

How the Marketing and Selling of Books by Authors of Colour Produces Racial Inequalities in Publishing

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Article abstract

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HOW THE MARKETING AND SELLING OF BOOKS BY AUTHORS OF COLOUR PRODUCES RACIAL INEQUALITIES IN PUBLISHING

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ABSTRACT

Based upon a unique empirical study on diversity in UK publishing involving over 110 interviews with publishers, this paper explores the obstacles facing authors of colour. While the underrepresentation of authors from minoritized backgrounds is generally seen as a problem of acquisition, we identify what political economist Nicholas Garnham calls the “cultural distribution” stage as the most critical for authors of colour. Specifically, we demonstrate how racialized assumptions about audiences as articulated and mobilized by people working in promotion, sales, and retail impede the progress of these authors. We argue that racial inequalities in publishing are a product of how racially and ethnically minoritized audiences are undervalued, culturally as well as economically. Adopting a postcolonial cultural economy approach, we identify the areas where antiracist activism needs to be focused in order to address racial inequalities in publishing in a more impactful way.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article explore certains obstacles auxquels se butent les autrices et auteurs de couleur. Il s’appuie sur une étude empirique de la diversité dans le monde de l’édition au Royaume-Uni rassemblant entre autres quelque 110 entrevues menées auprès d’éditrices et d’éditeurs. La sous-représentation des autrices et auteurs issus de minorités est la plupart du temps perçue comme un problème d’acquisition; selon nous, l’enjeu le plus critique pour les autrices et les auteurs de couleur est plutôt ce que l’économiste politique Nicholas Garnham qualifie de « distribution culturelle ». Plus précisément, nous montrons de quelle

manière ces autrices et auteurs sont affectés par les présomptions racisées que formulent et entretiennent, à propos des lectorats, les personnes travaillant à la promotion, à la distribution et à la vente des livres. Nous postulons que les inégalités raciales observables dans le monde de l'édition sont le produit d'une dévaluation des lectorats issus de minorités ethniques et raciales, dévaluation à la fois culturelle et économique. Partant d'une approche de l'économie culturelle qui se veut postcoloniale, nous identifions les lieux qu'aurait intérêt à investir le militantisme antiracisme afin de s'attaquer à ces inégalités de façon plus efficace.

Keywords

Diversity, racial inequalities, racism, marketing, book selling

Mots-clés

Diversité, inégalités raciales, racisme, marketing, vente de livres

The publishing industry is the Whitest and most privileged cultural sector in the United Kingdom. From an analysis of the 2019 Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey, Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien, and Mark Taylor¹ find that 95% of the publishing industry is White compared to 87% of the entire workforce.² (By way of comparison, the percentage of White people working in film, TV, video, radio is 91% and in music, performing and visual arts it is 85%³.) The racial inequalities that characterize publishing are generally conceptualized as a problem of diversity. While a discourse of diversity in British publishing goes back several decades,⁴ it has taken on greater urgency in recent times and dominates agendas in both corporate and cultural policy settings. Following the Black Lives Matter protests from 2020, all the major publishing houses in the UK took the unprecedented step of releasing statements that declared their support of the protests and acknowledged the need to improve their industry's recruitment from marginalized communities and publish more authors of colour.⁵

Despite the array of diversity initiatives that have been put in place this century, the publishing industry remain overwhelmingly White. Indeed, critical theorists of media and race highlight that the way that "diversity" is conceptualized and mobilized is precisely the problem, understood merely as an add-on to existing structures rather than a radical transformation of those structures.⁶ Diversity works for the benefit of Whiteness, and in doing so displaces the more assertive terms of anti-racism that better capture the

experience of authors and other publishing professionals who come from racialized backgrounds⁷.

As part of this special issue's exploration of activism in contemporary book culture, this article examines how racial inequalities in publishing need to be tackled in a more impactful way. Specifically, we argue that antiracist activists need to focus on an area that diversity initiatives are not addressing: cultural distribution. We work with cultural industries theorist Nicholas Garnham's definition of cultural distribution as the process of finding an audience for a particular cultural work—or rather, creating cultural works for specific audiences.⁸ We argue that the failure of publishing houses to attract racialized people (assuming publishers are genuine in their desire for better representation in their workforce or on frontlists) is because these communities are not valued as an audience; or at least they are perceived as having less cultural or economic value than White middle-class audiences. This disparagement is most evident during cultural distribution—the marketing, publicity, sales, and retail stages of the publishing process—which, we argue, is the stage where racial inequalities materialize and proliferate.

Contributing to research in book studies on questions of race, culture, and inequality, we approach the issue from a media studies perspective, using the postcolonial cultural economy framework.⁹ This paper explores how publishers understand racialized audiences and is based on a unique study of the UK publishing industry involving over 110 interviews with professionals who work in all areas of publishing, including acquisition, promotion, and sales. For this research we focused on the core publishing industry that, as we shall describe, includes but is not limited to the big conglomerate publishing houses that dominate the UK book market. In doing so we do not wish to diminish new forms of digital production that are creating new opportunities for authors of colour or the history of radical independent book makers and sellers that have provided a nourishing space for the most marginalized in society. We decided to focus mainly on the biggest publishers, however, not only because of their dominance in the marketplace but also because of how they define the business of publishing itself, which in turn shapes the experiences of authors from racialized backgrounds.

As mentioned, this article is based on a case study from the UK. While we recognize that this does not directly aid the important project of de-Westernizing book studies and media studies, we hope our findings will resonate with other nations where discourses on diversity are also taking place, especially in settler colonies such as Australia,¹⁰ Canada,¹¹ and South Africa.¹² When presenting our research to international audiences, we often encounter an incorrect assumption that the UK publishing industry is somehow more advanced on issues of diversity. The workforce demographics with which we opened this introduction clearly indicate otherwise. The purpose of the article is to better understand why racial inequalities persist in the publishing industry and how they can be addressed in a more impactful way.

Approaches in the Fields of Book Studies and Media Studies to Racial Inequalities in Publishing

The study of racial inequalities in twenty-first century book studies

To begin, we want to consider how academic researchers have explored the topic of racial inequalities in the context of publishing. In cultural and media industries research there is a significant body of work, mostly sociological, that tackles issues of inequality framed explicitly in relation to social justice. Most of the work has focused on class and gender, but an increasing amount of research has focused on race and racism in cultural industries. What is significant about this work is how it draws attention to the racializing nature of cultural production itself, which shapes both the experiences of cultural workers and the symbolic character of the cultural commodity in ways that reproduce historical constructions of Otherness.¹³ However, while we have seen important studies on such issues in film and television,¹⁴ very little of this research has focused on publishing. We open this article with a focus on publishing studies research and studies that have addressed the issue of racial inequality specifically in the book trade.

Much like the publishing industry itself, publishing studies—or what Noorda and Marsden prefer to call twenty-first century book studies¹⁵—has a problem with diversity. Studies on race and racism in publishing appear to be of marginal interest, and those who work in the field tend to take the institutional Whiteness of the publishing industry as a natural fact rather

than something to be interrogated.¹⁶ This is not to say that research on racial inequalities in the book trade is totally absent. Indeed, we note a spurt of recent studies on this topic from both an industry and an academic perspective. These studies emerge from the heightened urgency around issues of diversity in the current moment, often sparked by social media activism campaigns such as #ownvoices (and variations thereof¹⁷) or #publishingpaidme.¹⁸ But there is also a longer tradition within book studies that tackles the exclusion or marginalization of authors from racialized backgrounds. Such research focuses on bookmaking as a social process, with an emphasis on “paratextual” materials such as manuscripts, covers, adverts, book reviews that shape how books are received (in the context of literary studies, Sarah Brouillette refers to this as “the ‘materialist’ book-historical turn”¹⁹). Relevant to our focus on cultural distribution is the attention such work pays to the way books are designed, marketed, and packaged for the marketplace, giving texts added meaning.

The focus on the entire form of the book itself—including the rationales and processes that go into their making—forms the basis for book studies approaches to the books of author of colour. For instance, John K. Young's influential study of Black American authors²⁰ examines book jackets and promotional materials to argue that the way African American literature is marketed leads to its marginalization. He concludes that “minority texts produced within a majority culture will continue to be marked as such, one way or another.”²¹ Cécile Cottonet similarly contends that “books authored by cultural minorities, published by culturally dominant institutions, by definition represent some of the most significantly ‘constrained’ products.”²²

One of the most significant discussions within the field of book studies on the subject of racial difference addresses the marketing and reception of postcolonial literary fiction in the West.²³ This discussion has already received considerable examination,²⁴ but we want to highlight Brouillette's analysis of the commodification of writers from the Global South as one of the most important contributions to this debate.²⁵ In conversation with Graham Huggan's equally important work on the marketing of postcolonial writers, Brouillette argues that these authors are not unwise to market demands and willingly partake in their own commodification, often incorporating such commodification into the storylines of their books. Brouillette's intervention is unique in the way that she situates her

discussion of postcolonial fiction within a detailed analysis of capitalism and the global political economy. There is also an emphasis on how the material shapes the symbolic and ideas of racial difference (Brouillette shows how the *alienated, hybrid* postcolonial author has become a publishing format in literary fiction²⁶). With this social theoretical grounding for her claims, Brouillette argues that the author is not a mere product of capitalism. Rather, their agency is curtailed by these social conditions, where their ability to manoeuvre depends on the social and cultural capital they are able—or allowed—to accrue.²⁷ Brouillette’s epistemological framework—analysing the relationship between capitalism and empire, the material and the symbolic, and structure and agency—is similar to the postcolonial cultural economy approach that underpins our analysis of racial inequalities in the UK’s publishing industry.

The discussion we have referred to above is mostly concerned with marketing and reception, operating at the boundary between book history and postcolonial literary studies. Melanie Ramdarshan Bold’s wide-ranging study of Black and Asian authors working in Young Adult Fiction adopts a slightly different tack and offers a template for our own approach.²⁸ Based on in-depth interviews with the authors, Bold draws from cultural industries and cultural economy literatures to explore a variety of issues that reflect racial inequalities in publishing: how authors of colour feel tokenized or ghettoized; the under-representation of publishers from marginalized groups and how this affects which books get published; feelings of discomfort and anxiety in the literary community; the burden of representation; the lack of backing or marketing after publication; discrimination or unconscious bias; and low rewards for labour. Bold’s approach is particularly strong in how it contextualizes sociological findings in relation to structural change in the political economy of publishing, where increasing commercialization and marketization places greater constraints upon authors of colour who are seen as a riskier investment in comparison to their White counterparts. Adopting a cultural industries framework allows Bold to explore contradictions and complexities in the publishing industry. Relevant to our own study is Bold’s discussion of “narrowcasting”—that is, creating “niche” books for “niche” audiences. She finds that “while narrowcasting, particularly through alternative media, can have a positive impact on minoritized production, acting as an enabling space, there is also the danger

of ghettoization and of isolating mainstream audiences from minority cultures.”²⁹

Thus, through a reading of Brouillette’s and Bold’s work we identify two approaches to the topic of racial inequalities in the book trade. Brouillette is interested in how the marketing and packaging of works by authors of colour reinscribes the power of the status quo, to paraphrase bell hooks.³⁰ Bold is more focused on the structural inequalities that exist within publishing industries and how this constrains authors of colour.³¹ Keeping these two approaches in mind, we will explore how the cultural distribution of authors of colour reflects and reproduces racial inequalities in publishing, and discuss what activists can do with this knowledge.

A postcolonial cultural economy approach to racial inequalities in publishing

This paper’s media studies approach to racial inequalities in publishing works in tandem with Anamik Saha’s conceptualization of a postcolonial cultural economy framework, which is designed to unpack the different forces that shape race-making practices in media.³² This framework analyzes the dynamics of racial capitalism in a given moment, recognizing how legacies of empire shape the present, and examines in detail the workings of cultural production. Such an examination entails a consideration of all dimensions of production, including at the levels of political economy and organisation, and the everyday experience of creative labour, analysing the dynamics between structure and agency, in order to explain the historical representations of Otherness in media. There is an emphasis, as well, on strategies and forms of activism that can disrupt processes of marginalization/exoticization.

The subject of postcolonial cultural economy is cultural production, and its theoretical approach is rooted in cultural industries³³ and cultural economy³⁴ research. While stemming from different traditions, these approaches overlap in their shared interest in the industrial nature of cultural production and what it reveals about the relationship between media, culture, and capitalism. Echoing book studies’ understanding of bookmaking as a social and material process, Garnham explains that the cultural industries approach

sees culture, defined as the production and circulation of symbolic meaning, as a material process of production and exchange, part of, and in significant ways determined by, the wider economic processes of society with which it shares many common features.³⁵

Thus, both cultural industries and cultural economy researchers understand that the production of commodities like books in the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) follow similar forms of organisation as other industries that operate under capitalist conditions. These researchers also acknowledge, however, elements that distinguish CCIs from other industries, such as the significance of the symbolic quality of cultural commodities. For the purposes of our research, we acknowledge this significance by examining the racial meaning that imbues cultural commodities like books, which either reinforces or challenges historical constructions of Otherness in complex and ambivalent ways. The symbolic meanings that books generate, especially in relation to ideas of racial difference, is precisely what makes them so significant, and what gives them great value.

The question of value is of particular interest to cultural economy theorists, who study the different types of cultural and economic value that different types of cultural commodities and forms of cultural work are invested with or accrue. What sets cultural economy approaches apart from other studies of value is its social justice framework. For instance, cultural economy asks, what types of culture are valued, whose culture is valued, and who is allowed to make culture. This last question brings us to the issue of inequality in participation that is the concern of our paper. Mark Banks's notion of "creative justice"³⁶ helps provide a normative frame from which to critique and address inequalities in CCIs. The persistence of social inequality in CCIs amount to what Banks calls a "democratic deficit, since the range of voices and perspectives that circulate in the cultural arena is diminished."³⁷ He articulates three principles as part of a cultural justice programme: first, everyone should have a fair opportunity to access, work in, and obtain a fair living from CCIs; second, creative work should afford everyone cultural recognition and the ability to express themselves and their interests; and third, the purpose of creative justice is to enhance democracy through equal participation and cultural dialogue between different democratically elected

groups across the political spectrum.³⁸ In this paper, we apply Banks's theory of creative justice in an explicitly antiracist context: media is not only the space where dominant hegemonic ideas about race are reproduced but also where they are challenged. Thus, an important part of antiracist struggle is ensuring that racial and ethnic minorities have access to the means of cultural production and have the freedom to tell the stories that they want to tell.

The cultural industries approach is similarly interested in how the capitalist organisation of media relies upon the exploitation of workers, and how the process of commodification turns culture into private property which reproduces inequalities. Cultural industries scholars are also interested in how the media privileges and produces certain types of cultural commodities over others. Additionally, these scholars recognize that commodification as a historical process has enabling qualities³⁹ (as Bold alludes to in the quotation above). As Garnham points out, for example, the use value of a cultural commodity is difference, novelty, and originality.⁴⁰ In an unpredictable market cultural industries rely on formula, but it is the unexpected hits that often produce the most profit.

Cultural industries research covers a wide range of different topics related to cultural production in a variety of different sectors (though again, research into publishing remains curiously lacking.) Of relevance for this paper is Garnham's emphasis on cultural distribution in relation to cultural industries policy. Garnham critiques the way that cultural policy, in the form of public subsidies, often centres on the creative artist, based upon the crude distinction between culture and the market (as distinct from capitalism), where the creator needs to be buffered from corrupting commercial forces. According to Garnham, public policy needs to focus less on subsidising the creative artist and instead pay greater attention to the audience. He maintains that "it is cultural distribution, not cultural production, that is the key locus of power and profit. It is access to distribution which is the key to cultural plurality."⁴¹ It follows that the focus of policy should be on creating an audience or public for the work, rather than producing cultural artefacts or performances.

For Garnham, a cultural industries approach should focus on the function that he (somewhat ambivalently) calls "editorial." We should stress this is

distinct from the common sense understanding of the editorial role in publishing, which involves acquiring and preparing manuscripts. Instead, Garnham defines the editorial stage as

the function not just of creating a cultural repertoire matched to a given audience or audiences but at the same time of matching the cost of production of that repertoire to the spending powers of that audience [...] It is a vital function totally ignored by many cultural analysts, a function as creative as writing a novel or directing a film⁴².

Here Garnham describes the significance of the editorial function of cultural production. Missing from his description, however, is an account of which audiences are valued in the first place—or rather, whose spending power is valued and taken seriously. This question underpins the following section. But what we underline for now is that when considering racial inequalities in publishing—whether in workforce composition, the representation of minoritized groups in books, or the way that books written by authors of colour struggle commercially (with any profits monopolized by the dominant culture)—we need to pay closer attention to the stage of cultural distribution. In the context of publishing, this is the stage of identifying and targeting audiences for books. As the remainder of the paper will demonstrate, publishers fundamentally undervalue racialized communities, and thus do not feel the need to engage them in book culture—or at best, see them as an add-on to the core audience. We argue that this undervaluing is the source of racial inequalities in cultural industries more broadly, and needs more attention from antiracist practitioners in the book trade.

The Research: Context, Methods, and Findings

To reiterate, this paper examines how people who work in British trade publishing understand and approach Black, Asian and racialized audiences—when they do so at all. Following book studies approaches we identify the marketing, publicity, sales, and retail stages of publishing as crucial to how the books of authors of colour are received, often Orientalizing, exoticizing, or Othering their work. These stages of cultural distribution are, to use Garnham’s words, the “key locus of power”⁴³ in publishing. While we will not go as far as asserting that cultural distribution is the very source of racial inequalities in publishing, we make a more

nuanced claim that the way that publishers undervalue racialized audiences affects who is and who is not included in book culture. This gatekeeping determines the forms of exclusion and marginalization encountered by people from racialized backgrounds who work or want to work in publishing.

To make this argument we draw from a year-long research project on the UK publishing trade conducted between 2019-2020. It involved 113 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who work in the UK book trade, including publishers (CEOs and managing directors), agents, editors, book designers, senior and junior personnel who work in marketing, publicity, communication and sales, booksellers, and authors. While we sent out an open call for respondents via social media and various industry networks, in order to ensure we obtained a good sample of people working in each stage of production, most of our interviewees were invited specifically by the research team following introductions by our industry partners, including the industry trade magazine (see Table 1).

Table 1. Breakdown of Respondents by Role.

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

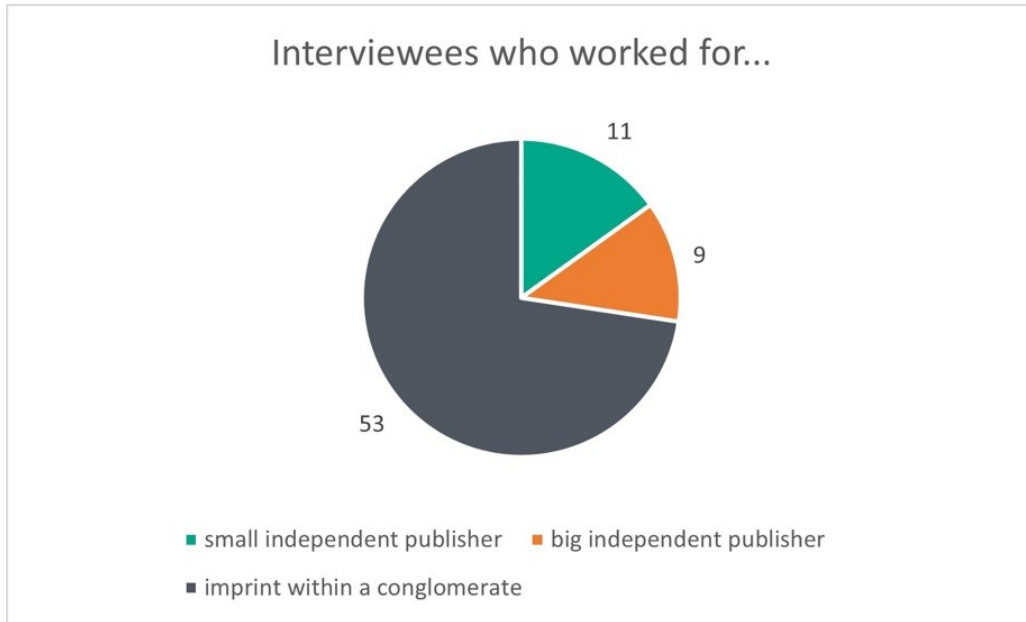


Figure 1. Breakdown of respondents by type of publishing house.

The project mostly focused on the major UK publishing houses (all of whom were involved in the research), but also included interviews with people who work in big and small independent houses (see Figure 1). Sixty-six of our respondents were White and 47 were BAME— “Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic,” a term used in UK social and cultural policy. The term *BAME* is a contested one, especially by the groups who are being described, for how it flattens very particular racial and ethnic identities and experiences.⁴⁴ While we share the same concerns, we use “BAME” to describe our respondents from racialized backgrounds precisely because it is so general and allows us to protect their identities, though we put “BAME” in quotation marks to highlight our ambivalence around the term. For the sake of confidentiality, all respondents and publishing houses have been anonymized in this research, and to further protect our “BAME” respondents we do not mention their professional roles either.

To repeat, this paper brings a cultural industries perspective to discussions of race and racism in the context of book studies. We employed sociological methods, focusing on publishers and their experiences and worldviews to grasp the nature of racial dynamics in this particular social world. In terms of our epistemological framework, we work with Georgina Born’s post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production, which recognises that a cultural or aesthetic object is shaped and instrumentalized by power but is

also an autonomous entity that can transform social relations.⁴⁵ Using this theory, we recognize that the making of books by authors of colour is done in a way that reinforces the status of the White-dominant culture that runs publishing, but that these same books also contain symbolic power that can lead to positive material outcomes for marginalized communities, albeit in complex and ambivalent ways. We also work with Stuart Hall's conception of the field of popular culture as a "war of position":⁴⁶ as a popular cultural product, books play a role—however modest—in the struggle for hegemony. Born argues that the dynamics of cultural production, and the forces that shape them, can be captured by speaking to the social actors involved and eliciting their reflections on the cultural objects that they help fashion.⁴⁷ Thus, in this paper we focus on the narratives of respondents—both White and "BAME"—working at the promotion (including marketing and publicity) and sales (including wholesale and retail) stages of publishing. Again, our interest is in what their responses reveal about how racialized audiences are understood and approached. We demonstrate how the discourse around these audiences effectively marginalizes them from UK book culture and affects the books that get made. In what follows, we identify three key themes that emerge in our research, starting with who is defined by the publishing world as its core reader.

Construction of the core reader

Throughout our interviews, the dominant narrative was that publishers need to do better in finding and attracting authors of colour. In other words, diversity was seen as a problem for those involved in the acquisition process, including agents, publishers, and editors. Our respondents who worked in promotion and sales also expressed concerns about diversity in terms of the books being published and the racial and ethnic composition of the workforce. But the sense was that this issue needed to be addressed at the point of acquisition, with strategies such as ensuring that the make-up of editors is more diverse. However, our interviews with promotion and sales personnel show what a powerful role they play in shaping books for the marketplace, determining where they appear, and deciding which ones are acquired.

One of our immediate findings was that UK publishers have a very narrow sense of their audience. Rather than work with a diverse range of audience

segments, respondents admitted that they usually have only one reader in mind. The following quotation from a White woman sales manager captured what many of our respondents described as the core reader: “I think it’s a sort of 50-something middle-class to upper-middle-class White woman. And she reads a lot because she has time, and she has resources to spend on books.” Indeed, in our interviews this reader was often sardonically referred to as “Susan” or “Susie.” The point about class is particularly pertinent; according to one White marketing manager we interviewed, their marketing plans only ever initially target people at the highest professional and social grades, since lower social grades “don’t shop at book shops, or we don’t think they are.” As he concedes, “that is a whole group of people who are not being marketed or spoken to by publishers.”

The construction of Susie as the core reader has ramifications for what books get published. As a White senior editor admits, a lot of acquisitions are based:

On the assumption that the majority of the British reading public is White, which is not necessarily the case. Well, technically it is percentage wise, I suppose, but I think we base too much on that when we’re thinking about it.

This quotation illustrates media industry scholar Timothy Havens’s notion of “industry lore”—the assumptions that White creative managers use when dealing with Black cultural production.⁴⁸ Havens argues that industry lore is a form of power/knowledge that places limits and constraints on what Black cultural producers can do, based on the commonly-held understandings of White people around the market, audiences, and Blackness. The quotation from the respondent above highlights how industry lore can contain tensions: as the respondent states, while the statement is factually correct that the majority of the British reading public is White, it potentially diminishes the value placed on racialized audiences.

The caricature of the core reader as Susie might appear reductive, but what was striking in our interviews was how this imaginary individual informed important business decisions. As a White sales manager we spoke to stated,

Everyone has to reduce things, everyone has to simplify things to help make decisions. So when you’re in an acquisitions meeting and everybody’s trying to convince

everybody to buy the book that they like, you can't be too nuanced [...] because you've got to come up with a number that we think they'll sell. And you know, Susan or Sharon or whatever her name is, is probably the quickest way of doing that. Even though we know that's obviously not every customer.

We draw attention to the way that working in reductive terms is presented as a natural, common-sense rule of publishing.

Our point is that the construction of “Susie” produces reductive epistemological outcomes for authors of colour, who must perform their ethnic and racial identities in a way that is seen to have value to this one reader. In other words, assumptions about reading audiences like those articulated by the above respondents have an impact on acquisition, including even, upon the manuscript itself. As a “BAME” respondent said to us,

I think often White editors are not realising that not every book is being written for a White reader, so editorial notes come in and suggest that certain things need to be made clearer, or need to be sort of translated for a White reader, when the writer's writing to their own community [...] I think publishing imagines one reader for every single book.

As highlighted in the previous section, this is a common finding in book studies of race: that authors of colour are made to translate their writing for “one reader,” who is imagined as White and middle-class, which leads to exoticisation and Othering. However, what we want to highlight in this quotation is how the respondent argues that authors of colour are sometimes writing for their own communities. Their point is that the publishing industry is not set up to cater to those readers who are not currently being targeted by marketing and sales. This is the theme of the next section.

Undervaluing racialized audiences

The failure to reach racialized groups was a common theme in our interviews with respondents working in promotion and sales. The “elephant

in the room,” as it were, was the stereotype that Black, Asian and racialized people do not read. During the research interviews, our White respondents were reluctant to touch on this issue, let alone use it as an excuse for not promoting to racialized audiences. We suspect that this might have been because they did not want to offend members of our multiracial research team. Our “BAME” interviewees, on the other hand, were more comfortable addressing this issue. While they displayed a range of positions on the topic, the common belief was that White publishers probably do not consider these audiences as avid readers—a form of industry lore. The most assertive response to this issue came from a “BAME” respondent: “Ethnic minorities don’t read, and we don’t know how to make them read... Publishers don’t have a clue about how to increase their market.”

It was difficult to elicit White respondents’ feelings on racialized audiences; again, maybe this was from a fear of causing offence or not saying the right thing. But the lack of value they attached to these audiences was expressed in other ways. For instance, it was easier for them to speak about the privileging of White middle-class audiences. Take the following example: one publisher suggested that authors of colour are not published because there is a feeling among publishers that such books would not be read by, for example, people in Cornwall, a region not known for its ethnic diversity. She then expressed indignation at this belief:

Go to your media buying agency and ask them, where’s the heaviest density book buyer. It’s the southeast. It’s London and the southeast, so, frankly if you’re claiming you’re not going to publish someone of colour because it’s not going to sell in Cornwall, I don’t care.

The argument the publisher is making here is that since the main book-buying audience is in the affluent south-east of England including London, then using the supposedly narrow-minded readers of Cornwall as an excuse for not acquiring authors of colour is disingenuous. But to make this point, the respondent further demonstrates how the publishing industry caters to only one type of audience: White, middle class, and metropolitan.

Another quotation from the White marketing manager from the previous section further demonstrates how publishers can be disingenuous about their assumptions about non-White, middle-class audiences. When we put it

to him that publishers consider Black and Asian audiences in the UK as too small to focus on, he reframed the question by reflecting on who his team target when working on literary fiction in general: “there was a sort of joke, are we talking to the same two thousand people in London every single time?” By acknowledging that the established literary fiction sector historically works with relatively small numbers, the respondent is suggesting that publishers cannot use the perceived lack of spending power of Black and Asian and other racialized communities as an excuse for not targeting them. Rather, publishers do not see cultural value in these audiences; their neglect of these audiences cannot be for purely economic or demographic reasons when they publish plenty of books that they know will only ever generate 2000 sales.

Another way that the lack of value attached to minoritized audiences presented itself was through respondents’ narratives about non-mainstream media, particularly media run by and for racialized communities. Especially evident in our interviews with people in publicity was their reliance on traditional press. As one White PR officer described her process, “you kind of have your go-to places [...] primarily, we have to think about book sales [...] so like, a national review is going to be much more valuable to the overall process.” The rationale here is that the traditional press have the biggest audiences and therefore will generate the most sales. When we asked people in PR whether they would target non-mainstream media, media that caters directly to minoritized communities, this was seen as an add-on to traditional media campaigns. As another White PR officer said, “you would do that in addition to a core literary readership that you’ve got with [BBC] Radio Four.”

Again, we note how these attitudes towards mainstream media versus more community-based media is expressed as common-sense PR practice. However, the “BAME” respondents were critical of what they considered outdated attitudes to non-traditional media. In recent years the UK has seen the emergence of several influential minority-run online journalism platforms that produce content specifically for audiences that have been historically neglected. The most well-known examples of such platforms include *gal-dem* and *Black Ballad*. Unlike what is historically understood as “minority ethnic media,”⁴⁹ these platforms are run by young British-born Black and Asian people at the vanguard of popular culture—indeed, a

significant proportion of their readership will be White. They have a significant social media presence, too. Thus, publishers' ignorance of these new platforms became a common thread amongst "BAME" respondents. The following quotation sums up this frustration:

There are so many different platforms, whether it's platforms made by people of colour or just platforms in general that are popping up, that are perfect opportunities where you can put books by people of colour. But the opportunities are not being taken to market those books by those people because they think—I don't know, like I said, maybe they think they don't read or they're not looking enough into those audiences and they're considering them enough.

In this quotation the respondent speaks to missed opportunities (later in the interview they express frustration that the publishing house they work for has missed out on great books that have been catapulted by this new media because of their company's ignorance of the significance of these platforms). But the respondent also alludes to how publishers are ignorant of and not interested in the audiences that these media cater to.

Respondents also suggested that the Whiteness of marketing teams is a factor for why they are unable to engage with new media platforms. The impact of this lack of diversity is implied in the following quotation from a "BAME" respondent who describes how marketing personnel do not have the knowledge to speak to racialized audiences even if they wanted to:

[White publishers ask] what would a Black teenager or a BAME teenager be into and what kind of culture would they consume?" [...] incorporating that into your targeting, into your keywords, is going to be limited if you don't have any knowledge of it. So, even like for example using #Blackgirlmagic on a book that is all centred around being a Black teenage girl, that isn't something that I've seen incorporated much and I don't know whether that is borne from a fear of marketers in terms of not wanting to encroach or inappropriately use certain tagging or targeting [...] But either way, it's a concern, because it means that if we're actually trying to reach audiences that we haven't

previously attempted to target and aren't usually targeted by book advertising, it means that our ads aren't going to get anywhere in actually reaching those audiences.

This quotation shows that by neglecting new forms of digital marketing, publishers are missing out on the ability to reach very specific audiences. What we highlight in this quotation is the respondent's suggestion that White marketers fear using cultural tropes to appear on the social media feeds of racialized audiences. This speaks to broader concerns around cultural appropriation but also reveals the effects of institutional Whiteness in publishing. As another "BAME" respondent said, "the culture of the people in the room filters into the publishing, so what ends up coming out is very White-centric."

Booksellers, diversity and selling books by authors of colour

The third and final subject that we explore in this article is booksellers and their attitudes towards books by authors of colour. It became evident that booksellers have fears around the economic value of these books. Another common finding was that booksellers are a powerful influence on the acquisition of books, since the success of any book depends on what books booksellers think will sell and what they want to work with.

Just as the core publishing industry lacks racial and ethnic diversity, so too does the profession of bookselling. In some ways it is more pronounced in retail. Respondents, including booksellers themselves, reported that booksellers are "predominantly older White people," who, as one White sales representative suggested to us, can be resistant to or feel alienated by the diversity discourse that is happening in publishing. As one White bookseller stated, "I think perhaps it's more difficult for them to adjust to some of the initiatives that are coming through." One senior White bookseller and advocate for greater diversity shifted the blame slightly to sales representatives, describing them as a "slightly slow changing breed" who need to do better at communicating the benefits of diversity to booksellers; he says that sales reps, as the "gatekeepers of a lot of bookstores [...] are not being fed the reason why this is all important." Either way we find that these narratives reaffirm our earlier assertion that

personnel working at the commercial end of publishing, both wholesale and retail, are arguably behind on issues of “diversity”.

This is because at this stage of publishing, economic value outweighs the types of cultural value that commissioning editors are more likely to factor into their decision-making. And we find that sales reps and booksellers tend to see less economic value in books written by authors of colour. This belief, or industry lore, was never directly stated in our interviews, but it found expression in other ways. For instance, sales managers and booksellers spoke of their reliance upon bestsellers that happen to be written predominantly by White authors. As a “BAME” respondent observed of booksellers, “they’re working in a precarious sort of high street business, and they’ll always go for the sure-fire thing.” A senior White bookseller conceded, “[we] tend to fall back on examples that can give you a grounding [...] We’re a business, so people aren’t supposed to go off-piste too often.” This quotation implies that books that give booksellers a “grounding” are written by White authors with a proven track-record of sales. We should add that there are different layers of nuance on how bestsellers are promoted in physical bookstores that depend on the type of retailer—whether large supermarkets, High Street chains, or smaller independent stores. For instance, the smaller independent stores often expressed how they do not bother promoting bestsellers as they cannot compete with the discounts that the major retailers can offer. But we want to draw attention to the respondent’s characterization of pushing a book by an author of colour—that is, buying a lot of copies and heavily promoting them in-store—as going “off-piste,” as risky or almost counter-intuitive. In a hegemonically White industry, authors of colour are not seen as a profitable investment.

This brings us to our next point, that sales and retail have a significant influence on which works are acquired. The phenomenon of the sales rep telling an editor to change a book jacket because the retailer does not believe it will sell is well-known in publishing studies. We now consider what this means for authors of colour. In some of our interviews, respondents described explicit forms of hostility that they had encountered either from colleagues in sales or from retailers when people of colour were featured on book jackets. For instance, one White senior editor recalled how in a marketing meeting she was told, “we can’t put a Black girl on the cover of a

book because it won't sell.” Another White editor described a sales meeting with a supermarket over a book which featured a Black woman on the cover: “There was one supermarket who told our sales director that their demographic was White working class and therefore they saw no reason to support the book.” This last quotation raises an issue that has remained implied in our argument until now: that issues of race in publishing are invariably articulated in relation to class. In the previous section we highlighted how books by authors of colour are designed to appeal to the tastes of an implicitly White, though explicitly metropolitan, middle-class reader. In the context of the supermarket buyer, the assumption is that their typically working-class customer would have no interest in books that feature characters from racialized backgrounds. This prejudice acts as a powerful form of industry lore that potentially alienates both the author of colour and the working-class reader in this context, but ultimately serves the dominant culture.

Returning to a theme in the previous section, we found that booksellers also affect publicity campaigns and the almost exclusive focus upon “traditional media.” For instance, one “BAME” respondent reflected on why “mainstream media” is the primary target for books by writers of colour, saying that it is because “that’s what Waterstones, and that’s what the independents, and that’s what Amazon understands. They only understand mainstream media that has quite a White, middle-class audience, because that’s their customer base.” The feeling is that a book is not going to sell in significant numbers unless it is bought and promoted by the biggest booksellers. Thus, the institutionalized cultural and racial bias of bricks-and-mortar retailers has negative implications for authors of colour—especially since booksellers target, “even in London, pretty middle class, pretty White” readers (in the words of a White former employee of Waterstones). The respondent went on to reaffirm that “even if it is a book by a BAME author, they’re mainly selling to White middle-class people.” This is a further iteration of our main argument about how a very specific audience is valued over others and how this in turn has epistemological consequences for authors from racialized backgrounds in terms of how they are supposed to, or allowed to, appear in book culture.

Interestingly, the same respondent goes on to describe how this status quo can be challenged by marketing directly to audiences rather than booksellers,

audiences who can then buy these books on Amazon. The significance of Amazon as the biggest retailer of books and how this is shaping the acquisition of books, especially by authors of colour, is a topic that demands its own investigation. As we have stated, our focus is on the “traditional” publishing and bookselling industry. While we acknowledge the influence and significance of non-traditional modes of publishing, the core publishing industry in the UK is still arguably the most important, employing tens of thousands of people and generating over £1 billion per year. Thus, how traditional publishing treats authors of colour is important to an explicitly antiracist form of creative justice, as outlined earlier, to ensure a “parity of participation”⁵⁰ inside cultural industries—to foster (multi)cultural dialogue and understanding through symbol creation and cultural work.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated how racial inequalities manifest at the cultural distribution stage of publishing, where publishers, in performing the editorial function of searching for audiences for their books, construct and privilege a White, middle-class audience. This, we argue, is a significant source of racial inequality in publishing. To conclude this article, we use our findings to formulate activist strategies that are focused on cultural distribution to better address racial inequalities in the industry. In the UK there have been a number of important antiracist interventions, the significance of which is worthy of its own study. But in what follows, we offer broad suggestions for activist strategies centred around cultural distribution.

We argue that the first step is to reject the diversity approach. As we suggested in the introduction, the way that “diversity” is conceptualized and mobilized allows the dominant culture to maintain the status quo. “Diversity”—as the strategic insertion of racialized and other minoritized peoples into the publishing industry—is also a way for the dominant culture to protect its cultural authority at a time where it feels particularly threatened, arguably more than at any point in modern publishing⁵¹.

We argue that activism needs to be focused on opening book culture for racialized groups in particular. Following the cultural industries approach, this involves macro- and micro-level strategies. We find that the initiatives in

the UK that best speak to the needs and desires of historically neglected communities are led by organisations—whether independent presses, booksellers, or media platforms—that create and promote reading material for those communities, by those communities.⁵² While there is a long history of radical Black publishing in the UK, this is also a history of ghettoization—not only because of racism from mainstream media, but also because these radical publishers cannot sustain themselves beyond their immediate communities. Therefore, at the macro-level, we argue for policies that provide significant financial support for these independent, minority-led organisations framed in terms of a radical creative justice programme. We also argue that antiracist media activists must take a more central role in campaigning for regulations that place stronger restrictions upon media concentration and conglomeration, to allow independent publishing houses—especially those run by racialized people—to compete on a more equal footing. Moreover, there needs to be greater campaigning around the protection and expansion of a public library system, which is used by a higher proportion of Black and Asian communities. Funding cuts to libraries is a major source of inequality in book culture.

At a micro level, activists need to intervene in core publishers’ engagement with minoritized audiences. While we are critical of diversity agendas that are more interested in hitting racial quotas rather than the transformation of existing structures, we also believe that more diversity within these publishing houses is a necessary step towards greater equality, as it means more representation of those minoritized communities inside the industry. Crucially, Black, Brown, and Asian people need to be present throughout the organisation, working both on books by authors of colour and White authors. They also need to be given autonomy and economic resources, especially when tasked with reaching specific audiences. We also argue for more financial support for those who work in grassroots audience engagement programmes. While we have concerns about the ways that such programmes can essentialize, homogenize, or privilege certain sections of a community over others,⁵³ we also see immense value in building deep relationships with communities to better understand their needs and to ensure that key institutions and venues can make them feel more comfortable participating in book culture. Book festivals can play an important role, but they need to centre rather than just engage communities that have been historically marginalized and excluded.

We acknowledge that there are many more forms of activism in publishing that can meaningfully address racial inequalities. Nonetheless, we argue that there remains a tendency to centre activism around the author. Following Garnham, we argue that the stage of cultural distribution is neglected by activists and academics formulating antiracist praxis in the context of cultural production. To return to Garnham’s view of cultural distribution “as the key locus of power,” he also describes it as the “the key to cultural plurality.” We argue that the publishing industry will remain monocultural unless it learns to value all readers.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES

Anamik Saha is a Professor in Race and Media in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. He is interested broadly in race, culture and media, with a particular focus on creative and cultural industries and issues of ‘diversity’. He is the author of *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Polity, 2018), *Race, Culture and Media* (Sage, 2021) and the co-author AHRC-funded industry report *Rethinking Diversity’ in Publishing* (with Dr Sandra van Lente, Goldsmiths Press, 2020). His research has featured across a range of media, including BBC Radio, *The Guardian*, *TES* and *The New Statesman*. He was included in the *The Bookseller’s* 2020 list of most influential people in the book trade. He is an editor of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Sandra van Lente works as a freelance academic and cultural project manager. She is also the personal assistant of novelist and political activist Sharon Dodua Otoo. Sandra worked as a lecturer and researcher at the Centre for British Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where she taught British Literatures and Cultural Studies, and wrote her PhD. Sandra is the co-author of the AHRC-funded industry report *Rethinking Diversity’ in Publishing* (with Dr Anamik Saha, Goldsmiths Press, 2020). In an interdisciplinary team, she continues to work on (the lack of) ‘diversity’ in the German literary field.

Notes

¹ Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien, and Mark Taylor. *Culture Is Bad for You*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.)

² Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, *Culture Is Bad for You*, 60- 61.

³ It is also the most middle-class, with 60% of key occupations in publishing coming from managerial or professional backgrounds (compared to around 30% of the general workforce. (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, *Culture Is Bad for You*, 62.) For an alternative overview of industry generated data see Nancy Roberts, "Diversity and Inclusion in Publishing: What Do We Know?", *Publishing Research Quarterly* 37 (2021): 255–63.

⁴ Danuta Kean, "In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today", *The Bookseller* 12 (2004).

⁵ Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente, "The Limits of Diversity: How Publishing Industries Make Race", *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 19.

⁶ Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

⁷ Sarita Malik, "'Creative Diversity': UK Public Service Broadcasting After Multiculturalism", *Popular Communication* 11, no. 3 (2013): 227–41. Clive James Nwonka, "The New Babel: The Language and Practice of Institutionalised Diversity in the UK Film Industry", *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 17, no. 1 (2020): 24–46, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2020.0506>.

⁸ Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: Sage, 1990), 161- 162.

⁹ Anamik Saha, *Race, Culture and Media* (London: SAGE, 2021), 92- 96.

¹⁰ Zhinan Yu, "White-Dominated Cultural Appropriation in the Publishing Industry," in *Moving Through the Grey: Publishing in Action* (self-pub., 2018), 11–20, Open Journal Systems. Emily Booth and Bhuvan Narayan, "Towards Diversity in Young Adult Fiction: Australian YA Authors' Publishing Experiences and Its Implications for YA Librarians and Readers' Advisory Services," *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 67, no. 3 (2018): 195–211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2018.1497349>.

¹¹ Kara Locke, "White Voices: The Dominance of White Authors in Canadian Literary Awards", *PUB 371: The Structure of the Book Publishing Industry in Canada*, 2017. Sarah McNeil, "Lack of Ethnic Diversity in Canadian Publishing", *PUB 371: The Structure of the Book Publishing Industry in Canada*, 2017.

¹² Cécile Cottenet, "On Publishing Diversity in South Africa and the United Kingdom", *E-Rea. Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone*, no. 11.1 (2013).

¹³ Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries*.

¹⁴ Sarita Malik, "'Creative Diversity...'; Clive James Nwonka, "The New Babel...".

¹⁵ Noorda and Stevie Marsden, “Twenty-First Century Book Studies: The State of the Discipline”, *Book History* 22 (2019): 370–97, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.2019.0013>.

¹⁶ Saha and van Lente, “The Limits of Diversity”.

¹⁷ Sarah Park Dahlen, “‘We Need Diverse Books’: Diversity, Activism, and Children’s Literature”, in *Literary Cultures and Twenty-First-Century Childboods* (Springer, 2020), 83–108. Booth and Narayan, “Towards Diversity in Young Adult Fiction”.

¹⁸ Tin Cheuk Leung and K Coleman S. Strumpf, “Discrimination in the Publishing Industry?”, *Available at SSRN 3660289*, 2021.

¹⁹ Sarah Brouillette, “Postcolonial Authorship Revisited (from Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace)”, in *Bourdieu and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Raphael Dallio (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 82.

²⁰ John Kevin Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006).

²¹ Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers*, 20.

²² Cottenet, “On Publishing Diversity in South Africa and the United Kingdom”, 7.

²³ See also Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London; New York: Psychology Press, 2001); Claire Chambers, “Multi-Culti Nancy Mitfords and Halal Novelists: The Politics of Marketing Muslim Writers in the UK”, *Textus* 23, no. 2 (2010): 389–403; Sandra Ponzanesi, *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies* (Springer, 2014).

²⁴ Cottenet, “On Publishing Diversity in South Africa and the United Kingdom”, 9- 10. Noorda and Marsden, “Twenty-First Century Book Studies: The State of the Discipline”, 384- 5.

²⁵ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²⁶ For a discussion of how the racial identity of an author becomes a marketing ‘format’ in publishing see Anamik Saha. “The Rationalizing/Racializing Logic of Capital in Cultural Production”. *Media Industries* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1- 16.

²⁷ For a similar post-Bourdieuian approach to the “boundary work” behind the inclusion and exclusion of ethno-racial authors in the literary field, see Timo Koren and Christine Delhaye, “Depoliticising Literature, Politicising Diversity: Ethno-Racial Boundaries in Dutch Literary Professionals’ Aesthetic Repertoires”, *Identities* 26, no. 2 (2019): 184–202.

²⁸ Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2019).

²⁹ Bold, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction*, 49.

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- ³⁰ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).
- ³¹ See also Claire Squires, “Publishing’s Diversity Deficit”, *CAMEo Cuts* (Leicester: CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, 2017).
- ³² Anamik Saha, *Race, Culture and Media*, 92- 96.
- ³³ David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, Fourth Edition (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2018).
- ³⁴ Justin O’Connor, “After the Creative Industries: Why We Need a Cultural Economy”, *Platform Papers* 47 (2016): 1–60.
- ³⁵ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, 155.
- ³⁶ Mark Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality* (London: Pickering & Chatto Publishers, 2017).
- ³⁷ Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, 3.
- ³⁸ Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, 2.
- ³⁹ Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*.
- ⁴⁰ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, 160.
- ⁴¹ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, 161-162.
- ⁴² Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, 162.
- ⁴³ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, 162.
- ⁴⁴ Sarita Malik et al., “BAME: A Report on the Use of the Term and Responses to It Terminology Review for the BBC and Creative Industries” (Birmingham City University: Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, 2022).
- ⁴⁵ Georgina Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production”, *Cultural Sociology* 4, no. 2 (1 July 2010): 171–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975510368471>.
- ⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”, in *People’s History and Socialist Theory (History Workshop Series)*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 227–39.
- ⁴⁷ Born, “The Social and the Aesthetic”.
- ⁴⁸ Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media Around the Globe* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).
- ⁴⁹ Anamik Saha, *Race and the Cultural Industries*, 147- 151.

⁵⁰ Mark Banks draws from Nancy Fraser to develop this term. Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, 66–69.

⁵¹ Saha, Anamik, and Sandra van Lente. “Diversity, Media and Racial Capitalism: A Case Study on Publishing”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 16 (2022): 216–36.

⁵² There is not the space to cover let alone evaluate different types of antiracist initiatives in UK publishing. But as a small set of examples of initiatives that are making proactive attempts to bring racialized communities into book culture, we highlight the following (in no particular order): Jacaranda’s TwentyIn2020 initiative; the Jhalak Prize; writer development agencies like Spread the Word and Writing West Midlands; Birmingham Literature Festival; Bradford Literature Festival; independent publisher Knights Of; and the independent bookseller Round Table Books.

⁵³ Anamik Saha, “The Politics of Race in Cultural Distribution: Addressing Inequalities in British Asian Theatre”, *Cultural Sociology* 11, no. 3 (2017): 302–17.

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