R.F. Kuang's Babel and the Tower of Education:

Using Dubois and Fanon to Analyze Racial Identity and Educational Linguistic Alienation

ziyahreadsandwrites.blog

[REDACTED]

December 17, 2024

Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of linguistic alienation in academic institutions, exploring how the commodification of marginalized languages reinforces systemic inequities and racial hierarchies. Using Frantz Fanon's theories of colonial alienation and W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness as theoretical lenses, the analysis focuses on R.F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence*. The novel portrays how languages of the colonized are transformed into objects of knowledge, symbolized by the silver bars that literalize the power extracted from linguistic translation. This commodification not only sustains institutional dominance but also alienates students, compelling them to intellectualize their cultural heritage while severing personal connections to it. Fanon's insights illuminate how this alienation extends beyond academia, as colonial systems drive marginalized individuals to conform to dominant norms, often at the expense of their authentic identities. *Babel* dramatizes these dynamics, offering a lens to understand how academia extracts value from cultural difference while maintaining systemic inequalities. This paper argues that linguistic alienation is a structural feature of educational systems and concludes by calling for reforms that validate and center marginalized linguistic and cultural identities.

Introduction

"*This debate would come down firmly on the side of the Anglicists, best represented by Lord Thomas Macaulay's infamous February 1835, "Minute on Education": 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect*'" (Kuang, 2022, 271; *A footnote in Babel; Or The Necessity of Violence*).

Language functions as a powerful instrument of inclusion and exclusion, particularly within academic institutions. For students from marginalized cultural and racial backgrounds, academic success often hinges on their ability to navigate and master dominant linguistic norms. These norms are frequently presented as universal and neutral, yet they serve to obscure the power dynamics underpinning them. This dynamic fosters a process of different forms of linguistic alienation, whereby individuals are compelled to intellectualize their language and cultural heritage for institutional acceptance, often at the cost of their personal connection to it. This is different from other forms of linguistic alienation previously discussed. Instead of being alienated due to lack of access because of language barriers or accents, the language itself is a piece of study in which students of that culture can only engage with it through an academic lens. Such alienation not only fractures the identity of the student but also commodifies their culture, perpetuating systems of power and domination. This paper investigates these dynamics, and extends the theories of Frantz Fanon's theories of colonial alienation and W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, with particular focus on how they are dramatized in R.F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence*.

A. Contextualization of Babel

Kuang's *Babel* provides a compelling narrative framework to explore the relationship between linguistic alienation and systemic inequities. The novel portrays the commodification of marginalized languages through the metaphor of silver bars, which derive their power from the irreconcilability of linguistic translation. These bars symbolize how academia transforms the languages of the colonized into objects of knowledge, extracting value from cultural difference while reinforcing hierarchies of dominance and subordination. The protagonist, Robin Swift, embodies this dynamic: recruited to Oxford's translation institute for his linguistic prowess at a

young age, Robin is simultaneously celebrated and marginalized. His Cantonese heritage, stripped of its personal resonance, is reframed as a resource to be exploited. Through Robin's experiences, *Babel* illustrates the profound psychological and cultural dislocation engendered by linguistic alienation.

B. Thesis Statement

Fanon's theories provide a critical lens to understand the systemic and psychological dimensions of this alienation. In his seminal works, Fanon argues that colonial systems compel individuals to conform to dominant norms, severing their ties to their cultural heritage and fostering a sense of inferiority. This phenomenon aligns with Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which captures the internal conflict experienced by marginalized individuals who must navigate dual identities: their authentic self and the version shaped by external perceptions. These frameworks illuminate the costs of academic assimilation, where marginalized individuals often face the paradoxical demand to intellectualize and commodify their cultural heritage to achieve institutional success, even as this process deepens their own personal alienation.

This paper makes three key contributions. First, it synthesizes Fanon's and Du Bois's insights to develop a robust theoretical framework for understanding linguistic alienation within academic institutions. Second, it demonstrates how *Babel* vividly dramatizes these dynamics, offering a narrative lens that renders systemic inequities visible in ways that abstract theory alone cannot. Third, it creates a new process of how linguistic alienation materializes in academia, arguing that it manifests in four ways: commodification of languages, communal isolation, academic violence, and imperial extraction. I also argue against DuBois, that the solution to this double consciousness is not inclusion in these academic spaces, it's a severing of the extractional

nature that these educational structures perpetuate. Through Fanon, and decolonization can we create new academic structures that allow students to connect culturally to their heritage and study it in a way that rebuilds their connection and builds knowledge in a way that benefits the culture they are studying. Babel exemplifies this solution of decolonization and restructuring of academic systems. By combining theoretical and literary analysis, the paper situates linguistic alienation as a structural feature of academia and calls for systemic reforms that validate and center marginalized linguistic and cultural identities.

C. Outline of the Paper

This paper will begin by explaining the theoretical framework I'm using to analyze Babel, through a fusion of DuBois and Fanon. Then I will begin the literary analysis of Babel explaining how linguistic alienation occurs through these four mechanisms: commodification of language and culture, isolation from community, academic violence, and through knowledge extraction for imperial and academic institutional gain. Next, I will discuss counterarguments and real-world parallels between Babel and academic institutions today. Finally, I will propose some solutions to this alienation process. I will argue that Babel proposes decolonization through violent processes as the solution, due to its dramatized nature. I will argue some practical measures in academia that can be used to prevent this violent end. Then I will conclude this paper with my overall findings and places for further research.

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Frantz Fanon’s Concept of Colonial Alienation

Frantz Fanon's works, particularly *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, critique colonial systems as mechanisms of alienation. Fanon describes how colonized individuals are severed from their cultural roots, compelled to adopt the norms and language of the colonizer to achieve survival or acceptance. This process is exemplified in his assertion: "The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level" (Fanon, 2008, p. 9). This reflects a dual alienation—from the colonizer's unattainable ideals and from one's authentic cultural identity.

Fanon's exploration of alienation extends to language as a key instrument of colonial control. He argues that the imposition of the colonizer's language not only facilitates domination but also reshapes the colonized subject's self-perception. Language, in this context, becomes a double-edged sword: a tool for survival and advancement, but also a marker of disconnection from cultural heritage. Fanon writes, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon, 2008, p. 38). Within academia, this dynamic persists as marginalized students navigate the "neutral" linguistic standards of academic discourse, which privilege dominant cultural frameworks and marginalize alternative epistemologies. The alienation that results from this process mirrors the colonial hierarchies Fanon critiques, where assimilation is achieved at the cost of authenticity.

B. W.E.B. Du Bois's Double Consciousness

W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, introduced in *The Souls of Black Folk*, articulates the psychological impact of systemic oppression on identity formation. Du Bois describes double consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2). This split identity forces marginalized individuals to navigate dual

perspectives: their authentic self and the version shaped by external, often oppressive, societal expectations.

Double consciousness captures the inner conflict of marginalized individuals as they strive to reconcile their authentic cultural identity with the demands of dominant societal norms. In academic spaces, this duality manifests acutely. Marginalized students are often required to suppress aspects of their heritage to fit into institutional structures that valorize conformity. Du Bois's framework elucidates how the pressure to perform competence in dominant norms creates a constant negotiation of identity. This experience is deeply alienating, as students find themselves intellectually engaging with their cultural heritage while being emotionally and socially disconnected from it.

The psychological toll of double consciousness extends beyond individual experiences, shaping how marginalized groups interact with systemic structures. Du Bois's insight into the duality of identity highlights the pervasive tension between external validation and internal authenticity, a dynamic that is amplified in academic institutions. Here, the intellectualization of culture for institutional acceptance reinforces systemic inequities, perpetuating a cycle of alienation and marginalization.

C. Intersection of Fanon and Du Bois

The theories of Fanon and Du Bois converge in their focus on how systemic power structures compel conformity while alienating individuals from their authentic selves. Both theorists emphasize the psychological and structural consequences of existing within systems designed to marginalize. In academia, these dynamics are vividly illustrated in the processes of linguistic

alienation, where marginalized individuals must intellectualize their culture for institutional validation but are denied genuine engagement with it.

Fanon's critique of colonial alienation provides a structural understanding of how power operates through language, while Du Bois's concept of double consciousness offers a psychological lens to examine the inner conflicts experienced by marginalized individuals. Together, these frameworks illuminate how academic systems replicate colonial hierarchies, commodifying cultural heritage while alienating its speakers. Marginalized languages and cultures are transformed into objects of knowledge, valued for their utility to dominant institutions rather than their intrinsic worth.

As Kuang's *Babel* dramatizes this dynamic, it shows how using language as an object of knowledge sustains institutional dominance while fracturing individual identities. Robin Swift's journey exemplifies the toll of linguistic alienation. This dual alienation, as Fanon and Du Bois articulate, reflects the broader systemic inequities embedded in academic structures. Through the intersection of Fanon's and Du Bois's insights, this paper develops and applies this theoretical framework to analyze the structural nature of linguistic alienation. It critiques the commodification of marginalized languages in academia and reveals how these processes perpetuate racial and cultural hierarchies. By applying these theories to *Babel* and broader academic contexts, this analysis underscores the need for systemic reforms that validate and center marginalized identities, challenging the norms that sustain exclusion and inequality.

III. Manifestations of Alienation in Babel

A. Commodification of Language

R.F. Kuang's *Babel* deploys the imagery of silver bars as a central motif to underscore the commodification of linguistic translation. In the novel, these bars are imbued with power extracted from the tension between languages, serving as a literal representation of how linguistic differences are mined for their utility. Silver-working relies on the art of language and translation, specifically through the use of "match-pairs" — two words from different languages that share similar meanings but are not identical. These pairs are engraved onto silver bars, with the magic harnessed from the translation gap, the "meaning lost or warped in the journey" between the two words. For the process to work, however, the match-pairs must be spoken by someone fluent in both languages, as "words have no meaning unless there is someone present who can understand them…do you dream in Greek…in Latin?" (Kuang, 2022, p.45). The language must not only be understood, but known at a deeper level, by someone with native fluency and the ability to bounce between the two worlds.

This magical system is employed by Britain, and exclusively for Britain's benefit, to enhance infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways, and ships, as well as to develop more effective tools of domination, including slave collars that enforce compliance. For example, bars with the match-pairs for the words, "strength", "endurance", "speed" are created by students and professors at Babel, sold and manufactured by the university and then placed in the infrastructure of London at large. Yet, as languages evolve and borrow from one another, the potency of certain tongues wanes, necessitating the acquisition of new languages. This is where students like Robin, from Canton, and his fellow students Ramy, from Calcutta, and Victoire, from Haiti come into play—representing the Royal Institute of Translation's efforts to stay ahead in exploiting linguistic resources for imperial power. This metaphor exemplifies how

academia—like colonial systems—reduces cultural and linguistic heritage to tools for profit and control.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* provides a critical framework for understanding how colonial systems use language as a tool of domination, stripping it of cultural and personal significance. Ngũgĩ argues that the imposition of colonial languages erases indigenous linguistic agency, transforming native tongues into subservient tools that serve the colonizer's agenda. This dynamic is powerfully reflected in Babel's depiction of silver-working, where the inherent value of marginalized languages is disregarded in favor of their utility for British imperial projects. The engraving of match-pairs onto silver bars mirrors what Ngũgĩ describes as the colonial extraction of linguistic value, repurposing language into an instrument of control and profit. By aligning Kuang's metaphor of silver-working with Ngũgĩ's critique, Babel underscores the ways in which colonial and academic systems commodify language, perpetuating hierarchies that dehumanize and exploit the speakers of these languages.

The silver bars in *Babel* reveal how marginalized languages are not valued for their intrinsic worth but for their capacity to serve institutional agendas. The characters' are students at Babel, but also undergo a form of mental and physical labor for the university that mirrors the extraction of value from colonized subjects, reinforcing systemic hierarchies while alienating the individuals who produce this value. The silver bars also symbolize the broader commodification of cultural difference. bell hooks observes, "Language is also a place of struggle" (hooks, 1994, p. 168). This struggle is evident in *Babel*, where the institutional mechanisms of translation transform languages into commodities, stripping them of their lived, cultural significance. Through this lens, the silver bars become a potent critique of how academia appropriates and decontextualizes marginalized cultures for institutional gain.

B. Isolation from Community

The novel Babel shows multiple characters of color who are students in this academic structure. These students portray signs of alienation from their work at Babel and their culture as a whole. This creates a type of double consciousness, where for example, Robin Swift, is oscillating between his identity as a Chinese immigrant and his identity as a British scholar.

Robin Swift is a character in Babel who is born in Canton and trained by a tutor in English. Due to the fact that his native tongue is Cantonese Chinese, and has fluency in English, an Oxford professor named Lovell discovers him and takes him to his home in London to prepare him for a life of translation in service to Babel or the Oxford Royal Institute of Translation. Throughout his journey in London and later Oxford, Robin is isolated from his Chinese community and doesn't interact with any Chinese person. He only speaks Chinese when it's time to focus on his studies.

Fanon argues that colonialism re-engineers the colonized subject's worldview by replacing their traditional culture with the dominant colonial ideology. In *Babel*, this is epitomized by Robin's forced assimilation into British academic culture. His Cantonese heritage is devalued, and he is required to embody the ideals of British intellectualism to survive. Kuang writes,

"His world now was, Professor Lovell, Mrs Piper, and the promise of this country on the other side of the ocean. He buried his past life, not because it was so terrible but because abandoning it was the only way to survive. He pulled on his English accent like a new coat and adjusted everything he could about himself to make it fit within weeks and wore it with comfort. In weeks no one was asking him to speak a few words in Chinese for their entertainment. In weeks no one seemed to remember he was Chinese at all" (Kuang, 2022, 18).

Here we already see his alienation forming. Forgetting his life in China and pulling on his English accent, he is assimilating into a culture for survival. This act of self-erasure reflects the psychological violence of cultural imposition. Fanon states, *"The Negro is in every sense of the word a victim of white civilization"* (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 192). Similarly, Robin becomes a victim of the British colonial mindset, forced to suppress his heritage to gain acceptance within the system. Robin's alienation deepens as he internalizes the racialized hierarchies of the colonial system.

When he does attend university and eventually visits Canton again on an academic research expedition he doesn't feel connected to his culture, he has completely been severed from it due to years of alienation. Kuang writes,"Apart from Griffin, he had not seen any Chinese people since. …or to see if he was experiencing some great emotional catharsis. But nothing stirred in his chest. Standing on the deck, minutes from stepping foot and his motherland after a lifetime away, all Robin felt was empty" (Kuang, 2022, 293). Later on in the novel, Robin's name is used as a means of further alienating him from his culture. When he is asked to translate a diplomatic meeting between Chinese diplomats and the British we further see the absurdity in his identity, Kuang writes,

"What is your name?" Commissioner Lin, asked quietly. 'Robin Swift', Robin said, then blinked, confused. The anglophone name seemed incongruous for a conversation held in Chinese. His other name, his first name, had not been used for so long that it hadn't crossed his mind to say it. 'I mean -' but he was too embarrassed to continue," (Kuang, 2022, 311).

Robin has been so isolated from his fellow people that he doesn't identify with his Chinese name, even when he finally speaks in Chinese with the Chinese. Since his only form of contact with his language is through academics, Robin's identity and personal connection with Chinese is severed.

C. Academic Violence

Later on in the novel, Kuang shows how violence is used to further this alienation and create a severance between the original identity of the student and the assumed one of a British scholar. After Robin spends the day reading a novel, he gets lost in its pages and is three hours late to his at-home tutoring session during his stay at Lovell Manor. Kuang writes,

"As Robin rose to his knees dazed, the Professor pulled the poker from beside the fireplace and swung it diagonally against the right side of Robin's torso. Then he brought it down again. and again...."I won't tolerate laziness under this roof," said Professor Lovell. Translation is no easy occupation, Robin. It demands focus. Discipline…You cannot waste time on daydreams…Laziness and deceit are common traits among your kind….You must resist these traits Robin…I have gambled greatly on your capacity to do so" (Kuang, 2002, 40)

Shortly after in the novel, Robin shows signs of disconnection from the world he lives in, placing his academics as most important. Kuang writes,

"But if the world was an abstract object for them, it was even more abstract to him, for he had no stake in any of these matters. Robin processed that era through the myopic world of Lovell Manor….All that mattered were the dead languages before him and the fact that one day, a day that drew even closer as the years trickled by, he would matriculate at the University he knew only from the paintings on the wall - the city of knowledge, the city of dreaming spires." (Kuang, 2002, 44).

This alienation is further progressed through violence, and continued pressure for academic success. Gayatri Spivak's critique of how the subaltern is denied a voice in knowledge production provides a crucial lens for understanding the systemic violence perpetuated in Babel's academic environment. Spivak argues that within colonial and neo-colonial systems, marginalized individuals are often exploited for their labor or cultural contributions but are excluded from participating in the broader discourse that defines their representation. This dynamic is evident in Robin's experiences, where his linguistic skills are commodified by the

Royal Institute, but his identity and agency are systematically erased. The physical violence inflicted by Professor Lovell underscores this silencing, emphasizing the coercive control that academia exerts over its students. By framing Robin's alienation through Spivak's analysis, the novel highlights how the institutional demand for compliance and intellectual output mirrors colonial practices, further silencing and dehumanizing marginalized voices within the very systems that claim to empower them. The academic system perpetuates violence in its students by forcing them to abandon personal hobbies and means of enjoyment to fully dedicate themselves to their study. This is further explored below.

D. Knowledge Extraction for Imperial and Academic Gain

In *Babel*, the process of learning is depicted as an extractive enterprise. Students of marginalized backgrounds are recruited for their unique linguistic knowledge, only to have their skills appropriated for imperial ends. This mirrors critiques by Spivak (2013), who argues that education within colonial frameworks often "others" the student, transforming them into instruments of empire while alienating them from their cultural roots (*An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*). Kuang's portrayal of Robin's growing awareness of his role in perpetuating imperial violence illustrates this dynamic, challenging the assumption that education is always a force for good.

When Robin finally attends university, he realizes that he is being used as a tool for colonial power and his double consciousness reaches an all time high. Kuang illustrates Robin's alienation poignantly: "He would never be enough for England, but he could never go back to Canton either" (Kuang, 2022, p. 183). After he sees the brutality being propelled by the British and he speaks up he realizes England will never accept a voice like his, but after living there for

so long, he believes he can't exist in Canton either. This captures Robin's fractured identity, a state that Du Bois describes as "two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). Robin's experience reflects the internal conflict of performing English academic excellence while grappling with the loss of his Cantonese heritage.

Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* provides a compelling framework for understanding how academic institutions, like Babel's Royal Institute, commodify and exoticize marginalized cultures for their own benefit. Said critiques how Western institutions systematically construct "the Orient" as an object of knowledge, defined and dominated by the West, stripping it of agency and authenticity. In Babel, this dynamic is evident in the Royal Institute's exploitation of Robin and other students of color. Their linguistic heritage is not valued for its cultural richness but as a resource to sustain imperial dominance. This parallels Said's observation that the production of knowledge about "the Other" serves to reinforce existing power structures, transforming culture into a tool of control. By situating Babel within this Orientalist framework, Kuang emphasizes how academia perpetuates colonial hierarchies, treating marginalized students not as individuals with agency but as instruments for extracting and weaponizing cultural knowledge.

Robin's alienation is further compounded by the university's systemic exploitation of his linguistic abilities. When Robin meets Griffin, [his long-lost half brother who is in a secret society and resistance group against the British called the Hermes Society] Robin learns of how Griffin's lack of linguistic skill severed him from the institution and the society, and led him to join the resistance. Here, Kuang portrays Robin's realization that he is a tool for the empire. Kuang writes, "How awful it would have felt [for Griffin] to reach for flimsy Chinese from a barely remembered life, knowing full well that it was the only thing that gave him value here.

Small wonder he hated Babel with such vehemence. Griffin had been robbed of everything - a mother, a home, a motherland, a family" (Kuang, 2022, p. 183). Griffin's tragic story mirrors Robin's own struggle, highlighting the violence of a system that values individuals solely for their ability to serve its interests. This commodification of cultural identity resonates with Fanon's observation that colonized subjects are "stripped of their humanity, reduced to tools of labor or objects of study" (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 14). The act of reaching for "flimsy Chinese" illustrates the alienation of one's own heritage, transformed into a resource rather than a source of personal identity.

This theme is further explored in the moment of Anthony's death, a fellow student, where Robin reflects on their shared expendability within Babel. Kuang writes, "...a terror which Robin felt as well, which was that Anthony had been expendable…that they were, in the end, only vessels for the language they spoke" (Kuang, 2022, p. 201). This chilling realization captures the essence of Du Bois's critique of systematic dehumanization. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois identifies the alienation caused by being seen through the eyes of a dominant culture, stripped of individuality and reduced to a function. In Babel, this reduction is literalized in the characters' roles as translators, whose worth is tied exclusively to their linguistic utility.

The psychological consequences of this dehumanization reach a breaking point for Robin, who finds himself caught between irreconcilable truths. Kuang writes, "He had become so good at holding two truths in his head at once…That he hated Babel, and wanted to live forever in its embrace…He could not exist as a split man" (Kuang, 2022, p. 319). This moment encapsulates the core of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness—the fractured identity of navigating dual and often contradictory demands. For Robin, the "razor's edge" of these truths becomes unsustainable, reflecting Fanon's assertion that true liberation requires the rejection of

imposed identities and the reclamation of one's authentic self. Robin's ultimate decision to reject Babel marks an act of resistance, echoing Fanon's call for the decolonization of both the mind and society.

R.F. Kuang's *Babel* engages deeply with Frantz Fanon's theories on decolonization and the transformative potential of violence as a means to dismantle oppressive systems. Through its narrative, *Babel* suggests that academic structures can only be reformed by confronting the systemic violence underpinning their foundations. By invoking Fanon's ideas, the novel proposes a decolonized academic framework that enables students to reconnect with their cultural heritage and produce knowledge that serves their communities. This is poignantly exemplified in Robin Swift's journey as he transitions from alienation to self-actualization.

IV. Proposed Solutions

A. DuBois and Babel

W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of education is often characterized by its optimistic view of learning as a means of liberation and empowerment for Black individuals and other marginalized communities. In works like *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois articulated the importance of education in fostering leadership and uplifting the community through what he termed the "Talented Tenth." However, R.F. Kuang's *Babel* offers a powerful critique of education as a potentially alienating and exploitative institution, particularly for students of color. By exposing how education can perpetuate systemic violence, exploit labor, and objectify language as a neutral tool of study, Kuang's novel interrogates the idealism inherent in Du Bois's framework, forcing readers to grapple with education's darker dimensions. The other students of color at Babel do join the Hermes Society and build a coalition that can be reminiscent of the Talented

Tenth, but the fact that their livelihoods are still determined by the colonial alienating structure of the institution, they can not escape without deconstructing the system itself first.

Du Bois's approach to education is grounded in the belief that knowledge equips marginalized groups to challenge oppression and claim their rightful place in society. Du Bois states: "Education must not simply teach work — it must teach life," (DuBois, Ch. 3, 1903). This statement reflects his commitment to education as a holistic, emancipatory force that nurtures intellectual growth, moral character, and social responsibility. His endorsement of higher education for Black Americans, particularly through the development of an intellectual elite, underscores his belief in education's transformative potential. For Du Bois, learning is inherently positive, offering a pathway to dignity, self-realization, and societal progress.

Political theorists have lauded Du Bois's vision of education as forward-thinking. As noted by Bates (2019), Du Bois emphasized education as "not merely a tool for individual advancement but as a communal good, integral to the uplift of the race" (*Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*). This perspective situates education as a moral and collective endeavor, one that is ultimately liberatory in its aims. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence,* complicates this optimistic narrative by revealing how education can serve as a mechanism of imperial extraction and control. Through Robin's experiences, Kuang underscores how education—particularly for students of color—can be alienating and dehumanizing. Of course the creation of black institutions can be a solution to this issue but as I stated in the introduction, all students of color can not be isolated in these majority POC institutions. All black students for example in the United States can not be trained in Historically Black Colleges.

A central theme in *Babel* is the objectification of language as a neutral, apolitical field of study. Language, in the novel, is weaponized through the use of silver-working—a magical process that harnesses the power of translation for material and political gain. This depiction critiques the idea of language as a mere academic pursuit, revealing it instead as a site of power and conflict. Kuang's work aligns with critical theories of language, such as those by Dubois (2016), who contends that language policies within educational institutions often "reflect and reinforce colonial hierarchies"

By contrast, Du Bois's writings often treat language as a means of self-expression and cultural preservation. While he acknowledges the cultural alienation that Black students experience in predominantly white institutions, he does not engage deeply with the idea of language as a tool of systemic violence. Kuang's novel thus challenges Du Bois's idealism, illustrating how the very act of translation can be complicit in sustaining systems of oppression.

Another key divergence between DuBois and Kuang lies in their treatment of labor within educational contexts. In *Babel*, the intellectual labor of marginalized students is appropriated to serve imperial interests, echoing critiques by Brown (2003), who argues that education often "relies on the unpaid or underpaid labor of marginalized groups to sustain itself" (*Rutgers Law Review*). Robin and his peers are made to confront the ways their contributions to academia directly support systems of exploitation, a reality that contrasts sharply with Du Bois's vision of education as a pathway to empowerment.

While Du Bois acknowledges the economic barriers faced by Black students, he frames education as a means of overcoming these challenges, rather than as a site where exploitation might be reproduced. Kuang's depiction of education as labor-intensive, coercive, and ultimately

violent invites readers to reconsider the costs of academic participation for marginalized individuals.

R.F. Kuang's *Babel* provides a necessary counterpoint to W.E.B. Du Bois's optimistic vision of education, revealing its potential to be extractive, alienating, and complicit in systemic violence. By critiquing the labor, language, and power dynamics inherent in educational institutions, Kuang's novel forces a reevaluation of the assumptions underlying Du Bois's framework. While Du Bois's idealism highlights the transformative potential of education, *Babel* reminds us that such potential is often tempered by the realities of exploitation and alienation faced by students of color.

B. De-colonialism and Fanon As Presented in Babel

Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* posits that decolonization is necessarily a violent process, as it seeks to dismantle a colonial system predicated on violence. In *Babel*, Griffin articulates this idea when he states, "Decolonization must be a violent process" (Kuang, 2022, 394). This mirrors Fanon's assertion that "violence is a cleansing force" that disrupts the psychological and systemic oppression of the colonized (Fanon, 1963). Griffin's dialogue underscores the inevitability of violence in dismantling the exploitative structures of academia, where knowledge and labor are extracted from marginalized students to sustain imperial power.

The novel illustrates this through its depiction of silver-working. Griffin's insistence that "violence shocks the system" (p. 397) echoes Fanon's argument that the colonial system cannot be reasoned with but must instead be disrupted. This critique applies to academic institutions that, like colonial systems, perpetuate violence through extraction and alienation. By depicting

Robin's eventual decision to resist through destruction, *Babel* aligns with Fanon's belief that radical change often requires forceful action.

Audre Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" underscores the limitations of attempting reform within inherently exploitative systems like Babel's academic structures. The institution's reliance on translation as a tool of domination reflects how extractive systems co-opt and neutralize the very tools that could challenge them. Lorde's critique suggests that true decolonization cannot occur through incremental reforms or adjustments that leave the foundational hierarchies intact. In Babel, this is evident in the inability of the Royal Institute to operate as anything other than a mechanism of imperial control, reinforcing the idea that dismantling such structures requires creating entirely new frameworks for knowledge production. By integrating Lorde's perspective, the novel highlights the futility of relying on existing power structures to achieve liberation, advocating instead for transformative practices that prioritize cultural sovereignty and systemic equity.

While violence serves as a catalyst for decolonization, *Babel* also envisions a path toward rebuilding academic systems in ways that prioritize cultural connection and self-determination. Robin's journey exemplifies this transformative potential. However, the novel suggests that decolonization involves more than dismantling oppressive systems; it also requires rebuilding academic structures that honor cultural heritage. Robin's final vision of his mother—who calls him by his Chinese name—represents his reconciliation with his cultural identity, "He shut his eyes and he still remembered the stillness. The peace. As the window smashed in, Robin shut his eyes and imagined his mother's face. She smiles. She says his name" (Kuang, Babel, 536). This is the final line in Babel before the Epilogue. This moment symbolizes the unification of his fractured consciousness, achieving what Fanon describes as a reclamation of self that enables the

colonized to “redefine their place in the world” (Fanon, 1963). Through violence, where he uses the same silver bars to destroy Babel and prevent the use of silver bars for a war with China over the trade of opium, he breaks free from the academic system that is causing his alienation.

Kuang’s exploration of violence as a means of decolonization raises critical questions about the ethics and efficacy of such methods. While the novel acknowledges the moral complexity of violence, it also emphasizes its role in disrupting entrenched systems of exploitation. This perspective aligns with Brown (2003), who argues that systemic violence often necessitates equally radical responses to achieve justice (*Rutgers Law Review*). In *Babel*, Robin’s ultimate sacrifice underscores the transformative power of resistance, illustrating how acts of defiance can pave the way for new possibilities. By integrating Fanon’s theories, *Babel* challenges readers to rethink the role of violence and resistance in achieving decolonization. The novel’s conclusion—with Robin’s reconciliation with his cultural identity—offers a hopeful vision of what decolonized academic systems might achieve. By fostering cultural connection and dismantling exploitative practices, such systems can create spaces for marginalized students to thrive and produce knowledge that uplifts their communities.

R.F. Kuang’s *Babel* exemplifies how Fanon’s theories of decolonization can inform the restructuring of academic systems. Through its critique of systemic violence and its emphasis on cultural reconnection, the novel offers a compelling vision of how academia might be transformed to serve the interests of marginalized communities. While acknowledging the necessity of radical change, *Babel* ultimately envisions a future where education becomes a tool of empowerment rather than oppression.

V. Counterarguments and Real-World Parallels

A. Addressing the "Fantasy" Critique

Although modern day academic institutions don't condone violence, this pressure to succeed still exists today and by extension this alienation does as well. Due to the stigma against students of color, they often have to work harder to prove they deserve to be there. They have to fight against the racist underlying assumption that they are "diversity hires" and be grateful that the university accepted them to begin with. As a result of the lack of diversity in higher education, students of color are in spaces where they are the minority, isolated from their cultural peers. They are separated from their homes and often travel far distances to study at these highly regarded institutions. When they do encounter their own cultures on that rare occasion, it's viewed through the lens of academia, with rigor and objectivity. This space doesn't allow for connection on a deeper level. Even on the rare occasion that they find spaces that are diverse or come into contact with culture on a deeper level, its through sub-divisions of academia, smaller departments, less-regarded journals, and with lower paid faculty, which disincentives students from connecting with those spaces to begin with, and therefore the alienation continues.

B. Real-World Examples

In contemporary academic structures, even without silver bars this extraction still exists. Academic institutions in the United States and many western countries extract data from foreign countries to examine or forward theories on how they run and how best to exploit them. This knowledge production is sold by publishers to other (usually western) academic institutions, and rarely translated into the languages used in the countries they are extracted from. This research is only shared with those countries through a mandatory cost, either through other institutions and sometimes not offered at all. This is an inherently extractive and a colonial aspect of education

that Babel brings to light. Babel also shows this extractive nature through the labor of the students. In today's world, pressure is a fundamental aspect of the graduate student journey, intensified by competing responsibilities and the unique inner struggles faced by individuals in this academic role (Offstein et. al. 2004). This violent extraction that the students experience also creates a form of alienation and double-consciousness that the students psychologically face as they are aware of the furthering of imperial powers through their work.

C. Practical Measures in Academia

Although in *Babel* the alienation Robin experiences is resolved through violence, this doesn't need to be so. Since the causes of Robin's alienation are dramatized, so is this solution. In today's day and age, there are ways to prevent this violence and create a safe educational environment. Ensuring safe and inclusive environments for students of color can first start by avoiding the four forms of alienation I described above: diversifying ways of knowledge-making to prevent the commodification of language and culture as an objective form of study; promoting diversity so students aren't isolated from their communities; preventing academic violence by encouraging healthy and holistic practices of academia; and, finally, stopping the extraction of knowledge while promoting equitable sharing of academic insights. bell hooks' assertion that "language is also a place of struggle" underscores the need for these interventions, emphasizing that reclaiming linguistic agency is essential to resisting systems that commodify and decontextualize marginalized cultures. For hooks, fostering inclusivity in educational spaces means not only creating opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard but also validating their lived experiences as sources of knowledge. By implementing such practices, academia can transform from a site of alienation into a place where cultural and linguistic identities are celebrated rather than commodified.

Conclusion

R.F. Kuang's *Babel* offers a profound critique of the systemic inequities embedded in academic structures, using the metaphor of silver-working to highlight the commodification and alienation of marginalized linguistic and cultural identities. By situating the narrative within the frameworks of Fanon, Du Bois, and other critical theorists, this paper has demonstrated how linguistic alienation operates as both a psychological and structural mechanism of domination. Through Robin Swift's journey, *Babel* vividly illustrates the personal and societal costs of this alienation, revealing how academia, much like colonial systems, perpetuates hierarchies of power by dehumanizing and exploiting marginalized voices.

However, *Babel* also invites us to imagine a different academic future—one where education does not extract and alienate but instead fosters genuine cultural connection and empowerment. Drawing from the insights of DuBois, Fanon, Ngũgĩ, Lorde, and Spivak, this paper has argued that dismantling these oppressive systems requires not only the critique of their foundations but the construction of new, inclusive frameworks that honor the intrinsic worth of all cultural identities. Practical reforms in academia, as discussed, can mitigate alienation and promote equity, but as Kuang reminds us, true transformation often requires radical reimagining.

In this context, *Babel* serves as both a warning and a call to action. It critiques the violence of extractive systems while emphasizing the necessity of systemic change. By reclaiming language as a site of struggle, as bell hooks suggests, and rejecting the tools of domination, as Lorde advocates, academia can be restructured to prioritize cultural sovereignty and the collective good. As Robin's ultimate act of resistance illustrates, breaking free from systems of alienation is not only a personal liberation but a step toward creating spaces where

marginalized communities can thrive. This paper calls for further exploration into how these ideas can be realized, fostering an educational paradigm that centers equity, inclusion, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as forwarding the literature by closing the gap between fiction and theory in modern day politics.

Bibliography

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1994). *The Souls of Black folk*. Dover Publications. (Original work published 1903)

Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)

Gay, W. C. (1998). Exposing and overcoming linguistic alienation and linguistic violence. *Philosophy & Social Criticism, 24*(2-3), 137–156. https://doi.org/10.1177/019145379802400210

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

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

Spivak, G. C. (2013). *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey.

Offstein, E.H., Larson, M.B., McNeill, A.L. and Mjoni Mwale, H. (2004), "Are we doing enough for today's graduate student?", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 18 No. 7, pp. 396-407. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540410563103