**Human rights lecture**

**Kep Enderby memorial lecture**

EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN AUSTRALIA

Alice Pung

As a writer and lawyer, I’d like to talk to you today about **the power of language**. Literature and the law are united by this common tool, and if you are in this room today, you probably know very well how to use this tool because you’ve logged yourself into this zoom call.

My mother can’t log into a zoom call, do online banking or shopping, make a simple phone call to sort out a billing error, or distinguish shampoo from dishwashing detergent if the bottles both have flowers and fruit on them and are similar in shape and size. My mother can’t read or write. They closed down all the ethnic Chinese schools in Cambodia when she was in grade one, as the very first state of ethnic cleansing, and so she is barely literate in her first language. Then she came here as a refugee, raised four children, and worked as an outworker in the back shed for two decades.

I do not tell you all this as an anodyne story of hard work, sacrifice and maternal love that leads to a happy ending of immigrant success. Because even as adults, that’s the sort of didactic story we like to tell ourselves about multiculturalism.

I’m here to tell you a different story. When your world is peopled by strangers, as my mother’s was, its parametres constrict. Outside your house, you can’t use a self-service checkout; and what a nightmare if you are given the wrong change by a cashier, but you are harassed by other shoppers behind you for painstakingly counting out your coins. Inside your own house you can’t understand your own children. You are outraged that they never tell you anything, but when they do tell you things, you are outraged that they did not consult you first. Your husband gets to go to work, but you feel like you have absolutely no power. In fact, you spend most of your waking hours in that small shed in the backyard, with poor light and ventilation. You feel angry all the time, but no one cares.

“Your mother’s been here forty years”, journalists have remarked in bafflement, “why can’t she speak English?” I am not the only author who has been asked this.

Now I listen to talkback radio. You know those stations in Australia in every capital city that allow people to call in and vent their spleen. As a writer, of course I appreciate the ABC producing beautiful, prose-like shows with erudite callers that speak in full paragraphs about racial harmony and climate change and indigenous art. I listen to those as well.

But admittedly, there’s something I recognise viscerally in the 3AW caller who is stunned for several seconds on air because they can’t believe they are being heard all over Melbourne at long last, and then they proceed to gasp and rant like a shaken can of Victoria Bitter with the top yanked off. And oh, how bitter they are! Their words take enormous effort and strain because they are so unused to being heard. Their anger reminds me of my mother’s. These callers sometimes say some petty and racist things.

But I’m sitting comfortably in my car. I’m middle-class now. I can easily switch to the ABC but sometimes I don’t. No-one’s going to hurt me or chuck a rock through the window. I didn’t always feel this safe, because of course I have encountered racist people, particularly if you grow up working-class. Those kinds of racists have no filters so you understood exactly why they hated you and what they wanted to do to you if you were alone; but never have I ever felt that the radio was going to reach out and assault me.

So it often baffles me, why so many comfortable ‘woke’ people don’t listen to these stations more? If you want to be enlightened, if you want to understand racism, you probably need to understand the rage of being misunderstood, being blocked out, of being unheard. In my own life I saw it through my mother’s illiteracy, and the working class people whose powerlessness derived from an inability to have their needs met: Job losses, unemployment, welfare, little access to free dentistry.

I grew up in the sort of suburb you’d find in any big Australian city (Footscray, Cabramatta, Paramatta, Broadmeadows, Redfern), which every once in a while would be described as an ethnic enclave and an example of people not assimilating. But no-one who lived in these suburbs, and who had day to day interactions with their inhabitants, would call them that. Not many adults spoke much English in these areas where I grew up, but that didn’t stop my grandma from discovering nougat from the Italian pizzeria, my Malaysian friend having a crush on the owner of Café D’Afrique, or my sister from finding a Croatian boyfriend. And our language was full of profanities, and sometimes even racial slurs; and yet we bought and sold things from each other, helped each other out, stopped physical altercations, married each other. Actions spoke louder than words.

These places, outside of the city of Darwin, are the most truly unselfconsciously multicultural areas in Australia, but because many middle-class non-ethnic-Australians are scared of them, they will forever be impenetrable to them.

Australia is culturally diverse. That’s a given.

But language is used to **lock the working-class out of discussions about race**. Christos Tsoilkis talks about the inner-city people displaying their virtue by supporting refugees, but he also points out that these refugees generally get placed in working-class areas or rural Australia, among the poorest people in this country; and it is these Australians who have to deal with us on a day to day basis; while being simultaneously derided for being racist-bogans or materialistic coveters of MacMansions.

The writer Shannon Burns grew up in Mansfield park, Adelaide, and writes:

I suspect that the shame I felt about my parents’ racism sprang mostly from experience: the bulk of my friends were Vietnamese and Chinese, and their families seemed more admirable than mine. My attitude was, therefore, a product of intimacy and experience rather than abstract notions of morality or equality. I had an opportunity, as a child, that my parents—who had grown up poor among working-class whites—never had.

I also had the chance to see myself through migrant eyes, and what I saw was often confronting. Poor whites were scorned by more than a few of the Chinese and Vietnamese migrants I came to know, especially the hard-working, self-sacrificing parents who were deeply invested in their children’s education and upward mobility. They made it clear that I was not the kind of friend they wanted for their sons.

The experience of being deemed undesirable and unworthy even by new Australians is a peculiarly lumpen trial. For me, it was eye-opening. For others, it’s an unutterable humiliation.”

I understand this abject humiliation not because I’m particularly more virtuous than anyone else, or more compassionate because of adversity, or even because I’m more educated. I understand it because to be poor and at the bottom of the pecking order is to suffer such humiliations on a constant day-to-day basis, not just from strangers but from, dare I say it, even from one’s own community and extended family. It is a universal human feeling, and it is a crappy feeling. I make no bones about it. People find it more difficult to change when they feel disempowered and shamed.

My friend Maxine grew up in a middle-class suburb, the only black family in a sea of white. The adults around her seemed very nice but the kids at school were feral. When her mother told her not to put up with bullying and she stood up for herself, suddenly the nice adults turned feral. These adults, who all probably saw themselves as non-racist and kind – other parents, teachers and counsellors - were all complicit and excused or defended or ignored the terrible racist abuse she encountered. In her book *The Hate Race,* Maxine writes:

“I learned to stay quiet. I learned that nobody much cared. I learned that it was probably my fault anyway, and that what they were doing to me was perfectly okay. This is how it alters us. This is how we change.”

In Maxine’s case, these people – arguably more educated and affluent than anyone I grew up with – their inaction spoke louder than their self-justifying words. At least the racists I grew up with didn’t care about being perceived as ‘nice.’ If everyone around you is supposed to be ‘nice’, and they are telling you that you are making a big deal out of their best intentions, well, it can really mess you up as a child, as an adult, as a servile ‘grateful refugee’, as a stolen generation.

Maxine Beneba Clarke says:

‘If racism is a shortcoming of the heart, then experiencing it is an assault on the mind.’

Now there has been lots of talk lately about “doing the work,” about reading up and learning. About educating yourself. But what does it all even mean? All good and fine if you can read. But often I think that this exercise of collecting knowledge is undertaken in the same spirit as how people collect useful stuff that would benefit them, like rare Pokemon cards that might be valuable to flash around in a few years’ time, to people who can least afford them.

The idea that the more you know about something (a people, a culture, a class), the better you understand it, the more empathetic you become, is kind of self-serving when you have little or no interaction with those people. And this is exactly what happened to mar the childhood of my beautiful friend Maxine, who is now our Poet Laureate, and whose writing is read by ‘woke’ people to prove that they’re ‘doing the work’.

You might adore the writing of Melissa Lucashenko, Tony Birch, Waleed Aly, Tim Soutphommasane, Christos Tsoilkis, Behrouz Boochani, Alexis Wright and Dr Anita Heiss. But books don’t change people. And I am saying this as a writer. Books don’t change people.

People change people.

You can’t just throw a book at someone and rail at them for being stubbornly ignorant for refusing to read it, when they work with their hands. They might’ve been fixing their Sri Lankan neighbour’s tap for free for the past six months. They might know this stuff already, innately, from working in a production line with Burmese refugees in the Nhill Duck factory. You can’t be apoplectic with rage when they say “there’s too many refugees in this country” because they’ve read it in the *Herald Sun*, because English is their second or third language and they don’t believe any major newspaper in this country would print anything not true, unlike the newspapers in their home country.

(Racism is not just a white-against-other-colours issue. It’s just that white culture seems to have a monopoly in defining it socially and politically in this country).

Sure, some books and essays can change people’s thoughts, but we have to undertake the follow-through action instead of wallowing in the feelings of those books and essays – the feelings of guilt, discomfort, shame. Inaction then leads people to regarding ‘our’ literature as ‘hard work’ to be endured instead of enjoyed. So when people flail my books around to other woke people and tell them to ‘do the work’, I think, hang on a minute. My first book is meant to be funny, my second book an account of the Cambodian genocide, my third book a satire of private schools, my latest book about a pregnant teenager – what work are they supposed to be doing? Learning the interior life of Alice Pung? What wankiness is this?! They’d be better off volunteering to coach basketball for at-risk kids in Braybrook.

And these same people tell me to turn off the radio and say, “What the hell Alice? Isn’t it traumatic to hear all these racists go live on air and say their racist things?” To us, trauma is my dad eating a leather belt to survive. Trauma is forever grieving a child or sibling’s death. I get asked all the time to read books about the death of children, the horrors of war, the perils of racism against Muslims, black people, refugees; and write supporting lines on the cover.

So to the people who are comfortable out there, and don’t like to deal with uncomfortable feelings: you do the work. You work out why angry racist people (who may or may not be exclusively white) call into 3AW. You work out what their gripes are. You work out why they are poor, have bad health, are lonely, are depressed, are disenfranchised, have unremitting toothaches. You work out what structural things have led to this point in their lives, and maybe you might just want to figure out things to alleviate this.

Because it’s not our responsibility to be as patient as possible, as accomplished as possible, as generous as possible, to be accepted as Australians and to fix racism. Kupakwashe, Zaahir and Jidah are advocates, lawyers, leaders. You will hear from these extraordinary panellists shortly. I can guess that each and every one of them, at one point or another, have had to deal with the same feelings of inarticulate rage, alienation, and sense of paranoia that *they* might be making a big deal out of nothing.

This is what it means to do the work – so that vulnerable people don’t have to take on this impossible burden. Last year my friend Erin Chew did a huge and well-published survey on Covid racism and found that Asian women were most likely to be attacked, spat on, and subject to verbal abuse in Australian streets. Just like Muslim women in hijab whenever the terrorism fears are amped up. Or indigenous women being overrepresented in women’s prisons. The weakest are the easiest to scapegoat, hurt and in some cases, kill.

Audre Lorde said, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Lionel Murphy and Ket Enderby ‘did the work’ back in 1974-5. The Racial Discrimination Act punched many holes in the walls of that house so that people would not be left out in the cold, with equal access to housing and jobs.

But our language these days is yet another tool to lock some people out of the house and keep some people in. The people I care about the most generally don’t read the same things that I do, or listen to the same stations, or even share the same religion or culture.

At the conclusion of the parliamentary debate on the Racial Discrimination bill, Attorney-General Enderby acknowledged that one could neither legislate for morality nor expect that community behaviour would change instantaneously.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But nothing changes if we are locked into our own sense of righteousness.

The Irish novelist Sally Rooney was once the number 1 debating champion of Europe aged 22. She writes, with precocious self-awareness:

“The most ambitious debaters go out of their way to absorb information about sexual violence, racial profiling, police brutality: issues many of them will never experience firsthand. I did the same thing. Did it make me more empathetic and self-aware? Or did it just continue to affirm the idea that if I were smart and competitive enough, I could speak for anyone I wanted?”

I have had the good fortune of learning another kind of language. Being around my mother, as a child I have had to learn to speak and write about complex ideas and the law in a way that a bright twelve-year old can understand. Because that’s about how old my mum was when all her formal education stopped. And then she became an adult with enormous power over us, and we had to be careful not to make her feel stupid, because she felt that way a lot of the time.

In this talk about multiculturalism, I’ve focused on how language can lock people out, and usually the people we least expect. And when language locks people out, you can spend a whole lifetime placating the damage.

You spend a lifetime learning to speak in a way that neither panders to prejudice yet does not attack a person for their illiteracy, poverty, trauma and anguish. You begin in your own household, in your communities, and then in the world. You don’t always succeed of course. But you know you do not have the luxury of having the kind of eye-rolling trigger-happy readiness to take offence at words instead of actions, because your life is not lived in an echo-chamber; and you cannot control it so that it is.

Although we bandy around this term a lot, I think this is what we mean by privilege – people who are unaware that they are so powerful they can block out what they don’t want to hear or see, with no real-world consequences to their lives.

So when people like us – like me, like Maxine, like our panellists today – tell you that there is certain speech or actions we consider so hurtful, so soul-destroying, please believe us. We are not overly-sensitive PC crusaders. We’ve put up with a lot of crap to get to where we are today.

So in conclusion, being woke is being awake to power and powerlessness; but mostly, powerlessness. These are the people I am speaking to today. Not on their behalf, of course; but just in the hope that my words will cut through the ‘we must all embrace cultural diversity’ platitudes to reach that sense of connection as human beings who share different thoughts but exactly the same spectrum of emotions and feelings that undeniably make us human.

Thank you.

1. Dr Tim Soutphommmasane, The Whitlam Government and the Racial Discrimination Act [↑](#footnote-ref-1)