Encultured Biases: The Role of Products in Pathways to Inequality

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Abstract

Recent sociological work shows that culture is an important causal variable in labor market outcomes. Does the same hold for product markets? To answer this question, we study a product market in which selection decisions occur absent face-to-face interaction between intermediaries and short-term contract workers. We find evidence of "product-based" cultural matching operating as a pathway to inequality. Relying on quantitative and qualitative observational data and semi-structured interviews with intermediaries in trade fiction publishing, we show intermediaries culturally match themselves to manuscripts as a normal feature of doing "good work." We propose three organizational conditions under which "encultured biases" come to the fore in product selection, and a fourth resulting in inequalities along demographic lines and other markers of perceived cultural proximity and distance. We close with a discussion of other settings in which product-based cultural matching is likely to occur, call for the investigation of cultural matching beyond previously theorized conditions, and argue for the inclusion of cultural products in the broader movement toward reconsidering culture as a causal factor.

Unequal racial and gender representation in film, television, and literature is a subject of both academic and public interest (Hickey 2014; Lindner, Lindquist, and Arnold 2015; Yuen 2017). Public advocacy projects like the VIDA Count, the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, and the #OscarsSoWhite campaign suggest that the demographics of intermediaries are related to underrepresentation in what is produced and valorized. Yet beyond the general suggestion that a connection exists, little is known about the pathways through which it may occur.

To study the relationship between the demographics of intermediaries and the products they select and promote, we extend findings from hiring in labor markets to a product market: the selection of fiction manuscripts for publication. Studies of hiring in labor markets have emphasized the independent effects of demographics (Pager 2003; Pedulla 2016) and culture (Koppman 2016; Rivera 2012). Yet the intersection of demographics with perceived cultural differences is generally left out, or effectively controlled for by audit methods or case selection (cf. Turco

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2010). This decoupling of demographics from culture overlooks that demographic differences are associated with perceived cultural differences (Ridgeway 2011; Schachter 2016), and that perceived cultural differences are used to justify demographic inequalities (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Massey 2007).

Aligned with the recent focus on demographics and culture as co-constitutive in inequality, we bring DiMaggio's (1992) and Rivera's (2012) "cultural matching" approach and Lamont, Beljean, and Clair's (2014) "cultural processes" model into a product market. In so doing, we highlight on-the-ground processes of "product-based" cultural matching at work. In Lamont and colleagues' (2014) terminology, manuscripts are first "identified" along demographic-cultural lines and then "rationalized" by intermediaries as "good" or "poor" fits. The question of "fit" is not about audiences—about whom little is known (Caves 2000; Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006)—but concerns the intermediary as an agent tasked with shepherding the manuscript through its developmental editing and production.

Using quantitative and qualitative data, in this article we show that book publishing intermediaries select manuscripts based on perceived cultural proximity to themselves, which, coupled with unequal demographic representation, results in macro-level inequalities. From Lamont and colleagues (2014), we take seriously that the macro-level outcomes from cultural processes are not predetermined and may vary based on setting and context. In this spirit, we propose three organizational conditions under which "encultured biases" in product selection should be most prominent, and then suggest a fourth condition under which they result in macro-level inequalities. We then discuss how our field site allows us to isolate product-based pathways from interpersonal effects in labor-based markets, satisfying our four conditions.

After discussing our methods and providing an ethnographic "telling case" (Mitchell 1984) of the processes we propose in action, we use quantitative data to first show that publishing intermediaries demographically match themselves to fiction manuscripts along lines of gender, age, and race. We then use interview data to show demographics operate as proxies—real or perceived—for symbolic proximity and distance from manuscripts, within a larger set of cultural proximity markers (e.g., religiosity, region, peer groups, educational experiences, interests, and hobbies). Having established intermediaries select manuscripts based on perceived cultural proximity, we then turn to race as a particularly salient marker of cultural similarity and difference, explaining how intermediaries select and pass on manuscripts along culturally inscribed racialized lines, and we discuss the resulting inequalities faced by non-white authors due to these processes. After discussing alternative accounts, we close with the application of our framework to other settings and contexts, and ideas for future research.

INEQUALITY THROUGH CULTURE

Research on labor markets is particularly attuned to demographic biases in hiring (Pager 2003; Pedulla 2016). Applicants may be hierarchically sorted by their demographics, but employers also select applicants via a matching process based on demographic similarity (Elliott and Smith 2004; Gorman 2005). This is also true for the role of cultural comportments and tastes in hiring, in which employers show preference for applicants of high cultural status (Koppman 2016; Williams and Connell 2010) and who match them along culturally-based identity markers of similarity and difference (Garnett, Guppy, and Veenstra 2008; Rivera 2012).

In these studies, to isolate demographics from culture, one or the other is effectively controlled for via audit methods (e.g., Pager 2003) or case selection (e.g., Rivera 2012). However, by isolating demographics from culture, the intersection of cultural tastes, comportments, and experiences with demographics may be overlooked or misspecified (Turco 2010).

For instance, as Ridgeway (2011) found, cultural beliefs about demographic categories such as gender produce "social difference

codes," and in the United States, white individuals view non-white people as symbolically dissimilar from themselves (Schachter 2016). This may be of particular concern in contexts in which demographics and cultural tastes are associated, such as in markets for cultural goods (Bourdieu 1984; Thomas 2017). More generally, the disaggregation of demographics from culture in labor market research may elide how culturally encoded classificatory schema build up into macro-level patterns of demographic inequality (Brubaker 2015; Massey 2007; Ridgeway 2011; Tilly 1998).

As Lamont and Molnár (2002:168; emphasis added) argue, symbolic boundaries—the stuff of culture—"separate people into groups and *generate feelings of similarity* and group membership." This is further refined in Lamont and colleagues' (2014:583) *cultural processes* model, which argues that the pathways via which symbolic boundaries may build up into macro-level inequalities "are centrally constituted at the level of meaning-making." In this framework, channels of *identification* (e.g., racialization and stigmatization) and *rationalization* (e.g., standardization and evaluation) may act as pathways to inequality. Yet this need not happen with instrumental goals such as resource monopolization in mind, as macro-level outcomes from these processes are generally undetermined (Lamont et al. 2014).

A good illustration of this indeterminacy is Rivera's (2012) analysis of cultural matching in elite firms. Cultural matching is a micro-interactive theory of network formation between individuals in which "actors rely subliminally on verbal and nonverbal cues to estimate cultural overlap" (DiMaggio 1992: 127). In Rivera's setting, firms are self-segregated into discrete cultural types (e.g., "fratty," "egghead") and reproduced by ascriptive cultural sorting in hiring. Consistent with Lamont and colleagues (2014), this may or may not lead to macro-level inequality, provided a scenario in which the distribution and proportion of applicants' cultural types are mirrored by hiring firms' cultural

types. At work in cultural matching are scalar measures of similarity/dissimilarity between two entities, rather than a fixed hierarchical structure across all entity pairs. In what follows, we explain how entity pairs can be person-to-object (rather than just person-to-person, as previously theorized), and how culturally determined person-to-object entity pairs can build up into macro-level hierarchical inequalities.

Building on Lamont and colleagues' (2014) framework, we extend DiMaggio's theory of network formation from Rivera's (2012) labor market to the case of a product market. We do so for three reasons. First, the analysis of selection decisions in a product market helps explain the perceived relationship between the demographics of intermediaries and underrepresentation in the culture that is produced. Second, findings from product markets allow for analyses of market inequality without decoupling demographics from culture. In the model we propose, demographics operate as proxies—real or perceived—for perceptions of cultural proximity and distance. Third, by extending networks-based theories of cultural matching to the case of a product market, we are able to theorize how matching-based findings in labor markets extend to settings and contexts in which they would seem not to operate. This is a topic of interest across sociological subfields—culture, organizations, economic sociology, inequalities—but it is of particular concern to scholars of labor markets, given the rise of remote, short-term, contractual, product-based work (Cohen 2016; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Schwartz 2018). In the next section, we explain how the particularities of our field site allow us to differentiate "product-based" cultural matching from the interpersonal networks-based theory on which it is derived.

From People to Products

Rivera (2012) leverages scope conditions at her field sites to isolate interpersonal cultural matching as a causal factor in hiring. Because candidates are pre-screened, come from elite

institutions, and the work required is not "rocket science," screening based on demographics or skill is minimized (Rivera 2012:1008). Instead, cultural fit is prioritized because of "the time-intensive nature of their work. With the long hours spent in the office or on the road, they saw having culturally similar colleagues as making rigorous work weeks more enjoyable, although not necessarily more productive or successful" (Rivera 2012:1007). For this reason, cultural matching also works as an employee retention device. In short, due to the specifics of Rivera's (2012) field sites (pre-screened, elite candidates doing non-challenging work over long hours together), cultural matching comes to the fore because the conditions of labor (i.e., interactions) take precedence over the product of labor.

But what of a different setting in which, under current theory, cultural matching would not or could not occur? In such a context, first, there would be no interview in which employers could interpersonally estimate cultural overlap. Second, the work would be entirely distance-based, exclusively on a short-term contract with no possibility for full-time advancement, and the interpersonal communication required would be infrequent and mostly over email rather than requiring long hours of daily co-presence. In this setting, cultural matching would be significantly dampened, if it is to have any effect at all. We argue that a cultural matching process may also occur under these conditions, provided a pathway flows between intermediary and object (a person-to-product relation). This is different from the interpersonal network channel (a person-to-person relation) considered in previous work.

In literary book publishing, the labor performed by authors is done remotely and on a short-term contract. Over the long-term, a short-term contract may eventually lead to another short-term contract, but authors are not auditioning to be full-time publishers. Save for the case of celebrity authors whose names may help sell books, it is almost exclusively the manuscript that is under evaluation,

and the author's interpersonal style, cultural comportment, and background may be entirely unknown when making publication decisions. Erika Goldman (2017:155), publisher and editorial director of Bellevue Literary Press, explains why it may be useful—but not necessary—to speak to an author once by phone before acquiring a manuscript:

> [I]f possible, I contact the writer by phone. In the course of my call with Paul Harding, I described to him my response to his book and sought to confirm that I had read the book that he had intended to write.

Here, Goldman's "if possible" is not about cases in which a phone call is literally impossible, but rather is to suggest that if the intermediary is not too busy a phone call can be useful. Yet the purpose of the call is not to ensure that the author will interpersonally fit in at the publisher—the author will rarely if ever step foot in its offices—but rather to ensure the author and intermediary align *in their understanding of the product*. This lack of interpersonal interaction and knowledge between authors and intermediaries at the decision stage can also extend to demographic backgrounds, as explained by the literary agent Adriana Domínguez (Low 2013):

> Most of the time, I haven't met these authors and illustrators in person so the only way for me to tell what their ethnicity might be is by their name and their choice of subjects, but these can be misleading. I once made an offer on a picture book about an African American family . . . by an author with an African American sounding name and she turned out to be a white librarian.

As Domínguez explained, she had already decided to publish the book and offered a contract prior to any knowledge of, or sustained interaction with, its author.

As a straightforward distinction, in previously studied settings, employers use interpersonal cultural matching because workers will be spending a lot of time together. In our

setting, interpersonal cultural matching is of little to no concern because people will spend little if any interpersonal time together. For example, during the first author's fieldwork, intermediaries regularly traded stories of "crazy" authors. Unlike a "crazy" new employee in an elite law firm, however, the "craziness" of authors was tolerable, and the subject of joking between intermediaries, because on a day-to-day basis they were simply not around. Rather than spending a lot of time with authors, intermediaries spend a lot of time with manuscripts. This creates the conditions under which product-based cultural matching can be isolated.

Organizational Settings in Which Product-Based Matching Comes to the Fore

Product-based cultural matching should be most pronounced in settings with (1) high levels of uncertainty, (2) intermediary autonomy in selection decisions, and (3) products that cannot be easily de-cultured, de-raced, or de-gendered. Organizational contexts with all three of these features should most regularly result in encultured biases in product selection. Building off Lamont and colleagues (2014), we specify a fourth condition under which these biases are likely to build into macro-level inequalities: (4) markets in which intermediaries are less culturally diverse than the creators or consumers. In making this argument, we begin with the simple observation that cultural familiarities and preferences—based on sentiments, affinities, tastes, and experiences—are not randomly distributed across the population (Bourdieu 1984; Mark 2003). This can be both commonplace and trivial, but if the holder of preferences holds the keys to others' life chances and uses them to decide others' fates, it is not.

Uncertainty is an important condition under which a reliance on encultured preferences may influence product selection decisions. Sentiments and sympathies always play a role in decision-making outside (Bruch and Feinberg 2017) and inside (March 1994:213)

organizational settings, but even in highly rationalized systems, what is deemed as "good" boils down to people's emotions and preferences (Aspers 2018). Contexts characterized by uncertainty heighten these effects, as uncertainty creates the conditions under which individuals "are thrown back on sympathy as an assessment criterion," with sympathy "constructed in part out of categories (like us/not like us)" (DiMaggio 1992:127).

Uncertainty leads intermediaries to fall back on personal affinities and culturally derived "like me/not like me" assessment criteria. However, intermediaries must also have relative *autonomy* in their selection decisions for those affinities to come to the fore as legitimate decision criteria. Intermediary autonomy is a key feature of what DiMaggio (1977) calls a "pure brokerage" model of cultural industries. Although pure brokerage organizational structures should theoretically increase product diversity—and in some cases have been shown to do so (Lopes 1992)—this assumes that intermediaries are themselves diverse in their selection criteria. If they are not, in their selection autonomy, culturally redundant "pure broker" intermediaries would generate something closer to product homogeneity through reliance on overlapping affinities and experiences.

Finally, the products under question must be read as *culturally inscribed* for encultured biases to occur in their selection. Here, because tastes, interests, and experiences are, to at least some degree, sorted along demographic lines, we use a broad definition of "culturally inscribed," ranging from, for instance, a Bangladeshi-American intermediary feeling cultural proximity to a novel involving the interior thoughts of a Bangladeshi-American main character, to a younger intermediary feeling their "fit" is wrong for evaluating and shepherding a product targeted to older people.

These three features—uncertainty, autonomy, and the cultural inscription of products—describe the conditions under which encultured biases in product selection may most robustly occur. Yet these are necessary

but not sufficient to the production of macro-level inequality. A particularly insightful contribution of Lamont and colleagues' (2014:584) cultural processes model is the idea that "the inequality-related outcomes of most cultural processes are largely uncertain and open-ended." We argue that encultured biases result in macro-level inequalities when a fourth condition is met: intermediaries are less culturally or demographically diverse than the population of consumers (or would-be consumers) and creators (or would-be creators).

SETTING: TRADE BOOK FICTION PUBLISHING

Creative industries and markets for cultural products typically operate under high levels of *uncertainty,* and trade book publishing is no exception (Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972). Creative industries use many strategies to mitigate this uncertainty (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Elberse 2013; Franssen and Kuipers 2013; Godart and Mears 2009), yet as we will show, perceived cultural proximity between intermediaries and products is a powerful, if previously under-theorized, tool.

For product selection, trade publishing relies on a pure brokerage structure predicated on intermediary *autonomy* (see Thompson [2010] on the "federal model").[1] In fact, in his explanation of the "considerable discretion" given to intermediaries in a pure brokerage structure, DiMaggio (1977:442) suggests trade publishing as the ideal-typical case. Given their "professional independence" (Anand, Barnett, and Carpenter 2004:12), when selecting manuscripts editors rely on a four-pronged decision heuristic, consisting of evaluations of (1) artistic ability, (2) market feasibility, (3) fit with their publisher, and (4) their own tastes, interests, and experiences (Childress 2017). It is through evaluation of fit with their publisher that editors are most likely to self-regulate their autonomy (Powell 1985), and through reliance on their personal tastes, interests, and experiences that they most express their autonomy. The reliance on personal tastes, interests, and experiences is heightened because the

products under consideration, books, are themselves *culturally inscribed*.

Publishing intermediaries explain the selection of manuscripts as "an affair of the heart" (Rabiner 2017:83) and "based more on emotional response than calculated judgment" (Sale 1993:269). Rather than personal tastes and experiences in product selection being the hidden underbelly of organizational decoupling, reliance on these evaluative criteria is highly institutionalized, and even valorized in the industry as a sign of doing "good work."[2] James Wade (1993:74; emphasis added), then executive publisher and vice president of Crown Publishers, wrote of this institutionalized edict in advice to young editors in an essay subtitled "The Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Editing":

> If you suspect you are going to distort, even unwittingly, the author's ideas and expressions for whatever reason (*your "expertise" or your moral evaluation or even hazy issues like taste*), then you have no business editing that book.

The normative imperative for selecting and avoiding manuscripts based on personal tastes, interests, and experiences is further clarified by publisher and author Richard Marek (1993:90), who offers similar advice to young editors:

> Writers are always told to write from experience, and editors should follow the same advice. Your problems, concerns, your passions are not unique—they are mirrored by others, and therefore there is an audience for books about them. The young single editor with relationship problems is far better off looking for writers who share his concerns than for books on marriage. An editor with an expertise in science might be advised to turn over a book on ballet to a colleague.

This edict for culturally matching on products is so ingrained in book publishing that it extends beyond initial product selection and into developing production teams. As the

literary agent Meredith Kaffel Simonoff explained, a good intermediary will come up with "specific reasons why a book should appeal to different members of his or her team: This book is set in western Pennsylvania—aren't you from western Pennsylvania?" (Morgan 2017:138).

In summary, trade book publishing operates under *uncertainty,* relies on a pure brokerage structure in which intermediaries are given substantial *autonomy* in product selection, and they do so for *culturally inscribed* products for which they rely on their own tastes, interests, and experiences when making selection decisions. As a result, in our setting, encultured biases come to the fore not only as a decision heuristic when selecting books for publication but also as an institutionally entrenched and *legitimate* decision heuristic.

These three conditions create the recipe from which encultured biases in product selection are most likely to occur, but for this to build up into macro-level inequalities in our framework, intermediaries must themselves be less culturally or demographically diverse than the population of consumers and creators, or would-be consumers and creators, in a fully rational market. The socio- and cultural-demographics of intermediaries in book publishing also meet this fourth condition.

Intermediaries in book publishing tend to hail from upper-middle-class backgrounds (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982), attended elite colleges and universities (Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton 2007), and are disproportionately white. According to the 2014 *Publishers Weekly* Salary Survey (*Publishers Weekly* 2014), 88 percent of responding editors identified as white, 3.7 percent identified as Asian, 2.8 percent as Hispanic (any race), 2.8 percent as mixed race, and 1.4 percent as African American. As one of Coser and colleagues' (1982:166) respondents noted, acquisition editors tend to be a demographically "homogenous, unidimensional staff," and those who "do not fit 'the mold'" can have trouble gaining access to these positions.

Yet this barrier to entry for individuals from non-white and working-class backgrounds is not the result of occupational closure, as there are no formal degree requirements excluding entrants, and professional trade associations are weak and voluntary (Childress 2017). Instead, categorical inequality emerges through subtler forms of opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998). As Michael Nauman, then chief executive of the publisher Henry Holt summarizes, "the system of assistant editors is a self-recruiting system for the cultural establishment" (Carvajal 1996). This primarily operates through three mechanisms. First, as is true across most media industries (Frenette 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011), entry-level positions in book publishing rely on unpaid to low-paid internships. This creates what associate fiction editor for the *New Yorker* Willing Davidson (2009) calls "a truism of the industry that most of these jobs are held by people who can afford them—people with some parental support and no student loans." Second, book publishing is a "who you know" industry in which social capital is paramount (Thompson 2010), and internships are traded through "old boy" and "old girl" networks of college friends, former colleagues, and industry acquaintances (Greco 2005:127). As David Unger explains, "because the business is so clubby . . . [t]he children of editors and writers get most of the internships" (Arnold 1998). Third, the skills required to be a good publishing intermediary are even unclear to employers, who describe publishing as a "gut business" (Nelson 2005:10). In trying to delineate between the skilled and unskilled, employers rely on what Soar (2000) calls a local "taste culture" shared by a narrow pool of like-minded, well-educated, metropolitan, and cultural elites (see also Koppman 2016). As explained by one of our interlocutors, "historically publishing has always been thought of as a rich person's profession. It's very difficult for people who don't have some kind of family backing or other income or revenue stream to make it in publishing." In short, and as recognized by those in the industry, individuals who select books for publication disproportionately hail from white, elite, middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

Regarding authors and readers, along lines of race, publishing intermediaries are two times less likely to be non-white than are

professional writers (NEA 2011), and four times less likely to be non-white than are regular readers of literature for pleasure in the United States (NEA 2009). Note that should our theory hold, due to census occupational definitions, the proportion of non-white professional writers may be artificially *deflated* due to the lack of racial representation among publishing intermediaries, and non-white readers may also be artificially deflated due to selecting books in an underserved market. The interdependence of author and reader demographics on intermediary demographics— as well as the basic implications of the model we propose—has been explicated by African American publishing intermediary Chris Jackson (2017:223, 228):

> I'm often asked to speak about a thing that doesn't actually exist: diversity in publishing. . . . When we expand the range of the industry's gatekeepers, we expand the range of our storytelling . . . [but] it can only happen if we widen the gates of literature and diversify the gatekeepers.

These realities of the demographics of book publishing intermediaries constitute our fourth clause for how encultured biases may build up into macro-level inequalities.

DATA AND METHODS

Literary Agent Database

In 2015, the first author scraped an online database of literary agents. The database consists of information voluntarily entered by agents, who do so because they are actively seeking manuscripts from authors. As such, these data are naturally occurring. Data include name, agency, address of agency, Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR) membership, a picture, genres of books represented (from a drop-down list of 43 fiction genres and 73 non-fiction genres), and sometimes a biographical statement. For fiction, which is the focus of this work, agents could mark themselves as representing as

many as 43 and as few as zero genres. An estimated 1,500 literary agents are working in the United States (Thompson 2010).

The database of literary agents we rely on consists of 1,312 agents, 1,270 of whom work on fiction. For each agent, we merged these data with two additional data sources: (1) the Publishers Marketplace database of publishing deals, which we use to capture the number of six-figure deals completed by the agent ($N = 1,196$), and (2) publicly available LinkedIn profiles, for which in one set of models we use year of college entry as a proxy for age ($N = 493$). We use these data to confirm that in a product-based match, intermediaries sort themselves into working on genres of fiction that are overpopulated with main characters who align with their own demographic backgrounds.

Interviews

In 2008 to 2009, interviews were conducted with 42 acquisition editors. As there is no established population of acquisition editors in book publishing from which to draw a representative sample, we sampled editors for range and conducted interviews with editors (1) on the east and west coasts of the United States, (2) working for conglomerate and independent publishing houses, (3) of varied age cohorts, and (4) of varied gender. Demographic characteristics can be found in the Appendix. All but one editor interviewed always or sometimes worked on literary fiction. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Topic areas included (1) entry into the industry and current position, (2) typical workday, (3) processes and factors in selecting manuscripts inclusive of narration of current or recently selected manuscripts, (4) role in the overall publishing process, and (5) an orally conducted work-related social support network module. The second and third of these topics inform the bulk of the interview data used here.

As part of a larger research project, the first author also conducted interviews with 15 literary agents who worked on literary fiction,

and 25 authors, most of whom wrote literary fiction. As three of the four decision heuristics between agents and editors are the same (agents are less concerned with agency "fit"), and the statistical majority of agents have also worked in publishing houses, interview procedures for agents were largely the same as for editors. Interviews with authors covered a different range of topics, including (1) writing processes, (2) social and creative support networks, (3) financial lives, and (4) experiences with agents, editors, and publishers. Here, authors' descriptions of their publishing experiences highlight the effects of product-based matching on non-white authors.

As is generally true across media industries, book publishing intermediaries have trouble accurately describing their selection decisions beyond appeals to "feelings" or "sensibilities" (Curran 2011). This is heightened because emotional connection can be a legitimate selection criterion in the contexts in which they work. As a result, although cognitive affinities for similarity can be accurately and declaratively stated when discussing selection decisions, the composite elements that generate them may be part of non-declarative personal culture—feelings for which explanations are not easily accessible in conversation (Lizardo 2017). Interlocutors, however, could more easily cue the contents of their affinities and disaffinities via interview questions directing them to specific manuscripts, both those they worked on and manuscripts presented to them in narrative scenarios. In the interview data, these types of less standard interview questions produced more coherent and, for the interlocutor, more easily accessible responses (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

Initial Deduction of Processes through Ethnographic Observation

Ethnographic work conducted within a publishing house over the course of a full publishing season generated initial observations and ideas about processes, which were further clarified and analyzed through interviews and the compilation of an original observational quantitative dataset. Although we do not draw on ethnographic field notes in this article, the context and story of one extended "telling case" observed during this fieldwork is useful to describe here. As per Mitchell's (1984:239) specifications, "the particular circumstances" surrounding it "serve[d] to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent."

In this telling case, an intermediary purchased the manuscript of an author with whom he shared little in common: the intermediary was a Jewish male in his mid-20s who enjoyed playing and watching basketball; the author was a Presbyterian woman in her early 60s who enjoyed watching and competing in dressage. Beyond the author's manuscript they had little cultural overlap, they mostly communicated over email, and during their four months working together, the author visited the publisher's office on just three occasions: once for lunch, once to drop something off, and once for a marketing meeting. Neither had a desire to hang out with one another socially.

The author's manuscript told the story of a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, which in its first draft was told entirely from the woman's first-person perspective. In explaining this decision, the author later remarked, "Sometimes men do things. I don't know why." Yet by the time the intermediary received the manuscript, it was told in equal parts from each character's first-person perspective. The intermediary, while reading the female main character's first-person section, worried that "it was culturally not the right fit" for him or the publisher. Yet upon getting to the male main character's first-person section, the story came alive for him: the male main character reminded him of one of his "friends," and he recognized the character's internal conflicts in himself. Over the course of their work together, the author and intermediary realized that in the same manuscript they were reading two different stories. As the author explained:

> I'm always tracking [the female protagonist], you know, she's partially my mother,

Table 1. Data Sources

Data Type	Number	Utilization in Analyses
Observational Literary Agent Data	1,196	Evidence of intermediaries demographically sorting onto products
Interviews (literary agents, editors, authors)	82	Evidence of product-based cultural matching as the process through which demographic sorting occurs
Participant Ethnography	Four months in a publishing house; six months general industry fieldwork	Initial deduction of processes

and partially me. She's independent. Whereas [the intermediary] is, I learned tracking [the male protagonist]. For [him, the male protagonist] is the star!

In this telling case, an author and an intermediary who are demographically (female/male; older/younger) and culturally (Presbyterian/Jewish; dressage/basketball) dissimilar have little interest in establishing a social relationship beyond their shared interest in a manuscript. Yet based on their encultured experiences, they connected on the same manuscript in opposing ways: their readings of the story aligned along gendered lines with the main character with whom they shared experiential sentiments. This was the initial telling case that informed subsequent data collection and a broader analysis of encultured biases at work in product-based cultural matching (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Table 1 describes data sources and their uses.

FINDINGS

The Demographic Matching of Intermediaries and Products

Are intermediaries more likely to select into working on fiction genres with main characters that match their own demographic backgrounds? In a word, yes. To test this, we use our quantitative data on literary agents, modeling the relationship between intermediaries' areas of genre specialization and their demographic and occupational characteristics.[3] To do so, we take advantage of alignments

between some fiction genres and the demographic backgrounds of their main characters. Namely, the genre of "women's fiction" centers on female protagonists, "young adult" fiction centers on younger protagonists, and "ethnic" and "multicultural" fictions center on the stories of non-white protagonists. Should intermediaries engage in demographic matching with manuscripts, we would expect female intermediaries to select into working on women's fiction at higher rates than do men, younger intermediaries to select into working on young adult fiction at higher rates than do older intermediaries, and non-white intermediaries to select into working on ethnic or multicultural fiction at higher rates than do white intermediaries. In Models 1, 3, and 5 of Table 2, we report these bivariate associations, finding evidence that this is the case.

To ensure we are not confusing a story of status hierarchies for a story of demographic sorting onto product categories, in Models 2, 4, and 6 of Table 2 we add a suite of industry-specific and more general status-based controls. Industry-specific controls include having *offices in New York City* (NYC), membership in the *Association of Authors' Representatives* (AAR) (Thompson 2010), and the total number of *six-figure deals* completed. In Models 2 and 4, we also control for race, and in Models 4 and 6 we also control for gender.[4]

As seen in Model 2 of Table 2, inclusive of a suite of status-based controls, the odds of female intermediaries selecting to work on women's fiction compared to male intermediaries are 5.5 to 1. Relying on the same controls as used in Model 2, this matching

Table 2. Odds Ratios for Intermediaries Socio-demographically Matching on Fiction Genres

	Women's Fiction		Young Adult Fiction		Ethnic/Multicultural Fiction	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female	4.452*** (.902)	5.486*** (1.242)		3.699*** (1.036)		.928 (.196)
Age (reverse coded)			1.035*** (.009)	1.045*** (.011)		
Non-white		.925 (.303)		.596 (.269)	5.525*** (1.549)	5.777*** (1.745)
NYC		1.505* (.260)		.662 (.166)		1.089 (.213)
AAR		1.203 (.214)		1.039 (.293)		1.062 (.211)
Six-Figure Deals		1.010 (.011)		1.032 (.023)		.989 (.012)
Constant	.014*** (.004)	.008*** (.003)	.027*** (.015)	.008*** (.006)	−.017*** (.004)	.019*** (.005)
N	1,196	1,052	493	432	1,196	1,052
AIC	1086	945	528	447	828	775
BIC	1101	980	541	479	843	810

Note: All models reported in odds ratios and controlling for total number of genres represented, with robust standard errors in parentheses.
$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

between intermediaries and genres overrepresented by same-gender main characters is a more general pattern across fiction genres: female intermediaries are more likely to select into representing romance fiction (OR: 2.589; $p < .000$) and chick-lit fiction (OR: 4.152; $p < .000$), whereas male intermediaries are more likely to select into working on action/adventure fiction (OR: 5.545; $p < .000$), crime/detective/police fiction (OR: 2.265; $p < .000$), espionage/military fiction (OR: 4.624; $p < .000$), science fiction (OR: 2.356; $p < .000$), and westerns (OR: 3.358; $p < .05$). Regarding age, as seen in Model 4 of Table 2, as measured around the mean, each year of increased age decreases the likelihood of working on young adult fiction by 4.5 percent. Regarding race, in Model 6 of Table 2 the odds of non-white intermediaries selecting to work on ethnic or multicultural fiction, compared to white intermediaries, are 5.8 to 1.[5] In the following section we show that this demographic matching operates within a

larger suite of culturally inscribed identity markers of similarity and difference.

Cultural Proximity as a Selection Criterion

As Peter Ginna (2017:20), the founder and former publisher of Bloomsbury Press, explained, "making the publication decision . . . begins with the editor's gut response: the spark." Ginna's "spark" of sentimental affiliation with a manuscript is the same "spark" felt by one of Rivera's respondents when describing interpersonal matches with job candidates. Like Rivera's (2015:142) respondents who described "instant . . . feelings of connectedness that [they] interpreted as evidence of cultural fit," our respondents also felt and acted upon instant feelings of connectedness, except with *products* rather than people.[6]

In our data, Sam, a younger female intermediary who worked in Manhattan, shared a positive case of spark ignition. When asked

about a recently acquired manuscript she was particularly enthusiastic about, Sam explained how her similarities to the protagonist of the story drew her in right away:

> I could just tell instantly [that I would publish it]. . . . She grew up in New York like I did and we went to similar schools and [reading it] it was like hanging out with one of my friends who's an amazing storyteller. So that's something I'm very enthusiastic about. I knew right away.

Much like Ginna's description of an automatic gut response, Sam explained a snap affinity for the manuscript ("I could just tell instantly"). In narrating how she could tell instantly, without prompting she cited geographic ("grew up in New York like I did"), educational ("we went to similar schools"), and social ("like hanging out with one of my friends who's an amazing storyteller") cultural proximity markers to explain her advocacy for the novel ("I'm very enthusiastic . . . I knew right away"). Although unstated, Sam also matched with the novel's protagonist in age (both young), gender (both women), and race (both white).

For our interlocutors, these sparks of affinity for cultural and personal experiences could sometimes be powerful enough to override traditional status hierarchies, whether based on gender or prestige. When we asked an intermediary what made him the "right" or "wrong" person to publish a literary manuscript, he explained that he was the right person for something he knows well and feels intimately and emotionally connected to, which would allow him not only to help authors achieve their vision but also to put in the extra time and work to improve the manuscript. When asked if this was a particular criterion for him or a more general strategy in purchasing manuscripts, he said everybody generally does this, and he offered the following example of an editor-in-chief:

> He just had a kid, and this [publishing] season we're about to publish a breastfeeding book, and we're also next season going to publish an alternative mothering book. [We've] never been into those kinds of things. They're [in the genre category of] self-help. I don't think he needs therapy or anything, but we wouldn't be publishing a breastfeeding book if he didn't just have a kid. There's no chance.

In this case, a male editor-in-chief of a literary imprint began acquiring and publishing breastfeeding and mothering books because of his experiences as a new father, and his experiential closeness to the topic overrode a concern over publisher fit: the imprint had a reputation for working in high-status literary and upmarket books but was dipping into low-status self-help. According to our interlocutor, there was "no chance" the press would be publishing these books without the editor-in-chief aligning his selection criterion with his own interests and experiences.

Building on the idea that cultural or personal familiarity with the topic of a manuscript act as an important selection criterion, an intermediary at an East Coast firm explained her decision to publish a book on roller derby:

> *Interviewer:* You signed a roller derby book, right?
> *Respondent:* Yes.
> *I:* So, let's say you didn't know anything about roller derby, but you thought . . .
> *R:* [cutting off question] If I didn't know anything about roller derby I probably wouldn't have signed that book.

In this exchange, the intermediary cut off the question to immediately dismiss the idea that she would have signed a book set in the world of roller derby had she lacked appropriate knowledge or interest of that world. This interpretation of the interactional sequence was confirmed when she explained her more general decision heuristics when reading a submitted manuscript: "The first thing is, you know, does it speak to you? Does it resonate with you?" In clarifying what she saw to be the problem with working on manuscripts for which she lacks a personal connection or feeling of cultural familiarity with the characters,

she added, "You read a book and you think that's great, but why the fuck did X do Y?" She explained the process behind another book she had recently signed on the topic of environmentally friendly living:

> The agent thought of me for that [book] because we were having lunch. It was the first time we'd met each other and we got into this conversation about how my boyfriend and I had just bought a house in Brooklyn and how I was really interested in putting solar panels up on the roof. We got in this really intense conversation about it and he was like, "I really have a book for you." It just it totally came from a conversation about, "Oh, you live in Brooklyn? I live in Brooklyn." "Oh, really? How long?" "Oh, yeah, we just bought a house." It's those kinds of conversations that are really productive.

These three examples illustrate the salience of the industry edict to work on what one knows, not only as an institutionalized norm for "good work," but also as an internalized cognitive scheme guiding processes of rationalization (Lamont et al. 2014). These can be considered positive cases in which feelings of cultural proximity—along lines of neighborhood, schooling, friendship, life experiences, setting, and outside interests or hobbies—lead to publishing decisions, but intermediaries also narrated how they have "passed" on manuscripts that felt culturally distant to them. Jeremy, who worked at an independent publishing house on the West Coast, recounted the story of a manuscript that was a "bad fit" for him due to its cultural distance:

> And then [my publishing director] also handed me a book about the existence, or lack thereof, of angels, and it was like a really far-reaching kind of thing. It was translated from I think Norwegian or something like that and I'm about as far from religious as I can be. I was raised Jewish so it's not like I can really relate to this conflict over religion in modern society. I'm just the wrong person for that kind of thing.

For Jeremy, the book about angels did not need to be a good or bad book in his evaluation for him to be "just the wrong person" to be working on it. Jeremy was born and raised in the U.S. Midwest and the manuscript was Scandinavian ("translated from I think Norwegian or something"), and religion did not play a large role in his life ("I was raised Jewish so it's not like I can really relate to this conflict over religion in modern society"). He was, he believed, "just the wrong person for that kind of thing." In these four cases, positive and negative alike, intermediaries adhere to institutionalized rules of doing "good work" when selecting manuscripts, as based on their perceived cultural proximity to them.

Race as a Salient Marker of Cultural Similarity and Difference

Confirming our quantitative findings, race emerged as a symbolic marker of cultural proximity and distance during our interviews. This held for both white and non-white intermediaries, although this took more work to confirm for white intermediaries, possibly due to issues of race and social desirability bias. It also stands to reason that non-white intermediaries are more often asked to speak to the salience of race as a cultural proximity marker. British-Arab intermediary Nicole Aragi described how her focus on ethnic fiction reflects her own hybrid identity:

> [It didn't start] consciously, I don't think. . . . [But] it was clear that I'd built up a list of authors who were in some way straddling cultures, or writing out of a sense of cultural dislocation. Maybe in literature I was looking for something which reflected, in some way, my own experiences of living between different cultures. (Lee 2013)

Here, Aragi confirms our product-based matching model, in which an automatic cognitive process ("[it didn't start] consciously, I don't think") of cultural similarity ("looking for something which reflected . . . my own experiences") informs her selection

decisions. In a market context in which this is seen as doing "good work," Aragi noted how others encourage and reinforce her product-based matching: "I joke that the more hyphens there are in an author's ethnicity, the more likely it is that the book will end up being sent to me" (Lee 2013).

The same is true for the editor Chris Jackson (2017:228), who explained his focus on manuscripts about "cultural outsiders": "I knew from my own life experience as an outsider what can be lost when we aren't allowed to speak our own languages—the ways meaning and nuance are diminished." Like Aragi, product-based matching was also encouraged for Jackson, who explains how he was identified as a potentially good intermediary to develop the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates, back when they were both unknowns: "[W]e were set up on a lunch date . . . because . . . [w]e were both youngish black men, from somewhat similar backgrounds and with some of the same tastes and interests" (Jackson 2017:229). Here, Jackson cues demographics and cultural tastes when explaining what made him the right intermediary to work on what would soon become Coates's books.

For the white intermediaries we interviewed, it took more inventive questions to assess whether race was used as a salient marker of cultural proximity and distance. When asked straightforwardly about whether they work on books with non-white main characters, white intermediaries would indirectly explain that they were not the right "fit" for them, or they would cue the "artistic ability" prong of their decision heuristic and say they would be interested in *any* book of exceptionally high quality, which introduced a new clause about atypically exceptional books to sidestep the question. To overcome this, late in the interview schedule we began to ask the question differently, proposing hypothetical literary manuscripts that interlocutors *did* match on, save for race.

For example, David, a white intermediary in his early 30s who had grown up in New York City and acquired literary fiction for a publishing house on the West Coast, discussed the role of emotional connection in his selection of manuscripts. While sitting over coffee in a park during his lunch break, we asked David what he would do if he received a great manuscript about the evolution to manhood of a young black man from the Bronx. The question relied on background information about David from his responses to earlier questions. A story about a young man's path to manhood in New York City echoed David's own experiences as a young man, save for David's racial background (white) and the racial background of the main character (black). The contents of the hypothetical novel—a path to manhood narrative—clearly signaled the manuscript as a work of literary fiction, rather than genre fiction such as a crime or romance novel. Put another way, the proposed novel "matched" on gender, region, age, and genre to identify if the lack of a racial "fit" between the manuscript and David's own experiences might influence his decision to take it on. From David's response to the question, it was clear the cue of racial mismatch had been picked up:

> I just don't think I'd know what to do with it. Even if I really liked it, the fit is probably wrong, and you want great manuscripts to find someone [i.e., an editor] who can really understand them and champion them and do them justice.

Either because he did not need to or due to social desirability bias, David never stated that it was the racial mismatch between himself and the main character that guided his response. Yet due to the question design, the racial background of the main character was the only detail given to David that could prompt his response that an editor must "really understand" the perspective of the manuscript to "champion" it and "do [it] justice." Importantly, David did not reject the premise of the quality of the hypothetical manuscript ("you want great manuscripts"), yet he explained that the racial mismatch between himself and the book's main character pushed it beyond his cultural wheelhouse ("the fit is probably wrong"). In this instance,

in a product-based cultural mismatch between manuscript and editor, gender, age, and geographic similarity were not enough to overcome racial difference in creating a good match. On follow-up, David was asked if he could think of an editor who would be a better fit for the described manuscript, and he said he could not.

Rachel, also a white acquisition editor on the West Coast, responded to the same question posed to David, with the gender pronouns of the hypothetical main character flipped from male to female and the story setting changed to reflect the geography of her upbringing in Southern California:

> *Respondent:* You know, I'd really want to read that book, and we [as an industry] need more voices, more stories, like the one you're describing, but agents don't send them to us, that I know of.
> *Interviewer:* What if they did?
> *R:* You know, I'm not sure we'd know how to market it.
> *I:* Would you [as an editor] know how to develop it?
> *R:* Probably not. I'd like to, we . . . sometimes publish [searching for a phrase] "alternative voices," but [it is] probably not right for me.

Rachel, like David, clearly picked up on the racial cue in the prompt ("more voices, more stories . . . 'alternative voices'"), and like David did not reject the premise of the quality of the hypothetical manuscript. In so doing, she made the distinction between wanting to read the hypothetical manuscript ("I'd really want to read that book") and considering herself an appropriate person to developmentally edit and shepherd it through the publishing industry ("probably not right for me"). Rachel also mentions that she is not sent books with non-white main characters, which is the opposite of what non-white intermediaries such as Aragi and Jackson describe. She commented that her publisher would not know how to market the story, presumably to an assumed non-white audience. For Rachel, who acquires literary fiction for her publisher, the racial background of the main character in the story is the primary filter through which she thinks

her editorial board would understand the book. This point came up with some frequency in conversations with interlocutors working in book publishing. As a different editor at a different publisher explained, the several times in her career when she brought stories featuring non-white main characters to her editorial meeting, she was advised that other presses, and ostensibly other intermediaries, would be "better fits" for those manuscripts.

Extending Beyond Cultural Wheelhouses

In which cases and contexts do publishing intermediaries extend beyond their cultural wheelhouses? Because intermediaries rely on multi-pronged decision heuristics, this most regularly occurred for manuscripts that were deemed to have atypically high market potential or artistic quality. Judgment of atypical market potential reduces uncertainty (Elberse 2013) and therefore the need to fall "back on sympathy" as an assessment criterion (DiMaggio 1992:127). Like cultural fit, judgments of atypical artistic quality could also produce a "spark" of enthusiasm (Ginna 2017). As adroitly and succinctly phrased by one of our interlocutors, some books are simply "too good not to publish." It was ultimately occasionally-activated market potential and "too good not to publish" quality distinctions that made cultural proximity a predictive selection tool rather than a definitive one.

Meredith, a white intermediary in her 30s who has taken on manuscripts with non-white protagonists, provided a different instructive case: "It's always . . . white men and white women getting the voices out to the world and that to me is very frustrating. You know, because you want it to be more diverse than it actually is." For Meredith, a concern about equality of opportunity at times overrode her concerns about personal fit. She did not deny the salience of "fit" and in many cases used it, but she sometimes took what may be considered an activist stance in manuscript selection. Although our white interlocutors were generally quick to speak to and lament

inequalities in what gets published overall, Meredith's conscious and strategic decision to incorporate that concern into her own selection decisions was for us an outlier case.

More generally, in borderline market-potential or quality-potential cases, intermediaries would sometimes attempt to extend beyond their cultural wheelhouses by soliciting "anecdata" from friends and colleagues. Diana, an intermediary who was considering publishing a stand-up comic's memoir, explained:

> Sometimes I'll ask my friends if I don't know about something. [An agent] sent me the memoir of a stand-up comic but I don't really know anything about stand-up comedy, so I asked my friend who follows it, "Hey, would people be interested in reading this thing?"

Intermediaries evoked the use of socially derived anecdata across a wide swath of cases: from Diana soliciting a friend who liked stand-up comedy to an intermediary soliciting her sister about a children's book because she was a kindergarten teacher. Intermediaries also reported being regularly solicited for anecdata from other intermediaries, both inside and outside their places of employment. These solicitations for cultural and experiential familiarity extended to demographics, as Jeremy explained concerning his publishing director:

> He gave me that [manuscript] when he was almost positive that we were going to publish it. He just wanted me to read it to see how a young person would respond to it. He decided that I was his "young person."

By relying on co-workers, family, and friends—with whom they are likely to share identity characteristics and tastes (Lewis and Kaufman 2018; Lizardo 2006)—in their pursuit of anecdata, editors extend across areas of expertise, without necessarily taking long walks across cultural experiences or expressions. As a result, even when considering manuscripts for which they did not deem themselves perfect fits, intermediaries could unwittingly end up reproducing publishing inequalities while trying to extend beyond their narrow niches of personal experience.

Consequences for Authors

Our interviews with non-white authors made clear that they understood the cultural proximity framework through which intermediaries select manuscripts, and they recognized the consequences of this framework for their literary careers. Several non-white authors mentioned Chris Jackson, one of the three black male editors in the field who could be named by publishing intermediaries during interviews and field work. Richard, a young black author of multicultural literary fiction, described his thought process when Jackson passed on his manuscript: "Chris Jackson said 'no,' so I'm fucked." Richard was disappointed that he would not get to work with Jackson, but the larger meaning behind his disappointment was that he feared there were few other editors who would perceive themselves as culturally proximate to his work. Michael, a black novelist and essayist, explained his shared feelings about Richard's concern:

> Chris Jackson is wonderful. But he didn't publish any debut novelists last year. He doesn't have to, he shouldn't have to, he should do what he's doing, but if you're a debut novelist of color and Chris Jackson isn't publishing any debut novelists where do you go?

During interviews, some non-white authors also expressed a concern that the industry has a limited number of "slots" for stories not centered on white characters, and that once those slots are filled, all other stories are blocked out. This idea was echoed by Ronald, a white editor-in-chief of a well-respected independent press in New York:

> [Book] publishing has always been a playground for the landed gentry, the gentleman's hobby. And it's still just as it was in the

[19]50s and [19]60s, with [James] Baldwin and [Ralph] Ellison allowed in just to make the whole thing look more presentable.

For other non-white authors, the concern was that their fiction would have to be deemed not only as good, but also as culturally interpretable by a predominantly white industry. This was the case for Damon, who signed with a black acquisition editor working at an African American imprint of a larger publisher. Although the "fit" was not quite right—he was writing high-status literary fiction and the press had a reputation for low-status romance fiction—he was glad to be working with an editor who "got" and "understood" him and his work. Yet when his editor left her position for a more general imprint at a large publisher and brought Damon with her, problems started to arise over the "accessibility" of his novel:

> It was a huge tension. That's the thing about her moving, it would have never been a question if I stayed at [the original publisher]. But because she moved [to the new publisher], it's a question of how much I had to narratively explain, because I have to explain what this is, and what this is, and what this is, and what this is [about the lives and languages of his black main characters] to people who don't know, and don't know because they don't care. It takes the characters and particular sensibilities out of the effective allusion.

> I know that a lot of what my editor said [once she was at the new publishing house] came from people above her. There's no way this same person, who was sending me these letters about what she loved about my book six months earlier, could all of a sudden just be like, "I don't know if people talk like that." [So I said,] "Well, I'm telling you, this is how people talk. And you thought people talked like this six months ago," [but she said] "It has nothing to do with that. I just don't know if people will understand what that means," [and I replied] "But a few months ago you thought that the context would carry through to people who

didn't understand, but now you want me to dumb it down?"

I feel like it's the problem [with writing with black main characters for a disproportionately white industry]. But I also feel like acquisition editors, and even the writers, I think writers in a lot of ways write to the acquisition editors. Like, we are aware. And that can just tear up your imagination. Which means that a lot of times if you're writing a book like mine, which is not peopled at all by people who are like acquisition editors, I could synthesize that. Like . . . I'm synthesizing that experience for these other people who have no understanding of the nuances of the rituals, and routines of these folks [I'm writing about], as opposed to writing a book for a lot of the people who are in the project. And that's what's happened. Even with this rewrite that I did, I did the best I could do, and it was humbling because that's what I did. I had to sell out.

Damon did successfully publish his novel, but he feared he had to "sell out" and decenter it from the culturally accurate specificities of its characters and setting to make it more accessible to a largely white publishing house that, at the organizational level, did not have the cultural familiarity to understand his work as it was written and intended. Although Damon felt his work was at first culturally matched to the editor, as a cultural product it had to be "whitened" to become relatable to a new and largely white editorial board.

Damon's account exemplifies not only the mechanism of product-based cultural matching, but also the consequences of this process for non-white authors and the work they produce. Even with a black editor, due to pressures he believed she was receiving, he had to de-culture the manuscript in ways that made him uncomfortable. Maxine, a black Caribbean-American romance writer who writes on contract for the African American imprint of a larger press, described similar experiences in having greater restrictions placed on her portrayals of black characters:

Wealth is a requirement most of the time. No drug use, no cursing, the sex has to be romantic. It feels like they're trying so hard to be opposite to street lit. It's like white Harlequin in black face. But with greater restrictions. It feels like the policing of black sexuality.

That Damon and Maxine worked through feedback in the developmental editing of their manuscripts is not uncommon. Yet that this feedback was oriented toward culturally denuding their manuscripts along lines of race—requests for inartistic exposition in Damon's literary fiction, and the policing of black sexuality in Maxine's romance fiction— was not an experience shared by white authors.

Damon's and Maxine's manuscripts were mediated for being "too" culturally black, whereas other non-white authors reported that in the marketing and publicity stage, the non-whiteness of their characters was sometimes over-emphasized in stereotypical and offensive ways. Judy, a Chinese-American author, explained her negotiations with her publisher over the cover design for her new short-story collection:

> I said, "Just promise me you won't put any lanterns or fireworks on the cover because these are stories about *people*. Yes, they happen to be Chinese, but they're stories about people." So, as you'd expect, I get the mock-up [for the cover] and it has goldfish on it, the only thing I left them.

Collectively, these authors describe the consequences of product-based cultural matching along racialized lines at different steps of the publishing process: Richard and David fear their manuscripts will not be published due to product-based matching and the lack of non-white intermediaries who might feel culturally proximate to them. After securing a contract, Damon first struggles with feeling forced to place a literary book with a romance publisher and then, like Maxine, struggles with culturally denuding the racial specificities of his manuscript to make it more accessible to white publishing intermediaries. Yet in marketing and promotion, Judy finds the opposite effect in her cover design, in which the Chinese-American identities of her main characters cannot be accentuated enough.

ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTS

We believe the primary alternative account for our data would be that our argument needlessly overcomplicates the process at hand, and that demographics operate more directly on the field, with a general preference for white over non-white individuals, men over women, and so on. We certainly do not deny the existence of more straightforward demographic biases, but our data are more comprehensively explained through perceptions of cultural proximity in product-based matches.

First, in our cultural proximity argument, within the same framework we can explain matching on products for everything from straight-forward demographics such as race, gender, age, and religiosity, to subtler groupings such as schooling experience, region, peer styles, and interest in roller derby or environmentally sustainable housing. In short, although a status-based hierarchy framework may initially feel simpler and more parsimonious, in our case it actually explains less, and it mischaracterizes the data by mistaking a specific instantiation of a process for a more generalizable one. A status-based hierarchical framework could not make sense of a male intermediary at a high-status literary press deciding to publish a self-help book targeted to women, yet with the additional information that his wife recently had a child, this behavior makes perfect sense in our framework.

Second, we remind the reader that the cultural proximity model we propose is not a fully unconscious, hidden, or obscurantist decision-making heuristic in the industry we study. Rather, it is deeply institutionalized and publicly valorized as advice to young intermediaries about how to do "good work." That intermediaries rely on their personal expertise, moral evaluations, taste, problems,

concerns, and passions when selecting manuscripts should be unsurprising not only because reliance on these things comes to the fore in the conditions under which they work (DiMaggio 1977, 1992), but also because doing so is actively encouraged and celebrated. Again, this does not mean traditional status-based hierarchies are absent, but only that the framework we rely on has its own explanatory power. In short, we match the face-validity of people doing what their industry valorizes and encourages them to do, with the empirical validity of showing this is what they are actually doing.

Third, a reasonable critique may be that interviews are not ideal for uncovering status-based hierarchy, and that our cultural proximity framework may reflect a less direct or more "polite" way for interlocutors to reframe status hierarchies as something else. While we acknowledge this, it is for this reason that we triangulate across ethnographic observations, observational quantitative data, and non-standard interview questions. Findings derived across these methods point in the direction of product-based cultural matching. We also note that, contrary to a straightforward status-based hierarchy model, in our quantitative observational data men are more likely to work in low-status fiction genres than are women, provided that those genres are mostly populated by male main characters. This again makes sense in a product-based matching framework, but not in a fixed-status hierarchy account.

Another method through which researchers could capture more straightforward demographic bias would be anonymous survey data. Yet in anonymous survey data, at least on the topic of racial animus, book publishing intermediaries overwhelmingly do not display demographic biases: only 5.3 percent of editors in book publishing disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "the publishing industry suffers from a lack of racial diversity," and the majority of editors (55 percent) agree or strongly agree with the statement "the lack of diversity among editors impacts the lack of diversity in the titles published"

(*Publishers Weekly* 2014). From this population, we would expect implicit demographic bias to have a modest or moderate effect—not the strong effect we find in our cultural proximity framework.

Fourth, again using the case of race, in a status-based hierarchy account, the types of non-white fiction we focus on would be low-status due to their central emphasis on the lives of non-white main characters. Yet, the reverse is true. As commonly understood in publishing but perhaps dubious to outsiders, ethnic and multicultural fiction are genre code words for *high-status* fiction centering on non-white and immigrant main characters. In book publishing, literary fiction is high-status, and low-status fiction—crime/detective, fantasy, mystery, romance, science fiction, suspense, thriller, and westerns—is called "genre fiction." In Table 3, we show evidence of ethnic and multicultural fiction's high-status by modeling intermediaries' co-selection of those genres with high-status and low-status genres, allowing us to relationally position ethnic and multicultural fiction in cultural space (Mohr 1994).

As seen in Table 3, working in ethnic/multicultural fiction is positively and significantly associated with working on literary fiction, and negatively associated—and statistically significantly so in six of eight cases—with the standard suite of low-status genres. This is true both when controlling only for the total number of genres represented (Model 1), and when controlling for a wide range of occupational and demographic intermediary characteristics (Model 2). In a straightforward demographic hierarchies account, ethnic and multicultural fiction should not be high-status fiction genres, and in a world in which they are, as high-status players, white intermediaries should be re-inscribing their status through working on them (Bourdieu 1984; Podolny 2005). Yet in our data, ethnic and multicultural fiction *are* high-status fiction genres, and it is non-white intermediaries who select into working on these genres and white intermediaries who select away from them. These findings only make sense in our framework.

Table 3. Working on Ethnic or Multicultural Fiction by High-Status and Low-Status Genres

Genre	(1)	(2)
High-Status		
Literary	.822***	.729***
	(.202)	(.302)
Low-Status		
Crime/Detective	−.818***	−.763**
	(.255)	(.264)
Fantasy	−.793***	−.781***
	(.242)	(.245)
Mystery	−.624**	−.657**
	(.230)	(.230)
Romance	−1.09***	−1.23***
	(.227)	(.244)
Science Fiction	−.850***	−.825***
	(.250)	(.252)
Suspense	−.361	−.268
	(.211)	(219)
Thriller	−.538*	−506*
	(.216)	(.229)
Western	−.675	−662
	(.413)	(.478)

Note: N = 1,196. Models reported in log odds with robust standard errors in parentheses. Model 1 controls for total genres; Model 2 controls for total genres, gender, race, six-figure deals, AAR membership, and New York offices. **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (two-tailed tests).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In its original conception as a theory of network formation, research on cultural matching has focused on the effects of perceived cultural proximity in hiring. Building on that work, we argue that in product markets, under different conditions, cultural matching still happens via the products themselves. The settings in which product-based cultural matching is most likely to occur are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and intermediary autonomy in selecting products that cannot be easily de-raced, de-gendered, de-cultured, and so on. This leads to macro-level inequalities when intermediaries are less diverse than the population of would-be products they evaluate, or the consumers who may take interest in those products.

We show that in literary fiction publishing, product-based cultural matching creates inequalities for non-white authors. This creates inequalities in consumer markets as well, as readers of literature for pleasure in the United States are nearly four times more likely to be non-white than are publishing intermediaries (NEA 2009). This inequality extends well beyond non-white fiction lovers, as it is unknown if general readers select works of fiction according to the same principles of product-based cultural matching as do intermediaries. There is reason to suspect this is not the case, as readers often choose fiction specifically to inhabit the worlds and experiences of people dissimilar from themselves (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004; Long 2003). In our data, this was exemplified in the case of the intermediary Rachel who would "really want to read that book [about a non-white girl's path to womanhood]" while holding that she is not the right person to developmentally edit it.

We see many potential applications of our product-based framework and findings to other settings, especially given how variation in our first three conditions (uncertainty, autonomy, encultured products) may change the degree of encultured biases at play, as well as how variation in our fourth condition (underrepresentation in intermediaries) may change the outcome of macro-level inequality. Here we focus on the indeterminacy of these processes and variation on macro-level outcomes.

Implications for the Study of Culture and Product Markets

Take, for example, straightforward cases of other markets for creative goods, which both face uncertainty and engage with encultured products (Caves 2000; Hirsch 1972). In recorded music, record labels sometimes give successful artists or executives their own imprints, which is a "pure brokerage" administrative structure (DiMaggio 1977; Lopes 1992). Cash Money Records, for instance, is an imprint of the Universal Music Group; since its founding in 1991, it has specialized in the rap genre. Rap music is not only a clearly encultured product, but also one that is

regionally encultured down to the city-level, with regard to both lyrical references and sonic qualities (Forman 2002). Given our organizational conditions, we would expect Cash Money Records to engage in some degree of reproduction in both the sounds and regional backgrounds of the artists they release, which they do. Controlled by Bryan "Birdman" Williams and Ronald Williams, the majority of Cash Money's recording artists are black (89 percent), men (84 percent), from the South (70 percent), from the city of New Orleans (57 percent), and use or have used the New Orleans "bounce" sound that was also employed by Bryan "Birdman" Williams.[7]

Yet because the macro-level outcomes of product-based matching are undetermined, the effects of Cash Money's roster selection may be variable. In the overall landscape of label-signed recording artists, Cash Money may be increasing racial heterogeneity (with regard to African Americans, if not Asian American and Latinx artists) while at the same time reproducing regional homogeneity in the rap genre, for which select cities (e.g., Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, New Orleans, New York, Los Angeles), with their own city-level style of rap music, seem to produce the lion's share of today's nationally recognized rappers. This may be because these cities all have artist-controlled labels and imprints located around them. As an extension of this logic, our framework would predict that for music genres with less regionally specific sonic associations, imprints specializing in those genres would engage in less regionalized artistic reproduction.

Staying with creative industries, we would predict a different outcome for the case of title selection in library-based One Book programs. These programs meet our first three conditions, but in the case of regionalism not our fourth, because they are disproportionately selecting regionally specific fiction for regionally specific markets (Griswold and Wohl 2015). As a result, the same process leading Cash Money to create regional reproduction at the national level would cause One Book programs, which are present across the country, to create regional heterogeneity at

the national level. For this reason, if we wanted to investigate if product-based cultural matching in One Book programs acts as a pathway to inequality, instead of regionally infused encultured biases we might look at the effects of race, as compared to readers for pleasure in the United States, librarians are disproportionately white (Lance 2005).

Further afield from book publishing are the cases of angel investing and venture funding. In these cases, 82 percent of angel investors and 89 percent of partners in venture capital firms are men, and 2.2 percent of funding goes to women-founded companies (Guynn 2016; Solomon 2014; Zarya 2018). This inequity is partially due to gendered selection effects in seeking funding and a direct gender bias (Brooks et al. 2014). However, we suspect that in formal analyses of gender inequality in funding, product-based cultural matching may also be lurking in the error term or partially misspecified as a direct gender effect. By way of example, Brooks and colleagues (2014) find that male entrepreneurs are more likely than female entrepreneurs to win pitch competitions, with the main effect of entrepreneur's gender explaining 24 percent of the variance. Including interaction terms and a suite of controls (race, age, attractiveness, years of experience for the pitcher, business sector for the product, time of day, and length of pitch) explains 42 percent of the overall variance. Yet as Brooks and colleagues (2014:4427) note, the investors selecting pitches are disproportionately men, and women entrepreneurs "have predominantly pursued ventures that focus on the female consumer, such as fashion, cosmetics, and cooking." With women disproportionately pitching products that solve problems for women's lives, and funders being disproportionately men who often make their decisions based on "gut instincts" (Chen, Yao, and Kotha 2009; Riquelme and Watson 2002), the independent role of product-based cultural matching in angel investment and venture capital funding for products is worthy of further investigation. Given the demographics of funders, we would expect similar

outcomes for products targeted to non-white consumers, just as we might tentatively suspect it is harder to secure funding for products that solve problems in rural-life rather than city- and suburban-life, to the degree that venture funders live in cities and suburbs over rural areas.

Another setting in which product-based matching may lead to inequalities regarding race or gender is in the publication of opinion-editorials in news outlets. According to the American Society of News Editors (2018), 65 percent of newspaper supervisors are men and 90 percent are white. Yet women are disproportionately called on for expertise on "pink topics," with female op-ed writers only outnumbering men on topics relating to family, gender, style, food, and health (Yaeger 2012). In our framework, male intermediaries may underestimate the need, gravity, interest, import, and so on of "pink topics," which may contribute to some of the macro-level outcome of gender inequality in mainstream opinion pages. This is, in fact, the conclusion of Harp, Bachmann, and Loke (2014:300; emphasis added) in their analysis of U.S. newsrooms when noting that "the editorial voice of a newspaper—its opinions, its endorsements, its critiques—has much more to do with the *perspectives, interests, and concerns* of men, particularly white men."

General Implications for Culture and Inequality Research

More generally, for sociologists of culture, as well as for organizational and economic sociologists studying creative industries, a major implication of this work is the call for renewed emphasis on the role of cultural products as an important causal factor. Under the continued, if sometimes indirect, stewardship of the Production of Culture approach, sociologists of culture have, as Griswold (1987:3) argued, bracketed out the meanings of cultural objects and treated them as no different "from pork bellies." The analysis of encoded contents of cultural products has, to some degree, crept back into the sociology of culture (e.g., Askin

and Mauskapf 2017; Lindner et al. 2015; McDonnell 2016), but still equally, if not more, common, is to bracket any possible effects of the role of encoded content as due to their oversupply or due to meaning and quality ultimately being subjective (e.g., Godart and Mears 2009; Salganik et al. 2006).

The meanings and quality of cultural products are subjective, yet that does not mean they are treated as such by individuals in concrete situations. Just as cultural understandings or beliefs can be "motives for action" (Vaisey 2009:1678), in particular situations the encoded contents of cultural products can also be independent variables in the analysis of larger outcomes. As Lee and Martin (2015) argue, the empirical analysis of meaning in encoded content is becoming easier, not harder. For this reason, although Peterson (1994:184) famously argued that "[i]f production studies run the risk of eliminating 'culture' from the sociology of culture, researchers who focus on the content of cultural products run the risk of . . . taking the 'sociology' out," at this moment and into the future, this is likely a false dichotomy.

Finally, as in Lamont and colleagues (2014), this work calls for further analyses of the ways micro-level cultural classifications can be institutionalized in meso-level organizational and industry structures and build up to macro-level inequalities. In this case, product-based cultural matching is the micro-level pathway institutionalized through meso-level organizational contexts and field-level norms of "good work," which may build up into statistically discernible inequalities. We also answer Lamont and colleagues' (2014:597) call for work that integrates identification and rationalization. More empirical research on these processes in this context and others is needed. This can be done using observational data and the careful and empirically grounded coding of cultural products, or through audit studies in which labor or product characteristics, rather than applicant characteristics, are isolated and focused on. With the right design, researchers could test for the relative weights of labor- and product-based cultural matching

in these contexts, if one mediates the other, if there are super-additive effects between them, or if mismatch between labor- and product-based cultural matching would lead to a penalty due to role violation. What is true in one market or organizational context may not hold in another, meaning the relative weight of market uncertainty or reliance on "gut instinct" in selection decisions can be teased out. Rather than the inclusion of cultural products and work practices muddying our studies of identity-based inequalities, their inclusion holds significant potential to add to and better account for the multiple pathways through which inequalities are created and reinforced.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Quantitative Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
Demographics			
White	.940	.238	–
Female	.708	.455	–
Age	42.5	13.2	22–80
Controls			
Offices in NYC	.600	.490	–
AAR Member	.281	.450	–
Total Genres	7.7	5.2	0–33
Six-Figure Deals	4.0	8.2	0–83
Genres			
Ethnic/Multicultural	.158	.364	–
Women's	.344	.475	–
Young Adult	.500	.500	–

Table A2. Correlation Matrix for Table 2

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Male	1						
2. White	.101	1					
3. Reverse Age	.177	.115	1				
4. NYC	−.051	.042	.272	1			
5. AAR	.066	−.041	−.175	.134	1		
6. Genres	.045	.020	−.014	.007	.161	1	
7. Six-Figure	−.112	−.069	−.159	.102	.108	.173	1

Table A3. Qualitative Descriptive Statistics

	%
Intermediaries (*N* = 57)	
White	91
Female	65
Age	
20s to 30s	45
40s to 50s	42
60s to 70s	12
East Coast	56
Works on Literary	98
Authors (*N* = 25)	
White	72
Female	60
Age	
20s to 30s	32
40s to 50s	40
60s to 70s	28
East Coast	40
Works on Literary	92

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Notes

1. Thornton (2004) finds a transition from "editorial" to "market" logic in academic publishing. Trade publishing underwent this same transition from the 1960s to early 1980s, but then on the editorial side transitioned back during the second wave of conglomeration from the 1980s to the present day (see Chapter 3 in Thompson 2010).
2. This institutionalized edict is what Rivera (2012) calls "organizational processes" that encourage reliance on cultural fit.
3. Using pictures and names, the first author hand-coded the entire database for race (reduced to white/ non-white, as used in Table 2). Without access to this coding or its distribution, the second author used the same coding scheme for 355 randomly drawn cases (30 percent of the population). These procedures produced a simple agreement of 98.9 percent, and a Krippendorf's alpha intercoder reliability statistic of .925.
4. In Models 2 and 6 of Table 2, we do not control for age due to sparseness in our publicly available LinkedIn data (it drops our *N* by 60 percent). In supplementary bivariate analyses, age does not associate with working on either women's fiction (Model 2) or ethnic/multicultural fiction (Model 6).
5. As robustness checks, we also ran models just for ethnic fiction, just for multicultural fiction, and for both ethnic and multicultural fiction, none of which meaningfully changed our results.
6. This "spark" referred to by Ginna is what Rivera (2012) calls "affective processes" in cultural matching.
7. As an aside, we note that 48 percent of Cash Money's platinum albums and singles come from two artists who are not from New Orleans or the South: Drake and Nicki Minaj. In our framework for book publishers, Drake and Nicki Minaj may have just been "too good not to publish." Since 2012, Drake has also held his own imprint, OVO Sound, a division of Warner Music Group. As would be predicted, like Drake, all seven of the artists currently signed to OVO Sound grew up in or around the city of Toronto.

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