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Uncovering an "Arcane" History: How R.F. Kuang Demystifies the Entanglement of Translation, Academia, and Colonialism

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Professor Greaves

Dark Academia

3 December 2023

Uncovering an “Arcane” History:

How R.F. Kuang Demystifies the Entanglement of Translation, Academia, and Colonialism

Introduction

The tagline of R.F. Kuang’s bestselling 2022 novel *Babel* (or *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution*) is: “an act of translation is always an act of betrayal.” Thanks to the work of countless translation scholars, we know what this tagline means in the literal sense. In order to translate from one language into another, there is an unavoidable loss of meaning in the process. Whether one chooses, as Walter Benjamin proposes, to preserve the feeling of the original text while adding syntactical or linguistic flourishes, or to do the opposite, as Vladimir Nabokov encourages, and translate in only the most literal word-for-word terms no matter how clumsy, there is always some matter of the original text that is inevitably lost. There is no such thing as an accurate one-to-one translation from any one language into another, and any translator is forced to choose in which way they will “betray” their source text.

However, Kuang adds another meaning to this tagline in her work with *Babel*. She sets her novel in a fantastical Victorian reimagining of Oxford that includes an invented translation institute by the name of Babel (going forward in this paper, “Babel,” without italics, refers to the institute, while “*Babel*” refers to the novel itself), and creates a world through which she can give

a concrete demonstration of the idea of “betrayal” when it comes to translation. Not only is she stressing the acknowledgement that all translation comes with a linguistic price, but she pushes this idea further by connecting language with a direct cost to people. In *Babel*, translation takes on a more sinister role in the greater scene of British colonialism: translation from the languages of colonized countries into English feeds directly and concretely into British industrialization and imperial might. In this sense, the “betrayal” of translation takes on dual meaning. When students selected by the Empire to be taken from their home countries and brought to Oxford engage in translation from their home language into English, they are directly contributing power to the British industrial and imperial projects. The British then use these translated words and the power they create to return to colonized lands and inflict greater suffering. Therefore, an act of translation becomes not only a betrayal of the language itself, but the people connected to that language. An act of translation is a direct aid to the British Empire.

Within *Babel*, Kuang sets up her own conceptualization of translation through her invention of “silver-working.” This construct not only lends the novel its fantastical element, it also allows translation to take on a physical power within the world of the novel. Robin Swift, our main character, and his cohort of Babel initiates are taught that silver-working is the fuel that allows Britain to both industrialize and colonize. Kuang obscures silver-working’s intricacies initially and instead reveals its inner workings over the course of the novel, making it difficult to form a clear and concise definition for what silver-working actually *is*. Kuang uses it as essentially a concretization of whatever unknowable meaning gets “lost in translation” when working between languages—the loss of meaning manifests itself as concrete power when written onto purified silver, and Britain in turn uses it to power its machinery, make its roads safer, build faster transportation, and of course reinforce its military, and therefore colonial,

might. Kuang utilizes silver-working to provide her readers with physical evidence of her own analysis of translation as a beneficiary to the British industrial and colonial efforts.

Throughout *Babel*, Robin and his fellow classmates, Ramiz (Ramy) Mirza, Victoire Desgraves, and Letitia (Letty) Price, are indoctrinated into Babel's faculty and convinced that their efforts of translation and silver-working are a universal good. However, Robin soon discovers that Babel is not the beneficiary it upholds itself to be. Robin encounters the Hermes Society, a secret counter-organization that aims to steal Babel's knowledge and distribute it to a larger audience in order to provide access to silver-working for everyone, not just those the British deem worthy or safe to share their technology with. This effort simultaneously hinders Britain's ability to technologically advance by robbing it of the knowledge needed to enhance its silver-working. Robin realizes that, with his continued contribution to the translation archive, he is betraying his homeland of China by enabling Britain to advance its military and colonial might, therefore expediting the subsequent British return to and crippling of Robin's country and people.

Kuang's emphasis on the "betrayal" of translation, set alongside the ominous implications of her invented silver-working, encapsulate not only the main tension in her own novel, but a tension within history and the development of the academy as we know it today. I argue that there is an inescapable triangulation between translation, the development of academia, and the rise and success of imperialism in the Western world. Using *Babel* as a lens through which to formulate this triangulation, I will not only examine history and translation theory, but also expand upon Kuang's situation of translation and the academy at the center of British imperial expansion. Finally, I will apply this *Babelian* lens to other works of Dark Academia, most notably Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, to demonstrate how readers can use the outline Kuang

provides to problematize the institution in works where even the author may not have intended to provide such a critique.

Translation and “Silver-Working”: Methodologies at Work

Kuang draws on several existing theories of translation to create her own conceptualization of translation that places Oxford, and Babel specifically, directly at the center of the colonial project. Therefore, understanding translation is a fundamental part not only of this paper, but of *Babel* itself. Thankfully, *Babel* is still, at its heart, a Dark Academic novel, and so Kuang allocates the work of this explanation to a professor—the reader learns about the fundamentals of translation along with the characters. When Kuang is first introducing her characters to the concept of translation, she calls on Professor Playfair to explain the mechanics of it. He lectures,

I will try to impress upon you the unique difficulty of translation. Consider how tricky it is merely to say the word *hello*. Hello seems so easy! *Bonjour. Ciao. Hello.* And on and on. But then say we are translating from Italian into English. In Italian, *ciao* can be used upon greeting or parting—it does not specify either, it simply marks etiquette at the point of contact... When we bring *ciao* into English—if we are translating a scene where the characters disperse, for example—we must impose that *ciao* has been said as goodbye. Sometimes this is obvious from context, but sometimes not—sometimes we must add new words in our translation. So already things are complicated, and we haven’t moved past hello. (104)

Here Kuang uses Professor Playfair to draw upon an archive of translation research and theory to illustrate the point that, in actuality, there is no such thing as a one-to-one translation of a text. Even a word so simple as “hello” provides endless contradictions depending on the language you

are translating from and the context in which the word is used. Predictably, this problem does not resolve itself when moving from a simple greeting to much more complex articulations of thought as well as syntax—it rather gets worse. The apparent impossibility of translation forces us to question: How can any translation be considered “good” or “correct” if there is no way to make it exact?

Translation theorists have attempted to answer this question in various ways throughout history, often in contradiction to each other. Walter Benjamin and Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, pose translation frameworks that directly oppose one another. Benjamin, in his essay “The Translator’s Task,” argues for the transmission of the feeling of an original text, declaring that “the relation between content and language in the original is entirely different from that in the translation” (79). Here he dismisses the idea that any translation can be perfect, and instead advocates for a new relation between “content and language” that still preserves the ideas of the original text but changes the language constructions in order to assist said ideas. He insists, “word-for-word translation completely thwarts the reproduction of the sense and threatens to lead directly to incomprehensibility” (81). The “reproduction of the sense” that Benjamin refers to is the reproduction of the feeling behind a piece—the emotions and ideas a literary work is aiming to convey to its audience. He cautions that any translation that attempts to favor the individual words themselves over the overarching meaning and focus of a piece runs the risk of making the translation “incomprehensible.” Benjamin’s theory of translation therefore seems to align at least in part with Professor Playfair’s initial assessment of the word “ciao”—he agrees that when the meaning of a word is not obvious from the context in which it is placed, “we must add new words in our translation” (Kuang 104). Benjamin’s methodology mirrors Professor Playfair’s assessment and stands firmly on the side of a transmission of feeling and idea across

language barriers, rather than an adherence to syntactical conventions and individual word accuracy.

In contrast, Vladimir Nabokov, in his essay “Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English,” argues for direct translation even at the risk of losing some of Benjamin’s precious “sense” of a piece. As Nabokov puts rather bluntly, “the clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase” (113). Nabokov is uninterested in the adaptation of texts to fit even syntactical properties of the new language—he is only concerned with the most literal translation possible. He writes, “the person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text” (119). This idea of Nabokov’s aligns more closely with something Professor Playfair articulates later in his explanation: he cautions that “translators do not so much deliver a message as they rewrite the original. And herein lies the difficulty—rewriting is still writing, and writing always reflects the author’s ideology and biases” (Kuang 106). Nabokov, in his push for a reproduction of “absolute exactitude,” appears to seek a remedy for the author bias that Kuang brings up through Professor Playfair. The idea that a text could become distorted in meaning and the audience would remain unaware is a frightening one. The translator ultimately holds an extreme amount of power in their hands, and Nabokov’s method of translation provides somewhat of a counterbalance to that power. If a translator is only allowed to create what is as close to a word-for-word translation as possible, the likelihood of personal interference in the message of the original text is smaller.

Kuang herself, through the work of *Babel*, seems to align with slightly more contemporary translation theorists in terms of methodology, landing solidly at an intersection between Benjamin and Nabokov’s theories. She endorses a method of translation more in line

with the likes of Philip E. Lewis, who writes in his essay “The Measure of Translation Effects” that “translation, when it occurs, has to move whatever meanings it captures from the original into a framework that tends to impose a different set of discursive relations and a different construction of reality” (223). Lewis argues for a transference of both meaning and structure, while acknowledging at the same time that such a transference is impossible. The nature of language construction means that no two languages function in the same way or possess the same construction; therefore, a perfect translation from any one language to another is unattainable. Lewis ultimately describes translation as “an activity of constant, inevitable compromise” (226). Lewis, like Kuang, takes a middle ground between Benjamin’s and Nabokov’s polarized methodologies, arguing instead that in translation one should simply aim to create the best interpretation possible, while recognizing that there is no scenario in which it can be perfect. Kuang seems to agree with Lewis’s more neutral stance, and even draws on Lewis’s “inevitable compromise” to influence her creation of the power of silver-working.

Kuang’s invention of silver-working draws upon various interpretations of translation theory to create her own conceptualization of translation, which can then be extended beyond mere theory to the realization of real-world impact. Silver-working drives *Babel* and, in its world, the British imperial project. Again, she calls on Professor Playfair, one of the leading scholars working at Oxford in silver-working, to initially explain the concept. He declares, “We capture what is lost in translation—for there is always something lost in translation—and the [silver] bar manifests it into being” (Kuang 158). Such manifestation comes about by engraving two words of similar meaning but from different languages on a silver bar and chanting the words aloud to induce a reaction. The reaction differs from bar to bar, as every translation loses something unique depending on the meaning of each word used. One example of a “match-pair,”

or a pairing of words to engrave onto the silver bars, that Kuang provides is the French-English “*parcelle-parcel*,” used by the Royal Mail postal service to lighten the weight of packages in order to allow for the transport of more packages by a given horse and carriage (470). She further explains,

Both French and English had once used *parcel* to refer to pieces of land that made up an estate, but when it evolved to imply an item of business in both, it retained its connotation of small fragmentariness in French, whereas in English it simply meant a package. Fixing this bar to the postal carriage made the parcels seem a fraction of their true weight. (470)

In other words, the division into smaller parts that the French definition still carries but the English definition lacks is what the translators “capture,” then allowing the silver bar to “manifest into being” the diminishment of, in this case, the weight of each package. There are countless other applications for silver-working throughout the British Empire, some frivolous, some undeniably useful, but all inextricably integrated into the bones of society at the point our novel takes place. The power created by silver-working is essential to the function of British society in *Babel*, and without it, Britain would lose its exceptionalism.

Despite the already complex nature of her silver-working invention, Kuang complicates it further and emphasizes the vitality of Robin and his cohort to the silver-working project. As Professor Playfair goes on to explain, “Words have no meaning unless there is someone present who can understand them. And it can’t be a shallow level of understanding... you need to be able to think in a language—to live and breathe it, not just recognise it as a smattering of letters on a page” (Kuang 159). Kuang emphasizes the importance of “thinking, living, and breathing” a language within both the academic study and real-life application of silver-working, repeating those three words time and time again. The repetition of these words creates almost a slogan that

repeats itself in various contortions throughout the text, reminding the characters, as well as the readers, of the extreme academic upkeep each character must perform in order to even be able to engage on a base level with their studies. Robin and his cohort are not only expected to be able to create new match-pairs, they also must ensure their continued fluency in at least two languages, ideally more, to engage with silver-working in the first place. The incantation aspect of silver-working, what actually generates the power of these silver bars, is dependent on a present party who is able to “think, live, and breathe” both the initial language and the language into which translation is occurring. The special skill of being raised “thinking, living, and breathing” another language is something inexpressibly valuable to the continued success of silver-working.

Kuang intentionally mystifies the concept of silver-working so that her audience can continue to discover its intricacies along with the characters, but it is an essential aspect of not only the learning taking place in *Babel*, but the structure of its fantastical society. In the larger British society, silver-working provides structural integrity for buildings, speed for transportation, stability for steam-powered engines, and uncountable other purposes. And Babel is the only provider of such silver-work. As Griffin Lovell, a chief member of the Hermes Society, states, “London sits at the centre of a vast empire that won’t stop growing. The single most important enabler of this growth is Babel” (Kuang 99). Kuang’s emphasis of Babel as the “most important enabler” of Britain’s growth hammers home the significance of not only the silver-working industry, but also the need for the previously mentioned translators who can “think, live, and breathe” in non-English languages. The Babel students, many of whom are native speakers of such languages, are understood immediately to be a commodity within both the institute itself and society at large—as people who can “think, live, and breathe” languages outside of English, they are invaluable to the rapidly industrializing English economy, as well as

the developing colonial project. Without Babel and the silver bars it provides, Britain's factory production would slow, its transportation would grind to a halt, its weaponry would fail, and the very fabric holding its society together would fall apart. Through her fantastical construction of silver-working, Kuang manages to perfectly situate the academy and the use of translation at the center of the developing British Empire.

Epistemological Violence: Translation as Destruction of Knowledge and Identity

In Kuang's universe, British imperialism would be impossible without the work of academic scholars. The scholars of Babel are indispensable to the British industrial and colonial efforts through their study of and contribution to the archives of translation and silver-working. Griffin describes this phenomenon to Robin early on in the novel, as previously mentioned. His phrase, "a vast empire that won't stop growing," of course describes the British Empire, and he establishes an inextricable link between its growth and the work Robin and his fellow scholars do at Babel, namely, silver-working (Kuang 99). Griffin further explains, "'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'" (Kuang 99). Griffin's critique emphasizes silver-working as a tool to which the British have access, but no one else does. The knowledge collection that Griffin refers to as "foreign languages and foreign talents," or the colonized bodies Britain captures and manipulates into working for their translation institution, puts the British Academy steps ahead of other nations, and by extension allows for Britain to become a colonial force.

Silver-working would not be such a boon to the British Empire if it were accessible to everyone—part of the success of silver as a means of power is that access to it is restricted.

Britain, by virtue of having the most advanced silver-working technology and knowledge in the world, has an effective monopoly over enchanted silver, which allows them to hoard the silver for themselves and sell it at exorbitant prices to others who desire it. As Professor Playfair jokes, ““We hold the secrets, and we can set whatever terms we like”” (Kuang 160). Britain is able to control who gets access to their silver-work, and how much access they get. Silver-work, as it functions in *Babel*, is a concretization of the knowledge the British keep walled up in their prestigious and exclusive libraries—after all, you can only access the translation archive if you are enrolled in Babel’s faculty, a position which, in itself, is nearly impossible to attain. Robin is one of four students admitted in his year, and the classes are never larger than that. Therefore, not only is Britain restricting access to the actual power of silver-working, but they also keep secret the very knowledge that allows them to develop such a power. At all levels, access to the power of the British Empire is cut off from the common person and the foreigner.

Arguably the most formidable weapon in Britain’s power within *Babel* is their collection and maintenance of knowledge. Babel, as part of its work towards knowledge collection, has a series of books scholars refer to as “The Grammaticas”—essentially an archive of every language they deem worthy enough to require translation, and for which they therefore need some sort of translation guide. Anthony Ribben, an upperclassman at Babel, informs the new students that ““The Grammaticas are better protected than the Princess Victoria”” (Kuang 78). Anthony’s passing comment, almost framed as a joke, serves to demonstrate the incredibly high value Britain places on their translation tomes—they are more important than the life of their royal family. A mere few pages later, Professor Playfair expresses a similar idea, explaining that ““Babel sees more robbery attempts than all of the banks in London combined”” (Kuang 83). Professor Playfair indicates that the knowledge kept at Babel is not only recognized as important

by those working there, but by outsiders as well. The value of Babel's work is universally recognized and envied, demonstrated by the fact that people attempt to steal it. Both Anthony and Professor Playfair are emphasizing the desirability and importance of the work they do at Babel, and by extension the knowledge they collect. This knowledge is positioned as more vital than both money and the life of the royal family of England, illuminating the importance the Empire, and its enemies, recognize in it.

The inaccessibility of Babel's archive adds to the danger it poses to non-English, and particularly non-Western, entities and nations. To help understand this danger, Kuang teaches us to not only recognize the triangulation of knowledge, power, and empire, but also question how it is working to reinforce dominant ideologies. I return to Professor Playfair's quote in which he cautions that "rewriting is still writing, and writing always reflects the author's ideology and biases" (Kuang 106). This becomes an incredibly dangerous reality in a colonized world, particularly when dealing with texts translated from colonized languages into English. When the voices in power, in this case the scholars, are so deeply used to incredibly racist rhetoric surrounding colonized people, their lands, and their languages, those ideas manifest in the work they do. So, if "writing always reflects the author's ideology and biases," when a scholar translates from a colonized language into English, it is inevitable that such racism will appear in the treatment of the translation.

The emergence of racist ideology is not just an occurrence in the translation itself—doubly as troubling are the ways in which certain languages are deemed worthy of translation, while others are dismissed from the offset. This has its roots in the colonial project; Robin's Mandarin and Ramy's Urdu, Arabic, and Persian are prioritized as essential languages because of Britain's colonial investments in China and India. The decision of which languages should be

prioritized in translation is also very clearly informed by racist logic. In a footnote, Kuang references the real-life figure Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt, a German philosopher and linguist, who wrote in 1836 that (in Kuang's paraphrase) "a culture's language is deeply tied to the mental capacities and characteristics of those who speak it, which explains why Latin and Greek are better suited for sophisticated intellectual reasoning than, say, Arabic" (Kuang 156). Stating that Latin and Greek are "better suited" for academic purposes than a language like Arabic reinforces the idea that European peoples are inherently more advanced and sophisticated than non-Europeans, and non-European people therefore do not merit even academic consideration. The only reason their languages might be studied is, as with both China and India, to strengthen the British foothold in its colonies. This is a deeply racist practice, clearly inspired by colonial ideology at the time, and showcases how racism fed back into the work of the academy, an institution self-praised for its removal from the "real world."

Translation theory is riddled with this kind of racist thought, and Benjamin is certainly no exception. As discussed, he believes that a translation is at its best when it focuses on the relaying of "sense" within a piece, rather than focusing on word-for-word translation (81). While Benjamin's overall argument for the practice of translation does have its merits, and has undoubtedly shaped translation as a field, he still does not escape the trappings of the problematic ideologies of his time. I would therefore like to trouble some of the language that he uses within other parts of his essay.

The racism present in translation studies as a whole is undeniably evident within Benjamin's work. When determining the "translatability" of texts, Benjamin declares, "the less value and dignity the original's language has... the less is to be gained from it for translation" (82-83). Benjamin's wording, while not as blatant, aligns with von Humboldt's ideas of

sophistication in certain peoples. Benjamin's use of "value and dignity" as language descriptors is highly reminiscent of von Humbolt's declaration that Latin and Greek are "better suited for sophisticated intellectual reasoning" (Kuang 156). Both of these instances very clearly utilize what we now understand to be deeply problematic language. The idea that one language might have less "value" or "dignity" than another undoubtably comes from, if not a Eurocentric standpoint, then at the very least an academically elitist one (which has ties to Eurocentrism). As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a post-colonial translation theorist, writes, "there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket" (320). Both von Humboldt's and Benjamin's word choice demonstrates this "old colonial attitude," as they use incredibly charged language surrounding foreign countries, particularly colonized countries, where the people were described as "simple," "savage," or "lazy," among other much more offensive terms.

Kuang calls attention to these racist assumptions that von Humboldt and Benjamin make through her character of Victoire. Victoire is of Haitian descent, and in her time at Oxford aspires to contribute to the translation of Haitian Creole. When she voices her desires to her professorial advisor, she learns that the addition of Haitian Creole to Babel's translation archive is something he is "not wholly opposed to despite thinking it's a degenerate language" (Kuang 191). The word "degenerate" indicates a disdain on the part of this white, English faculty member for any language that comes from a society or a people he deems "lesser" than the British, or more broadly, the Europeans. Victoire's advisor's word choice recalls Benjamin's requirements for the translatability of a text; it is not so far of a jump in logic to assume that a language deemed without "value" or "dignity" could also be considered "degenerate." Benjamin's work, while giving a useful overall framework for a translation method, does play into the structures of

knowledge formation endemic to Empire, and ultimately uses harmful wording that lends itself to the exclusion of languages and people from spaces of translation if they are too foreign to recognize.

Kuang's acknowledgement of the racism present in the field of translation aligns her with post-colonial theorists, particularly in her development not only of silver-working as a translation theory, but also in her situating of translation as an essential part of colonialism. Spivak writes in her essay "The Politics of Translation" that "in the old days, it was most important for a colonial or post-colonial student of English to be as 'indistinguishable' as possible from the native speaker of English" (319). The "old days" that Spivak refers to, of course, align perfectly with the Victorian setting of *Babel*. Spivak's assessment forces the reader to reconcile with the fact that colonized bodies were pressured to essentially "translate" themselves into an English-adjacent context in order to be taken seriously as students or scholars. This aligns with an observation Gauri Viswanathan, director of the South Asia Institute at Columbia University, makes in her book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. She declares, "no serious account of [colonial] growth and development can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England" (Viswanathan 2). Both Spivak and Viswanathan set up an idea of authenticity as related to some kind of English-ness, whether it be academic authenticity in the case of Spivak, or, as Viswanathan points out, mere civility and acceptance into British society.

Kuang certainly does not shy away from acknowledging Viswanathan's idea of the "imperial mission" in her (admittedly fictional) "account of [colonial] growth and development" (Viswanathan 2). Kuang's agenda on this matter is particularly apparent through the introduction of Robin into the narrative, as well as into British society at large. The first line of *Babel* dictates,

“By the time Professor Richard Lovell found his way through Canton’s narrow alleys to the faded address in his diary, the boy was the only one in the house left alive” (Kuang 3). The novel starts with the intrusion of British power into Canton in the form of Professor Lovell, a scholar at Babel and Robin’s future guardian. Professor Lovell is the first character introduced in the narrative, already claiming British dominance within just the first sentence. Additionally, we see Robin referred to as nothing more than “the boy,” indicating his invisibility and insignificance as he has not yet been colonized or anglicized. Robin is referred to as merely “the boy” or with simple pronouns until pages later, when Professor Lovell forces him to select an English-friendly name. Professor Lovell declares, “It occurs to me you need a name,” to which Robin, still referred to as “the boy,” responds, “I have a name... It’s—” (Kuang 11). Before he can utter his true Chinese name, Professor Lovell interrupts, saying “No, that won’t do. No Englishman can pronounce that” (11). Robin’s Chinese name is never once given in the entire novel, effectively erasing his ties to his homeland, and allowing the reader to view him as nothing other than an ultimately English body.

When Robin does choose an English name for himself, his selection process clearly reflects Viswanathan’s emphasis on the education of colonized subjects in the “literature and thought of England”—Robin chooses his name directly from one of the few works of English literature he was familiar with growing up. He recalls that his English tutor, when he turned four years old, “insisted he adopt a name by which Englishmen could take him seriously,” and he had “chosen something at random from a children’s rhyming book” (Kuang 11). The name he chose was, of course, Robin. His selection of this name from an English “children’s rhyming book” is a direct representation of Viswanathan’s critique—Robin is quite literally deriving his “civilized” self from English literature.

Robin's national identity is further complicated when asked to select a last name, a matter of marked distress for him. When Professor Lovell initially prompts him to select a surname, he reflects, "Family names were not things to be dropped and replaced at whim... they marked lineage; they marked belonging" (Kuang 11). In response to Robin's hesitation, Professor Lovell declares, "The English reinvent their names all the time" (Kuang 11-12). Robin's Chinese upbringing teaches him that surnames, or "family names," are something precious to be held onto and passed down through the ages. Professor Lovell's assertion that "the English reinvent their names all the time" serves as another reminder of the cultural difference Robin must cross to enter British society, and the forced disappearing of Robin's Chinese values as he makes that transition. The erasure of Robin's Chinese self recalls Spivak's language of "colonial... student[s] of English [being] as 'indistinguishable' as possible from the native speaker of English," as Robin must let go of all possible indicators of his Chinese origin, even down to his name, to gain acceptance into English society.

Robin's actual selection of his last name returns to Viswanathan's reference to civilizing colonized bodies through the use of English literature. After Professor Lovell makes it clear that, despite his reservations, Robin will have to select a new surname, Robin's eyes "land[] on a familiar volume on the shelf above Professor Lovell's head—*Gulliver's Travels*" (Kuang 12). Once he remembers this novel, he decides on the last name Swift, as it feels recognizable to him. From that point forward, the narration grants Robin the status of personhood, either referring to him as "Robin" or "Robin Swift" for the remainder of *Babel*. Robin's naming is the ultimate realization of Viswanathan's analysis of the forms British imperialism took—Robin is only able to be "civilized" through the direct use of English literature, whether that be a children's book or the more canonical *Gulliver's Travels*. What enables him to become, in Spivak's words,

“‘indistinguishable’... from the native speaker of English” (319), is Viswanathan’s expressed “imperial mission of... civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England” (2). Kuang clearly has these theorists in mind from the very beginning of her novel, and incorporates their post-colonial frameworks into the very narration of *Babel* immediately.

Robin’s forced translation of himself into British terms Europeanizes him and is the first step of many to attempt to remove his Chinese identity. If, as Spivak asserts earlier in her essay, language is “one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves,” Robin is then no longer allowed the familiarity of understanding himself within his native language of Cantonese (312). Instead, he must create a new conception of himself as English, constrained by the boundaries of the English language. His self-hood becomes fully derived from English, demonstrating that even the very way he exists has been anglicized. Robin’s knowledge is essential to Babel’s growth as well as Britain’s, but neither will accept him until he meets them on their terms. He must become “civilized,” as Viswanathan says, or “‘indistinguishable’” from native British citizens, in Spivak’s words. Without the construction of the academic discipline of English as a literary canon, this “civilizing” of identities such as Robin’s would be impossible. The expanding academy contributed to the colonization of bodies and personhood and was therefore essential to and inextricably linked to British imperialism. Kuang expertly draws on pre-established theory to create her own concrete example, through Robin, of the impact of academic development on colonialism and British Empire building.

Using Kuang as an Analytical Framework within Dark Academia

Part of the brilliance of *Babel* lies in its creation of a new framework through which to analyze the obscured corruption at the heart of the institutions we hold most dear, which is then

exportable to other texts. Through her work in *Babel*, Kuang highlights the stories that have been systematically erased; *Babel*'s subtitle is, after all, *An Arcane History*. The definition of arcane, according to (ironically) the Oxford English Dictionary, is, "hidden, concealed, secret" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This definition indicates Kuang's concern with telling the stories that have been hidden by dominant narratives, forcing the truth into the light. Kuang urges readers to look beyond what authority is telling you and find the agenda behind the indoctrination. Just as Robin does in discovering *Babel*'s inherent corruption, we must interrogate these systems that we have been told to put our faith in for so long and see where our loyalties truly lie.

However, using the third definition of "arcane" as "secret," a Dark Academic scholar may notice another connection that the subtitle of this novel invokes. Describing *Babel* as an "*Arcane History*" seems to be a direct callback to the novel widely viewed to be the founder of Dark Academia as a genre: Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Stowell and Therieau par. 3). This connection seems too obvious to not be deliberate. Kuang is relating her own Dark Academic novel very intentionally to the first Dark Academic novel, perhaps alluding to an effort on her part to create a new brand of Dark Academia. Kuang's Dark Academia, while still romanticizing the institutions we pledge our lives to, also critiques those very institutions and illuminates the ways in which they are actively harming us and the world around us even as we devote ourselves entirely to them.

Kuang's Dark Academia can not only be seen as the potential birth of a new subgenre in which we are more critical of the academy, but also provides a framework to look back on works such as *The Secret History* and analyze them in a new way. We can draw parallels between Richard and Robin, two main characters who, while devoting themselves to and falling in love with their respective academic institutions, are being exploited by those very institutions—Robin

through his labor towards a translation archive that is ultimately used to abuse his homeland and people, and Richard through his financially crippling payments of tuition that seem to provide him with little to no concrete assistance once at the university. Both are supposedly “rescued” by their institutions, Richard from his poor, monotonous life in Plano, California, and Robin from a life of poverty and disease in Canton, China. The key difference between these two characters is that Robin eventually realizes his exploitation and turns so far against his institution that he quite literally tears it down, while Richard is so helplessly devoted to the academy that he instead builds it up, pursuing a career in professorship. Kuang provides us with the framework to notice these discrepancies and allows us to critique Hampden College in ways that even Donna Tartt herself did not perhaps anticipate.

Kuang’s examination of how the institution of Babel exploits Robin and his cohort for their academic labor allows us to look at *The Secret History* in a similar light. Richard expresses his financial troubles very early on in the novel, explaining that, when applying to Hampden College, the amount he would have to pay after receiving financial aid was still “more than [his] father said he could afford and he would not pay it” (Tartt 12). For such a steep price, one might expect the institution to be able to provide for Richard. However, we soon find that Hampden is in fact taking the money from Richard without providing him the support he needs in return. When approaching his winter break, Richard is forced to find off-campus housing due to the fact that, on campus, “the buildings were old and expensive to heat,” and therefore, “the school was closed during January and February” (Tartt 104). Richard does not seem to consider the great sum of money he is paying to Hampden college and how that could be used for heating the buildings and keeping the campus open, rather than whatever unacknowledged purpose it currently serves. Instead, Richard willingly goes in search of other accommodations, ultimately

finding a room to stay during the winter months in which “there was a large hole in the roof” (Tartt 113), and where he experienced a “cold... like nothing [he’d] known before or since” (Tartt 115). Richard’s experience ultimately lands him in the hospital and gives him a lifelong illness. Richard, unlike Robin, is unable to conflate the (in his case, physical) harm that he experiences with the institution’s exploitation of its students and misuse of the resources those students provide. While *Babel* takes on the lens of a colonial critique rather than a class critique to exemplify institutional corruption, we can use the guidelines Kuang gives us in *Babel* to identify similar patterns in *The Secret History*.

The Secret History’s more obvious class critique seems a far cry from the scathing colonial commentary Kuang provides in *Babel*—yet another application of her *Babelian* framework shows that echoes of colonialism underly Tartt’s novel in ways that the text, as a purveyor of the dominant American narrative, renders invisible. Lisa Lowe, a Professor of American Studies at Yale University, uncovers in her book *The Intimacies of Four Continents* the “often obscured connections between the emergence of European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic African slave trade, and the East Indies and China trades in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (1). As Lowe deftly demonstrates, European liberalism, and subsequently the narratives dominating our current society, were created within the environment of British imperialism. As the development of European liberalism coincided with the colonization of the Americas, it follows that the ideologies forming in Europe were foundational to the construction of the United States and its institutions. The “obscuring” of these connections that Lowe recognizes is crucial to understanding the significance of the framework Kuang provides. Kuang’s work in *Babel* exposes these connections and assists readers in uncovering them in other places—namely, *The Secret History*.

While interpretations of *The Secret History* expose clear issues within the institution, such as its aforementioned mistreatment of Richard due to his class, it is just as important to examine what is left unsaid. The lack of any kind of acknowledgement of race or racism is a notable omission once looked at through a *Babelian* lens. First of all, it cannot go unrecognized that, despite the absence of race from the diegesis, the characters' race is still indispensable within the construction of *The Secret History*. All of the characters in Tartt's novel are white, and the fact that so many read it as a race-less novel speaks to a larger cultural phenomenon in which whiteness exists as a default unmarked racial category. Kuang teaches us to question this dominant narrative and read between the lines to uncover this hidden racial subtext.

Because Kuang centers race and colonialism so heavily in her own novel, the exclusion of any such discussion from *The Secret History* becomes immediately suspicious. Kuang, as outlined throughout this paper, demonstrates how the development of academy is inextricably linked to colonialism through the exploitation of Robin and his cohort as racially minoritized bodies for their labor and knowledge. In America, the setting of *The Secret History*, this link which Kuang helps us to recognize also invokes the history of Native American genocide and removal from their native lands, as well as African enslavement and labor. American institutions have been historically built on stolen land, by the hands of enslaved people. Therefore, American institutions are haunted by the blood of these racialized minorities who were exploited and killed and are now having their history erased from the dominant narrative. Marc Parry, writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, discusses how "slaves built the first buildings on [the University of Mississippi's] Oxford campus," and reveals that "more than 95 percent of its first students either owned slaves or came from slaveholding families" (par. 4). Parry's article reasserts how American institutions were, quite literally, built on the backs of enslaved people, a history

schools like Tartt's Hampden College do their best to ignore. The tacit acceptance of the entwined history of slavery, Native American genocide, and American institutional development in Tartt's novel places *The Secret History* within this dominant narrative that maintains the obscurity of these issues that Lowe works to unmask.

The continued suppression of this side of American history is further enabled by Tartt's decision to have her characters study ancient Greek. *The Secret History* is undeniably a novel about translation, but the translation involved serves a very different purpose than *Babel*'s. The choice to study ancient Greek recalls Kuang's summary of von Humboldt's argument, in which he claimed that "Latin and Greek are better suited for sophisticated intellectual reasoning than, say, Arabic" (Kuang 156). The fact that these white characters in their traditional American institution choose to study ancient Greek reinforces the hierarchy in which some languages are valued more than others. The only alternate languages Richard is given as a stand-in for ancient Greek are French, German, Italian, and Spanish, further concretizing the idea that only European languages are worth studying for academic purposes (Tartt 14). Not only does this emphasize the perceived academic value of European languages as opposed to others, it also romanticizes and prioritizes a long-dead language while ignoring the colonialist erasure of dying languages and dialects, much like Victoire's Haitian Creole, that are devalued in academia. Kuang's demonstration of the sinister prioritization of certain languages over others once again allows readers to uncover this pattern in *The Secret History*, where it remains unquestioned. The framework Kuang develops throughout *Babel* opens readers' eyes to the concealed truths at the center of not only our society, but also the private worlds of other novels.

Conclusion

R.F. Kuang's use of "arcane" to describe the history she presents in her 2022 novel *Babel* provides us with a rather chilling insight: if not for her work, the history of colonial exploitation of minoritized bodies at the center of the development of academic archives and institutions would remain obscured. Through the framework she expertly molds in her novel, she reveals the inextricable ties of the British imperial project to the development of "Western" civilization, particularly its prized academic institutions. This framework is proven beneficial when exported to other works of Dark Academia, as it helps readers uncover the corruption within other narratives which so often refuse to acknowledge it themselves.

However, Kuang complicates this understanding of the academic institution as birthed from colonialism by insisting on a third player in this configuration: translation. Through her own concretized translation theory of silver-working, Kuang demonstrates that the building of a translation archive within British academia directly bolstered Britain's ability to go forth and colonize. She uses Robin's internal conflict throughout the novel to demonstrate the inherent treachery in his work in translation at Babel, as he slowly realizes that his seemingly separate academic research is allowing Britain to return to his home country of China and wreak even more devastation on his people. Translation, through silver-working, takes on a much more sinister role than the mere conveyance of meaning across language—it becomes a vehicle of destruction. Robin finds that he has been brought to Babel to contribute to that very destruction through his engagement in what he initially thinks to be harmless research and academic experimentation. The triangulation between translation, the development of the academy, and the expanding British Empire is inescapable, and so, as *Babel* inquires, "how can we conclude, except by acknowledging that an act of translation is then necessarily always an act of betrayal?" (153).

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