

***Capturing the Invisible: Dynamics of Abstraction and Extraction in Capitalism, Imperialism, and Photography through the Lens of R. F. Kuang's Babel (2022)***

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***Abstract ;***

*This article examines the symbiotic relationship between capitalism and imperialism, as well as photography as a technology shaped by both, through an analysis of the dynamics of abstraction and extraction in R.F. Kuang's Babel (2022). It covers key aspects of abstraction through insights from Marx' Labour Theory of Value in addition to Said and Memmi's insights on stereotypes as abstract generalizations. It examines the material history of photography and silver extraction in relation to capitalist free trade and imperialist expansion. The article concludes with an examination of the role of colonial discourse in abstracting the non-western "other" to fuel war sentiments and facilitate dominion and resource extraction.*

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# ***Capturing the Invisible: Dynamics of Abstraction and Extraction in Capitalism, Imperialism, and Photography through the Lens of R. F. Kuang's Babel (2022)***

## **1. Introduction:**

Capitalism and Imperialism are two systems that have shaped the modern world, and thus, it comes as no surprise that they share many similarities in the way they operate. At their core, both systems rely on abstracting elements – be it natural resources, human labour, or communities – from their original contexts in order to extract value. Through abstraction and extraction, the two are able to impose new economic and social structures, create markets, and establish imperial rights that justify both territorial and economic expansion. As the daughter of these two systems, photography is not only born from the technological advancements during the industrial revolution, but it has also a material relationship with imperialist expansion, mainly through the extraction of silver. The process of taking a photograph relies on abstracting the photographed subject or object from their surroundings and then extracting their likeness to fix it on paper through light-sensitive silver particles. It becomes clear then that the conception and *modus operandi* of photography are interwoven with the imperialist and capitalist expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the timing of the invention of photography is significant. Coleman and James (2021) place the birth of photography squarely within the development of the capitalist theory and its critique; in other words, between the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) by Adam Smith, and the publication of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' (1848) the *Communist Manifesto*. As this also coincides with the period where European powers were expanding their dominion and influence, both economic and colonial, photography came to play an important role in abstracting and commodifying colonial experiences. In this regard, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2021) posits that "Photography should be understood as part and parcel of the imperial world" (p.42). According to her, the camera lens has participated in creating a visual wealth of colonial experience which has, often, abstracted the indigenous communities and reduced them to types and spectacles mainly through documenting and categorizing colonized peoples and territories. The process of visual abstraction often served to justify and reinforce colonial power structures.

The link between the development of capitalism precisely at the age of high imperialism has been explored by multiple prominent figures. Karl Marx has often commented on the insidious link between the two since his earliest writings. In *Capital, Vol. I* (1867/2013), he discusses imperialism as one of the chief momenta of "Primitive Accumulation,"<sup>2</sup> a process he deems necessary to the development of capitalism. He believes imperialism to be one of the instances of primitive accumulation because as "the colonies secured a market for the budding manufacturers, and, through the monopoly of the market, an increased accumulation. The treasures captured outside of Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder, floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital" (p.527). Therefore, it is necessary, as Hadas Thier (2020) argues, to understand that capital was not accumulated penny by penny as Adam Smith's economics suggest, but rather through exploitative and coercive processes of accumulation as Marx explains. The treasures and resources extracted outside of Europe through coercive trade or military occupation

have indeed sponsored the various technological developments during the industrial revolution leading to the growth of capitalism.

This article, therefore, aims to read the links between photography, capitalism, and imperialism through exploring some aspects of abstraction and extraction via a reading of R.F. Kuang's bestseller historical fantasy *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022). Kuang offers an alternative history of the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century England and its empire where the wealth is acquired mainly through the extraction and monopoly of silver. Through the Royal Institute of Translation, commonly referred to as Babel, England monopolizes not only silver, but linguistic and cultural knowledge too, in order to inscribe magical silver bars with different languages and translations. The inscribed bars become the building blocks of the British Empire and its indestructible wealth. The story highlights the relationship between the growth of capitalism and Imperialism in addition to the ruthless resource extraction and displacement of various indigenous people across the globe to extract more wealth. It also presents photography as a technological tool born from the development of capitalism. As such, the novel becomes a unique blend of history and the critique of capitalism and imperialism at once.

First, the article will briefly explain some of the connotations of the process of abstraction, mainly, abstraction as suggested through Marx' Labour Theory of Value, in addition to abstraction as construction of simple generalizations and representations with the help of insights from Edward's Said and Albert Memmi. Next, the article examines the tower of Babel and its engagement with silver-working in relation to the abstraction of labour and knowledge in order to extract value from silver-bars as the most significant commodities in the novel. Additionally, it discusses the material history of photography and its relation with resource extraction, mainly, silver. This leads to a discussion of the historical process of extracting and monopolizing silver through a brief account of the Anglo-Chinese Opium war, as represented in the novel. Eventually, the article concludes with an examination of the role of colonial discourse in abstracting the non-western other which is used to fuel war sentiments, and in turn, to facilitate dominion and profit extraction.

## **2. Processes of Abstraction**

Primarily, abstraction is a fundamental process of thought whereby complex ideas and concrete details are simplified by focusing on essential features while ignoring the less pertinent ones. This simplification allows for a generalization of concrete details into conceptual terms. The process has been utilized and referred to by various thinkers throughout history. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle explored in their works abstraction in relation to forms like Plato's theory of Forms. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Alfred North Whitehead (1967) writes in *Science and the Modern World* that one "cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction" (p.73). This is necessary because, as he further explains in *Process and Reality* (1987), the process of abstractions is not limited to thought processes only but also the way reality functions. He believes that in essence, it is hard to conceive of any entity in total abstraction from the workings of the universe. Stengers (2008) explains in her rereading of Whitehead's works that abstractions can be more than just the abstract notions that determine how we perceive the world, and more than abstractions from the concrete or generalizations. Nevertheless, it is in fact these same aspects of abstraction that this article is mostly interested in.

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To further explain the connotations of abstraction, Halewood (2011) provides an explanation of the word 'abstract' from the *Collins (English) Dictionary* (n.d) as follows:

one definition of abstraction is 'the process of formulating generalized ideas or concepts by extracting common qualities from specific examples...an idea or concept formulated in this way: *good and evil are abstractions*' This invokes the primacy of the link between ideas and abstraction, as usually conceived. (p.148)

He further dissects the word and states that the meaning is "linked to that of 'traction' adjoined to the prefix 'ab-' meaning 'away from' or 'off'" (p.148). In other words, this means that the meaning of the word does not only refer to a process of thought but also to a process of movement such as moving from a concrete form of an object to an abstract image of it, or moving from a detailed more complex aspect to a generalized or summarized one. In this way, the word abstract and extract become intermingled. In the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (n.d), it is stated that "The idea of "removing" or "pulling away" connects *abstract* to *extract*, which stems from Latin through the combination of *trahere* with the prefix *ex-*, meaning "out of" or "away from." The adjective form is "borrowed from Medieval Latin *abstractus*" which refers to incorporeal, universal, extracted," among other things.

Thus, we come to an important use of the word in its relation to society and labour. G.W.F. Hegel (1820/2008) explains in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* that the "universal and objective element in work...lies in the process of *abstraction* which effects the subdivision of needs and means and thereby *eo ipso* subdivides production and brings about the *division of labour*. By this division, the work of the individual becomes less complex, and consequently his skill at his abstract work increases, as does the volume of his output." (p.191, emphasis in the original). Here, he describes the dialectical process where the division of labour leads to a subdivision of needs through a process of abstraction. This means that as work becomes more specialized with individuals focusing on particular tasks within the production process, it also becomes abstract. He also emphasizes the social dimension of the division of labour making it a dialectical process, as he contends that through the abstraction of skills and means of production, people become necessarily dependent on one another and this reciprocal relation, in turn, satisfies their other needs.

This becomes an important departure point for Marx.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Marx applied abstraction to his critique of capitalism first as a method, by going back to the commodity and its value in order to explain how capitalism functions, and second, through his Labour Theory of Value. In his critique of capitalism, and as Thier (2020) writes,

By distilling, simplifying, and abstracting the key elements of the system, Marx was able to present them in their purest form, isolated from complicating factors. Once he set up the foundations, he built out the layers of complexities so that we are able to apply the deeper concepts to concrete reality. (p. 12-3)

That is to say, by actually starting his analysis from the commodity itself, he uses a process of abstraction that allows him to start with the most essential aspect of capitalism. Moreover, he uses abstraction to explore how social relations and labour are tied through their connection with commodities. This relation between the commodity and its value is the first building block of

Marx's *Capital*, a relationship that has a unique obscuring quality in that it obscures concrete labour that produces the commodity and transforms it into an abstract labour used to measure the value of said commodity.

Marx (1867/2013) bases his labour theory of value on the labour necessary to give value to a commodity. For him, "that which determines the magnitude of the value of any article is the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour time socially necessary for its production" (p.20). In other words, he explains, it is the needed labour required to make an article within ordinary conditions of production including skill and intensity determined both socially and historically. From here Marx addresses the abstraction of human labour or the "total labour power of society." What happens is that labour becomes abstract as it becomes "embodied in the sum total of the values of all commodities produced by that society" which transforms labour into "one homogenous mass of human labour, composed though it be of innumerable individual units" (p. 20). Therefore, under capitalism, labour is considered a collective undifferentiated whole even though the individual labour requires unique skills and tasks.

This abstraction becomes necessary for commodities to have an equivalent value that facilitates their exchange, a value which does not account for the individuality of each type of labour. Marx (1867/2013) illustrates the abstraction of the labour power by equating a said amount of linen (the article whose value we are looking for) with a coat (the equivalent value). These two different types of articles underwent two different types of labour: weaving for linen, and tailoring for the coat. Yet, the final value of linen does not bring forth the type of labour that gives it value. He affirms that "it is the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities that alone brings into relief the specific character of value-creating labour," and this happens through "reducing the different varieties of labour embodied in the different kinds of commodities to their common quality of human labour in the abstract" (pp.29-30). Therefore, abstract labour generalizes and gives a universal form to concrete labour which allows for the quantification of labour and makes it a measure of value in a capitalist society. Through his analysis, he makes clear that a commodity obscures its relations of production through an abstraction of human labour.

Marx sets the foundation of his critique through an examination of the commodity and its various relations of production. In his own words, "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,' ...our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of the commodity" (1867/2008, p.17). For him, it is only fitting that he starts his critique with the commodity and leave the historical development till the later parts of *Capital*. Marx also refers to the "immense accumulation of commodities" as commodity fetishism; He believes that "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." (46). That is to say, the commodity is not a mere object of exchange. It reveals hidden social relations and abstract values that endow it with a mystical quality. Commodities are labour and social relationships embodied in the physical appearance of the object and its exchange-value. Hence, just as Marx sets off the foundation of his critique through an analysis of the commodity, so does this article start its exploration of the processes of abstraction and extraction in relation to industrial capitalism, imperialism, and photography as seen in *Babel*, through the analysis of the magical silver-bars.



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### ***3. Silver Fetishism: Abstracting Conditions and Relations of Production.***

The dearest commodity in the world of *Babel* is silver, which is used as magical silver bars inscribed with equivalent translated expressions at the tower of Babel at Oxford. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, Robin Swift, is found in Canton dying among his dead relatives and mother, who succumbed to Cholera. He was saved by Professor Lovell, an Oxford professor on a business expedition to Canton, through the use of a silver bar. Professor Lovell is most likely Robin's biological father, as it soon becomes clear that he has assigned a governess and a collection of English books for Robin to learn from way before the death of his mother. Robin learns English through novels expedited yearly to Canton, and he is soon taken to England where he receives an extensive education in both English and Cantonese, in addition to Latin and Greek. When he is admitted to the prestigious Institute of Translation at Oxford, he soon becomes friends with Ramiz, or Ramy, and Indian, Victoire, from Haiti, and Letitia, or Letty, the only British person in his circle. Initially, Robin naively believes that the tower of Babel has extended a benevolent hand to those who have potential in translation, foreigners who can offer knowledge to the world. Through his unexpected meeting with Griffin, who is revealed to be his half-brother, he becomes involved with a secret society named "Hermes," through which he slowly sheds his naiveté and discovers that the institute is nothing short of the heart of the industrial and economic power of England. The tower, a reference to the Tower of Babel<sup>4</sup>, hoards the accumulated knowledge of the most important and powerful texts ever produced in the world in all languages. The foreign students are revealed to be commodities, or assets aiding the empire to hoard more riches and exert power.

When Robin sets foot in London, its magnificence is revealed to be a result of works of silver bars. It is described as "the Silver City, the heart of the British Empire, and in that era, the largest and richest city in the world" (Kuang, 2022, p.18). At the height of the industrial revolution, silver was used as an enabler and amplifier of new technologies. The narrator refers to the unmistakable industrialization and its relationship with silver as follows:

London had a mechanical heartbeat. Silver hummed through the city. It glimmered from the wheels of cabs and carriages and from horses' hooves; shone from buildings under windows and over doorways; lay buried under the streets and up in the ticking arms of clock towers; was displayed in shopfronts whose signs proudly boasted the magical amplifications of their breads, boots, and baubles. (p.19)

As silver "hums" through the city it is revealed to be the lifeblood of industrial and economic progress. It has a pervasive and transformative power over technological advancements and urban modernization from clock towers and bridges to bread and boots. In his stupor, Robin takes silver to symbolize wealth and prosperity in addition to industrial and technological superiority.

In *Babel's* London, silver lines the canals and makes the water "fresher than any river like the Thames had a right to be;" it disguises the bad smell in the gutters and sewage with "the invisible scent of roses; and it makes the bells "chimes for miles and miles further than they should have" (p.20). Silver becomes a marker of difference between London and the rest of the world. The significant role it plays in making England the most powerful and wealthiest nation at that particular

historical moment in the novel seems, to Robin, a testament of this nation's inherent technological superiority and its global influence. Yet, here is where silver as a commodity becomes problematic. In the first instance, the silver bars become an abstraction of congealed human labour and various relations of production that bestow an exchange value on the bars. In the second meaning of the word, they function through abstraction as they obscure the details and steps of their production. First, following Marx's model of value and labour theory of value, we find that inscribing the silver bars, or doing "silver working" through a process of match pairing is labour power in the abstract. In this case, "what is reproduced...is not individuality/specificity, but rather abstract value. The worker reproduces not 'himself/herself' but rather an abstract and interchangeable quantity of labor power" (Novak, 2007, p.130). The concrete and complex labour that goes into "silver working" becomes an abstract value, which eventually determines the exchange-value of the silver bars.

During Robin, Ramy, Victoire, and Letitia's first day at Babel tower, they are met with an upperclassman, Anthony Ribben, from the West Indies, who is tasked with giving them a tour throughout the tower. He explains that the upper level, the 8<sup>th</sup> floor is the most important place in the Institute because it is the place that produces all the silver bars of the country, and the British Empire. Once there, they find that the floor, unlike the other floors, is extremely guarded by various devices that enhance its security, including keeping a blood sample of every student in case of theft attempts. The headmaster of Babel, Professor Playfair, informs them that the tower is "the most important research centre of the world" (Kuang, 2022, p.80). He explains that the "power of the bar lies in words. More specifically, the stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing – the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language and another" (p.82). In their second year, they learn that the underlying principle of silver working is "untranslatability" (p.155). In other words, many expressions do not have an equivalent in another language and this happens mainly because of semantic gaps caused by lived cultural differences. The headmaster sums up the principles of doing match pairing as follows:

the basic principles of silver-working are very simple. You inscribe a word or phrase in one language on one side, and a corresponding word or phrase in a different language on the other. Because translation can never be perfect, the necessary distortions – the meanings lost or warped in the journey – are caught, and then manifested by the silver. (p.156)

Although this process sounds simple, it in fact requires a native speaker of a language who has mastered a second and even third or fourth languages, a lived cultural experience, and years of dedication to "absorb and breathe" the spoken languages.

The inscribed silver bar as a commodity does not bring into relief the complexity of the skill nor does it give justice to the identity of the translators and their backgrounds. Silver working then, becomes "human labour in the abstract" (Marx, 1867/2013, p.19). What is obscured through the silver bars is the identity of the scholars and translators whose knowledge of languages and ethnocultural origins are extracted in order to give use-value, and in turn, exchange and surplus value to the silver bars. In fact, Robin, Ramy, and Victoire come to learn that the only reason they are granted scholarships from Oxford is because they are foreigners, "they don't let [their] kind in otherwise" (Kuang, 2022, p.58). Through his extensive private lessons in Chinese with Professor Chakravarti, Robins is told that he is "a rare native speaker capable of expanding the bound of

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Babel's scant existing knowledge" of Chinese language (p.110-111). Their foreignness becomes an identifier along with the languages they have mastered. When students at Babel meet for the first time, they introduce themselves through the languages they are fluent in. Not counting Latin and Greek, which are admission requirements, Ramy is fluent in Arabic, Urdu, and English; Victoire is fluent in French, English, and Haitian Creole; Anthony has mastered German, French and Spanish alongside English; Letitia, whose native language is English, is fluent in German and French.

Both the cultural backgrounds and the linguistic knowledge involved in the process of silver-working become invaluable resources extracted from foreigners. Professor Playfair tells the students that inferior silver bars that are used in common everyday tasks and jobs are touched up by translators when they run out of charge. Letitia wonders whether this maintenance truly requires that much money, to which the professor replies "It pays well to perform what the general public thinks of as magic, doesn't it?" He goes on to rationalize this invented exchange-value and elaborates: "We hold the secrets, and we can set whatever terms we like. That's the beauty of being cleverer than anyone else" (Kuang, 2022, p.160). His response is significant on multiple levels. It calls to mind the capitalist conditions of production where the capitalist controls both the means of production, and the relations of production as Louis Althusser (1971/2014) explains in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Babel, in this case, is the capitalist entity that hoards the majority of silver bars in the country, in addition to the unique skills and knowledge required to create this commodity. Through this institute, "London had accumulated the lion's share of both the world's silver ore and the world's languages, and the result was a city that was bigger, heavier, faster, and brighter than nature allowed" (Kuang, 2022, p.20). When Robin first gets into contact with Hermes, Griffin informs him that Babel is the "most important enabler" of Britain's growth. The Institute "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" (p.99). Since it controls everything, "the secrets," as professor Playfair describes them, Babel has full control over the silver bars' production and use, in addition to the value extracted from them.

Therefore, foreign cultures and languages are treated like "a silver mine to be plundered..." (2022, p.111). Griffin urges Robin to consider the sources of England and Babel's power: "How does all the power from foreign languages just somehow accrue to England? This is no accident; this is a deliberate exploitation of foreign culture and foreign resources" (p.100). Indeed, the Institute collects foreign languages and their speakers as it collects silver. One proof is the large number of volumes of "Grammaticas," or volumes that contain the rules of each language possible; they have been "sat on crimson velvet cloth beneath a glass display case" (p.77). These works are some of the most treasured resources for which people have fought and died. This goes to show the importance of foreign languages and extracting exchange-value from them; they are commodified through silver-working. The foreign students themselves are handled as commodities. The only way they can be admitted to Babel is through recommendations of their guardians or sponsors, mostly emissaries or businessmen, who bring the children from all over the world, with a particular focus on the Orient.



This is mainly because “Romance languages will yield fewer returns as time goes on” as professor Lovell believes, and Classic languages “are getting less promising” as Anthony informs Robin and his friends (p.163). On the other hand, Orient languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Chinese, etc., are languages that Babel hasn’t “milked to exhaustion yet.” He addresses Robin and Ramy and tells them “boys, you’re uncharted territory. You’re the stuff everyone is fighting over,” because their languages are a “resource just like gold and silver” (p.164). This explains why professor Lovell, one of two faculty members who are engaged with Chinese, goes as far as to illegitimately father two boys, Griffin, and Robin. Since Prof. Lovell considers Griffin a failed experiment, he made sure to let Robin grow up in Canton until he was 7 to absorb as much Cantonese as possible, and thus, to be of more value to him and England.

In order to keep hold over these students and guarantee their loyalty, Babel offers them incredible privileges to the extent where if a student “could make even the flimsiest case that a gold-capped fountain pen would aid their studies, then Babel paid for it” (Kuang, 2022, p.138). At the most prestigious institute in Oxford, “Babblers” were granted permission to access any of the college libraries. This actually initially leads Robin to believe that “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 talent mattered” (p.136). Despite these privileges, the students who actually get to work on silver bars are exploited. Anthony, who is already a senior doing silver-work has managed to create six match pairs. Nevertheless, he is not paid the equivalent of his labour and his knowledge. Victoire asks if he gets royalties “every time they make a copy of [his] bars,” to which he answers: “Oh, no. I get a modest sum, but all the proceeding profits go to the tower. They do add my name to the ledger of match-pairs, though...that’s about the highest academic laurel you can claim” (p.163). Through silver bars, not only does the skill, knowledge and labour time involved in the making become labour in the abstract, allowing for a replication of that commodity and bestowing it with an exchange value, but the labour itself becomes easily reproduced and thus exploitable. The labourer does not get the full worth of his/her labour. In this way, Babel functions along the lines of capitalist market imperatives: extracting and monopolizing resources, transforming concrete labour into labour in the abstract, and exploiting labour value to extract more surplus value of a commodity.

#### **4. *Photography, Silver, and Abstraction***

The value of silver as commodity is also seen through photography. The photographic medium, in fact, obscures its own material reality. Hence, attributing the invention of photography to a single person or a single date is often an abstraction in itself. Yet, however much its history deserves to be discussed in more depth and length, it will be presented here in brief and mainly in relation to the processes of abstraction and extraction seen in both capitalist economic expansion and colonial empires. Wells and Price (2015) argue that though the invention of photography was officially announced in 1839 by both Fox Talbot in England, and Louis Daguerre in France, the idea itself precedes that date. What Talbot and Daguerre succeeded in doing is “fixing a photographic image” (p.56). It is also argued that in the early 1820s in France, Nicéphore Niépce has achieved key discoveries that in fact led to Daguerre’s photographic machine that came to be called the “Daguerreotype.” Azoulay (2021) offers to read the history of Photography against mainstream accounts and argues that “photography should be understood as part and parcel of the imperial

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world, that is, the transformation of others and their modes of being into lucrative primary resources, the products of which can be owned as private property” (p.42). Similarly, the history of capitalism should not be separated from its imperial essence; in other words, she argues that

capitalism is predicated on the same unstoppable movement that sped up the creation of new markets, the appropriation of land (transformed into “abandoned,” marketable, granted, or “available” property), its commodification, the exploitation of natural and human resources, the expansion of entrepreneurial opportunities, and growing groups of uprooted people, detached from their preexisting social fabrics, legally abused, made dependent on provisions and aid, and at best, allowed to be exploited as “labor power. (p.46)

Here, she draws attention to all the ways in which capitalism and imperialism are interconnected including the profit motif that is often obscured through abstraction.

In *Babel*, Kuang strategically links photography to its capitalist and imperialist background through the use of silver bars. In her narrative, the French chemist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre did not invent photography yet, but he had “a heliographic camera obscura” that “could be capable of replicating still images using exposed copper plates and light-sensitive compounds” (Kuang p.171). Daguerre wants the Babblers to take a look at his device and see if “they could improve it somehow,” with a promise of a patent and a percentage of the profits. To this effect, Babel’s 8<sup>th</sup> floor “frothed with silent frenzy as fourth years and graduate fellows flipped through etymological dictionaries, trying to find a set of words that would get at the right nexus of meaning involving light, colour, image, and imitation” (171). Eventually, Anthony was able to create a silver match pair that made the device work. Whether he cracked the problem through the inscription of matching words or dissolved the silver bars themselves, the camera worked through the use of silver. This process has a historical significance as it draws attention to photography’s material history. Angus Siobhan (2021) explains that “Photography has a material history as well, one in which silver and the metallurgist— *métallon* (mine, metal) + *érgon* (worker)—play crucial roles” (p.68). Two things become clear here, first, that the camera obscura obscures its own history of metal extraction, and second, it obscures the process of extraction and the process of making the photograph.

Therefore, Angus (2021), places silver rather than light as central to the conception of the first photographic devices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The process itself originally required the image to emerge “in the darkroom when the latent image is immersed in a chemical bath and the exposed silver halides are chemically reduced to elemental silver” (p.68). This explains the growing demand, at the time, for a “cheap and steady supply of silver” (p.71). And since England itself is not known for owning natural metals such as silver, the only source must be resource extraction from its colonies and through trade. Hence, it only makes sense that there should be “a connection between mining and the materiality of the photograph as an object” which, in actuality, “emerged from the political, economic, and environmental transformations of industrial capitalism that made surplus minerals available for the newly popular medium of photography” (p.71). He concludes that “the story of silver is one of conquest: of nature, of indigenous territory in the Americas, of the body of the laborer, of matter itself...the photograph’s physical existence is a function of resource extraction

and of the relationship between labor and capital” (p.85). Silver is, then, central not only to photography in its early days, but also to the material conditions of its existence, namely colonial expansion and industrial capitalism. The very physical existence of a photograph is inseparable from histories of extraction and processes of abstraction.

When the likeness of reality is extracted and fixed in a photographic image, that which it captures also becomes abstract. An example can be seen in the photograph Robin and his friends take at Babel when the invention became a sensation. At Letty’s request, they “assembled themselves before the camera. Letty and Victoire sat in chairs, hands folded stiffly in their laps. Robin and Ramy stood behind them” (Kuang, 2022, p.171). Victoire, and Ramy complained that the portrait is “unnerving” and that it “looks nothing like [them].” Robin thought “all their expressions were artificial, masks of faint discomfort. The camera had distorted and flattened the spirit that bound them” (172). What “flattened” means is that the concrete bond that is the result of their various experiences and “camaraderie” at Babel, in addition to the complexity of their cultural backgrounds have vanished. What they become on the surface of the photograph is an abstraction.

Robin’s feelings echo Roland Barthes’ (2010) reflections on photography where he states that “the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (p.12). Barthes writes that he experiences a “sensation of inauthenticity” whenever he is photographed, and this process renders him “neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object” (p.14). What happens to Robin and his friends is that they have become objects fixed through a device that obscures its own material history, their own cultural backgrounds, and their role as translators involved in silver-work, and as will be discussed shortly, their role in facilitating silver and profit extraction. That is why, “a critical exploration of the relationship between the materials from which these objects are made and the social world within which they are created” (Angus, 2021, p.87), will allow for a deeper understanding of the commodity that ties all three together: photography, capitalism, and imperialism.

### **5. *Capitalism, Imperialism, and Resource Extraction.***

We come then to an important intersection in history, where the rise of industrial capitalism was preceded and accompanied with the expansion of the British Empire and the extraction and exploitation of foreign resources. Despite the mutual influences, there is consensus that imperialism is not a direct cause of capitalism but that it has greatly enhanced the development of industrial capitalism in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marx (1867/2013) explains

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalistic production.

These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. (p.525)

Marx clearly implies that the origins of industrial capitalism are violent ones as he refers to the exploitation and atrocities committed by the empire in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. He sarcastically calls the atrocities of imperialism as “the rosy dawn” of capitalism to highlight to inhumanity that fuelled its initial growth. Moreover, Vladimir Lenin (1919/1999) goes as far as to argue that imperialism “undoubtedly represents a special stage in the development of capitalism”

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(p.92). Lenin sees imperialism as a stage and not necessarily a product of industrial capitalism. This implies an equivalence in terms of imperialism and capitalism. He focuses more on the structural transformation within capitalism itself as capitalist nations have come to rely on monopoly capitalism, finance capitalism, and the rise of banking.

In an interesting take, Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002) argues that the riches accumulated from overseas colonization “may have contributed substantially to further development” of capitalism, but it was not “a necessary precondition” (p.149). The British economy was already developing into capitalist social property relations and “the wealth from the colonies and the slave trade contributed to Britain’s Industrial revolution” (p.149)<sup>5</sup>. Instead, she believes that the capitalist development and the capitalist economic structure already at work in Britain gave rise to new forms of colonization whereby capitalism “created new reasons, new needs, for pursuing some of them with even greater gusto...it created a whole new logic to its own, new forms of appropriation and exploitation” (p.151). To illustrate, she refers to the difference between the Spanish Empire, which at some point amassed greater riches from the Americas than England did, but did not develop in an industrial capitalist way. In comparison to Spain and Portugal, England lagged behind in its imperialist ventures, and the wealth accumulated from these ventures also lagged in comparison. Nevertheless, this made British imperialism function more along capitalist demands rather than mercantile ones.

This can definitely be seen in the world of *Babel*. As discussed above, Babel, “the enabler” of the wealth of the British Empire functions much like a capitalist machine in the way it extracts resources and monopolizes them, the way it exploits the translators who do silver-working, and the way it commodifies knowledge and cultural heritage to gain profit through silver. When Robin first steps ashore at the port of London, he is in awe with the docks that “were a flurry of the colonial trade at its apex” (Kuang, 2022, p.20). Early on in the story, there is clear concern with Britain’s colonial ventures, which Robin was still unaware of as a boy. He notes that the port was filled with

Ships heavy with chests of tea, cotton, and tobacco, their masts and crossbeams studded with silver that made them sail more quickly and safely, sat waiting to be emptied in preparation for the next voyage to India, to the West Indies, to Africa, to the Far East. They sent British wares across the world. They brought back chests of silver. (p.20)

This is a clear indication of the link between British colonial trade and silver. The colonies supply England with material wealth gained through extraction of resources. This mirrors the historical pattern of British colonialism and silver gains a symbolic meaning in that it represents both the economic power and the technological advancements of Britain. Therefore, silver, that is extracted from the colonies and used for global trade becomes the commodity that both sustains and speeds up the capitalist imperial machine.

In fact, Britain’s colonial ventures and their relationship with Babel often become points of heated debates between many characters, especially between Letty, who is British, and Ramy who is a Muslim Indian, in addition to Robin and Griffin. When Letty comments on the Mughal rule and the intervention of the British to save the Indians, Ramy retorts: “We’re not being ruled, we’re being misruled. What’s happening to my country is nothing short of robbery. It’s not open trade; it’s



financial bleeding, it's looting, and sacking" (p.131). Griffin discloses to Robin that one of the major sources of income of Babel comes from "militaries, both state and private" (p.99). "Military contracts," according to Griffin and the Hermes society, "compose half of the work orders" of silver at Babel, mostly related to the British colonial ventures (p.136). He elaborates on the role of Babel in expanding the empire through silver bars and tells Robin:

We possess all this silver because we cajole, manipulate, and threaten other countries into trade deals that keep the cash flowing homeward. And we enforce those trade deals with the very silver bars, now inscribed with Babel's work, that make our ships faster, our soldiers hardier, and our guns more deadly. (p.100)

Both Ramy's response and Griffin's insights draw attention to two important aspects of Britain's colonial ventures and its monopoly over silver. First, that "The wealth of Britain depends on coercive extraction," as Griffin shares with Robin (p.176), and second, that that coercive extraction is often masked as "free trade."

Both of these aspects are made evident during Robin and his cohort's trip to Canton with Professor Lovell. During this trip, several key events unfold that deepen the young scholars' understanding of British imperialist exploitation and its frantic desire for silver. Before that, it is necessary to briefly go on a historical tangent that significantly informs the magnitude of the trip's events. Initially, it was the Spanish empire that extracted silver and gold from Latin and South America. Alan J. Specter (2007) explains that this wealth was not sustained as the Spanish nobility "spent so much of its wealth from Latin America importing products from Britain, which in turn invested a major part of its profits in funding Britain's industrialization and consolidation of the British Empire" (p.9). Silver was in return used in trade in India and the far East, mainly China. Britain, silver, and trade in China lead us without fail to the Anglo-Chinese Opium wars. The trade between England, China, and India was initially done through the English East India Company, which, "as is well known, obtained besides the political rule in India, the exclusive monopoly of the tea-trade, as well as of the Chinese trade in general, and of the transport of goods to and from Europe... The monopolies of salt, opium, betel and other commodities, were inexhaustible mines of wealth" (Marx, 1867/2013, p.526). According to Marx, at some point about 1798, and because of various parliamentary interventions, the company ceased to be a direct exporter of opium and they instead became the producers of opium in India.

In his journals in the New York Times *Tribune*, Marx (1858/2007), who was greatly invested in the English trade with the Far East at the time, explains that when the opium monopoly was established in India, the trade between China and India consisted exclusively of an exchange of silver with opium. This eventually drained silver reserves in China in an outflow from the colony to England. Chinese traders have originally exchanged tea for silver, but through the opium trade, silver flowed back into England. Marx nicely sums up the process of cultivating opium in India and selling it in China through Canton. He writes that the British government,

...in its Indian capacity, it forces the opium cultivation upon Bengal, to the great damage of the productive resources of that country; compels one part of the Indian ryots to engage in the poppy culture; entices another part into the same by dint of money advances; keeps the wholesale manufacture of the deleterious drug a close monopoly in its hands; watches by a whole army of official spies its growth, its

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delivery at appointed places, its inspissation and preparation for the taste of the Chinese consumers, its formation into packages especially adapted to the convenience of smuggling, and finally its conveyance to Calcutta, where it is put up at auction at the Government sales, and made over by the State officers to the speculators, thence to pass into the hands of the contrabandists who land it in China. (pp.30-31)

The British government, therefore, oversees the whole process from the cultivation of opium to its smuggling to China, a manifold process that shows the exploitative impact of the opium trade on both India and China.

On the one hand, the Indians are forced to cultivate opium which is harmful for their lands and thus forming a state monopoly of the drug; on the other hand, the opium is smuggled to China fuelling addiction and corruption among the people and officials. This indicates that the British imperial interests and profits are prioritized over the well-being of both the Chinese and the Indians. Colonial Treasurer at Hong Kong, Montgomery Martin, wrote back to the government that “the opium seller slays the body after he has corrupted, degraded, and annihilated the moral being of unhappy sinners, while every hour is bringing new victims to a Moloch which knows no satiety...” (as cited in Marx, 1858/2007, p.25). Therefore, it becomes clear that state-run trade, on top of being contraband, is an act of violent exploitation with severe consequences.

According to Hao Gao (2018), the Jiaqing Emperor banned the trade in 1796. Nevertheless, the trade persisted and the supply of opium by British merchants increased “forty-fold in four decades” (p.22). The Qing Dynasty took serious action to thwart the contraband trade of opium and appointed Commissioner Lin to end the trade. The commissioner reached Canton in 1839 and confiscated the opium chests that were on board of the contraband ships near Canton (mostly of British merchants), and after a series of events, he ended up enforcing a lock down on the British subjects and representatives residing in Canton until the opium sellers give up the trade. This was taken very badly by the British merchants who demanded the opium chests be returned or reimbursed until an escalation led to the intervention of the British Government, which after much debate, decided to take military action. The reason behind this decision became a contested historical moment and two main arguments for the war emerged: “expanding national interest and restoring national honour” (Chen, 2017, p.2). A group of private merchants known as the “Warlike Party” pushed through with a rhetoric of national honour and national interest while the true motif was profit and “the desire to trade in conditions under which the merchants believed themselves entitled by right of being British” (p.3). The British have considered the Chinese actions of forcibly confiscating their merchandise “a serious insult to British subjects and their property...that deserved punishment” (Gao, 2017, pp.29-30). Therefore, the focus of the parliament shifted from “what the British did to Chinese subjects,” to “what the Chinese authorities did to British subjects” (p. 31).

The question of free trade also emerged as a prominent argument used by private British merchants who argued that through the actions of the Chinese officials, “the principle of free trade had been severely violated” (Gao, 2018, p.27). Song-Chuan Chen (2017), explains that “trade was considered a matter of national interest,” and therefore, the private merchants believed that “a war to secure extensive trade privileges in China was in the British national interest and reflected the cold

calculations of free trade: the more Britain traded with China, the richer the British would become” (p.2). In fact, Marx (1858/2013) believes that trade and profits gained from the monopoly are at the heart of this war instigated by the British who wanted to force open a market of opium in China. He perceives an inherent contradiction in the argument of free trade and states: “While openly preaching free trade in poison, it secretly defends the monopoly of its manufacture. Whenever we look closely into the nature of British free trade, monopoly is pretty generally found to lie at the bottom of its ‘freedom’” (p.31). In its military support of private merchants and trade ventures, the British government shows hypocrisy in advocating for “free trade” while pushing through with the monopoly of commodities, in this case, opium.

This form of expansion goes along the lines of Wood’s argument that “it was British capitalism that produced an imperialism answering to the specific requirements of capitalist accumulation... [It] created new imperialist possibilities by generating economic imperatives, the compulsions of the market, which could reach far beyond direct political dominion” (2002, p.175). Eventually, this is the result of the first Opium War that forced the Chinese government to sign the Treaty of Nanking and to accept the opium trade, which thrived even further leading to the second Opium War. Zhuang Guotu (1994) explains that the war had far-reaching consequences. It has technically enabled the westerners, led by England, “to revamp the structure of their trade with China on their own terms and forced the Chinese government into acceptance. Since then, the process of western expansion into China was characterised by commercial expansion, military show of force, and political control” (p.156). The new terms of this capitalistic trade are monopoly under the guise of free trade, exploitation, and coercive extraction of resources.

How do these events play in the world of *Babel* then? Kuang has remained mostly faithful in her representations of historical England, as she declares in the novel’s preface. She nonetheless, took liberties with the dates of the events for the sake of narrative. As mentioned earlier, some of *Babel*’s translators often go on trips to the colonies as part of their training before graduating. Prior to the trip, Robin discovers that Ramy and Victoire are also part of the Hermes secret society. Their trip will resolve any difference of opinion they had previously concerning the violence of the British Empire. The main reason for their voyage is sending translators proficient in Mandarin and Cantonese in order to

... help negotiate on behalf of several private trading companies, foremost among them Jardine, Matheson & Company. This would be more difficult than it sounded, for trade relations with the Qing court had been marked by mutual misunderstanding and suspicion since the end of the past century. The Chinese, wary of foreign influences, preferred to keep the British contained with other foreign traders at Canton and Macau. But British merchants wanted free trade – open ports, market access past the islands, and the lifting of restrictions on particular imports such as opium. (Kuang, 2022, p.288)<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the demands of British merchants to conduct trade following their own rules that guarantee maximum privileges were a major instigator of the opium war. What these merchants needed, in the world of the novel is linguistic and cultural knowledge of China, thus the need for *Babel*’s translators.

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The misunderstandings, as will be evident, are a result not of an inability to communicate between the two sides, but an inability of the British to enforce their own trade rules through words alone. Professor Lovell blames the previous failures in reaching a positive agreement with the Chinese on “cultural miscommunication” (Kuang, 2022, p. 289). He indicates that one of the reasons previous trade delegations failed is because the traders “tend to assume that everyone should naturally just learn to speak and behave like the English. They have done a fairly good job at provoking local animosity” (p.289). Nevertheless, he persists that despite the lack of delicateness of the traders, “such heightened tensions were fundamentally the fault of the Chinese” (p.289). Mr. Baylis, Jardine, Matheson & Co’s liaison, informs Lovell that commissioner Lin “demands the immediate surrender of all opium brought to China...he suspended trade” and prohibited the British to leave factories until they abide by the set rules (p.294). He confesses that although the British subjects were supposedly under “siege” by the Chinese, “it really wasn’t so bad...the only harms were overfeeding and lack of exercise” (p.294). Nevertheless, the siege will be used as a justification for calling upon the British Parliament to take military action against this injury to the British national honour. The delegation chooses Robin to mediate with commissioner Lin because he is Chinese and might be more favourable in light of this shared kinship.

Robin comes to his senses and finally throws away his loyalty to Babel after he sees an opium den in Canton. He realizes that he has been trying to look away in disbelief of the horrors Babel and England were allowing. Ramy reveals that his own guardian, Sir Horace Wilson, has invested in the opium fields in India. Sir Horace “owned a share in one of the plantations. He was so proud; he thought that this was the future of the colonial trade” (p.305). The sight of the scarlet poppy fields and its effects on both India and China left a lasting impression on Ramy, explaining his open hostilities against the British. He tells Robin: “The British are turning my homeland into a narco-military state to pump drugs into yours” (p.305). The implications of the connections between Babel, silver, free trade, and England finally dawn on Robin as he reflects: “Cotton from India to Britain, opium from India to China, silver becoming tea and porcelain in China, and everything flowing back to Britian. It sounded so abstract – just categories of use, exchange, and value – until it wasn’t” (p.305). The shift in Robin’s perspective indicates that he is finally moving beyond the abstract representations of British imperialism, and its capitalistic trade to the concrete and material realities of inequality and exploitation. From Babel, the flow of commodities such as silver appears abstract and detached from his lifestyle. Yet, considering Marx’s discussion of abstraction of labour and value, he realizes that global “free trade” is reduced to abstract categories such as use, exchange, value, all of which obscure the social and human realities behind them.

During the audience with Imperial High Commissioner Lin, the latter appears to be well aware of the British line of argument pushed forward by Jardine and Matheson. He raises important moral and ethical questions to Mr. Baylis that make their argument of free trade seem hollow. He politely asks Mr. Baylis

...is it not true that in your country, opium is prohibited with the utmost strictness and severity?...does not the sanction against your own civilians’ use of opium prove that you know full well how harmful it is to mankind?...Have we ever sold you anything



save for that which is beneficial, that which your country has great demand for? Is your argument now that the opium trade is, in fact, good for us? (Kuang, 2022, p.309)

Mr. Baylis avoids the questions and persistently shifts the focus to free trade. He demands that both parties make the trade legal to reap the benefits. In the likely case Commissioner Lin confiscates the chests and meddles with British citizens and property, Britain will defend its citizens, on Chinese soil, doing illegal trade, as it sees fit. Kuang's twist on historical events happens through making Robin an important agent of this debate as Commissioner Lin requests a private talk with him where he asks whether mediation would actually "change anything" (p.311). Robin confesses that the British "want what they want, and they won't settle for anything less" (p.312). The same day, Commissioner Lin "was burning the opium," (313), the equivalent of "over two million pounds" (317); this marks the beginning of the armed response of Britain, the urgent departure of Robin and his cohort, in addition to the killing of professor Lovell during the trip back to London.

#### **6. *Justifying Extraction through Abstraction: A Colonial Rhetoric.***

As mentioned previously, the opium war was often justified by the British as an issue of both national interest and national honour. Forcing open a market in China that gives trade privileges to Britain was the main imperative. Besides military enforcements, it appears that what professor Lovell describes as "cultural miscommunication," is in fact a deliberate colonial rhetoric of abstracting the local populations through the construction of demeaning ethnic and racial categorizations that legitimize colonial dominion and forceful economic expansion. Mr. Jardine and Matheson, in addition to the other private merchants' line of arguments come from a position of superior self-perception. Mr. Baylis dodging the moral questions raised by Commissioner Lin is proof that the British refuse to argue on equal moral grounds, and therefore, will not settle for anything less than what they demand. This is in fact an important aspect of the process of abstraction as often used in colonial discourse. This process, as will be discussed shortly, facilitates resource extraction and colonial domination. In the novel, it proves to be a catalyst in shaping public opinion and fuelling war sentiments against China.

Upon his return to Prof. Lovell's home at Hempstead, Robin discovers in his office two-years' worth of correspondences with Jardine and Matheson, in addition to other private trading companies. Even reverends such as Gützlaff and Morrison have been using "their covers as missionaries to spy on the Qing military" (Kuang, 2022, p.349). Gützlaff and Jardine were communicating a "detailed sketch of Canton's main docks," in addition to "known ships in the Chinese navy," in short, what he found was evidence of "war plans" against China way before the delegation made its way to Canton (p. 348). What astonishes Robin most, is Prof. Lovell's description of the Chinese and vocality on the various benefits of the war including linguistic resources. He assures his correspondent that the "Chinese, languid and lazy, with an army without one iota of bravery or discipline, might be defeated!" (p.348). He realizes that war was only a question of time; The delegation has been a pretext to stir further hostilities. Matheson and Jardine have already prepared pamphlets to "whip up public support of the war," in which they describe the Chinese as "a people characterized with a marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy" (p.149).

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Prior to the negotiations, Prof. Lovell primes Robin and his cohort about what to expect from the Chinese. He has always been of the opinion that the Chinese were a race inclined to sloth and unproductivity, and he was strict with Robin so that he does not inherit this trait. For him, the problem of the Chinese is that they “have convinced themselves that they’re the most superior nation in the world...they recognize no laws except their own, and they don’t regard foreign trade as an opportunity” (p.289). Ironically, what he describes here is the same line of reasoning the British delegations and merchants conducted themselves in. During his quarrel with Robin and right before his death, he shouts that China is “a nation mired in superstition and antiquity, devoid of the rule of law, hopelessly behind the West on every possible register. It is a nation of semi-barbarous, incorrigibly backward fools –” (p.318). Robin retorts that this is “a nation of *people*... People you’re poisoning whose lives you’re ruining” (p.318). This rhetoric casts the Chinese, and any people outside the West as “Other.” Such generalizations and demeaning categorizations convert real people into abstract images easily reproducible in the minds of people.

This type of abstraction reveals itself a necessary part of colonial discourse. In light of this, Edward Said (1987/2003) makes the question of possibly dividing different cultures into distinct categories the core of his work *Orientalism*. Said critiques the ways in which Orientalism reduces Eastern cultures and civilizations into abstract representations and simple generalizations. He argues that “to such abstractions Orientalism had contributed its power of generalization, converting instances of a civilization into ideal bearers of its values, ideas, and positions, which in turn the Orientalists had found in “the Orient” and transformed into common cultural currency” (p.252). Through abstraction, racial and ethnic stereotypes are reinforced which allows western scholars in particular, such as Prof. Lovell in *Babel*, to present a homogenized image of the East or Orient that serves Western interests. Not only that, but these images become the default setting for Western perceptions of the Orient. Because of this, “... the notion of a type – Oriental, Islamic, Arab, or whatever – endures and is nourished by similar kinds of abstractions or paradigms or types as they emerge out of the modern social sciences” (p.260-261). In the novel, and as seen through the racist stereotypes often uttered by Prof. Lovell and other academics at Oxford, even educated people fall back on these abstract conceptions of the ethnic “other.”

Letty, for instance, despite her thorough understanding of class structure and struggle in Britain, is unable to think of Indians as concrete individuals. She thinks of the British imperial presence in India as a benevolent act that is saving Indians from the atrocious Mughal rulers, therefore, the British victory at Plassey is a fair “retaliation.” She believes that the British rule in India cannot be so bad since “there are plenty of Indians in the civil administration, as long as they’re qualified” (Kuang, 2022, p.). Despite Letty’s absence of malice, her words imply that she perceives of Indians as a type to be unqualified for such positions. Here we see her falling back on abstract conceptions of India even though she “had never stepped foot in the colonies and therefore,” according to Ramy, “shouldn’t opine on the supposed benefits of the British presence in India” (p.128). The image of the colonized, like India, or the object of economic Western economic expansion, such as China, comes to form a mythical portrait as described by Albert Memmi in *The colonizer and the Colonized* (1974/2003). He states:

Just as the bourgeoisie proposes an image of the proletariat, the existence of the colonizer requires that an image of the colonized be suggested. These images become excuses without which the presence and conduct of a colonizer, and that of a bourgeois, would seem shocking. But the favored image becomes a myth precisely because it suits them too well. (p.123)

Therefore, just like the bourgeois who thinks the proletariat are shiftless and lazy, so does the colonizer think the colonized is unqualified, deceitful, and stupid.

Memmi questions the validity of such abstract images; in his own words: “can one accuse an entire people of laziness? It can be suspected of individuals, even many of them in a single group. One can wonder if their output is mediocre, whether malnutrition, low wages, a closed future, a ridiculous conception of a role in society, does not make the colonized uninterested in his work” (pp.124-5). Here, he draws attention to the unlikelihood of an entire people of being lazy and to the necessity of considering the material reality of the colonized before constructing a simple image of them. And this is exactly what Prof. Lovell, Prof. Playfair, Baylis, Jardine, Matheson, etc. are doing. Can one in fact accuse a nation as large and populous as China of being “languid and lazy,” or prove that all Chinese people are marvellously “imbecile, obstinate, or conceited”? Such accusations, when independent from “any sociological or historical conditions” are “suspect” (Memmi, 1974/2003, p.125). Casting the colonized in simplified and demeaning abstract representations removes complexity and concreteness of these people as individuals.

Through abstraction, it is easier to allow oneself to exert violence in order to control and exploit. Memmi argues that whenever a colonizer feels the need to state that “the colonized is a wicked, backward person with evil, thievish, somewhat sadistic instincts, he thus justifies his police and his legitimate severity. After all, he must defend himself against the dangerous and foolish acts of the irresponsible” (p.127). This statement explains all that happens during the delegation trip, and it explains the vocality of characters like Prof. Lovell and Mr. Baylis about the inferiority of the Chinese who are about to ruin great profits. Therefore, the merchants, and Babel, take it upon themselves to prevent the foolishness of the Chinese. We come once again to profit extraction through both violence and abstraction; this is what Memmi considers to be the core motive of such constructions – “the colonizer’s economic and basic needs” (p.127).

Such stereotypes rationalize the colonizer’s oppressive methods and make imperialism appear natural and necessary to “fix” the colonized, out of benevolence. That is why, even after witnessing how the British conducted themselves in Canton, Letty was still unable to comprehend that this is part and parcel of imperial dominion and its economic expansion. She finally breaks down when Victoire confronts her about the truth behind Babel’s involvement with slave trade through selling slave owners silver bars to be fixed “to iron chains so that slaves can’t escape...It makes them docile” (Kuang, 2022, p.354). Letty naively believes that slavery was gone with its abolition in Britain, but Victoire shakes her naiveté and asks: You don’t think we sell bars to America? You think British manufacturers don’t still profit from shackles and irons? You don’t think there are people who still keep slaves in England...?” (p.354). Letty complains that if inequality is the issue, Robin, Ramy, and Victoire, should have gone through the university because “there are all sorts of aid programmes, missionary groups. There’s *Philanthropy*...” (353). This clearly shows that her reality is detached from the material reality of the colonies. Through abstraction, she, and the public

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come to accept imperialism and not find fault in the way her country and Babel coerce and exploit in order to extract value. Even worse, she perceives her friends' collusion with Hermes as a betrayal to Babel and cries out: "But Babel gave you everything...you had everything you wanted, you had such *privileges* – (p.352). What she perceives as an act of charity from Babel and England are in fact acts of bondage. From the perspective of the colonizer, their "...acts of charity are wasted, the improvements the colonizer has made are not appreciated. It is impossible to save the colonized from this myth" (Memmi, 1974/2003, p.126). It is precisely because of deeply ingrained abstract generalizations and categorizations, that it becomes difficult for the colonizer to free his/her mind.

### **7. Conclusion**

With their mechanisms of abstraction and extraction, the capitalist drive for expansion and imperialist ventures share more than a symbiotic relationship embodied in *Babel* through the symbolic use of silver. By using silver as the most precious commodity in the novel, Kuang artfully draws attention to that which a commodity obscures. A commodity's value transforms concrete labour into human labour in the abstract, obscures the unique and complex skills required for the work, and renders abstract the very being of the workers. Silver bars in the novel, obscure the fact that a Royal Institute as prestigious as Babel is nothing else than "the business of colonialism" (Kuang, 2022, p.100). Babel not only monopolizes silver, a metal obtained through manipulation, cajoling, looting, and coercion, but also monopolizes linguistic and cultural knowledge extracted from foreign students it exploits under a mask of benevolence. In this, it is a capitalist machine that controls both the means and relations of production. The characters' trip to Canton proves to be a catalyst that reveals the invisible ties of free trade and imperialist coercive extraction of resources; they realize that terms such as commodity, free trade, value, and exchange are often perceived in their abstract form hiding from view the concrete realities of exploitation and coercion. The exploited people are not rendered abstract through economic systems and imperialist ventures only, but also through the very language used to demonize them, demean them, and render them abstract and simplified categories.

Moreover, Kuang presents photography as a technology born from the industrial revolution and materially links it to imperialist expansion through the use of and extraction of silver. The process of photography itself mirrors the dynamics between abstraction and extraction as it makes invisible its own material history, in addition to abstracting subjects from their contexts to extract their likeness and fix it on paper. Therefore, as a technology, photography embodies the very principles that drove 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalist and imperialist expansion. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the historical roots and explore the relationship between materials that make up a technology in order to address the systemic inequities and exploitative practices that go behind the production of technology. Through a commodity, just like a camera obscura, concrete labour and complex histories of both individuals and cultures are obscured, and that which is revealed to the eye is their abstract form.

### **8. Notes:**



<sup>1</sup> This article is not concerned with offering a detailed account of the invention of photography. Historical aspects of the development of photography appear in relation to the industrial growth of capitalism and colonialist extractions of silver.

<sup>2</sup> Marx argues that primitive accumulation happens both before and during the growth of capitalism. For a full discussion of “Primitive Accumulation,” See Karl Marx *Capital, Vol I, part 8* “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation.” See also David Harvey’s reinterpretation of the concept in his essay “Accumulation by Dispossession.”

<sup>3</sup> Marx does not refer to Hegel’s words explicitly in his analysis of abstract labour and the value of commodities, but the influence is clear despite the difference in intent.

<sup>4</sup> The tower of Babel appears in a biblical story referring to a time when all human beings spoke the same language and decided to build a city and tower. R.F. Kuang provides an explanation of this biblical narrative as part of the students’ lessons with Professor Playfair.

<sup>5</sup> For the full argument on capitalist imperialism, a specific form of capitalism that links capitalism to Imperialism, see Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, chapter 7 “The Origin of Capitalist Imperialism.”

<sup>6</sup> Jardine, Matheson, &Co was an English private trading company involved in tea trading with China. William Jardine and James Matheson were personally involved in instigating war sentiments against China. Having privately traded with China for over 20 years, they possessed extensive knowledge of China’s military strength. For more on the role of private British traders see Chen, Song-Chuan (2017). *Merchants of War and Peace: British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War*. For correspondences between merchants including Jardine and Matheson, See Hao Gao, (2018). “Imagining the Opium Trade: Britain’s Justification for the First Anglo-Chinese War,” and Karl Marx, (2007). *Dispatches for the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, part 1: “China.”

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