The Limits of Diversity: How Publishing Industries Make Race

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This article is a critical account of how diversity is understood and mobilized within cultural industries, based on an empirical study of the UK publishing industry. Drawing from 113 qualitative interviews, we examine how diversity discourse shapes the acquisition, promotion, and sale of authors of color. We highlight the limitations of the industry's quantitative approaches to the diversity "problem" and suggest an alternative approach that focuses on how cultural production reflects and reproduces existing racial inequalities. We demonstrate how diversity acts as a form of racial governance that commodifies authors of color while simultaneously devaluing them. Contributing to the project of race-ing media industry research, the article demonstrates how the unraced dominant culture profits the most from the commodification of culture.

Keywords: diversity, race and racism, cultural industries, publishing, media industry studies, production studies, Whiteness

The year 2020 was a tumultuous one, not least for race relations in the West. The unavoidable fact that racialized groups have been disproportionately affected by the Covid pandemic, combined with the Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the mediatized murder of George Floyd, forced a reckoning with racism in societies that had convinced themselves that it was a thing of the past. This soul-searching was particularly felt in the cultural industries, where media corporations that historically have shied away from making explicitly political pronouncements took the unprecedented step of releasing statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

As one sector that is acutely aware of, to paraphrase former BBC Director General Greg Dyke, its *hideous Whiteness*, the UK publishing industries came out strong on this issue. The Black Lives Matter protests effectively served up yet another reminder of the publishing industry's abject record on diversity.

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Date submitted: 2021-10-04

In a letter to his company that was shared publicly, CEO of Penguin Random House UK Tom Weldon acknowledged "the systemic racism that Black people, and indeed all people of colour, face daily" (para. 6), before outlining the company's commitments to "inclusivity" (and achievements made in that area to date), including increasing representation, creating "a culture of belonging," and publishing "books for everyone, by everyone" (Penguin Random House UK, 2020, para. 16). David Shelley, CEO of Hachette UK, similarly released a statement, describing how he wants "people to feel seen, heard, understood and supported by everyone at Hachette, particularly at a time when terrible things are happening in the world around them" (Hachette UK, 2020). Pan Macmillan's (2020) statement highlighted an urgent need "to be better allies to the Black community, to educate ourselves on Black issues and to commit to sustained and effective action to oppose racism" (para. 1), before outlining a list of pledges—mostly around recruitment, but also acquisition. Harper Collins (2020) released a single message on Twitter that expressed solidarity with "all of our colleagues, authors, readers and partners who have lived with racism and oppression throughout their lives in the US."

A year that has exposed the ongoing dispensability of Black, Brown, and Asian lives can make the subject of "diversity" in publishing feel a little trivial. But the very utterance of Black Lives Matter underscores the lack of value that is ascribed to Black life in all aspects of society, including media. Nearly all the statements referred to earlier involved a reference to the power of books—as David Shelley (as cited in Hachette UK, 2020) wrote, "books are among the most potent agents of change in the world" (para. 4). Such expressions can feel slightly trite, particularly when coming from corporations that make immense profits from the commodification of culture. But if racism involves the dehumanization of people of color, then one of the powerful dimensions of books, especially fiction, is how they can help restore the humanity to people racialized as Other, to return value to those whose lives have been devalued.

The statements shared by the major publishing houses in support of Black Lives Matter focused on recruitment in an industry that remains overwhelmingly White and middle class. There was also an acknowledgment of the lack of diversity in the books being published. Yet, an underexplored area is the treatment of authors of color[2] once they are acquired. As this article will show, although there is an increased demand for authors from racialized backgrounds in particular, their books—and, by extension, representations of race—are made according to the dominant White hegemony. While this has been a long-standing theme in critical theories of race and media, what this article brings to the discussion is a still relatively novel empirical insight into how *race is made* by cultural industries. In doing so, this article demonstrates how publishing houses are attempting to capitalize on the demand for diversity and how authors of color continue to struggle despite the new opportunities that this new moment of diversity is bringing. Specifically, it highlights how the way the books by authors of color are made reinforces the economic and cultural status of the dominant culture.

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[2] We use the term of "authors of color" as a shorthand to describe authors who come from racialized backgrounds, such as Black or Asian. When using this term we recognize that it can flatten differences between particular groups. This article focuses on the shared experience of racialized authors. When making these arguments, we do not seek to diminish or downplay the specific experiences of authors from particular racialized groups.

Based on an in-depth study of the trade publishing industry[3] in the United Kingdom, the purpose of the article is to show how the publishing process can harm writers of color. It begins with a critique of how racial/ethnic diversity has been discussed in media research, going on to highlight the value of a production studies approach to race and media. We then introduce the study on which the research is based, involving 113 interviews with people who work in trade fiction. We focus on the contradiction between how writers of color in the moment of diversity are seen not only as an opportunity but also as niche and a risky investment. As the empirical section will demonstrate, diversity is effectively mobilized on the terms of Whiteness, which simultaneously commodifies and marginalizes narratives around race. We argue that this is a central feature of the publishing industry, which operates to sustain privilege as much as to make profit.

Critiquing Diversity Discourse in Publishing

The Numbers Approach to Diversity

The lack of diversity in UK publishing is stark. The industry has been subject to numerous reports that have exposed the dearth of racial and ethnic diversity in publishing, in terms of the composition of the workforce and the composition of writers and illustrators who produce books (Bold, 2019; Kean, 2004; Kean & Larsen, 2015). According to the Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey, publishing is the Whitest of all the creative sectors (95% of its workforce is White) and the most privileged in terms of the percentage of its workforce from higher or other managerial/professional backgrounds (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2020). From an anecdotal perspective, during our fieldwork, for which we visited all the major publishing houses and big independents, the absence of racial and ethnic diversity in these offices, except for a smattering of interns, was striking. For an industry that prides itself on its openness, this lack of diversity is a great source of embarrassment (Squires, 2017). Our concern, however, is how publishing becomes an alienating environment for creative workers from underrepresented communities.

These statistical studies have played a crucial role in ensuring that diversity remains high on the agenda. Together, they have added urgency and prevented complacency around these issues; certainly, in our interviews, we did not encounter any denial around publishing's overwhelming Whiteness. However, we want to start this article by considering the limitations of a purely quantitative approach to diversity as employed by the industry, including CEOs, executive boards, and policy makers. In this context, diversity—and, by extension, inequality—is reduced to a numerical problem to be fixed through self-administered targets based on gaining demographic parity with the wider population. Newsinger and Eikhof (2019) critique the business-case-for-diversity approach on these terms, highlighting how diversity is rendered in terms of data initiatives to evidence change, measured using cost/benefit analysis/return-on-investment policy. Their argument is that the conceptualization of diversity in this way is a direct product of the neoliberal logics that are shaping the managerial culture of creative and cultural industries, including publishing.

Scholars adopting a more explicit critical race frame have highlighted how "diversity" is better understood as a form of racial governance, particularly when datified in terms of what Clive Nwonka (2020)

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[3] *Trade publishing* refers to books made for general audiences, including fiction and nonfiction.

calls an "instrumentalist and enabling mode of rationality" (p. 32). For instance, in an important yet somewhat overlooked critical account of diversity and media, Gwyneth Mellinger (2003) focuses on the American Society of Newspaper Editors' attempts to solve the diversity "problem" in the US newspaper industry through a minority-hiring initiative, which she argues entrenched "systemic racism in their newsrooms at the same time that they claim to champion its eradication" (p. 130). Drawing from critical Whiteness studies, Mellinger (2003) argues that the reduction of minoritized journalists to a statistical problem to be solved in effect allows Whiteness to remain invisible and unmarked, while reifying the Othered status of the people of color it is attempting to include. Similarly, Herman Gray (2016) challenges recent studies on communication research that attempt to empirically measure rates of diversity in terms of "the production and expression of media content" (p. 241). More precisely, he takes issue with the underlying assumption that diversity in media is fulfilled once it attains demographic parity with the population at large. For Gray, diversity is better understood as a discourse that structures the *making* of race in the media industries, rather than a social fact that can be measured according to a number of discrete indicators.

A Production Studies Approach to Diversity

We open with this brief discussion of the limitations of the quantitative approach to the diversity "problem" to introduce an alternative perspective of diversity that focuses instead on cultural production as the source of racial inequality in cultural industries. Herman Gray's (2016) criticism of the demography-representation approach (that he finds undergirds *both* media policy and academic research) becomes a call for a theoretical and empirical reorientation within studies of media that center the issue of production. As Gray states (2016),

> inattention to race-making rather than racial representation in media studies assumes that the source of inequality and racism rests with individual preferences and dispositions of show-runners and directors, network executives, and advertising executives. Concerns with diversity and race as a practice of knowledge/power (what John Caldwell calls the deep texts of production cultures) are not endemic to the organization of media industries or research approaches to their study. (pp. 248–249)

As Gray puts it, the focus on racial representation—where visibility becomes the normative frame through which diversity is understood and measured—deflects attention from the dynamics of race-making practices that should be the core of a critical media industry program that is invested in the problem of inequality. Gray (2016) is calling for a more production-orientated research agenda that seeks "to identify sites, discourses, and practices of producing difference and to study race-making practices as power/knowledge that operates as a logic of production" (p. 249).

Before we develop this point further, we want to briefly underscore Gray's (2016) reference to "race-making" in media. Such a notion employs an explicit constructionist mode, to think through how media make ideas of race as embodied in cultural commodities—such as film, television, music, and books—that circulate in and through production and consumption contexts. In shifting the attention to *race-making* (rather than racial representation), Gray additionally prevents the slippage into a cul-de-sac that conceptualizes representation solely in terms of problematic assertions around visibility or accuracy. Gray's

(2016) approach is more in keeping with Stuart Hall's (1988) important notion of the politics of representation, which understands race as a floating signifier, the meanings of which remain resolute, yet are always under contestation, existing in the permanent state of being made and remade.

To return to Gray's (2016) point about the need for a focus on production, since the particular piece we are referring to was published, we have witnessed the bourgeoning field of production studies of race that address Gray's call. Some of the most important race and media research that has emerged in recent years has appeared in what we broadly refer to as critical media industry studies. Such studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of race and media, especially about the operation of diversity in media industries (see Martin, 2021; Molina-Guzman, 2016; Nwonka, 2020; Warner, 2015). Countering the notion that inequality in media will simply be solved by inserting more enlightened practitioners into media organizations, the strand of production studies that this article draws from demonstrates how ideas of race penetrate the processes and logics of cultural production that in turn lead to the reproduction of historical constructions of Otherness. We are referring to Timothy Havens's (2013) notion of "industry lore" and Keith Negus's (1999) idea of "culture produces an industry," which both demonstrate how the social and cultural values that creative mangers bring to their work affect the making of Black television and Black music, respectively, and, in turn, the value placed on these genres. Of particular pertinence for this article is Saha's (2016) research into the use of technology in the *comping* of British South Asian authors (i.e., the part of the acquisition process that identifies comparative titles to forecast future sales for a new book), which he demonstrates is embedded with Orientalist assumptions about South Asian cultures. This in turn steers the production of books by these authors into repeating the very Indophillic tropes of Asianness that they in fact set out to challenge. Saha's (2016) concept of the "rationalizing/racializing logic of capital" (p. 2) evokes Gray's (2016) earlier comment, regarding how logics of production operate as a form of power/knowledge when it comes to race-making practices.

The studies referenced begin to touch on the literature on *racial capitalism* (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Melamed, 2015; Robinson, 1983/2000) that highlights how racism and capitalism, as two distinct historical forces, come together to organize populations into those without value (those who are racialized), and those with value (the *nonracialized*). The basis of theories of racial capitalism is that while capitalism is not intrinsically racist, it is invariably racial in character. This raises an important issue in critical media industries research more broadly, which assumes that racism is a by-product of media's profit-making drive rather a structuring force in itself. This has meant that despite their important contributions, production studies of race remain somewhat marginalized and overlooked, when it is in fact deeply revealing about the nature of cultural production and the media industries as a whole. For Herman Gray (2016), the lack of attention of race in production studies is

> the result of the analytic confinement and discursive linkages of race to people of color
> (and not the operation of Whiteness) as it is to not appreciating the logic of creative
> practices, especially media, as a site of making race and practices of inequality. (p. 248)

Or, as Alfred Martin, Jr. (2020) puts it, "When race and production practices are studied, the findings are considered to be extrapolatable only to those studying race in media production and not to

those who study unnamed Whiteness within media industries" (p. 136). As we attempt to show, the way that publishing industries make race is not just about siloing the narratives of race that are believed to have little commercial value, but also about the very means through which the (White) dominant culture maintains its economic control and power. In this way, the article is a contribution to the urgent project of what Martin (2020) calls *race-ing* production studies.

Race-ing Publishing Industries/Studies

In the preface to the first edition of his influential study of the publishing industry, John Thompson (2012) describes his "puzzlement" that, as one of the oldest cultural industries, publishing has received the least attention in media and communication research (p. viiii). Both Marsden (2017) and Murray (2006) also note the almost willful neglect of publishing in media studies. Perhaps publishing has resisted treatment as a form of mass communication because of its association with high literary culture. Thompson's (2012) book *Merchants of Culture* was a significant contribution, then, to media and communication studies; it underscores publishing as a huge industry that has undergone significant transformation in the last 30 years, driven by both economic and technological developments. Thompson's (2012) book achieves the important task of demystifying and deromanticizing the book-making industry.

Yet, in the very few communication studies/sociological studies of the publishing industry, including Thompson's (2012), there is very little discussion of race. With reference to Thompson's (2012) book, it is surprising to us that an in-depth, book-length study of the publishing industry features so little discussion of diversity, let alone race and racism. The one section of the book that looks at the issue of diversity (Thompson, 2012, pp. 395–402) considers whether the impact of commercialization and conglomeration has led to the homogenization of book content. Diversity here is broadly conceived with no actual reference to inequality, let alone race. One could argue that Thompson (2012) is not necessarily diminishing the subject of racism in publishing; rather, it is simply not his interest in this particular study. But in the spirit of race-ing media industry research, we assert that the dynamics of book publishing cannot be explored without a recognition of the operation of Whiteness.[4] After all, as stated, the publishing industry remains the *Whitest* and most privileged creative sector, certainly in the United Kingdom. Rather than taking the Whiteness of publishing as a natural fact, we ask, How does the making of books ensure the status of the White middle class who effectively control the industry? How is the discourse of "diversity" impacting this?

Few production-orientated studies address these questions, especially in relation to trade fiction. One exception comes from scholars working at the intersection of postcolonial studies and publishing/book studies. We are specifically referring to debates on the commodification of postcolonial literary fiction (Brouillette, 2007; Huggan, 2001; Ponzanesi, 2014), which explore how postcolonial writers are marketed for Western audiences and how value is inscribed onto their books, particularly through literary prizes and cultural criticism. This touches issues on diversity, but more in relation to which novels by authors who originate from the "Third World" gain recognition/cultural legitimation and

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[4] By way of contrast, in one of the few other sociological monographs on the publishing industry, Clayton Childress (2017) at least acknowledges the Whiteness of this industry in his mapping of the production and reception of a particular literary studies novel.

the extent to which they resist/reinforce the privilege of the literary establishment. The work here produces many important insights relevant for our argument, particularly the understanding of publishing as a global marketplace that is shaped by the unfolding relations between culture, capitalism, and imperialism. Yet, while there is an interest in production, mostly marketing, the focus is more on reception. As these works belong to the field of literary studies, there is understandably less sociological concern in how diversity discourse is shaping the production of the books of authors of color across trade fiction, including commercial genres. In the context of publishing studies, Claire Squires (2017) produces a rare example of the approach we are calling for, adopting a cultural economy perspective[5] in a short report on the "diversity deficit." Drawing from in-depth interviews with commissioning editors, Squires (2017) highlights how commercial imperatives impede diversity initiatives; as one editor said to her,

> there's a lot of discussion . . . about diversity in terms of ethnicity and class in publishing too and I think, yeah I hope that will . . . change in publishing. But . . . I guess ultimately publishers are businesses so there needs to be a commercial imperative to . . . implement those political changes too. (p. 6)

As we will show in this article, the tension between the moral argument for diversity, yet the lack of faith in the economic value of authors of color, is an important dimension of how publishing makes race.

Our research builds on Squires's (2017) account, as well as Saha's (2016) study of the comping of British South Asian authors mentioned earlier. It is a contribution to the ongoing project of the race-ing of production studies, and media and communication studies more generally. The aim of this article is to provide an empirical account of what diversity *is doing* to the acquisition of authors of color and the making of their books. It argues that diversity as a discourse contains two movements: one that attempts to address demands for more representation and a second that tries to limit actual structural change to publishing. Put another way, the article demonstrates how the publishing of authors of color makes race in a way that paradoxically continues the marginalization of those authors, which in turn is precisely how the dominant culture sustains its position of privilege. As Cedric Robinson (1983/2000) describes in his important thesis on racial capitalism, "in the realm of the economic, racism is an attempt to safeguard the interests of those deemed dominant or 'unraced'" (p. 21). As we will show, this quotation uncannily captures the politics of race-making in publishing in this moment of diversity.

Introducing the Research

Research Context

This article is based on a yearlong study of the UK trade publishing industry. The aim of the study, quite simply, was to explore how books by authors of color are made. Although, as shown, the limited amount of research on diversity in publishing has mostly focused on the racial, social, and gender composition of the publishing workforce, and occasionally the diversity of authors published (Bold, 2018), there is less focus on how diversity is impacting the authors of color—or, as Sara Ahmed (2012) puts it,

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[5] For an overview of this approach in relation to race and media, see Saha (2021, pp. 93–94).

what *diversity is doing*. The focus of our research, then, is to examine what happens to those authors from racialized backgrounds who are published. Does the emphasis on diversity enable their practice and provide new opportunities? Does diversity ensure that they are afforded the same opportunities as their White counterparts? These are the urgent, yet neglected, questions during this moment of "diversity" in publishing.

The British publishing industry has gone through dramatic changes over the past 30 years. These include a period of conglomeration that intensified in the 1990s as successive governments adopted neoliberal policies of marketization and deregulation that, along with the fall of the Net Book Agreement in the mid-1990s, facilitated mergers and the consolidation of the market among the biggest publishing houses. Huge technological changes also occurred, including the launch of Amazon.com, which became the world's biggest retailer of books, the emergence of digital books and e-readers, and new online platforms that presented independent presses in particular with an opportunity to market and sell their books directly to audiences. In a nutshell, policy and technological developments in cultural industries have both consolidated the clout of the major publishers and lowered the barriers to entry for smaller presses (though they continue to exist in a precarious state). It is against this backdrop that "diversity" discourse comes into ascendency. While a language of diversity has always been present in UK cultural policy making, it takes a more assertive form during the *New Labour* government that, again, shaped by neoliberal agendas, understands diversity as a driver of economies, urban regeneration, and social cohesion. The business case for diversity, as outlined, becomes the basis for creative industries policy that in turn has shaped diversity agendas within publishing.

But diversity has also been driven from the ground up, particularly through popular antiracism activism that see the treatment of racialized communities in media as part of a social justice agenda. Moreover, the angry pronouncements of activists and social media users on the ongoing invisibility/marginalization/stereotyping of minoritized people on our screens (and on our pages) have become popular media content in themselves (Littler, 2017; Titley, 2019). This media amplification of the demands of activists and audiences for more *diverse* books from marginalized voices is putting immense pressure on publishers, whose very social and cultural authority is being challenged, perhaps more so than at any point in the history of modern publishing. It is in this context that we argue that "diversity" is in fact better understood as the response of the dominant culture to these calls, as an attempt to meet the demands of minoritized groups while keeping their privilege and status in place (see Saha, 2018). Thus, to reiterate, we treat "diversity" as a set of practices and methods through which the dominant culture attempts to maintain its status, rather than simply a target that is not being met. As we will show, this status is reinforced through what decision-makers decide has quality and what is deemed to be of commercial value.

Research Methods

The research in question was based on 113 in-depth interviews with people who work in publishing, 66 of whom were White, and 47 were "BAME."[6] Similar to Clayton Childress's (2017) study, which traced the making of a literary novel through each of the key stages of production, we also tracked the making of

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[6] BAME, an acronym for "Black, Asian, minority ethnic," is a policy term used in the United Kingdom to describe anyone who is not White.

books by authors of color in three sectors of trade fiction: literary, young adult, and crime/thriller. This involved interviews with agents, CEOs/managing directors/publishers, editors, people who work in communications (including marketing and PR) and sales, designers, and booksellers/retailers[7] (see Table 1 for a full breakdown). We interviewed a mix of senior and junior personnel from both big and smaller publishing presses (all the major publishing houses participated in the research; see Figure 1). Our initial respondents were found through introductions via our research partners (see Saha & van Lente, 2020), followed by snowballing techniques and e-mail invitations to people in specific roles. We aimed to reach a cross section of the industry to allow us to make generalizations about the publishing process.

Table 1. Breakdown of Respondents by Role.

Agents	18
CEOs/MDs/publishers	26
Editors	17
Designers	6
Communications (marketing and publicity)	15
Sales	9
Booksellers	8
Other (festivals, authors, rights, etc.)	14
Total	113

Interviewees who worked for...

- small independent publisher (11)
- big independent publisher (9)
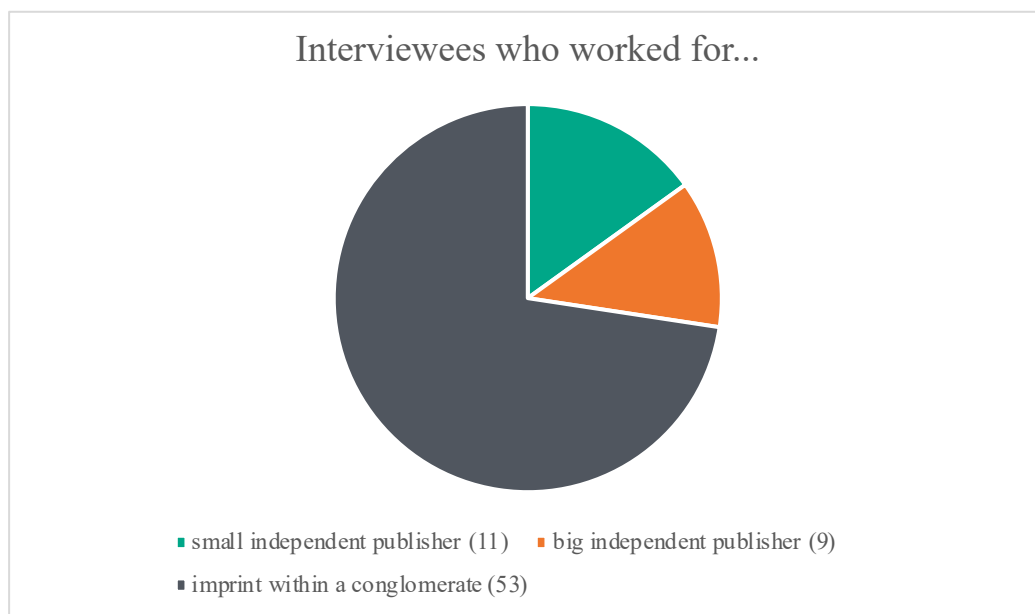- imprint within a conglomerate (53)

Figure 1. Breakdown of respondents by type of publishing house.

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[7] One major online retailer, after discussions, decided not to participate in our research.

Our methodological approach is shaped by Georgina Born's (2010) sociological/anthropological approach to cultural production, which uses publishers' "exegeses on the art object in question" (p. 176) and their reflections on their professional practices to think through how production shapes the aesthetics of the book and vice versa. A particular emphasis is placed on how "aesthetic categories and judgements" (Janet Wolff, as cited in Born, 2010, p. 175), as well as commercial understandings (what Havens, 2013, calls *industry lore)* in relation to diversity, are formed. Given this, interviews were based on getting respondents to reflect on their role in the publishing process, and what they do and why. Most of the respondents had some experience working on books by authors of color, but we found that even those who had not were still able to speak to diversity issues in publishing. During our interviews, we were acutely aware that because one member of the research team was a person of color, respondents might have overemphasized their commitment to diversity to prove that they were not racist. Nonetheless, this was interesting knowledge in itself, which spoke to anxieties around *doing diversity right*. Our focus then was on how respondents construct meanings about their work and experiences within the context of the interview. The task entailed thinking through how the knowledges that emerged could be used and deconstructed to reveal "the how and the actual what of narratives of lived experience" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p. 149) in publishing authors of color in trade fiction.

How Publishing Industries Make Race

From the outset of the research, it became evident that authors of color are in demand right now. Publishing in the United Kingdom is not subject to government creative industries policy—as are other cultural sectors, like film or the arts, that are buoyed by public money—but the business case for diversity that is the basis for such policy has been subsumed into publishing. The search for authors from diverse backgrounds (and the inability to find them) was a strong narrative among the agents and editors we interviewed. As one White editor said to us, it is "an advantage if a writer you publish . . . isn't White in literary fiction." In the genre of crime/thriller, which, according to the report *Writing the Future* (Kean & Larsen, 2015), has the least representation of authors from racially minoritized backgrounds, one White agent went as far as telling us that she would be "biased towards a foreign-sounding name" if one ended up in their *slush pile*. Once again, in the context of the research interview, such hyperbolic comments can be read as an outcome of a desire to demonstrate antiracist credentials. Yet, such a narrative, we argue, speaks to a very real thirst among publishers for more diverse voices, born out of both moral and commercial rationales, and external pressures.

Although this moment of diversity, as expressed in these quotations, has certainly led to some opportunities for writers from underrepresented communities, in what follows, we do not merely make the argument that such comments are disingenuous in how they fail to attend to entrenched racial inequality. Rather, we want to demonstrate how these sentiments in fact reproduce inequalities through simultaneously marginalizing, as they attempt to include, authors of color (as captured in the agent self-professed attraction to a "foreign-sounding name"). We make this argument based on respondents' reflections on the initial stages of the publishing process, including acquisition and editing. We focus on two issues in particular: the pressure for authors to conform to (racial) expectations of White publishers and the lack of value afforded to writers of color despite the demand for them.

Conforming to Whiteness

One finding from the *Writing the Future* report cited earlier was that writers of color feel steered toward reproducing racial and ethnic stereotypes. In our research, publishers unsurprisingly disassociated themselves from such practices if it was felt that they do occur, but what became clear from our interviews was the strategy of replicating past successes. Publishing is an inherently risky business, so publishers look to reproduce formats or formulas that they know worked in the past. As one "BAME"[8] respondent put it to us, publishers "don't want the next big thing. They want the next big thing to be just like the last big thing, only slightly tweaked." This comment was said half-jokingly, but many other editors agreed that publishers want the same but different, especially in commercial fiction. This has unique ramifications for authors of color. As we will demonstrate, although there is a demand for the diverse perspectives of authors of color, limits are placed on what stories they can tell.

In a nutshell, many of the "BAME" respondents we spoke to felt that authors of color had to fulfill certain—or indeed *racialized*—expectations of White middle-class editors to get a publishing deal. For instance, the following quotations from White respondents acknowledge how authors of color are restricted to certain genres or subject matter:

> What people don't seem to be as open to, is [a "BAME" author] writing a rom-com, or a crime novel. It seems it's almost like we've pigeon-holed (them) and so the more diverse authors are generally writing about war or terrible things. (Editor, senior, White, woman)

> So thinking about the crime market, if you had like a Black Londoner writing about knife crime, I can imagine selling that and people nodding and going, ok, that makes sense. But if it was a Black Londoner writing a cosy, village mystery with a vicarage—an Agatha Christie type thing—I think I would struggle to get people to pay attention to that book because it doesn't fit their perception of what [Black] people should be doing. (Sales, senior, White, woman)

Both of these quotations act as admissions regarding how publishers place authors of color in boxes, in terms of what they are allowed to write about. They point to how such writers are tied to an expectation around what is supposedly authentic to their experience, understood in terms of negativized discourses around victimhood. Both quotations also describe how being able to write in the most commercially lucrative of genres, like romance and classic Christie-esque thriller, is a privilege denied to writers of color. In the second quotation, when the respondent who works in sales describes how it would be a "struggle to get people to pay attention" to an Agatha Christie-type novel written by a Black person, it

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[8] In recent times, the term *BAME* has been criticized for homogenizing racialized populations and not attending to the specificities of particular racial and ethnic experience. While we have similar problems with the term, for the purpose of protecting identities, we use "BAME" (in quotation marks) precisely because it is so nonspecific. We purposefully do not state the person's professional role. The extent to which the UK publishing industry lacks diversity is such that naming someone by his or her racial/ethnic identity alongside the individual's job title would potentially reveal his or her identity.

is not clear whether the person is talking about retailers/booksellers or audiences. Nonetheless, this perception of what "people" want is effectively a form of industry lore that in this instance places constraints on authors of color and what they can write about. These quotations effectively reveal how all genres are racialized in terms of who is allowed to participate in them and who is not.

A further elaboration on the theme of how ideas of racial authenticity become imbued in genre formats comes in the following quotation from a "BAME" respondent. The respondent describes the negative reaction of publishers to a manuscript written by an author of color that did not meet their expectations in terms of subject matter:

> And I think a lot of White editors were like "We thought you were giving us this immigrant narrative, but you're not, and so we're not going to pursue it." . . . I think there's a particular narrative that they're at ease with, and they know how to grapple with politically, and they know how they want to publish it in a particular way.

This quote echoes the findings of the scholarly work on the making of postcolonial literary fiction cited earlier, and how those works that, as Sarah Brouillette (2007) shows, articulate narratives of exile and hybridity appeal the most to cultural critics in the West. The reference in this quotation to how editors know how to "grapple" with these books politically is also a point made by Brouillette on how the themes typically covered in postcolonial fiction appeal to the liberal politics of White middle-class publishers. What we draw attention to in this quotation is the way in which it alludes to how a particular type of literary fiction written by authors of color—based on stories of exile and migration—has become a production format in itself. The respondent describes the "ease" that publishers find working in this genre, in contrast to alternative narratives of racial experience otherwise deemed uncomfortable. The failure of the author in question to deliver the "immigrant experience" coveted by White editors led to the manuscript's rejection.

To end this section, we finish with two quotations from authors of color that are direct expressions of how they feel they have had to conform to the Whiteness of the industry:

> to get it through all the checks and balances that you need to get published in the first place, you've got to adhere to what White people expect. [My book] did feed into a narrative . . . we're talking about the working-class stereotype of Black kids on council estates, smoking crack and shooting guns . . . totally, that was part of it. And here's a guy who grew up kind of like that and who can tell this story as opposed to a White dude telling it. ("BAME" respondent)

> Either you've been redeemed by the establishment so, you've gone to Oxbridge, so, they say "amazing intellect, went to Oxbridge." Or came from the streets: "Look how good he's done." Those are the two main marketing kind of channels for publishing in England, if you think about it. Or extremely good looking, who's a model for whatever. So, there are all of these things that seep into it and this is why I always say the industry says it wants to diversify but it's on its own terms, but it's still with the kind of exoticizing people. ("BAME" respondent)

In the first quotation, the author admits to how his acquisition was based on their perceived racial authenticity; this (a) presents a narrative around Black experience, which the author admits veers toward racial stereotype but is interpreted by White middle-class editors as authentic, and (b) is based on said author having the required authenticity to be able to tell this story (unlike a "White dude"). Thus, in this instance, the author is deemed to have the required racial capital to write this particular novel. We also underline how the respondent describes the acquisition of authors of color as meeting "checks and balances," which speaks to the processes of rationalization that characterizes publishing. The quotation speaks to how highly racialized assumptions become bound up in standardized industry practices and logics.

The second quotation refers more to promotion and publicity, and how authors of color get reduced to two main marketing narratives, emphasizing either "quality" (going to Oxbridge) or "authenticity" (coming from the streets). Both narratives involve a story arc of redemption, in which the author is being rewarded for successfully entering the middle-class milieu of book publishing. There is also a reference to the sexual dynamics of this patronage. The quotation ends on very explicit reference to how diversity is understood as a form of exoticization. As the respondent asserts, the "industry says it wants to diversify but it's on its own terms." This directly affirms our argument that diversity works for the benefit of Whiteness.

Race Made as Niche

When conducting this research, we encountered a paradox, however. While there is this heightened demand for diversity, there is still a fundamental lack of value attached to authors from racialized backgrounds. The fact remains that such writers are seen as a riskier investment despite the business case for diversity. Although there has been a shift in the perception of authors of color—such that coming from a marginalized experience is seen as an "advantage," particularly in genres that remain historically White— there is a fear among publishers that the "core" audience (implied to be White and middle class) will not be able to relate to their stories.

In the previous section, we wanted to illustrate how constraints are placed on authors of color and their storytelling practices. They are restricted to narratives that White editors decide are authentic to their experience (so, for instance, a gangland thriller rather than a quaint English *whodunnit*). We argue that this is a form of industry lore that is based on and that reproduces Orientalist assumptions of the Other. However, as writers of color are steered into these narratives, often centered on marginality, they then encounter an attitude or sense that such narratives are seen as of marginal interest. For instance, according to a White woman who has a senior position in marketing, "There will be an automatic perception that a commercial title that features a Black character as a protagonist might be a smaller opportunity." A White woman senior editor, when referring to a hypothetical manuscript written from the perspective (and in the colloquial language) of a Black character, adds, "There's just a shut-off because they think it's going to be in an unrelatable setting or this person's back story is going to be too niche. That comes up a lot." As another White woman senior editor puts it, "Books that are dealing with *issues* are just harder for us to publish." While it is not made explicit, when this respondent refers to "issues," she is referring to storylines relating to racial/religious identity.

We highlight how phrases such as "a smaller opportunity," "too niche," and books "with issues" as harder to publish reflect the way that White publishers consider the novels written by authors of color, especially those that feature a Black protagonist or Black vernacular language. When such books are referred to as niche, it means that they are seen as having low economic value. It is interesting that the first respondent makes the explicit reference to commercial fiction; one common narrative in our research describes how authors of color feature more in literary fiction because there are not the same commercial pressures (or rewards) in this genre compared with others, such as crime/thriller or romance. The main point here is that we find that writers of color are stuck between a rock and a hard place: On the one hand, there is an expectation of what stories such writers can write about (usually relating to their racial or ethnic identity in some way), and on the other, a fear that such stories might appear too niche.

What is alluded to in these quotations is the audience. When the White senior editor from the second quote refers to how a book written by a Black author is going to be "unrelatable," she is referring to how it is the audience that will find it alienating. In fact, we found that publishing professionals were conflating their own position with the readers'. How the publishing industry's imagines its "core" audience, we argue, is the source of the marginalization of writers of color. A major theme in media industries research is the inherent unpredictability of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh, 2018). Studies of Black American television production have shown how the risk and uncertainty are even more pronounced when it is White executives contending with the needs and desires (or what they *believe* to be the needs and desires) of Black audiences (Fuller, 2010; Havens, 2013; Martin, 2021). Our research on British publishing produces a slightly different insight, in that publishers demonstrate very little interest in Black, Asian, or other racialized audiences. Or, put another way, we find that publishers find it difficult to imagine any other any audience than the White middle classes, which immediately compounds the supposed risk in acquiring or investing too much in authors of color. This is illuminated in the following quotation from a "BAME" respondent, who describes how writers of color struggle to get acquired because of their perceived lack of commercial value:

> That's not what they think will sell. There's a whole language that they use. "It didn't resonate with me." "I don't know if I can place this book" or whatever. The fact is that they don't know what to do with it because they don't have the kind of mindset. They have certain kinds of barriers and stuff. And I don't think it's conscious. I think it's a cultural thing. I think it's upbringing. I think it's the way they have been conditioned to see the world.

We draw attention here to respondent's references to the different euphemisms that editors use to explain their fears over the relatability—or, more accurately, the marketability—of books by writers of color: "It didn't resonate with me," "I don't know if I can place this book." While such comments appear innocent, the quotation speaks to how editors disguise the "mindset" of White editors toward books by writers of color. The respondent suggests that publishers effectively struggle to imagine an audience for such books, or, more precisely, audiences beyond what they regard as their "core" audience whom they understand as just like them: to repeat, White and middle class (and female; see Saha & van Lente, 2020). The respondent wants to make the point that this is not a form of direct "conscious" racism. In doing so, the quotation alludes to the *hegemonic Whiteness* of the publishing industry. The rejection of writers of color is attributed to the "upbringing" of the dominant culture that runs publishing, whose members are "conditioned to see

the world" a certain way. The point is, this very particular Eurocentric worldview becomes industry common sense, where writers of color are only valued in terms of their appeal to White, middle-class readers. Because they are speaking from the same location, publishers feel confident in making assertions about authors of color based on their readers' assumptions. Even when they have the best intentions about diversity, publishers' attempts to include authors of color, we argue, will always be limited by whom they recognize and value as their audience.

Conclusion

The publishing industry in the United Kingdom is essentially set up to cater to one kind of reader—or, more precisely, the White middle-class reader is valued more than *Other* readers. While in our interviews, publishers expressed a desire to reach wider audiences, they are held back by how they do not see value in the types of the books that they imagine they would need to produce to engage non-White, non-middle-class audiences. Returning to Huggan (2001) and Brouillette (2007), we note that the recognition and legitimation of postcolonial literary fiction as a body of literature with merit are due to its perceived cultural value to the liberal sensibilities of metropolitan elites. Cultural value is not afforded to (or is not enough for) those Black, Brown, or Asian writers operating in commercial fiction, compounded by the racialized common sense of decision-makers who perceive these writers in general as high risk—hence, the lower rates of representation of authors from racialized backgrounds in those genres.

This article hinged on the question, How do publishing industries make authors of color? The short answer is they are made for a White, middle-class audience. The ascendency of the business case for diversity may lead to some opportunities for writers of color, but only if they conform to racialized expectations of White publishers and retailers. And even when those expectations are met, it does not necessarily result in economic rewards. In fact, it arguably reduces their rewards for labor. Our interviews reveal how certain genres have certain racialized assumptions attached to them. These do not merely exclude authors of color from particular genres but allow Whiteness to dominate and profit from the most commercially lucrative genres. It is in this way that production logics operate as a form of power/knowledge that leads to the making of race in reductive ways that sustain Whiteness.

Thus, it is not just the case that attempts to diversify publishing are not working and need to be better implemented. Rather, we argue that diversity discourse is doing precisely what it is supposed to: appearing to meet the demands of minoritized groups while keeping the privilege and status of the dominant culture intact. However, we do not entirely dismiss diversity as a mere instrument of the powerful. Diversity contains within it a disruptive quality that is a product of the tensions between top-down neoliberal agendas and more grassroots forms of antiracist activism (see Saha & van Lente, 2021). Although we have ambivalences over activism centered on representation and visibility alone, such activism has undeniably prized open a space in the cultural industries that can lead to more radical outcomes. The threat to the cultural elite that has resulted is certainly being felt, reflected in the anxieties around "woke culture" and "cancel culture" that circulate in media, and especially in publishing.

Yet, diversity, as it is mobilized in the acquisition and publication of authors of color, is precisely how the group that owns the publishing industries seeks to maintain its authority. To stress, the story we

present is not just about the marginalization of writers of color. Its bigger purpose is to demonstrate how the dominant culture stays in control, allowing it to continue its economic power. To paraphrase Cedric Robinson (1983/2000), in a market-based system, diversity is an attempt to safeguard the interests of those deemed dominant or "unraced." How publishing industries make race, even in this moment of diversity, is how the unraced remain dominant.

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