebranding and covering up June's secret. The industry as a whole continues to be "dominated by affluent and subliminally racist white people" (Nguyen, 2023, p. 11) such that "publishing picks a winner... 'diverse' enough, and lavishes all its money and resources on them" (Kuang, 2023, quoted in Nguyen, 2023, p. 11). Athena's relational capital and its susceptibility to goodwill in the industry is her greater success (three bestsellers, Netflix deal) that is at risk.

This means that the manuscript itself is an 'exotic' object of Orientalism, Chinese wartime history being the exotic content of this heritage to be recovered and repackaged for the needs of Said's (1978) contemporary West. The two sides come together and Kuang is praised in the NPR review for her 'privilege on both sides of the spectrum', but that is because the structure of the book itself is engineered to have June either a best-selling fiction or rehabilitated; the two sides come together and then Athena is policed. Directly reflection of Kuang's pessimism is that the conversation questions ask the reader to consider issues/challenges that communities of color face in publishing, as well as the changes that need to be made.

Through the lenses of consumer representation theory (Hall 1997), analysis of how the industry calls for "diversity" as signifier without realities can be made. Examples of the writer's double binds as a writer of colour include the cancellation of the version of the story of China that is "rosily" represented by Athena. This is not how scandals here can be viewed as (potential) occasions for reform and change, but rather as another instrument for commodities; the book concludes with June's thought of a meta-account of what has happened and of what will happen with Candice's book.

Yellowface is the evidence of a publishing industry where hypocrisy still prevails: diversity speaks, and, "hey they're more diverse than white", and that they're just as white, and that it's evident there's a vicious circle of consequence here because they're trying to say that "we suffer from sinful white relationships" but yet the one thing that's pretty clear, is that it's still pretty white, it's still pretty methodical, pretty purposeful, and white money still rules. As regards the latter, the composite theoretical logic sees the novel as an extraordinary way of

denouncing the need for change in a system, and also an impatience with breaking through a "post-postmodern" market economy.

Discussion

As shown above in the analysis of R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) based on the entire paratext, the novel serves as a theoretically insightful socio-literary critique of cultural appropriation, authorship ethics, and identity commodification within the neoliberal literary marketplace. This research investigates *Yellowface* by analyzing its unreliable first-person perspective, plagiarism criticism, racial re-branding, social media interactions and the industry hypocrisy through an intersectional approach using the theories of Stuart Hall (1997), representing and representation theory, as well as critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital and fields. These findings not only validate the current research on inequities in publishing (Lee & Low Books, 2024) but also deepen the understanding of literary theory by permitting an exploration of literary ecosystems and a view into how representation, power, and capital intersect in fictional and real-world settings.

Firstly, unreliable narration and moral ambiguity in the novel stately complicate the binary oppositions of victim/perpetrator that characterize public debate on cultural appropriation. In the process of normalizing her theft as "reparations" and slowly convincing herself that she has been telling the truth, readers are required to undergo Hall's (1997) controversial decoding and the reader either does the preferred decoding by the industry (bestseller success) or does the critical decoding that reveals systemic racism. The publishing strategy aligns with aspects of critical race theory in particular interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), in which publishing is tolerated, and profitable, insofar as it is also a desire of the marketplace for "diversive" publishing. Against this backdrop, appropriation is referenced as a double-sided process, highlighting the "magpie's eye for suffering" (Athena's mining of the trauma of June) and complicating moral questions, as Kuang quotes saying in the interview, "The waters are a lot murdier than binary concepts.". This research builds upon previous researchers on literary *Yellowface* (Nguyen, 2023; Devi & Panmei, 2024) by proving that even marginalised authors can engage in moral ambiguitas and consequences remain racially bifurcated because of the structural asymmetries. What's left is a subtle critique: *Yellowface* doesn't demonize Athena or idealize June, nor does it single out any one of them - it's an examination of personal ambition vs institutional privilege.

Second, this is obvious in the re-branding of June as 'Juniper Song' and the commodification of the manuscript of Athena on the Chinese labourers of World War I, in line with Said's (1978) Orientalist logic at work in the contemporary neoliberal realm. The shift of the racial ambiguity of the author image to symbolically racial capital (Bourdieu, 1984) by publishers' demand for an "ambiguously ethnic" publisher image for a "clean start" (HarperCollins, 2023, p. 4) renders historical trauma exchangeable with marketable exoticism. McCommons' process mirrors veritable scandals like *American Dirt* (Gurba, 2019) and Hudson's Yi-Fen Chou pseudonym (Nguyen, 2023) and is consistent with Lee & Low Books' (2024) empirical result that 72.5% of the U.S. publishing workforce is White/Caucasian, despite incremental increases in diversity. The novel can be seen, then, as a 'representational apparatus' (Hall, 1997) which both satirizes and mimics the industry's abstraction of 'diversity' from life. The implications don't only apply to literature: tokenism is maintaining that "gatekeeping" which Kuang denounces in her interview: "we've barely made any progress since the seventies" (Lin, 2023). Recommendations to include in the policy should involve compulsory authorship disclosure procedures, open diversity audit requirements in connection with federal funding and contractual agreements to include an ethical provenance review on historical fiction.

Third, the novel highlights the internet spaces of social media to depict how it serves as a relational friendship economy that ravages reputations and creates alienation for those involved in it, and those who are not. That June and her compatriots spent countless hours scrolling through the vitriol of Twitter reveals what Williams (2023) states as a premise of his book: “reputations in publishing are built and destroyed, constantly, online”; in-line with the findings of Traversa et al. (2023) for digital cancelation, the cancelling of a reputation or voice rarely shifts a power dynamic. Bourdieusian theory reveals an increasingly fast-lived dynamics about the struggle in the literary field that is embodied in social media; while reputational capital may rise and fall from one day to the next, it will still rebalance in the end to those who have been granted structural privilege, white editors and agents don’t seem to be affected. As the novel comes to a close, Kuang’s pessimism is echoed when June thinks about how she could profit further from her scandal, as suggested in one of the discussion questions in the Book Club Kit. Consequently, positive stories about digital accountability (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Haskell, 2021) should be challenged and policies should be considered for platforms level changes, such as transparency of algorithms, labeling of sources of content, and regulatory control of discourse on platforms, which acts as a means to avoiding harassment without compromising free expression.

The meshed theoretical model gets one to glimpse a more fundamental structural level: publishing is an autoregulatory field where the three of Hall, CRT and Said, and Bourdieu, converge into the process of the commodity of identity. The contrast between these two books demonstrates the double bind that is writers of color who are both hyper-visible as “diverse” assets, but are hyper-policed for authenticity, and June who survived, showing whiteness as a durable cultural capital. That’s the way a scandal such as Yellowface people, why such a scandal creates entertainment value and sales figures (as the NPR review report pointed out) but no substantive change. Ironically, the book’s meta-ending (June planning her ‘novelization’) of what’s already been reported in the news is what Kuang foretold is what the bad actors will use to reimagine blow-ups into ‘new novels’ (Lin, 2023), proving there is a limit to satire in a post-postmodern news marketplace.

Caution should be used in interpreting the results of this study. The descriptive nature of this study, which was limited to one novel and its accompanying paratexts, could make the results only useful for comparison with other studies, for instance of other American authorial interventions, such as those in *Erasure* (2001) by Percival Everett, or within a wider audience of the global publishing situation. Furthermore, the Book Club Kit discussion questions (p. 225-227) are clearly written and serve as helpful resource for teachers and parents. Although 21, 22 offer informative and supportive reading prompts, they do not relate to any reader data.

Future studies should include mixed-methods analyses through diversity data surveys of publishing professionals, a longitudinal study on the letdown of diversity, and an ethnographic study of social media discourses surrounding appropriation scandals. The novel representational impact might be further tested by a quantitative content analysis of the Goodreads reviews or by a content analysis of the Twitter corpora with the hashtags Yellowface.

In short, *Yellowface* is not simply an art yet it’s a diagnosis of a literary marketplace that allows for cultural appropriation, a passing privilege and a marketing ploy, and superficial online accountability. So, the question is of critical importance: what is the solution so that publishers can stop “picking a winner... ‘diverse’ enough... and continue to propagate the inequities that it is constantly lauding”? Once read within its paratextual field, Kuang’s novel, then, acts as a looking glass and a provocation to the scholarly community, publishers, and readers to accept

the harsh reality that in the literary world, the “scales always rebalance in favor of those who had the edge at the beginning”.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Richard F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023) is more than just a satirical success story; it's a theory-laden socio-literary intervention into the ongoing crises of cultural appropriation, authorship ethics, and identity politics in the neoliberal stages of the literary publishing industry itself. The first-person unreliable narrator and the narrative plot of plagiarism, the degradation of reputation by social media and the characterization of both the appropriation of the other and the appropriation of the self, combine and work off of each other, both of whose weight offer a condemnation to the 'diversity'-commodifying and systematically whitening publishing system. The study presents a case of *Yellowface* acting as a diagnostic mirror and provocative catalyst that illuminates or even challenges readers, scholars and industry actors to reflect on and question the uncomfortable reality wherein “the scales always rebalance in favour of initially those who had the advantage”.

There are three interrelated mechanisms of inequity that are highlighted in the central findings. Firstly, it explores what Hall (1997) labels as the circuit of culture, a conspiratorial discourse that focuses on stealing and suggests that it is a moral necessity to be stolen from (there is a lot of “holding the line, maintaining my innocence” in this one), and includes (paratext) as do the NPR review, which emphasizes the “vitriol raging across the Web,” and Cleveland Review of Books criticism of “palatable groupthink” reading as a new racism. The fight over this representative battle is such that CRT can shed light: white authors can profitably co-appropriate narratives of racial minorities without the true stories of these minorities being tokenized and posthumously “policed” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Lee & Low Books, 2024). Secondly, the Chinese war history recovers a re-branding space: Chinese History, as such, is exoticised and is repackaged for economic profit and symbolical gains with an indistinctly ethnic figure: A literalization of Said's (1978) Orientalism in Bourdieusian field. In fact, towards social media, cancel culture is providing “social validation” for oppressed communities, and only “performatic justice” for editors, agents and the “affluent and subliminally racist white people” of the industry.

The lessons from these findings for publishing practice, policy and pedagogy is significant. In institutionally, set diversity goals (in conjunction with funding and/or the tax) and a roadmap for disclosure for all historical fiction writers, maybe a contractual requirement. The novel may be used by book clubs or by educational programs or groups. There is no moral low ground to story-telling' education in this novel: even if it is 'fluid' and 'there is always another way to spin the story' while there is an ethical obligation to do source communities and lived experience no harm. Not least, Kuang's intense pessimism “everything is still the same” casts doubt on the superficial claims of “representational” progress supposed to be taking place in the post-2020 era, an “era of industry reckoning,” as such redistribution of capital has not occurred in Bourdieu's literary field.

The study contributes to the research strand of within cultural sociology, literary studies, and media/communication in the following respects: (i) it brings together three strands that have not been linked together until now (i.e. empirical research in baseline data on diversity in books, represented by studies by Lee & Low Books (2024) and PEN America (2022); critical scholarship on appropriation (Said, 1978; Hall, 1997); close-text analysis of contemporary realist fiction); (ii) it suggests a need to rebuild interculturalism for the contemporary world; (iii) it encourages cross-disciplinary research in the topical field of diversity across various disciplines. The study can help to form the discourses of knowledge on how the 21st century

publishing is a neoliberal space of identity as asset and as liability, or as scandal and more reconfiguration of the taken-for-granted than structural changes.

There can be multiple directions for the future research of high priority. Firstly, there is a need for longitudinal mixed method studies of the outcomes (advances, marketing budgets, author demographic, etc.) associated with publishing companies after *Yellowface*, to determine if the novel's cultural impact has resulted in measurable reform (extending Lee & Low Books, 2024). Second, it would've been useful to have parallels drawn between *Yellowface* and other applications of intertextual appropriation, such as Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001); Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt* (2020) or other efforts around the world (appropriation scandals in Indian or African publishing), to further illuminate and situate cross-cultural differences in racial capital and representational politics. Third, an analysis of the large number of Goodreads, Twitter/X and TikTok reviews of *Yellowface* and related books might be a way to quantify the novel's exposure to the concept of cancel culture and authorship ethics in the public sphere, which could serve as the basis for an online humanities analysis, as described by Traversa et al., (2023), and Bouvier & Machin (2021). Fourth, ethnographic in-field study would provide lived experience of the gatekeepers of the fantasy/publishing fields and people of color inhabiting this space as aspiring authors; further, this approach would test out Bourdieu's field theory by empirically gathering data from literary agencies that reveal the lived experiences of gatekeepers, as well as people of color who enter the debut author community as entrepreneurs. Lastly, evidence-based research guidelines for algorithmic transparency, the marking of verified authors for literature and action against harassment will grant space for the voices of marginalised people and art, without compromising artistic freedom of expression.

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