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Yellow Tokens: From Racist Depictions to Token Minorities

Debra Kates
Columbia College Chicago

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Student Name: **Debra Kates**

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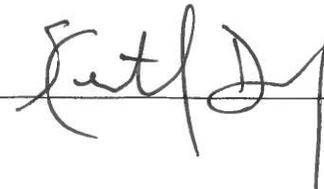
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Douglas Reichert Powell, PhD  20 May 17
Thesis Director

ROBERT E WATKINS  6/28/17
Program Director

Kenneth Daley  6/20/17
Department Chair

Yellow Tokens: From Racist Depictions to Token Minorities

By

Debra Kates

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Abstract

The project argues that the misrepresentation of Asians in film is a direct result of white supremacy. It researches the presentation of East Asian Americans in films as a result of the hegemonic ideology of

whiteness, focusing on the standard of movie star perfection as a form of white supremacy, and includes films that have white men and women cast in lead roles, even when the story is uniquely Asian. Using the theoretical lens of whiteness studies the project analyzes examples from the American film industry from the past fifteen years.

Keywords: Whitewashing, Yellowface, film, East Asian Studies, Identity Politics, Whiteness Studies, Critical Race theory, Politics of Representation

In 2015, it was announced that Scarlett Johansson had signed on to star in the DreamWorks' adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell* (Kroll, 2015). The new film is an adaptation of a manga (Japanese comic books) set in a futuristic Japan whose anime is widely considered part of the pinnacle of its genre (Fuster, 2016). Soon after, a petition popped up online calling for the dismissal of Johansson from the lead role as Major Motoko Kusanagi with over 15,000 signatures (Child, 2015) and the film has faced backlash from the Asian American community ever since. At first it may seem like an overreaction but Hollywood has a long history of stepping on Asian people by whitewashing roles. This lack of representation of Asian Americans in film is a result of the hegemonic ideology of whiteness that focuses on the standard of movie star perfection as a form of white supremacy.

Ideology is at its most basic definition is a structure that defines the way we think. Power and social structures feed each other, and ideology is defined in its relation to power. Power functions as an integral part of society, not as an up to down pressure that happens to a person. As it is ingrained in all relationships, it is a toolkit for engagement with others in society, for example, how Asians are viewed in U.S. society. The dominant ideology promotes the power structure but at the same time keeps it hidden. This manufacturing of consent that gets the people as willing participants in the

dominant ideology keeps the institutions in power. These institutions work through values, conceptions of the world, and symbol systems. Values are literally the values we live by, and what we care about, they are often contradictory. Conceptions of the world are social norms such as marriage or conforming to the gender binary. Symbol systems are what most of our society runs on; money, language, class, race, or visual structures such as film or photography are all examples of symbol systems. These three things work together to legitimize the dominant ideology. The ideological function of institutions ingrained and internalized social norms to define how “reality” gets defined, reproduced and reinforced and places conflict as an afterthought (Lye, 1997).

Representation is not only how something is depicted but also it is how something is re-presented through the eye of the media and representation as a stand in (Hall, 1997). With representation simultaneously acting as a both a reflection and distortion of reality, Stuart Hall redefines representation as a stand in for reality and through that it’s meaning is given to the depicted object it represents.

The world we live in is a media obsessed, commodity-hoarding society that forms its main notions of what something based on presentations by media institutions. There is often a competition over the correct, appropriate, or preferred way of representing objects, events or people. In fact, although there are many possible modes of representing the world and communicating them to people, the course of history can be envisioned as successive attempts to impose one mode of representation upon another (Mehan 241).

This explanation of the issue of representation is not a groundbreaking concept, however Hollywood still has issues with imposing identities onto minorities in order to keep white people at the top of the racial hierarchy. By either placing Asians in

stereotypical roles or by casting white people in Asian roles. Representation is dictated and maintained by those in power and those who have power are constantly trying to fix meaning in a way that supports its agenda (Hall, 1997). We have to question ourselves; are people free to choose how to think, believe and then act, or do structural forces dominate people, especially when it comes to ideologies surrounding race (Hall, 1997). It can be argued that the film industry chooses actors based on bankability, which reads as popularity or attractiveness. This puts their agenda as one that wants to make as much money as possible, which is not a surprise; we all know that this is a business. However, citing economics as an excuse is a frail defense, how will Asian actors build the popularity and box-office pull if they are never given a chance to star in films in the first place (Chow, 2016)? In 2015, a study done by the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at the University of California found that films that had minorities or diverse leads had higher box-office number but also produced higher investment returns for the studios (Hunt and Ramon 4).

In addition, misrepresentation is a hegemonic force that works to undermine other races. It is not just enough to recognize that there is a lack of representation but start to identify ways to accurately depict Asian Americans. While these misrepresentations do not try to be out rightly racist, they reveal a lot about the hidden ideology of the creator when shown. This can be seen especially in older films, and roles in the past for Asians in Hollywood. Anna May Wong is widely considered the first Chinese American movie star. Her beauty and looks were routinely exoticized and othered by the film industry from the beginning of her career in the 1920's. She was often placed into roles depicting Chinese people as cunning and sneaky villains and in her case, often highly sexualized. More than once she was looked over for lead roles in films

set in China because she was too Chinese looking and white actresses in yellowface were given the roles (Lim 2). At the height of her career Wong tried out for the role of O'lan, a Chinese farmer in *The Good Earth* (Franklin, 1937). The character of O'lan was one of the few roles that depicted Chinese people in a good light. However at the time under The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 or Hays Code, the anti-miscegenation made it illegal for people of color to be in relationships with white people on screen (Mondello, 2008). Since the lead male role had already gone to Paul Muni, also in yellowface, Wong couldn't have portrayed O'lan in the film and the role eventually went to Luise Rainer in yellowface makeup. Wong was offered to play Lotus, an evil prostitute, but she was fed up with playing wicked caricatures of her people and told the studio (Prasso 82), "You're asking me – with my Chinese blood – to do the only unsympathetic role in the picture, featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters" (qtd. in Prasso 83). Being the only Chinese person in a film about Chinese people played by white people in yellowface makeup and being the only character that is a villain was unacceptable and Wong did not take the part.

"Cinematic whitewashing isn't really ever aiming for prejudice. It's mostly subtle, with characters delicately re-appropriated for a Caucasian-centric public. But sometimes, just sometimes, it's full on racist" (Shamdasani, 2017)

In his article, Pavan Shamdasani addresses several Hollywood films that feature whitewashed roles. He suggests that this is done in order to make the films of Asian stories more palatable for white people but casting actors that people are familiar with and adore. However, he likens Mickey Rooney's famous character in a popular 60's film a World War II propaganda images (Shamdasani, 2017). Rooney's racist caricature Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961) is widely considered one of the most

racist and derogatory depictions of Asians on screen. Rooney in yellow face makeup including taped up eyelids, buckteeth and a strong and exaggerated accent are a testament to race perceptions the time and was not poorly received until many years later. Rooney and the film's director, Blake Edwards, have both stated that they did not mean for the role to be offensive (Yang, 2014). Intentionality is not the question people should be asking. Whether it was intentional or not it was still done. They thought it was acceptable and humorous at the time. The notion that a white woman would be a better actress for a role of an Asian woman over and actual Asian person is absurd. We often look at the past with a judging eye and exasperated tone when it comes to misrepresentations of race, but yellowface and the whitewashing of roles has not disappeared, it has just become stealthier. The reason it is happening in movies now and since the beginning of the film industry is hegemonic force that is white supremacy. The standard of movie star perfection in Hollywood films is and has always been focused on attractive White people. This is white supremacy in action, when casting directors place white men and women in lead roles, even when the story is uniquely Asian. It silences the Asian identity by saying that they're not worthy of telling their own stories and it silences the East Asian experience. That Asian people are unable to save themselves from their troubles without a white man as the chosen one. The misrepresentation of East Asians in films affect Asian men and women in American society; film helps form public opinions on race.

One of these public opinions is the seeming harmless model minority myth. Frank H. Wu's book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* examines American society through the lens of Asian American experience and discusses several undermining stereotypes for Asians, mainly the model minority and perpetual foreigner

tropes. Being called a model minority may seem like a compliment, but it is a backhanded, micro-aggressive one. Being told, you're not like other races is racist and the problem is that most people wouldn't even recognize it as so. In "The Repressive Hypothesis," Foucault states that power does not come from the individual. It's formed from groups and society. Power forms discourses, knowledge and these produce social norms subjects and ways of being. Society has been adding to this model minority concept blindly. The model minority is a minority group (racial, ethnic, or religious) that in certain countries that are perceived to have attained higher socioeconomic success than the population's average. In the United States, this term was originally coined for Japanese-Americans; it was expanded to include East Asians, American Jews and most recently South Asians. Other countries have their ideas of the model minority but America is where it is most prevalent. Sociologist William Petersen coined the term model minority in 1966 in a *New York Times Magazine* article, "Success Story: Japanese-American Style". The peak of the civil rights movement Peterson used this term to give rankings to minority standing using different factors in their environment. Education levels, income, commitment to employment and family stability were all measured to provide him with his outcome. Asians status in America was not always perceived this way. When the first Asian immigrants (mostly Chinese) arrived in America, they were generally tolerated by the masses. When gold was found in California, thousands of Chinese immigrants rushed there. They mined and they worked on the transcontinental railroad. In 1868 the Burlingame Treaty was signed which secured friendship between the U.S. and China, and even encourage sending Chinese laborers to work on the West Coast. But soon the people began to fear being overwhelmed and overpowered by the Chinese and passed laws discriminating against

them and several violent protests happened like the Anti-Chinese protest in Chico California in 1887. During World War II, 100,000 Japanese Americans were put into Internment camps. America was also at war with Germany and Italy, but Americans with those ancestries were not put into camps. Asians haven't always been the model minority, so when did they change from being outcasts to examples?

Wu examine legal cases, news stories, and cites personal experiences to illustrate how people think about race in the U.S. Asians in America are often referred to as the model minority. What this means is the Asian minority out of all the other races present in America are at the top of the racial hierarchical pyramid right below white people. But most importantly, still not equal to them because they are not white. This concept is a thinly veiled presentation of white supremacy that is more than often characterized as an internalized view. People think the model minority myth is true without really questioning it, or where it came from. Asian Americans are the model minority because of being viewed through stereotypes such as Asian people are smarter, better at math, or have better work ethics. However, the main reason is because of how well Asians have assimilated to white culture. Their racial standing is negotiated by how well they can imitate white people. Racial standing outside of White is mediated by whiteness. The American dream is fueled by the idea that hard work will make your dreams come true, and if you have not achieved them yet you are not working hard enough.

What makes Asian Americans the model minority, is it the submissive culture? Is it *wa*, the Japanese concept of group harmony over personal interests? Petersen measured it by education levels, income, employment commitment and family stability. Asian culture holds family in high regard; from a very young age obedience and family values are instilled into children. In his article, Petersen states that Confucian values

were a part of the Japanese-Americans rise to the top. Confucius held education in high regard and believed that it lead to peace. Being a hard worker is one of those values that your family teaches you. All of these things that the model minority was supposed to be stems from Asian culture. But these days, the model minority guidelines have been altered slightly. Education levels are still important but excelling is emphasized. The model minority myth occurs mainly because of two things. The first is studying and school is approached in a different way in most Asian countries than in America. School is stricter and the material is often more difficult and more advance than American schools. This affects the way children are forced to study once they come to America or how immigrant parents monitor their children's study. The second reason is once in America immigrant parents often push their children to pursue high paying jobs as security when they come from poorer countries. Jobs as doctors, lawyers and engineers or careers in finance are the most popular; this is part of the assimilation process not because these jobs are seen as jobs for white people, but jobs of successful people. In opposition to this idea, we have a myriad of examples of different races in high paying jobs held in notoriety. Pigeonholing certain races in job categories or stereotyping is a dangerous practice used by the white majority to keep other races fighting within themselves instead of raising questions against why these stereotypes exist in the first place. This is not exclusive to East Asian parents but to many parents who had a less fortunate upbringing regardless of race. These are not easy going pursuits. It starts in high school; you need good grades to get into a good college that has your concentration. After four years of college, to become a doctor you have to study for and score well on the MCATS to get into a medical school. Then go to medical school for four years, then apply and complete a residency in a real hospital. Depending on your specialty this can

take anywhere from three to seven years. If you choose to do a fellowship, this is an additional one to three years. This sort of dedication to academics is considered hard work but have a high payoff. Again, this is an example of the hard work it takes to become a doctor, but being a doctor is not racially exclusive. In the case of the model minority race is being perceived as a fact rather than a social construct, how smart or successful one race of people is compared to another is not a fact it's a racist assumption built on white supremacist ideology. Believing in the model minority myth is just a form of contemporary racism and a classist idea. People with a lower income might not have the time to study or go to school for eight plus years, when the focus is on making money in order to survive. But according to the myth, hard work is what helped Asian achieve this "blessing" from white America. This means that the other minorities are perceived as lazy, or just not willing to work hard, when people know this is not true. In this ideology, race functions as a guarantee, it gives people expectations of certain races. The model minority myth has a cyclical aspect to it. It plays into the formation of stereotypes but stereotypes about Asians are also formed by it. It also brings to question how other races in America are perceived. If Asians are the so-called "model" minority then in turn what kind of ideas are being perpetuated by it about other minorities? By placing Asians as the model that also places African Americans, Latinos and Natives in opposition to the myth of the model because they don't conform to white standards is in a small part a crucial aspect of white supremacy. As previously stated, presenting and accepting stereotypes is a dangerous practice but where does the acceptance come from? Barthes writes on the naturalization concept as an essential function to the innocent transformation of myth. Through the naturalization process, myth is de-contextualized and therefore purified of the power structures the concept has come from. This model

minority concept stems from the power structures ingrained in racial hierarchies and is seen as innocent, because it is not a derogatory practice and its fictional aspects have been made irrelevant.

Also if Asians are credited as model citizens, why are they not properly presented in films? The answer to both of the questions is the same, white supremacy. Minorities are placed in these roles that has created and reaffirmed the racial hierarchy in America.

The films below have been selected for further analysis as a case study for representation. The films selected are only few of many that encroach on Asian identity from the past fifteen years. These films encompass more than one of these themes and some have all three but each study will focus on analyzing these films by examining the components within them and how they add up to misrepresentation. They will be separated into three case studies: 1) Yellowface, 2) Asia as the exotic/Asian Mysticism, 3) Whitewashing/Substitution.

Yellow Face

Yellowface akin to blackface is almost self-explanatory, you take a white actor and make them look Asian. By doing this you have the issue of white directors and actors controlling ideology around what it means to be Asian on screen in the same way that minstrel shows controlled what it meant to be black in the public's eye with racist depictions and stereotypes. A popular practice in film history it is used to make white actors appear more Asian. This is can be achieved by either make-up or prosthetics or a combination of the two, taping eyelids is a trick from old Hollywood films in order to achieve the monolid, "slanty" eye look. This might seem like an old-fashioned and outdated practice but this is still happening in modern films.

When *Ghost in the Shell* released the first photo of Johansson as Major in 2016, it renewed the hate towards the film from the previous year when it was announced that Johansson would be in the film. Soon after, Paramount and DreamWorks were accused of using CGI to make her appear more Asian after a leak from their companies went to the press (Sampson, 2016). Both companies vehemently deny testing being done but the damage of the rumor still remains and online sources hold fast to the claims (Sampson, 2016) This new wave of yellowface in the digital sphere is just as harmful and racist as yellow makeup and taped eyelids. Instead of pondering the use of digital yellowface as a response to the backlash towards the film, perhaps an Asian woman should have been casted instead.

For a film that supposedly transcends race *Cloud Atlas* (Andy and Lana Wachowski and Tom Tykwer, 2012), based on the David Mitchell novel, has come under fire for the blatant and tasteless use of yellow face via prosthetics in the Neo Seoul arc of the film. In this film white actors, Jim Sturgess, James D’Arcy, and Hugo Weaving, along with Black actor Keith David are all put in makeup and prosthetics in order to look more Korean by giving them slanted and small eyes and then are paired with East Asian actresses. The basis for this is to have the characters in the film transcend race and sexuality by being portrayed by the same actors in each time period. However, placing actors in yellowface is a slap in the face to the Asian community. “Placing a white performer in yellowface is to put a megaphone to the lips of an A-list actor so he can announce ‘chink’ before an audience of millions.” (Lee, 2012). The use of yellowface is the same offense as a racial slur, it reinforces harmful stereotypes in any era. When criticized on their racist actions the Andy Wachowski defended their choices by stating, “The intention is to talk about things that are beyond race. The character of

this film is humanity, ” (qtd. in Rosen, 2012). They do this by as if the argument for humanity as a common race can be used to justify racist practices. In reality, the post-racial or colorblind argument is being used to silence people of color whether users know it or not. By stating that you don’t see color, you are ignoring the struggle that people of color endure everyday. One of their biggest critics is the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA). On their website, a public statement was released in order to assert their offense to the use of yellowface in the film. The organization’s founding president Guy Aoki stated,

Cloud Atlas’ prides itself on its ‘multi-racial cast . . . Cloud Atlas missed a great opportunity. The Korea story’s protagonist is an Asian man—an action hero who defies the odds and holds off armies of attackers. He’s the one who liberates Doona Bae from her repressive life and encourages her to join the resistance against the government. It would have been a great, stereotype-busting role for an Asian American actor to play, as Asian American men aren’t allowed to be dynamic or heroic very often. But instead, they cast Jim Sturgess in yellowface.

Aoki briefly touches on how Asian American males are typically cast in American films. They are mostly relegated to sidekick positions or only exist to help the white protagonist. It is hard to ignore the unintentional irony of having a white man in yellowface inspire an Asian woman to rebel against her oppressors.

Asia as the exotic/Asian Mysticism

Asian Mysticism is a problem that occurs in film when East Asian culture is appropriated in order to make the setting and characters more exotic. This also included the white savior complex as a cinematic trope. The white savior narrative occurs when the plot features a white man or women saving the native people in a foreign land or

people of color form their struggles or plight that is usually the fault of the community they came from (Hughey, 1). That way, even when a film about people of color is made, white people are put in the foreground. Daniel Hamamoto writes on Asian films and directors who won Oscars in the 1990's as opposed to the films that take concepts from Asian culture and justify the appropriation by stating a love for a culture that they don't even try to understand.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has conveniently forgotten its history of anti-Asian racism in film and congratulated itself by giving token recognition to Yellows who have demonstrated a willingness to play by it's rules. Rule number one: The life worlds of Asian and Asian American peoples must always be mediated by Whiteness. (Hamamoto 14)

The mediation of minorities' otherness by whiteness completely diminishes the culture they stem from. By comparing Asian culture to whiteness, it already implies an inferior choice and reinforces the racial hierarchy as a hegemonic force to keep white people in power especially in white savior narratives. This is an extremely toxic ideology as David Brooks states in his article "The Messiah Complex,"

It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. . . It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration. (Brooks, 2010)

His article is a critique of the white savior in James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009) is still applicable for films featuring Asian people and spaces. For example, Tom

Cruise in *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003) and more recently Matt Damon in *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2017). Presenting Asia as the exotic or a backdrop where Asian mysticism is principle in the main characters development and used only as a tool to further the plot not revered for what they are. Asia is only viewed as exotic because Asian culture is different than American. Visiting the “far East” and finding enlightenment via a Magical Asian, usually a wise old man, are popular manifestations of this motif. This is often a result of Asiaphillia. Asiaphillia is the love of Asian culture as a poor excuse for cultural appropriation. “Asiaphillia is a deceptively benign construct that naturalizes and justifies the systematic appropriation of cultural property and expressive forms created by Yellow people” (Hamamoto 12). Films that take concepts from Asian culture and justify the appropriation by stating a love for a culture that they don’t even try to understand work in conjunction with the fetishization of Asian people.

Marvel’s *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) draws heavily on the concept of Asian mysticism and the white savior narrative. After the protagonist Stephen Strange injures his hands in a car accident, he seeks a way to heal them by any means, which leads him to the fictional city of Kamar-Taj in Nepal. There he meets the Ancient One, a whitewashed portrayal by Tilda Swinton and she helps him heal and teaches him magic and the mystical properties of the world that he eventually saves from an evil magician. This is problematic on three levels. The first is the whitewashing of the Ancient One role. The character was originally Tibetan with a racist portrayal in the comics. In order to combat that a white women was chosen for the role. The director Scott Derrickson stated in an interview with *The Guardian* that he always envisioned the Ancient One as a women and did not want to the character to be a dragon lady stereotype (Evan, 2016). However, the original character as previously mentioned is Tibetan, and the

screenwriter Robert Carvill suggests that the choice was made in order to appease China,

He originates from Tibet, so if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going, 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political.

(qtd. in Evans, 2016)

The second grievance with the film is the use of Asian places and people as a background or set decorations. The main characters in the film save one, are almost entirely white, except for Chiwetel Ejiofor's character. The hero, villain, love interest, and mysterious leader are all white. The only Asian character of any importance is killed off. Nepal is presented as this mystical place of healing and wonder and the Ancient One is the "magical" and all-knowing Asian (minus the Asian) archetype. Instead of whitewashing this typical trope, perhaps an Asian actor could have been casted in order to reclaim and reinvent this character in order to subvert stereotypes and another actor of color could have been casted as the lead so people of color in film do not have to keep on sacrificing themselves for white people's gain.

Whitewashing

Whitewashing is an antiquated casting practice that puts white actors in ethnic roles, which has carried on for far too long. It is an ongoing problem in Hollywood that doesn't only pertain to Asians and through whitewashing history and culture gets destroyed, warped or erased (Williams, 2017). For example, Mara Rooney as Princess Tiger Lily in *Pan* (Joe Wright, 2015) and pretty much every movie ever made about Egypt including the almost entire white cast of *Gods of Egypt* (Ridley Scott, 2015). This

substitution motif has been especially popular recently in films *Aloha* (Cameron Crowe, 2015) and *Ghost in the Shell*. Both of which are under fire for casting white women in Asian roles. Whether it is in the characters or the plot, almost all of the films previously mentioned feature some form of whitewashing. This undermines Asian people and their culture, whitewashing is basically saying that your stories are good enough to make, but your people aren't good enough to star in them.

In *Aloha*, Emma Stone plays Allison Ng, a ¼ Chinese, ¼ Native Hawaiian, and ½ Caucasian character. The film has been criticized for presenting a whitewashed version of Hawaii and casting Emma Stone as a mixed raced Native girl is not helping it's cause. In response to the backlash Crowe offered a "heartfelt apology" on his blog The UnCool and explains the origins of Stone's character. In the film Ng is written as very proud of her Hawaiian heritage and is frustrated by having to explain or justify herself because of her outward appearances and gave her a half Chinese father "to show the surprising mix of cultures often prevalent in Hawaii," (Crowe, 2015). Crowe based Ng on a redheaded locale he met that had a similar background (Crowe, 2015). Of course there are white-passing people in the world with diverse backgrounds, but in a film that aims to "respectfully showcases the spirit and culture of the Hawaiian people," (qtd. in Tribune wire reports, 2015) Yet, the film has been criticized for the disconnect between it and a connection to Hawaiian culture (Kelleher, 2015). There is no way to respectfully showcase Hawaiian culture and spirit when the main character doing so is a white person. To think that Stone is the right choice for this is delusional. Asian Americans are already underrepresented in Hollywood films, why would Crowe add to that by casting a white woman as an Asian person when he could have chosen an Asian actor? The allure of Stone's star power paired with her whiteness is being used in an attempt to secure

financial gain. The names and power of white stars are more important than the voices of the native people. The entire film is based around a slew of white actors: Bradley Cooper, Bill Murray, Emma Stone, Rachel McAdams, Alec Baldwin, Danny McBride and John Krasinski. The MANAA publically condemned Crowe and Sony for adding to the erasure of Asian Pacific Islanders in the film (MANAA, 2015). In their statement, former Hawaiian resident Guy Aoki states,

“60% of Hawaii’s population is AAPIs, Caucasians only make up 30% of the population, but from watching this film, you’d think they made up 90%. This comes in a long line of films (*The Descendants*, *50 First Dates*, *Blue Crush*, *Pearl Harbor*) that uses Hawaii for its exotic backdrop but goes out of its way to exclude the very people who live there. . . It’s an insult to the diverse culture and fabric of Hawaii (MANAA, 2015).

After researching the film’s IMDB page, Aoki found that the only roles for Asian people in the film were for unnamed roles, which adds to the exclusion of Native Hawaiians. You cannot present a “love letter” (to a culture and ignore it’s people. *Aloha* exoticizes Hawaii as a playground for white people. The whitewashing, military romance focused film is also under attack for its title choice. Native Hawaiian activist Walter Ritte denounces the use of *aloha* as the title ““If you have a romantic comedy about the military in Hawaii ... but a title that says 'Aloha,' I can only guess that they'll bastardize the word. They're taking our sacred word ... and they're going to make a lot of money off of it," (Kelleher, 2015). *Aloha* the word, is so much more complicated and beautiful than the simplified representation of it in the film as a greeting or conveyance of love (Kelleher, 2015). Even worse, Crowe tried to defend his choices by saying her hired locals to help make the film, doing lots of research and by working closely with

Dennis “Bumpy” Kanahale, a Hawaiian activist (Crowe, 2015). Crowe stating that he worked with a native activist is like a person saying a racist comment and they justifying it by saying that they have black friends. It does not justify your actions and it is a poor excuse.

Dragonball Evolution (James Wong, 2009) a live action movie based on *Dragon Ball* franchise. The franchise began with a manga created by Akira Toriyama in 1984 that was based on the traditional Chinese text, *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en and has had several anime adaptations created. *Journey to the West* was first published in the 16th century and is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature (Stempniewicz, 37) and is based on the pilgrimage of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang during the Tang dynasty (Zhang, 2016). The 2009 film features Justin Chatwin, a white man as the main character Goku, modeled after Xuanzang in the manga. Goku is tasked with saving the earth by collecting the mystical Dragonballs before an evil Alien bent on destroying the earth can find them. The film's protagonist, antagonist and most of its cast are all white with a few Asian actors are thrown in the mix. This is not only whitewashing but also implementing a white savior narrative on this important and revered Chinese novel. Fortunately, the film was so bad it garnered less backlash from whitewashing and the main focus of bashing the film was based purely on its content.

21 (Luketic, 2008) is loosely based on the novel *Bringing Down the House* by Ben Mezrich. The film is based on the true story of the MIT Blackjack Team, a group of students from MIT who won millions by counting cards at blackjack tables in Las Vegas and other casinos. The team was comprised of mostly Asian students whose ethnicity was crucial to winning large quantities without much notice or fuss (Lin, 2008).

The MIT team thrived by choosing [Big Players] who fit the casino mold of the young, foolish, and wealthy. Primarily nonwhite, either Asian or Middle Eastern, these were the kids the casinos were accustomed to seeing bet a thousand bucks a hand. Like many on the team, Kevin Lewis was part Asian, and could pass as the child of a rich Chinese or Japanese executive ... ‘... White 20-year-olds with \$2 million bankrolls stand out, ‘explains Andrew Tay, one of Lewis’ teammates.

(excerpt qtd. In Lin, 2008)

Even when the Asian ethnicity is central to the plot, white actors are still being chosen over Asian ones. In a lecture at MIT, Mezrich stated that the casting process is typical “though most of the actual blackjack team was composed of Asian males, a studio executive involved in the casting process said that most of the film’s actors would be white, with perhaps an Asian female,” (qtd. in Der, 2005). So now the film does not just whitewash an Asian story, but it also creating a token Asian character to give the illusion of diversity. In his article Lin even theorizes that if Asian Americans had better filmic representations, then maybe the backlash would not have been so big. This film had the potential to present Asian characters as three-dimensional and varied being but instead miss the mark completely.

M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Last Airbender* is renowned for its whitewashed cast. The film is based off the animated TV series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Both are set in a fictional world that appropriates different Asian and Inuit cultures including religion, iconography and general aesthetic. The Asian themes of the film come directly from the cartoon on which it was based. However, Shyamalan was heavily criticized for casting white people in the main roles. In the fictional world of the film, the earth is separated into tribes by location and within these tribes some people have the ability to

manipulate or “bend” the four elements: water, earth, fire and air. The Water Tribes are separated by location on the North and South Poles and are heavily based on Inuit culture. The Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation are influenced by East Asian culture, mostly Japanese and Chinese based on the clothing. The airbenders are known as nomads who travel to and live in temples around the world and are based on Buddhist monks. Only one person has the ability to control all four, the Avatar. The Fire Nation is waging a war against the other tribes and has killed all the airbenders because it was believed that one of them is the Avatar. This entire world is based off of many Asian cultures yet in the film feature practically no Asian people. The four main characters of the film are Aang, Katara, Sokka and Zuko. White actors play the first three. Zuko is the villain of the film and is played by Dev Patel. Now there is the problem of not only whitewashing but creating a brown villain to chase and capture a bunch of little white children, this presents a problematic representation of South Asians. Using white people to represent any person of color is additive to the racial hegemonic nature of Hollywood films, “this property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power,” (Dyer, 127). The act of whitewashing in itself is where it’s power comes from. By presenting white people as the default, then the control is exerted through the film and is then used to construct a representation of what it means to be Asian through the lens of a white body. Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko created the original show in 2005, two white American men (Lopez, 435). However, because of the show’s overtly Asian influence (Chinese, Japanese, Inuit, Korean), many fans of the show commented online on the accuracy of these cultural portrayals, regardless of the characters’ racial ambiguity in the show (Lopez, 435). Despite being based on a widely

popular cartoon, the film was not well received and has a six percent approval rating on Rotten Tomato.

Ghost in the Shell is a Japanese media franchise that began as a manga by Masamune Shirow, then was adapted into an anime movie in 1995 and has had several anime sequels and a TV show made. Johansson's controversial casting as Major Mokoto was making waves all across the internet. The story of *Ghost* is an inherently Japanese one. The characters are Japanese and the setting is in a futuristic version of Japan yet the actors are white. It would have been one thing to make this a cultural adaptation but the Japanese setting and names are still in the film. At its very core it is a story about what it means to be a human being and most of the original film despite coming off as an action anime deals with questions of philosophy presented by the "ghost in the Machine," an explanation of Cartesian Dualism by Gilbert Ryle (Sankaran, 2017). However, the director of the original anime film, Mamoru Oshii, has commended Johansson on her performance as Major saying that she exceeded his expectations (Sheridan, 2016). Japanese-American Actress Ai Yoshihara blames that acceptance of Johansson as Major by the anime's director and Japanese fans on the internalized views on white beauty standards and western ideals, "People in Japan worship white people" (Sun, 2017) Max Landis, a Hollywood screenwriter with no ties to the remake released a YouTube video about the controversy. In it he blames an ignorance of industry for people's outrage and stated that Johansson was picked for the role over an Asian actor because there are no "A-list female Asian celebrities" that have the kind of pull Johansson has and claims it to be part of a broken system (Child, 2016). This is a result of the racial ideology mentioned previously. There are no A-list Asian actors because they have not been given the opportunity and they are not given opportunities because

they are not A-listers. In an interview with *Marie Claire* Johansson defends her casting by stating that she isn't playing a Japanese character, "I certainly would never presume to play another race of a person. Diversity is important in Hollywood, and I would never want to feel like I was playing a character that was offensive," (Johansson qtd. in Hauser, 2017). These mindsets paired with the fact that her character is a cyborg and therefore identity-less (Kenneally, 2017) are the excuses Johansson gave in order to quell some sort of justification for her casting. Which is understandable, people like to think that they get rewards based on merit of talent, not because they are white, but by ignoring one's privilege, others are silenced. This was before the release of the film, after the film was released the MANAA called Johansson a liar due to the film's attempt to confront the whitewashing critique. Near the end of the film, it is revealed that Major was actually a Japanese woman named Motoko Kusanagi (the Major's original name in the manga) and activist that was protesting against the Hanaka company that Major now works for. She was kidnapped and her brain was put in the shell that is her cyborg body, then her memories of her former life were erased. Major was then given a completely new backstory, that she used to be a woman named Mira Killian by the Hanaka company, then put to work for them. Not only does the film add to the erasure of Asian people by whitewashing but also it does it in the story as well by making the erasure a plot twist that does not occur in the original manga or any of the anime productions. By trying to confront the whitewashing head on, the film has just made it worse. In an interview about the film with three other Japanese-American actresses Keiko Agena is not impressed with the big reveal and it made her focus on the beauty standards set in the United States around whiteness,

That was the other cringe-worthy moment, when they called each other by their Japanese names. We're looking at these beautiful white bodies saying these Japanese names, and it hurt my heart a little bit . . . I felt more messed up watching this movie. It reinforced my own personal messed-up standards of physical beauty. (Sun, 2017)

At the beginning of the film, it's stated that Hanaka only make the best of the best, whether it's human or robotics, Atsuko Okatsuka stated her concern for that statement because the best of human and robotics in this fictional world reads as whiteness (Sun, 2017). There is an interesting pattern present in films and other entertainment when a theoretical future is presented.

In film, whenever creations of a possible future are constructed, Asian aesthetics or culture is always present, but there is a noticeable absence of Asian people. Why is it when a new version of the future is presented that the future is always white? Or is the future presented as white because people of color are not presented with the opportunity to be cast in lead roles under the guise of less financial gain? The *Harold and Kumar* films more than doubled their budget inside and out of box office sales (Chow, 2016). With that in mind, this excuse is no longer valid as *Ghost in the Shell* is considered a box office flop after only garnering \$19 million opening weekend in comparison to the film's \$110 million dollar budget (Herreria, 2017). This paired with the 45% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes has Paramount claiming that the whitewashing controversy that has followed the film since it's conception is to blame for the film's poor reception (Herreria, 2017). Now that the money excuse has been disproven, Hollywood will now have to look within itself and just admit its preface for a racial hierarchy with white people at the pinnacle. After *Ghost in the Shell* became a

flop, there is nothing left for executives to hide behind and exposes the racist casting practices. Insuring proper representation is important not only for Asian Americans, but for all people of color.

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