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The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house: decolonising intercultural communication

Giuliana Ferri 🄳

Department of Education, College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

The issue of representation has polarised public discourse and in recent years the decolonisation of research methodologies has entered the field of interculturality. However, universalistic discourses of dialogue and tolerance can be harnessed to silence certain voices by construing them as 'other'. With this paper I confront this conceptual knot of representation and I recognise the role of epistemic violence in speaking for 'the other'. I employ the idea of minor literature to counteract non-perfomative and tokenistic displays of diversity that appropriate the word intercultural and use it as a form of currency in neo-liberal academia.

La questione della rappresentazione ha polarizzato il discorso pubblico e negli ultimi anni la decolonizzazione delle metodologie di ricerca ha investito il campo dell'intercultura. Tuttavia, discorsi universalistici di dialogo e tolleranza possono in realta' silenziare certe voci costruendole come 'altre'. Con questo articolo affronto questo nodo concettuale e riconosco il ruolo della violenza epistemica quando si da voce all''altro'. A questo scopo, utilizzo il concetto di letteratura minore contro dimostrazioni non-perfomative di diversita' che si appropriano della parola 'intercultura' e la usano come una forma di scambio nell'accademia neo-liberista.

Introduction

Critical interculturalists working in neo-liberal and globalised Higher Education find themselves in the double bind of critiquing cultural essentialism and the commodification of difference (Giroux, 1993) while operating in institutions that use diversity as a marketing strategy to promote internationalisation (Rolfe, 2013). This paper, written for the twentieth anniversary of IALIC and the concomitant special issue titled *Confronting Issues, Controversies and difficult questions*, aims to tackle this double bind and suggests some future directions for research in the field of interculturality. The two interrelated questions of who benefits from intercultural research and to what extent it makes a difference to tackle prejudice, othering, oppression and exclusion are particularly poignant as we have entered a decade of intensified intercultural conflicts, widening social rifts and the polarisation of public discourse.

The drive to decolonise knowledge following the impact of Black Lives Matter has been one of the catalysts of this polarisation, for example in the debate over cultural heritage and the colonial

past it represents, as in the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Oxford campaign (Shilliam, 2019). In this context, current academic policies promoting interculturality and diversity can be seen as rhetorical devices that do not address the systemic causes of inequality, oppression, and othering (Bhambra et al., 2020). Indeed, universalistic discourses of diversity, equality, dialogue and tolerance can be harnessed to silence certain voices by construing them as 'other' and further marginalise them. With this paper, I intend to explore this epistemic silencing of 'other' voices. I begin self-reflexively with the issue of representation and privilege in academia. I then employ the framework of minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) to read two novels, Agota Kristof's *The Illiterate* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers,* in order to explore an interculturality of embodiment and difference that is intersectional, open to the contradictions of lived experience, and narrated from the 'othered' perspectives of migrant voices.

Interculturality, social justice and decolonisation

The field of interculturality originated in Anglo-American political hegemony after WW2, and despite an established body of academic literature that challenges essentialism and cultural reification, interculturality still operates in the context of the neo-liberal economic dogma that has invested Higher Education globally. In fact, interculturality has become an instrument of policy initiatives that advertise universities as diverse and internationalised spaces for both students and academic staff. As a result, much intercultural research has focused on higher education students and their experiences of mobility, and to a much lesser extent on academic mobility. A notable exception is Byram and Dervin (2008) who approach mobility from the perspectives of both students and academic staff. However, the experiences of those at the margins of academic discourse and academic life is an area of intercultural studies that is becoming more prominent. Aman (2017), writes about the need to decolonise interculturality decentring its colonial Eurocentric epistemic position and inviting the field to open to epistemic diversity, invoking an inter-epistemic rather than an inter-cultural approach. This decolonising, decentring stance is at the heart of Phipps (2019) account of migrants' and refugees' experiences of multilingualism. Phipps' writing is of particular resonance to the scope of this paper, as her writing disrupts academic conventions using poetry, self-reflection and ethnographic field notes to allow for the relations between bodies, languages and emotions to become visible. This commitment to social justice is also invoked by Zu (2020), who invites researchers *to make a stance* and make clear their own positionalities when conducting research. Zu (2020) identifies social action as a new focus for intercultural research, which means moving away from the notion of culture to that of social actors and their relationships with societal structures, ideologies and power. Furthermore, in the last few years a plethora of studies have focused on the role of identities, reflexivity, and marginal voices in global contexts (Bishop, 2020; Dervin & Risager, 2014; Kramsch & Zhu, 2016; Kubota, 2019; Macedo, 2019; Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). Dervin and Tournebise (2013) propose a number of *turbulences* to renew the notion of interculturality, of particular relevance here are the need to embed intersectionality and social justice in intercultural education, confronting inequality and essentialist ideologies of culture (Holliday, 2010).

Using the masters' tools at the intersection of privilege and marginalisation in in neo-liberal academia

Academia is a highly contested space in which societal inequalities are reproduced, including the epistemic silencing of those who are othered (Morley et al., 2018). Higher Education in England is characterised by high tuition fees and the consequent 'value for money' neo-liberal discourse (Tight, 2019) promoted by successive governments since 2010 (Kandiko Howson & Buckley, 2020), which has contributed to embed a culture of economic competitiveness and quantification of research outputs (O'Regan & Gray, 2018). This neo-liberal turn can be observed in how the

notion of the intercultural is institutionalised (Collins, 2018) in Higher Education to project an image of universities as internationalised spaces that promise high levels of employability in the global market. The role of interculturality is therefore highly problematic when it becomes a signifier of internationalisation and intercultural competence building in neo-liberal, marketized, globalised academic spaces, while leaving issues of representation and privilege within these same institutions unproblematised and unquestioned.

Although it is now accepted practice to inform readers that the writer is aware of their own privilege (Laadegard & Phipps, 2020), many academics are at the margins of this privilege (Ahmed, 2021), occupying interstitial spaces while reclaiming their rights to academic authorship. Writing at the intersection of a number of identity positions, I use my own positionality in Anglophone academia as a starting point to reflect on wider inequalities in internationalised and globalised academic spaces. This self-reflexive exercise (Hundle et al., 2019; Kirk, 2009; Lather, 1986) is employed here to illustrate the interplay between different social categories such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and how these are enmeshed in a network of power relations, all of which are experienced in differing ways by individuals (Tatli & Ozbilgin, 2012). I write as a non-native English speaker Southern European woman, first arrived in the UK as an economic migrant. I returned to education as a 'mature' part-time post-graduate student after working in primary schools in London for a number of years, and after completing a PhD I started my academic career as a casualised lecturer on hourly paid contracts at two different Russell Group universities. This casualisation of academic jobs is based on the aggressive free market economy ruling work relations within universities, whereby a decreasing number of established academics work alongside an increasing number of casualised academics on temporary contracts (Allmer, 2018). Furthermore female academics, and in particular working class women, are relegated to the condition of 'lumpen proletariat' (Reay, 2000, 2004) as the 'non-citizens' of academia (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019) performing 'the housework' (Oakley, 1995) and carrying the burden of emotional labour within these institutions (Evans & Moore, 2015; Rickett & Morris, 2021). I am therefore placed at the intersection of a number of positions as a woman, second language speaker (or 'non-native' speaker), economic migrant from Southern Europe, a positionality that inscribes my own practice within academia, including the feeling of non-belonging, of being a 'space invader' (Puwar, 2004). Puwar uses the image of space invaders to critique the current emphasis on inclusion and diversity as rhetorical devices that mask the reality of gendered and racialised (and I add, bilingual/multilingual migrant) bodies entering institutional spaces in which they have been historically relegated to the role of 'others' who bear the burden of representation. Ahmed (2006, 2012) describes the work of resistance undertaken by marginalised people within academic institutions that while openly addressing diversity in their own mission statements, at the same time retain the same structures of privilege that place those same individuals at unfair disadvantage. As an illustration of this process, the underrepresentation of ethnic minority academics in universities in the UK (Arday, 2021; Reay, 2018) combined with the institutional hierarchy between post-92, or 'second tier' institutions, and research intensive universities, creates a layer of inequality and reduced access to postgraduate education and PhD research for underrepresented groups (Mirza, 2018; Pásztor & Wakeling, 2018). Kumaravadivelu (2016) describes in a reflective piece of writing the native/non-native speaker inequity in the field of TESOL, and the position of subalternity of non-native speakers in Anglophone institutions which reduces their opportunities for academic publication and career progression (see also Lillis & Curry, 2010; Śliwa & Johansson, 2015). This subalternity is exacerbated by students' perceptions of competence, with non-native English speaking academics perceived as less competent than their native counterparts in students' evaluations (Hendriks et al., 2021). Not only is language diversity presented as a problem in monolingual and culturally homogeneous Anglophone academia (Preece & Marshall, 2020; Reay, 2018), but the dominant role of English in global academic practices is directly correlated to its status as a commodity in neo-liberal global economies (O'Regan, 2021). The work of interculturalists working in Anglophone academia, therefore, is positioned within a network in which wider inequalities are produced and reproduced, affecting individual academics

and students in different ways depending on their own intersecting positionalities that place them at advantage and/or disadvantage.

An interculturality of becoming minor

The critical examination of practices of exclusion and othering is at the centre of transnational and postcolonial feminism. Spivak (1988) points at the complex web of colonial and patriarchal exploitation beyond simplistic reductions of representation to the binary Western/non-Western cultures. Dhawan and do Mar Castro Varela (2016) warn against reducing intersectionality to a non-perfomative (Ahmed, 2006) series of identity markers that masks the complexity of power dynamics and the economic basis of exploitative relations in globalised neoliberal economies (Conway, 2017; Lunny, 2019; Mohanty, 2003). According to this critique, essentialist identity politics reduces identity to a series of checkmarks that reify diversity, while leaving the economic basis of inequality and exploitation intact (Davis, 2008). Adopting this perspective, it is argued here that non-perfomative and tokenistic displays of inclusion and diversity appropriate the word 'intercultural' and use it as a form of currency in neo-liberal academic discourses while glossing over inequality and othering practices within these same institutions. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1986) I explore difference as a source of creativity and affirmation presenting two narratives from minor, marginalised, and embodied subject positions. In Deleuze and Guattari's ontology (1986) difference unfolds through becoming other and becoming minor which, as argued elsewhere (*see* Ferri, 2020), foregrounds fractured and outsider subjectivities over the reification of diversity and the impasse between self/other that has dominated intercultural discourse. From this perspective, intercultural journeys narrated from minor subject positions are not linear trajectories of discovery of 'otherness' and final overcoming of differences in intercultural understanding. As an illustration, the two literary examples discussed in this paper narrate experiences of linguistic alienation from minor and outsider perspectives that create counternarratives to dominant perceptions of diversity and intercultural understanding. Agota Kristof's *The Illiterate* and Xiaolu Guo's *A concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, are first person narratives of exile, of migration and of the struggles experienced when operating in a major language and within a major culture from minor positions, or in other words from a position of difference or of othering. These two narratives are analysed here through the framework of minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) to represent intercultural journeys fraught with contradictions, complex, messy, and inscribed within socio-historical and political contexts that both constrain and provide lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) for the narrating voices. According to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature, the intervention of a minor voice operating in a major language creates deterritorialization, or the destabilisation of the link between language, tradition and national culture. As such, minor literature, or literature written from a minor position, is always political (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) meaning that the social milieu is not just a backdrop but an integral part of the story that affects the writer and the stories that are narrated. The author, in other words, writes from a unique and marginal space, or to use Min-Ha's (1989) distinction, from the perspective of an embodied 'i' that does not reflect the universal and abstract 'I' of the major language:

> The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 18)

Similar to a third space (Bhabha, 1994) created by hybridity and the recontextualization of language and of cultural practices through experiences of negotiation, translation, and emotional work, this becoming minor of intercultural learning is not a space of reconciliation of different cultural traditions. It is rather a contradictory, messy, and open ended process in which the intercultural is lived from the positioning of this embodied 'i', a *space invader* (Puwar, 2004) who enters and disrupts established languages, practices and relations.

The Hungarian writer Agota Kristof wrote the short autobiographical text *The Illiterate* in French towards the end of her life in 2004, recounting how she became a writer after fleeing Hungary as a refugee at the end of WW2, finally settling in Switzerland. The *Illiterate* is an example of minor literature that narrates the experience of migration, linguistic alienation and the sense of aphasia that accompanies thinking and writing from what the Hungarian writer Agota Kristof called a hostile language, referring to the use of French in her literary work.

The author's brief autobiographical text embodies all three characteristics denoted in Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) description of minor literature. First of all, as an émigré who has to learn a new language in difficult personal circumstances created by the political upheavals following WW2, Kristof interiorises French as an enemy language by stripping it of any flourishes and dismissing the diversity of tenses, using only the present tense (Hites, 2012). In doing so, Kristof ruptures established literary conventions bending them to the immediacy and urgency of expression, while reconfiguring the standard language of literary tradition from within. Kristof pushed French to its expressive limits to embody her own sense of alienation and estrangement, mirroring the plight of those who live in a language *that is not their own* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 19):

> It is in this way that, at the age of twenty-one, when I arrive in Switzerland and when, completely by chance, I arrive in a city where French is spoken, I confront a language that is totally unknown to me. It is here that my battle to conquer this language begins, a long and arduous battle that will last my entire life […] It is for this reason that I also call the French language an enemy language. (Kristof, 2014, p. 20)

This experience of exile narrated by Kristof reflects the lived experiences of emigres who have to forge a new identity in a new language, finding themselves in often hostile environments. Her work translates her story of migration and exile into literary expression by shaping a major language from the minor position of a political refugee, non-native French speaker. Translation is intended here in terms of change and transformation in intercultural encounters but also as a means of interpreting the world (Coperías Aguilar & Martínez Sierra, 2021), rendering salient those cultural dynamics that silence voices and essentialise others in the presence of power imbalance and systemic oppression. Kristof's writing expresses the becoming minor (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) of intercultural experience: becoming migrant, becoming a stranger, becoming 'an illiterate'.

This process of intercultural translation is at the heart of Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the writer's first English novel published in 2007. The novel centres on one year in the life of a young Chinese woman who arrives in England as an immigrant to learn English. Her name is stripped to a letter – Z, signifying her reduced status to alien, other, a foreigner with a defective use of the English language (Sinoimeri, 2021). Through the literary device of word entries assembled in the form of an English dictionary for each month of the year, the protagonist uses an interlanguage that is at odds with the unattainable monolingual ideal of the native speaker of English. Z's intercultural journey begins with her positioning as an 'alien', as Z describes herself at the start recalling Puwar's (2004) notion of a space invader, reflecting her condition of migrancy:

> Sign in front of queue say: ALIEN and NON ALIEN. I am alien, like Hollywood film Alien, I live in another planet, with funny looking and strange language. I standing in most longly and slowly queue with all aliens waiting for visa checking. I feel little criminal but I doing nothing wrong so far. My English so bad. How to do? (Guo, 2008, p. 9)

Her existential condition as an 'alien', an immigrant, a 'space invader' becomes apparent as soon as she arrives at the airport, where her difference becomes visible through her linguistic alienation. As in Kristof's *The Illiterate*, Z begins to translate and negotiate the new hostile environment starting with a diary in which she lists all the new words encountered that help her navigate the language and the new culture, which are mediated through her love story with an older English man. Ultimately, the intercultural encounter between Z and her lover is destined to fail. The distance between the two is too wide to be bridged due to a visible power imbalance in terms of gender and age

difference, but also due to a more subtle imbalance that contributes to this failure of translation. Z's societal othering as an immigrant, second language speaker is reflected in the more intimate othering by her lover, who sees her linguistic and cultural resources as a barrier to communication:

> I feel like being abandoned. The word I learned the first day I arrived in London in the bloody red Nuttington House. It is the second word in my Concise Dictionary, coming after Abacus.

> You carry on: 'It is so hard for me. I don't have my own space to think about my sculptures, my things, and my own words. I don't have time to be on my own. Now when I talk to other people, I become slower and slower. I am losing my words'.

> I listen. Gosh, I am upset to hear this. I have to say something to defend myself.

> 'If so, that is not my fault. It is just because we live in such different cultures. It is very difficult for you and I to find the right way to communicate'.

> You listen, then you say: 'You really are starting to speak English properly'. (Guo, 2008, pp. 177–178)

While Z is defensive and insecure about her language abilities and Chinese culture, her lover is unable to separate Z's individuality from her national identity (Hwang, 2013) and her 'otherness', which includes her being a second language speaker of English. Although her journey of becoming minor, becoming illiterate, becoming migrant brings pain and alienation, it also offers lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) that positively affirm Z's difference and sense of agency. Her decision to return to China and to live in Beijing against her family's wishes is the result of having acquired a unique and embodied understanding of the painful complexities of language learning, cultural translation and its emotional and affective dimensions.

It could be argued that in both examples the writers Kristof and Guo are using the master's tools, in this case two major languages such as French and English, to write their novels to narrate stories of migration. However, the notion of minor literature highlights how the minor use of a major language changes the canon from within, expressing minor and marginalised experiences from an agentive position. The literary device of biomythography (Lorde, 1982) is another example of a narrative of becoming from a minor subject position that affirms radical difference and agency (Ferri, 2020). In her seminal essay *The masters' tools will never dismantle the masters' house,* Audre Lorde (2007) illustrates dynamics of exclusion that place the burden of difference on the other and normalise the narrative of the self as universal, meaning that the other can only acquire a voice when using those tools that have been forged by this universalised self. However, against the tendency to overemphasise commonalities that erase the specificity of marginalised experiences, Lorde reclaims difference as a source of strength and empowerment. This is not the neo-liberal agency (Gershon, 2011) of the individual who forges a successful sense of oneself and takes control over her own life through sheer determination and will. This personal and embodied subject – the 'i' (Min-Ha, 1989), is the positionality from which 'i' write, as opposed to the neutral 'I' of the social sciences, connecting the personal and the political (Olson, 2000) as in Lorde's radical feminism. Min-ha's use of 'i' to designate the embodied self writing reflexively and from a unique and embodied position is presented here as an intercultural act that recognises the impossibility to define and crystallise the otherness of the other. According to Levinas (1985), the act of defining the other is an act of violence that reifies and essentialises otherness, or in the words of Min-ha it is an impossible act that attempts to force an analytical outlook to a reality that escapes categories:

> Trying to find the other by defining otherness or by explaining the other through laws and generalities is, as Zen says, like beating the moon with a pole or scratching an itching foot from the outside of a shoe. (Min-Ha, 1989, p. 76)

An interculturality of becoming and difference is then attentive to this 'i', this agentive subjectivity asking *what position am i writing from? who am i writing for, and why?* Or in other words, *what difference does my difference* make? to paraphrase Dhawan and do Mar Castro Varela (2016) in

relation to the non-perfomative use of diversity policies in academic institutions. Radical difference, embodiment and the 'i' are proposed here as underpinning features of an interculturality of engagement, responsibility, and activism (Laadegard & Phipps, 2020; Phipps, 2019).

What difference does difference make?

As academics working in globalised, internationalised, Anglophone and neo-liberal universities we operate under the logic of metrics and competitiveness, while taking part in unequal relations and practices. Writing and researching about interculturality poses a number of issues for those who believe in the public role of academic research and its potential to affect positive change in society. Laadegard and Phipps (2020) call for a renewed debate on the transformative role of intellectuals and a shift from elite groups to narratives that place disenfranchised groups at the centre of research. With this paper, I decided to write self-reflexively to make clear my positioning as a second language speaker economic migrant in relation to the context in which I operate. I then chose two minor voices that, albeit fictionalised, stem from lived and first-hand experiences of migration, exile and living interculturally in situations with clear power imbalances and unequal treatment in virtue of their 'outsider' status. The reading of these two narratives through the lenses of Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) ontology of difference could be applied to real life data in order to reclaim the struggles of living intercultural lives from embodied experiences of difference. In this regard, I conclude providing some points for reflection and debate as way forward towards the development of an interculturality of difference that is not afraid to confront issues and to ask difficult questions. First of all, taking into account minor positions and embodiment to create solidarity networks with marginalised voices and forging intersectional and international communities that co-construct new narratives and place social justice at the centre of interculturality. This epistemic enlargement of the field to other voices would also increase the inter-disciplinary reach of interculturality, adding analytical tools from indigenous methodologies, literary criticism, cinema studies and art production. The language of the arts can indeed disclose intercultural dimensions and othered voices hitherto marginalised in research. Trin Min-Ha's cinematic production or Audre Lorde's poetry are examples of this interculturality rooted in artistic production stemming from embodied difference and social activism. Lastly, exploring the posthuman possibilities of interculturality (Ferri, 2020) to include the relationship with geographical locations, landscapes, and artefacts, as well as the kinship with the animal and natural worlds (Haraway, 1991). It is claimed in conclusion that an approach to interculturality underpinned by becoming, difference and embodiment could allow interculturalists to reject reified binaries and to disidentify with the neo-liberal subject of inclusion and diversity.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Giuliana Ferri is a senior lecturer in education at Brunel University London. Her research in intercultural communication has explored the framing of otherness and the notion of competence from a philosophical perspective. Giuliana has published Intercultural Communication: Critical Approaches and Future Challenges for Palgrave Macmillan.

ORCID

Giuliana Ferri http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4843-3273

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