

“How slender, how fragile, the foundations of an empire”: The Neo-Victorian British Empire of R. F. Kuang’s *Babel*

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What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though." —J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye

Para a menina que gostava de livros como se fossem amigos.

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“HOW SLENDER, HOW FRAGILE, THE FOUNDATIONS OF AN EMPIRE”: O IMPÉRIO BRITÂNICO NEO-VITORIANO DE *BABEL*, DE R. F. KUANG

Resumo

Publicado em agosto de 2022, *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* de R. F. Kuang é uma das mais recentes obras de ficção merecedoras de ser classificadas como neo-vitoriana. Situada numa versão alternativa da Inglaterra vitoriana, na qual a tradução se transforma num sinónimo de domínio imperial, a narrativa examina as complexidades da relação colonial, definida por poder, resistência e subjugação, através da perspetiva usualmente negligenciada do Outro. Como tal, a presente análise intersesta neo-vitorianismo com perspetivas pós-coloniais, desconstruindo os efeitos desta relação simbiótica por meio da ótica daqueles que vitimiza. A narrativa é centrada no ponto de vista de Robin Swift, um órfão chinês que é trazido de Cantão para Inglaterra, onde é preparado e manipulado para um dia entrar no prestigiado Real Instituto de Tradução da Universidade de Oxford, conhecido informalmente como Babel. Durante o seu tempo enquanto estudante, Robin aprende que os negócios conduzidos pelo Instituto são nefastos e intrinsecamente ligados ao imperialismo inglês, enquanto tenta conciliar o seu desejo de resistir ao Império ao mesmo tempo que deseja pertencer tanto a Babel como à sociedade vitoriana, uma dualidade que é ilustrada pela sua associação quer com o Instituto, quer com o seu oposto, a sociedade secreta conhecida por Hermes.

Palavras-chave: Neo-vitorianismo, Pós-colonial, Outro racial, imperialismo, história alternativa.

“HOW SLENDER, HOW FRAGILE, THE FOUNDATIONS OF AN EMPIRE”: THE NEO-VICTORIAN BRITISH EMPIRE OF R. F. KUANG’S *BABEL*

Abstract

Published in August of 2022, R. F. Kuang’s *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution* is a more recent work of fiction befitting the label of neo-Victorian. Set in an alternate version of Victorian Britain, wherein translation becomes synonymous with imperial domination, the narrative examines the complexities of the colonial relationship, defined by power, resistance, and subjugation, through the often-neglected perspective of the Other. As such, the presently conducted analysis intersects neo-Victorianism with postcolonial frameworks, deconstructing the effects of this symbiotic relationship through the perspective of those it victimises. The narrative is centred through the perspective of Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan who is brought from Canton to England, where he is groomed and conditioned to one day attend Oxford’s prestigious Royal Institute of Translation, informally known as Babel. During his time as a scholar, Robin comes to learn that the Institute’s dealings are nefarious and indelibly tied to the business of English imperialism, while he struggles to reconcile his desire to resist the Empire while simultaneously desiring to belong in both Babel and Victorian society, a duality that is illustrated by his association with both the Institute and its polar opposite, the secret society known as Hermes.

Keywords: Neo-Victorian Studies, Postcolonial, racial Other, imperialism, alternate history.

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INTRODUCTION | “We’re here to make magic with words”

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech. (*The Bible*, Gen 11: 5-7)

Affirming the lasting presence of the nineteenth-century in the present day, Heilmann and Llewellyn write that neo-Victorianism “connects us to the idea of the enduring influence of the Victorian on the contemporary world, particularly, though not exclusively, in the cultural sphere” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 2). Published in August of 2022, R. F. Kuang’s¹ *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution*² can be considered a more recent contribution to the ever-expanding canon of the “evolving genre and discipline” (Ayres 508) that is neo-Victorianism³. Set in an alternate England from 1829 to 1839⁴, in which translation and silver, despite their markedly distinct nature, are conjoined through magic, the novel sets out to examine the effects and ramifications of the colonial project undertaken by the British Empire, both on a personal and macro level.

The magic of silver-working “lies in words. More specifically, the stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing – the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language and another” (Kuang 82). As “translation can never be perfect” (Kuang 156), these magical bars of silver capture “the meanings lost or warped” (Kuang 156) in this process, which are “caught, and then manifested by the silver” (Kuang 156). Almost only the upper classes have access to these magical bars and their variety of uses, which provide comforts

¹ Rebecca F. Kuang was born in 1996 in Guangzhou, China, and her family moved to Dallas, Texas, in 2000 (<https://locusmag.com/2019/07/r-f-kuang-distortions/>). The author has an “MPhil in Chinese Studies from Cambridge and an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford; she is now pursuing a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale” (<https://rfkuang.com/about/>).

² The title of the novel will henceforth be referred to simply as *Babel*.

³ Illustrating the relevance of her work, it is worth adding that the author visited Portugal in July of 2024, appearing in two sessions with fans on the 7th of July (https://www.instagram.com/p/C9KB2dSMOuw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link), and on the 10th of July (https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Sh41WMI0l/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

⁴ The term ‘Victorian’ implies an epoch that “begins with the accession of Victoria to the throne in 1837 and ends with her own demise in 1901” (Poston 3), but there is some debate regarding this temporal limiting.

and amenities, make transportation faster and more efficient, and aid in the cure of certain ailments, among others. One of their principal applications, however, is their employment by the British Empire in ameliorating the weaponry and ships used in their undertakings. Central to the narrative, then, is an exploration of how silver-working magic is used for imperial purposes, to aid the British Empire in its expansion and consequent subjugation of colonised individuals and territories. As such, the narrative transforms the practice of translation into a symbol of Britain's imperial might, with this magic system coming to represent inequality and oppression.

The narrative is focalised through the perspective of Robin Swift, a Chinese orphan who is brought to England by Oxford Professor Richard Lovell. Acting as his guardian, Lovell primes Robin to one day attend the prestigious Royal Institute of Translation, colloquially known as Babel. As it tracks Robin's story from his early childhood into his early adulthood, *Babel* can be classed as a neo-Victorian *bildungsroman*⁵, situating it "among YA texts self-consciously writing-back to power" (Kohlke 2022, 272). Being a person of colour inserted into Victorian society, Robin faces difficulties in adapting and assimilating, leading him on "a quasi-pathological, self-destructive pattern" (Kohlke 2022, 265) as he struggles with the dualities of his identity and the challenges it raises. As part of his coming of age, Robin learns that Babel, the institutions which he spent his entire life preparing for, is in fact corrupt, and the work he conducts on its behalf as a translator directly contributes to the expansion of the British colonial enterprise, carrying significant ramifications for the territories affected by this project. Robin's arc, then, revolves around his personal struggle to merge the dichotomous aspects of his identity as half-Chinese, half-English. This inner turmoil, with which he contends throughout the narrative, is summarised as follows: "He had become so good at holding two truths in his head at once. That he was an Englishman and not. That Professor Lovell was his father and not. That the Chinese were a stupid, backwards people, and that he was also one of them. That he hated Babel, and wanted to live forever in its embrace" (Kuang 319). As illustrated by this quote, Robin's identity struggles are

⁵ *Bildungsroman* can be defined as "a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 27), typically but not necessarily aimed at young readers, who are "variously defined as young people anywhere from ten to eighteen, or more often thirteen to nineteen" (Maier 2). These narratives explore the predicaments faced by the young characters as they enter into adulthood, as "[a]dolescence is a difficult period of transition – an 'awkward age' – for most individuals, past or present, and offers particular challenges for the writer" (Maier 4). In this context, Maier further writes that "[t]he voices of not often heard Victorian adolescents are restored in neo-Victorian young adult narratives and may be investigated through self-conscious and self-aware intersectional readings of trauma studies, gender studies, psychiatric history, or any other means righteously invoked in the study of adult fiction" (10).

inherently tied to *Babel*, as his association with the Institute and its dealings raise moral qualms with which he contends throughout the course of the narrative.

Because it is so long, the title of the novel is worthy of analysis, in that it provides insight into some of the key moments and themes of the unfolding story. Robin's character arc is premised on his learning and coming to accept that his work for the Institute perpetuates both the British Empire and its oppression of colonised territories. Rebelling against the *status quo*, Robin helms the Translators' Revolution to which the title refers, as a final attempt to force the Empire to capitulate and cease its predatory practices, being spurred into action when a plot to begin what is known as the First Opium War is uncovered. The threat of these hostilities is also central to the "necessity of violence" referenced in the title, a philosophy that is a fundamental feature of Robin's character progression. The necessity of violence is explored in threefold: how violence is at the centre of the imperial project; how violence is the key to bring the Empire to its end; and how violence is inherent to the very act of translation in itself. The reference to these events as an "arcane history" is also relevant to emphasise, as this choice of words foreshadows how, in this alternate version of England, the events that led the translators to revolt in the first place might have been covered up to protect the British Empire and its interests, thus reducing their efforts and their suffering to something that is not remembered or acknowledged by the masses.

Works of neo-Victorian fiction "often approximate the length and structure of Victorian novels with books, chapters, and epigraphs" (Maier and Ayres 2), employing such elements to recall and subvert the time period they depict. These characteristics are present in *Babel*, where the narrative is divided into five books, with each chapter being introduced by an epigraph that varies in source and in time period, alluding to the themes that will be explored throughout it. Another notable stylistic feature of the narrative is its use of "frequent footnotes, either academic-style explanatory notes relating to translation or else providing contextual background" (Kohlke 2022, 273). There are thusly two narrators: a third-person limited perspective that follows Robin throughout his journey in a chronological manner, and the narrator of the footnotes, an outside voice that provides insight into the unfolding events, clarifies linguistic concepts, and offers commentary in a sometimes-sarcastic tone.

Addressing the reader directly, the secondary narrator⁶ frequently discloses knowledge of which Robin is not yet aware, thus allowing the reader to learn from the outset what Robin will find out throughout his period as a student.

That the Royal Institute of Translation is informally known as Babel evokes the biblical myth of the fall of the Tower of Babel. While “[i]n the Bible’s texts there is no reference to this monument’s ruin, but only the confusion of languages and the scattering of men in the world” (Pozzer and Paim 23), *Babel* ends with the literal and figurative fall of its namesake tower, this being the principal similarity between the two stories. According to the biblical tale, the world’s population, united in speaking a single language, aimed to build a great city and a tower that could reach Heaven. Witnessing their efforts, God scattered humankind all over the world, leading to the creation of various languages and cultures. Baden notes that “this brief story actually comprises two originally independent recensions: one about the building of a tower, and one about the building of a city; the first explaining the dispersion of humanity, the second the confusion of languages” (209). Although the tale is widely interpreted as being “both the penalty for human pride and the means to restrain further assertions of it” (Hiebert 29), it can also be read as being “not about the suppression of differences between cultures but about the origins of difference itself” (Hiebert 35). As such, the passage on the Tower of Babel can be interpreted as a myth about “the place where cultural diversity originated, that is, the cradle of civilization” (Hiebert 50). If the story of the Tower of Babel is about the birth of diversity, then the imperial role undertaken by the narrative’s Babel becomes even more evident, as its goal is to eliminate God’s design of multiple cultures and civilisations, all of them different, to be replaced with hegemony under the tutelage of the British Empire.

As regards the objectives of this study, the present dissertation aims to analyse how the British Empire and its wide-ranging impacts are depicted and deconstructed in R. F. Kuang’s *Babel*, from a perspective that is guided by a neo-Victorian framework, and which accounts for trends in the areas of English and North-American studies. For the purposes of this study, neo-Victorianism, which is “fast becoming a genre at pains to defend itself”

⁶ On the role of this secondary narrator, R. F. Kuang explains: “I love the fact that footnotes allow you to add a second narrator. The narrator of the main text is Robin, whose point of view is extremely narrow and limited. He only knows what he knows, and he doesn’t know very much, so he’s confused most of the time ... the [secondary] narrator lets me add another character who is omniscient and situated differently in time; I think she’s positioned much later than these events. I’ve joked around that the narrator’s voice is God, which is the author, which is me. But I tried to leave my personality mostly out of that voice. That narrator knows a lot more than any of the other characters. She’s a bit like the omniscient Victorian narrator who sometimes pops in to whisper clever and snarky asides to the reader about things that the characters don’t know” (in “Author R.F. Kuang Talks Magic and What’s Lost in Translation, *Goodreads*, August 1 2022).

(Carroll 172), is succinctly defined as “contemporary fiction set in the nineteenth century, or that which mimics the Victorian novel” (Carroll 172) while simultaneously offering “a more sympathetic treatment of social outcasts” (Ayres 510) of this epoch. It is also vital to consider how this emergent literary and critical current intersects with the field of postcolonial studies, a convergence that is particularly relevant for the presently analysed narrative, as it depicts the negative effects of colonial exploitation. Nineteenth-century Britain was profoundly and undeniably moulded by the significant growth of the British Empire, which “was very large, very powerful, and very influential, and the fact that it no longer exists does not mean that its effects have dissipated” (Steinbach 82). It is natural, then, that the Empire and its various and wide-reaching ramifications have become one of the topics dissected through neo-Victorianism. For this reason, intersecting this area of studies with postcolonial frameworks is vital and enriching.

In its approximation to the Victorian period and its literature, the neo-Victorian project subverts the tenets and stereotypes that most predominantly dominate our conceptions of this historical era, which is characterised by “a confidently triumphalist imperialism, a rigid separation of public and private spheres, a repressive sexual morality, and an ascendant hegemony of bourgeois values” (Joyce 5). The designation of Victorian has come to be associated with “[c]oncepts such as hard work, bustle, determination, energy, purpose and progress ... practical philosophies such as ‘self-help’ and ‘philanthropy’” (Purchase xi), but has historically ignored the “textual other, which is portrayed as either the ‘victim’ of difficult sociopolitical circumstance or the ‘troubled soul’ of some psychological or existential crisis” (Zhang 176). In emphasising the adversities encountered by the Other, neo-Victorian fiction challenges the notions and stereotypes that have come to designate the Victorian period, through the foregrounding of these marginalised voices, whose experiences of this era are, evidently, quite different from how it is stereotyped. Neo-Victorianism thus emerges as a possible mechanism for acknowledging the hardships of the past, while simultaneously aiming to “help us better prepare for the future” (Zhang 176). Two principal characteristics stand out in *Babel* as defining of neo-Victorianism: it follows the experiences of a Chinese young man as he navigates life as the racial Other in Victorian society, and it features women and people of colour attending a prestigious academic institution alongside their white, male peers.

It is important also to recognise that nineteenth-century Britain exists in “the context of technological, and consequently social, change” (Purchase xii), defined by considerable advances in a variety of areas, and which reflect the behaviours and societal norms that define

this epoch. The Industrial Revolution, which occurred from around 1780 to 1840 (Purchase 86), is one such event that led to significant societal changes, as it propelled Britain from a largely rural to an urban, industrial society. The Victorians were “unparalleled as innovators in the sciences and technology. Important engineering feats came to symbolize this change, especially the development of the railways from the 1830s onwards” (Purchase xii). As such, the country “launched upon the world a new civilization” (Kumar 590), solidifying their place as a standard of civilisation and consequently generating “a great cause with which the English, along with the other ethnic groups, could identify. Britain was the world’s first industrial society” (Kumar 590). In the narrative, these technological advances are intricately linked to the magic of silver-working, which accelerates these developments. In *Babel*, then, this emblematic event of the nineteenth century is termed the Silver Industrial Revolution, with such advancements primarily benefitting the upper echelons of society to detriment of the working classes, transforming silver and its magic into not only a symbol of imperial domination, but also of the social inequality and duality that defines Victorian Britain.

The present dissertation is divided into three chapters, named after quotes from *Babel*, connecting the undertaken analysis to the contents of the narrative itself⁷. The first chapter establishes a framework for the analysis of *Babel*, which will include a revision of existing literature to define concepts such as neo-Victorian and postcolonial, fundamental for the study that is being conducted. This chapter focuses also on the intersection of both areas, aiming to explore the relevance and defining characteristics of postcolonial neo-Victorianism. As a work of neo-Victorian fiction that explores the multiple and multifaceted effects of imperialism, *Babel* can be situated as a postcolonial neo-Victorian narrative, thus accounting for the relevance in considering this crossing. The narrative is also a work of alternate historical fiction, incorporating real life events and characters. Accordingly, this chapter provides also an overview of the First Opium War, fought between China and England. While some details diverge between the actual and the fictional events, the lead up to this conflict is a key moment of the narrative, as well as a pivotal juncture in Robin’s own character journey, and it is thus important to include some historical context to enhance and enrich the analysis of *Babel*.

Chapter two provides an analysis of Robin’s character arc, a study of which is paramount to comprehend the various effects of the colonial project on the self. From the

⁷ The quotes for each chapter can be found, respectively, in Kuang 81, 535, 136, 351, and 537. Likewise, the quote referenced in the title of the dissertation is also from the narrative, and can be found in Kuang 469. The titles for subchapters 2.1, 3.2, and 3.3 are adapted from the novel’s own title.

moment he is removed from Canton and brought to England, Robin struggles to reconcile the duality of his split identity, especially as he struggles with the realisation that Babel is not the beacon of progress and academia that was presented to him, but instead a corrupt institution that directly supports the British Empire and upholds its ideologies. When he learns that other scholars of colour are removed from their home countries under similar circumstances, Robin realises the depth and magnitude of imperial exploitation. Despite their contributions as scholars of the prestigious Royal Institute of Translation, however, these academics are never fully embraced, as Robin's own character arc demonstrates. The dichotomy with which Robin contends throughout his time in Britain is illustrated by his association with both Babel and the Hermes Society, institutions with vastly divergent missions, and which cannot coexist. Because literature is fundamental in the dissemination of ideas and the perpetuation of stereotypes, the second chapter will also include a brief overview of the role of the Victorian novel as sustaining the imperial project. In focalising experiences of Otherness, *Babel* deconstructs and subverts this role, positioning the practices of the British Empire as abusive and predatory, rather than exalt them and its actors as the Victorian novel did, as is explored throughout the course of Robin's arc.

The third chapter examines the events that directly lead to the insurrection known as the Translators' Revolution, simultaneously focusing on the culmination of Robin's inner turmoil. This chapter begins with a segment that examines how translation has historically been employed in sustaining the imperial project, through manipulation of language to subjugate the colonised. It is vital to include these considerations because of the symbolic role that translation undertakes in the narrative, standing in for imperialism and its associated consequences on those it victimises. Whereas the second chapter more deeply focuses on Robin as an imperial subject and asset, the third chapter aims to analyse the ramification of the British Empire and their incursions on a wider level, as well as its effects on other nations. The events of the cohort's journey to Canton are a significant focus of this segment, as is the translators' strike, a direct consequence of what Robin and his cohort witness both in China and in its aftermath. As a work of alternate history, in itself a widely explored aspect of neo-Victorian fiction, the ambiguous ending of *Babel*, is also analysed in this chapter, as it raises interesting notions about this subgenre, and what it might entail for the events that might (or not) occur in the aftermath of the tower's fall.

To complete this dissertation, two appendixes are included, containing the two maps that are printed on the novel. The first appendix presents the alternative City of Oxford, including the location of the tower of Babel as well as other places referenced throughout the

story, while the second appendix contains the layout of the tower's interior, labelling each floor and indicating its respective departments.

CHAPTER 1 | “Language was just difference”: Contextual Framework

1.1. The Contemporary Past of Neo-Victorian Fiction

[S]uch accounts invoke a power dichotomy between ‘voicing’ and ‘silencing’. We see that ‘silenced’ Victorians are granted a ‘voice’ by contemporary authors and this is largely perceived as a noble, politically-aware enterprise, an attempt to challenge and redress the broader social and cultural inequalities that lead to this ‘silencing’ in the first instance. (Davis 3)

The concept of neo-Victorianism has roots in postmodernism⁸, which can be traced back to Dana Shiller who, in 1997, first characterized neo-Victorian fiction as “not simply a pastiche of popular mental images of Victoriana” (545), but as “historical novels [that] take a revisionist approach to the past, borrowing from postmodern historiography to explore how present circumstances shape historical narrative” (Shiller 540). It is necessary, here, to clarify the concept of postmodernism, which, as Baldick explains in the *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* “may be seen as a continuation of modernism’s alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world” (201). Furthermore, in the same source, Baldick defines pastiche as “a literary work composed from elements borrowed either from various other writers or from a particular earlier author” (185-186). Thus, Shiller’s characterisation of neo-Victorianism presents the genre as something that is more complex than pastiche and imitation of the Victorian novel, a form of postmodern literature that explores the multiple and complex connections between the past and the present. Shiller argues, furthermore, that “neo-Victorian fiction is motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge” (541). Neo-Victorian novels are therefore, according this scholar, “at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel” (538), meaning they retain some of their historical referent while simultaneously transforming it through postmodern methods. These narratives furthermore present “a historicity that is indeed concerned with recuperating the substance of bygone eras, and not merely their styles” (Shiller 539-540).

⁸ “The neo-Victorian is very much a product of postmodernism in its treatment of truth as being arbitrarily portrayed by the writer and appropriated by the reader as to what is relative and meaningful” (Maier and Ayres 3).

From Shiller's first definition, the concept of neo-Victorianism has grown vastly in scope, and has come to encompass more than its association to postmodernism. In the inaugural number of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, in 2008, Mark Llewellyn defined neo-Victorianism as "those works which are consciously set in the Victorian period ... or which desire to re-write the historical narrative of that period by representing marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and generally 'different' versions of the Victorian" (165). Llewellyn, then, expands on Shiller's conceptualization, but both definitions have in agreement that neo-Victorianism takes a revisionist approach to the past, and that "the neo-Victorian is about new approaches to the Victorian period rather than an attempt to indulge in escapism masked as historical narrative" (Llewellyn 169). According to both authors, the neo-Victorian novel stands beyond pastiche of the time period it represents. Additionally, Llewellyn notes how "neo-Victorian studies aims to tap into the potential for re-reading, re-voicing, and re-imagining the collective memory" (180) of the Victorian period.

Alongside Ann Heilmann, Llewellyn expands upon his conception of neo-Victorianism. In their 2010 monograph *The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century*, itself a seminal work of neo-Victorian studies, the authors define this literary and critical genre as "*more than historical fiction*" (4), distinguishing novels set in the nineteenth century from those that are "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretations, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (4). Here, the academics delineate one of the key characteristics of neo-Victorianism, which is its conscious return to the nineteenth century through a contemporary perspective, allowing the authors of such works to reshape this time period. Heilmann and Llewellyn also distinguish between post-Victorian and neo-Victorian, in that all novels written about the Victorian period after "the end of Queen Victoria's reign in 1901" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 8) are, necessarily, post-Victorian, but not all post-Victorian novels are neo-Victorian, as they may lack the self-conscious and self-reflexive elements. The authors also acknowledge the lasting presence of the Victorian period within contemporary society to explain the continued interest in this era, which in turn translates into the production of neo-Victorian fiction:

The physical presence of the nineteenth-century in the very fabric of the post-war United Kingdom induced renewed attentiveness to the textual and archival remains of the Victorians too. Part of this arose from the traumas of war itself: in returning to a landscape scarred by modernity and its fighting machines, the post-war generation was caught between the insecurities of

the present and nostalgia for a pre-war period (wrongly yet widely) associated with stability and general affluence. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, 498).

Building upon Heilmann and Llewellyn's definition, neo-Victorianism can be perceived as "a deliberate misreading, reconstruction or staged return of the nineteenth century in and for the present across genres and media" (Ho 2012, 5), that necessarily "add[s] some new knowledge or understanding of either the Victorians themselves or how contemporary fiction adapts and appropriates the past, preferably both" (Ho 2012, 8). Because one of its key characteristics is the self-conscious reshaping and reworking of the Victorian past, neo-Victorian fiction consists of, simultaneously, a "cultural and critical practice that re-visions the nineteenth century and its latter-day aesthetic and ideological legacies in the light of historical hindsight and critique" (Kohlke 2014, 21), as well as a fantasy, "what we *want* to imagine the period to have been like for diverse reasons including affirmations of national identity, the struggle for symbolic restorative justice, and indulgence in escapist exoticism" (Kohlke 2014, 21). Within such works, it is possible to identify a critical engagement "with nineteenth-century fiction, culture and society as opposed to *just* repeating or nostalgically harkening back to a past era" (Davies 2), meaning that, as noted by Heilmann and Llewellyn in *The Victorians in the Twenty First Century*, neo-Victorian fiction is something more than just media about the Victorian epoch, but works that consciously, reflectively, and critically engage with the nineteenth century. The result is that "[n]eo-Victorian texts as cultural *doppelgänger*s of the Victorian Age both mimic and challenge the discourses of the nineteenth century" (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 1-2) or, as Robin Gilmour aptly summarises, neo-Victorian cultural products are "more self-conscious than the straightforward historical novel with a period setting" (189).

Kate Mitchell considers that neo-Victorian fiction functions as memory texts, stating that it "prompts authors, readers and critics to confront the problem of historical recollection" (3). Mitchell, who considers neo-Victorian literature to fall under the banner of historical fiction, ponders that "historical fiction poses the question of whether we, unavoidably influenced by our own historical moment, can know the past, and if so, whether we can do so through the medium of fiction" (3), thus acknowledging the "greater affective power" (18) that is inherent to fictional narratives and their ability to work through the traumas of the past. Echoing Heilmann and Llewellyn, Mitchell considers that neo-Victorian narratives "remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that

they re-embody, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it” (7). By “[p]ositioning neo-Victorian novels as historical fiction, and historical fiction as ‘memory texts’” (Mitchell 29), it becomes possible “to account for the multifariousness and complexity of [the neo-Victorian novel’s] approaches to the past” (Mitchell 29) thus “[foregrounding] the historical novel as an act of recollection that is firmly grounded in the ways we remember in the present” (Mitchell 29).

Because of its framework, neo-Victorian fiction has the unique potential to “lend a voice to the dead” (Kohlke and Gutleben 30), particularly “the racially, ethnically, gender or sexually discriminated; the physically disabled or mentally ill; the socially marginalised, economically exploited or otherwise persecuted” (Kohlke and Gutleben 14), essentially “those figures underrepresented by Victorian historical and fictional texts” (Carroll 195). The self-reflexive and critical framework on which neo-Victorian fiction is sustained facilitates a meditation on experiences of “dark family history, sexual deviance, the female body and the racial as well as disabled other” (Zhang 72), topics widely considered to be taboo during the Victorian era, resulting in such experiences being often ignored. It is relevant here to recall Mitchell’s commentary on fiction’s affective power: because fiction is a space in which traumas can be safely explored, it is important to acknowledge the medium’s “capacity to enhance the representation of marginalised groups” (Carroll 195), thus making it “an important mechanism for meeting out recognitive justice” (Carroll 195). Similarly, Garrido corroborates that “[t]he neo-Victorian, as nearly all definitions emphasize, can attend to ‘lost’ voices and marginalized perspectives, the exclusivist nature of racialization, and the racialized inflections of gender, and, therefore, to the mechanisms by which Victorian reverberations still distort collective imaginations of the nineteenth century” (Garrido 2023, 459), this being one of the central characteristics of neo-Victorian fiction.

Through this engagement with the “self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself” (Kaplan 3), neo-Victorian fiction has the distinctive possibility of appropriating the Victorian period’s “standard tropes as the fallen woman, the orphan, spiritualism, and the London slums” (Kohlke 2014, 25) and in turn convert them “into agents of social and sexual liberation; advocates of self-chosen, non-patriarchal/non-heteronormative families; a form of capitalist entrepreneurialism and empowerment by the socially marginalised; and carnivalesque spaces of self-fashioning” (Kohlke 2014, 25). Such an enterprise again harkens back to Heilmann and Llewellyn’s assertion that neo-Victorianism is a necessarily self-conscious restructuring

of the Victorian era, thus highlighting the impact of their proposed definition within the field of neo-Victorian studies. This particular characteristic of neo-Victorianism is illustrated by Carroll in the following citation: “the neo-Victorian novel frequently reassigns prominence from the voices at the centre of Victorian history to the figures at the margins” (195).

The voice as a metaphor for power or the lack thereof is relevant to underscore within this context. Helen Davis utilises voice and ventriloquism as a metaphor of neo-Victorian fiction’s capacity to call attention to the histories of marginalized Victorians, stating also that the giving of a voice can be “interpreted as subversively ‘talking back’ to the Victorians” (3) by centring “those whom fiction or historiography has forgotten, those who have never had a proper voice, story, or discursive existence in literature” (Kohlke and Gutleben 31). The contemporary rewriting of their time period, then, challenges the Victorians, and questions their society and *status quo*. The act of elevating the “marginal identities and voices” (Matthews 287) of “servants, prostitutes, gays and lesbians, black and colonial peoples” (Matthews 287) permits neo-Victorian fiction to give “a voice to the voiceless, [speak] for the speechless, where historians can only speculate as to what such persons *might* have said or sounded like” (Kohlke and Gutleben 19). Thus, the discourse of neo-Victorianism is necessarily partisan and dominated by “the representation of subjects who have been largely absent from the traditional master discourse of history, a narrative which privileges patriarchy, heteronormativity, euro-centricity and the ‘able-bodied’” (Davies 2-3), thus “[exposing] the inadequacies and silences of the Victorian novel” (Gilmour 191), and allowing “previously silenced Victorian voices” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, 498) and their experiences to finally be brought to the forefront.

It is pertinent to note that “neo-Victorian fiction and its writers are *not* native to the nineteenth century, but to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Carroll 180), another central component of the narratives produced in this genre. The Victorian past is reconstructed and re-formed through a modern perspective, and therefore reflects modern concerns, forcing the consumer of neo-Victorian fiction to “interpret two texts at once – the pretext which exists in memory and the aftertext which exists on the page” (Humphreys 445). Succinctly explaining the formulations of this contact between past and present, Joyce offers the following metaphor: “[W]e never really encounter ‘the Victorians’ themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving” (4). The neo-Victorian novel, then, “does not attempt to recreate a Victorian novel for the twenty-first century, but rather focuses on the ways in which we engage with the

Victorian period through cultural memory” (Shuttleworth 183), making the consumer of such fiction “not passive readers of – or witnesses to – the past” (Zhang 2), but instead “active participants” (Zhang 2) in its (re)construction. Through its self-conscious engagement with the past, neo-Victorian fiction allows for a reflection on our own present-day political and social concerns, as “fictionalisations of specific historical traumas stand for indirect representations of, or analogical commentaries on, contemporary shocks and disasters” (Kohlke and Gutleben 12), thus carrying great significance as a tool of affective recognition and mediation. By “[e]voking the Victorians and their world” (Gilmour 200), we are able to attain “a fresh perspective on the present” (Gilmour 200), thus denouncing the parallels between the faults and graces of the Victorian period and our present time; or, as Kate Mitchell notes, “the reworking of the Victorian period in neo-Victorian novels embody its uncanny repetition, so that the period is both shaped by and shapes our twenty-first century present” (35).

It is important to acknowledge that neo-Victorianism has some limitations. Specifically, neo-Victorian studies “remains largely on Anglophone engagements with Anglophone histories, stories and adaptations” (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013, 26). Through this statement, Llewellyn and Heilmann acknowledge that the field of neo-Victorianism is limited by its narrow focus on the experiences and narratives of the Anglophone world and the former British Empire. In this regard, they write that “neo-Victorian studies can draw particular strength for the future exploration of the field from thinking much more diversely and much less homogenistically about the spaces it inhabits as part of a wider cultural memory” (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013, 29). Antonija Primorac recognizes the role translation plays in the presence of Anglophone cultural products throughout the world, writing that “thanks to both translation and to the current global dominance of English, Anglophone cultural products, especially literary and screen texts, are disseminated widely across the globe, with impact beyond the borders of the former British Empire (50). Because of translation, then, “a great number of texts throughout the world are not perceived only as classics of English literature, but also as classics of *world literature*” (Primorac 50). Thus, it is possible to state that the Victorian period has had an impact beyond the confines of the British Empire, as its legacy extends on a global scale, making it relevant that neo-Victorian production is also disseminated on a comparable level, while also accounting for the various experiences that exist of this epoch throughout the globe. In her essay, Primorac proposes a more “inclusive re-definition of neo-Victorianism, one that would contribute to a discussion about neo-Victorianism in a context beyond the borders of the one-time British Empire” (65)

by accounting for how “a global approach to neo-Victorian studies holds out the promise not just of uncovering examples of neo-Victorianism that have gone unnoted in the Anglosphere, but also of fostering transnational dialogues that can offer new and surprising interpretations of existing and emerging neo-Victorianisms” (66). The approach proposed by Primorac thus offers a spotlight to the enduring impact of the Empire in the general consciousness, made more relevant by globalisation.

In a similar vein, Anna Maria Jones introduces the concept of transnational neo-Victorianism. Jones notes that the “relatively new field” (4) of neo-Victorianism has focused more on “[defining] the objects of study – what counts as neo-Victorian” (4) and only more recently has it started “to consider the global scope of the neo-Victorian and what it might mean methodologically for those who study it” (4). Thus, to broaden the scope of neo-Victorian studies and what the field entails and explores, it becomes essential to broaden “the generic definition of what counts as neo-Victorian” (Jones 5). Jones thus acknowledges that “our very disciplinary categories themselves are a byproduct of Anglocentric – or at least Eurocentric – tradition” (5), leading this academic to propose the concept of transnational neo-Victorianism, an approach that considers “the intersection of chronological, as well as geographic, generic, and linguistic axes” (4), clarifying also that the term transnational “signifies a sensibility that imagines that there is more to know and more ways of knowing it than any of us is necessarily cognizant of” (6). Like Primorac’s definition of global neo-Victorianism, Jones’ transnational neo-Victorianism accounts for how a broader spectrum of voices, perspectives and experiences enrich the field of neo-Victorian studies and neo-Victorianism as a form of artistic expression, allowing it to encompass new horizons. On this note, Jones defends that “if we are to embrace a plurality of perspectives, then such an embrace must encompass not only the vast array of objects studied ... but the equally diverse perspectives of those who produce, consume, and study them around the globe” (6).

In a criticism that recalls the work of Primorac and Jones, Garrido points out that “African literatures are rarely recognized as critical to neo-Victorianism” (460), even though such authors produce works that “dissect the interdependencies between British colonial encounters, legacies of enslavement, gendered oppressions, female agency, and, not least, suicide as a form of resistance” (Garrido 2023, 460) themes that are typically addressed in neo-Victorian fiction. The following year, the scholar further posits that “[p]ostcolonial and global approaches to neo-Victorianism offer the capacity to revise, contextualise, and expand the insights of Global Northern scholarship” (2024, 100), calling attention to how Western academia is still centralised, thus narrowing the focus from other outlooks and perspectives

that particularly note the struggles of the affected. Comparably, Elizabeth Ho's work centres an Asian approach to neo-Victorianism. The scholar writes that "Asian neo-Victorianism serves as a reminder that the nineteenth century brought a surge of Euro-American colonial expansion across South East Asia in particular" (Ho 2019, 4). Ho also discusses the concept of neo-Victorian-at-sea, which according to her "serves as a reminder that the British empire" (Ho 2014, 166) was focused on maritime expansion "forcing us to rethink the usual structures of centre and periphery that mark postcolonial fiction" (Ho 2014, 166). This approach also aims to provide a more globalized outlook into neo-Victorianism serving "as an attempt to move beyond conventional neo-Victorianism's bounded territorial spaces and status as national literatures and argue instead for a global memory of 'the Victorian' that is attuned to the conditions and experience of transnationality" (Ho 2014, 166), thus accounting for the varied experiences of the Victorian era throughout the globe. Ho argues that "[t]he turn to the sea ... can rejuvenate the field's archive and generic capabilities as the Victorian can now also be read as maritime empire and a memory of empire that is also shared between Britain, Africa, Asia and the Americas" (2014, 167), being thus in agreement with the authors previously mentioned that neo-Victorianism benefits from a more globalised outlook.

1.2. Postcolonialism and Deconstructing Empire

Far from celebrating the definitive conclusion to colonialism, then, postcolonialism analyses its effects both in its heyday and during the period that followed the end of the literal, concrete colonial presence. The movement is associated with the examination and critique of colonial power both before and after decolonization. (Hiddleston 4)

To understand and define the concept of postcolonial, and what the field of postcolonial studies entails, it is essential first and foremost to define and distinguish colonialism and imperialism. Colonialism entails "the conquest and subsequent control of another country, and involves both the subjugation of that country's native peoples and the administration of its government, economy and produce" (Hiddleston 2), in what is "a concrete process of invasion and a practical seizing of control" (Hiddleston 2). Moreover, colonising nations brought their own practices, such as "religion, education, language – that were, slowly or violently, imposed upon the subject races of the colony ... accompanied by

an erasure of natives histories and a condemnation of native beliefs and practices (such as religion) as primitive” (Nayar 31). British colonial expansion had an economic motivation, as “the colony provided the raw material and labour for English manufacturing industries, the market for its foods, the clerks and soldiers for its administration and army” (Nayar 31). It is possible to distinguish two different types of British colonies: whereas “[s]ome ... were considered settlement colonies, to which British people moved and settled permanently” (Steinbach 73), there were also territories that were designated as dependent colonies, and as such “had much smaller British populations; British people were expected to move there only to work (in military or civil service, the extraction industries, and the like) and to return home to Britain” (Steinbach 73).

On the other hand, “[a]n empire is a political system based on military and economic domination by which one group expands and consolidates its power over many others – usually one nation over many other nations” (Robinson 8). This practice may be enacted for a myriad of reasons, such as

economic gain (the conquered lands will enrich the imperial power), strategy and security (the conquered lands will serve as buffer zones between the imperial power and its enemies), moral obligations (tyrannized peoples must be liberated from their oppressors and protected from them), and Social Darwinism (stronger cultures will naturally rule over weaker ones). (Robinson 8-9)

An empire “is typically a form of rule in which a symbolic head, the emperor, rules over a series of lands linked by dynastic connection or allegiance to the emperor” (Kumar 578). As such, the principal difference between colonialism and imperialism is the scope of one and the other, with imperialism casting a much wider net of influence, as an empire “[constitutes] a global political system” (Young 17). Hiddleston summarizes this distinction as follows:

If colonialism involves a concrete act of conquest, imperialism names a broader form of authority or dominance. Colonialism is in this way one active manifestation of imperialist ideology, but imperialism can also be understood as a larger structure of economic or political hegemony that does not have to include the direct rule and conquest of another country. (2)

An empire, then, can be considered a vast network of colonies, which are all ruled and subjugated by a head nation and its emperor or empress.

One of the most defining characteristics of both practices is the notion that their enterprise is, in a sense, a “civilizing’ mission” (Kumar 580). During the Enlightenment period, societies came to be ranked “along an evolutionary scale from ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization’” (Hall 239), with non-European nations being characterised as inferior in contrast to their civilised, European counterparts. Colonial expansion is often justified as morally necessary and beneficial “for all those nations brought under its sway” (Young 5), on the pretext that it was for the betterment of their overall lives. Postcolonial critique has encouraged a reframing of such notions, aiming to illuminate the more nefarious effects of imperial expansion and their effects both on the individual and the societies of which they are part. Douglas Robinson observes that “[a]t worst, empires destroy entire peoples and cultures” (9), because “[t]ypically empires make little effort at cultural or ethnic homogenization. To do so would be to strike at the heart of their very being” (Kumar 578).

While “[c]olonialism may have brought some benefits of modernity, as its apologists continue to argue” (Young 6), it has undeniably also “caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact” (Young 6). One of the more defining characteristics of colonialism is thus the systemic elimination of native practices and identities, to be replaced by modes of living and cultural and societal norms that agree with the coloniser’s palate. The subjugation of the colonised was justified under the pretence “that all races except for ‘the Caucasian or Indo-European family’ were incapable of progress” (Brantlinger 37), a notion arising from “discourses of primitiveness, backwardness, and otherness” (Burney 192). As a consequence of this framing, the colonised are often depicted as being in need of intervention on the part of the coloniser to usher in elements of what is considered modernity, such as industry or scientific and medical progress.

Through this framework, a narrative is constructed, wherein “the conquering and colonizing heroes have ‘character,’ amounting to virtues; the vanquished lack character – they are ‘savages’ or ‘barbarians’ because they are racially inferior and perhaps ‘unfit’ to survive” (Brantlinger 38). Such a framework leads to the construction of a racial binary, “the advanced, progressive and modern European (‘Us’) versus the backward, primitive and non-modern native (‘them’)” (Nayar 31), with this notion serving as an argument for imperial proliferation. Despite notions of the inherent superiority of the domineering coloniser, the

colonial relationship is symbiotic, with Stuart Hall noting that “[c]ommodities (and images of English domestic life) [flowing] outwards to the colonies; raw materials (and images of ‘the civilizing mission’ in progress) [being brought] into the home” (Hall 240). It is in this dynamic of mutual influence and effect that images and notions of racial difference come to be. It is in this vein that the concept of reverse colonisation emerges, illustrating the complexity of the colonial relationship. Reverse colonisation refers to “the flow of immigrants of all races into England” (Nayar 134), leading the country to “[become] irreducibly multicultural” (Nayar 135). However, this term “[carries] a certain pejorative connotation because it not only recalls a history of European colonization but also suggests that modern-day migration and cultural mixing is as violent as the more traditional forms of colonial conquest” (Nayar 135).

Any discussion on postcolonialism that fails to mention Edward Said’s contributions is necessarily incomplete. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*⁹, Said examines the complex and multifaceted relationship between the Occident and the Orient, establishing their relationship as a binary of power and subjugation¹⁰ in which “[t]he Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1). As Nayar summarizes, “Orientalism was an apparatus of representation through which Europe saw the East, and posited this East as the radical-cultural Other” (118). According to Said himself, Orientalism as a practice is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (1); Said furthermore argues that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3). As per the scholar, then, the West defines itself and its identity in opposition to the East, which was viewed as its radical opposite, an affirmation that remits us to the binary of racial superiority and inferiority that supports imperial expansion. Furthermore, “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (Said 20-21).

Through the process of Orientalism, the Orient is reduced to a set of characteristics and judgments that are formulated from an outsider’s perspective, causing “the Asian and

⁹ It is paramount to note here that Said’s *Orientalism* is “often cited as the founding text of postcolonial studies” (Brantlinger 72), and remains a seminal and widely mentioned work in this field.

¹⁰ “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5).

African subjects [to] see themselves through European eyes, and therefore as inferior, primitive and non-modern” (Nayar 45), due to “European intellectual hegemony wrought through instruments like law, education, religion and literature” (Nayar 45). Said’s definition of Orientalism expands upon the conception of the racial Other¹¹, which arises from the notion of “European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 7). Said explains this binary as follows: “There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (36)¹². These images of Otherness were depicted in various mediums and disseminated both in the metropolis and the colonies, leading to the proliferation of these binary notions of the (civilised) Self and the (uncivilised) Other. On this note, Stuart Hall writes:

The progress of the great white explorer – adventurers and the encounters with the black African exotic was charted, recorded and depicted in maps and drawings, etchings and (especially) the new photography, in newspaper illustrations and accounts, diaries, travel writing, learned treatises, official reports and ‘boy’s-own’ adventure novels. Advertising was one means by which the imperial project was given visual form in a popular medium, forging the link between Empire and the domestic imagination. (240)

Said’s work in *Orientalism* was fundamental to the birth of postcolonial studies as a discipline, as the academic “demonstrated that the habitual practices, and the full range of effects of colonialism on the colonised territories and their peoples, could be analysed conceptually and discursively, and it was this that created the academic field of postcolonialism and enabled such a range of subsequent theoretical and historical work” (Young 18). Postcolonial studies as a field began to rise “out of both the break-up of the great European empires in the 1940s, 50s and 60s and the subsequent rise to prominence in academic circles of counterhegemonic cultural studies” (Robinson 13), leading imperialism to gain a negative connotation and be portrayed “as antidemocratic and exploitative bullying”

¹¹ The field of subaltern studies is also concerned with understanding and deconstructing the role of the Other, building upon Said’s work on this subject: “Sociologists of culture have been actively interested and engaged in the ways in which people construct ‘the Other’. Subaltern studies offers opportunities to deepen that engagement in order to further nuance our understanding of the ‘Other’ and its construction” (Ray and Radhakrishnan 41).

¹² “Britons saw themselves as the lords of all the world and thus humankind. They placed themselves at the top of the scale of civilization and achievement, they ranked all other races in descending order beneath them, according to their relative merits” (Cannadine 5).

(Robinson 10). The scope of postcolonial studies lies in “formulations of radical critiques of discourses of power” (Sorensen 3), focusing “on the long-term cultural effect of imperialism that persist after formal imperialism has ended” (Steinbach 67). Because of the significant scope they achieved in their heyday, and because the effects of their exploitation of other territories carries still-lasting effects and multiple social, political, and cultural consequences, it is important to note that imperialism as a concept “has been associated primarily with *European* empires of the 19th century” (Nayar 31).

Considering these notions, postcolonialism “can generally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and sprawling in scope” (Hiddleston 1), referring to “the wider, multifaceted effects and implications of colonial rule” (Hiddleston 1), as well as a subversion of the “status quo of hegemonic economic imperialism” (Young 58). Because colonialism is a practice of subjugation and stripping of indigenous identities, it is notable that it “also studies the psychological and cultural impact of colonial rule on the non-European, arguing that the native’s subjectivity was itself formed ... within the violently unstable crucible of colonialism” (Nayar 122), a statement that echoes Said’s affirmation that the practice of Orientalism leads the Orientals to shape their self-identity according to the apparatuses inherent to colonial subjugation. Postcolonialism “notes that the Western constructions ... of non-European races were informed by racial ideologies and the larger purpose of dominance over the land, people and cultures of the non-European” (Nayar 122-123), meaning that colonialism as a practice and ideology had a significant impact in how the world was perceived both by the coloniser and the colonised themselves.

1.3. “Writing back to the empire”: Postcolonial Neo-Victorianism

Postcolonial neo-Victorianism offers a rich repository of a global English heritage that implies the after-effects of colonial settlement, imperial policies, and the survival of ‘civilizing’ institutions; however, it also acknowledges and reckons with colonial brutality and atrocities. Thus, neo-Victorianism contains at its heart a powerful ambivalence: its agenda includes ‘writing back’ to empire – a reinterpretation of canonical Western texts and a critique of entrenched master narratives – as an act of revision, however, neo-Victorian texts

simultaneously give voice to feelings of regression and return that manifest themselves in often noncontestatory, even celebratory evocations of the nineteenth century. (Ho 2012, 11)

In 2024, Garrido writes that “[p]ostcolonial neo-Victorianism, then, seeks to counter the legacies of Victorian mythmaking of ‘Selves’ and ‘Others’, of imperial glory, and the colonial epistemologies that still dominate large parts of Britain’s self-perception as abolitionist haven and civilisational beacon throughout the nineteenth century” (93), illuminating how a postcolonial approach to the field might increase its lines of inquiry regarding subjects such as “stereotyping, hybridity, mimicry, and Orientalism” (93). As has previously been established, one of the more pronounced limitations of neo-Victorianism is its narrow engagement with histories and perspectives that are situated outside of the Anglophone sphere. In a similar vein, the field of neo-Victorian studies lacks a more profound and nuanced engagement with postcolonial studies, even when its fiction depicts the experiences of the racial Other. In their 2014 essay *On the Neo-Victorian, Now and Then*, Heilmann and Llewellyn remark that “postcolonial critique in neo-Victorianism is an increasing area of analysis” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, 505). The intersection of neo-Victorian and postcolonial studies gains particular relevance when the vast scope of the British Empire¹³, and its resulting worldwide impact, is considered, as this endeavour “was not only a geopolitical entity: it was also a culturally created and imaginatively constructed artifact” (Cannadine 3).

The empire and the colonial project overall have become crucial elements of British identity, coming to be associated “with the Crown, with Parliament, with the Protestant religion, and with the worldwide British Empire” (Kumar 589-590). Notably, the empire as a symbol of the British nation is a prominent feature of the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution, another event that heavily defined this historical era, was also crucial for the development of British self-identity. This self-conception of the British people “as the standard bearers of modernity and progress, the carriers of civilization” (Kumar 591) justified the need for imperial expansion, under the notion that their colonial efforts would bring development to those parts of the world considered to be underdeveloped. Presently, Britain “still grapples with its colonial past, lives in an environment shaped by Victorian (social) architecture and is far from free of Victorian value systems and gender hierarchies” (Boehm-

¹³ “At its height, just after the First World War, this empire covered a fifth of the world’s surface and incorporated a quarter of its population” (Kumar 588).

Schnitker and Gruss 6); as such, the enduring legacy left by the Victorians is still undeniably present in the fabric of contemporary Britain, and it is because of the strong association between Victorian Britain and the British Empire that it becomes essential to discuss how the fields of neo-Victorianism and postcolonialism, and their associated discourses, intersect.

It is paramount here to spotlight Elizabeth Ho's work, which focuses extensively on the topic of postcolonial neo-Victorianism¹⁴. According to the author, "[p]ostcolonial neo-Victorian production ... has been dominated by a need to work through historical relationships with the former coloniser, usually Britain, in order to pose deimperialised futures" (Ho 2019, 2). The scholar's statement places emphases on how neo-Victorian fiction allows the contemporary reader to better understand and imagine the post-imperial present and future, harkening back to the previously stated notion that neo-Victorianism reflects present-day concerns, even though its narratives take place in the past. By focusing on colonial violence, "[n]eo-Victorian literature ... 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" (Kohlke 2022, 275), affirming neo-Victorianism's potential to highlight and provide a voice to the (colonised) voiceless of the nineteenth century.

Ho's 2012 monograph *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* is an extensive study on postcolonial neo-Victorianism, an undertaking that approaches the area and its narratives "as a global, Anglophone project" (8), through which neo-Victorianism "can be viewed as a strategy with which to incorporate and work through the anxieties and uncertainties that emerge in the wake of the British Empire's dissolution" (Ho 2012, 7). Of this study, Llewellyn and Heilmann write that Ho "suggests that enacting relationships between the empire's periphery and centre is a complex business that blurs the boundaries of contemporary conflict, trauma and cultural memory with a more nuanced interpretation of the past as a history that can be reclaimed and can redeem the present" (2013, 27), while Garrido stresses how her work has "advanced the field's attentiveness to the convergences between postcolonial and neo-Victorian theoretical approaches" (2024, 93). In Ho's own words, her study "provides a necessary corrective to the omission of the postcolonial from neo-Victorian scholarship" (2012, 8), which is relevant because

¹⁴ In the present dissertation, postcolonial is employed as an adjective that characterises neo-Victorianism. Although both fields of study are complementary, in that they analyse and deconstruct similar topics, albeit through different frameworks, the present study focuses on the neo-Victorian depiction of the British Empire in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*. As such, postcolonial theory complements this neo-Victorian analysis, but is not at its centre.

[s]ituating neo-Victorianism within the postcolonial agenda, rather than a more conventional postmodern understanding of the loss of historicity, reveals how neo-Victorian narratives supplement and enhance postcolonial theory as a memorial practice at a time when our geopolitical conditions call for new ways of engaging with history. (2012, 8)

This focus on postcolonial narratives within neo-Victorianism is, according to Ho, a more recent trend of the genre: “Postmillennial examples of neo-Victorianism demonstrate an imperative to delineate neo-imperial and neo-colonial arrangements in a globalized present” (2012, 9).

Because it looks back to the Victorian age through a current-day perspective, neo-Victorian fiction “offers a highly visible, highly aestheticized code for confronting empire again and anew; it is a site within which the memory of empire and its surrounding discourses and strategies of representation can be replayed and played out” (Ho 2012, 5). Therefore, Ho proposes that neo-Victorian fiction is an apt space whereby the Empire and its colonial past may be confronted, which is reminiscent of the mission of postcolonial studies. It is necessary here to recall that the British Empire spanned from the sixteenth century until the mid-twentieth century¹⁵, and it “continues to have profound ramifications today” (Steinbach 65). Such ramifications constitute key themes of neo-Victorian fiction and, as Ho asserts “[n]eo-Victorianism ... allows us to see the residue of imperialism in current policies like multiculturalism, which are supposed to enable the Other and pave the way for an antiracist future, but which nonetheless serve as perpetual reminders of the radicalized past” (2012, 12)¹⁶. The author’s statement, then, remits to the already established conception that postcolonial studies analyse and deconstruct the lasting effects of the Empire in the post-imperial present, once more emphasising the importance of conjugating both fields.

Kohlke and Gutleben’s work also focuses on the lingering effects of colonial trauma, and the scholars write that “[t]he fact that no sufferers remain to offer personal testimony necessitates a reconstruction of events from intermediary texts and images, which, even when records of actual first-hand experiences, require analytical commentary, (re)interpretation,

¹⁵ “[T]he British Empire ... was first established in the sixteenth century, remained largely intact until after World War Two” (Steinbach 65).

¹⁶ H. D. J. van Dam’s dissertation *Making it Right?: Writing the Other in Postcolonial Neo-Victorianism* (2016) is a relevant study that examines various depictions of Otherness in twenty-first century neo-Victorian narratives.

and translation for today's general public" (5), thus claiming neo-Victorianism is an adequate foreground for the experiences of the racial Other. Postcolonial neo-Victorian fiction bridges the past and the present through its "structure of address between a past Other and witnessing present" (Ho 2012, 18). Colonial trauma is, then, a central component of both postcolonial and neo-Victorian fiction, particularly in those works in which the British Empire features heavily. It "becomes a textual characteristic of neo-Victorianism as it describes a radical presence of the past in the present" (Ho 2012, 18), harkening once more to the notion that neo-Victorianism has the ability to reflect contemporary concerns in its narratives. Postcolonial neo-Victorianism explores and articulates the experiences of colonial trauma, often by focalising the experience of the Other. As Young notes, "[p]ostcolonial cultural critique involves the reconsideration of this history, particularly from the perspective of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact" (4). In fact, neo-Victorian fiction benefits from postcolonial critique, as it creates more strategies of study and understanding of the experiences of the colonised, racialised, and exoticized Other, who is usually the focal point of such narratives. However, it is essential to recall that "both the represented suffering and the words used to describe it are the result of fictional production, of creation rather than theft, with trauma conveyed primarily via invented images and metaphors" (Kohlke and Gutleben 18), which is in itself a limitation inherent to postcolonial neo-Victorianism.

While acknowledging what is proposed by these authors, Garrido has recently noted the still-existing limitations that impact postcolonial approaches to neo-Victorianism, asserting that "there is an acute danger to overestimate neo-Victorianism's interventionist potential as a critical project" (2024, 106). While the author recognises that "[f]rom the late 2000s onwards, postcolonial and global approaches have been increasingly codified as integral to neo-Victorian studies" (98), he also calls attention to such constraints, emphasising that neo-Victorianism is slow in accounting for

the notion that postcolonial and, more recently, decolonial approaches have thought not in terms of multiple intersections *between* race and colonialism, but racialisation and its material manifestation via imperial contexts as the central function of colonialism, understood as a distinct capitalist system of exploitation. (2024, 97)

Garrido understands that considering neo-Victorianism

from a postcolonial and global perspective and as embedded in a lasting coloniality that structures genres, arts, media, and academic practices alike, might begin with an interrogation of why a decade-spanning, highly self-reflexive development ... which routinely interrogates and lays bare the systemic mechanisms on which whiteness operate in discourses of national and transnational identities and memories barely registers within a field whose theoretical premises emphasise the insights that precisely these artistic engagements with the nineteenth century might yield. (2024, 105-106)

One such hindrance noted by the author is how the predominant focus on Western scholarship and frameworks limits neo-Victorianism as an academic field, offering that a more global outlook on the discipline contains “the capacity to revise, contextualise, and expand the insights of Global Northern scholarship” (2024, 100). Moreover, Garrido suggests that “[a] postcolonial and/or global understanding of Neo-Victorianism, then, is less useful as a tool to delineate or even expand the borders of Neo-Victorianism, but to interrogate which ones have tacitly formed in the field” (106), a self-reflection that is necessary to remediate the constraints that the author points out. In this vein, the scholar suggests that neo-Victorianism must broaden its definition to include “regions, ‘peoples’, or histories not (yet) understood as neo-Victorian” (106), whilst also considering “the critical traditions and epistemologies that have been developed outside of, and often enough against, global northern academia’s interpretation of the remediated nineteenth century” (106).

From its earlier roots in postmodernism, the field of neo-Victorianism has significantly evolved, but one of its more pronounced constraints remains its limited engagement with perspectives situated outside of the Anglosphere. In this regard, an intersection between postcolonial and neo-Victorian arises as a benefit, as both areas share a similar mission of foregrounding the voices of the marginalised. In spotlighting the experiences of the racial Other and the colonised, postcolonial neo-Victorianism has the unique potential to facilitate an analysis of the various and wide-reaching effects of the colonial project, which still reverberate on a global scale, thus transforming such narratives into adequate spaces in which to examine colonial trauma. It is necessary to recall, however, that one of the principal limitations attached to neo-Victorian fiction is that it is produced by

natives of the post-Victorian period, and none of its authors hail from the historical era they depict.

Considering a postcolonial approach to neo-Victorian fiction can then enhance our understanding of the aftermath of British colonial rule, as such works centre the experiences of the Other to articulate the horrors of this epoch. In the case of R.F. Kuang's *Babel*, this approach gains an added relevance: the story is told through the perspective of a Chinese youth who is removed from his home to serve the Empire's interests in England, where his very identity is imbued with Otherness. By providing a voice to characters hailing from territories oppressed by British colonial rule during the height of its empire, neo-Victorian fiction becomes an adequate space in which colonial relations can be safely deconstructed and explored. However, it is always relevant to recall that neo-Victorianism is produced not by natives of the nineteenth century, but by contemporaries of the post-colonial present. For this reason, theirs is an inherently slanted perspective, a limitation inherent to neo-Victorianism in itself.

1.4. Historical Context: The Opium Wars

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. (Kohlke 2022, 263)

The Opium Wars¹⁷ were political armed conflicts between Britain and China during the nineteenth century. At the source of these conflicts were "China's attempts to suppress the opium trade" (Pletcher), as "[f]oreign traders (primarily British) had been illegally exporting opium mainly from India to China since the 18th century" (Pletcher). In fact, "[b]y the start of the 19th century, trade in Chinese goods – such as tea, silks and porcelain – was extremely lucrative for British merchants" (National Army Museum) but "the Chinese wouldn't take British products in return; they would only sell their goods in exchange for silver." (National Army Museum). Therefore, trade between both nations favoured China and placed Britain in a disadvantaged economic situation. The British "were concerned as increased amounts of

¹⁷ The lead up to the First Opium War constitutes one of the key moments of *Babel*, and is the principal reason behind the Translator's Revolution that is referenced in the novel's title.

silver left their coffers and poured into Qing China” (Scherf 12). Aiming to rectify this imbalance, “the East India Company and other British merchants began to import Indian opium into China illegally, demanding payment in silver” (National Army Museum), despite the Qing Emperor’s prohibition: “in 1836 [the Qing Emperor] issued an edict banning both opium importation and use” (Cassan 108), largely due to the widespread addiction and social unrest it provoked in China.

The Victorian period idealized China as “at once place, commodity, people, and, at the same time, something more than all of those ... a field of imagined visual possibility that directed many other kinds of material and rhetorical interaction” (Chang 1). This description remits us to the conceptualisation of the racial Other and Said’s Orientalism: the Chinese are viewed as different and exotic, and stereotyped “by many Western academics as an isolationist, backward, and overall closed off society” (Scherf 21), thus standing “in contradiction to empire-building progress and order” (Chang 7). Similarly, Indians were depicted as “sunk in tropical indolence and oriental fatalism” (MacKenzie 54). These Oriental nations stood in the Victorian imaginary as a direct opposite to the British, often stereotyped as “repressed, dutybound and humourless slaves to family values” (Jenkins and John 2). In this period, Chinese people were viewed as “internally unproductive, unwilling or unable to travel forward in time along with the European nations” (Chang 7), having been a nation “ruled long prior to British arrival by a centralized non-native dynasty that exerted profound national control over social and economic systems large and small” (Chang 10), heavily contrasting the image projected by the British and their Empire. Opium traffic into China was justified by the British as necessary because it met a local demand for the drug, and by the view that, as an inferior and unruly people incapable of making rational decisions, the officials responsible for the prohibition did not know best. In truth, however, the British Empire engaged in such a practice because it benefited their economic interests, shifting the trade imbalance by forcing a recirculation of silver into Britain. Opium trade, then, was a way of forcing the Qing dynasty to comply to British interests.

The First Opium War begins in 1839, and is the culmination of an escalation in tensions between both nations, who regarded one another as barbaric and uncivilized. It is essential to note the role played by traders such as William Jardine, who “owned the company that was the largest importer of opium into China, thus supplying the catalyst for the war” (Cassan 107). Alongside his partner, James Matheson, Jardine “engaged in the lucrative, though illegal, opium trade and began importing the drug into Canton” (Cassan 108), thus becoming one of the principal beneficiaries of such business. One of the principal catalysts of

“[t]he clash itself was triggered by the confiscation under threat of a large inventory of opium” (Caquet 1010) by Lin Zexu, “a well respected scholar and government official, as Special Imperial Commissioner” (Cassan 110) nominated by the Qing Emperor, placing upon him the responsibility of enforcing the opium ban. Commissioner Lin, acting on the orders of the Chinese government, “confiscated ... a large quantity of opium held in and around Canton by the British merchant community: 20,000 chests, for a value of around £2 million” (Caquet 1017) and “ordered all of the merchants who had engaged in the trade to leave China” (Cassan 111). Both acts provoked the anger of the British, in what was “characterized as the grossest abuse and an insult to the British flag” (Caquet 1017).

The matter of the Opium War was divisive in Britain. Whereas “[s]ome believe Britain waged war in China to preserve and expand its trading privileges there” (Cassan 106), others construe the conflict as being the “result of the British wishing to defend their honor” (Cassan 106) and “Britain’s patriotic duty to defend her honor against the insults perpetrated by China” (Cassan 114) in response to Commissioner Lin’s destruction of the opium chests. For partisans of the war, the continuation of opium traffic was seen as necessary because it balanced out the trade between both countries, satisfying the depletion of British coffers. As Steinbach observes, “[a] large portion of Britain and the East India Company’s profits came from its sale of Indian opium in China” (75), despite this trade being then illegal. The opium that was trafficked into China “originated in British-ruled India and the principalities” (Caquet 1010), in a “practice which earned the East India Company significant revenue” (Caquet 1010). The war was defended as necessary not “on its own terms, but only through a circuitous argumentation and a combination of excuses” (Caquet 1019), which hindered on the economic and commercial benefits for Britain, without considering the social impact of the drug in the country into which it was being sold.

Some defended also that “the emperor’s true concern in banning opium was said to have been the export of silver and the negative metallic balance involved in the trade, not his subjects’ health” (Caquet 1019), much like Britain’s concern rested also on economic matters. The arguments of the faction in support of the war, then, shifts attention “away from the relative morality or economic benefit of the opium trade and toward the constitution of China as visually defiant to British influence” (Chang 11). The construction of China in the minds of nineteenth century Britain contrasts quite heavily to Victorian stereotypes of industriousness and decency, leading the British to feel it was their responsibility to intervene in the country and civilise it, as was the supposed goal of their imperial efforts. As the opium

sold into China had its origins in Britain-dominated India, the drug becomes symbolic, as it “bonds together a history of international contracted labour originating in India, China, and Africa” (Ho 2019, 8), simultaneously shedding light onto the depth and extent of British rule over colonised nations.

The faction morally opposing the war was critical of opium trade into China against the countries’ laws because such a practice “involved smuggling, because it was accused of crowding out legitimate manufactured goods exports to China, and because it hindered the preaching of Christianity by missionaries” (Caquet 1023). It is worth stating that, although “opium was needed as a painkiller” (Caquet 1027) in Britain at the time of the conflict, the dens in which it was consumed in London “had yet to open and the social concerns they would spark yet to arise” (Caquet 1025), contrasting with how opium had at the time already become a source of concern in China. Additionally, it was “repeatedly compared to the slave trade” (Caquet 1014), a characterization “aiming to rouse the British public, with its considerable philanthropic clout, against opium as it has been roused against the slave trade and slavery itself” (Caquet 1014), driven by the

ahistorical belief in a near-exclusively white British demographic before the mid-twentieth century that silences a range of heterogeneous Black experiences while memorialising abolition as an exclusively white, benevolent project that sustained a sense of British moral superiority throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. (Garrido 2024, 100)

Throughout Britain’s imperial century, then, opium becomes a valuable currency, not only in monetary terms, but also due to the power it denotes.

China lost both the first and second Opium Wars, a defeat which significantly impacted the country and the course of its history. The First Opium War reached its end in August of 1842, with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing,

which granted increased British trading rights, established the extraterritorial system of coastal Chinese cities opened to British settlement and mercantile activity called treaty ports, ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain, and specified the payment of a large indemnity to the British by the Chinese for damages incurred in the conflict. (Chang 11)

The loss was brutal on the Chinese, and “[f]inal death tolls at the end of the war have been estimated at only 500 for the British and over 20,000 Chinese troops” (Cassan 114). Moreover, the loss of the Opium War “marked the start of the era of unequal treaties and other inroads on Qing sovereignty that helped weaken and ultimately topple the dynasty in favour of republican China in the early 20th century” (Pletcher), thus being “the first step in the partial colonization of China, leading to the establishment of Hong Kong, and ... ushering in ... China’s modern era” (Caquet 1010). The profound changes the loss of both Opium Wars brought to China were in part due to “[t]he ease with which the British had defeated the Chinese armies” (National Army Museum), which “seriously affected the Qing dynasty’s prestige” (National Army Museum), propelling the period known as “the ‘Century of Humiliation’ which spans the time roughly one hundred years from the Qing defeat in the First Opium War to the rise of the Communist Party” (Scherf 6) and leading also to a continued indignation towards, and distrust about, foreigners in the country¹⁸. Despite the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, tensions between China and the British continued to mount, leading to the Second Opium War, fought “from 1856 to 1860 to ensure its ‘right’ to sell opium (and spread opiate addiction) in China” (Steinbach 75).

¹⁸ Taking place in 1900, the Boxer Rebellion exemplifies this continued distrust held by the Chinese regarding foreigners in the country. In this conflict, “a Chinese secret organization called the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists led an uprising in northern China against the spread of Western and Japanese influence there” (History.com). As they moved into Beijing, “where the Boxers killed Chinese Christians and Christian missionaries and destroyed churches, railroad stations and other property” (History.com), Western and Japanese powers organised to end the rebellion, achieved through the alliance of “an international force of approximately 20,000 troops from eight nations (Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) arrived to take Beijing and rescue the foreigners and Chinese Christians” (History.com).

CHAPTER 2 | “It’s violent work that sustains the fantasy”

He felt less unrooted and bewildered now – he had a purpose, he had a place, and even though he still couldn’t quite fathom why this life had fallen to *him*, of all the dock boys in Canton, he took his duties with determined, uncomplaining diligence. (Kuang 26)

In 1829 Canton, a young boy is orphaned when his family succumbs to Asiatic Cholera. The boy himself is at death’s door when Oxford Professor Richard Lovell, an English man, arrives and saves the boy from disease with the magic contained in a bar of silver. Professor Lovell presents the boy with two choices: he can either return with him to England, where he will be raised as his ward, or he can remain in Canton, where he will be a destitute orphan, most likely forced to work on the docks and live in “poverty, disease, and starvation” (Kuang 10). Lovell also explains the terms of his guardianship: the boy is to take lessons in “Latin, Greek, and of course, Mandarin” (Kuang 10), with the expectation that he will “apply [himself] diligently to [his] studies” (Kuang 10). This exchange immediately establishes the dynamic of their relationship, particularly its power imbalance. The boy, left vulnerable and orphaned, is confronted with two very disparate scenarios: should he refuse Lovell’s terms, his life will, according to the older man, be difficult and grim, whereas going to England will provide him with opportunities he could otherwise only dream of. Faced with such a choice, it is inevitable that the boy opts to accept the Professor’s offer. He agrees to Professor Lovell’s terms, but is “too shaken to do anything but nod” (Kuang 11), in an exchange that he notes “seemed less like an adoption and more like a business proposal” (Kuang 10). This description emphasises the transactional nature that is established between the boy and the cold, distant Professor, enhancing how he “[objectifies] him as an instrument to further British wealth production” (Kohlke 2022, 263).

Lovell’s first directive to the boy is that he must choose a new name¹⁹ “by which Englishmen could take him seriously” (Kuang 11), implying that in England his name and cultural identity will be regarded as inadequate and less respectable. The boy selects for himself the name Robin Swift²⁰, drawing inspiration for his surname from the author of his

¹⁹ Emphasising the relevance and symbolism of his name, the last words spoken by Robin’s mother before her death were “his name, two syllables mouthed without breath” (Kuang 3).

²⁰ Robin’s English nanny, Miss Betty, had encouraged him to select this English first name when he was four years old. When it comes to his surname, Robin asks Lovell why he cannot use his guardian’s last name as his

favourite novel, *Gulliver's Travels* because, like Gulliver, he would also be “[a] stranger in a strange land, who had to learn the local languages if he wished not to die” (Kuang 12). Nevertheless, Robin is reluctant to shed his family name, as they “were not things to be dropped and replaced at whim ... They marked lineage; they marked belonging” (Kuang 11), demonstrating his awareness of how a name can be an important signifier of cultural and historical identity. Adding another layer of significance to Lovell’s order is the fact that he is Robin’s biological father, which lends to the boy physical features that “could have belonged anywhere on the spectrum of either race, white or yellow” (Kuang 30). As such, forcing Robin to select an English name has also the goal of dispelling any doubts that might be raised regarding his cultural lineage, whereas the use of his real, Chinese name would augment his Otherness. The narrative, then, opens with a symbolic rebirth, in what Kohlke calls “a parodic dramatisation of the white saviour syndrome” (2022, 262): by assuming a new identity, Robin sheds his old life and roots in China to travel to a new country, as a new person.

Robin’s name becomes a significant and recurring motif throughout the narrative, representing his internal struggle to conciliate his Chinese and English halves. When he first meets Griffin, his half-brother asks him if Robin Swift is “the name [he prefers]” (Kuang 94), a query that creates some confusion in Robin, who had never been asked this question. Similarly, when he meets with Commissioner Lin in Canton, Robin introduces himself with his Chinese name, noting that “[h]is other name, his first name, had not been used for so long that it hadn’t crossed his mind to say it” (Kuang 310). In both instances, he opts for his English name, a choice that is worth highlighting because it clearly illustrates the turmoil that Robin undergoes throughout the entire narrative in reconciling the split in his self-identity: mirroring the rise in tensions between China and England, owing to the latter’s colonial pursuits, Robin is aware that he cannot exist in the split between his Chinese and English identities. The narrative closes with Robin, in his dying moments, picturing his mother “[saying] his name” (Kuang 536). Given that she had never known Robin after Lovell’s order to change his name, it is implied that she proffers his Chinese name, which is never revealed throughout the narrative, in a moment that parallels the opening of the story. The closing of the novel can thus be read as Robin reconnecting with, and regaining control over, his cultural identity. Robin’s name is thus also a representation of the authority and control Lovell has

own, an idea at which the Professor scoffs because such a choice would lead others to believe that Lovell is Robin’s father (Kuang 12). While it is later confirmed that the Professor is, indeed, Robin’s biological father, to reveal such a fact would threaten the Professor’s image as a respectable university professor and gentleman.

over the boy, and as such the control, authority and hegemony the coloniser aims to force upon the colonised.

In Canton, during his childhood, Robin has an English nanny, “one Miss Elizabeth Slate” (Kuang 7), who spoke with him “exclusively in English” (Kuang 7) and taught him the language. Furthermore, from the age of four, Robin had received “a large parcel twice a year filled entirely with books written in English” (Kuang 7). Upon meeting Lovell, Robin concludes that the Professor was, most likely, the benefactor behind both the nanny and the books, which he later confirms, and he later learns also that he is his biological father. Although at first unable to “quite [grasp] the larger picture” (Kuang 7), it soon becomes apparent that Lovell’s investment stems from an interest in ensuring that, once Robin is isolated from his family and taken to England, he will be fluent in both English and Mandarin/Cantonese, conditions that will be essential for his eventual enrolment in Babel. Indeed, Robin learns that the Professor aims to have him “take courses in a curriculum of [his] design. It will be language work” (Kuang 10) so that he may one day, “should [he] progress sufficiently well in [his] studies” (Kuang 23-24), attend Oxford’s Royal Institute of Translation, where Lovell teaches and which he considers to be “the centre of all knowledge and innovation in the civilized world” (Kuang 23). As such, from very early on in his childhood, and even from afar, Robin has been primed and controlled by Lovell, who aimed to ensure his future ward would have the necessary characteristics of a Babel scholar when time came for his enrolment in the Institute.

Lovell and Robin’s relationship is aloof and detached, and “based on coercion and dissimulation, mimicking Britain’s relationship with China” (Kohlke 2022, 263), one that is fraught with rising tensions. Furthermore, their relationship can be read as an allegory for the relationship between the coloniser, manifested in Lovell, the “monstrous father figure ... who embodies the purportedly benign but actually patronising, exploitative, and deeply racist paternalism of Western empires” (Kohlke 2022, 272), and the subjugated colonised, represented by Robin. From the outset of the novel, the imbalance in their dynamic “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” (Kohlke 2022, 263). The process of colonialism necessarily implicates a systemic erasure of native cultures, under the assumed inferiority of colonised territories, its people and their social and cultural customs. The coloniser aims to attain hegemony through “the literal process of entering into a foreign territory and assuming control of its society and

industry, and, on a more conceptual level, the *post facto* promulgation of a cultural ideology that justifies the colonizer's presence on the basis of his superior knowledge and 'civilization'" (Hiddleston 2). Although he subscribes to the coloniser's mindset that Chinese people are "by nature, foolish, weak-minded, and disinclined to hard work" (Kuang 40-41), Lovell fathers two children with different Chinese women, whom he uses as assets through which he conducts something like "a eugenic experiment to produce docile, talented Chinese linguists for the British Empire by breeding them from his own bloodline" (Kohlke 2022, 264). Much like the colonial dynamic is symbiotic²¹ and produces a mutual effect, so is the Professor's and Robin's relationship. Particularly illustrating this reciprocal impact, Lovell dies at Robin's death, and Robin's death is directly caused by Lovell's intercession in his life.

Lovell epitomises the imperial project, employing any and all means, including his progeny, to attain British sovereignty and domination on a global level. Names are essential to define one's cultural identity. As such, it is significant that the Professor's first order to Robin is that he is to shed his Chinese name and instead choose an English one. For similar purposes, when they arrive in London, Lovell takes Robin "on a series of errands in the service of assimilating him into British civil society" (Kuang 22), including a visit to the doctor, a barber "who clipped Robin's unruly, chin-length curls into a short, neat crop above his ears" (Kuang 22), as well as "a hatter, a bootmaker, and ... a tailor" (Kuang 22). These actions illustrate the extent to which Professor Lovell attempts to erase Robin's cultural self, aiming to propell his blending and assimilation into Victorian society by forcing him to detach himself from all defining physical and cultural markers of his Chinese origins. Lovell's efforts at minimising Robin's Chinese traits can be construed as an attempt to prevent ward from being stereotyped²². However, the Professor's actions are not guided by a desire to ensure that Robin is protected from discrimination on account of his race, but are instead an effort on his part to both assert his dominance over Robin, whose image is altered to satisfy his will, and also to protect himself and his social image. Lovell furthermore informs Robin that he is to be tutored in Mandarin, and that his Cantonese "could now be forgotten" (Kuang 26), as "Mandarin was the language of the Qing imperial court in Peking,

²¹ "[T]he remains of empire affect the formerly colonized countries as much as the colonizing nations themselves because of the much discussed symbiotic relationships between colonizers and colonized" (Burney 174).

²² Stereotyping, here understood as "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics" (Hall 249), has an "essentializing, reductionist and naturalizing [effect]" (257). Stereotypes were used to justify the imperial project's civilising efforts, as they tended "to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group" (Hall 258), thus being essential in establishing power dynamics of perceived superiority and inferiority.

the language of officials and scholars, and therefore the only dialect that mattered” (Kuang 26). Through these actions, then, Lovell aims to prime Robin into becoming “a more efficient translator to better promote the interests of the British Empire” (Kohlke 2022, 265), demonstrating also that the Professor is only interested in cultivating the aspects of Robin’s Chinese identity that will in the future be fruitful assets to the political and economic gain of the Empire.

In Lovell’s Hampstead home, which is extensively decorated “with painted fans, hanging scrolls and porcelain vases, sculptures, and teapots” (Kuang 344), creating the effect of “a garish re-creation of a Canton teahouse juxtaposed upon a base of English furniture” (Kuang 344), Robin spends his childhood in isolation, being tutored in Greek and Latin, and Mandarin, with Professor Lovell serving as tutor for the latter. Consequently, he comes to acquire “a deep appreciation of language and all the words for what you could do with it” (Kuang 24) and a passion for scholarship. Although Victorian England is typically thought of as predominantly white, it is worth noting that “the population of nineteenth-century Britain included thousands of nonwhite people, most of whom lived in London or in port cities” (Steinbach 70). Nevertheless, and despite sometimes travelling to London for leisure, Robin does not interact with people that hail from the same cultural background as him, as they did not frequent the same “circles of London where he lived” (Kuang 27), but is frequently subjected to Lovell’s “variety of guests” (Kuang 28), whom Robin assumes are other scholars. Because he is isolated from conversing in his native tongue, Robin finds that it can be “startlingly easy to lose a language that had once felt as familiar as his own skin” (Kuang 27), to the point where he realises that he sometimes “sounded, to his own ears, like a European sailor imitating Chinese without knowing what he said” (Kuang 28). The fear of losing the only remaining thread he has to his culture and heritage motivates Robin to “put twice the effort into Chinese” (Kuang 28) that he places in studying his other languages. Determined to not lose this small connection to his native culture, Robin demonstrates an act of resistance and an inkling of rebellion against Lovell’s attempts at colonising him.

Another layer to the dynamic between Lovell and Robin is the authority that Lovell, the coloniser, exerts over Robin, the colonised. In *Orientalism*, Said notes that “[t]here is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces” (Said 19-20). In Said’s perspective, then, authority is an essential mechanism to imperialism, and it is necessary for

the coloniser to assert their dominance over the colonised; similarly, Lovell asserts his authority over Robin over various moments of his teenagerhood in Hampstead, aiming to prime his ward and son to do his bidding (and the Empire's) without question or resistance. Lovell does not provide Robin with an allowance, in what can be construed as an attempt to further isolate him. Therefore, Robin is only able to visit London on occasion, when the housekeeper, Mrs Piper, "let him have some small change" (Kuang 31). Robin is also only able to undertake these visits while the Professor is away at Oxford, as these are the only moments when he was not "breathing over his shoulder" (Kuang 31) regarding his application in his studies.

To ensure that Robin bends to his authority, Lovell also employs fear, of the poverty and destitution that Robin is sure awaits him in Canton, to ensure control. A defining episode of Robin's time in Hampstead occurs on a day in which he distracts himself reading a book, causing him to be late for one of his lessons. In response to his transgression, Lovell beats Robin with a fireplace poker to discipline him for his irresponsibility, a reaction that Robin finds "so unexpected, so wholly out of character" (Kuang 39) for the very proper Professor. During the beating, Robin observes that Lovell "did not look like a man in the throes of a tempestuous rage. He was not shouting; his eyes were not wild; his cheeks had not even turned red. He seemed simply, with every hard and deliberate blow, to be attempting to inflict maximum pain with the minimum risk of permanent injury" (Kuang 39-40). The assault "becomes an opportunity for Lovell to explicitly articulate his white supremacist ideology, which recycles prevalent real-world Victorian stereotypes of the Chinese" (Kohlke 2022, 264). Lovell's justification for his outburst is that "[l]aziness and deceit are common traits" (Kuang 40) of Chinese people and, as such, Robin must be disciplined to overcome the "pollution of [his] blood" (Kuang 41). At the end of the beating, Lovell threatens that, should he fail to apply himself on his studies, Robin will be returned to Canton where, according to the Professor, he will "be back on the streets with no family, no skills, and no money" (Kuang 41). Proving that authority can successfully condition the colonised, Robin decides that he will from there on "[devote] his life to becoming the student Professor Lovell wanted to see" (Kuang 42).

Robin, then, comes to realise eventually "that he was not, and could never be, a person in his father's eyes. No, personhood demanded the blood purity of the European man, the racial status that would make him Professor Lovell's equal" (Kuang 319). Professor Lovell is

married to a “terribly rich” (Kuang 93) English woman²³ with whom he has two legitimate children, whereas he does not claim Griffin and Robin as his offspring, relegating them to simple assets to further the interests of the Crown and its Empire. Outwardly, then, Professor Lovell appears to fit into the Victorian archetype of the proper English gentleman, both through his respectable marriage and prestigious employment, as well as his seemingly composed temperament. The existence of his two illegitimate children, as well as the race of their mothers, however, is incongruent with this archetype, recalling the concept of miscegenation, a term which “referred to the sexual union of white and black races” (Nayar 104), and its subjacent “worry about the ‘contamination’ of their ruling race with the blood of the ‘primitive’” (Nayar 105). Additionally, the violence, both physical and psychological, he inflicts upon his offspring is also incompatible with the ideal of the British gentleman, further illustrating the hypocrisy that deeply defines his character.

2.1. The Necessity of Violence

Of all the marvels at Oxford, Babel seemed the most impossible
– a tower out of time, a vision from a dream. (Kuang 72)

Upon his arrival at Oxford²⁴, Robin immediately befriends his roommate Ramy, who is also to be one of the members of his cohort. The pair become “kindred spirits in the span of minutes” (Kuang 51), a bond that is made stronger by the similarities of their youth and upbringing: Ramy reveals that, much like Robin, he too had been brought from India to England where he was “holed up in a big, boring estate in Yorkshire” (Kuang 50) to “acclimatize to English society” (Kuang 50) before his matriculation in the Institute. These similarities astound Robin, whose isolation growing up had caused him to never having “met someone else in his situation, or anything like it” (Kuang 50). From early on in his friendship with Ramy, Robin notes how their physical differences influence the way they exist in Victorian England: Robin, who is mixed race and is able to pass as white tries to “keep his head down and assimilate, to play down his otherness” (Kuang 54); on the other hand, Ramy,

²³As Griffin informs Robin, “[t]here’s no love lost in that marriage. He wanted an estate and she wanted bragging rights. They see each other about twice a year, and the rest of his time he lives [at Oxford], or in Hampstead. We’re the children he spends the most time with, funnily enough” (Kuang 94). The Professor’s marriage and the (legitimate) children he produces aid him in sustaining his image as a respectable English gentleman.

²⁴ Appendix A contains a map of the narrative’s alternate version of the City of Oxford, facilitating an understanding of the locations traversed by the characters throughout their time as students.

who is Indian and has brown skin, “had no choice but to stand out” (Kuang 54). These differences are defining throughout the narrative, and influence the fact that, while Robin expresses a desire to belong to the country where he was brought up from a young age, Ramy never shared such an ambition.

On the night before their first day of lessons, as they are returning from the library, the pair are accosted by a group of students, who take particular issue with Ramy, a brown man, wearing scholar robes. This event leads Robin to realise that they “did not belong in this place, that despite their affiliation with the Translation Institute and despite their gowns and pretensions, their bodies were not safe on the street” (Kuang 68), succinctly describing his and Ramy’s situation as follows: “They were men at Oxford; they were not Oxford men” (Kuang 68). Acutely aware that his Chinese identity hinders his full acceptance into Victorian society, Robin attempts always to assimilate the best he can, although his assimilation “always remains contingent and incomplete” (Kohlke 2022, 265). The encounter sours his experience at Oxford, which had, until then, been “three of the happiest days of Robin’s life” (Kuang 53), and informs how he conducts and presents himself onwards during his time at University. Owing to his mixed heritage, “Robin is both invisible and hypervisible, and his survival depends on his awareness that he will never be able to fully integrate into a white-dominated colonial culture” (Sanchez-Taylor 9), causing him to lean into the white half of his identity as a mechanism of self-protection.

In the aftermath of the attempted attack, Robin feels that “Oxford took a sinister air now that he was alone; the lights were no longer warm but eerie, stretching and warping his shadow against cobblestones” (Kuang 64). This description emphasises how Robin’s feelings about the University and his as a student shift depending on external factors. As he had spent his youth confined to Hampstead, immersed in his studies in preparation for his attendance at Babel, Robin does not have any meaningful connections or relationships. As such, upon meeting Ramy, Oxford immediately becomes synonymous with happiness for Robin, as the place that has enabled him to encounter friendships. Forced to confront the fact that not even his attending the prestigious Royal Institute of Translation affects his and Ramy’s Otherness, Robin finds that the University loses some of its charm, foreshadowing the symbiotic nature of his relationship to both Babel and his friends: while their friendship is in its heyday, Robin associates happiness to Babel; when their bond “[twists] in a decidedly hurtful direction” (Kuang 193), straining under the pressures of coursework and, in Robin’s case, his inner turmoil, he finds that “Oxford [loses] its charm” (Kuang 189).

On the first day of term, Robin and Ramy meet the two other members of their cohort, Victoire Desgraves and Letitia “Letty” Price. Throughout that day, the foursome receive a guided tour of the Institute²⁵ by a Black upperclassman, Anthony Ribben, who explains to them how Babel operates. The Institute services “[l]ocal tradesmen ordering bars for their equipment” (Kuang 73) and “city officials requesting public works maintenance” (Kuang 73), but it is worth noting that its second-highest grossing service is the Legal Department, which is concerned with “[t]he gears of empire, the stuff that makes the world go round” (Kuang 74) through the “[manipulation of] language to create favourable terms for European parties” (Kuang 74). Robin is thus aware from the outset that Babel favours economically from its imperial dealings, even if he does not immediately understand the magnitude of this business. In contrast, Anthony explains that the Institute’s Literature Department, focused on “translating foreign novels, stories, and poems into English and – less frequently – vice versa” (Kuang 75), is often regarded as a less prestigious department, as it “runs a deficit every year” (Kuang 76), once more highlighting the benefits accrued by Babel from its involvement in imperial expansion, leading the scholars from such departments to be favoured.

What most impresses Robin about Babel is the various sets of Grammaticas it contains, most of which, he notes, tended to be produced by “white British men rather than native speakers of those languages” (Kuang 78). The Grammaticas were, as Anthony explains, “better protected than the Princess Victoria” (Kuang 78), as they contained the entirety of the research conducted by the Institute and its scholars over several years. Robin observes that “[s]ome Grammatica sets – notably the European languages – took up entire display cases on their own; others, largely the Oriental languages, contained few volumes” (Kuang 77), a disparity that can be attributed to the fact that Babel’s interest in non-European languages was a recent endeavour. Robin later learns that this turn towards the Orient, particularly pressed by Lovell, is born of genuine necessity because colonialism and the cultural contact it inevitably generates has led silver bars to lose their efficacy, as “[l]anguages affect each other” (Kuang 163) when new words from different languages enter the lexicons of other countries. As this “linguistic flow spreads across continents ... the semantic warp loses its potency” (Kuang 163), which makes it necessary to seek out other, less used languages to continue the practice of silver-working. It is ironic, then, that the Institute is a significant mechanism of colonialism, surviving from the profits it generates, but

²⁵ See Appendix B for the map of the Royal Institute of Translation.

it is also colonialism that is causing the work of its scholars to become increasingly obsolete. Griffin encourages Robin to ponder on why “all the Grammaticas under lock and key in the tower” (Kuang 117), or why Babel never “[hosts] foreign scholars, or send scholars to help open translation centres elsewhere in the world” (Kuang 117) in an effort to prove to him that what motivates the Institute is not the search for progress and development, nor is it academic interest in linguistics, but rather profit and the imperial proliferation.

From the very beginning of their acquaintance, Griffin becomes an influential figure in Robin’s life, often challenging him to question Babel and its practices by offering a countering perspective. His older half-brother immediately points out the similarities in their upbringing²⁶ in an effort to demonstrate Lovell’s pattern of fathering children to create translators in service of the empire. Believing that he might persuade Robin to join his cause, Griffin introduces himself as a criminal who, alongside his colleagues, “regularly [steals] silver manuscripts, and engraving materials from Babel [to] funnel them across England to [their] associates throughout the world” (Kuang 95) on the behest of the Hermes Society, a secret organisation aiming to counter Babel’s and the British Empire’s colonial efforts by “[funnelling] silver away to people, communities, and movements that deserve it” (Kuang 100) and “[aiding] slave revolts. Resistance movements” (Kuang 100). Griffin points out that the silver produced by the tower is employed for the comfort and benefit of the British upper class, to provide them with amenities such as “alarm clocks that sound like real roosters, lights that dim and brighten on vocal command, curtains that change colour throughout the day” (Kuang 99), which is made possible due to the “deliberate exploitation of foreign cultures and foreign resources” (Kuang 100) in the form of translators who, like Robin and Griffin, are groomed from childhood to serve the empire as assets. Silver bars are also employed by the military, enabling the expansion of the British Empire. As Griffin points out,

London sits at the centre of a vast empire that won’t stop growing. The single most important enabler of this growth is Babel. Babel collects foreign languages and foreign talent the same way it hoards silver and uses them to produce translation magic that benefits England and England only. The vast majority of all silver bars in use in the world are in London. The newest, most powerful bars in use rely on Chinese, Sanskrit, and Arabic to work, but

²⁶ In their first meeting, before revealing their familial connection, Griffin lays down their similarities to Robin: “You grew up without a father but with an inexplicable English nursemaid and a never-ending supply of books in English, and when Professor Lovell turned up to carry you off to England, you said farewell to your motherland for good. You think the professor might be your father, but he hasn’t admitted that you are his own. You’re quite sure he never will” (Kuang 90).

you'll count less than a thousand bars in the countries where those languages are widely spoken, and then only in the homes of the wealthy and powerful. (Kuang 99-100)

Griffin, then, denotes how the relationship between Babel and the British Empire is synergistic: without the profits generated through the selling of silver bars for imperial purposes, Babel cannot sustain its enterprise, and British imperial expansion is a direct result of the work that the Institute produces with the profits of colonialism, which Griffin heartily condemns. Here, then, Griffin establishes a binary between the Hermes Society and Babel, in which Babel is “intricately tied to the business of colonialism” (Kuang 100), servicing the British by employing translation magic for “luxury, to the military, to making lace and weapons” (Kuang 263), and the Hermes Society employs its efforts to end imperial overreach. Further denoting this binary is the fact that Hermes also functions as “a research centre in its own right, though its projects had to be done in secret, with scant and stolen resources” (Kuang 383)²⁷.

Griffin invites Robin to become a member of Hermes, a proposal that he is initially hesitant to accept because it would force him to confront the possibility that his work for the Institute might provoke harm, and in the process, likely shatter the illusion he has created for himself about the good parts of life as an Oxford scholar. Pressured to decide, Robin requests some time to think, knowing that if he were to outright deny his half-brother, “Griffin would simply vanish from the Oxford he knew, would fade so effectively into the shadows that Robin would be left wondering if he’d imagined the entire encounter” (Kuang 101), which he does not want. Having been orphaned for a significant portion of his life, and with Lovell as the only familial connection that he has left, forging a bond with his brother is important to Robin, who yearns for connection and strives to find meaningful relationships. Nevertheless, the information that is presented to him leaves him feeling as overwhelmed as he had felt when the Professor proposed he come to England with him, the difference being that “then he’d had nothing, so there had been nothing to lose. This time he had everything – food, clothing, shelter” (Kuang 102), and no assurances of safety if he joins Hermes.

²⁷ An example of research undertaken by Hermes is a comparative study of “the quantity of footnotes added to translations of European texts versus non-European texts” (Kuang 383), which “tended to be loaded down with an astonishing amount of explanatory context, to the effect that the text was never read as a work on its own, but always through the guided lens of the (white, European) translator” (Kuang 383), exemplifying the stark opposition of what each translation centre prioritises and their goals.

Attentive to Griffin's warning, Robin attempts to find clues that corroborate his brother's accusations of Babel's exploitative nature, but finds that "in daylight, in the classroom, his brother's grand conspiracies felt quite ridiculous" (Kuang 105). Robin is finally convinced to join Hermes when he realises that Professor Lovell would never admit that it was wrong of Babel to restrict the knowledge it produces to applications that favour only the British populace. In this discussion, which occurs some days after his meeting with his brother, Robin argues with their biological father, with his position being anchored in a sense of fairness and equality, claiming that the "bars that can help people who need them most" (Kuang 117) should be available for wide consumption. Lovell, on the other hand, defends that the Institute and the Empire must employ their most precious resource where it might benefit them most, politically and economically, justifying his reasoning on the premise that "all nations hoard their most precious resources" (Kuang 117). Angered, but not surprised, at his father's dismissal of his feelings and arguments, Robin accepts Griffin's invitation, as a form of rebellion against Lovell and his imperialistic mindset, which is "what Babel was at its roots" (Kuang 120).

His acceptance into Hermes cleaves Robin's life at Oxford into two halves that he cannot reconcile, in which "Griffin existed in the shadow world, hidden from sight" (Kuang 180) and his experience in classes and with his friends exist in the daylight. In his lessons, Robin comes to understand that he is regarded "not simply a student but a colleague, a rare native speaker capable of expanding the bounds of Babel's scant existing knowledge" (Kuang 111), leading him to feel pride in the usefulness of his skills. In contrast, his first few times assisting Hermes feel like "an act of betrayal – of stealing from Babel itself, the institution to which he'd literally given his blood²⁸" (Kuang 125). Despite his anxiety that his betrayal will be found out and result in his being expelled from the Institute, Robin finds that "[i]n the light of day" (Kuang 125) those exploits "seemed a faraway dream. The tangible and solid consisted of Oxford, of coursework and professors and freshly baked scones and clotted cream" (Kuang 125). It is important to note that this binary of Hermes and Babel comes to be distinguished in Robin's eyes as, respectively, dark and light, positive and negative: "Griffin and the Hermes society belonged to bad dreams and shadows; his cohort was sun and warmth and laughter" (Kuang 131). As he continues to undertake his missions on Hermes' behest, he becomes progressively less anxious, and finds that it is all "less romantic than Robin had

²⁸ Students and faculty of Babel are required to provide a sample of their blood "to distinguish scholars from intruders" (Kuang 83) to the protective wards that guard the tower's entrance. Symbolically, it also binds the scholars to the imperial project in which Babel participates. If a student is expelled, their blood vial is destroyed, representing the severing of their ties to the Institute.

imagined – and, perhaps, hoped for. There were no thrilling escapades or coded conversations spoken on bridges over running water. It was all so mundane” (Kuang 178). Nevertheless, the this distinction continues to be ever-present.

Parallel to his work for Hermes, Robin forges and deepens his bond with the members of his cohort. From the very beginning of their acquaintance, they learn that all of them share one similarity: “without Babel, they had nowhere in this country to go” (Kuang 87), as a condition of their Otherness. Like Robin, Ramy and Victoire were also brought to England by benefactors who had primed them to one day become translators for the Institute, whereas Letty joined Babel against her father’s wishes, as he held the notion that women did not belong in academic spaces. Therefore, their experience in Babel is deeply defined by their alterity, causing the foursome to have difficulty blending in. The treatment they receive from other academics and Oxford residents illustrates the marginality of their status:

No one would serve Ramy at any of their favourite pubs if he was the first to arrive ... Victoire was assumed by shopkeepers to be Letty or Robin’s maid. Porters regularly asked all four of them if they could please not step on the green for it was off limits, while the other boys trampled over the so-called delicate grass all around them. (Kuang 139-140)

Despite being white and hailing from a respected upper-class family, a central feature of Letty’s character is her strife with not being fully embraced in Oxford on account of being a woman²⁹. Raised alongside her brother Lincoln, who “was meant for Oxford” (Kuang 435) despite his lack of academic interest, Letty was brought up “for an early marriage” (Kuang 435), the expectation for women of her period and social status. She is able to attend Babel only in the aftermath of her brother’s death, and does so against her father’s wishes, causing a rift with her family. Unlike her cohort, whose attendance is sponsored by benefactors, Letty had to undertake the “general entrance exam for applicants who don’t come specially recommended” (Kuang 150), which reinforces her notion that her friends should feel grateful for the opportunity they have been awarded. Letty, then, holds resentment against her peers of colour for what she perceives to be a privilege they have been awarded, while she has not, without realising their lack of agency in the decision to attend the Institute. Foundational to

²⁹ That Ramy and Robin fail to understand and dismiss her struggles is a constant source of tension in the cohort, and is one of the causes that eventually leads Victoire to betray her friends and the Hermes Society to the authorities. Aware of the difficulties Letty faces, Victoire points out to Ramy and Robin that they do not “quite understand how hard it is to be a woman” (Kuang 151) in Babel.

the cohort's bond, that leads them to become "veterans united by their trials, hardened soldiers who could lean against each other for everything" (Kuang 170), is their positioning as marginalised members of Victorian society. The insidious nature of the vassalage demanded by Babel students of colour becomes starker when considering how the imperial project was framed by the coloniser, under the pretence that such peoples "found happiness only when under the tutelage of a white master" (Hall 243).

Because his cohort are the people to whom he can most relate and with whom he spends the most time, Robin finds in them "what he thought he'd never have again after Canton: a circle of people he loved so fiercely his chest hurt when he thought about them" (Kuang 130) – in short, a family. They soon become "the colours of Robin's life" (Kuang 127), a description that reinforces the contrast between Robin's involvement with Hermes and its grim connotation, and the solace that he associates to his life at Oxford³⁰. The enjoyment he feels from his life as an Oxford scholar, while simultaneously acknowledging the truth in Griffin's warnings about the corrupt and amoral dealings helmed by Babel, creates an internal conflict for Robin, "for loving [his friends], and Oxford, as much as he did" (Kuang 130). Because of this contrast, Robin omits Hermes' existence from his friends, believing that they, like him, had "too much to lose" (Kuang 284) should the betrayal be found out. Robin finds that "he could not imagine bringing those worlds together" (Kuang 131) and consequently "shatter the life they'd built for themselves" (Kuang 132) among the comforts and routines of the Institute. Throughout his years as a student, Robin finds it difficult to reconcile his awareness "that all this gold and glitter had to come at a cost" (Kuang 132) while still finding genuine happiness in his friends and his work. Specifically, Robin yearns for the security of belonging to Babel, which for Robin is synonymous to belonging in England and thus never having to face hardship and poverty in Canton.

This concealment later becomes a source of tension in Robin's relationship with Victoire and Ramy³¹, who had been recruited for Hermes in their third year at Babel by Anthony Ribben. For Robin, "Babel represented more than material comforts. Babel was the reason he belonged in England, why he was not begging on the streets of Canton. Babel was the only place where his talents mattered. Babel was security" (Kuang 137). Having internalised Lovell's constant threats of his being returned to the streets of Canton should he

³⁰ Despite the strength of their bond, there are several moments in the narrative that foreshadow how their relationship "went sideways" (Kuang 88) at some point.

³¹ Maryam ElZayat's dissertation *Gramática de la lengua de violencia: Coming of age in R. F. Kuang's Babel: Or the necessity of violence: An arcane history of the Oxford translators' revolution* analyses the coming of age journeys of each of these characters, conducting the analysis through postcolonial frameworks that enable a study of the effects of colonialism and Othering.

fail in his studies in any capacity, Robin perceives his participation in the heists Hermes organises as both a rebellion against his father and imperialism, and as a risk to his own permanence in the country he considers to be his only home. Ramy and Victoire, also victims of the same practice that brought Robin to the country, “had come to Europe with a guardian” (Kuang 87). Ramy was removed from his family in Calcutta by a rich white benefactor who took a liking to his affinity for English, and Victoire was made slave to the family of a Parisian academic after her mother’s death, despite hailing from Haiti, a free, Black Republic, using Babel as her escape. As such, Robin is left “both baffled and resentful” (Kuang 286) when he is chastised by the pair after his omission is finally revealed. Ramy in particular expresses his hatred for the country to Robin, claiming that he had “been waiting for an opportunity like Hermes since [he had gotten to Oxford]” (Kuang 283)³². In response, Robin points out that, unlike Ramy who had a family to return to in India, he only had “a contract, a guardian, and a house in Canton full of dead relatives that for all [he knew] could still be rotting in their beds” (Kuang 285). This contrast is worth spotlighting, as it clearly articulates the differences between both characters: Ramy, more daring, is willing to sacrifice himself for the anticolonial cause, but still has the security of a home and a family to return to if something goes awry, whereas Robin is more fearful and cautious, most likely as a result of the abuse he endured throughout his childhood, plagued also by the feeling of being unanchored, of not belonging to either of the countries in which he has lived.

Despite his yearning to belong, Robin finds that “[m]any of Babel’s customers were ready to believe that their silver-work made use of foreign languages, but not that their maintenance involved foreign-born scholars” (Kuang 195). One of Robin’s assignments in his third year is to accompany Professor Chakravarti to perform maintenance on silver bar installations throughout London, and he finds that “more than once Professor Chakravarti had to enlist one of the white fourth-years to accompany him and Robin on trips just to get them through the door” (Kuang 195), illuminating the hypocrisy faced by scholars of colour: despite providing a much requested service to the English population, students and tutors hailing from territories beyond Europe are not provided the respect that is often associated to the prestigious Royal Institute of Translation. As has been previously noted, it is a result of colonial practices that “[t]he production of commodities became linked to Empire” (240), as

³² Ramy’s family was greatly affected by the colonial occupation of India by the British Empire, amplifying his desire to resist becoming “a lackey of empire” (Kuang 274) as was intended of him, this being the reason of his anger towards Robin. On the colonial relationship between both countries, Cannadine writes: “In social terms, the British colonies of settlement were about the export of hierarchy; India, by contrast, was much more about the analogues of hierarchy” (41).

the British population sought material comforts in these territories to meet their needs and desires. Within the narrative, translators become, likewise, commodified goods procured in other nations to satisfy the wants of the Victorians. Learning that he is one of the very few scholars specialising in the Chinese language, and realising that several bars employing the language are utilised throughout Britain, Robin ponders on how “the functioning of an entire empire depended on just a handful of people” (Kuang 200), him being one of them, and how this need contrasts with the treatment he receives at the hands of the population his services benefit.

It is relevant here to further explain the predicament of scholars of colour. Like Robin, Ramy, and Victoire, students of colour are brought to England through benefactors, “powerful and wealthy men” (Kuang 87) who fund their education during their formative years, as they prepare to one day attend the Institute. These students are “plucked from their motherlands at a very young age, thrown into England, and instructed to thrive or be deported” (Kuang 500). The threat of deportation is noteworthy, as it harkens to Said’s notions of the power of authority. Under the threat of being deported should they fail to meet the academic standards imposed upon them is what ensures their compliance with the Institute’s directives, as well as their obedience and allegiance. By isolating these scholars from their families (if they have any) and native cultures and forcing upon them the ideals and conventions of Victorian England, the students are led to “believe that [their] futures could only consist of serving the Crown” (Kuang 416) in a kind of servitude that should be interpreted by them as a privilege. As Griffin voices to Robin, the Institute views them as only “an asset ... A translation machine” (Kuang 207), easily discarded and replaced if they fail in any capacity, further denoting how their personhood is transformed into another resource to exploit. On this note, it is noteworthy that Lovell and Letty, the novel’s two principal white characters, share the belief that students of colour should feel nothing but “unfailingly, desperately grateful” (Kuang 438) for having the opportunity to work for the Institute. This lack of acknowledgment, particularly on Lovell’s part, is a point of contention and frustration to Robin, who “had not requested these privileges of Oxford, had not chosen to be spirited out of Canton at all” (Kuang 262), articulating the unfairness of the agreement into which he is thrust.

On their first day of lessons, Playfair notes to the cohort that “Babel alone among the Oxford faculties accepts students not of European origin” (Kuang 81), emphasising that these scholars are accepted “not despite, but *because* of [their] foreign backgrounds” (Kuang 81), for having “the gift of languages those born in England cannot imitate” (Kuang 81). While

this statement at first leads Robin to feel “a thrum of excitement at the thought of perhaps his unbelonging did not doom him to existing forever on the margins, that perhaps instead it made him special” (Kuang 81), what he witnesses and experiences in the Institute eventually lead him to realise that this not acceptance on Babel’s part, but instead one more symptom of colonialism, co-opting “the oppressed into perpetuating their people’s oppression under the guise of high ideals and accession to an otherwise unachievable privileged position” (Kohlke 2022, 268). Despite the claim that students of colour are valued, Robin notes they are disposable and replaceable to the Institute, their importance being intrinsically tied to the work they produce. When Anthony Ribben seemingly passes away during a voyage undertaken for Babel, Robin is appalled that the Institute does not “so much as hold a memorial service” (Kuang 201) for their academic. This lack of reaction gives voice to one of Robin’s greater fears,

which was that Anthony had been expendable. That they were all expendable. That this tower - this place where they had for the first time found belonging - treasured and loved them when they were alive and useful but didn’t, in fact, care about them at all. That they were, in the end, only vessels for the languages they spoke. (Kuang 201)

Griffin stands particularly strongly against this exploitation undertaken by the Institute, having strongly suffered its consequences in the flesh. As he was removed from China at too young an age, Griffin loses his fluency in his mother language, and is thus unable to “reliably make bars work” (Kuang 183). The magic of silver-working is only successful if the person is “able to think in a language - to live it, not just recognize it as a smattering of letters on a page” (Kuang 159). He explains his situation to Robin thusly: “Dear old Papa took me out of the country too early. I’ve got a natural ear for tones, but that’s it. My fluency is largely artificial. I don’t have memories in Chinese. I don’t dream in it” (Kuang 182-183). Having been raised under Professor Lovell’s “contemptuous and exacting roof” (Kuang 224), Griffin shares his father’s belief that “nothing except silver-working mattered, and that every other department was for unimaginative, untalented fools” (Kuang 224). As such, because he lacks the necessary skills to conduct silver-working in Babel, Griffin describes himself to his half-brother as his “failed predecessor” (Kuang 182), emphasising how the scholars are, indeed, replaceable. That Lovell is Griffin’s biological father emphasises not only his ruthlessness, but also the malevolent undertone of the relationship he

establishes with his illegitimate offspring, whom he perceives as relevant only insofar as they contribute to the Empire.

The similarities shared by Griffin and Robin in their respective character arcs are worth examining: like Robin, Griffin initially loved his life as a scholar of the Institute, something that he suspects because, in some of their encounters, his brother “did not mention Hermes all, but instead ... [inquired] about Robin’s life at Oxford” (Kuang 178), and it gradually dawns “on Robin that perhaps Griffin just missed being a student” (Kuang 178). Furthermore, both share a resentment towards their biological father for having destroyed the lives of their respective mothers, and for raising them as a kind of “linguistic experiment” (Kuang 321) without regard for their individuality and personhood. While he is at first incapable of maintaining “as Griffin did, an attitude of constant suspicion or rebellion ... [and] could not acquire Griffin’s hatred of this place” (Kuang 130-131), Robin is eventually able to empathise with his half-brother and his own turmoil. As Griffin begins to open himself up to Robin, he comes to understand how his half-brother’s negative experiences negatively shape his perception of Oxford and the Institute:

Robin could see Oxford now through Griffin’s eyes - an institution that never valued him, that had only ever ostracized and belittled him. He imagined Griffin coming up through Babel, trying desperately to win Professor Lovell’s approval, but never able to get the silver to work consistently. How awful it would have felt to reach for flimsy Chinese from a barely remembered life, knowing full well that it was the only thing that gave him value here. (Kuang 183)

When he learns that his two illegitimate sons have met, Lovell strives to create a rift in their relationship, furthermore claiming to Robin that he was “less corrupted by [his] heritage” (Kuang 268) than Griffin.

Throughout the narrative, then, Robin deals with an intrapersonal struggle, stemming from the contradiction that is repudiating Babel and its association to empire at the cost of the colonies, while simultaneously desiring to belong to this institution, for such belonging surely translates to a belonging within the ranks of Victorian society. Despite fearing that he might be caught performing tasks for Hermes, Robin continues to participate in their activities as a small act of vengeance and retribution, all the while justifying for himself that his continuing to be a student of the Institute is nothing more than an act of self-preservation. He feels

frequently frustrated that Griffin omits information about Hermes and the exploits they are engaged in, even though he continuously presses for insight on “what Hermes did with the materials he helped steal, and how the revolution, if there was one, was proceeding” (Kuang 173). Robin also often raises concerns for his safety with Griffin, particularly when he discovers the existence of protective wards guarding the entrance into the tower. When one of his missions goes awry, causing Robin to be shot by one of the wards as he had anticipated could happen, he feels a deep resentment for his half-brother for having ignored his fears over this possibility. Moreover, because he feels that he cannot confide in his friends, and because Griffin goes into hiding for an extended period after this accident, Robin feels, “for the first time since he’d arrived at Oxford ... truly alone” (Kuang 188), embittering his feelings for life as a student as well as for Hermes.

The two separate halves of Robin’s life finally collide when he confronts Griffin over the failed heist. Robin realises that he was wrong in depositing so much trust into Hermes and its exploits, as their efforts are insignificant in the face of the might and power of the British Empire. Jaded and aggrieved with Griffin, he tells his brother: “I’ve seen the men who really pull the levers, and they’re nothing like you. They don’t have to scramble for power. They don’t organize silly midnight heists and put their kid brothers in jeopardy in some wild attempt to obtain it. They’ve already got it” (Kuang 218). Faced with a choice between continuing to work for Hermes, which will eventually mean breaking from Babel, and continuing to live as a student of the Institute, Robin opts for the latter, a choice that Griffin repudiates. Whereas Robin continues to argue that to remaining a scholar ensures his safety, Griffin holds the belief that it is through violence and action alone that the empire will eventually be brought to its end. Robin assuages his guilt with the notion that “Hermes was not going anywhere. There would always be battles to fight. They would all be there waiting when Robin was ready to rejoin them, he was sure. And he could do nothing for Hermes if he did not remain firmly ensconced within Babel’s ecosystem” (Kuang 223), even after Griffin tells him that he is “in or ... not” (Kuang 218).

Further emphasising the similarities of their arcs, Griffin parts from Robin by telling him: “You’re lost, brother. You’re a ship adrift, searching for familiar shores. I understand what it is you want. I sought it too. But there is no homeland. It’s gone ... But realize this, brother. You fly no one’s flag. You’re free to seek your own harbour. And you can do so much more than tread water” (Kuang 219). As he enters his final year at Babel, Robin attempts “to convince himself that if he was not happy, he was at least content” (Kuang 281) over his permanence in Babel, for this belonging is synonymous with shelter and safety.

Although Robin he wants to aid Hermes in the efforts it conducts, Robin is not yet prepared to sacrifice his comforts for the anti-colonial cause. As he uncovers more of Babel's corrupt practices and further understands the harm caused by his own involvement, however, the rift that exists between his two halves begins to approximate, and will eventually collide.

2.2. The Victorian Novel and Empire-Building

English literature played a crucial role in supporting and developing an imperialist ideological discourse. (Sorensen 4)

Simon Joyce writes that “[t]he idea that a canon of written texts plays a part in legitimating empire is a long-standing one” (170). Literature and cultural production as a whole can be employed in the propagation of certain ideals and ideologies³³. As has already been ascertained, the British Empire had a wide-reaching impact, particularly during the Victorian period³⁴, a time in which British self-identity is largely defined by imperial expansion and the power it brought to the country: “Britain, a very small country, was the most powerful imperial nation in the world” (65), writes Steinbach, and the effects of the British Empire were experienced by “hundreds of million of people around the world” (Steinbach 66). British territorial expansion was made possible “by new technologies including faster ships across the oceans, railways across continents, and telegraphy across both” (Steinbach 79), supporting the Victorian notion that “because of industry, trade, and liberty, Britain and its Empire were in the vanguard of world progress” (Brantlinger 3) and, as such, the nation's forays into other territories were justifiable. Additionally, “British cultural products were particularly important because during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Britain was the center of all Anglophone ... culture” (Steinbach 212). For these reasons, and because the Empire is such a defining element of Victorian Britain and the

³³ Propaganda is one of the essential mechanisms that sustains an empire, and is here defined as “the transmission of ideas and values from one person, or groups of persons, to another, with the specific intention of influencing the recipients' attitudes in such a way that they interests of its authors will be enhanced” (MacKenzie 3).

³⁴ The nineteenth century is characterised by several historians as “Britain's imperial century: a period of significant economic and political growth commencing with the defeat of the French in 1815 and ending with the defeat of the Boers in 1902” (David 85). This period, which according to Hobsbawm “may be called the Age of Empire” (56), was largely defined by “the creation of a single global economy, progressively reaching into the most remote corners of the world, an increasingly dense web of economic transactions, communications and movements of goods, money and people linking the developed countries with each other and with the undeveloped world” (62).

country's sense of identity, it is relevant to briefly reflect on how literature of this time period aids in the legitimization of the imperial project and aids in its global expansion.

The Victorian era is in part characterised by a relatively high rate of literacy, wherein “the upper and middle classes had achieved full literacy, and by 1840 about two thirds of working-class people had basic literacy” (Steinbach 221), meaning that “the potential audience for affordable and appealing reading materials” (Steinbach 221) was significant, especially in comparison to previous eras. Ascertaining that the Victorian period was, as Alice Jenkins and Juliet John put it, a time of “unsurpassed period of innovation in fiction” (6), made possible by this rise in literacy rate, facilitated “literature to move *down* the social ladder” (Jenkins and John 4). Jenkins and John write that

[i]n 1837 the country was in the midst of a cultural revolution, quieter perhaps than the political and industrial revolutions afoot, but no less formative in the emergence of the novel as the genre of the age – and formative, further, in the development of a modern state. Literacy was increasing and developments in the publishing trade meant that books and newspapers were expanding their readership, moving further down the social ladder in the early Victorian period than ever before. (3)

The realist novel gains particular interest from readers of the nineteenth century, becoming a staple of Victorian literature. It attracts the interest of readers due to “its accumulation of ‘realistic’ description and detail, its capacity to name and map out time and space as if it mirrored reality” (Purchase 185). Scientific developments³⁵, another defining characteristic of this historical era, are in part the reason behind the rise in demand for works of fiction that “detail the particularities of a life or lives within a broader, recognisable context, seeking to convey the experience of living in a particular space and at a particular time” (Mitchell 17). Purchase further establishes a connection between the rise in notability of realist fiction and scientific breakthroughs, writing that novels of this genre could be perceived as “the literary counterpart of Victorian empirical achievements in science and technology, which grounded British culture in a more rational Darwinian world of observable

³⁵ Scientific and technological breakthroughs “enabled the Victorians to make advances in transport and communications systems, especially in the railways” (Purchase 123), becoming tantamount to the Victorian era. Keeping up with these influential evolutions, “Victorian literature in turn was profoundly influenced by scientific developments. Realism in the novel was the literary equivalent of scientific empiricism” (Brantlinger 3).

facts and ‘truths’” (185). Succinctly, then, the realist Victorian novel aims to create an authentic portrait of its contemporary society, illustrating scenarios and archetypes recognisable for the reader, and addressing themes that reflect their tangible, everyday issues. These narratives were “centrally concerned with the antagonism between individuals and society” (Steinbach 223) and “preoccupied with character, with the development of individual self-consciousness, and with the idea of ‘inner self’” (Purchase 186), exploring “the relationships between the social and the psychological and between the public and private realms” (Steinbach 223).

It is incontestable that the Victorian novel “could challenge and even shape Victorian life” (Steinbach 223). As the British Empire is synonymous to nineteenth century Britain, it is only logical that the institution and its project become features of literature produced during this period, which occurs “principally for two reasons: the growing significance of Britain’s geopolitical power in the lives of ordinary Victorian people and the formal commitment of the novel to social realism” (David 86). With the expansion and growth of the Empire, its literary depictions also grow in number and relevance. Whereas “[a]t the beginning of the great imperial century ... empire was not a topic for polite conversation” (David 85) or “a significant subject of literary representation” (David 85), its presence in literature becomes more pronounced throughout the century, as “Victorian fiction began to register this enlarged awareness of imperialism” (David 86). Hence, it must be acknowledged that the Victorian novel “participated vigorously in the celebration, legitimation, and interrogation of imperialism and colonialism” (David 89). Victorian authors were “unconscious agents in the complex, always changing interaction between political governance and cultural practice” (David 89). Because the colonial project was supported by the “belief in the absolute superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race and its providential mission to rule the supposedly inferior races of the world” (Brantlinger 2), the Victorian novel tended to reflect this notion, depicting “white Britons as leaders, explorers, and heroes across the globe, many miles from the British Isles” (Steinbach 65), who needed to erase the savagery of those races considered to be inferior. These narratives, then, established “proper relations between the coloniser and the colonized” (Chang 14), and its imperial tones made it a useful tool to aid the purposes of empire-building, conditioning the Victorian audience that consumed such stories to accept, embrace, and be a part of the colonial project and what it entailed.

By centring the experience of the (racialised) Other *Babel* becomes exemplary of the potential in postcolonial neo-Victorian fiction to probe into the ramifications of colonialism, on the self and as a whole. The Victorian novel was employed in legitimating and

propagandising the British Empire, presenting the white, British explorer as a man of valour and bravery for his colonial efforts, while the Other was represented as a savage in need of their intervention. The presently analysed narrative is subversive, as it employs notable stylistic characteristics that define the Victorian novel, such as its division into books and the use of epigraphs, as well as elements of the realist novel that is characteristic of this period, but simultaneously depicting the exploitative and abusive nature of the imperial project. Rather than exalt colonialism, then, *Babel* condemns it.

Subverting the Victorian novel, whose attention typically befell on white characters, *Babel* focalises Robin's perspective. In centring his character arc, the narrative examines Robin's relationship as an individual with the society around him, itself a characteristic of the realist Victorian novel, exploring the various impacts of his Otherness and how it shapes his interactions and conduct. Contrasting the typical depiction of the 'noble white adventurer' and the 'Oriental savage', the character of Richard Lovell, the epitome of imperialism, is portrayed not as the gentleman he outwardly presents himself as, but as an abusive, controlling, and domineering man. Accentuating the immoral nature of colonial exploitation, Lovell isolates Robin from his culture by taking him to a country where his difference is always starkly evident, and where his skills and personhood are commodified for imperial gain.

That the scholars from which *Babel* most benefits hail from non-European territories further distances them from the trope of the savage Oriental. The skills and intellect of these translators cannot be denied by their white counterparts, because they are vital for the perpetuation of imperialism, and to the business *Babel* conducts. However, this diversity is met not with acceptance, but with unwillingness, as Robin's perspective emphasises. As such, *Babel* gives voice to the racism and discrimination faced by scholars of colour by the very same Oxford residents to whom their work contributes, an angle that is absent from Victorian narratives.

CHAPTER 3 | “There was only the vast, frightening web of the colonial empire, and the demands of justice to resist it”

3.1. “*Traduttore, traditore*”: Translation, Manipulation, and Empire

The study of translation and empire, or even of translation as empire, was born in the mid- to late 1980s out of the realization that translation has always been an indispensable channel of imperial conquest and occupation. Not only must the imperial conquerors find some effective way of communicating with their new subjects; they must develop new ways of subjecting them, converting them into docile or ‘cooperative’ subjects. (Robinson 10)

In 1999, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi write that “[t]he close relationship between colonization and translation has come under scrutiny; we can now perceive the extent to which translation was for centuries a one-way process, with texts being translated into European languages for European consumption, rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange” (5). Their observation illuminates a growing focus in scholarship on the intersection of postcolonial and translation studies, permitting an analysis of how colonial relations have both shaped and been shaped by translation practices. A decade later, Tarek Shamma expands upon the contributions of this crossing, affirming that “[p]ostcolonial translation studies have contributed significantly to translation theory, not only through their investigation of actual (post)colonial interactions, but also as a mode of analysis that could illustrate crucial issues of identity, difference, and power” (2009, 195). In the same vein, Wang Hui writes that more recent studies into the postcolonial focus on translation “have redefined our understanding of translation, particularly in relation to power, ideology and empire building” (203).

These assertions underscore how the study of “the profoundly different meaning that translation held for different groups in the colonization process” (Bassnett and Trivedi 3) is becoming a practice that “is increasingly being investigated as a cultural artefact that is deeply entrenched in the historical reality of its production” (Hui 200), providing renewed insight into the complex relationship between coloniser and colonised. Moreover, it is necessary to note that “[h]istorical, audiovisual and postcolonial studies into the relations

between translation and power have all demonstrated the influence of power and ideology on the production of translations” (Remael and Logie 11). As “scholars in the emerging field of postcolonial studies ... began to observe the key role of translation in the operations of imperialist projects” (Shamma 2018, 280), colonial expansion emerged as one of “the most debated and widely deployed terms in modern translation studies” (Shamma 2018, 279), enabling an examination of how translation was historically weaponised in the domination of native populations, through control over language.

Although “[t]ranslation has traditionally been thought of in highly mechanical ways: as an impersonal process of transferring a meaning from a source text to a target text without changing it significantly” (Robinson 8), its role in the maintenance and expansion of empire is undeniable. When considering translation in colonial contexts, it is necessary to recall that “cultures rarely, if ever, meet on equal terms” (Hui 200), with translation itself being a “culture-bound activity” (Katan 30) that in its broadest sense “means cross-cultural understanding” (Rubel and Rosman 1). As such, it is produced by individuals who “are defined by their class, race, gender – their general position in networks of power and influence” (Cronin 39) and thus, it can never be unbiased³⁶. Because translation is “always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history” (Bassnett and Trivedi 6), it inevitably bears “an ideological form” (Rafael 85), and “even the most mundane translation choices cannot be separated from the wider context of communication between the two cultures, which include the history of representation between them, images about the other culture, and the current social and political realities in each” (Shamma 2018, 279-280).

Within the context of colonialism, this inherent partiality becomes even starker because, historically, translation played a crucial role in the subjugation of the colonised³⁷. Through “the translation of cultural products” (Shamma 2009, 185) of native communities, the coloniser accrued “the necessary knowledge to manage the local populations” (Shamma 2009, 185), which then enabled them to “inculcate [the colonised] into the linguistic and cultural norms of the dominant nation” (Shamma 2009, 185). Since “[l]anguage is culture”

³⁶ The notion that translation is inherently biased is explored in *Babel*. Professor Playfair notes that in any work of translation, there are “semantic gaps ... created by cultural differences in lived experience” (Kuang 156). As such, “translators do not so much deliver a message as they rewrite the original” (Kuang 106) and the final product of their work “always reflects the author’s ideology and biases” (Kuang 106).

³⁷ Translation is a necessary mediator of the colonial encounter, as “[t]he European explorers and travellers to Asia and later the New World were always being confronted with the problem of understanding the people whom they were encountering” (Rubel and Rosman 1), On a first stage, this communication was undertaken with recourse to “[g]esture and sign language” (Rubel and Rosman 1), and later on, “lingua francas and pidgins, and individuals who learned these lingua francas and pidgins became the translators and interpreters” (Rubel and Rosman 1).

(Remael and Logie 12), and understanding the culture of native populations was essential to ensure the success of colonial incursions, it is unsurprising that translation was weaponised to enforce subjugation. Additionally, translation also bore economic benefits to imperial nations. As a facilitator of communication, which “could work only if it were in a language that could be understood by both colonizer and colonized” (Rafael 85), translation becomes a tool “of mediation vital to the commerce between rulers and ruled” (Rafael 85), as “[a] significant motive for translation in the colonial and postcolonial period has been trade in one form or the other” (Cronin 43). Considering these benefits, then, it was common that “colonialist enterprises were usually accompanied by large-scale translation movements, whose aim was to transcribe the local culture for the new rulers” (Shamma 2009, 185).

Given that the colonial relationship is fundamentally unequal, translation in such frameworks “rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems” (Bassnett and Trivedi 2), with “[h]ierarchy, hegemony and cultural dominance” (Rubel and Rosman 6) being starkly reflected in translations undertaken throughout the colonial period³⁸. The power imbalance that epitomises colonialism transforms the act of translation into “a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries” (Bassnett and Trivedi 2), as well as a mechanism of control and subjugation “for extracting consent and establishing hegemony” (Rafael 85). One such example of the predatory application of translation in the colonial relationship is its use as “a form of intelligence gathering. The natives can be conquered with brutal military force and coercion, but colonial rule must be sustained through persuasion and knowledge of the other” (Hui 200-201). Similarly, translation institutions have historically played a significant role “in shaping societies’ beliefs and values. These institutions also produce a substantial part of societies’ political translations” (Gagnon 253)³⁹, often written for the benefit of the coloniser, as is explored in the narrative of *Babel*. Shamma notes that “[i]f there is one unifying thread to the varied and multifaceted postcolonial approaches to translation, it is their paramount attention to the effects of power imbalances in communication between cultures” (2018, 279). Understanding the dynamics that underscore the colonial relationship is paramount to understanding the predatory and exploitative application of translation in imperial contexts: in the interaction between the natives and the

³⁸ Rubel and Rosman further argue that such features “are also said to be present in translations, which are being done now in the postcolonial period” (6), thus demonstrating how the effects of colonial enterprises linger beyond their decolonisation.

³⁹ A similar remark is made in the narrative: “Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools of - nay, the centres of - great civilizations” (Kuang 73).

coloniser, the latter party holds the authority, which is attained through violence and compulsion; to maintain their authority, the coloniser imposes upon the colonised their social and cultural norms to achieve hegemony⁴⁰. Due to this imbalance in power, the language barrier “is resolved at the expense of the colonised, the weaker side, whose uniqueness and authentic characteristics ... are erased, with the conceptual frameworks of the coloniser imposing themselves as the only norms” (Shamma 2018, 286). In the communication between coloniser and colonised, “political inequalities (epitomised by the colonial encounter) carry over into linguistic and cultural interactions, including translation” (Shamma 2018, 279).

The crossing of postcolonialism into translation studies remains grounded on the disparity of power that characterises the colonial relationship, as the unequal nature of cultural exchanges premised within imperialism “and their impact on translation in the modern world has been a common theme in postcolonial studies” (Shamma 2018, 282). Within this framework, the act of translation can, in itself, be interpreted as a metaphor for colonialism, with the European continent “regarded as the great Original, the starting point, and the colonies were therefore copies, or ‘translations’ of Europe, which they were supposed to duplicate” (Bassnett and Trivedi 4), a classification that necessarily implies “a value judgement that ranks the translation in a lesser position in the literary hierarchy” (Bassnett and Trivedi 4). Translation, then, “has often become a metaphor for many types of intercultural communication beyond the most flexible textual practices to which translation scholars have typically applied the term” (Shamma 2018, 279)⁴¹. Postcolonial approaches to the study of translation and its associated ideologies carry the benefit of clearly articulating how “translation is never neutral, ... it is a site of intense ideological and discursive negotiation” (Hui 202).

By examining the intersection of the fields of postcolonial and translation studies, it becomes possible to better ascertain how the disparities that delineate the colonial encounter

⁴⁰ As a facilitator of cultural transference, translation in colonial contexts enables the coloniser to bring back to their countries not only “the words of the newly encountered people, but also ... information about these people” (Rubel and Rosman 1), thus transforming them into “interpreters of their very different ways of life, for European intellectuals, and the European public at large” (Rubel and Rosman 1). Concurrent with Said’s explanation that at the core of Orientalism was a Western interpretation of Occidental modes of living, “translation took pride of place in nineteenth-century Orientalism, with translated knowledge informing the colonial project of ruling and transforming the colonized in the interests of the colonizers” (Hui 201).

⁴¹ Further emphasising this metaphor, Bandia writes that “postcolonial literature is understood metaphorically as a form of translation whereby the language of colonization is bent, twisted or plied to capture and convey the sociocultural reality or worldview of an alien dominated language culture. The very fact of writing about the experiences of formerly colonized societies by postcolonial subjects in the language of the colonizer is thus likened to translation as a metaphor for the representation of Otherness” (265).

influence, and are influenced, by translation practices and norms. This approach also facilitates the deconstruction of the impacts of translation in the cultural exchange that is inherent to imperial expansion by centralising the role of translation in the establishment of imperial hegemony, thus highlighting “the political aspects of translation practices that may have looked politically neutral or only ‘technical’” (Shamma 2009, 186). Translation norms “derive from the values and beliefs relating to particular cultures, whether they be transnational, national or professional” (Katan 30). Thus, it is essential to recall that no translation can ever be without bias. The work of Edward Said becomes pertinent here. The author states that in the context of colonial expansion, “[i]t is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (57). In his statement, Said spotlights how the colonising nations of Europe shaped and defined the Orient through their limited understanding of this unfamiliar region, its customs, and its people. As such, translations produced by colonising nations reflect their limited and skewed understanding of native communities, their culture, and their practices, simultaneously shaping Western perceptions and constructions of colonised peoples. While translation has often been defined “as purely an aesthetic act” (Bassnett and Trivedi 6), meaning that its “ideological problems were disregarded” (Bassnett and Trivedi 6), an exploration of its application in colonial contexts unlocks a deeper understanding of the contours of the imperial encounter. Additionally, accounting for postcolonial frameworks about translation has

reset the button of an ethics of translation, raising questions about the relation between writer-translator and language, about who translates postcolonial literature and for whom, about publishers and editorial policies regarding minority literatures written in major languages, about the location of power and the relation between centre and periphery, and ultimately about the teaching of post-colonial literatures in translation. (Bandia 267-268)

Translation plays a crucial narrative role in *Babel*, standing as a metaphor for the British Empire and its colonial project, thus becoming implicated “in invasion, occupation, and forcible extraction” (Kohlke 2022, 269). It is reiterated throughout the narrative that silver-working, the necessary element of the magic of translation, is fundamental in ensuring

the success of Britain's colonial exploits, thus equating silver "to undemocratic, oppressive, *imperialist* power, obfuscated as benevolent 'progress' and earned privilege for those identifying themselves with the colonisers" (Kohlke 2022, 268). Further cementing the exploitative nature of Babel's endeavours is the fact that "non-European languages are the key to the continuing dominance of England's magic" (Sanchez-Taylor 9), highlighting how even language is commodified to the benefit of the Empire. Expanding upon this notion, Rafael suggests that translation can be perceived as "a kind of conquest: of meaning as it is transported triumphantly from one language to another; of entire cultural traditions as these are extracted from their original context and inserted into a foreign one; of literary legacies as these are rewritten and paraphrased to reflect and augment the authority and order of the translator's world" (83), a perception that is crucial within the narrative. Professor Playfair, one of the characters who most prominently epitomises the ruthless and ravaging nature of the imperial project, explains to the cohort that "[t]ranslation means doing violence upon the original, means warping and distorting it for foreign, unintended eyes" (Kuang 153) stating that "an act of translation is then necessarily always an act of betrayal" (Kuang 153) in a premise that evokes the famous Italian saying "*Traduttore, traditore*", according to which all translators are traitors⁴². Thus, Playfair acknowledges that translation is not an inherently benign or neutral transfer of meaning from one language to another, but that in colonial frameworks, it is implicated in an unequal power dynamic, with native cultures being exploited and commodified to the benefit of the coloniser. In equating translation with violence, Playfair also calls attention to the inherently forceful and brutal nature of colonialism, although he is also one of its principal defenders.

Rafael refers to the notion of translation as a conquest; Cronin suggests that in colonial and postcolonial contexts, translation is portrayed as "either a predatory, exploitative activity or as the True Path to reconciliation, understanding and the withering away of prejudice" (35). Likewise, Professor Playfair's conceptions on the usage of translation in colonial contexts remits to this notion: additional to his understanding of translation as betrayal and violence, he also describes it as a "facilitator of peace" (Kuang 81), that "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" (Kuang 81).

⁴² "The cultural interchange spawned the Italian phrase, *Traduttore, traditore*: Translator, traitor. First applied to the French by irate Italians who felt that many French-language translations of Dante betrayed either the beauty or the accuracy of the work, this clever consonance plays upon the worst fears of an international society" (Alta). Reflecting on this phrase, Roman Jakobson raises a crucial question: "translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?" (118).

Two distinct perspectives on translation can therefore be expressed: on the one hand, “[t]here are those who see translation as a natural act, being the basis for the intercultural communication which has always characterized human existence” (Rubel and Rosman 6), in an approach that “emphasizes the commonality and universality of human experience and the similarities in what appear, at first, to be disparate languages and cultures” (Rubel and Rosman 6); on the other hand, there is “the view that translation, seen as the uprooting and transplanting of the fragile meanings of the source language, is unnatural. Translating is seen as a ‘traitorous act’” (Rubel and Rosman 6).

Playfair’s views are therefore paradoxical, in that he understands translation (and by extension, colonialism) as something that is both violent and necessary to achieve peace. During one of their first lessons in Translation Theory, Playfair explains that “[i]t is often argued that the greatest tragedy of the Old Testament was not man’s exile from the Garden of Eden, but the fall of the Tower of Babel” (Kuang 107), for it led to the loss of “not merely human unity, but the original language – something primordial and innate, perfectly understandable and lacking nothing in form and content” (Kuang 107), called the Adamic language. Here, it is relevant to recall the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, which led to “[t]he division of languages and dispersion of peoples – that is, the origin of the world’s cultures” (Hiebert 29) and, consequently, a source of partition. Attempting to fully understand how his own role and contribution to Babel impacts the colonies, Robin questions Playfair “if the purpose of translation, then, is to bring mankind back together ... bring about that paradise again, on earth, between nations” (Kuang 108), to which the Professor responds that “[s]uch is the project of empire – and why, therefore, we translate at the pleasure of the Crown” (Kuang 108). His response is significant, as it directly ties the Royal Institute of Translation to the British monarchy and its imperial interests, leaving no questions as to where the allegiances of the scholars ought to be. Furthermore, Professor Playfair’s assertions also establish a direct connection between translation and the imperial project, which seeks to establish a single, dominant culture under the authority of the British Empire.

Realising the toll of his involvement with Babel on colonised nations is a central component of Robin’s character arc. From early on, he internalises the power that is inherent to translation and to the understanding of language, recognising how it may be employed to (re)shape and manipulate reality. On his first ever journey from Canton to England, Robin finds that he is the only person aboard their ship able to speak both Cantonese and English, meaning that he alone “could determine the truth, because only he could communicate it to all parties” (Kuang 14), in a moment that foreshadows his eventual realisation that Babel

translators and interpreters manipulate language, and therefore reality, to aid the British Empire. In his first ever meeting with Griffin, his half-brother, already aware of the insidious nature of the Institute and its affairs, encourages Robin to consider “why the Literature Department only translates works into English and not the other way around, or what the interpreters are being sent abroad to *do*” (Kuang 100), thus calling attention to how Babel “is the business of colonialism” (Kuang 100) and, consequently, how translation stands as a manifestation of imperial power. Robin later learns that the Hermes Society also functions as a research centre⁴³ which, unlike Babel, does not limit the work undertaken by its scholars, further emphasising the dichotomy between both institutions and their respective missions. The investigations performed by Hermes, which include “the compilation of dictionaries between regional languages ... non-English silver match-pairs” (Kuang 382), as well as “[a] comparative analysis of the quantity of footnotes added to translations of European texts versus non-European texts” (Kuang 383) are thus premised on bridging the gaps that are left by Babel’s focus on business and imperial matters, a mission that is predicated on their anti-colonial agenda.

The role of the secondary narrator is also worth highlighting here, as their voice provides additional context and information regarding, *inter alia*, the Institute’s imperial dealings. During the cohort’s first tour of Babel, Anthony succinctly explains that the operations of the Legal Department are concerned with “[i]nternational treaties, overseas trade, that sort of thing” (Kuang 74), prompting the secondary narrator to comment that “[t]his is, frankly, quite a generous description of the Legal Department” (Kuang 74), as the translators employed in this division participated in the manipulation of language to craft contracts favourable to the Empire’s dealings, relating the following events to illustrate their statement:

One example is the alleged sale of land by King Paspehay to the English in Virginia ‘for copper’, despite the obvious difficulty of translating precisely the notions of European kingship or land as property into Algonquin languages. The Legal solution to these issues was simply to declare that the Algonquins were too savage to have developed those concepts, and it was a good thing the English were there to teach them. (Kuang 74)

⁴³ In considering a postcolonial approach to the study of translation, “the shameful history of exploiting translation to justify and maintain cultural dominance” (Hui 203) is exposed, and postcolonial frameworks in the study of translation are “instrumental in exploring the various ways of putting translation in the service of anti-colonial and decolonizing agendas” (Hui 203), which is reflected in the work carried out by the Hermes Society.

By recounting this instance, the secondary narrator immediately forewarns the reader that Babel is, in effect, corrupt, and the dealings it conducts on the benefit of the Empire disregard cultural nuances and their impact on language and understanding. The reader is thusly aware from early on of what Robin will learn in his tenure at the Institute: while Babel may outwardly appear to be a progressive organisation that employs scholars of colour in positions of prestige, a practice that was remarkably uncommon for the Victorian period, its dealings are fundamentally amoral and connected to exploitation and domination.

Robin's inner turmoil with the significance of his role as a translator leads him to sometimes challenge Professor Lovell's commonly espoused beliefs of the innate superiority of the British Empire and its project. Lovell, who considers the Institute to be the epitome of knowledge and civilisation, often defends Babel's exploitation of foreign languages and the practice of forcibly recruiting students from the colonies, claiming that, as "an infinite resource" (Kuang 117), no limitation should be imposed on the exploitation of language for Britain's gain. Furthermore, the Professor argues that other countries have had "every opportunity to construct their own centres of translation" (Kuang 263-264), and as such, it is not "Britain's problem if other nations fail to take advantage of what they have" (Kuang 264) by not engaging in these same pursuits. Likewise, Letty also shares the belief that "[l]anguage is just words, just thoughts" (Kuang 164), thus excusing its exploitative application in colonial affairs. Its transformation into a resource equated with "gold and silver" (Kuang 164) signifies that in this alternate version of Victorian England, languages have become "modes of looking at the world ... the keys to civilization" (Kuang 164) and, as such, "knowledge worth killing for" (Kuang 164), for they permit control and subjugation. This "voracious exploitation of other peoples' languages as just another resource" (Kohlke 2022, 269) illustrates "Britain's dependence on and debt to non-European cultures" (Kohlke 2022, 269), which becomes particularly evident as the efficacy of silver magic wanes due to the growing contact between languages brought on by globalisation, itself a result of imperialism. As Robin grapples with his contributions to the pain and misery perpetuated by the colonial enterprise, the notion of translation as an act of betrayal gains an increased significance, as he and the other students of colour are leveraged to facilitate the expropriation of their home countries "under the guise of high ideals and accession to an otherwise unachievable privileged position" (Kohlke 2022, 268). Realising that his work as a Babel scholar, an institution to which he felt a strong attachment, facilitated oppression and suffering, Robin

feels that he cannot continue living, thus fully embodying the more personal impacts of the undeniably harmful imperial project.

An examination of the crossing between postcolonial and translation studies enables a broader and more nuanced understanding of the varied impacts of the colonialism and its cultural and historical ramifications, which is made possible because “[p]ostcolonial translation is mainly concerned with preserving the alterity of dominated languages and cultures” (Hui 203). Colonial exchanges are framed in an unequal power dynamic, in which the coloniser asserts their authority over the colonised. As such, language, itself a defining cultural element, becomes an instrument through which the imperial power upholds control over native populations, recalling Playfair’s notions that translation is a form of betrayal, for it disseminates valuable knowledge to an unintended and potentially hazardous audience. In colonial contexts, therefore, translation reflects a power disparity and, consequently, acquires a possibly predatory connotation. This analysis accentuates how, despite being intangible and infinite, translation has the potential be weaponised by colonial powers to exert their dominance over colonised communities. This perception of translation as potentially rapacious is central to *Babel*, wherein the relationship between subjugation and translation is explored, with the latter becoming the tangible embodiment of Britain’s imperial reach and might. The forcible removal of scholars of colour from their countries to contribute to the oppression of their own homes further accentuates this notion, positioning translators as imperial assets, whose services are commodified, in what comes to represent the apex of Britain’s imperial power. In opposition to the Empire and to this corrupt employment of translation, however, the Hermes Society emerges as the embodiment of resistance and, on this note, Hui remarks how the act of translation “is not solely a channel of colonization; it can also be a site of active resistance to colonial and neocolonial powers” (202).

3.2. The Translators’ Revolution

Power could only be brought to heel by acts of defiance it could not ignore. With brute, unflinching force. With violence.
(Kuang 432)

Early into their final year at Babel, Robin and his cohort learn that their graduation expedition, a tradition wherein graduating cohorts “went on a grand, fully compensated international voyage at the conclusion of fourth-year exams” (Kuang 254) would occur at the

beginning of the year rather than at its end. Such journeys “usually corresponded with some Babel business” (Kuang 254), and were also an exercise through which the young translators could practice their skills on a real-world context. Furthermore, proving that the Institute plays a vital role in sustaining the Empire, the “practice of sending entire cohorts, all of whom specialized in different languages, on the same graduation voyages was a testament to the reach and connectedness of the British trading companies” (Kuang 287), demonstrating how “[t]he colonial trade had its claws in dozens of countries across the world” (Kuang 287). Owing to the rising tensions between both countries, the cohort receive news that their voyage will take them to China, to both Canton and Macau, due to “[s]pecial circumstances in Canton” (Kuang 276), where there is a shortage of translators. Upon learning of their destination, Robin finds that he cannot “summon any feelings of excitement, only a confused, vaguely guilty dread” (Kuang 254) over the prospect of returning to the place of his birth. In part, his complex feelings regarding the destination of their voyage hinder on his awareness that “[n]othing awaited for him there; no friends, no family, just a city he only half remembered” (Kuang 254). Further emphasising this complexity, however, is Robin’s fear that he might not be able to “bring himself to leave” (Kuang 254) his home country upon his return, over the possibility of encountering a sense of belonging in China which he had never experienced in England. When their ship finally docks in Canton, Robin notes that “nothing stirred in his chest. Standing on the dock, minutes from stepping foot in his motherland after a lifetime away, all Robin felt was empty” (Kuang 293), indicating his struggles to feel connected to the country and culture that Lovell had for so long strived to sever from him.

During the voyage, Professor Lovell primes the cohort for what they will be doing in China: “They were going to help negotiate on behalf of several private trading companies, foremost among them Jardine, Matheson & Company” (Kuang 288), a task they were aware would be difficult because “trade relations with the Qing court had been marked by mutual misunderstanding and suspicion since the end of the past century” (Kuang 288). The principal conflict between both nations resides, according to Lovell, in the British push for open, free trade: whereas “[t]he Chinese, wary of foreign influences, preferred to keep the British contained with other foreign traders at Canton and Macau” (Kuang 288), the British “wanted free trade – open ports, market access past the islands, and the lifting of restrictions on particular imports such as opium” (Kuang 288).

It is worth recalling here that the trade imbalance between China and Britain favours the former, leading to a depletion in the silver reserves of the latter, an imbalance that the British attempted to circumvent through the illegal trade of opium into the country. Griffin

explains to Robin that the country is “gorging itself on imports from the Orient” (Kuang 175), which are paid for with silver. However, “China has no reciprocal appetite for British goods” (Kuang 176) and as such, “silver keeps flowing to China, and there’s nothing the British can do about it because they can’t alter supply and demand” (Kuang 176). Considering that silver accrues an added importance over its application in translation magic, the Empire holds particular interest in rectifying this imbalance, which accounts for the role played by Babel and Robin’s cohort in this matter. If China continues to accumulate silver that flows from British territory, then eventually “it won’t matter how much translation talent [they] have, because the silver reserves will simply not exist to put it to use” (Kuang 176).

Emphasising the connection established in the narrative between translation and imperial might, Griffin points out to Robin how, should the trade imbalance between Britain and China remain unresolved,

[t]he British Empire will crumble as a consequence of its own greed. Meanwhile, silver will accrue in new centres of power – places that have heretofore had their resources stolen and exploited. They’ll have the raw materials. All they’ll need then are silver-workers, and the talent will go where the work is; it always does. So it’s all as simple as running out the Empire. The cycles of history will do the rest, and you’ve only got to help us speed it along. (Kuang 176)

The matter of silver, then, is of life or death to the Empire, because it cannot sustain itself without it. Silver becomes a paradox: it is the struggle for silver that stands at the centre of the war that is brewing between England and China, it is silver that allows the Empire to expand its influence and authority throughout the globe, and it is silver that will eventually lead to both the literal and metaphorical fall of Babel.

Going into the voyage, the cohort are aware of growing animosity between both countries, as it had been documented in the newspapers “which mostly reported the kinds of ignominies British merchants were suffering at the hands of brutal local barbarians. Chinese forces, according to *The Times*, were intimidating merchants, attempting to expel them from their homes and factories, and publishing insulting things about them in their own press” (Kuang 289). The language employed in these reports is worth noting, as it sheds light on the Victorian stereotypes of the barbarous racial Other, less evolved and, as such, in need of English intervention to propel its development according to their set definition of civility.

Lovell supports the notion of Chinese inferiority, claiming that “China is a nation of semi-barbarous people in the grips of backward Manchu rulers, and it would do them good to be forcibly opened to commercial enterprise and progress” (Kuang 290) even if such an approach required violence. Lovell, then, continues to embody the coloniser and the attitudes they espouse, elaborating on them in Robin’s presence, without accounting for the effects such discourse has for his ward and son.

In Canton, the cohort and Professor Lovell are accommodated in an industrial area known as the New English Factory, as the Chinese are adamant about “keeping foreigners within the foreign enclave” (Kuang 295). Because the narrative is a work of alternate history, it is relevant here to recall the real historical elements that are blended with the fictitious ones: Commissioner Lin Zexu, “a high-level Chinese official” (Caquet 1010) did, indeed, segregate the British merchants from the rest of the population in Canton, in an effort to control the illegal importation of opium into the country. Tensions rise after the Commissioner “demanded that the European merchants hand over all of their opium and cease in trading it” (Cassan 111), an order that was refused, leading him to “[quarantine] the foreign communities and [have] all of their factories surrounded by troops” (Cassan 111). The Commissioner took this drastic approach because his efforts in writing “a letter to Queen Victoria in an attempt to appeal to her moral responsibility in controlling her subjects’ activities” (Cassan 110)⁴⁴ was unsuccessful, as his correspondence “was lost in the mail” (Cassan 111). It is in this climate of tension and strife that Professor Lovell and the cohort arrive to the English factories, where the guests are attended to by Chinese servants, something which Robin finds disconcerting. He experiences “an odd pang of guilt every time he met the servant’s eyes” (Kuang 295) for being seated among the coloniser in his own homeland.

Robin is tasked with accompanying Mr Baylis, a liaison for the merchant company, to serve as an interpreter in his meetings, because the Chinese “won’t speak to barbarians” (Kuang 296)⁴⁵, meaning Caucasian men, and because, according to Baylis, they cannot be trusted “to represent [their] interests ... You can always tell when they’re not giving you the truth” (Kuang 299). Furthermore, death is the official punishment “for teaching Mandarin to a foreigner” (Kuang 164) in China, emphasising the distrust with which the Qing government

⁴⁴ The letter is also mentioned in the narrative, during the meeting between Lin and Mr Baylis: “I will reiterate to you what we wrote to your Queen Victoria ... Those who wish to trade with our celestial empire must obey the laws set down by the Emperor” (Kuang 309).

⁴⁵ “[T]he Chinese viewed the British as Barbarians, and unworthy of directly communicating with high Chinese officials” (Cassan 108), an attitude that ironically recalls how Victorian Britain conceptualises the Chinese in the same manner.

approaches relations with the English, as well as the pivotal role that Robin holds in the context of their trip and the meetings to be conducted. Baylis, who holds deeply racist notions of Chinese people, whom he considers to be “simply filthy, lazy, and easily addicted” (Kuang 299), denies that Robin is, himself, one of the Chinamen he is critical of, further augmenting the complicated feelings he has in conciliating his identity and his collaboration with the enemy, and leaving him deeply uncomfortable with the prospect of working in such close proximity to the man.

Baylis’ views, Robin quickly finds, align with those held by the other merchants gathered in Canton. During dinner on their first night, when the conversation turns to the trade of opium, Robin and Ramy attempt to argue that perhaps “the Chinese have a rather good point” (Kuang 298) in restricting access to a drug that had provoked “one of the greatest vices ever to plague” (Kuang 298) China, but the merchants reject their intercession, reducing the conflict to the argument that “[t]he point is free trade between nations” (Kuang 298) and, for this reason, “[t]here should be no restrictions between those who have goods and those who want to purchase them” (Kuang 299). The merchants, then, frame their actions as an ode to free trade, challenging the Qing Emperor’s 1836 edict “banning both opium importation and use” (Cassan 108) to force the tipping of the commercial balance to their favour. This disregard for the harmful effects caused by opium leads Robin, who had rejected Hermes in favour of Babel, to realise that the institution to which he had granted his allegiance does not protect from harm those that are viewed as inferior to the English race. As per the task he is assigned, Robin accompanies Baylis as he meets “with a procession of Chinese agents, all of whom he treated with incredible rudeness, and then looked to Robin as if expecting him to translate not only his words but his utter contempt for his interlocutors” (Kuang 301), increasing his displeasure and discomfort with the choice that he has made.

Looking to escape Mr Baylis, of whom “he could not take another moment” (Kuang 301), Robin, accompanied by Ramy, visits Canton during the night. Surprised to find how easily the pair blend into the crowd, Robin notes that it is “strangely, a complete reversal of their situation in England” (Kuang 301), where their Otherness is in stark display. The opposite occurs in Canton, where they find “they attracted less attention than white foreigners” (Kuang 301), who are ironically inverted into the racial Other⁴⁶. Robin traverses a city “wildly different from the way he’d left it” (Kuang 302) to find his home, and notes that the street in which his family house had once been located “didn’t resemble anything he

⁴⁶ “To be a European in the Orient *always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with, its surroundings” (Said 157).

remembered” (Kuang 302), symbolically reflecting the deep and significant changes that have also occurred in his life and in his self since moving to England with Lovell. Ironically, in the place where his home had once stood, Robin finds an opium den in its stead, and enters it wishing to witness first-hand the impact that opium sold by the English has had on his fellow countrymen. Inside, he observes smokers “sprawled over low couches in various states of undress” (Kuang 303), some of them “[fondling] girls perched atop their laps, some listlessly [playing] a gambling game, and some [laying] alone in a stupor, mouths half-open and eyes half-closed, staring out at nothing” (Kuang 303).

This sight leads him to recall his mother once telling him his uncle had also lost himself to the vice of opium and squandered his family’s fortune on the dens, leaving them destitute. During their first meeting, Professor Lovell enquires to Robin what had happened to his “well-off merchant family” (Kuang 16), as he had known them, to which Robin responds that his uncle “lost all their money at the opium houses” (Kuang 16) in the years that had followed his birth. He was thus aware that his family had been one of the victims of the vice of opium, but had then been too young to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Robin, then, imagines “his mother, young and desperate, eager to do anything for the foreign man who promised her coin, who used and abused her and left her with an English maid and a bewildering set of instructions to raise their child, her child, in a language she couldn’t speak herself” (Kuang 303-304), realising then that he had been “birthed by choices produced from poverty, poverty produced from this” (Kuang 304). Robin, therefore, is a product of colonial exploitation, and in contributing to Babel and its imperial exploits, he assists in the perpetuation of the very same cycle of abuse that led to his existence and to the hardships he experienced thereafter.

This is a significant moment in the narrative, fundamental to Robin’s development, as he finally and fully realises the effects his work as a translator through the Institute has not only in China, but in all territories colonised by the Empire, the enormity of which he had not yet fully comprehended. Overwhelmed, he explains to Ramy: “[S]omehow I still had it all spilt in my head, and I never put the two pieces together because I just didn’t see” (Kuang 305). Ramy, who already had this awareness, explains to Robin that the opium sold in Canton is produced in India joining their countries through “the vector used to chart a connected world of free trade and indentured labor, drug trafficking, shipping and trade, in which violence and cosmopolitan communities weave together via the Indian Ocean” (Ho 2019, 3). Imagining the “great spider’s web” (Kuang 305) that the Empire weaves, Robin feels that resistance of any nature, even what is attempted by the Hermes society, is pointless, because

“[t]hese trade networks were carved in stone” (Kuang 306), and thus impossible to challenge. Overcome with guilt and grief, Robin exhibits for the first time an inclination towards self-destruction, telling Ramy that “[i]t doesn’t feel like we have the right to be alive” (Kuang 306) for having ever contributed to the Empire.

In the wake of this realisation, Robin decides to “suffer through the rest of his duties in Canton by doing the bare minimum required of him” (Kuang 307). During the meeting between Baylis and Commissioner Lin, for which Robin serves as an interpreter, Baylis continues to speak in a “loud and patronizing” (Kuang 308) tone, listing the demands of the British merchants as follows:

It is the opinions of Mr Jardine and Mr Matheson that it would benefit both your people and ours if their agents could legally sell opium along the coast in Canton without interference. They’d appreciate an official apology for the inhospitable treatment their trading agents received earlier this year. And it seems only just that the twenty thousand chests of opium that were seized a few months ago are returned to us, or at least monetary compensation equivalent to their market value. (Kuang 308)

The Commissioner rebuffs Baylis’ demands, pointing out that “the sanction against [English] civilians’ use of opium” (Kuang 309) is proof of Britain’s knowledge of the harmful effects of the drug, and furthermore informing him that “the Emperor’s new law, about to be put into force, reads that any foreigners bringing opium into China with designs to sell it will be decapitated, and all property on board the ship will be confiscated” (Kuang 309). An indignant Baylis responds by stating that the English will “defend [their] citizens as [they] see fit” (Kuang 309), an arrogant and thinly veiled threat that leaves Robin “so amazed Mr Baylis had spoken these words out loud that he forgot to translate” (Kuang 309). Baylis’ statements are indicative of the extent the English are willing to traverse in ensuring they collect the profits to which they believe to be entitled, including even disregarding the authority of another sovereign country to achieve their goals. Lin requests to speak with Robin privately, and plainly enquires if there was any possibility for a peaceful resolution between both nations. Robin ponders on how “[c]ompromise required some acknowledgement that the other party deserved equal moral standing” (Kuang 311), which the English merchants were incapable of doing because of the racist notions they hold regarding any race they consider to be inferior. Robin’s response to Lin is that the British “want what they want, and they won’t

settle for anything less” (Kuang 312). Finally assured that there is no possibility of a compromise, the Commissioner burns the opium stored in Canton, destroying a considerable material and economic value amount of the drug. Justification for the First Opium War stands on the claim “that the Chinese had wrongfully destroyed property which was not theirs, and in the process had directly insulted the British Crown” (Cassan 113).

This escalation of the conflict forces the Professor and the cohort to flee Canton and immediately return to England. Lovell confronts Robin and presses him to confess if, in his unsanctioned private audience with the Commissioner, his words might have somehow encouraged to the destruction of the opium stores, which he denies, while stating also his own personal opinions regarding the trafficking of the drug. The quarrel between father and son escalates into an argument: Lovell continues to espouse his racist views that China “is a nation mired in superstition and antiquity, devoid of the rule of law, hopelessly behind the West on every possible register ... a nation of semi barbarous, incorrigibly backwards fools” (Kuang 318), in the process reducing Robin’s mother to “just some Chink” (Kuang 319), and thusly undeserving of being saved through silver-working like Robin had been. Robin replies that as her son, and having spent his childhood in China he, too, was “just some Chink” (Kuang 319), and being taken to England and forced to work as a translator for the Institute was not enough to eliminate his cultural heritage. Robin begins to feel an increasing pressure “like he would literally burst” (Kuang 319)⁴⁷, as “he could not go on” (Kuang 319) existing “a split man, his psyche constantly erasing and re-erasing the truth” (Kuang 319). Consequently, in an act he cannot recall if it was premeditated or an impulse, he murders Lovell with a silver bar he had in his possession. Even though he “was not thinking of how the bar would claw apart his father’s chest” (Kuang 321), he acknowledges that “[s]ome part of him must have known ... because words only activated the bars if you meant them” (Kuang 321). Symbolically, then, Lovell’s death is another significant turning point of the narrative, representing Robin finally choosing to denounce Babel and reject his role in the imperial project, even if such a decision was unconscious on his part. Furthermore, the culmination of the tensions between Lovell and Robin coincides with the culmination of tensions between China and England, emphasising how their relationship is a mirror to the colonial relationship of those countries.

The cohort, who find Robin with the Professor’s corpse immediately after, promptly assist him in concealing the act by disposing of the body in the ocean and devising a story to

⁴⁷ This passage foreshadows Lovell’s death, as he dies because Robin activates a silver bar that makes his chest explode: “*Bào*: to explode, to burst forth with what could no longer be contained” (Kuang 322).

justify Lovell's absence for the remainder of their journey, claiming that he is ill. Although this assistance is proof of the strength of their friendship. Victoire points out how their help is also a matter of self-preservation, as all of them but Letty are "foreigners returning from a foreign country on a ship with a dead white man" (Kuang 330), and even if Robin were to confess his crime, they would certainly be implicated on account of their being the racial Other. Upon their arrival in London, the cohort flee to Lovell's home in Hampstead, where Robin inadvertently discovers correspondence in his father's office that implicates Lovell as one of the architects of a planned war against Canton. Robin is shocked to ascertain that the merchants had "never meant to negotiate with Commissioner Lin in good faith" (Kuang 349), and their journey had simply been a pretext to open the hostilities against China. Furthermore, Robin discovers that Jardine and Matheson⁴⁸ "had funded Professor Lovell's trip to Canton as a final expedition before they introduced the bill to Parliament" (Kuang 349), and "were relying on Professor Lovell to help them win a short, brutal, efficient war" (Kuang 349). Faced with the enormity of his findings, and once again feeling small and powerless against the might of the Empire and its machinations, Robin, together with his friends⁴⁹, decides they must bring their findings to the Hermes Society "the only entity they'd encountered that had ever professed to bother with the problem of colonialism" (Kuang 351).

Not able to imagine "themselves as anything else but students" (Kuang 341), and desperate to find a way of conveying their findings to Hermes, the cohort return to Oxford, which Robin now describes as a "magical and tainted place" (Kuang 359). This description is worth noting, in that it demonstrates the duality in the feelings Robin holds for Babel: while he still feels an affinity for the space which he had loved and called home for the last few years of his life, and while the space holds happy memories of his time with his friends, he is no longer able to ignore the harms that the Institute's work provokes, having witnessed them in person in Canton, and with the Professor's war plans in mind. Wariness regarding Lovell's absence begin to rise, in part motivated by the appearance of Lovell's wife⁵⁰, who travels to

⁴⁸ William Jardine was, indeed, one of the principal architects of the First Opium War, having even proposed the strategies that aided the British in winning the conflict (Cassan 114). It is important, then, to acknowledge the role he played "in developing some of the military strategies used during the first Opium War" (Cassan 117), which was beneficial for his own private interests: "Since the early 1830's Jardine & Matheson Co. had made a fortune as one of the premiere opium smugglers into China ... With the Chinese hesitant to open their Empire to further foreign influence an open affront was the only way to increase the expansion of free trade. Recognizing this, Jardine began pushing for war as early as 1834" (Cassan 117).

⁴⁹ When she finds them discussing whether or not they should contact Hermes, Ramy, Victoire and Robin are forced to reveal the existence of the secret society to Letty, who will eventually betray them.

⁵⁰ Robin sees his half-siblings by Lovell's marriage from afar, and remarks on how physically similar Lovell's trueborn son is to him and Griffin: "The boy looked so much like himself, like Griffin. His eyes were the same light brown, his hair similarly dark, though it curled more than either of theirs" (Kuang 367).

Oxford to inquire about her husband's whereabouts. Eventually, and as expected, suspicions befall on the cohort, as they had been his travel companions, and purportedly the last ones to have seen him. The cohort are rescued by Hermes and brought to the society's hiding place, where they find other peers from the Institute who work as secret operatives, almost all of them being people of colour and, consequently, affected by the work done by Babel on a deeper and more personal level. During dinner with the group that evening, where "[t]he offerings ... were global" (Kuang 385) to reflect the variety of cultural heritages congregated, Robin feels that the scene is "a distillation of all that Babel promised. He felt he'd been looking for a place like this all his life, and still he'd betrayed it" (Kuang 386). Knowing that the Institute united under its roof a variety of cultural backgrounds, Robin had hoped to meet people with whom he could relate on account of their similar experiences and circumstances and, in their midst, find belonging and acceptance, a desire that is accentuated by his having been left an isolated orphan in a strange country at a young age. Realising that the kinship he so ardently sought after could also have been found in Hermes, Robin feels immensely guilty for having chosen Babel instead.

This is also the first time Robin encounters Griffin since having parted from Hermes. While the secret society devises a plan through which they might prevent the war on Canton, two differing perspectives emerge: on one hand, Anthony Ribben defends lobbying the House of Commons "to convince them that war is against the best interest of their constituents" (Kuang 388), perceiving this the safest and most obvious path to achieve their goals; on the other hand, Griffin insists that "decolonization must be a violent process" (Kuang 394) and considers the approach proposed by the other members of Hermes to be naïve for "holding on to this unbelievable faith in human goodness" (Kuang 394). Griffin's philosophy of violence, espoused often throughout his meetings with his younger brother, considers brutality to be the only method to which the coloniser might respond in acknowledgement to the strife of the colonised, "because their system of extraction is inherently violent" (Kuang 397). As an example, Griffin points out that slave revolts are successful because "[t]hey can't fire on their own source of labour" (Kuang 397), whom they need to sustain their system. Standing in complete opposition to Griffin is Letty who, having been raised within the upper echelons of English society, believes the Empire to be "inevitable. The future immutable. And resistance pointless" (Kuang 438). Her participation in Hermes is unwilling, as she only joins her cohort within the secret society to protect herself over her participation in concealing Lovell's murder. While she believes "she could support lobbying for change, as long as it was peaceful, respectful, civilized" (Kuang 439), she is shocked with "that horrible Griffin

Lovell” (Kuang 439) and his notions of violence, which in her view manipulate her friends to agree with “blackmail ... kidnapping, rioting, blowing up a shipyard” (Kuang 439), approaches she considers to be “vindictive, violent, awful” (Kuang 439) and, as such, unacceptable. In an act of self-preservation, Letty betrays Hermes and reveals their whereabouts to the authorities, directly causing the deaths of the other operatives. Additionally, Ramy’s murder at Letty’s hands becomes another crucial moment for Robin, as “time ... stopped when Letty’s bullet had left the chamber” (Kuang 509) and all that remained “was the fallout” (Kuang 509). In allying herself with those who stand against Hermes’ goal, “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’” (Kohlke 2022, 273), despite “seeing the evidence of Professor Lovell’s conspiratorial, war-mongering correspondence” (Kohlke 2022, 273) and knowing what such an assault would entail for the innocents in Canton, and the precedent it sets for the British Empire to attack other sovereign nations and territories.

While at first wary of his brother’s preponderance towards violence, Robin comes to embrace the need for such acts. His willingness to employ brutality in an effort to overcome the Empire becomes even more pronounced after Griffin’s death, a defining moment for Robin that, coupled with Ramy’s murder, leads him to believe that extreme actions are all that might convince the oppressor to “sit down at the negotiating table” (Kuang 489). It is relevant here to analyse the conversation where Griffin explains his theory to his half-brother, this being also one of their last interactions. During this exchange, Griffin teaches Robin to shoot a handgun, simultaneously explaining to him that violence becomes disruptive to the systems of oppression the Empire places on the colonised territories. When Robin finally fires the gun, he agrees that “Griffin was right – the rush of that moment, the explosion of force contained within its hands, the sheer power he could trigger with just a twitch of his finger – it felt good” (Kuang 398). Their final earnest conversation is thus symbolic, in that while holding an object often related to brutality (or in some cases, resistance), Robin realises that violence might give him the sense of relief and release he is seeking to assuage his guilt over having engaged in imperialism. Additionally, it also foreshadows how Robin eventually comes to understand that he (figuratively) holds in his hands the same ability as his brother to utilise violence in the quest to achieve emancipation from the British Empire.

Griffin perishes while rescuing Victoire and Robin from prison, causing them to become the only remaining Hermes operatives they are aware of. While at first unsure of how to proceed, the pair return to Babel, which they now view clearly as a “dream that had always

been founded on a lie” (Kuang 431), and where “[n]one of them had ever stood a chance of truly belonging ... for Oxford wanted only one kind of scholar, the kind born and bred to cycle through posts of power it had created for itself” (Kuang 431). Finally accepting that he could never belong in the Institute, for its mission was corrupt and directly harmful to him and his compatriots, Robin points out to Victoire that their only option would be to take over the tower, a plan that Griffin had previously put forward to Hermes, but had been rejected for being too violent. As Griffin had noted, the students were “scholars, not soldiers” (Kuang 392), meaning that any assault would be swift and would require only taking “a gun in there, wave it around and shout for a bit” (Kuang 392). Because “Babel is the crux ... the source of all the Empire’s power” (Kuang 392), seizing it and keeping hostage the knowledge and resources it contains could be a fruitful option to ensure the cooperation of the British government.

Robin and Victoire swiftly enter the tower and explain how “Parliament is debating military action on Canton” (Kuang 449) and the effects such an unjustified war would have. While at first finding that he is not like his half-brother, as “Griffin was the storyteller, the true revolutionary” (Kuang 449) who could “paint the necessary picture of imperial expansion, complicity, guilt, and responsibility with a handful of gutting phrases” (Kuang 449), he pushes himself to “channel his dead brother’s spirit” (Kuang 449) in an attempt to rally the academics to their cause. They garner the support of six other scholars: “Professor Chakravarti, Professor Craft, two undergraduates – Ibrahim and a tiny girl named Juliana – and two graduate fellows named Yusuf and Meghana” (Kuang 456), and it is worth noting that they are all “[f]aces of colour, faces from the colonies, except for Professor Craft” (Kuang 456). As they bond in the early days of the strike, barricaded within the tower, the eight share how they have come to be at the Institute, and find that their stories are “astonishingly similar” (Kuang 500), in that they too had been removed from their motherlands at a young age and told to either do well in their academic pursuits, or else be deported⁵¹. In finding this common ground, Robin realises that Griffin was also right in claiming that “the obstacle was not the struggle, but the failure to imagine it was possible at all, the compulsion to cling to the safe, the survivable status quo” (Kuang 453). Robin reflects

⁵¹ As the secondary narrator points out, by encouraging scholars to keep isolated within their own cohorts, the Institute removes from them “all avenues towards meaningful solidarity” (Kuang 500), thus making them “believe ... that they were the only ones caught in their particular web” (Kuang 500). Isolation is one of the keys to how Babel perpetrates its oppression over the scholars, ensuring they never join their efforts to revolt against the Institute.

that, had he not been afraid of what leaving Babel might entail, he might have come to this understanding sooner.

Initially, the striking translators fear that their efforts “might do nothing but damn themselves, and that their cries would go unheard into the unforgiving dark” (Kuang 465). They eventually realise that, because they have cut access to all of Babel’s resources, there are no translators nor materials available to perform maintenance on the several silver bar installations spread throughout Oxford, which Chakravarti points out is not a flaw, but a design, as the city had been made “as reliant on the Institute as possible” (Kuang 469), because “maintenance appointments bring in money” (Kuang 469). Robin, thrilled to ascertain that the effects of their strike will be witnessed by the city, proposes removing the resonance rods through which “distant bars are maintained” (Kuang 468). His suggestion is met with some trepidation from his fellow strikers, who consider this approach to be extreme and reckless, to which Robin argues that he wants to instigate mayhem and produce fear: “I want them to think that a dozen Magdalen Towers will fall every day until they listen to us” (Kuang 468). Robin, then, begins to reveal signs of his self-destructive instinct to his peers, aggravated after the deaths of both Ramy and Griffin, proving also his increasing adherence to his brother’s philosophy of violence.

The brutality of his approaches only intensifies as the strike progresses, and he relishes in witnessing the confusion caused by their acts. Privately, he wants “to see how far he could take this. He wanted to see Oxford broken down to its foundations, wanted its fat, golden opulence to slough away ... He wanted the whole place dismantled so thoroughly that it would be as if it had never been built” (Kuang 471). However, he is also aware that these vicious thoughts inhabit a part of him “deep down, where the ghosts of Griffin and Ramy resided” (Kuang 471). Robin, then, views the strike as a form of personal vengeance against the Empire, which he holds responsible for these deeply impactful deaths. Victoire diverges from Robin’s violent perspectives from early on, warning him that “[t]here’s dramatic, and then there’s reckless” (Kuang 468), and that in order for their efforts to convince Parliament to be successful, they must be careful to not cross any lines. Whereas Robin desires to employ brutal means to achieve their ends, guided by the memory of his brother’s expressions on the need for violence and “less by conviction, less by telos, and more by sheer, untrammelled rage” (Kuang 495), Victoire embodies Anthony, proposing always caution, restraint and diplomacy, with the “conviction that the enemy would at least act in rational self-interest, if not altruism” (Kuang 495). As Oxford’s infrastructure and services begin to crumble over the lack of silver to maintain them, the population of the city turn on the strikers in the tower,

perceiving them as the source of their struggles rather than the government they are pressuring through their actions. As the populace crowds around the Institute in an attempt to force the end of the strike, Robin, whose tendencies for violence and rage aggravate with the escalation of their protest, secretly yearns for the opportunity for physical altercations, to show them “exactly what he was, which was their worst nightmare – uncivilized, brutal, violent” (Kuang 474), a passage that expertly demonstrates the gradual decline of Robin’s mentality towards brute force and extremist actions.

Pivotal to the strike is the moment when the translators receive the support of British labourers. This is a contribution to which Robin did not know how to respond, as it “defied what he had come to expect of the world” (Kuang 484), which was “only violence, not solidarity” (Kuang 484), underpinning the increasingly bleak outlook that sustains his self-destructive tendencies. Whilst planning Hermes’ course of action, Anthony had pointed out to the cohort that there were similarities to be traced in the varied and extensive effects of the Silver Industrial Revolution⁵² on both the poorer and working classes of Britain and the colonised, telling them that “[t]he fate of a poor family in Canton is in fact intricately tied to the fate of an out-of-work weaver from Yorkshire” (Kuang 404), as “[n]either benefits from the expansion of empire. Both only get poorer as the companies get richer” (Kuang 404). It is only when he witnesses the support these workers offer to their cause that Robin acknowledges that Anthony’s observations had been right, and that despite the differences in the colour of their skin, “they were all connected, all caught in the same web of coercion and exploitation” (Kuang 476-477) in which the only beneficiaries “were those in power at the heart of the Empire” (Kuang 477).

It is necessary to note here that the labourers had organised demonstrations in front of Babel during Robin’s third year of education, protesting because although “[s]ilver-working [had] catapulted Britain ahead of every nation” (Kuang 209), it had the consequence of leaving “thousands of labourers out of work” (Kuang 209) when their positions were made redundant, with “both the textile and agricultural industries” (Kuang 492) more strongly experiencing these effects. Professor Lovell had regarded the plight of the workers with indifference and disdain, considering himself to be superior for “[believing] in knowledge and scientific progress” (Kuang 210), whereas the labourers “[were] where they [were] because

⁵² Throughout the period of the Industrial Revolution, Britain “became the leading industrial nation, and up until around 1870 it was known as the ‘workshop of the world’” (Purchase 86). Despite the progress and development to which the Industrial Revolution is associated, however, “[l]ife in industrial Victorian Britain was notoriously brutal and short for its growing working-class population” (Purchase 86), emphasising social inequality. In the narrative, the Silver Industrial Revolution comes to be associated with these same notions, as exemplified by the protests held by the labourers, whose work is made redundant by the magic of silver-working.

they [had] stubbornly refused to move forward with the future” (Kuang 210). His comments reflect how he disregards the plights of the poorer of England, unable to achieve his social standing on account of their lack of education and resources, Othering them over his perception of their inferiority and his own, inherent, superiority. Throughout that year, Robin notes how “[s]omething was happening throughout England” (Kuang 210), as “[r]eform, unrest, and inequality” (Kuang 211) became “the keywords of the decade” (Kuang 211). This shift in social awareness illustrates a desire of Britain’s lower classes to enact change, as they realise that the “promised future of progress and enlightenment seemed only to have wrought poverty and suffering” (Kuang 211), wherein “the only ones who seemed to profit from the Silver Industrial Revolution were those who were already rich, and the select few others who were cunning or lucky enough to make themselves so” (Kuang 211). This sentiment can be connected to Hermes’ own efforts, as the support of the labourers for their cause so clearly confirms. Throughout the initial protests, which occur shortly before Robin parts ways from the secret society, he had avoided reflecting on the causes that had motivated the demonstrators, feeling guilty and hypocritical because, “for all of his professed allegiance to revolution, for his commitment to equality and to helping those who were without, he had no experience of true poverty at all” (Kuang 212), as his time in England had been one of relative comfort and material privilege.

The striking translators accompany the developments of their takeover through the newspapers. On the one hand, some

expressed the opinion that Robin had expected, which was that the war on China was a matter of defending national pride, that invasion was nothing more than a just punishment for the indignities imposed by the Chinese on the British flag, that the occupation of Babel by foreign-born students was an act of treason, that the barricades in Oxford and the strikes in London were the work of brutish malcontents, and that the government ought to hold firm against their demands. (Kuang 490-491)

On the other hand, others defend their efforts, and “for every headline that urged swift action in Canton, there was another by a publication ... that called the war a moral and religious outrage” (Kuang 491). The secondary narrator notes the language employed by the publications when referring to the translators, as “[t]he papers always referred to the strikers as foreign; as Chinamen, Indians, Arabs and Africans. (Never mind Professor Craft.)” (Kuang

491). Moreover, they “were never Oxfordians, they were never Englishmen, they were travellers from abroad who had taken advantage of Oxford’s good graces, and who now held the nation hostage” (Kuang 491). The employment of such expressions once more shines a light on the hypocrisy of Victorian society, who had always regarded Babel to be “a national treasure, a quintessentially English institution” (Kuang 491) but was now forced to confront that the Institute had employed a vast number of foreign-born scholars, imported as assets from throughout the Empire, whose work had benefited them and satiated their wants.

The stakes of the strike escalate when the scholars learn that Westminster Bridge⁵³ is at severe risk of collapsing over its lack of maintenance. The possible fall of the bridge, which “saw the heaviest traffic” (Kuang 494) in the crossing of the river Thames, would cause severe constraints to London, as “no steamers, no houseboats, no sculls or canoes would be able to get around the wreckage” (Kuang 495), consequently leading to the entirety of London being halted. Robin, who at this point “had fully converted to Griffin’s theory of violence” (Kuang 489), is satisfied that the fall of the bridge would be “the worst possible thing that could happen” (Kuang 495) and such an event might apply the necessary pressure to force the British Empire to capitulate in their favour. Victoire opposes Robin’s proposal to not prevent the bridge from falling, aware that the extreme nature of his plans is simply a form of retribution for the deaths of Ramy, Griffin, and the other members of Hermes, as well as for the predicaments faced by people of colour in Victorian Britain. Professor Chakravarti is also vehemently averse to this recourse, as it would be “punishing the city” (Kuang 497), including the innocents who inhabit it. Because the vote to allow Westminster Bridge to collapse wins, Chakravarti leaves the strike, parting with Robin with the following words: “Your violence is personal, it is vindictive, and this I cannot support” (Kuang 498). Nevertheless, Robin remains resolute in not preventing the collapse of the bridge. His self-destructive desires are also heightened, as he feels increasingly incapable of imagining “a world where [they] coexist” (Kuang 495) with the Empire and those who had caused the deaths of the people he had cared for. His willingness to allow the bridge to fall stems from his desire for “it all to end” (Kuang 509), and “for someone else to struggle through” (Kuang 509) whatever consequences might arise from his actions.

⁵³ Bridges carry a significant connotation in the British imaginary, as they are codenames for the operations set into motion in the immediate aftermath of a monarch’s death. Throughout the 20th century, the codename Operation London Bridge signalled the plans for Queen Elizabeth II’s death and funeral. Similarly, the plans for King Charles III’s death are codenamed Operation Menai Bridge, “named after the world’s first iron suspension bridge in Anglesey, Wales” (Kingsley and Zakir-Hussain). In this context, then, bridges are symbolic references to change in the country, as markers of a significant shift for the monarchy and possible unrest.

3.3. An Arcane History?

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. (Kohlke 2022, 272)

History, for once, is fluid. (Kuang 537)

Westminster Bridge does, indeed, collapse, and in the immediate aftermath, “the human toll remains under debate” (Kuang 511). In the wake of the brutality of the situation, “Oxford’s streets exploded into proper violence” (Kuang 513), confirming Robin’s expectations that an action of extreme nature was needed to arouse a response from the white Britons that had, until that point, ignored their efforts. Letty arrives at the tower to converse with Robin and Victoire, this being the first time the surviving members of the cohort meet since her betrayal and Ramy’s death. Although “[s]he looked grief-stricken, vulnerable, the wretched heroine of a terrible fairy-tale” (Kuang 517), it is undeniable to both Robin and Victoire that their former friend stands clearly against them and their efforts, finally embracing her role as an agent of Empire. She pleads with them to end the strike, plainly stating that those “who run this country care more about the pride of the British Empire than they do mild inconveniences” (Kuang 518), and that in the end, as had already happened with the fall of Westminster Bridge, “it’s the poor who will suffer the most” (Kuang 518), as those in power are not affected by the nuisances caused by their protest. In her pleas, Letty explains that, should they capitulate, “come out peacefully, and cooperate with restoration” (Kuang 521), they will eventually be permitted to “be back at Babel in no time, doing the work [they had] always dreamed of” (Kuang 521), in a moment that fully and clearly highlights that she is “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” (Kohlke 2022, 273).

In response to Letty’s warnings on the approach of the Army, who will “storm the tower at dawn” (Kuang 518), Robin and Victoire conclude that their only possible responses are to either surrender and be forced to return to the Institute “in chains” (Kuang 528), and be forced to resume their work as translators, or to die bringing down the tower. This is the emotional climax of the narrative, wherein Robin reveals to Victoire the plan he had concocted from early on to destroy Babel and all the resources contained within: as has

previously been established, silver becomes a symbolic paradox in the narrative because it is needed to advance the Empire, and because it eventually leads to the destruction of Babel, its most essential agent. During their first year, Professor Playfair had explained that “[t]he translation match-pair creates a paradox” (Kuang 161) as it attempts to “create a purer translation, something that will align to the metaphors associated with each word” (Kuang 161), which “is of course impossible, because no perfect translations are possible” (Kuang 161). As such, silver bars with match-pairs to the word “translate” can cause cataclysmic destruction, rendering useless not only the bars in which they are inscribed, but any silver it touches. Foreshadowing the eventual fall of the tower, Playfair warns his students to not engage in any experiments with this match-pair, for “that might bring down the building” (Kuang 162). There is a clear symbolism in causing the tower to fall, as it ties to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, as the principal message of this story is God’s displeasure of humanity’s defiance of divine authority. While “[a]ll the inhabitants of the earth speak one language and wish to live in one place” (Hiebert 36)⁵⁴, God’s scattering of humankind throughout the globe can be read as the birth of cultural diversity. While the biblical myth refers to onset of diversity, the narrative tower falls to protect it from imperial overreach, which at its core aims to attain homogeneity at the expense of difference.

With this knowledge in mind, Robin’s proposal is that they gather the vast stores of silver bars within Babel and activate the translation match-pair several times. If successful, their plan would make the translators themselves useless because the “facilities ... Their library ... The Grammaticas ... Their resonance rods, their silver” (Kuang 523) would all be gone, which might indeed cause irreparable damage to the Empire. This mission, however, would be suicidal, as there would be no way for the strikers to safely escape the tower once the chain reaction commenced. An angry, saddened Victoire accuses Robin, who reveals he had been planning this destruction “[s]ince the beginning” (Kuang 523), of having simply concocted an elaborate suicide plan to avoid facing his complex emotions. Robin finally verbalises that “ever since Canton” (Kuang 523), when he had fully witnessed and realised the extent of the harm caused by the British Empire and confronted the role, even if unwilling, he had played in perpetuating it, he had felt a “weight crushing his chest” (Kuang 523), with which he could not go on living. Unlike him, however, Victoire has no interest in becoming a martyr by dying “to get their pity” (Kuang 525); she wants to continue living “day by day” (Kuang 524) and possibly witness a future in which their plans might succeeded

⁵⁴ “The story is thus about the cultural homogeneity of the human race characterized – characterized here by a single language and location - and about the desire to preserve it” (Hiebert 36).

in ending the oppression and inequality perpetuated by the Empire. The pair explain their plan to the remaining strikers, with Robin stating that, although he cannot perform the feat of bringing down the tower on his own, he will not ask any of them to stay and join him on his suicide. Victoire and Ibrahim escape, while the rest remain.

Throughout their time barricaded within the Institute, Ibrahim had written a chronicle detailing “what happened inside the tower. Everything that was said. All the decisions there were made. Everything [they] stood for” (Kuang 504) so that, in the event of their death, “some record of [them] exists” (Kuang 504), anticipating “the burying or eradication of their struggle for future generations, whose knowledge about the revolution will be severely curtailed by official versions of events” (Kohlke 2022, 271). Robin initially feels discomfort at the prospect of thinking about the strike “as history when [they hadn’t] even yet made a mark on the present” (Kuang 505), and is reluctant to contribute to this record over the fear that it would become “all [they] ever were” (Kuang 505). As the strike draws to its end, Robin delivers one of the two copies of the chronicle to the leader of the labourers who had assisted them, with instructions to print the written record “all over England” (Kuang 530) so that their efforts would last and reverberate throughout time and history.

Victoire parts ways with Robin and the strikers with “some envelopes in her coat pocket: parting words of advice from Anthony and the code names of several contacts” (Kuang 540) of Hermes that might help her, and with “silver lining her pockets ... in the in seams of her dress” (Kuang 540). Robin and the remaining translators, meanwhile, prepare to activate the silver bars. Robin reflects that while “[i]n theory this decision they’d made was something beautiful” (Kuang 533) because “they would be martyrs, heroes, the ones who pushed history off its path” (Kuang 533), in truth “he was terrified” (Kuang 532). As the Army approaches, they speak the necessary words to activate the translation match-pairs, and Robin reflects on the first morning he had spent with Ramy at Oxford, illustrating the depth of their bond and the reason why, in a world in which Ramy no longer lived because he had fallen victim to the British Empire’s brutality, Robin does not feel that he can go on either. Recalling this specific memory in his last living moments demonstrates one last time how the Institute had become symbolic to Robin of his friendships and the happiness he encountered in them.

It is only in his very final moments, as the tower crumbles on him, that Robin regains a “true sense of home” (Kohlke 2022, 273), wherein “he imagines his mother smiling and speaking his Chinese name” (Kohlke 2022, 273). In his last act of defiance and resistance, then, a second symbolic rebirth occurs, wherein the boy who Lovell rescued in Canton fully

returns to, and embraces, his cultural identity. However, the ending “is deliberately harrowing rather than comforting or exalting” (Kohlke 2022, 273), as “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” (Kohlke 2022, 273) despite his efforts at integration.

The epilogue does not indicate what happens to either Letty nor Victoire, the only surviving members of the cohort, simply alluding to the rivalry between the two and the disparate ideologies each defends, with the narrator indicating that, should Letty ever learn that Victoire is not among the deceased strikers, she will “hunt her to the ends of the earth” (Kuang 541) for being a physical manifestation of resistance to the Empire, which stands against all that Letty defends. The narrative’s ending is ambiguous, as the Institute’s destruction “is unthinkable, its ramifications unimaginable. There is no historical precedent for this. The juncture is shot” (Kuang 537). Throughout the entirety of Robin’s time in England, the role that Babel plays as a crucial agent of the Empire is reiterated time and again. When the strike begins, however, Robin concedes the possibility that the other scholars “might establish a secondary translation centre elsewhere” (Kuang 457), an enterprise that would take several months, but could nevertheless be achieved. Backups of the Grammaticas are located “at Cambridge, Edinburgh, and the Foreign Offices in London” (Kuang 78), and, although not as comprehensive as those stored in the Institute, they “are updated annually to account for new findings” (Kuang 74). Moreover, “much smaller resonance centres” (Kuang 198) are established throughout the nation as well. As such, the destruction of the physical tower might be a significant blow to the Empire, but the question remains as to the extent of its long-term effects.

Here, it is crucial to recall that the novel’s subtitle classes the narrative as “an arcane history of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution”, arcane meaning “mysterious and known only by a few people” (Cambridge Dictionary). In the epilogue, it is stated that Victoire is aware that “[t]here are so many battles to be fought, so many fights on so many fronts - in India, in China, in the Americas - all linked together by the same drive to exploit that which is not white and English” (Kuang 541), alluding to the fact that, even without Babel, the British Empire would continue its efforts to assert their authority and hegemony globally. Moreover, although Robin parted from the leader of the labourers with directives that he should disseminate their chronicle as widely as possible, thus ensuring their efforts echo throughout history, the employment of the adjective ‘arcane’ raises doubts as to the success of this enterprise. The question that remains is thus: was the Oxford Translators’ Revolution

successful in bringing the British Empire to its knees and accelerate its end, or did Robin's fears that their occupation of the tower would be forgotten and erased from history come true?

The ending raises challenging notions about the literary subgenre of alternate history, this narrative style being "a fundamental feature of the way humans explore possibility" (Hamon and Niefanger 67). History tells us that between 1820 and 1914, the British Empire "expanded dramatically" (Steinbach 66), comprising one quarter of the world's population and a fifth of its land by 1914, when World War I started. Additionally, Queen Victoria, "the personification of Britain and its empire" (Steinbach 191), was crowned Empress of India in 1877, solidifying her as both "an eastern potentate as well as a western sovereign" (Cannadine 45) in a moment of significant importance in her reign, that also solidifies the wide reach of the British Empire over the colonies. If what happens after the ending of the narrative resembles real history, then the Empire will continue to thrive throughout the remainder of the Victorian period, even in the (potential) absence of the Royal Institute of Translation. However, the alternate history in which the narrative occurs allows for the possibility that the strikers' efforts in thwarting the Empire were successful. Moreover, history tells us also that the war on Canton did, indeed, occur. In the narrative, the orchestrators of the conflict "were relying on Professor Lovell to help them win a short, brutal, efficient war" (Kuang 349); real history indicates that this war was, indeed, brutal to the Chinese, who were "systematically massacred" (Cassan 114) by the British troops, with final death tolls accounting for an estimation of "only 500 for the British and over 20,000 Chinese troops" (Cassan 114). However, in the context of the narrative's alternate events, doubts remain as to whether or not the war occurred, particularly in the wake of Babel's fall and Professor Lovell's death, and if its possible aftermath retained the same level of brutality as what happened in reality.

CONCLUSION | “Who knows what will happen now?”

So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Thereafter it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (*The Bible*, Gen 8-9)

The scope of neo-Victorianism has vastly grown since its earlier roots in postmodernism, accounting for narratives that are self-consciously and critically engaged with the Victorian period, at the same time lending voice to the experiences and perspectives of the marginalised of this era. Despite this evolution, some limitations are still encountered within this field of studies. One of its most pronounced constraints is its limited engagement with narratives situated outside the purview of the Anglosphere. Addressing this particular constraint, Garrido writes that the impetus to expand the boundaries of neo-Victorianism

cannot always come from within the established structures, academic locations, and demographics of current neo-Victorian scholarship. It also requires a critical self-assessment of neo-Victorianism’s methodological and conceptual contributions, and of what the neo-Victorian project adds to critical intellectual traditions already in place. (2024, 106)

In this regard, the intersection of neo-Victorianism with postcolonial structures of analysis emerges as a possible mechanism to mitigate this limitation, highlighting the importance of intersectionality, which hinders on “questions of how race, class, and gender simultaneously figure into questions of personal identity” (Raka and Radhakrishnan 39). The importance of this convergence becomes even starker when considering the global and wide-ranging effects of the British colonial project, which have projected the Victorian period and its enduring legacy to a worldwide scale.

Colonialism, “the establishment, maintenance, acquisition, and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another territory” (Burney 182), is a process in which the colonising power asserts their dominance and sovereignty over a colonised territory and imposes upon them their own modes of living, the effects of which are experienced by a significant number of territories. One of the principal characteristics of colonialism is the

establishment of “unequal and exploitative relationships between the metropolis and the colony, between the colonists and the indigenous populations” (Burney 182). As Said summarises, it is a “feature of Oriental-European relations ... that Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination” (40). It is on the grounds of this dichotomy that relationships of Otherness premised on racial difference arise, and the aftermath of such dynamics reverberate to the present-day, beyond the decolonisation of formerly dominated territories. As one of the great European empires, the effects of the British colonial enterprise have particular and noteworthy effects, denouncing the relevance of the exploration of this topic in the context of neo-Victorianism.

Postcolonial studies are premised on an exploration of the mechanics of the colonial enterprise, in a framework that is “used primarily to describe the European conquest, settlement and systemic administrative control (by which we mean institutional structures of governance, legal apparatuses and military dominance) over territories” (Nayar 30-31), spotlighting the myriads of effects and consequences of such practices. The colonial relationship is thus defined by the dichotomy between the coloniser, the ‘civilised Us’, and the colonised, ‘the uncivilised Them’. It is this opposition, under the perception of superiority held by the coloniser, that justifies the colonial enterprise, with the coloniser asserting that theirs is a mission to aid the technological, cultural, scientific, and societal development of the colonised.

Much like these dichotomies and oppositions characterise the colonial dynamic, so is the Victorian era defined by a “series of socioeconomic and cultural divisions which defined the Victorian century and beyond, those between work and leisure; the male sphere of work and the female sphere of the home (especially for middle-class families); city and country; and the ‘industrial’ north and the ‘rural’ south” (Purchase 87). The profound and lasting social and cultural impact of the Victorian period is made more significant due to the global reach of the British Empire, so that “even as we move further away from the Victorian, the ideas of the period come to haunt us more deeply and in unexpected ways” (Llewellyn 2008, 172). As its effects extend beyond the borders of the British Isles, and sometimes even beyond the borders of the British Empire itself, a postcolonial approach to neo-Victorianism emerges as a necessity, as it enriches and enhances an analysis of colonial trauma, the effects of which did not end with decolonisation movements of the second half of the twentieth century.

Babel is one such narrative that benefits from a postcolonial neo-Victorianism approach, as it addresses and examines the experiences of Othering and the effects of the

British Empire, recalling tropes and characteristics of the Victorian novel not because it exalts imperialism, but because it criticises it. The narrative can be read as a character study that meditates on constructions of whiteness and Othering, of racialisation and the aftermaths of the colonial relation, relayed through Robin's perspective, which becomes central to establish an understanding of the personal-level effects of colonial exploitation. His very existence as a byproduct of colonialism demonstrates the sinister means that the Empire employs to achieve its ends. In producing half-Chinese children, who are to be raised according to his instructions and prepared to one day become translators themselves, Lovell is transformed into the embodiment of the British Empire and its machinations. The Professor continuously espouses his beliefs regarding the inherent inferiority of his illegitimate sons due to the race of their mothers, having fathered them to be not his children, but assets to the Empire. Lovell consistently rebuts and belittles Robin and any attempts he makes to convince his father of the difficulties inherent to his situation, while aiming also to fully remove from him all traces of the Chinese half of his identity, with the exception of his language skills, essential to his role as a Babel translator. His relationship with Robin is also a mirror of the relationship between China and Britain, as the two nations clash over the matter of opium trade, tracing these rising geopolitical hostilities in their bond, defined by dissimulation and manipulation. Much like China seeks to assert itself in the face of British abuse of power, so does Robin seek to assert his independence from his father's efforts to force his assimilation into Victorian Britain.

Griffin emerges as another significant figure in Robin's life, the only other familial bond that remains after he became an orphan. Whereas Lovell is a figurehead of empire, Griffin represents its opposite, embodying resistance and anti-colonialism, which is manifested more strongly even in his association with the Hermes Society. While Lovell attempts to manipulate Robin into accepting the British Empire and its sovereignty as inevitable, Griffin encourages his half-brother to reflect on the wrongness of Babel and its dealings. It is hinted in the narrative that Griffin and Robin are mirrors of one another, having undergone identical paths: Griffin was also a student of the Institute, and was similarly close to his cohort, but his wonderment for life as a Babel scholar fades as he learns about the depth of its corruption, eventually turning to violence as the only adequate response to halt the Empire, with Robin also eventually accepting his half-brother's philosophy and carrying it out after his death.

Robin's character journey very much reflects the harmful effects of imperialism, as his personhood is in itself commodified and transformed into an asset. Upon his removal to

England, Robin's identity becomes split into two halves that are in constant combat with one another, physically manifested in the ambiguity of his features. As a mechanism of self-preservation, Robin leans into this ambivalence, hoping to pass as white to protect himself from prejudice. Nevertheless, his inner turmoil betrays the presence of the Chinese portion of his identity, with which he more strongly identifies, as is confirmed by his recalling his real, Chinese name in his dying moments. Whereas the time Robin spends in England is defined by his difficulty in belonging, the opposite occurs during their visit to Canton, where he finds he blends in, further denoting the comfort he feels in his Chinese identity, in contrast with the discomfort that defines his time in England. Robin's struggles are furthermore depicted in the duality of his embracing both Babel and the Hermes Society, two opposing institutions with opposing missions. Having internalised Lovell's threats of deportation, Robin views Babel as the only possible avenue for comfort and stability in his life, and Hermes is initially a form of both resistance and rebellion against his father's constant dismissals, with his brutal murder signifying Robin's final rejection of Babel and embracement of Hermes and, consequently, resistance to colonialism.

As Robin eventually learns, other scholars of colour are brought to the Institute under circumstances similar to his, uncovering a coordinated effort to ensure the empire has the assets it requires to perform its dealings. Translation, which "is never an innocent procedure" (Primorac 56), arises as a metaphor for imperial power, manifested in Babel's recourse to academics of non-European origins to participate in, and perpetuate, the subjugation of their home countries, providing an ironic edge to the definition of translation as an act of betrayal. This nefarious application of translation is further denoted in the cohort's journey to Canton, in which real and alternate history converge. In the lead up to the conflict that became known as the First Opium War, the role of translation as manipulation and betrayal becomes more starkly pronounced, with translators becoming necessary to undercut Chinese sovereignty in an effort to impose terms that benefit British interests. That Lovell, an Oxford professor who specialises in translation, is one of the principal architects of the war further denotes how powerful translation can be as an agent of imperial expansion.

Witnessing the effects of the colonial enterprise to which he has been contributing, the trip to Canton marks the beginning of Robin's mental decline, aggravated by both Ramy and Griffin's deaths. The ending of the narrative is symbolic, in that it parallels the fall of the biblical Tower of Babel. This monument, "standing unfinished, has become a cultural icon, symbolizing the preposterous pride of its builders and the divine punishment for all such acts of arrogance" (Hiebert 29). Similarly, the Babel of the narrative is felled as a form of

punishment for the hubris of the coloniser, whose efforts to dominate the world and establish hegemony are pursued without regard for the consequences they carry. As he no longer desires to live because he cannot conciliate his existence with that of the Empire, Robin's sacrifice becomes the epitome and embodiment of the repercussions of imperialism. Up until the tower's fall, real and alternate history run parallel to one another without significant differences. As is acknowledged in the epilogue, however, this unprecedented event carries consequences that are impossible to anticipate. Will alternate history continue to follow the footsteps of reality, meaning the British Empire will grow exponentially for the remainder of the century, or will the translators' sacrifice bring about its end?

Despite focalising the hardships provoked by the colonial enterprise, other threads of study can be considered in an analysis of *Babel*, such as the experience of women, femininity, and gender through the characters of Letty and Victoire, victims of discrimination on account of their gender. Here, intersectionality must be accounted for, as their races inform the disparity of their experiences. While she suffers greatly as a woman in an unwelcoming academic setting, Letty still reveals herself as a willing participant and defender of the empire and its continued expansion, as is demonstrated by her eventual betrayal of the cohort and the Hermes Society. On the other hand, Victoire's experiences are aggravated by woman of colour, doubling the hardships she faces in her time at the Institute. As such, while the two characters share some struggles, they still represent disparate ideologies, and an analysis of their complex friendship and dynamic would also benefit from being framed in a postcolonial context. Another relevant relationship to analyse is that of Ramy and Robin, as the feelings between the pair are oftentimes hinted as exceeding those of simple friendship. Neither of them pursue these romantic feelings, and as the Victorian period is notorious for its repression of sexuality and the taboo of homosexuality, such a thread of analysis would also be interesting to explore within the context of neo-Victorianism.

A significant conclusion to draw from the present dissertation is that in focalising marginalised outlooks of the Victorian period, neo-Victorian narratives are spaces with the unique potential to reflect on contemporary concerns through a more empathetic perspective, as "[t]he unsettling text-reader relationship afforded by neo-Victorian fiction ... ultimately encourages readers to envisage a potentially different future for both the text's characters and human behaviour in general" (Zhang 175). Subverting elements of the Victorian novel, *Babel* carries a distinctly Victorian voice, simultaneously engaging in a critical reflection of the hardships associated with racial discrimination. Pondering on the past facilitates a reflection on the present, with the aim of bettering the future, and centring the perspectives of those

most vulnerable enables the breaking down of barriers between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’. In her most recent, contemporary novel, *Yellowface*, in which the author similarly explores themes of race, identity, and exploitation, this time focalised through the lens of the publication industry and its pitfalls, R. F. Kuang (2023, 106) succinctly explains the power of fiction as a mediator of empathy as follows: “Reading lets us live in someone else’s shoes. Literature builds bridges; it makes our world larger, not smaller”.

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Appendix A

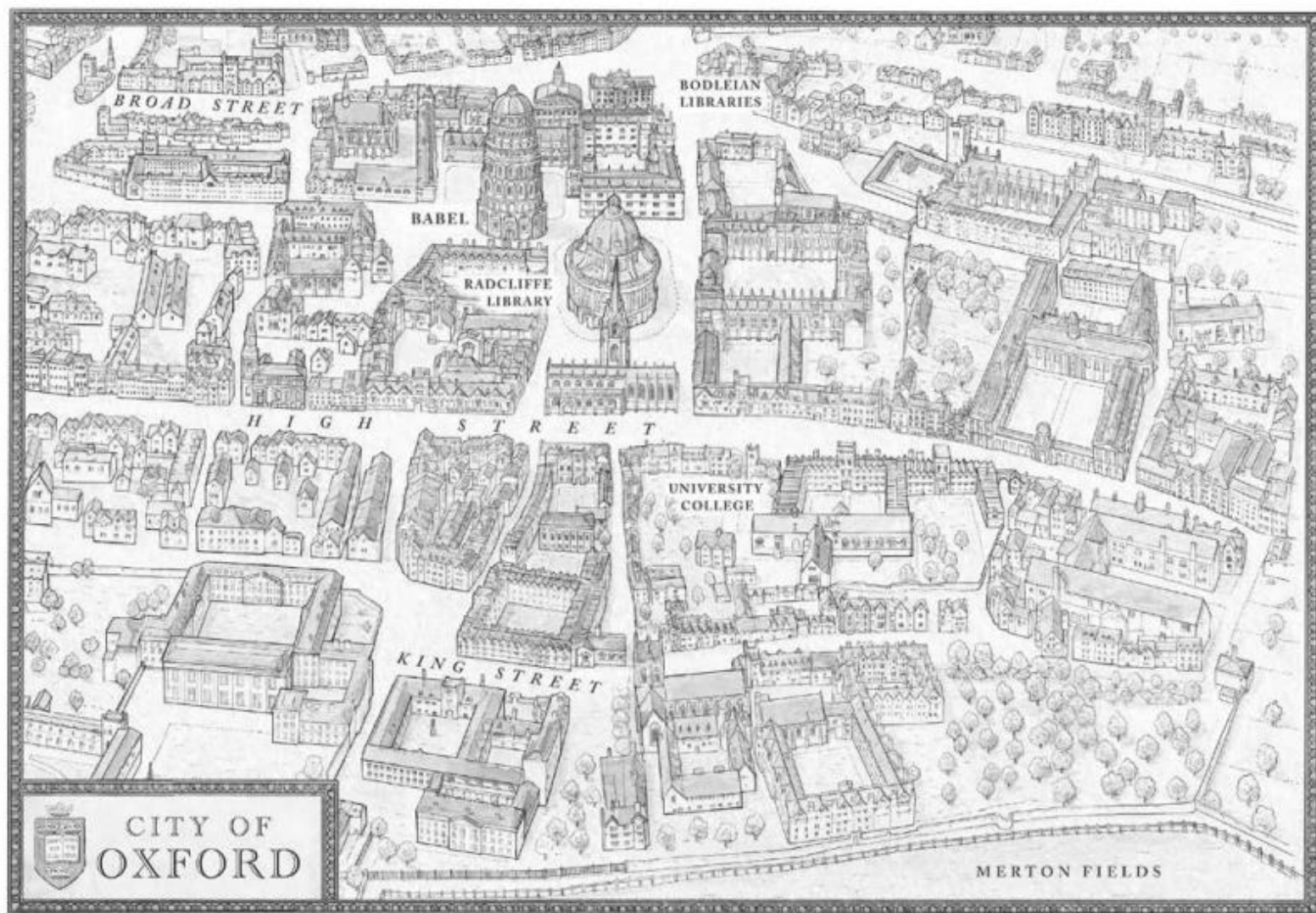


Image 1: Map of the (alternative) City of Oxford.

In Kuang, R. F. *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, 2022 (Harper Voyager).

Appendix B

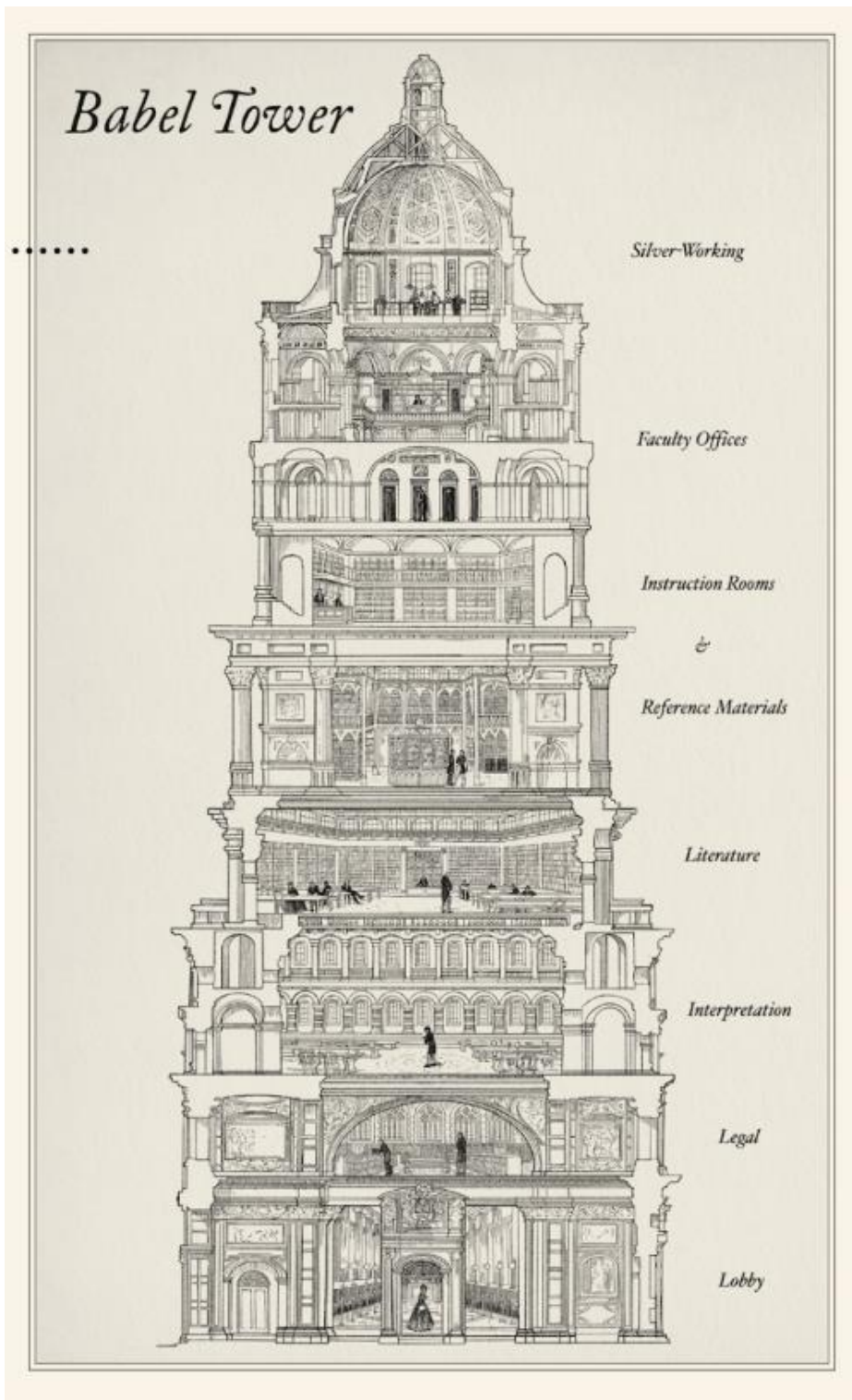


Image 2: Map of the tower of the Royal Institute of Translation, colloquially known as Babel, with the location of each department.

In Kuang, R. F. *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, 2022 (Harper Voyager).