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Diversity, media and racial capitalism: a case study on publishing

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ABSTRACT



This article demonstrates the ambivalence of diversity in the cultural industries, and racial capitalism more broadly. Based upon an empirical study of the production of writers of colour in UK trade publishing, the article highlights how diversity acts as a form of racial governance but is also a source of anxiety for the dominant culture. Opening with an overview of critical approaches to diversity, we then introduce the study, based upon in-depth interviews with 113 people, which explores how publishers make sense of diversity, which includes moral and economic arguments. While publishers are convinced that both the moral and economic cases for diversity are aligned, we argue that they exist in a tension, which results in mostly reductive outcomes for minoritized authors. But the article also highlights how diversity potentially disrupts the liberal sensibilities of the dominant culture, especially their sense of publishing as meritocratic.

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Introduction

One of the more unusual media industry stories from 2021 involved Tabatha Stirling, publishing director of a relatively obscure publishing house based in Scotland. She made the national press after she was dumped by one of her acquired authors, controversial British writer Julie Burchill following a leak of Stirling's participation in a meeting of the far-right group Patriotic Alliance (Cain 2021). While it is not difficult to see why Stirling was attracted to Burchill's book *Welcome to the Woke Trials: How #Identity Killed Progressive Politics*, what was harder to make sense of was how Stirling had previously published a book on black mental health called *The Colour of Madness* edited by two

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black women activists (who were unaware of her far-right politics and cancelled their agreement with Stirling when the story broke). In the audio-clip leaked by the anti-fascist group that exposed her, Stirling is speaking to Patriotic Alliance members, trying to prove her nationalist credentials after being accused of being an undercover liberal/member of Antifa. In her tearful and somewhat bizarre defence Stirling expresses regret for publishing *The Colour of Madness*. She says:

I do have a publishing company and I have published *The Colour of Madness*, as I need to make money and that was a very “in” way to do it, it was bound to get published, it was bound to get on the Jhalak [prize] longlist ... I wish I had never done it, because I have only had awful, awful anti-white sentiment from all of them. They are all Black Lives Matter.

While the publishing industry was quick to denounce Stirling (Chandler 2021) in this article we will demonstrate how she in fact was adopting the very same approach employed by mainstream publishers. When Stirling says that publishing *The Colour of Madness* was a “very ‘in’ way to do it” – that is, to win prizes and make money – she alludes to the thirst of both publishers and audiences for more diverse perspectives. Stirling appeared willing to compromise her white nationalist beliefs in order to cash in on the latest trend for black and brown voices. She was essentially following the business case for diversity.

This neoliberal conjuncture of capitalism is characterized by new modes of racial governance entailing ever more rationalized forms of racial violence enacted against the most dispossessed in society. But somewhat paradoxically it has also seen the ascendancy of *diversity* discourse, particularly in the West. Diversity is perhaps the most urgent policy issue in creative and cultural industries including television, film, publishing, music and the arts. It is based upon the recognition that cultural industries are unrepresentative of the population at large, and an acknowledgement – to an extent – that racialized groups, in particular, have been historically excluded. It is under the terms of diversity and visibility that the representation of racialized groups is under constant dissection and interrogation especially on social media. A key target for popular anti-racism is the lack of diversity in media both onscreen and offscreen. The most high-profile examples of this type of media activism are the social media campaigns around #OscarsSoWhite and #BaftasSoWhite which drew attention to the whiteness of the nominee lists of the major film awards. In the book industry, #PublishingPaidMe drew attention to the smaller advances that authors of colour receive in comparison with their white counterparts, while the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests led to the formation of the Black Writers Guild demanding better representation for black authors (Roberts 2021). The impact of such campaigning is such that major media corporations can no longer evade the forms of visibility-based politics being mobilized against them. Some are learning to

capitalize on this demand for diversity – as Stirling tried to emulate. But as we will show, addressing diversity is also a source of stress and anxiety for white publishers. This is shaping how *media make race*, in very particular ways (Saha 2021).

While media industries are frantically attempting to adjust to the clamour for more diverse content, diversity also becomes an important aspect of the industry's own sense of meritocratic self. As O'Brien et al. (2016) and Littler (2017) show, meritocracy ideals undergird creative industries policy and (neo)liberal democracy more generally. The visibility of diversity demonstrates open, meritocratic creative industries running fairly and efficiently. This is driving the cultural sector to implement an ever-increasing number of diversity schemes and initiatives to address the embarrassingly stark absence of racialized workers in its workforce (Saha 2018, 87–89). But there is a contradiction in that if increasing diversity within an organization is tackled too assertively, it very quickly challenges society's meritocratic sensibilities. Put it this way: if diversity, as it is mobilized in policy, recognizes that certain groups are under-represented, then how to address this without adopting a form of positive action – the very antithesis to meritocracy? Conversely how to increase diversity without breaking current UK equality laws that outlaw both negative *and* positive forms of discrimination?

This is a challenge for policymakers but is not the concern of this paper. Instead, we want to critically examine this contradiction of diversity and how it shapes race-making practices in media. Influenced by Sara Ahmed's (2012) study of diversity practitioners working in higher education, we are interested in *what diversity is doing* in the context of cultural production. The article has two aims. Firstly, building on critical accounts of diversity in media, we provide an empirical study of how diversity is made sense of and mobilized within cultural industries, drawing from an in-depth study of the UK publishing industry. While the focus of this paper is on Britain, this article will have an international application, especially since diversity discourse is shaping cultural production across the global cultural economy (De Beukelaer and Spence 2018). This is particularly the case in those nations that have adopted forms of creative industries policy as conceived by Tony Blair's New Labour government, which gave birth to the modern conception of diversity (Nwonka 2015). We argue that "diversity" commodifies race for the benefit of the dominant culture. The reason we open this piece with the case of Tabatha Stirling is to make the point that rather than an act of fascism, Stirling is in fact following the very logics of the publishing industry.

Secondly, the aim of the article is to add nuance to critical accounts of diversity. While we maintain that diversity discourse reinforces structures of dominance, we highlight the ways in which it also disrupts the very meritocratic ideals around which neoliberalism seeks to gain legitimacy and how

it remains ascendant. Through adopting an explicitly race critical frame (Goldberg and Essed 2002)¹ grounded in a discussion of “racial capitalism”, this article exposes the ambivalence of diversity discourse.

A race critical approach to diversity and media

Diversity and race in creative and cultural industries

Diversity is the dominant paradigm in creative industries policy. Diversity policies seek to address the under-representation of minoritized groups in media content and the creative labour force itself. Such an emphasis on diversity is affecting the media we consume. As Herman Gray (2013, 772) states, “abject and marginal” groups have gone from invisibility/exclusion/exaggeration to proliferation/hypervisibility. But this has not necessarily led to a widening in the regime of representation (Nwonka 2020; Saha 2021), let alone had an impact on cultural industries that remain overwhelmingly white and middle-class (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2020).

The majority of the literatures on diversity in the context of creative and cultural industries have come from critical management/policy studies. The central argument is that diversity is a product of neoliberal policy, where it is rationalized as a way of increasing the social capital of individuals in order to foster social cohesion (O’Loughlin 2006), regenerating deprived, “super-diverse” inner-city areas by turning them into creative hubs (Virani and Gill 2019), and improving economic productivity, where diversity is the means to greater innovation, originality, creativity and competition (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019). But in this policy-orientated literature there is less concern with how diversity is shaped by racial ideology and histories of racism.

Researchers of inequalities in creative and cultural industries who have a stronger grounding in critical approaches to race emphasize how diversity acts as a form of racial governance. These arguments can be distilled into three points. Firstly, diversity while launched from recognition of exclusion works to deflect charges of structural racism (Ahmed 2012; Malik 2013; Nwonka 2020). Secondly, diversity reproduces whiteness; in order to be included racialized people to need perform their ethnic/racial identities and their stories in a way that conforms to the worldview of white gatekeepers (Mellinger 2003; Saha 2012). Thirdly, diversity *commodifies* race, that is, it converts racial identities into a form of capital, adding a brand or reputational value to an organization (Leong 2012), often in a way that leads to the reproduction of reductive tropes of race (Saha 2013; Nwonka and Malik 2018). To reiterate, it is not just that diversity policy is not working, but it is the very means through which racial hierarchies are kept in place. In this way, Herman Gray argues that diversity is better understood

as a discourse, as “a technology of power, a means of managing the very difference it expresses” (Gray 2016, 242).

As important as these arguments are, with their macro policy/media industries orientation there remains few actual empirical studies of how diversity is operationalized during cultural production. As such, they do not encounter the contradictions of diversity as laid out in the introduction. In other words, there is a tendency to paint diversity as a mere tool of domination. While we do not disagree with the main thrust of the critique of diversity as presented, in this article, we want to finesse the argument further. As such in the following section, we situate diversity within theories of “racial capitalism” in order to highlight the ambivalence of diversity discourse. A race-critical approach to diversity and media, in contrast to critical policy accounts, we believe provides a more nuanced account of what diversity is doing, and sheds light on the contradictions of racial capitalism/neoliberalism more broadly.

Racial capitalism and diversity

The case of Tabatha Stirling appears to back up the arguments of the likes of Slavoj Žižek and Walter Benn Michaels who provocatively suggest that anti-racism is useful to capitalism (Pitcher 2012). But this is a reductive claim. For Pitcher, both racism *and* anti-racism can coexist with, and be enabled (or blocked) by capitalism. Racism and capitalism need to be understood as two distinct historical forces that are inextricably intertwined. Such an insight is the very basis of a body of work concerned with racial capitalism. As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, 37) explains, the idea of racial capitalism “helps us think through “how and why some racisms feed capitalism and of how capitalism enables some racisms”.

Cedric Robinson’s (2000 [1983]) text *Black Marxism* is foundational in the theorization of racial capitalism. According to Robinson racial division and hierarchy was the essential foundation from which capitalism develops. In a direct challenge to Marx, Robinson argues that instead of a homogenizing force, capitalism entails a process of differentiation, “to exaggerate regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones” (Robinson 2000, 26). The point is that rather than a mere byproduct of capitalism, racism helps capitalism expand while capitalism in turn keeps racial hierarchies in place. With particular pertinence for this article, Robinson (2000, 21) states that “in the realm of the economic, racism is an attempt to safeguard the interests of those deemed dominant or ‘unraced’”.

Theorists of racial capitalism following Robinson have focused on the racial violence enacted by capitalism in its need to differentiate populations for the exploitation of capital. But while the stress is on how and which racial Others capitalism excludes there is a concern as well among who is *included*. It is this

dimension of racial capitalism where diversity discourse performs its role. Bhattacharyya (2018) highlights desire around “the fantasy of race” as key to enabling capitalism to grow (Bhattacharyya 2018, 5). For Bhattacharyya, the fetishization of difference embodied in diversity – or what she refers to as “global corporate antiracism” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 152) – becomes a way to attract consumers, through “capitalist fantasies of consumption” (Bhattacharyya 2018, 153). Jodi Melamed in her thesis on racial capitalism (2006, 2015) underlines the interplay between capitalism and the state that produces a form of “neoliberal multiculturalism” that deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to “value and devalue forms of humanity differentially” (2015, 77). Moreover, under neoliberal consumerism civil rights becomes expressed as economic rights or consumer rights, where free markets and other neoliberal measures are understood as the most efficient way to deliver equality.

Postrace, diversity and meritocracy

The literatures on racial capitalism and diversity as described above echoes those from policy-focused critiques on diversity as a product of neoliberal agendas. However, the more race-grounded approaches provide an important historical perspective, drawing attention to capitalism’s needs to differentiate populations according to the logic of race in order to expand. Diversity is essentially the neoliberal mode of the governance of race within the history of racial capitalism, entailing the careful differentiation of racialized populations organized according to their economic value, whether as producers or consumers.

Scholarship that has focused more directly on *racial neoliberalism* provide more insights into the cultural dynamics of this current conjuncture of racial capitalism and shed further light on what diversity is doing in this moment. Specifically, we are referring to the discussion of *postrace*, which is the leitmotif in accounts of racial neoliberalism. Postrace refers to the idea that Western societies have overcome structural racism. Such an assertion has been critiqued as not just delusion but as a form of *postracialism* where racial discourse has been reconfigured in a way such that it allows the dominant culture to deflect accusations of racism. Racism is reduced to a problem of the individual rather than a social, structural phenomena (Goldberg 2009; Kapoor 2013; Titley 2019).

With particular relevance for this article’s interest in cultural industries’ “diversity problem”, the concept of postrace features in Jo Littler’s (2017, 153) important critique of meritocracy and its supposed appeals to equality. Littler coins the concept of “postracial neoliberal meritocracy” to explore the reproduction of racial inequalities, particularly in media. Meritocracy is neoliberal because it centres individual aspiration, that it is up to the individual (and

not the state) to achieve and attain. It is postracial because it assumes a level playing field and that equal opportunities are available for everyone regardless of race or ethnicity. The point for Littler is that they are both “wishful myths denying massive structural inequalities” (2017, 153). In relation to media, the myth of meritocracy is precisely how the dominant culture remains ascendent, especially in terms of being able to decide what culture gets made, according to supposedly universal notions of “quality”. Littler shows that what is deemed “quality” is not just highly subjective but based on a cultural canon that is literally made up by people belonging to a privileged social class (and ethnicity and gender) which reflect their interests and values.² Thus, the mobilization of “merit” is designed “to act as a safeguard against a reduction in privilege on the part of those wielding it” (Littler 2017, 159). It is not just that the cultural industries are not as meritocratic as they purport to be, but rather, it is the idea of merit as a universal that transcends all, which keeps racialized social hierarchies in place. As we shall see, the dynamics of postracial neoliberal meritocracy are very much evident when it comes to how publishers approach writers of colour.

But while on the surface discourses around diversity and postrace appear aligned – after all “diversity” is an articulation of difference that has been emptied of concrete references to race and by extension racism (Malik 2013) – as Littler shows, diversity is in fact a threat to the postracial foundation of meritocracy. Littler highlights how in cultural production, ideas of merit are seen to “be diluted, diminished or polluted if considerations of diversity are brought into contact with them” (2017, 157). In other words, to do diversity is apparently to compromise merit and what is deemed quality. To reiterate diversity undermines neoliberal postracial meritocracy in the context of media, whether in terms of what gets made, or who gets to make it. It is for this reason that we need to highlight the ambivalence of racial capitalism, in order to make sense of this tension between meritocracy and diversity that as we will show shapes how cultural industries make race.

Diversity from the ground-up? A dialectical approach to diversity

It should be stressed that theorists of racial capitalism acknowledge its ambivalent character. The purpose of Robinson’s (2000) critique of racial capitalism was to draw attention to the role of black radical thinkers as a counterculture to racial capitalism. Bhattacharyya (2018, 4) refers to the “hope and hustle, and a constant stream of adaptations and new ways of being that emerge with capitalist restructuring across the globe”. Melamed (2015, 83) similarly highlights the new potentially resistive subaltern formations that emerge as an inevitable consequence of the power plays of racial capitalism.

If we return to the cultural industries, the important dimension of Littler's critique of neoliberal postracial meritocracy is how it is being challenged and exposed by the "rise in popular feminist and anti-racist activisms, combined with expanding publicity of the dramatic exclusions of the media industries" (2017). Littler is referring to an infamous incident featuring white Hollywood actor Matt Damon on the reality television show *Project Greenlight*- which resulted in the trending of *#damonsplaining*. With *#damonsplaining* Damon becomes an object of ridicule on social media after he speaks over black American filmmaker Effie Brown when she makes a case for the importance of having diversity on a production team:

The comedy of *Damonsplaining* interrupted post-racial, misogynistic neoliberal meritocratic discourse. It had a brief life as an incident, but its existence and the extent to which it spread shows something of how this post-racial meritocratic dream is in crisis. It is not believed. It is ruptured, exposed, caught in the act of being a lie. If the post-racial meritocracy is potent, so too, increasingly, is its opposite. (Littler 2017, 171)

Thus, while diversity commodifies race when launched by "popular feminist and anti-racist activisms" it also threatens the established order. Diversity is better understood as an unruly presence. It makes race in reductive ways in a way that reinscribes the power of the dominant culture. But it also has a destabilizing quality, specifically in the way that it disrupts the dominant culture's own sense of meritocratic self. We will argue that this contradiction is precisely why cultural industries continue to have such a fraught relationship with diversity.

With this article, we provide an empirical account of what diversity is doing on the ground in cultural industries. This is based on a dialectical approach to racial capitalism, including the following speculations: (1) On the one hand the global cultural economy in the context of racial capitalism puts an economic value on diversity and difference, but on the other, as the Frankfurt School famously argues, the business of the culture industry is to homogenize/standardize culture. (2) Racial capitalism uses difference (and racism) to exploit and expand, but the slow creep of what Stuart Hall (1999, 188) calls "multicultural 'drift'" is transforming Britain, producing fear and anxiety within the dominant culture that feels its status and authority under threat. (3) While we see the rise of *English fundamentalism* (Hall 1999, 192) in political culture, the cultural industries seem to see the opposite trend, and are working hard to reorganize cultural production in response to popular demands for diversity and equality.

To stress, these are just speculations that need further elaboration that can be afforded here. But our point is that as much as diversity is a central protagonist in racial capitalism, its character is also being shaped from the ground up, by multicultural drift and (popular) anti-racist activism. The tension

between macro historical forces and what Stuart Hall (2000, 215) describes as “new subaltern formations and emergent tendencies” from below, we argue, affects the mobilization of diversity during cultural production. In what follows, through a case study of the production of trade fiction, we demonstrate how diversity is a source of stress and anxiety as much as it is a form of racial governance. In doing so we aim to complicate critiques of diversity as a direct product of neoliberal agendas. An empirical approach to diversity in this way highlights its ambivalent nature.

Case study: how “diversity” makes race in publishing

Methodology

The aim of this article is to think through what diversity is doing in the context of the cultural industries and cultural production. Doing diversity in media entails mostly a process of commodification and capitalization, but it also has an intrinsic disruptive quality too. The reason for beginning the article with Tabatha Stirling was to draw attention to how her assertion that *The Colour of Madness* was “bound” to be a commercial and critical success is an example of how publishers are attempting to capitalize on audience demands for diversity (even white nationalizes). But more subtly, “bound” also suggests uncertainty, reflecting how publishing and cultural production is characterized by unpredictability (Hesmondhalgh 2018). Within this unpredictability, publishing *diversely* – that is publishing more books by people of colour – appears an opportunity, but in risk-adverse and hegemonically white media institutions, it is also a source of uncertainty and anxiety.

As stated, this article is based on an in-depth empirical study of the UK publishing industry, specifically trade fiction.³ Perhaps more than any other creative and cultural industry, publishing recognizes its overwhelmingly white, middle-class constitution, in terms of who works in the industry and in terms of the authors being published. While research confirms that the publishing workforce is the whitest and most privileged in the entire creative sector (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2020, 57–62), the percentage of published books by writers from underrepresented backgrounds is much more difficult to find.⁴ One rare study comes from Melanie Ramashardan Bold (2018) who finds that just 8 per cent of published books in Young Adult (YA) fiction were written by authors of colour. While YA was one genre we looked at as part of this research, this kind of data was unavailable across other genres. Nonetheless, all the people we spoke to in this research conceded that the number of writers of colour published was probably very low.

The concern of this research was to explore how *publishing industries make race*, with regard to the books made by authors from racialized backgrounds. In that regard, it is situated within a burgeoning field of research that

explores race and cultural production in the context of the cultural industries. Its interest is in the industrial processes – and the social actors involved – that contribute to the making of media representations of race in the form of cultural commodities (for overviews of this relatively new area of research see Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013; Saha 2018). We conducted in-depth interviews with people who work in publishing to shed light on the publishing process – from acquisition to sales – to see how they shape the books written by authors of colour. We interviewed 113 people who work in publishing, 66 of whom were white, and 47 “Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)” (we will unpack the use of this term shortly). As stated we focused on all aspects of publishing and interviewed a range of people: authors, literary agents, CEOs and managing directors, editors, designers, marketing, PR and sales personnel, as well as booksellers and literature festival organizers. Some interviews were obtained through general callouts, but mostly they came through direct invitations sent by the research team. Respondents came from both big and small publishing houses, literary agencies and booksellers. All the major British publishing houses were represented in the research. Alongside YA fiction, we focused on literary fiction, where most authors of colours are located, and crime fiction/thriller, which has one of the lowest representations of authors of colour (Spread the Word 2015). The focus of the interviews was to see how creative workers – both white and racialized – narrate their experience working on books written by authors of colour.

To reiterate the purpose of this article is not to evaluate whether diversity is being done correctly or not. Rather, following Herman Gray we want to explore “the social life of diversity as a working practice, social commitment and policy goal” (Gray 2016, 242). Quite simply, this entails exploring how respondents make sense of diversity in relation to their work, to better understand how it shapes how race is made in trade fiction, in terms of storylines and characterizations, but also how the author and the book are packaged, promoted and sold. In this article, we especially focus on agents, publishers and editors and how they make sense of diversity in relation to the discovery and acquisition of writers of colour. As we shall demonstrate, the respondents’ reflections on diversity reveal different tensions, between (1) their own liberal values towards racial/ethnic difference, (2) what they deem as commercial and (3) the extent to which they understand the industry as meritocratic. This shapes what books by writers of colour are acquired and how they are sold. Diversity is a form of racial governance, but one that sings the hands of the dominant culture as they wield it.

A note on confidentiality and “BAME”

All respondents in this research are anonymized. White respondents are referred to by their gender, professional role, and level of seniority. However, we have had to adopt a different approach for describing

respondents belonging to racialized minorities: because there is so few working in the industry, referring to specific racial or ethnic identities and job titles – for instance, a “black editor” or “Asian publicity officer” – would risk revealing their identity. For that reason, we use the term “BAME” when referring to these respondents. In recent times this top-down term derived from policy has been challenged for centring whiteness and reducing the distinct experiences of black, brown and Asian groups into one homogenous mass. While we share these concerns, for the purposes of this research we use “BAME” when referring to black, brown and Asian respondents precisely because it is so vague and nonspecific, which in turn allows us to protect their identities. To highlight our ambivalence around this term, we use “BAME” in inverted commas.

The moral case for diversity

In our interviews, nearly all respondents expressed the importance of diversity in publishing. We encountered very little denial that the publishing industry lacked diversity or was only of minor concern (though as we will show defensiveness around the issue emerged in subtle ways). Since our interviewees volunteered to participate, maybe it was inevitable that we were only going to attract those who are open to the topic in some form. It was possible as well that respondents’ positive assertions around diversity were by virtue of being interviewed by a racially mixed research team and their desire to present themselves as liberal and open-minded (and not racist). Nonetheless, to reiterate, our interviewees wanted to make clear that they understood why diversity matters.

In that regard, nearly all respondents would articulate the need for diversity in moral/ethical terms, certainly in the first instance. Take the following quote from a young white literary agent:

It sounds really wanky and really woke, but I’ve been trying to make a real attempt to kind of decolonise my own reading experience in terms of what I read outside of work, but also having an awareness of the fact that publishing is extremely white, and I am a white woman and it is important to me to make sure my list is reflective of the world in which I live and the world that I see around me. (Literary agent, woman, white)

In the second part of the quote, the respondent acknowledges the whiteness of the industry and the urgency of having authors and books on her list that reflect the “world that I see around me”. This was the dominant narrative through which the moral case for diversity was articulated, as an expression of the liberal, cosmopolitan worldview of the publishers. Indeed, from our interviews, it was evident that the industry sees itself, or at least wants to present itself as open and inclusive. We want to draw attention as well to

the first part of the quote which we found was typical of the younger generation of publishers we interviewed, who would employ terms like “decolonization” in a matter-of-fact way, as a taken-for-granted political necessity.

However, it is interesting that this agent expressed self-awareness and slight embarrassment at using language that might appear “wanky and really woke”. This disparaging reference to “woke” introduces the anxieties around being seen as doing diversity right. Recent research on “woke capitalism” has explored how brands are increasingly making explicit commitments to social justice issues as part of how they sell their products and services (Kanai and Gill 2020), where, as Francesca Sobande (2019, 2739) shows, being “woke” in the context of branding and marketing is associated with being courageous and brave. But in our research on cultural production, we found that the moral case for diversity - and its association with being “woke” - were sometimes in fact borne out of fear, in terms of not being seen as diverse, or in terms of appearing performative, that is gesturing toward diversity in a superficial way. The new cultures of “woke”, inside and outside the publishing industry and the pressure to become more diverse were producing tensions within.⁵

For instance, in the following quote a senior white respondent suggests that the push for diversity within the major publishing houses is being driven by outside forces:

there has been a huge uptake in the number of non-white writers being published partly because there’s been huge amount pressure and partly because pressure is effective on big companies. (Senior publisher, man, white)

In this quote, the respondent alludes to the activism of campaigners and audiences who are putting pressure on the major publishing houses to address the lack of racial/ethnic diversity of the writers being published. Indeed, one key finding from the research is how publishing houses are becoming increasingly aware of how they are perceived by audiences, and in turn how diversity has become absorbed into brand/reputational value. This is demonstrated further in an exchange with one “BAME” respondent who suggests that the moral case for diversity is disingenuous and hides commercial motivations:

I think, depending on the house you’re in, it’s a game of, how can we present ourselves. So how can we make sure that we’re ahead of, maybe, negative press? How can we make sure that we’re seen to be doing things? How can we put ourselves at the forefront of positivity, and maybe not face a backlash, but how can we get ahead? [...] How can we make ourselves look good? (Independent publisher, woman, “BAME”)

In this passage, the respondent describes how publishers are desperate to prevent a “backlash” and “negative press” that might come with not being seen to be publishing more diversely. Stories of books and authors being

“cancelled” after being accused of cultural appropriation or exploitation are a regular news story in the trade press and in the national press more generally. But on the flip side, there is a recognition of how diversity is now a critical component of how publishers brand and promote themselves. Thus, diversity is important to a publishing house’s reputational value (see Leong 2012). Diversity, as the respondent above puts it, becomes how a publisher *looks good* and *gets ahead*. We go as far as to argue that diversity is a crucial component to the very *legitimacy* of the modern publishing house.

To conclude this section we make two points. Firstly, while theorists of racial capitalism have argued that diversity is a means to create brand value, we would add that this can be reactive, that is, driven by fear and anxiety over not being seen as relevant. Secondly, what gets expressed as the moral/ethical case for the need for more racial/ethnic diversity, specifically in terms of the writers being published, very quickly gets subsumed into economic rationales, in terms of how it builds brand value. This is a further illustration of the economic case for diversity as a product of neoliberal logics, which in turn is leading to the very particular commodification of writers of colour. We unpack this further in the next section.

The economic case for diversity

The main narrative of the literatures on diversity in the context of neoliberalism is that diversity serves capitalism. While in this section we are going to unpack the economic case for diversity as articulated by our respondents it should be stressed that we still encountered an attitude that books by writers of colour are still niche. As one white senior publisher who works in YA stated, “books that are dealing with *issues* are just harder for us to publish” (our emphasis). (The publisher’s reference to “issues” here is racialized, referring to stories about minoritized experience.) One literary agent we spoke to from a “BAME” background described the process of selling books by writers of colour to publishers as effectively an exercise in “saying well, you think this is uncommercial, but actually look at all these ways in which it can be commercial”. The perception of cultural producers from racialized backgrounds as a risky investment (in an already risky business) is a key explanatory factor for why media continue to rely upon weathered tropes of race (Saha 2018). While as we will show, respondents were eager to talk up the economic value of publishing more diversely, this was always in relation to the prevailing sense that authors from minority backgrounds have limited appeal to the core audience (who are understood as solely white and middle-class (Saha and Van Lente 2020)).

Nonetheless in our interviews we found that the respondents made a strong economic made for diversity. Indeed, our sense was that stressing commercial value was an attempt to make a more *rational* case for diversity – as if the moral case is not enough to inform actual business decisions. There were several

ways that this was articulated. Some respondents discussed diversity as the very (commercial) essence of trade publishing, in that audiences are eager for new voices and perspectives, as the following quote demonstrates:

Because at the end of the day if you're black or your gay or whatever, transgender, that's a kind of bonus [...] it's kind of like oh my gosh you are telling this kind of commercial story [...] and yet you are giving me a fresh view on it, that's not really out there, that's brilliant [...] as an agent you are always looking for someone that is different and that is part of the difference. (Literary agent, "BAME", woman)

This quote echoes political economist Nicholas Garnham (1990) point that what makes cultural commodity distinct – in contrast to other commodities – is how its use-value is different and novelty. In other words, book readers demand difference and originality as well as familiarity. It is interesting that this "BAME" respondent makes a point of stressing a "commercial story" in order to, we assume, mitigate the risk of using a "different" type of author.

The respondent's reference to how a marginalized identity acts as "a kind of bonus" speaks to how writers from underrepresented communities are understood as a financial opportunity by publishers. This at times slips into a form of exoticization. One senior white literary agent we interviewed expressed glee over a new Muslim author she had signed who is writing a crime novel: "I'm completely fascinated with her take on it because you think 'oh that's how you think, okay', and it's different". While the intention might appear open, it in fact exposes the Othering of writers of colour in particular that continues to characterize the publishing process in an industry that is hegemonically white and middle-class. The language might seem inclusive but it racializes the person in its very enunciation and will shape how that author is packaged and promoted further along the production process (see Saha and van Lente 2020).

But building on this quote from the publisher we found that many of our respondents believed that a writer who belongs to a minoritized community, rather than excluded as has been historically the case, actually has an "advantage" when it comes to getting a book deal. Take the following quotes:

I think it has been long been the case that it has certainly not been a disadvantage, and to be honest frequently an advantage, if a British writer published isn't white in literary fiction. (Senior publisher, white, man)

I would be, actually I would be biased towards a foreign sounding name, I would definitely be biased towards it [...] it's a new exciting area and that's what people are looking for. (Literary agent, white, woman)

We are definitely looking for authors of colour on our crime list, because we don't have any and we want some, and so if something comes in, we know

we would want to buy that. So I suppose that does give you an advantage.
(Senior publisher, white, woman)

All of these quotes explicitly state that the demand for writers of colour is such that it is now an advantage to be from a racialized background; as one white agent said to us, crime writers of colour are “easier to sell”. The suggestion of one of the respondents that they “would be biased towards a foreign sounding name” is an attempt to sound inclusive but it unwittingly highlights how precisely racial inequalities reproduce (the implication is that they previously may have been biased *against* someone perceived as foreign). It is interesting that was a dominant narrative in our interviews with respondents who work in crime/thriller where the authors are overwhelmingly white. In this field, racial/ethnic identities become a way of literally adding colour to one of the most monochromes of genres.

While it is very possible that respondents were over-enthusiastic in their desire for more writers of colour in the context of the research interview, the narratives produced do suggest that discourses of diversity are driving a particular demand for writers from underrepresented communities. This may appear progressive in terms of providing more opportunities for writers who have been historically excluded, but the fact that white nationalist Tabatha Stirling believed she could capitalize upon this fad for her own ends suggests that there is a dark side to the business case for diversity. In the remainder of the article, we want to unpack this notion of an “advantage” that writers of colour are believed to have – it is implied – over their white counterparts. In one interview with a senior white publisher, the respondent referred to an award-winning British Indian author, who they suggested would not have been as acclaimed if they had “been a white woman from Southampton”. Such an assertion begins to unravel the precarity of diversity discourse (Gray 2016).

Tensions between moral and economic arguments

As we have shown, discourses of diversity contain moral and economic arguments. While the former felt a natural extension of publishers’ predominantly liberal values, or at least their desire to present themselves as open and inclusive, the latter felt that it required a little more buy-in, in order to shift commonsense understandings that racialized writers remain of niche interest. But as we have suggested the economic case for diversity was the way in which publishers mostly rationalized the need for more diversity in cultural production. As one “BAME” respondent put it, “I always used to say as well, like even if you have zero morals around diversity in publishing [...] it makes economic sense”. But in this final section, we want to show how diversity actually produces stress and anxiety among publishers, specifically in the way that it disrupts publishers’ sense of meritocratic self.

We found a tension in that publishers want to publish more “diversely” but not if it disrupts their sense of what is quality or what is fair. As much as the respondents in the previous section were somewhat unashamed in their desire for more writers of colour – especially those respondents specializing in genres where such writers are least represented, at times there was discomfort expressed at such a trend – sometimes by the same respondent. For instance, the agent working in crime quoted in the previous section who expressed their enthusiasm for a new Muslim writer, pointedly referred to how publishers are “aiming towards making things more politically correct”. But as stated it is when diversity is seen as a threat to meritocracy that we see more defensiveness. The white publisher quoted in the previous section, who argued that it was an advantage rather than a disadvantage to be a writer of colour in literary fiction, went onto make one of the most brazen critiques of publishing more *diversely*:

I do think that the number of sub-par books being published precisely because they're not written by white people, I don't think that's good for anyone [...] I have found that kind of a slightly depressing that as with our world at the moment people seem very keen to lead on the identity of the writer rather than whether or not a book's any good. (Senior publisher, white, man)

In this quote, the respondent is unequivocal that diversity leads to an undermining of quality and more “sub-par” books. He expresses concern over the way that “identity” takes the “lead” in what gets published. In doing so he makes a normative reference to whether a book is “any good” or not. The quote exemplifies Jo Littler’s notion of neoliberal postracial meritocracy, particularly the way that what is deemed of quality or “good” is narrated as universal or as commonsense, disguising how it is a product of historical forces designed to maintain the privilege of the dominant culture.

The above quote was one of only a few explicit critiques of diversity that we encountered in our research. As stated, our respondents were much more circumspect when addressing the potential downsides of the emphasis on diversity. However, their concerns around publishing more writers of colour emerged in more subtle ways. The following quote from a white senior publisher working in crime/thriller was much more reflective of how publishers are approaching diversity in the acquisition process. In it, she is speaking about a crime novel by a black African author that she recently acquired:

I loved the book, but it was also when I shared it with everyone, I was like I also think it's a factor ... we have ... I'm really embarrassed frankly by our lack of diversity [...] And I was like, this is not the reason why we should buy the book. But I also think it's a really lovely addition to [our list]. (Senior publisher, white, woman)

The quote evokes the different tensions that are the core of publishing more diversely. On the one hand, the publisher describes frank embarrassment at the whiteness of their frontlist. But on the other, she wants to make it clear

to her colleagues that this fact should not be the reason to acquire this book. Nonetheless, she cannot help but admit that even though she loved the book, the way that it is written by an African author, and how their list lacks diversity, makes it an unavoidable “factor” that should go into the buying of the book. In the end, the acquisition is justified in normative terms, where the book is painted as a “lovely addition” to their catalogue. The choreography behind the respondents’ rationalization of the acquisition of a black author, where she at times contradicts herself (the racial identity of the author should not be the reason that their book but the lack of diversity on their list is also a factor they cannot deny), precisely shows how the attempt to publish more writers of colour is a fraught business.

Ultimately, as much as most of our respondents would argue that the moral and business case for diversity goes together, we argue that they exist in tension. More precisely, there remains a distrust of how the books of writers of colour sell. As we have argued elsewhere (Saha and van Lente 2020) publishers have a very narrow sense of their audience – specifically as white and middle-class – which places limitations on the expectations of how writers of colour will fare. While there is a tension between diversity and publishers’ belief in meritocracy, friction also exists between the publisher’s liberal sense of self (where diversity is a key ideal) and what they understand as economic necessity. Take the following quotes:

We are a business after all, as well. We mustn’t forget that. That’s always been people coming to me, oh, you should do this, oh, you should do that. I’m like, I’ve got to make profit as well. (Senior publisher, ‘BAME’, woman)

We’re being asked on the one hand to behave as if we’re a library at the same time as having to make enough money to stay in business to publish people which predates a really odd place in relationship to the work. (Senior editor, white, woman)

Both of these quotes stress that publishing is fundamentally a business. They also suggest that the moral case for diversity (that publishers should act like “libraries”) has little value in what is a commercial enterprise. The second quote, in particular, encapsulates the tensions of diversity in publishing that we have explored in this article: in order to publish more diversely money needs to be made in the first instance in order to publish and promote authors of colour, the implication being that authors of colour do not make publishers money. Again, this exposes the contradiction of the liberal sensibilities of the modern publisher, who both values but does not see value in authors of colour. These quotes demonstrate that doing diversity, despite the economic rationales presented, is seen as ultimately leading to a measure of commercial compromise. The moral and economic cases for diversity are not as symbiotic as publishers make out.

Conclusion

The cultural industries serve a dual purpose: to make a profit, and to maintain the status of the people who run them. This leads to a complex situation where diversity is concerned. Cultural industries need to show buy-in to diversity. Within power structures, this entails an element of appropriation, accommodation and at times transformation. Macro-analyses of diversity particularly in relation to racial capitalism/neoliberalism, persuasive as they are, are less concerned with what diversity is doing on the ground, especially in instances where formal policy is not being enacted such as purely commercial industries such as publishing. Referring back to the Stirling incident, our point is not just that it illustrates how diversity has become a commodity, but to also draw attention to how, in her emotional defence of the publication of *The Colour of Madness*, she was attempting to find certainty when dealing with an unpredictable market. As shown, while we did encounter some cynical instrumentalization of diversity, our research on publishing mostly found uncertainty, anxiety and stress when publishers described their feelings and experiences working with writers of colour. Diversity in this way highlights the contradictions of racial capitalism.

While this all may sound like a sympathetic take on diversity, our point in fact is that exposing its contradictions in this way can become the basis for a social justice programme. The fact that diversity discourse becomes disruptive when it threatens cultural industries' sense of itself as fair, open and meritocratic exposes a crack that can be prised open for more radical ends. It has been well established that diversity policy is having little impact on racial and social inequalities across all sectors; the dominant culture treats it as a mere add-on to existing structures. But what if diversity discourse can be transformed into campaigning around positive action initiatives? There is no space to explore such policy which has historical precedents that need careful analysis. But it is when diversity discourse inevitably slides into this issue that the authority of the dominant culture is suddenly threatened. To reiterate, this is the point where diversity has the potential to become a more radical intervention. Diversity discourse makes race in a way that reinscribes the status of the dominant culture, but like racial capitalism itself, it also needs to be understood as fundamentally ambivalent in character.

Notes

1. Like Goldberg and Essed (2002) we understand "race critical theory" as distinct from "critical race theory", a specific tradition of US-based critical legal theory.
2. Littler (2017, 159) demonstrates how the historical formation of the canon of great English literature was tied to the colonial project.
3. Trade fiction refers to books made for a general audience and that are available in general bookstores.

4. During the research we learnt of some publishing houses conducting company audits but these are rarely made public.
5. Also in relation to cultural production, Kimberley Allen (2021) speculates on the increasing “wokeness” of television industries as responsible for the demise of “poverty porn” that demonises the working-classes.

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