

Languaging as refusal

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How are we refusing to be the bridge in 'diversity' responses in academia? What processes open up when we refuse the word and the singular language of 'borders' circulating in border studies and gender studies in the Netherlands? Where are we refusing from? Who is the subject-object of refusal? What is the language of refusal? How to speak from our burning guts that refuse to refuse in a language that doesn't speak to our daily lives and struggles? How are we refusing the violence of research processes promoting the individual 'trophy' academic/artist in academic and cultural institutions while holding one's own and each other's bodies and power asymmetries shaping our writing processes for healing? How does one listen to the silences in histories of slavery, war, patriarchy, colonial trauma, and gender violence passing through our bodies while writing? In this essay we reflect on these questions by interspersing pieces of texts, experiences, excerpts (from thesis/thesis-related events), visuals, and poetry, by entangling biographies, traumas and memories situated in our everyday contexts and processes of teaching, writing for healing and for a living. Languaging becomes a location where we speak from, inspired and yet in tension with *Anzaldúa* (Hamzah 2020). Languaging (Kramsch *et al.* 2015) is our practice of refusal to refuse in one dominant language. *We language* a call for a poetics of refusal. We intentionally make the fleeting process known to each other and open it up to the reader, in holding each other's bodies as they are collapsing and healing. In doing so we invite the reader to struggle with us in the process of naming our struggles that emerge from refusing to refuse singularly in English, refusing to write by partitioning our guts and everyday battles with patriarchy, refusing the writing subject as fully *knowing* what one is refusing.

Keywords: poetics, refusal, languaging, entangling biographies

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When you slam into a block or get bitten by a virus remember to let it work itself through your body like water through a blowhole. (Anzaldúa 1999a, 243)

Story-mapping languaging as refusal

How are we refusing to be the bridge in 'diversity' responses in academia? What processes open up when we refuse the word and the singular language of 'borders' circulating in border studies and gender studies in the Netherlands? Where are we refusing from? Who is the subject-object of refusal? What is the language of refusal? How to speak from our burning guts that refuse to refuse in a language that doesn't speak to our daily lives and struggles? How are we refusing the violence of research processes promoting the individual 'trophy' academic/artist in academic and cultural institutions while holding one's own and each other's bodies and power asymmetries shaping our writing processes for healing? How does one listen to the silences in histories of slavery, war, patriarchy, colonial trauma, and gender violence passing through our bodies while writing? In this essay we reflect on these questions by interspersing pieces of texts, experiences, excerpts (from thesis/thesis-related events), visuals, and poetry, by entangling biographies, traumas and memories situated in our everyday contexts and processes of teaching, writing for healing and for a living. Languaging becomes a location where we speak from, inspired and yet in tension with *Anzaldúa* (Hamzah 2020). Languaging (Kramersch *et al.* 2015) is our practice of refusal to refuse in one dominant language. We *languaging* a call for a poetics of refusal. We intentionally make the fleeting process known to each other and open it up to the reader, in holding each other's bodies as they are collapsing and healing. In doing so we invite the reader to struggle with us in the process of naming our struggles that emerge from refusing to refuse singularly in English, refusing to write by partitioning our guts and everyday battles with patriarchy, refusing the writing subject as fully *knowing* what one is refusing.

This essay is a story-map of our shifting positions of refusing from our guts in everyday life. In what follows we take you, dear reader, through a journey of snippets that flow from a retrospective reflection and simultaneous manifesting of horizons of imagining otherwise from our guttural refusals. Sometimes this is a reflection on a classroom experience, sometimes in the form of poetry emerging from the struggle against any one dominant language capturing one's imagination; sometimes in the form of Questions (What if...? Can...?); sometimes in the form of flowing words that need to be written coming from a moment of collapse or all the emotions coming from the act of postponing writing; sometimes in the form of a (PhD) defence speech-act; and sometimes in the poetics of the politics of home and belonging.

The writings consciously flow across positions of I, We, Can it...? and What if...? to underline the paradoxes and impossibility of demarcating boundaries between I and We, subject and object, theory and lived experiences/stories, while situating our bodies in specific power asymmetries of academic knowledge production on borders, migration and belonging. It is an attempt to stay with a form of writing that does not render transparency (Glissant 1997) to the extracting eye searching for 'stories' that belong to pre-existing categories of measurement of Self or Other.

It aims to shift the gaze to the sensorial process of refusing as struggles of languaging – as the ceaseless shuttling back and forth between 'absent' and 'present' languages (Kramersch *et al.* 2015), terminologies and positions, requiring methodologies that listen to that which haunts the very process of imagining (part of the teaching and the writing process itself) (Aparna *et al.* forthcoming).

We invite you to receive our guttural iterations as an open-ended process of mirroring as a "multipolar reflecting reflection" (Minh-Ha 1989, 22) exercise that emerges not from a single mirror, but from a shattered mirror that "leaves the infiniteness of life's reflections intact" (Minh-Ha 1989, 23).

Holding space for multilingual silences: refusing to be the bridge between anti-racist English glossaries and racist Dutch glossaries

I am part of a team of lecturers developing a joint session for two MA programs at two Universities (Glasgow University and Radboud University) in Sociology and Geography. The content of the session has been developed with communities and actors resisting state regimes of immigration control in

Nijmegen, Netherlands and Glasgow, United Kingdom (UK). The aim is to get students across these locations to engage with the materials and discuss questions around the theme of “Encampment and Exclusion”. “What is the Border regime and how is it maintained/governed? How can we define a border as an injustice? What are the different forms of contestation of border regimes?”, are some exploratory questions.

We invite students to discuss in groups. It is the moment of ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests, and we are at the peak of the pandemic closures and online life. Students from Glasgow, UK are mostly students of colour and very vocal about the absence of critical race theory in their migration studies program, while the students in Nijmegen, Netherlands are less comfortable with English and less vocal about their curriculum. Many in Nijmegen, Netherlands have also turned off their cameras. After the session one of the students writes an email to her course coordinator in Glasgow, UK about the use of the term ‘coloured’ by a Dutch student in the discussions on exclusion and encampment in her group and as offensive to her and other fellow students. We decide to invite all the students to another session to discuss this issue.

It is me and a colleague – both staff of colour – who are put at the forefront to lead the discussion, to serve as bridges. I decide to focus on the language question since I am thinking about Dutch ‘students of colour’ who do not have the English glossaries for talking about struggles against racism and nationalism and who need to navigate this space in English. I start the conversation inviting all students to situate the glossaries used to unpack the power asymmetries between English and Dutch learning environments. However, the students based in UK, who are all fluent in English completely dominate the debate, pouring down on me and others despite our attempts to invite them to understand the context of the Dutch language and the silences that come with it. They protest to our focus on language, understood as diverting from an anti-racist agenda, while not giving any space for Dutch speaking students to express their struggles with the English language. The other colleague completely sided with the students from UK as he felt this was the only way he could escape the colour blindness and absence of anti-racist agendas within the Dutch classroom. We became divided into camps of vocal anti-racist English versus racist vocabularies in Dutch. In the context of structural and everyday racisms under conditions of colour blindness and notions of ‘Dutch tolerance’ as a national pride what vocabularies are being used? What are we refusing? Colour blind language? Are we comfortable with the label ‘person of colour’? How does it translate in Dutch? How do these terms circulate now and in the past? As Wekker (2022, 86) points out, “after a resounding silence of thirty years following the publication of Philomena Essed’s *Alledaags Racisme (Everyday Racism)*, some work has appeared on race and racism in the Netherlands; however it pertains mostly to the current period and not so much to the country’s former transatlantic colonies, Suriname and Dutch Antilles, and their racial pasts and presents.” She urges to pay attention to how terms have circulated and circulate now among White and Afro-descendent populations. This event brought to light the circulation of the term ‘gekleurd’/coloured in the circuits of anti-racist White networks in Nijmegen where the student who used this term in the classroom is situated. The dominance of English in this space was equally problematic which was simply dismissed. In holding space for the multilingual silences of bodies yet to articulate anti-racist vocabularies from their guts – I refused to be the bridge. The Dutch students of colour remained silent.

I am the Bridge yet I cannot break me

I have been postponing a lot of writing

I am waiting for the right time, the right language, the right genre

I postpone too much

That all the thoughts are fighting in my head like a tsunami

Flooding me with them

Sometimes I feel the only way to express myself is in English

وأحيانا أشتي أكتب بالعربي
 لكن ليس أي عربي
 بلغة البن المريرة
 بالعامية اليمنية السمراء
 المحمصة مثل ذاكرتي وتجاربي

Maar soms vind ik het heel moeilijk om ze niet in Nederlands uit te leggen

Ik wil graag mijn zonen mijn شتات lezen

Maar misschien is dit niet waar

Misschien wil ik gewoon met hun spelen

Ik doe dat

Ik zeg: wat betekent dit in het Arabisch?

Ze proberen het uit te leggen

Maar soms, zegt de jongste

Waarom, waarom moet ik Jemenitisch leren!?? Ik WOON in Nederland!!

I love his way of protesting

I love his arguments

BUT

I also love languages

They bring people together

Maar soms

They set them apart

أقول حينها: ما جدوى الكتابة؟؟
 فبرد صوتي
 سأكتب
 سأكتب حتى يتدفق حائطي
 من الوادي .. للجبل
 وتصدح الكلمات كالصدى
 فتخلق لي من قلب الصمت صوتا

Refusal to use the word 'border'¹

Or like the darkness in an abysmal ocean, overwhelmed with waves topped by waves, topped by dark clouds, darkness upon darkness: if a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it! (The Quran Surah An-Nur 24:40)

The globe is a small village, and the idea of borderlessness is a statement of the privileged who have it all. We do not (all) live in a borderless world. On the contrary, we live in times where more arbitrary layers are defining who we are, how we experience life, and even how we perceive life as such. These layers that I call waves not only manage our motion but also govern our interactions and our destinies. They are sometimes visible as a wall and sometimes invisible like an idea, like 'roots,' they are there, but we cannot see them.

In my first discussion with my internship supervisor about my thesis, I told her what I mean by stranded and how I intend to use it in my thesis as a metaphor by demonstrating the meaning by a verse from Quran in which 'waves' are another metaphor that would help me navigate through different forms of oppression and discrimination locally and globally.

She was very enthusiastic about it and told me that it reminded her of Sandbar, the metaphor by Anzaldúa. It was the first time I heard about Anzaldúa. I googled her name and searched for her book, *Borderlands*. Unconsciously, I moved from using the word waves to the word border. When I started working on my thesis, I used the word border to talk about the condition of strandedness. I mentioned it in my thesis presentation and then talked about it with my supervisor. Everyone was interested in what I meant by borders. However, once I started using the term, I became academically stranded. The more I searched for the term border or read about it, the more anxious I became. Anxiety and panic attacks grew after engaging with the term in many ways. There were so many borders that I wanted to explain, to understand what they mean and how they have been used in other studies.

When I reached the peak of my anxiety, I decided to take another approach, and think otherwise. It is my thesis, my way of healing, my agent in surfing academia, and not another border, I reminded myself.

I disposed of all the papers I wrote, all the references I tried to engage with and started to write from my gut. It was my way to reclaim my positionality in academia and my connection to my body. I have been in a fight with borders all my life, and that was enough. To Anzaldúa (1999b) borderland is a bridge since she has two lands to claim. What if one doesn't have any land to claim? Furthermore, borders in Arabic, my 'native' language, mean – besides the regular meaning of boundaries or limitations – punishment.

A border grounds you, tortures you, limits your desires, mobility, and emotions, and above all of that, it murders your imagination. This term has been overused: linguistics, scientists, researchers, politicians, priests, and everyone with authority claim borders and set laws and rules based on them, and for me I had to rethink beyond boundaries. Therefore, I went back to the metaphor waves to speak about the multilayers of oppression and discrimination.

As I see it, being stranded does not mean merely being motionless, helpless, or stuck. On the contrary, to discuss this concept is to engage with the struggle that a person confronts when demanding full being. Being stranded is someone who does not only go with the flow; they do not paralyze when overwhelmed with fluid; instead, they move on despite the direction or strength of the waves.

Waves here is a metaphor to help me understand the power relations that are in control of a stranded life and its conditions. I use waves because they can depict the challenges, oppression, and boundaries a stranded is confronted by. No matter how brilliant a swimmer you are, if you are left alone in the middle of the ocean, waves can push you away from your goal, set you upside down, cause you to lose orientation and/or kill you. When I use the waves metaphor to illustrate how stranded lives live their life, on the one hand, it reminds me of the many times someone who is stranded fights alone, thrives, loses, suffocates, survives, and struggles, again and again, trying to reach what could be a safe mode or a safe place.

On the other hand, it reminds me of those who surf the waves in order to win a competition and those who surf waves during summer vacations. It reminds me of how one thing can be perceived differently according to the subject's experiences and life conditions. The waves also remind me of the invisible wounds they cause where bones could be broken, lungs could be salted, and minds could be

traumatized. Stranded here is not to victimize nor empower the subjects because they have already opted for their path to blur the boundaries (Hamzah 2020, 16–17).

Refusing to write with words that murder our imagination, refusing to use the word border, allows one to stay close to the colonial violence we carry in our bodies guiding our process of writing. Adopting the 'academic exercise' of writing to join a 'debate' cannot come at the expense of not listening to the situated knowledges our bodies are carrying. Joining the debates on the 'b/ordering turn' (van Houtum *et al.* 2005) and borders as a social construction, reproduces the violence one is running away from – border as punishment to our imagination! Moving from borders to bordering stays with that violence that we refuse.

Subject/Object practicing refusal

What if the place from which one is refusing is one that one cannot return to nor one that can be fully claimed?

What notions of space and place are assumed in practicing refusal?

Who is the subject/Object enacting refusal?

What if there is no language one can claim for refusal but only fleeting foreign vocabularies that temporarily find refuge in one's guts?

What if one's own body deceives one's practice of refusal?

What if one starts to possess refusing more than flowing with what such a practice unfolds?

What if the barbed wire is home?

What if belonging is fleeting and yet feels timeless?

What if one is always burning to destroy oneself?

Can the parrots on the floor-tiles that bore full witness to my sister's screams refuse mental torture?



Fig. 1. Illusion. Credit: Saba Hamzah.

Can the landscape poster on the wall with its eternal luscious green grass refuse to be seen?

Can the scooter that gave license to my freedom refuse sexual abuse?

Can the wall we jumped across, every now and then, refuse the metal railings and the surveillance cameras?

Can the bus that carries bodies unbearable-to-live-in refuse to be touched by or touch them?

Can my mother's saree refuse to wrap itself around her wounds?

Can the street dog without a name that cried at every neighbour's death refuse to be forgotten?

Can the gate that taught me masturbation refuse to penetrate the compound wall?

Can the coconut tree that spurted out from a seed at the boundary between two lands refuse to be uprooted?

Can the girl across our street who refused to wear pads when she started menstruating refuse to become a woman?



Fig. 2. Illusion. Credit: Saba Hamzah.

Can the washing stone refuse the stink of dried blood and sweat caught between her legs for generations?

Can the full moon refuse to bear witness to our clandestine kisses in her arms?

Can my guts refuse generations of suppressed desires?

Can my soul depart from the duality of patriarchy and communal pleasures?

, ب *B and P*

you are taught that

"بلادي وإن جارت عليّ عزيزة وأهلي وإن ضنوا عليّ كرام"

you are taught that

borders matter

biology is either blurry or binary

being born as بنت is a burden

belonging doesn't mean protection

but pledge

a promise to believe

to submit

to be part of the club

and

bar the other

prickly pear is the blood

and nostalgia is the bread

you never mention that a home could be a bag

or worse than that

it could be a prison

You deny that بيت is part of a poem

and better than that

it is peace of mind

AND body

Home is a fleeting memory that haunts you, calls you and escapes you at her own will

Home is the urge to make paper boats and sail them

Home is the calling to make paper boats and burn them



Fig. 3. Sailing a paper boat when my body refused to write. Credit: Kolar Aparna.



Fig. 4. Burning a paper boat when my body could not stop burning.

We will never feel at home at the university in its current form.

We will never feel at home on the paper we write.

We continue to make paper boats (see Fig. 3 as one of the many instances of holding our bodies in times of refusal) of our pains, theories, homes and our bodies, sailing and burning them (see Fig. 4 as one of the many instances of letting go of what we create) at different moments depending on what is calling and urging us from our guts.

Burning the paper boat of a PhD (defence speech of June 12, 2020), refusing to be the 'I' defending my Thesis

With the permission of the Council of Deans and in order to obtain the degree of doctor from Radboud University, I would like to defend in public my doctoral thesis entitled: Enacting Asylum University: Politics of Research Encounters and (Re)Producing Borders in Asylum Relations.

Dear esteemed members of the committee, dear family, colleagues, friends, the ancestors of Radboud University present in this room, and all the people watching this livestream.

As I stand in this Aula, 'the center' or the heart of Radboud University, in Nijmegen along the Dutch/German borderlands, especially under ghostly conditions of an empty campus and a semi-virtual defence committee and audience, I strangely feel free and light to defend this thesis.

Not because I like empty campuses per se but because the empty campus is now marked by an absence that is very alive, present and haunting. A presence that speaks to this thesis.

As Minh-Ha (2016) reflecting on the symbolism of the empty chair argues, keeping space empty is a way of making space for the forbidden, and as 'material evidence' of absence.

While we did not choose to keep this campus empty, we must call out to those who are now evermore present here.

Behind each of the smiling portraits of the professors hanging on the walls of this campus, are all the women and children and invisible hands who toiled to ensure that these individuals could secure their place here on our walls.

Behind each of the theories written by those of us graduating on this campus, and behind each of our salaries are stories of people with no names that are now taking to the streets (as the protests in Antwerp, Eindhoven, Zwolle and other cities closer to us make clear in relation to the uprisings in the US [United States] of 'Black lives matter').

Behind every certificate or title granted to someone in this aula is simultaneously a denial to someone whose knowledge is forbidden at the threshold of our classrooms.

The forced shutdown of the campus under COVID-19 forces us to look into the very foundations of our practices as educators, researchers, scientists, students, part of this university to reflect on how we occupy space and therefore deny someone else that space.

As I stand in this Aula, I stand also where students in the late 1960s and 1970s called for turning this hall into a discussion centre, and more recently in 2015 as part of the new university student movements in the Netherlands, urging for a critical space on campus accessible to communities inside and outside Radboud.

However, I am here to defend claims made by people who are Not Yet students. I am here to defend the collective knowledges emerging the last half decade through the cracks of the walls of Radboud University and the cracks of walls of immigration procedures in the European Union.

Do only people employed by the University have the privilege and right of writing and teaching histories and stories of migration?

Why are bodies made to wait until they can think as 'citizens'?

Who writes theories of borders and migrations?

Whose stories are these theories literally built on? At what cost?

Why am I standing alone here when the processes of writing, researching and learning and thinking has always been in relation, in conversations with more than One?

This thesis is a practice of constantly asking these questions in response to claims made by people who are not yet citizens.

This thesis emerges as a movement in which academics, students, activists, volunteers, citizens, 'people waiting to become citizens' collide, confront, collaborate, diverge, and clash with each other in an informal manner.

I am here to defend and value the hard work in the last years that has gone into connecting this campus, and our classrooms to asylum centers, cultural organisations, the streets, restaurants, homes, cafes, train stations, parks, refugee camps, detention centers in the Netherlands, across the border to Kranenburg and Kleve, across the Italian/Austrian border to Bolzano, and all the way to Copenhagen.

I am here to defend the right to speak in the many tongues that each of us possess.

ನಾನು ಲೋಕಗಳನ್ನು ನಿರ್ಮಿಸಲು ಬಯಸುತ್ತೇನೆ. ik wil werelden opbouwen.

I am here to defend the right to protect our stories of migration.

I am here to keep asking what does solidarity really mean if it cannot speak back to structural racism?

I am here to defend the need to use poetry to cut through the formal language of academia and the paternalism of civil society.

I am here to remember the soldiers killed in the camp Thiaroye close to Dakar in Senegal in 1944 (whose history has served inspirational to our writing) as well as all the soldiers from across the world from Europe's colonies who came to help Europe during the world war II [...] I am here to remember them at a time when their grandchildren and future generations are being asked to be grateful to Europe, to integrate to Europe when they arrive in Europe, if at all they arrive.

I am here to dream with each of you Lost Europes, Lost Americas, Lost Indias, Lost Africas, Lost Worlds, that are no longer obsessed with fixing bodies in place and territories on maps and labels to flesh.

I am here to defend the rights of our children and grandmothers and ancestors and future generations to not be afraid to speak in such Aulas. [...] and to be able to breathe while doing so.

Having presented this summary of my doctoral thesis, I return the floor to the Rector.

One year after this speech-event I was 'recommended mobility', or rather my contract ended. My contract ended. Our home-making-burning practices became displaced yet again. A partition. A line drawn. I fled. Like we have fled many times and continue to flee every day. What do we carry to our new homes? What do we hang on the walls of our many past-present-future new homes?

Nothing on the wall

Neither a painting nor a photograph

No wallpaper, no shelf, no pin

Only emptiness paints this wall

Nothing likes it
No bookshelves based on it
No books piled close to it
No vase, no dried roses
No scribbles of a naughty child
Neither I nor you, we have no shadow
nor shadows

This barrier is not for you
It's not mine
This void was not created to contain you
This wall as white as blindness does not see us
Like waves that don't hesitate to swallow us

This dike does not separate us from them
It separates us from us
And violates the bravery to pass
It wants us covered in whiteness to plant us in front of it as a fence
So the silence of the cemeteries screams in the faces of passers-by
Don't you rage
Don't erupt

Welcome to our prison
Welcome to the room of deep deafening silence
Silence as an isolated sanctuary that stops burning desires, love and affection at her doorstep
Silence emptied out of thriving life and flowing deaths
Silence of still waters that don't even stink
Silence as a series of panels neatly aligned to contain and close-off
Silence as a white, blank, cold screen that shames you for splashing your colourful insides

Don't rage

Don't erupt

Don't rage

Don't erupt

And yet we do, we erupt with all our colours on this page that is not ours

We erupt in our many tongues, between languages that claim no lands

We rage and refuse to use borders to name our struggles

We erupt with the impossibility to struggle with naming

We channel our rage of being asked to remain silent in our intimately political and personal realm by entangling our pains to make and burn ideas of home and university.

We erupt

We rage

We refuse to refuse on your terms

We continue to flee from our practice of refusing (refuge as refusal) as an ongoing struggle to name our struggles part of un/making and un/becoming Self through the Other.

Notes

¹ Excerpts from MA thesis Hamzah 2020.

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