“This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you”

Posted on January 21, 2025 by Kirandeep Kaur
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]Adrienne Rich in *Burning paper instead of children* once said ‘This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.’

As a person descended from Indian migrant parents, one of whom was born in the dying days of the British Raj, these words in Rich’s poem have a haunting quality. bell hooks in Teaching to Transgress vividly shows the complications of speaking English as both a means of continued colonial oppression and resistance.

Reflecting on my own journey with academic writing and publishing, I have become increasingly convinced that academic language contains the same paradox.

As academics, we colonise ourselves through writing forms and structures. We need to colonise ourselves to communicate to the wider world because ‘the colonial’ is the language of the world. Every time we communicate,

we recolonise our minds. In order to create I need to colonise myself, to internalise the structures and narratives that I seek to critique. We are forced to use the ‘oppressor’s language’ because it grants us access to spaces of power and legitimacy, yet, in doing so, we risk internalising its norms and silencing ourselves.

This realisation is painful but necessary – especially given the need for academics to reflect on how it portrays knowledge and voices of rights-seeking communities.

As academics, we must continuously grapple with how language shapes our narratives, liberating and constraining them at the same time. Each time we engage in what Patricia Williams referred to as ‘word magic’ we must ask: whose voices and knowledge are being legitimised and communicated, and whose are being left out?

In the talk a few weeks ago I reflected on my journey in co-writing with refugee women. My experience, from participatory action research in Kuala Lumpur, co-creating articles with Somali, Afghan, Rohingya, and Syrian women leaders, has taught me more about the exclusionary power of academic structures than I could have ever anticipated. It has transformed how I approach knowledge production, communication, and the use of language as both a barrier and a bridge.

When I first set out to work with refugee women leaders, I intended to collaborate as co-researchers to explore their lived experiences as ‘development actors’. The goal was to find space for their voices through a Special Issue of Displaced Voices, borne out of our collective desire to make their perspectives visible and impactful. What I hadn’t fully anticipated was the deeply layered experience of navigating the hegemonic structures and demands of academic writing.

The tension is clear. To gain access to academia’s ‘hallowed spaces,’ we are compelled to perform specific word combinations—crafted in a supposedly neutral, objective, and aloof manner. For refugees, this is especially true; their stories, already filtered through layers of power, are often flattened into digestible stereotypes that commodify their pain. Their narratives are treated as objects for study rather than acts of agency. This issue, as I noted in Displaced Voices, highlights how refugee stories, often

broadcasted in the media, are rarely in their own voices, but are twisted to evoke fear, pity, or to support specificpolitical agendas. This process reinforces a sense of epistemic injustice – a profound act of silencing that attacks the core of who a person is and can be.

The co-writing process I engaged in with each of these women sought to offer a means of resisting this epistemic injustice, but it was not without its challenges. I became acutely aware of the power dynamics inherent in our collaboration. Navigating these dynamics required constant reflexivity, questioning when my input supported their narratives and when it risked overshadowing their voices. Creating safe spaces, especially for trauma-informed storytelling with individuals like Syedah Husain, highlighted the emotional labour and ethical weight of translating deeply personal experiences into text. Working with Arifa Sultana illuminated the tensions of self-representation within constraining media narratives while co-authoring with Parisa Ally underscored the delicate balance between personal narrative and theoretical framing. Throughout this journey, I grappled with the ethical weight of editing and the colonial demands of academic language, striving to make the writing process a space of genuine empowerment and praxis.

The solution was not simply to bend the women’s stories to fit established norms but to reimagine the structures of writing and publishing themselves. Working with the Displaced Voices journal allowed us to adapt processes—prioritising dialogue over rigid feedback, focusing on clarity over technical precision, and valuing authentic expression over perfect formality. This iterative, reflexive approach embodied what I now start to see as ‘disruptive writing,’ or creating a space where marginalised women could assert their agency without conforming to the narrow expectations of academic discourse.

Yet, honestly, this disruption was a timid one – barely a gentle push against a hard boundary.

We need to reimagine the world. There is a desperate, unrelenting need to speak a new world into being. Rights struggles are being pushed back globally, and academia plays a role in communicating these struggles’ meaning, their value and their worth. For academia to truly ‘decolonise’ itself, we must restructure how the existing epistemic and linguistic

frameworks within academia are imagined and imposed(?). We need to transform how knowledge is written into being, making room for creative, multilingual, and disruptive forms of expression that challenge the structures we inhabit.

This cannot happen individually nor in the current academic currency of ‘objective’ language that serves as a gatekeeper to what is published and what is not and further neutralises voices we seek to represent. We need publication platforms that allow for a greater diversity of collective forms of expression.

The language of the colonial is both a necessity and a struggle. But what if… just what if… we can reshape that language, reimagine it with the stories, rhythms, and truths of those who have long been silenced, perhaps we can open new paths for knowledge and transformation.

[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title=”Reading group event details” open=”true” css=””]Date: 9th October 2024
Title: From subjects to authors: Reclaiming agency in refugee research and building a publishing praxis with Kirandeep Kaur
Speaker: Kirandeep Kaur
Chair: María Jose Recalde-Vela
Minutes by: Claire French[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title=”Selected minutes” css=””]María welcomes guests and introduces Kiran.

Kiran:

> For this research, I did the main fieldwork in KL, Malaysia in 2017/2018 and I worked with several forced migrant communities. I wanted to really understand what it was for them to have a voice as actors, as a form of community development and how the law played a role in all of that.
>
> Because it was a participatory project, we really wanted to find ways to disseminate the findings that we had together, and that were out there more widely – and that was actually a far larger challenge than doing the research together. So, this special issue that I sent out from Displaced Voices came from those

findings.

We did interviews together in focus groups and so on with the wider communities and it came from a place of frustration which is something I’ll get into. As Maria said, yes, I am an accidental decolonial scholar because it wasn’t until I worked with these participants that I saw how academic writing itself from their perspective was layered with hegemonic forms and structures. It also kind of led me to understand that academic writing itself is actually colonial.

I’m gonna give you a minute to just have a quick read of this quote by Patricia Williams now. This quote is from her work with Alchemy of Race and Rights and I spent a lot of time thinking about what she really meant by this. She has this as the cover of her book and for a while I really just thought she meant that the law is difficult to understand which it is, but I started to realise this especially as I was writing the magical realist stories and the collection of current papers that academic language and the particular language that we use for writing is a kind of word magic. It’s kind of like a key that we use to gain access to the hallowed spaces of academia and it’s a language that we are required to perform and reproduce in particular word combinations that she talks about here, in order to be seen as legitimate, by which I mean legitimate knowers and speakers of our own knowledge but also the stories of others.

People are often represented in ways that commodify their voices. Institutions and NGOs twist the truth for their purposes to reinforce the same stereotypes that they were working against. And rarely are these stories ever told in their own voices. So, rather than me presenting their stories as something that could be sold which is effectively what they felt had happened previously, they wanted to try and reinforce this idea that we had a shared humanity.

The other thing that we realise is as the women went through the writing process, it is as if the colonial legacies embedded in the academic words themselves were further marginalising

them. Not only in the traditional ways that we sometimes see in academic research where forced migrants are positioned as objects of study, but also in this very real sense of creating the sense of epistemic injustice – whether the very knowledge and words were seen as illegitimate. What I saw is that we have two problems here: We have a language that locks out non-academic elites and then we have this wider system of lack of voice. But there was a third problem that really took me quite a few years to start to articulate which is you know and it centres around this idea of what does it mean to actually have this ‘word magic’ in academia, who holds this power and how is it taken from them? But also what do we do to ourselves when we try and gain this ‘word magic’ in academia?

What I found going through this process was that in order to write academically and represent the forced migrants, I needed to decolonise myself to internalise the same academic structures and narrative that I was seeking to critique. We actually colonise ourselves repeatedly through writing form and structure.

There is a beautiful poem by Adrianne Rich that bell hooks refers to and she has this line that this is the oppressive language you needed to talk to you. And that really is it. I mean for me, academic writing was embedding whiteness alongside all these layers of hegemonic language. Aaron Manning, I’m not sure if you’ve ever heard of her work – she’s a scholar and academic writer and she calls this the process of writing ‘white’. She kind of reveals how academic writing leads to the validation of specific knowledge that supports these hegemonic elites within academia.

So, based on my own experience it’s important to reframe what academic writing is, as a discursive arena itself, how it can be used to embrace a larger range of voices and maybe unsettle meaning.

I am interested in how we can use these plural perspectives to actually unsettle some of the means through which we create this oppressive language.

Patricia Williams refers to the specific forms that are developed to represent academic knowledge as separate, objective and supposedly neutral. We really hold ourselves aloof and I mean that. Really civically, we are apart and it is so important as academics that we build this as a part of our training to reproduce what Patricia was calling ‘word magic’.

In fact, my career depends on it, right? I need to publish otherwise I’m not getting work, so we need to decolonise ourselves. That was the part that was challenging for us – it was not only that we couldn’t recognise that there were these hegemonic forms but there was a need to replicate these forms.

Collaboratively, we explored writing as a space together, what it means for us and how it could be more inclusive or collaborative. We tried to offer an alternative way to express these questions.

For me, the questions that I wanted to really express were around rights, borders and social change. I mean, that’s the purpose that I’m trying to communicate.

There were nine co-researchers in total. We laid out the publication process and were all aware of the challenges, especially in reaching our own version of academic English. We wanted to have something substantive or at least substantive enough that the co-researchers were to be able to present their knowledge without it being too academic.

I actually go through this process in a little bit more detail in another publication that I have with the forced migration review, but the first challenge was to disrupt the publication process itself.

We reached out to journals without much interest until we came in contact with the refugee archives at UCL and the Displaced Voices journal. And since they were rather new, they allowed us to come up with their own timetable and were flexible with our process.

We’ve gone into some elements of training elsewhere, but we created some new structural elements where, rather than having a peer review as we normally would react with other academics, the Forced Migrants authors, those of the special issue, actually reviewed each other. This was useful in these processes of critique, translation and making meaning, especially because they had similar levels of knowledge and linguistic competency. They were able to give each other some really interesting advice on how to improve their own writing and how to communicate what they wanted to communicate. Additionally, rather than giving feedback to them in written form, which can be confronting, they actually gave it back to them as a conversation.

These structures and conversations really started to give us a chance to start to understand how we were communicating, who to, and for what reasons. It was a reflective and iterative process. For example, rather than looking out for linguistic mistakes I found as we went through these drafting ideas, I was looking for clarity – am I telling you a story in the way that you understand? We started to come to see this as a form of disruptive writing because it really allowed the women to narrate their experiences with their knowledge as the primary objective rather than to try and communicate an academic concept where their knowledge is a case study. So, it kind of flipped the script and we got rid of those magical word combinations which I found really interesting.

We hope that the articles at least convey something quite unique. It has its own voice.

This was a real struggle for me because I’m also an academic writing lecturer and teacher myself. To not be trying to teach them the same forms that we were trying to critique was a massive challenge because that is literally my job. We worked really hard to try and keep those idiosyncrasies. For example, one of the authors is a health advocate and they have a Bachelors in health policy. One of the things that we realised is that there was very little information on Malaysian women’s

health. Health is a major issue in Malaysia in particular because due to the lack of legal status or any other forced migrants, healthcare isn’t freely available. This means they have to find means to pay for it now. There is a health card which reduces some of the costs but there were issues in particular for the women who didn’t even have language access, and there is a lack of translators from Somali to English. Returning to the writing process, the author was the most clear in terms of her concepts before coming into the process and she already had the message. She brought a list of bullet points that she wanted to say, so our conversations around writing very much were about communicating this story and making sure that it was supported by her research findings. We’d done a lot of research so it was more to do with setting definitions and organising issues so primarily I was a tool for the author to support her language and clarity.

The two other writers had very different approaches and I worked out how to support them individually. Co-writing meant very different things for each of them. I’m running out of time so we’ll move on but please do ask me more about their stories if you are interested.

The experience of special issue was formative in the sense that I came to see a little bit more deeply how writing itself is a system of silencing, that it can limit the diversity of the communicated form and epistemic agency – and those two elements were quite clearly married. I had not fully been able to untangle that before.

As scholars who are concerned with coloniality, I think it cannot go unspoken that we need to disentangle academic writing itself. It has a very strong history, as we know, that it’s related to the sciences. One other thing I could not disrupt from is how English as a language is in itself embedded in the colonial needs of communication. Bell hooks speaks about this really beautifully in her work on transgression and teaching when she talks about this tension between language both as a colonial heritage but as a means of empowerment at the same time. She critiques how

mastering English itself is seen as a sign of intelligence, right, and at the same time we perpetuate social inequality. I kind of see my own history represented in this reclaiming, where English is one’s own and one’s own voice becomes a means of asserting experiences and challenging those same norms and power structures embedded in the language itself.

I’m really interested in how we can go beyond the means of transforming discursive structures. How do we write our knowledge into being in more diverse or polyvocal ways? How do we make the language of academia a space for marginalised communities to reimagine their own voices?

This could mean in a very practical way of opening up publishing. There are other journals that are doing similar things now which are really quite exciting.

Reader:

Insightful presentation, as a person from Kenya, I wanted to ask how then should we proceed. If I were to write my paper in Swahili, it will be limited in its audience. Do we then begin to explore multilingualism more in academia?

Kiran:

bell hooks tells us how we can reclaim, how we can use the tools but with our lived experiences. One thing I tell my students is academic writing is not a monologue, it is a chorus, bringing together others to demonstrate this knowledge, showing different styles of writing. Even I saw a paper in creole recently. Offering across languages might be a start.

Reader:

Speaking to experiences in academia – does it make sense for us to look more closely at what is good about academic writing and the academic community? I don't want to take for granted that it is good. There are other spaces that are more creative and cohesive and I wonder what they offer too.

Kiran:

What do you think is special about academic writing?

Reader:

The chorus. The peer review process is an opportunity to communicate about the work in a way that can be positive and validating. I think there is a certain criticality that is very much a double-edged sword. I think I am on thin ice whenever I say something positive about it.

Kiran:

I love academic writing. I think it communicates itself through an epic style. I think academic writing is another form of storytelling but where stories we're telling each other so that we can gain collaborations and partnerships and so that we can have a chorus together. There are other forms that we can use potentially to communicate that knowledge in the same level of critical depth. I guess that's what I am trying to say. I do think that's very interesting to think through – it is similar to the ways that we think about, for instance, fiction writing or epic writing and these many other spaces of writing rather than simply saying it's not inclusive so let's throw it out.

María:

I think this conversation is particularly important in the advent of ChatGPT, writing is all starting to sound the same, limiting, all sounding middle, upper class. In academia, similarly, we are all sounding the same.

Reader:

I am currently writing a PhD and thinking about how I might write it and challenge some of these systems in doing so.

Kiran:

I had a strange PhD experience where I was the only person doing participatory action research so there wasn’t much support on it. I also was working through some trauma. One day I sat down and wrote it down like a story. And I asked my supervisor is it okay to leave it in and can we work with this? Luckily she liked it and I worked the analysis in around that. It is ultimately a way to communicate knowledge and for me it comes from the work itself, the voices of the work.

Reader:

Thank you, that’s really helpful

Reader:

Did I miss something, or did you start with the aim to publish rather than the lived experiences of the group?

Kiran:

> Yeah, we started with the experiences of a group. When I went to KL, I asked the participants themselves to what extent they wanted to be co-researchers, and what that would mean for them and how they wanted to enact that. Some wanted very much just to do a research training to do some interviews and have that practice and then they get on with their own things. Others had a much more extensive idea, and some of them had some real interest in academia themselves. And they wanted to publish and I’ve, you know, written more substantive academic articles as well as the ones that I shared with you. But it was the participation, and it was really very much driven by them. They decided what that participation meant and then to what extent they wanted to work with me and on what level. And then co-writing and co-publishing was again driven by them.

Reader:

> I am an art historian and the discipline has been recently quite disrupted through practice as research where artists are developing new ways of committing to a PhD. Perhaps academia is structured in a way that even after this work, you never leave behind the coloniality.

Kiran:

> There is a new group that are exploring creative writing in academia that might be useful.

Reader:

> Could you speak to the production of knowledge in the group of women and how the discourse shifted through the project and publishing?

Kiran:

> We were thinking through multiple modes of practice as research, as a collective as well as disseminating to researchers through more practice as research. We were inherently joining up.

Reader:

> They change our research methodologies in incredibly permanent ways.

Kiran:

> They are containers for our words. So, how we choose to express that will contain that knowledge in different ways. So, yeah we think and we put things out there and engage in criticality in new ways I guess. The thing is that we don’t know – we’re still developing this. And stories, performance and theatre are a start.

Reader:

> Stories are about feeling, and academic writing doesn’t include feeling so maybe that is indeed one way to start. Kiran, there was a book that I read about the global forum on southern epistemologies and they were like zoom conversations that were then recorded and put into a book (‘Foundational concepts of decolonial and southern epistemologies’).

Kiran:

“This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you”

> Don’t we always start with conversation in our writing, but we just don’t say we do? That is what makes writing magic and hidden. Here is a dialogical part, here is a recorded part, here is how it all fits together.

[/vc_toggle][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]Photo: Kirandeep’s special issue ‘in the absence of sun’

[/vc_column_text][vc_separator css_animation=”fadeIn” css=””]

Editor: TEODORA TODOROVA
Second editor: GIULIA CHAMPION
[/vc_column][/vc_row]