Violence and Betrayal: Translation as a Window into Understanding Colonialism in R. F. Kuang's *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence*

Cătălina-Diana Teliban*

DOI 10.56177/jhss.1.16.2025.art.1

Abstract:
In this article I explore the ways in which the concept of *translation* is utilized throughout R. F. Kuang's novel *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence*, a work of speculative fiction which explores the colonial relations between Britain and China in the 19th century, in order to facilitate the understanding of colonialism and its penchant for destruction. Specifically, I use the methodology of critical race theory and critical race narratology in order to prove that the novel belongs to the category of ethnic counterstorytelling, and then move on to demonstrate how the concept of translation is employed as a literary device that permits historical recentering through fantasy, while also, on a metaphorical level, mirroring the perspectives on colonialism, intracultural trust and community belonging that the characters hold. In these ways, I argue that translation becomes a window into exploring the themes proposed by the novel, both internally, through the main character, and extrinsically, through the world built on its foundations as a magical system, while also exploring the consequences that these traumatic positions have on the main character's psyche.

Keywords: counterstorytelling, critical race narratology, Asian American literature, recent literature, colonialism

An act of translation is "always an act of betrayal", proclaims Rebecca F. Kuang's 2022 novel *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence*, a work of speculative fiction which reimagines the era of Britain's semi-colonialism in China by means of a fantastical setting that is guided, at its core, by the work of translation. The story unfolds through the third person narration, with the perspective oriented around the main character, Robin Swift, whose inner turmoil becomes the center focus of the narrative as he comes to understand the devastating effects that Britain, with the help of his very own work of translation at Oxford, is unleashing upon Canton, his home country from where he has been taken as a very young child. Translation is used in multiple ways throughout the novel, both as the core element of the magical system that Kuang has

* PhD Candidate, Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest, catalina.teliban@s.unibuc.ro

built, where translation is turned into the very means for the attempted colonial rule and for the revolution against it, but also as a philosophical theme on which the characters often reflect as the events unfold. A second layer of complexity is added to the story through the main character's unique position, in that he is an orphan forced into displacement and migration by his adopter, who perceives him to be in a highly privileged position and actively denies his trauma and perpetuates the abuse by engaging in manipulative behaviors rooted in racism. These experiences all have substantial consequences on the formation of his identity and sense of self as he navigates the events that unfold, and become important layers in the deconstruction of colonialism and its penchant for destruction.

Within this context, I argue that the concept of translation becomes a literary device used as a means to explore the processes of colonialism, both internally, through the main character, and extrinsically, in the world created by the author. Firstly, because translation represents the core of the fantasy element of the novel, it becomes the very catalyst that allows for the setting to exist and for the ethnic characters to be situated at the center of the action. Thus, I argue that the concept of translation utilized as a literary device permits the story to unfold through the framework of historical recentering and the use of an alternative timeline, in order to reimagine and dissect history, thus subscribing the novel to the tradition of counterstorytelling. Secondly, I argue that the reflections on the concept of translation that appear throughout the novel serve to mirror the main character's process of articulating his relationship with his homeland from his position of an orphan forcefully displaced from his birth country, thus turning the concept of translation into a metaphor for understanding Britain's attempted colonial rule in China and its devastating effects on both individuals and the national collective. Concretely, the philosophical perspectives about the act of translation help to unveil the complicated liminal position that the main character is situated within, and facilitate the understanding of his immense amounts of guilt and trauma that arise therein, while the magical system that functions through the work of translation gives way for that position to exist in itself, in order for it to be explored conceptually and philosophically. As such, the concept of translation becomes a window into understanding the processes related to colonialism that stand at the heart of the novel both extrinsically, as well as internally through the main character, and engaging with this aspect of the novel facilitates a much more thorough understanding of its themes.

To explore my argument, I utilize the methodology of critical race theory as seen in Delgado and Stefancic (2023), as well as the sub-branch of critical race narratology as seen in von Mossner et. al (2022),

frameworks which I employ in order to explain and understand the construction of the story and its particularities as a piece of ethnic literature. I am also in conversation with recent works from the area of refugee studies, as well as works on migration, colonialism, and orphanhood, in order to properly encompass the complexity of the situation portrayed. In these ways, I aim to not only show how translation functions as a literary device for conveying and exploring these themes, but also to investigate the traumatic aspects of the themes presented in the novel in regards to the effects of colonialism and forcefully taking part in it.

Translation as the Core of Historical Recentering

Through utilizing the fantasy lens for reimagining the relations between imperialist Britain and China in the years prior to what is known to history as the First Opium War, I argue that Kuang's novel subscribes to what has been termed as counterstorytelling in the field of critical race theory. Counterstorytelling has been described as a tool used by ethnic authors in order to "challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs" that have become the stereotypical norm for viewing non-white people, and which actively lead to marginalization and a fundamental misunderstanding of their histories and experiences (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023: 51). Formed around the belief that "attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023: 51), counterstorytelling focuses the narrative on ethnic people and their lived experiences, in order to bridge the gap of understanding that exists between ethnic minorities and the white majority, and through that, rectify the misunderstanding of the histories of ethnic people. Common features of such narratives include "reimagining narrative time, space, and history in ways that challenge or run counter to established literary and cultural conventions", often achieved by means of "alternative temporalities and spatial renegotiations" (von Mossner, 2022: 2). These tools are used in order to deconstruct the complex histories of people of differing ethnic origins through the act of historical recentering, by allowing the central consciousness of the story to be that of the ethnic minorities, often by creating fictional geographies and timelines that could not have existed during real history (von Mossner, 2022: 3). In these ways, literary works can dissect history and comment on it, by affording a special focus to the experiences of ethnic minorities.

In Kuang's novel, these traits arise by function of the fantasy element of the text, which becomes central for the exploration of the complex colonial relations between Britain and China in the 19th century.

The relations between these two countries during this particular point in history have been called by historians "semi-colonialism", a term which stresses "the mutual constitutiveness, reciprocity and interdependence between British colonialists and Chinese society" (Yang, 2019: 7), defining a very unique and particular iteration of colonialism. The fantasy element of the novel allows the author to reposition the characters and afford more liberties to the ethnic characters, by placing them at the forefront of the action in order to explore these particularities and provide a social commentary on them and their devastating effects. As I have previously mentioned, the magical system of the novel relies entirely on translation; this is achieved through what is called "silver-work", a form of magic which uses silver bars inscribed with translation pairs which capture the meaning of what is lost in translation, in order to create a magical effect. These silver bars are created by scholars at the Oxford Translation Institute, Babel, and they are used in order to power every aspect of Britain, from its economy (through facilitating agriculture and industrial production and work) to its military prowess, making the country essentially indestructible, albeit dependent on its access to silver. Babel seeks to recruit native speakers of languages less spoken in Britain, particularly languages from Asia, as match pairs between other languages, such as English and Latin or English and French are becoming less powerful because of the languages being too closely interconnected with English through neologisms, history and language formation. As such, Babel scholars seek to recruit people of various ethnic descents, in order to use their native languages for the gains of the British empire, which they do mainly by bringing orphans from colonized countries to the Babel institute, where they construct an image of privilege and purpose in order to entrap them into working for the benefit of Britain.

Within this context, translation represents not only the core of the magical system of the novel, but also the backbone of Britain's entire existence and the very object of colonization around which the novel revolves, as silver bars are only used for empowering Britain more and more, and never for the benefit of the countries whose languages they profit off of and who have more need of aid. In these ways, translation allows for the circumstances to be created, and becomes the foundation for the exploration of history and historical recentering, as the device around which the alternative timeline is created, thus permitting the story to unfold and opening up the dialogue on the particularities of Britain's semi-colonialism in China, which are then evidenced and commented on through the work that foreign scholars, such as Robin, the main character, do for Britain. In these ways, the novel is a clear example of counterstorytelling, as it aims to deconstruct history and provide a

commentary on it, while also imagining an alternative timeline where the events could have been prevented.

Self-Translation, Liminality, and Assimilation

Orphaned as a very young child after having to witness his mother slowly die of cholera, the main character is conveniently "rescued" by a Babel scholar, Professor Lovell, who uses a silver bar to heal him of the disease and then takes him along without any explanation. Troy et. al. argue that literary orphans are mobilized in order to "explore a time of change, social upheaval, and crises in national identity" (2014: 2), which is seen in the novel in various ways: firstly, through the fact that Robin becoming an orphan is the catalyst which sets in motion a chain of events that will end with an important revolution against colonization, but also through the importance that other orphans carry in the resistance and the revolution, since, as I have mentioned, orphans of colonized countries represent the main way through which Babel scholars attain their objectives. As Troy et. al. argue, "contemporary writers who are interested in expanding the canon to incorporate cultural difference use the orphan figure to explore alternatives to US hegemony" (2014: 3), reflected in Kuang's novel through the ways in which orphans aid in the quest of exploring the processes of colonialism, and ultimately rebelling against the imperialist hegemony of Britain.

After evaluating his skills in languages, Professor Lovell proposes a dubious "adoption", which entails the child's relocation to the professor's English estate, where he will live comfortably so long as he "appl[ies himself] diligently to [his] studies" (Kuang, 2022: 20). The proposition is a veiled and manipulative threat, as the professor does not hesitate to use the child's precarious position as an orphan in order to force him to agree, and his position as a ward and not an adopted child is made clear not only through the professor's detached and cold attitude, but also by being forced to sign a document accepting the terms of the professor's guardianship as if accepting a business proposal, despite being merely a very young child in a traumatizing situation. Upon accepting, the professor informs him that he must choose an English name and surname, which is how he takes the name Robin Swift, inspired by English books he has read during his childhood, and forever casting aside his Cantonese name (which is pointedly never revealed to the reader), thus marking the first official "translation" that Robin is forced to make for Britain, by discarding his native name for "one that will do in London" (Kuang, 2022: 21), in an attempt at being accepted through "a name by which Englishmen could take him seriously" (Kuang, 2022: 21).

The requirement of discarding his surname baffles Robin, who, even as a young child, recognizes the implications of the act: "The boy blinked at him. 'Pick… a surname?' Family names were not things to be dropped and replaced at whim, he thought. They marked linage; they marked belonging" (Kuang, 2022: 21). The professor retorts that he has no reason to hold onto his surname, as he has no titles that would make his surname valuable, thus marking the beginning of a very long string of racist manipulations that Professor Lovell utilizes in order to subdue Robin by making him ashamed of his origins and building a connection based on fear and blind idealization between Robin and Britain. Assmann and Schwarz explain that views on immigration have for a long time presupposed the idea of forgetting, based on which immigrants were expected "to leave their past behind in order to be 'reborn' in a different national context and to start over again by adapting to the culture of their new place of residence" (2013: 51). Changing one's name is cited among the "rituals of forgetting" by Assmann and Schwarz, who explain that this expected practice represented a "promise of equality for all citizens", but that this equality could only be founded on "the abolition of all distinctions, privileges and claims based on origin and status in favour of the sole principle of personal achievement based on individual qualification and performance in the future" (2013: 52). Professor Lovell adheres to the views presented by Assmann and Schwarz, and, accordingly, Robin is forced to leave behind any trace of his past for the quest to adapt to the English culture, motivated by the professor through the offhanded remark that "the English reinvent their names all the time" (Kuang, 2022: 21), and therefore implying that the customs which Robin holds valuable are viewed as unimportant and easily discardable from the perspective of the professor, already suggesting Britain to be the "superior culture" in his eyes, to whose rules Robin should live by.

Associating the surname with the idea of belonging, Robin manifests the desire to take the professor's name, as he is now becoming his caretaker, but the professor quickly and harshly shuts down the proposal by telling Robin "they'll think I'm your father" (Kuang, 2022: 21). Later in the novel, the professor is revealed to be, in actuality, Robin's biological father, and the orchestrator of all the events, having fathered Robin in order to be raised by his mother in Canton while living with an Englishwoman appointed by him, who was to ensure that Robin learns both English and Cantonese, in order to be later taken to Babel and turned into a translation scholar, thus building Robin's life from the very beginning as a cog in the colonialist machine, a scheme which he had previously tried once before with another child, Griffin, Robin's half-brother, who was a "failed experiment" as he was not given enough time to achieve fluency in Cantonese. Lovell's actions serve to portray the

extent of the dehumanization that colonization produces, as it makes clear the fact that Professor Lovell only sees Robin as a product he can use to bring profit to his own nation, showing no care at all to the traumatic circumstances that Robin is subjected to, despite being directly at fault for them. He also forces Robin to engage in various acts of self-translation, on the promise that these will help him assimilate in the new country. On a smaller scale, in Robin's life, Lovell's action and his rejection of Robin prove that orphans, despite being characterized by lacking family, "are nevertheless fundamentally constituted by their relation to family" (Troy et. al., 2014: 1), and that everything that takes place in Robin's life is attributed to this status and place that he holds. Because of this, not knowing how to navigate the situation better, Robin continuously attempts to emulate Lovell, continuing the series of translations that he has to make of himself, by studying and mimicking Lovell's reactions, saying what he thinks the professor wants to hear, or staying silent when he thinks that is what he wants, thus attempting to mold his reaction to better fit the expectations Lovell has, believing all the while that becoming a reflection of him will not only ensure the professor's love, but also his acceptance in the new world he has been brought in.

Slowly, as the events take place and he becomes more and more enmeshed into this world, Robin realizes that the promise of acceptance will never be fulfilled, and that he is perpetually on the verge of rejection, even at the slightest mistake. The first such hint comes when Robin, engrossed in a book, foolishly forgets about his lessons, to which Lovell reacts by abusing him: "He seemed simply, with every hard and deliberate blow, to be attempting to inflict maximum pain with the minimum risk of permanent injury" (Kuang, 2022: 48). This prompts Robin to become completely engrossed in his studies, "to the point of exhaustion" (Kuang, 2022: 51), in order to ensure that the abuse would not happen again, striving to control the situation, despite having little power in it.

Although the term refugee would not be introduced until much later than the events of the novel take place, Professor Lovell's behavior towards Robin, as well as his overall experience in England, are closely akin to behaviors experienced by refugees when they migrate to new countries of asylum, and who are continuously expected to show gratitude for being there. Motivated by the racist lens, Lovell sees himself, and by extension Britain, as Robin's saviors, to whom he owes everything and must therefore show perpetual unquestioned gratitude, neglecting to take into account that he himself is responsible for Robin's life circumstances, and that Britain, through its imperialistic and colonizing nature, is itself responsible for the state of the countries it depletes. This situation draws obvious parallels to refugee experiences, particularly in cases where they are forcefully displaced from their native countries because of situations that are the fault of the countries they

ultimately have to relocate to. Nayeri highlights that the ongoing expectation of being grateful "threatens and makes one afraid for the future" (Nayeri qtd. in Espiritu et al., 2022: 97), which is in line with Lovell's purpose, that of instilling dread into Robin in order to control him, while also forcing him to discard all loyalty to his roots. Against this backdrop, Robin's resignation comes as no surprise:

> Months ago Robin would have spat at anyone for speaking so cruelly about his family. But here, alone in the middle of the ocean with no relatives and nothing to his name, he could not summon the ire. He had no fire left in him. He was only scared, and so very tired (Kuang, 2022: 26).

In specialized literature, it has been described that the assimilation model entails that people of different ethnic origins who find themselves in a position of becoming migrants "were encouraged to disregard racial differences as a way to 'fit in' with 'white culture'" (Falvey, 2008: 276), which is seen from the very beginning in Lovell's treatment of Robin and his continuous attempts to remove all ethnic traits from him, save for his native language of which he can make use for Britain's gains. Through these racist manipulations, coupled with the constant expectation of working to the point of exhaustion and continuously exhibiting gratitude for the privilege of doing this work, Lovell attempts to make Robin not only disregard racial differences, but also develop hatred towards his origins, in order to switch his perceptions on his home country and ensure that he would not betray the cause that he is preparing him for: "Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind. This is why China remains an indolent and backwards country while her neighbors hurtle towards progress. You are by nature foolish, weak-minded, and disinclined to hard work" (Kuang, 2022: 49). With no other alternative and desperate to maintain his safety, Robin resorts to doing exactly what Lovell wants, which is to translate himself into the version that Lovell wants and that ensures his protection. This metaphorical translation of the self for the promise of assimilation is only achieved by repressing his true feelings about the situation, already showing how Lovell's manipulations seep into his judgement: "He had no right to be resentful. (…) Robin did not yet fully understand the rules of this world he was about to enter, but he understood the necessity of gratitude. Of deference. One did not spite one's saviors" (Kuang, 2022: 27).

Once arrived at Babel, Robin's attempts at assimilation are highly contrasted by another student, Ramy, of Indian origins, whose choices in navigating the English world are strikingly different from Robin's, thus introducing a fresh new perspective in Robin's life:

> That marked the difference between them. Ever since his arrival in London, Robin had tried to keep his head down and assimilate, to play down his otherness. He thought the more unremarkable he seemed, the less attention he would draw. But Ramy, who had no choice but to stand out, had decided he might as well dazzle. He was bold to the extreme (Kuang, 2022: 62).

The new perspectives on race and ethnicity that Ramy introduces to Robin's life are the first necessary building blocks in constructing Robin's perception on racism, colonialism and the oppressive nature that Britain encapsulates. Solely being around Ramy, whose otherness is markedly more striking than his own, opens Robin's eyes to the multitude of racist encounters that both of them have been going through, including Robin's experiences at Lovell's house and his probable status of fatherhood: "Robin found his frankness alarming. He'd got so used to ignoring the issue that it was odd to hear it described in such blunt terms" (Kuang, 2022: 63). Thus, Ramy becomes the first personification of the opposite pulling forces that Robin will eventually find himself stuck between: nativity and resistance, as marked by Ramy, and assimilation and betrayal, as marked by Lovell and the whole of the Babel Institute. This liminal existence between two opposite forces is only hardened once Robin meets his half-brother, Griffin, Lovell's previous "failed experiment" and active participant in the resistance against Britain's imperialistic attempts and its colonization of other countries, who introduces Robin to the Hermes Society, the resistance group itself, whom Robin attempts to help, by being an insider. Confronted with Griffin's views, strongly connected to Ramy's, Robin's world starts to unravel as he slowly realizes his real place in Britain's machinations: "And he wondered at the contradiction: that he despised them, that he knew they could be up to no good, and that still he wanted to be respected by them enough to be included in their ranks" (Kuang, 2022: 124). Gómez uses the term "intracultural trust" in order to describe relationships that form in people from ethnic communities, a term that "conceptualizes the need for attachment with other in-group members because of the toll of societal inequality" (2018: 3), which, she argues, entails a stronger sense of loyalty that extends to the entire community of which one takes part of. Robin's relationship with Ramy and with Griffin, as well as the community of resistance formed at Hermes Society become exemplary of this form of trust, as they solidify Robin's need to take action against the inequalities and abuses that he is starting to understand are happening, and represents a defining bond that guides the actions that he will eventually take.

Translation as a Metaphor for Colonialism

Once Robin is exposed to the realities of racism and exploitation, these events begin a long process of him trying to live both as resistance

and as a Babel Scholar without picking either one side, which Robin slowly realizes is impossible, as he becomes consumed by guilt:

> The only way he could justify his happiness here, to keep dancing on the edges of two worlds, was to continue awaiting Griffin's correspondence at night – a hidden, silent rebellion whose main purpose was to assuage his guilt over the fact that all this gold and glitter had to come at a cost (Kuang, 2022: 137).

Robin's reaction is a clear and direct result of the years spent living under Lovell's manipulations and the hanging threat of gratitude for the promise of protection: "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, 2022: 142). For Robin, going against Babel is akin to committing suicide, because he cannot imagine himself secure in any other position that the one he has been "gifted" by Lovell, as a result of having internalized his discourse from a very young age. Thus, even as he realizes he is being used and that his work is actively hurting others whose backgrounds he could easily identify with, cognitive dissonances such as those above help him justify continuing to not pick a side. This is made easier by the remoteness of what Griffin is describing, as he cannot easily grasp the magnitude of the situation: "And Robin, despite everything, hoped the day Griffin prophesied would never come, that he could live hanging in this balance forever. (...) Robin's life was split into two, and Griffin existed in the shadow world, hidden from sight" (Kuang, 2022: 173-183).

Within this context, while Robin is actively trying to turn a blind eye and repress his feelings about the situation he is in, translation represents the most important metaphor in the novel, through which these feelings continuously seep out, and which therefore facilitates the understanding of what Robin is indirectly expressing. Engaging with the views on translation means directly engaging with Robin's internal conflict, and the way he sees himself in this world, as well as with the way in which the world sees him. The most poignant example of this takes place when Robin attends the first lecture on translation at Babel, where the professor presents the dominant theories on translation: foreignization and domestication, the former one adhering to maintaining the text as filled with its original epistemologies as possible, and the latter adhering to bringing the text as close as possible to its target audience. The professor concludes that "the dominant strain in England now is (…) to make translations sound so natural to the English reader that they do not read as translations at all" (Kuang, 2022: 157), which is symbolic of the self-centering that Britain engages in all throughout the larger political context of the novel, prioritizing its desires over the needs

of the other countries it depletes of resources in its imperialistic quest of domination and power through colonization. It seeks novelty through foreign languages in order to create gains for itself, yet when it comes to understanding the larger sources of those languages, it offers little accommodation space, preferring a domesticized approach that brings the source as close to itself, the target, as possible. The most striking portion of the scene is that which most encapsulates this attitude:

> 'Translation means doing violence upon the original, means warping and distorting it for foreign, unintended eyes. So then where does that leave us? How can we conclude, except by acknowledging that an act of translation is then necessarily always an act of betrayal?' (…) And as Robin's eyes met Professor Playfair's, he felt a deep, vinegary squirm of guilt in his gut (Kuang, 2022: 157).

Robin's guilt is triggered by the professor's lecture because he attributes more meaning to his words than simply that of theory and philosophy, showing that the way in which Robin relates to the concept of translation itself is steeped in the political struggle and the obvious call to rebellion that he is trying to hide from. The scene shows that for Robin continuing to partake in the translation work at Babel represents a clear betrayal of his roots and his ethnic bonds. Shen draws attention to the fact that "although betrayal often results in the violent severing of social or emotional bonds, it sometimes involves complex negotiations with the conflicting demands of multiple loyalties and points to a nuanced definition of self-identity" (2012: 117-8). This is relevant in Robin's case because it shows the complexity of his sense of identity, and proves that although he has been raised for years as Robin Swift and prepared by Lovell to behave as one of the Englishmen, Robin has not forgotten his roots, despite Lovell's attempts at generating his hatred for them. Thus, in this case, what Robin perceives as betrayal represents "a reminder of the subject's dependence on and responsibility toward the Other for its self-formation" (Shen, 2012: 119).

The guilt that derives from translation and the necessity to make the choice to betray one's roots are brought into focus from the very first time when Robin departs from Canton and embarks towards England. On the ship that he and Lovell board, they encounter another Cantonese man who is seeking to board the ship, but who is unfairly and abusively rejected by the crew, despite having a paid contract for boarding the ship. Lovell pushes Robin to intervene and sort out the situation, him being the only one who speaks both the Cantonese dialect and English. Robin immediately appears to be an ally in the eyes of the laborer: "the labourer seemed relieved – he seemed to recognize immediately in Robin's face an ally, the only other Chinese person in sight" (Kuang, 2022: 23), which already establishes the importance of the link to one's roots. The

crewman immediately urges Robin to lie and tell the laborer that he cannot board the ship despite having a contract, offering a string of racist arguments ("'Last ship I sailed that carried a Chinaman got filthy with lice. I'm not taking risks on people who can't wash. Could even understand the word bath if I yelled it at him, this one. Hello? Boy? Do you understand what I'm saying?'" (Kuang, 2022: 23)), all while the laborer hinges his hope on Robin's translation, in another clear act of intracultural trust and expected loyalty. Lovell symbolically sits at Robin's side throughout the entire scene, a threatening presence that already instills fear in Robin, who realizes that should he not make the "correct" choice, he himself might be left behind in Canton, alone and afraid. Within this context, Robin does what the Englishmen silently urge him to do, which is to tell the laborer he cannot board the ship, an act that he engages in in order to protect himself, even at the cost of immense amounts of guilt. This scene establishes early on for the reader that which Robin only discovers much later in the novel, and which he does not directly articulate in words, that the translations he does in the name of the Englishmen represent a direct betrayal of his native country, and of himself.

The suddenness of forced displacement is a contributing factor to Robin's choice, as "the initial stages of flight may be fraught with fear and uncertainty, the focus being on staying alive and safe" (Goveas and Coomarasamy, 2018: 101). However, "once people reach the place of supposed safety, they become conscious of what they have left behind. They experience the losses; loss of family, community, culture and country" (Goveas and Coomarasamy, 2018: 101). Similarly, Robin only begins to realize these feelings once he arrives at a point of safety, out of Lovell's estate and at Babel, where he finally is allowed to interact with people of a similar background to his. After this point, everything is put through the lens of the continuous betrayals that they are all forced to do in order to survive, be those betrayals of the self or betrayals of their roots, but all achieved through the means of translation: "Robin wondered then how much of Anthony's life had been spent carefully translating himself to white people, how much of his genial, affable polish was an artful construction to fit a particular idea of a Black man in white England" (Kuang, 2022: 393), without directly realizing that he himself has been engaging in the same acts of self-translation that he identifies in Anthony, ever since stepping foot in Lovell's estate.

The final and most important moment that solidifies the truth in Robin happens when he and his schoolmates are taken as translators on a trip to Canton, marking the very first time that Robin returns to his home country after years of living in England. In line with his emotional journey thus far, the only emotion Robin can summon upon returning

home is "a confused, vaguely guilty dread" (Kuang, 2022: 251), as well as the confrontation to what Lovell has been telling him all along, that "nothing awaited him there; no friends, no family, just a city he only half remembered" (Kuang, 2022: 251). Being the first time that Robin engages directly with the politics of Britain in China, and having to translate them for the Chinese officials, he is left with no doubt that all he has been told all along has been true. He attempts to confront Lovell about it, but the result is another string of racist manipulations and reproaches, which represent the final tipping point for Robin who realizes that

> he had not requested these privileges of Oxford, had not chosen to be spirited out of Canton at all, (…) the generosities of the university should not demand his constant, unswerving loyalty to the Crown and its colonial projects, and, if it did, then that was a peculiar form of bondage he had never agreed to (Kuang, 2022: 258).

Arrived back at Oxford, Robin, as well as other members of the resistance, reveal to the Babel scholars the truth of their work of translation, and launch an important strike, which puts England essentially out of functioning order, proving how much everything was dependent on silver work. Laborers join their strike, and it evolves into an entire revolution, and Robin realizes that the only way to end it all is to destroy the Babel tower and all its research, in order to cut off England's power and its capability to be a threat to other countries. Robin's final act also represents his final work of translation: he uses the match-pair for the word "translate", which causes a chain explosive reaction which demolishes the Babel tower with him inside it, as a final act of sacrifice. Gómez proposes that intracultural trust and racial loyalty represent "the conscious process of self-sacrificing for the greater good of the minority group" (2018: 3), a concept which aptly fits Robin's sole solution for the betrayal that he feels he has been committing, wherein he sacrifices himself for the greater good of all countries that live under colonial rule, in order to reframe the translation act from one of betrayal, to one of violent loyalty.

Conclusion

In these ways, translation sits at the heart of the exploration of colonialism, constructing the world of the novel around it. It also supplements information when that information is attempted to be hidden, a fact made clearest once Robin starts to understand the position he has been put in and, assaulted by guilt, he begins to repress his real thoughts and feelings, and the perspectives on translation come as an aiding tool which brings these hidden perspectives to light. Thus, engaging with the philosophical concept of translation facilitates a more

thorough engagement with the themes of the novel, and a more thorough understanding of the characters and their psychology, and becomes a literary device utilized all throughout the novel in order to present the social commentary on colonialism.

REFERENCES:

Primary Sources:

Kuang, R. F., *Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: an Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution*, New York, Voyager, 2022.

Secondary Sources:

Assmann, Aleida, and Anja Schwarz, *Memory, Migration and Guilt*, in "Crossings Journal of Migration and Culture", vol. 4, no. 1, Apr. 2013, pp. 51–65. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.4.1.51_1.

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory, Fourth Edition: An Introduction*, New York, NYU Press, 2023.

Espiritu, Yen Le, et al, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, Oakland California, University of California Press, 2022.

Falvey, Lisa D., *Rejecting Assimilation, Immersion and Chinoiserie: Reconstructing Identity for Children Adopted from China*, in "Journal of Chinese Overseas", vol. 4, no. 2, Jan. 2008, p. 275–86. https://doi.org/10.1353/jco.0.0027.

Gómez, Jennifer M, *What's the Harm? Internalized Prejudice and Cultural Betrayal Trauma in Ethnic Minorities*, in "American Journal of Orthopsychiatry", vol. 89, no. 2, Nov. 2018, p. 237–47. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000367.

Goveas, Jacinta, and Sudharshana Coomarasamy, *Why Am I Still Here? The Impact of Survivor Guilt on the Mental Health and Settlement Process of Refugee Youth*, in *Today's Youth and Mental Health*, edited by Soheila Pashang et al., 2018, pp. 101–17.

Troy, Maria Holmgren, et al, *Making Home: Orphanhood, Kinship and Cultural Memory in Contemporary American Novels*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014.

Shen, Shuang, *Ends of Betrayal: Diaspora and Historical Representation in the Late Works of Zhang Ailing*, in "Modern Chinese Literature and Culture", vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, p. 112–48, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42940445. Accessed 28 Mar. 2025.

Von Mossner, Alexa Weik, *Introduction: Narrative Encounters with Ethnic American Literatures*, *Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology*, edited by Alexa Weik Von Mossner et al., New York, Taylor and Francis, 2022, p. 1–13.

Yang, Taoyu, *Redefining Semi-Colonialism: A Historiographical Essay on British Colonial Presence in China*, "Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History", vol. 20, no. 3, John Hopkins University Press, Jan. 2019, https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2019.0028.