

**The Weaponisation of the Language of Oppression:
Review of R. F. Kuang, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence:
An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution***

Marie-Luise Kohlke
(Swansea University, Wales, UK)

R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*
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Once in a blue moon, a neo-Victorian novel appears that sears itself into the consciousness of readers, promising to become a sort of instant classic of the genre. R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022)¹ is one such text, a cross-over Young Adult (YA) novel that unsurprisingly garnered the #1 spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list as soon as it came out and, more recently, made the 2022 Waterstones Book of the Year shortlist and went on to win the 2022 Nebula Award for best novel (*New York Times* 2022: n.p.; Waterstones 2023a: n.p.; Nebula Awards 2023: n.p.). The world-building in Kuang's alternative history not only takes an original approach to neo-Victorianism's prominent themes of imperialist exploitation and colonial injustice but also deftly focalises the intimate, often invidious links between power, language, and globalised capitalism in the making – and skewing – of our collective perceptions of reality and history. At the same time, Kuang's narrative enthrals through its celebration of the nuanced richness of English and other languages, their hybridity, multivocality, and inventiveness, deriving at least in part from cross-fertilisations between and infiltrations of one another. The power that propels Kuang's novel thus stems equally from the compelling plot and the text's exuberant pleasure in words and etymologies.

A Chinese-American writer and academic who holds BA, MPhil and MSc degrees in History, Chinese Studies, and Contemporary Chinese Studies

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respectively,² Kuang already established her fantasy credentials with the acclaimed Poppy War series, another alternative history consisting of *The Poppy War* (2018), *The Dragon Republic* (2019) and *The Burning Republic* (2020). Auctioned on Kuang's twentieth birthday, *The Poppy War* was subsequently nominated as best novel for the World Fantasy, Nebula, and British Fantasy Awards, with the series winning Kuang the 2020 *Astounding Award for Best New Writer* (The Hugo Awards 2020: n.p.), among other prizes. Like her trilogy, *Babel* too draws on real-world nineteenth-century Chinese history, specifically the West's illegal promotion of the opium trade in China and the resulting First Opium War of 1839-1842.³ While the Poppy War series explores Chinese history through the trope of military strategy, *Babel* dissects what Jon Miller and Gregory Stanczak have termed the invidious Victorian "triad" of British empire-building, economics and Christianity (Miller and Stanczak 2009: 332), evoked in the novel's titular biblical reference and epitomised by the translator guild's silverwork for supposed world improvement but actually for white⁴ Western, specifically British supremacy. Hence while Kuang's Poppy War trilogy reworks the collective cataclysmic traumas of Chinese history with magic and dragons, *Babel* concentrates more on British cultural appropriation and the infliction of insidious traumas on exploited colonised peoples, but once again through a distinctly Chinese perspective and protagonist.

Most of the novel's action takes place in Oxford, focused on the so-called Tower of Babel, which houses the University's world-leading Royal Institute of Translation. Here British academics and student linguists work alongside their 'privileged' immigrant counterparts, mainly from Britain's colonial domains, to harness the magical properties of silver through their strategic deployment of language and translation skills, all to ensure the empire's continuing economic and political world dominance. The art of silver-working makes British "ships faster", its "soldiers hardier", and its "guns more deadly" (p. 100), as well as the homes of the wealthy more comfortable.

The novel, however, opens in China with a parodic dramatisation of the white saviour syndrome, as *Babel*'s Professor Richard Lovell 'rescues' an illegitimate Cantonese orphan during an Asiatic cholera epidemic in 1829, after the boy's Chinese grandparents and mother, along with his English nurse, Miss Betty, have already perished from the disease. The boy (whose Chinese name the reader crucially never learns) is literally 'saved' from death

through Lovell's application of a silver bar and his pronouncement of a linked word-pair in French and English. Physically resurrected, the protagonist is also symbolically reborn as Lovell's ward, Robin Swift, combining the first name that his English nurse bestowed upon him with a self-chosen last name derived from the author of one of his favourite English-language books, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) – though not before Lovell has tested the child's affinity and innate ability for silver working. The novel's opening, then, establishes the entirely transactional and unequal nature of the imperialist-colonial relationship, with Lovell the possessor of silver and Robin the 'native' to be improved by Anglicisation and transplantation to England while obligated to eternal gratitude for his saviour's intercession. Indeed, in later chapters, Lovell accuses his ward of ingratitude whenever Robin dares to critique his 'saviour' or Britain's imperial project (see, e.g., pp. 261-262 and 318-319).

Fittingly, Lovell tests Robin's command of written English by having him read from *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) by Adam Smith, an early advocate of free trade (or what became known as laissez-faire capitalism), which Britain – both in Kuang's novel and in real-world history – would use to justify precipitating war with China. The work's full title, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, suggests that Lovell merely views Robin in terms of the boy's use value, objectifying him as an instrument to further British wealth production. It is no coincidence that the "prevailing view" propounded by Smith's work held "that gold and silver was wealth, and that countries should boost exports and resist imports in order to maximize this metal wealth" (Adam Smith Institute N.d.: n.p.) at a time when Kuang's alternative Britain, like its historical counterpart, suffered under a significant trade imbalance with China and sought to gain greater access to Chinese silver reserves through illicit sales of opium banned by the Qing Emperor.⁵

From the outset, Lovell and Robin's relationship is based on coercion and dissimulation, mimicking Britain's relationship with China. While threatening the boy with a dire fate should he choose to remain in Canton – "All you will ever know is poverty, disease, and starvation" – Lovell states that "your father [is] unknown" (p. 10), and when pressing the boy to choose an English name for himself, Lovell dismisses his proposal to adopt his benefactor's last name because people will "think I'm your father" (p. 12). The intuitive Robin quickly discerns that the professor must have been the

source of the twice-yearly parcels of English-language books he received since age four and the paymaster of his English nurse, leading the protagonist to question the true nature of his relationship with Lovell, with the latter in due course revealed to be the boy's biological sire. *Babel* further foregrounds the calculating aspect of Lovell's intercession when Robin realises that the professor could have intervened far earlier and used his silver bars to save the life of Robin's mother as well but deliberately chose not to do so.

Coercion becomes most overt in Lovell's one-off violent beating of Robin after bringing the boy to his Hampstead home in London to be educated and 'improved' sufficiently to qualify for entry to university studies at Babel. When Robin becomes so engrossed in a Marryat adventure novel that he forgets to attend the daily lesson with his tutor in Ancient Greek, Lovell strikes his face with sufficient force to knock him to the ground, before viciously beating his ward with a poker, cracking Robin's ribs in punishment for his "laziness", time-wasting "sloth", and lack of scholarly diligence (p. 40). The assault also becomes an opportunity for Lovell to explicitly articulate his white supremacist ideology, which recycles prevalent real-world Victorian stereotypes of the Chinese:

Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind. This is why China remains an indolent and backward country while her neighbours hurtle towards progress. You are, by nature, foolish, weak-minded, and disinclined to hard work. You must resist these traits, Robin. You must learn to overcome the pollution of your own blood. (p. 41)

Empathising with the shocked and violated focaliser, most readers will viscerally revolt against such a vitriolic racist attack upon a vulnerable, eleven-year-old child. The scene makes clear that the symbolic violence of Western imperialism is always underpinned with the threat of literal force, at the same time highlighting Britain's wilful blindness to its own "pollution" by virulent racism.

Lovell's betrayal of his own flesh-and-blood reaches its epitome in Robin's eventual discovery that the professor has, in effect, conducted a eugenic experiment to produce docile, talented, Chinese linguists for the British Empire by breeding them from his own bloodline. Robin, it turns out, is merely another prototype intended to replace an unsatisfactory prior model

of the dutiful colonial instrument, namely his half-brother Griffin Harley/Lovell, who not only defiantly appropriates their father's name but recruits Robin for the Hermes Society, a covert resistance movement. The brothers' uncanny resemblance as virtual doubles of one another underlines the colonials' ready expendability and replaceability when no longer deemed fit for purpose by their British exploiters.

The protagonist's removal from Canton initiates a quasi-pathological, self-destructive pattern of Robin desperately trying to fit in and go unnoticed, attempting to cast off his cultural heritage and Chinese identity to pass more easily as white (see p. 18). Just as crucially, however, Robin's violent separation from his home, along with his attempted dissociative self-transformation, positions the protagonist as a trauma victim of implicit cultural genocide. As Robin watches his Chinese homeland recede into the distance, aboard the ship departing from Canton, he thus experiences

a raw emptiness, as if a grappling hook had yanked his heart out of his body. [...] The word *loss* was inadequate. Loss [...] did not encompass the totality of this severance, this terrifying un-anchoring from all that he'd ever known. (p. 15, original italics)

Robin's mother tongue constitutes the only aspect of his Chinese heritage that Lovell insists he maintain and cultivate, though only to become a more efficient translator to better promote the interests of the British Empire.

Yet Robin's assimilation always remains contingent and incomplete, disrupted by repeated incidents of racist prejudice and threat. On his journey to Oxford, a female passenger on the train enquires on behalf of her son whether Robin "can see" properly or only perceives the world "in little slits" (p. 47). And once the protagonist forms a close friendship with another new colonial arrival at the Institute of Translation, the Indian Ramiz ('Ramy') Rafi Mirza, the boys "stuck out like sore thumbs" (p. 53), since Ramy's darker skin and self-dramatised exoticism – he presents himself as "a Mughal prince" (p. 54) to counteract racist denigration – renders the Indian "immediately, visibly other" (p. 53), no longer allowing Robin's own foreignness to go largely unnoticed. Robin's dream of assimilation and 'passing' are further disrupted by college rivalries, as when the friends have to flee from a group of drunken Balliol students intent on stripping them of

their academic gowns, which the white men do not deem foreigners entitled to wear (see pp. 62-63). *Babel* thus repeatedly foregrounds the existential precarity of ethnic minorities and individuals of mixed ethnic heritage in an inhospitable system based on the precedence of whiteness.

While Kuang's BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) readers may well recognise their own experiences of encountered racism in such scenes, the latter's pervasiveness becomes increasingly unsettling for white readers. That discomfort arguably serves a pedagogical function: such scenes give white audiences a defamiliarising vicarious 'taste' of what it means to be at the receiving end of racism (through cross-cultural identification with Robin). The sense of displacement from the security of their ethnic comfort zone – a 'safe', ameliorated mimicry of Robin's earlier cited "un-anchoring" – helps counter the dominant Anglocentric focus in neo-Victorianism along the lines proposed by Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann: "We need to understand what it means to be outside of home, to be the exhibit rather than the curator" (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 28).⁶ Implicitly, white readers, their culture and history become the "exhibit[s]" viewed and estranged through Robin's gaze. At the same time, depicted instances of racism also force white readers to confront their complicitous benefitting from white privilege and their exemption from comparable discrimination. Kuang's novel pulls no punches in this regard, refusing to 'shield' young (and adult) audiences from unpalatable truths that mirror those of our own society.

Kuang deliberately circumvents any celebratory or reparative re-telling of colonial trauma, which only becomes more extreme as the novel progresses. There can be neither a heroic overcoming against all odds nor reconciliation between opposing factions in *Babel's* culture wars. The novel's active encouragement of anger and outrage as legitimate and *appropriate* responses to systemic racial injustice makes it doubtful that, in the context of the USA's current own culture wars about 'wokeism', *Babel* will find the place in many American school libraries that it definitely deserves. Whether it will fare better in British school and university libraries remains to be seen. Rage bubbles away beneath the narrative as much as it does in repressed form beneath Robin's unassuming placid exterior until it eventually explodes into full-blown violent rebellion. For white readers, however, such cross-culturally appropriated anger on the Chinese colonial's behalf also involves more complex self-contortions of rage directed *against* one's reading self.

Repeatedly, Kuang's novel also depicts the wilful blindness of white privilege, as when Billings, a senior porter at Babel conducting Robin and Ramy on their first tour of the premises, draws their attention to a bas-relief commemorating the famous translator Sir William Jones in the college chapel. The memorial depicts the great man at his "writing desk, [...]" while three figures, clearly meant to be Indians, sat submissively on the floor before him like children receiving a lesson – "a digest" of their own "Hindu laws" in Sanskrit, which Jones is in the process of translating (p. 61). Billings implicitly reads this as an image of cross-cultural cooperation and inclusivity, proudly proclaiming, "We are, I believe, the only college whose walls are graced with Indians" (p. 61). The myth of Babel as the manifest ideal of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and (linguistic) diversity is further exposed in the racist myopia of Billings's response to Ramy's question as to why the Brahmins are made to occupy the floor: "They like sitting cross-legged [...] for they find it more comfortable" (p. 61). Ramy's laconic reply – "Very illuminating, [...] I never knew." (p. 61) – underlines the unthinking affront rendered by interpreting Indian culture to an Indian (albeit a Muslim rather than a Hindu) in an act of 'whitesplaining' or, perhaps more accurately, 'white mansplaining'. With barbed irony, Kuang thus locates the secret entryway to the Hermes Society's sanctuary beneath the same bas-relief, opened by pressing the inscribed letters for "*Gorasahib*" (p. 377), meaning 'white sir' or 'white master'.

Professor Playfair displays a similar racist blind spot when he expounds on Babel's multiculturalism by comparing Robin, Ramy, and their fellow colonial student, the Black Haitian-French Victoire Desgraves, to Psammetichus's "Egyptian boys" sent to the Egyptian King's Ionian allies to learn Greek and eventually become "interpreters between the two peoples" (p. 81). In light of the racism already encountered by Robin and Ramy, the ironically named Playfair's paean to translation reads more like a cover-up of imperialist predation:

'Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace. Translation makes possible communication, which in turn makes possible the kind of diplomacy, trade, and cooperation between foreign peoples that brings wealth and prosperity to all.['] (p. 81)

For Britain hardly ‘plays fair’ at the game of free trade, readily resorting to military force when diplomacy fails and Britain cannot get its own way, as in the case of China. Playfair goes on to stress Babel’s outlier status among Oxford colleges in being the only one to admit “students not of European origin”, insisting that “[w]e accept you not despite, but *because* of your foreign backgrounds”, since colonials possess “the gift of languages those born in England cannot imitate. And you, like Psammetichus’s boys, are the tongues that will speak this vision of global harmony into being” (p. 81, original emphasis). Playfair’s words prove insidiously seductive, encouraging the colonials to buy into Britain’s imperialist project. Robin eagerly contemplates the possibility “that perhaps his unbelonging did not doom him to existing forever on the margins”, even as Herodotus’s tale makes “his gut squirm”, remembering as he does that the Egyptian boys were “slaves” (p. 81).

Rather than a place of inclusivity, then, Babel serves to co-opt the oppressed into perpetuating their people’s oppression under the guise of high ideals and accession to an otherwise unachievable privileged position. As Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letitia (‘Letty’) Price – the only white British member of their year’s intake but marginalised on account of her sex – come to realise, once given “the keys to the kingdom”, no one “want[s] to give them back” (p. 88). Actually, of course, British silver-working technology does not extend Playfair’s “prosperity to all” but preserves it for white wealthy elites. In effect, silver’s magical properties equate to undemocratic, oppressive, *imperialist* power, obfuscated as benevolent ‘progress’ and earned privilege for those identifying themselves with the colonisers. As Griffin explains, Babel’s “translation magic [...] benefits England and England only” (p. 99), above all its upper classes. It is no coincidence that, when the rebels take over Babel, going on strike and threatening to make Britain’s silver-reliant economy grind to a halt unless the government publicly disavows any war plans against China, their main source of popular support comes from the disenfranchised working classes, who join their strike (see p. 476), and from the unemployed poor, the wage ‘slaves’ who have lost their living to the ‘improvements’ of silverwork in manufacturing occupations during “the silver industrial revolution” (p. 211).

Genuine world improvement is left to the Hermes Society. It operates a sort of global ‘dark net’ or network committed to a Robin Hood-style wealth “redistribut[ion]”, which involves “send[ing] bars and silver-working

materials all over the world to people who need them – people who don't have the luxury of being rich and British" (p. 97). Meanwhile Playfair's earlier cited, eulogised project of "global harmony" is no more than an orchestrated web of appropriation of "foreign resources" with Babel sitting like a spider at the centre; in Griffin's words, "It's intricately tied to the business of colonialism. It *is* the business of colonialism" (p. 100, original emphasis). Described by Playfair as "a literal transportation of texts across conquered territory, words delivered like spices from an alien land" (p. 106), translation becomes implicated in invasion, occupation, and forcible extraction. In similar vein, Robin finally recognises his role as a mere commodity, comparing himself to "*a silver mine to be plundered*" (p. 111, original emphasis).

The voracious exploitation of other peoples' languages as just another resource obscures both Britain's dependence on and debt to non-European cultures, which are denied rather than celebrated. Silver-working relies on an English word matched with a foreign term of similar meaning but also extra different connotations. Accordingly, the senior scholar Anthony Ribben, a fellow Hermes member, explains that as languages influence each other and the "barriers" between them become "more porous", with foreign terms assimilated and standardised into English, the power released by silverwork decreases and silver bars start "losing their efficacy" (p. 163). Hence Britain scours the rest of the globe for lesser-known languages to discover new match pairs. Rather than Babel with its collectors and curators, it is English itself that proves the fount of true multiculturalism in Kuang's novel:

the influences on English were so much deeper and more diverse that they had thought. *Chit* came from the Marathi *chitti*, meaning 'letter' or 'note'. *Coffee* had made its way into English by way of Dutch (*koffie*), Turkish (*kahveh*), and originally Arabic (*qahwah*). Tabby cats were named after a striped silk that was in turn named for its place of origin: a quarter of Baghdad names al-'Attābiyya. Even basic words for clothes all came from somewhere. *Damask* came from cloth made in Damascus; *gingham* came from the Malay word *genggang*, meaning 'striped'; *calico* referred to Calicut in Kerala, and *taffeta* [...] had its roots in the Persian word *tafte*, meaning 'a shiny cloth'. (p. 167)

Language effortlessly achieves the expansionism that Britain seeks to accomplish with force and deceit: encompassing the world, English honours and preserves rather than negates global diversity.

Kuang's novel resonates powerfully with current cultural discourses about global wealth and resource inequality, student and youth protest movements against social injustice, and debates around the 'decolonisation' of university curricula, academia, and wider culture to recognise the crucial contributions made by peoples and communities of colour to all aspects of Western societies. Indeed, *Babel* seems eminently suitable to be included on YA, neo-Victorian, fantasy, and dystopian fiction courses to help inject heterogeneity back into conceptions of the period that witnessed the apex of the British Empire, correcting what, in *Black Neo-Victoriana*, Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke and Julian Wacker decry as "a misleading homogenising concept of 'the Victorian' as a shorthand for a white Long Nineteenth Century" (Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke and Wacker 2022: 3). Akin to the Black British writer Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019), *Babel* contests "the narratological privileging of whiteness" and the "epistemic lens" that likewise erases colour, both in Victorian literature and a preponderance of neo-Victorian fiction (Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke and Wacker 2022: 3, 7).

A comparable problem has been identified in children's and YA fiction. The writer Walter Dean Myers's article thus explicitly poses the question, 'Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?', suggesting that non-white young readers fail to find proper "validation of their existence as human beings" due to the lack of fictional representations of people like themselves (W.D. Myers 2014: n.p.). Similarly, his son and sometimes collaborator, author and illustrator Christopher Myers, critiques what he terms "[t]he apartheid of children's literature", its "exclusivity, in which children of color are at best background characters and more often than not absent",⁷ as though their "lives" are not "worthy of being told, thought about, discussed and even celebrated" (C. Myers 2014: n.p.). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas points to the gradual "shift in terminology" from 'multiculturalism' to 'diversity' in children's (and YA) literature, in recognition of other intersectional differences "beyond race and ethnicity"; however, echoing the just cited neo-Victorian theorists, she points out that 'diversity' likewise still "fails in our purportedly post-racial era to challenge white privilege and structures of race and power" in the publishing business (Thomas 2016: 115),⁸

and arguably the wider world also. Charles Johnson too expresses dismay at the skewed available “reading experiences” for young readers of colour, who are “not so subtly indoctrinated by our Eurocentric society into seeing whites as having a monopoly on goodness, truth, and beauty while [they are] relegated to the supporting, ‘background,’ or sidekick role[s]”, thereby “reinforc[ing] this culture’s desire to place kids of color in a subordinate position as servants to whites or render them invisible” (Johnson 2014: 3). In contrast, Kuang’s YA novel deliberately *foregrounds* the lives and actions of its three protagonists of colour at the expense of those of any white Babel students (including Letty), who make up the majority of aspiring translators. At the same time, however, Kuang’s novel gives support to Thomas’s view that ‘diversity’ can too readily become a catchword to obscure rather than constructively engage with systemic racism. Just as crucially, Kuang foregrounds an Asian, specifically a Chinese perspective rather than the African, Caribbean, or African-American viewpoint more commonly focused on by both neo-Victorian and child/YA literature theorists.

Echoing Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke and Wacker’s notions of a distorted “epistemic lens”, the young rebel Ibrahim seeks to preserve an account of the Hermes resistance movement and Babel’s fall as a counter-history, an “intervent[ion] against the archives” (p. 505). The chronicle anticipates the burying or eradication of their struggle for future generations, whose knowledge about the revolution will be severely curtailed by official versions of events. One copy is entrusted to the working man Abel, the organiser of the barricades built to defend the occupied Babel from military assault, with the appeal to print and disseminate it across the country. Metafictionally, *Babel* thus draws on “neo-Victorianism as a larger global framework” to explore “discourses around nostalgia, heritage and cultural memory” (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 24) – including Western societies’ inherited systemic racism and strategic elisions in collective memories of empire. Moreover, Robin’s colonial perspective, alongside those of Ramy and Victoire, counteracts the risks that neo-Victorianism, when extended to encompass “international and global contexts”, assumes shades of an implicit cultural “imperialism” and unethical appropriation by “suggesting [...] an overarching narrative that erases the specificities of cultural memory and inculcates a homogenisation of heritage” (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 26). Instead, *Babel*’s alternative history reinjects cultural, ethnic, and linguistic *heterogeneity* into readers’ perceptions of the Long Nineteenth Century,

British history, and the English language, thus deconstructing the very possibility of asserting some sort of national ‘purity’ or exclusive whiteness as the foundations of collective identity, past or present.

Like some white neo-Victorian writers before her, Kuang might be accused of opting too conveniently for a mixed-race protagonist to act as intermediary between cultures for white readers. One might think here, e.g., of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Peevay, product of his mother’s rape by a white sealer, in Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* (2000). White readers may find Robin, like Peevay, easier to empathise with without incurring guilt for improperly appropriating the marginalised perspective of the dominated. However, Robin’s mixed heritage is also used to underline the excesses of British imperialism via the unnatural, monstrous father figure Lovell, who embodies the purportedly benign but actually patronising, exploitative, and deeply racist paternalism of Western empires. Hence Kuang’s Robin serves as more than just “a superficial marker of a performance of diversity”, which “Black historical presence” – or in *Babel*’s case, Asian historical presence – risks becoming in some neo-Victorian fiction, regardless of “authorial positionality” (Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke and Wacker 2022: 12, 13).

Much the same, of course, has been argued of tokenistic diversity in children’s and YA fiction. Lissa Paul, for instance, denounces a long dominant strand of “sunny Disney multiculturalism [that] reads with the superficiality of greeting-card cheeriness” while papering over “sins of omission” (Paul 2009: 85-86), failing to address historical racial injustice and systemic white violence. As Paul points out, “[u]ntil about the late 1980s, the presence of a child of colour was enough to classify a book as multicultural” (Paul 2009: 89). Only much more recently has such lip service to inclusivity “given way to something more disturbing”, what she suggests might best be designated as “a feel-bad version” of multiculturalism, which “involves uncovering and articulating the harm done by the original colonial encounter” (Paul 2009: 93). Kuang’s *Babel* certainly epitomises this more recent strand, graphically deconstructing the superficial notion of happy multiculturalism represented by *Babel*. For much of the novel, Robin thus vacillates between assimilation and resistance, between the quest for would-be impossible belonging and utter rejection of *Babel* and all it stands for. Paul’s summation of this darker and unsettling trend in multicultural narratives for younger audiences aptly encompasses the postcolonial aims of Kuang’s novel, situating *Babel* among YA texts self-consciously writing-back to power:

“Imagine these as origin myths told by the colonised to the colonisers. These are not brave, heroic adventure stories; they are often terrifying stories of dislocation, gross inhumanity and suffering (Paul 2009: 97). *Babel: An Arcane History* is deliberately harrowing rather than comforting or exalting, rejecting even a partially triumphant ending of overcoming, as opted for by YA dystopian classics such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010). Robin is accorded neither a Chinese homecoming in life nor does Britain magically transform into an adopted home, where he can find his place without becoming an accessory to the monstrous British Empire he learns to despise. His only true sense of home occurs in his dying moments, when he imagines his mother smiling and speaking his Chinese name (see p. 536).

Kuang also refuses to opt for neo-Victorianism’s typical partial appeasement to white readers to make up for their traumatic confrontation of historical guilt, by including ‘good’, white, anti-racist characters.⁹ While Kuang briefly dangles the possibility of such compensation before her readers in the form of Letty, who becomes part of Robin’s elective, fiercely beloved “family” (p. 130), Letty finally proves unable to transcend her interpellation into her nation’s racist system and her belief in white supremacy and Britain’s purported ‘civilising mission’, even after seeing the evidence of Professor Lovell’s conspiratorial, war-mongering correspondence and allying herself with Hermes. Letty becomes the rebels’ betrayer, killing Ramy in the process¹⁰ and precipitating Robin’s and Victoire’s imprisonment and torture until rescued by Griffin. She even returns to Babel, once the surviving rebels have occupied the tower, to try to bargain with them to turn themselves in, still oblivious to the fact that the clemency promised the rebels would amount to no more than enslaved service to the British Empire for the rest of their lives. At the last stand, the handful of rebels who sacrifice their lives to literally destroy the tower, once their position proves hopeless, include just a single white supporter, Professor Craft, which can hardly make good for white injustice and atrocity.

At a hefty 542 pages, *Babel* overtly flouts its neo-Victorian credentials by recalling the Victorian triple-decker, albeit in this case divided into five rather than three ‘Books’,¹¹ accompanied by frequent footnotes, either academic-style explanatory notes relating to translation or else providing contextual background. One might have expected the novel’s length to diffuse the storyline or introduce too many tangential complications. However,

Kuang manages to maintain suspense and reader interest, persuasively depicting an incremental, often conflicted and resistant self-awakening on Robin's part to Babel's true nature and his accessory's role to the British Empire's predations. From one point of view, Robin's transition to adulthood and greater knowledge about the world and himself aligns with the concern expressed by John Streamas that "[i]n the world of most children's books, the personal is not only political. It is everything" (Streamas 2008: n.p.). Robin's reluctant politicisation after repeated attempts to avoid conflict and confrontation with the political realities of his own and other translators' work inextricably merges the two domains. Streamas contends that if the growing number of "writers of color" producing fiction for younger readers "persist in subsuming the social to the personal, [...] then the only real progress – quantitatively better representation – will be slight" (Streamas 2008: n.p.). Yet Kuang's novel does something rather different: it insists that, for the colonised, politics cannot ever be anything but personal, since politics impact every aspect of their daily lives and identities.

Babel: An Arcane History proves less successful in its representation of Robin and Ramy's relationship and its rather unconvincing evasion of adolescent sexuality per se. While the latter could be justified (at least partly) by the rarefied intellectual atmosphere of Babel, with the friends' sexual energies sublimated into intense, often excessive linguistic study, the male bonding skirts rather too close to 'queerbaiting', evoking but never explicitly acknowledging same-sex attraction. An early homosocial scene of Robin and Ramy's sunset picnic in South Park, overlooking Oxford University, is glossed with an almost Edenic golden glow of innocent desire:

The light made Ramy's eyes glow, made his skin shine like burnished bronze. Robin had the absurd impulse to place his hand against Ramy's cheek; indeed, he'd half lifted up his arm before his mind caught up with his body. (p. 56)

Later, having previously comforted Letty in her unhappiness about Ramy's lack of romantic interest in her, Robin questions Ramy about the same at the commemoration ball, asking why he will not dance with Letty. When Ramy deflects by referring to potential racial conflict were he to dance with a white girl, Robin pushes further.

‘She wants you,’ Robin said. [...] ‘Very badly. So why—’

‘Don’t you know why?’

Their eyes met. Robin felt a prickle at the back of his neck. The space between them felt very charged, like the moment between lightning and thunder, and Robin had no idea what was going on or what would happen next, only that it all felt very strange and terrifying, like teetering over the edge of a windy, roaring cliff. (p. 244).

Almost too conveniently, the confrontation is interrupted by Ramy’s realisation that Letty and Victoire are being threatened with a sexual assault by drunken students intending to compare the colour of their nipples by forcing them to strip. Yet perhaps even this flaw should not be read as a failure of courage to depict homosexuality outright but as more of a reluctance to deflect from the novel’s primary focus on racial difference by attempting to explore diversity in sexual orientation also. Kuang’s choice does, though, elide any engagement with the role of nineteenth-century English universities, especially Oxford, as relatively safe spaces for ‘coded’ explorations of Victorian homosexuality – through “Greek studies” – during “the great age of English university reform” (Dowling 1994: xiii).¹²

Neo-Victorian literature focused on colonial violence treads a difficult balance between retrospective acknowledgement (or symbolic writing/righting of wrongs) and condemnation of the crimes of the past too often glossed over in national histories, particularly those of onetime imperial states like the United Kingdom. This often results in a keynote of elegiac mourning rather than outrage and vituperation – one might think of Robert Edric’s *Elysium* (1995) or Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008), which both address the Tasmanian Genocide. Arguably at least in part, elegy makes difficult histories of suffering more digestible for today’s inheritors of the residual benefits of empire, particularly white audiences. An ethically responsible attempt to ‘work through’ intercultural trauma and encourage the acceptance of white historical accountability seems to foreclose violent affects like angry fury and invective resentment, which reject forgiveness and reconciliation. It all helps make the bitter medicine of self-reflexive critiques of Western imperialist depredations go down more smoothly. In the case of YA fiction, with its aetonormative tendencies of ‘Othering’ childhood/adolescence as a

less rational, agential, and ethical stage to be overcome as protagonists enter adulthood, these strategies of ‘responsible’ re-presentations of colonial traumas might be expected to be still more pronounced, socialising young readers into endorsing conflict resolution over violent confrontation.

In *Babel*’s case, however, Kuang deliberately flouts the unspoken rules in this regard. Her neo-Victorian novel not only validates the colonised’s anger and retributive violence as inherently righteous, but also proposes that oppressive systems of power, built on and sustained by violence, cannot be dismantled through peaceful negotiation alone.¹³ Obliquely, her novel thus also invites readers to reflect on China’s own neo-imperialism,¹⁴ for instance its ‘One China’ policy and relations with Taiwan, the Beijing government’s responses to protest movements as in Hong Kong, and the Chinese state’s engagements with and cultural suppression of minorities such as the Uyghurs. *Babel* illustrates what Robin calls “the devil’s trick” of convincing the colonised “that the fallout from resistance is entirely our fault, that the immoral choice is resistance itself rather than the circumstances that demanded it” (p. 497). The bookseller Waterstone’s description of Kuang’s novel as “incendiary” thus proves a more than apt designation on various fronts (Waterstones 2023b: n.p.). The narrative logic of *Babel* presents the resort to force and violent resistance, involving bloodshed and the sacrifice of lives, inevitably including innocent deaths, as not just one among various options, but as the *only* viable option to effect genuine change in systemically unequal and unjust, coercive societies. Force becomes the *necessary* agent of change even if the Hermes Society’s revolution eventually fails. Revolutions to achieve more equitable societies, Kuang’s novel reminds us, always come at a cost – but that does not mean they should never be attempted. To read the deaths of Robin and his fellow revolutionaries as futile or as demonstrating the wrongness of their choices would be to wilfully misread *Babel*’s compelling critique of imperialism. Nonetheless, in due course, Kuang’s novel may well attract criticism from YA literature theorists for treading such a confrontational path.

Yet *Babel*’s power and impact stem from just this refusal on Kuang’s part to play to cross-over audiences’ expectations – whether of YA fiction, fantasy, or the dystopian genre – instead insisting on the right of writers of colour to imagine the world and colonial history *fiercely, furiously*, and, above all, *differently*. An example of neo-Victorian alternative history at its finest, *Babel: An Arcane History* simultaneously speaks back to real-world

nineteenth-century imperialist abuses and to present-day cultural debates about diversity, inclusion, reparation, and the Black Lives Matter movement or, more accurately, a still wider BIPOC Lives Matter movement that encompasses all ethnic minorities in Western cultures and beyond. Kuang's novel might also encourage readers to reflect on the unacknowledged weight of history and Western perpetrated historical injustices that underpin the anti-China rhetoric dominating much of today's Western political discourse and media, albeit reinforced by China's own neo-imperialist tendencies. *Babel: An Arcane History* lingers unsettlingly in the mind long after the reader closes the book on Robin's story.

Notes

1. Henceforth I will refer to Kuang's novel by the shortened title of *Babel* or, as per the front cover, *Babel: An Arcane History*.
2. Born in Guangzhou, China, Kuang emigrated at age of four with her family to the United States. According to the writer's official homepage (<https://rfkuang.com>), Kuang is currently pursuing a PhD in Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University.
3. The Poppy Wars trilogy, however, also draws heavily on other periods, specifically the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and the Second Sino-Japanese War of (1937-1945), as well as biographical elements from the life of Mao Zedong, on whom Kuang, in part, based the series' main protagonist: "Rin's life is meant to parallel the trajectory of Mao Zedong from obscurity in Hunan to a genocidal dictator leading millions" (Kuang in Anon. 2018: n.p.).
4. Since whiteness has historically functioned as the unmarked identitarian norm against which racial difference was defined and denigrated as 'Other', the term's derivatives are deliberately rendered in lower case in contrast to 'Black' as a marked identity category.
5. The perverse logic of Britain's position is made explicit by Mr Baylis, Canton liaison with the trading company Jardine, Matheson & Co. (see p. 299).
6. Aptly, Chapter Seventeen includes a brief vignette of Robin's recollected visit to the London display of Afong Moy, the so-called 'Chinese Lady' with bound feet, with Robin rapidly leaving the exhibit feeling embarrassed and mystified as to its apparent appeal (see pp. 292-293). In real-world history, Afong Moy only appears to have toured in the US from 1834-37, providing many Americans with their first encounter with Chinese culture. The exhibition

image is recalled in Ramy's confession to Robin of his true feelings about life in Britain: "I hate being passed around at their wine parties like an animal on display" (p. 283).

7. Drawing on the Cooperative Children's Book Center's 2014 annual report, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas further notes "a troubling trend of books that feature diverse characters but that are not written by authors from that background" (Thomas 2016: 213), much as Robin notes that most Grammatica are written not by Indigenous speakers but "white British men" (p. 78).
8. Thomas's conclusion specifically draws on Daniel José Older's 2014 *BuzzFeed* post, 'Diversity Is Not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing'.
9. Examples include Garney Walch at the end of Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) or Dr King Schultz in *Django Unchained* (2012), written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. Kuang incorporates a playful metafictional reflection on this typical move in the scene of Letty committing herself to Hermes and starting to weep uncontrollably, repeating "I'm so sorry", rendering Robin distinctly uncomfortable as he recognises "a great paradox, the fact that after [...] all the pain they had shared, she was the one who needed comfort" (p. 357).
10. Robin reads Letty's shooting of Ramy as revenge for her "humiliation" at her sexual rejection by "[a] brown man" (p. 503).
11. Book I covers Robin's displacement, loss of childhood and arrival in Oxford, with Book II focussed on his studies alongside Ramy, Victoire, and Letty, and on Robin's developing relationship with Griffin. Book III depicts Robin's growing involvement with Hermes and the friends' participation in a trade mission to China at the end of their third year, culminating in Robin's violent confrontation with Lovell on the journey back to England that results in the protagonist's use of silver magic killing the professor. Book IV chronicles the friends' attempt to hide Lovell's death and Hermes's efforts to avert the first Opium War via subversive publications about the government's machinations, ending with Letty's betrayal of their hideout and the deaths of Ramy, the senior Hermes conspirators, and Griffin, while Book V covers the revolution's turn to violence, the occupation of Babel initiated by Robin and Victoire, and Robin's defiant sacrificial suicide while Victoire escapes. The 'Epilogue', which belatedly provides readers with Victoire's backstory as well as depicting her flight from Oxford, holds out the possibility of a potential future sequel to *Babel*.

12. A further minor quibble is the novel's occasional slip into postmodern lexis, as when Ramy complains to Robin of Britain turning his "homeland into a narco-military state to pump drugs into yours" (p. 305).
13. I suspect that the lack of conciliatory tone, rather more than the novel's polemic tendencies, account for the occasional negative review, such as that by *Publisher's Weekly*, which describes *Babel* as offering a "didactic, unsubtle take on dark academia and imperialism", with "[t]he narrative [...] frequently interrupted by lectures on why imperialism is bad" (Bowman 2022: n.p.).
14. I am grateful to Nadine Boehm-Schnitker for drawing this issue to my attention.

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