

YORK



Communication Studies 2700
Fall/Winter 2022-23 12:30-2:30 Th in SLH D
Media, Culture and Society



Photo credit: Sungwoo Lee, Greenpeace International

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Office hours: 2:30-3:30 on Thursdays and by appointment

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Final paper assignments

The final paper demonstrates the mastery you have achieved related to all the learning objectives. Further guidance on expectations for the bibliography and thesis statement, and on the final essay, will be posted on eClass.

Final paper outline: Bibliography and thesis statement

Submit a thesis statement for your final research paper, along with 3-4 sentences explaining what course themes the paper will explore, and mentioning any specific examples you will focus on.

You must also include a bibliography of 5 sources you will use: two may be class readings, but the other 3 must be scholarly sources. Sources should be listed using either the Chicago Manual of Style author-date citation style (see

https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html) or APA style (<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/references>).

Final essay

Maximum 7 pages, double spaced, 12 point font. Sources must be properly cited in-text and in the Works Cited list. Further instructions will be posted to eClass.

Further guidance for the final research paper or project

As per the syllabus, the final research paper should be a maximum 7 pages, double spaced, 12 point font. Sources must be properly cited in-text and in the Works Cited list.

Please review the grading rubric that is posted on eClass, as it breaks down exactly what you will be graded on. Additionally the tips that follows may be helpful in thinking through the assignment.

1. Good writing is important. The best essays are clear, crisp, and well-organized

There are two key aspects of good writing to keep in mind. The first is clear structure. Normally, a paper will begin with an introduction that includes the thesis and lays out the argument. Next, several body paragraphs will each lay out a line of argument. Finally, the conclusion will restate the thesis and explain how you have supported it. As you write, do not forget to ‘signpost’ when necessary: remind the reader where they are at in the flow of the argument, and where you are going.

The second aspect of good writing involves taking steps to make sure the writing is comprehensible. It is better to be simple and direct than to use flowery language. **Remember to proofread.** Remember also that the paper should be understandable to someone who doesn’t know your subject matter – don’t forget to explain terms that need to be explained, and be sure to clearly make connections rather than assume too much – you can only be graded on what is actually in the text.

2. Remember that the object of a final research paper is to demonstrate your learning

In the final paper, you should aim to demonstrate some of what you learned in the course. The final paper should demonstrate not just some of the knowledge you’ve gained, but skills you’ve

developed. These skills include research skills, the ability to apply concepts and theories, and critical and analytic thought.

A final paper is an opportunity to apply some of the theories that we've discussed in class to a particular research topic or set of research questions. It allows you demonstrate your grasp of terms and concepts (which you developed through the glossary assignment), and the skills in interpreting, evaluating, and connecting arguments that you developed in the synthesis papers.

3. Analysis and 'big ideas' from the course

Whatever your topic is, your final paper should relate to at least one 'big idea' from class. The project needs to have a theoretical dimension. While your topic should be specific, through your research you are hoping to uncover or explain a why or how that has bigger implications.

4. The role of research: going back and forth between the general and the specific

It is important to use scholarly and other sources and to cite them properly. The idea of doing research is that you are able to explore a research question in a tangible way by working through specific facts and examples. A citation can help make the work specific: not 'video games are becoming more story-driven' but 'Donkey Kong marked a major step forward in video game storytelling. The game begins with an animated storytelling sequence of Donkey Kong kidnapping the protagonist's girlfriend ...' The essay can then draw on this and other examples to work through how narrative elements shape user experience of a video game.

Citations and paraphrasing are also ways to link your research with the 'big picture,' as you can link your particular narrow example to a bigger conversation concerning media, society and culture.

5. Some guiding words

Here are some 'guiding word' of qualities or processes you want to bring to your paper:

Concerning persuasion: Interpret, argue, assess, evaluate, connect; order of argument - logic, sequence and flow

Concerning presenting your research: accuracy, completeness and/or situatedness (you do not have to thoroughly know a whole field, but you should be able to roughly sketch out what field your research is in and how it fits within it); context; specificity;

Concerning writing and organization:

Clarity, simplicity.

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Counter-Hegemony In Historical Fiction: A Babel; Or The Necessity Of Violence Case Study

Introduction

In a world that erases the harsh truths of colonialism, historical fiction has the potential to demystify the facade that hegemony creates. This is especially true when authors tell stories from a postcolonial lens that highlights the perspectives of the oppressed rather than the oppressors. *Babel; Or The Necessity of Violence*, is a notable example of this. In her novel, R.F Kuang provides readers with insightful knowledge concerning the significant historical events The Opium Wars and The Abolition of Slavery in The Caribbean. Additionally, the character development of protagonist Robin Swift encourages marginalized readers to break free from the dominant forces that oppress them. Overall, it is clear that *Babel* and similar works challenge readers to confront the realities of colonialism and its legacies. By focusing on the perspectives and experiences of the marginalized and offering a message of empowerment and resistance, they encourage them to confront and dismantle systems of oppression.

The Erasure of History Concerning Colonialism

Society often turns a blind eye to the realities and results of colonialism due to erasure. This occurs due to dominant narratives which portray colonizers in a positive light and power imbalances that put colonizing nations at the forefront of storytelling. This process is systematic and often weaves through educational institutions and learning materials. For example, in 2020, an article by *The New Yorker* found that one-third of British people believe British invasion did more good than harm to former members of their colony (Jasanoff). This is partially due to a lack of compulsory historical education, in combination with deeply embedded biases and the burning and concealment of government documents which contain details of heinous acts and torture within former colonies (Jasanoff). Another example of this erasure occurs in Canada and involves Indigenous peoples. In the *Global News* article, “Canada’s school systems are failing to address colonial past”, Author Khan uses multiple sources to argue that education about Indigenous peoples within Canada is scarce. In one, a survivor of the 1960s scoop, an effort of cultural genocide that led to over 20,000 Indigenous children being ripped from their families states that the atrocity appears as a footnote in history studies (Khan). In addition, the article points out that although courses focusing on Indigenous peoples exist, they are not mandatory and the textbooks used in them tell stories from a western perspective that overlooks many parts of Indigenous history and culture (Khan). The erasure of history hides truth both figuratively and literally. This hinders the education of citizens and leads to centuries of mass ignorance. Since this occurs through the education system, an institution that citizens depend on for knowledge, alternative resources must be readily available to those willing to learn.

Historical Fiction As A Solution: Babel

The historical novel *Babel: Or The Necessity of Violence* can serve as a resource to fight against historical erasure. Written by R.F Kuang, a Chinese American academic specializing in Historical and Chinese studies, it follows Robin Swift, a boy from Canton who loses his family to the cholera epidemic in 1828. Prestigious Professor Lovell of Oxford saves the boy's life, and takes him to London (Kuang 0). In London, Lovell instructs Robin to spend years vigorously studying languages to enroll in Babel: Oxford's Translation Institute (Kuang 0). Babel is the headquarters for silver work, a fantasy element where translations are engraved onto bars of silver to create magical results. Once Robin enrolls, he views Oxford and Babel as a paradise. He is an asset due to his fluency in Mandarin. However, he slowly discovers hidden and plain truths about Babel and The Empire's role in using silver to oppress the world. This pushes him to reevaluate his morals and decide where he stands. Aside from Robin Swift and Professor Lovell, some important characters in this book are the students Ramy Mirza from India, Victoire Desgraves from Hati, Griffin Harley from China and Anthony Ribben from Barbados. They aid discussions about historical topics and contribute to Robin's character development which profoundly impacts readers.

How Does Babel Combat The Erasure of History?

To begin, Kuang effectively sheds light on the Slavery in the Caribbean, a topic often ignored in the Western curriculum. First, she uses her story to educate readers about the real reasons for the abolition of this slave trade. Many assume the event was due to a realization that slavery was unjust. However, this was not the case. This is evident through the words of Griffin and Anthony.

When speaking to Robin about the impact of slave revolts on abolition, Griffin says: "But I am saying that if you think the 1833 Act passed because of the moral sensibilities of the British, you're wrong. They passed the bill because they couldn't keep absorbing the losses" (Kuang 177). Later in the novel, when discussing plans for activism, Anthony says that two things that triggered abolition were pro-slavery whites destroying baptist churches and a belief that France was profiting too much from slavery (Kuang 403). *The Politics of Morality*, written by Dave Gosse, extends these ideas and explains that due to the French, abolition became essential to Britain due to their economic losses over the years (Gosse 130). Kuang also uses the stories of her two Caribbean characters, Anthony and Victoire to show readers that slavery did not necessarily end after abolition. First, Anthony, a former slave, reveals that once abolition became official, his master refused to let him go and planned to bring him to America, where slavery was intact (Kuang 380). This partially occurs due to the lack of flexibility and opportunities for former slaves in Barbados (Hoefte 258), which left Anthony vulnerable. Victoire's story slightly differs. Born during the Haitian Revolution, she fled to France with her mother and the family who owned them. Despite being legally free, they were treated as slaves in their French household for the entirety of her childhood (Kuang 538-539). Through these details, Kuang educates readers about slavery in The Abolition of Caribbean slavery and showcases the hardships Caribbean people endured due to the empire. Finally, Kuang educates readers about the realities of The Opium Wars. This conflict occurred because Britain wished to continue shipping Opium into China, while Chinese officials rejected this due to the impacts of the drug on their people (Tythacott 192). In this section, Kuang focuses on the wrongdoings of The British

during this time. First, in a footnote, she mentions the historical figure Reverend Guzlaff, a missionary who claimed to love China and its people. She then points to the irony in his support of the Opium trade, which harms Chinese people (Kuang 296). His reasoning for this is that he believed that British products and technology would bring China closer to a Christian God and help the nation stray away from superstitious ideas (Lutz) Further into the novel, Kuang reveals that he was using his missionaries to spy on the Chinese and aid Britain overtaking them which is a reflection of his actions in the real world (Kuang 347). Kuang also makes it clear to readers that Britain was fully aware of the negative impacts opium had on Chinese citizens and was willing to break Chinese laws for profit. When Robin calls the Opium trade cruel, he receives a response that paints Chinese people as "filthy, lazy and easily addicted" (Kuang 299) and emphasizes that "there's money to be made." (Kuang 299). Before this statement, workers for East India Company complain about Chinese officials destroying large chests of Opium at the Canton port (Kuang 298). They ignore that the importation of Opium had already been deemed illegal by the governor of Canton, Lin Zexu (Tythacott 198). Overall these factors inform readers about the Opium wars and highlight Britain's cruelty and lack of humanity towards Chinese people throughout the conflict. Discussions about Caribbean Slavery and The Opium War in *Babel* clearly show that Kuang's informative content combats hegemonic historical erasure by educating readers about diverse topics.

What Impact Does Babel Have On Marginalized Readers?

Historical education is not *Babel's* only counter-hegemonic trait. Through the development of Robin Swift, Kuang also inspires marginalized readers to question and defy hegemony. To

start, after meeting Professor Lovell, Robin becomes fully loyal to the empire. This occurs because, due to his circumstances, Robin believes he has no right to question the system he is under. A statement that illustrates his state of mind when he says: "One did not spite one's savior" (Kuang 17) to stop himself from questioning Lovell and The Empire. They are his saviors and to critique them would be to bite the hand that feeds him. This experience can resonate with many racialized readers who have limited power. It represents a version of hegemony where the ruling class maintains full domination and subordinates have nothing but dominant ideologies (Williams 108-110). Similar to readers, hegemonic values become Robin's norm, and they affect his everyday life. However, when Robin enters Babel and meets the assertive characters Ramy and Griffin, this begins to change. Through them, he learns of the truths behind British institutions, including Babel and their silver. In this stage of his development, he is torn. His past fantasies about The Empire cloud his mind, but as he becomes increasingly aware, the injustices they cause become difficult to ignore. The book describes him as "dancing between the edges of two worlds," (Kuang 132). This means he loves the things Babel and The Empire allow him to gain, yet he also knows that this is made possible by the suffering of himself and others. This is a feeling many marginalized people who reap the benefits and perils of the Western World have. Finally, near the end of this story, Robin realizes that the injustices surrounding him are intolerable. This is clear when he says he cannot continue "straddling the line" (Kuang 431) and chooses to rise against the empire rather than enable it. At this point, Robin's viewpoints are completely counter-hegemonic. He then leads a protest against *Babel* and The Empire for the remainder of the novel. In this case, Robin's philosophies reflect Fanon's text, *The Wretched of The Earth*. He is the revolutionary who works to dismantle the

system that once clouded his mind (Fanon 206-212). This section is less relatable to the average racialized reader. Despite this, it can inspire them to take action against hegemony and its faults. It shows them that defiance is possible. Online fan reviews from marginalized fans further prove this argument. For example, in a *Goodreads* review a black user states: *“Okay I’m going in but I have so much love for the risks this book took and the way Kuang forced both readers and characters to witness all the ways the world was built to destroy those deemed lesser. There is no separating yourself from it, no matter how much you try. But there is power in knowledge and words. There is always something you can do to fight back against it, no matter how small, or hopeless.”* (DeannaReadsandSleeps). It’s quite clear that Robin’s development inspires since their words reflect the conclusion he came to by the end. This impact can be further analyzed through media effects theory and platforms. Media effects describe the fact that media has an impact on its viewers (Laughey 7). This review showcases that, and it is an example of uses and gratifications, where the consumer gains emotional value from media and is empowered by it (Laughey 26). In addition, through feeling represented by Robin, readers feel a need to imitate his actions to some degree. Platforms are media objects that elevate and uplift (Banet-Weiser and Singh 164). When used correctly and under the right circumstances, they can empower (Banet Weiser and Singh 164). Robin's characterization and the fan review characterize this well because they show that Kuang successfully created a literary platform that broadcasts her decolonial messages. Overall, it is clear that through the development of Robin Swift, *Babel* has a significant impact on marginalized audiences and encourages them to defy hegemonic norms.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Babel: Or The Necessity of Violence*, shows that historical fiction can demystify hegemonic ideologies. By focusing on the viewpoints of the oppressed, it informs readers about historical topics often ignored within educational institutions and encourages marginalized readers to push against hegemony. To create a world where marginalized people are fully mobilized and educated, it is essential for historical fiction that deviates from the status quo like *Babel* embraced and uplifted. It will give them the knowledge necessary to rebuild the system.

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