

The Language of Power

Rose-Eva (hosting): Hello and welcome to Unheard Youth, a podcast created The Centre for Race and Culture focusing on newcomer youth voices all across Canada. I'm your host, Rose-Eva Forgues-Jenkins. The title for this episode is the Language of Power, youth media representation. For this episode, I wanted to focus on the topic of identity and look at the forces that shaped the way that we see ourselves. We receive messages from the media every day but what do those messages say about us and the groups that we belong to? To find out more, I talked to Communications professor at Concordia University, Dr. Yasmin Jiwani. Dr. Jiwani has published many articles and books on the way that the media represents race, gender, and violence. I found her articles on newcomer youth especially interesting and relevant to the podcast. So, I recorded a phone interview with Dr. Jiwani about her research about youth media representation. We discussed the messages that mainstream society sends folks living outside the majority and how that language of power is communicated. We also talked about the strengths of youth culture. Here is my conversation with Dr. Jiwani.

Rose-Eva: Thank you very much for speaking to me today, Dr. Jiwani.

Dr. Jiwani: My pleasure.

Rose-Eva: So, can you tell us a bit about yourself and your work?

Dr. Jiwani: Mainly, I focus on how violence is communicated through work but also the particular kind of violences that are recognized as violence, and here my focus is actually on racism. How racism as a form of violence is not only communicated but shapes how society views people and in turn, how power is actually leveraged on people.

Rose-Eva: So, you had a Walrus talk which is entitled, "How to Resist Oppression." And in that talk, you talk about resisting essentialism. Can you explain a bit more about the term, "essentialism" and what resisting that essentialism means to you?

Dr. Jiwani: Resisting essentialism is basically resisting the notion that everyone's essentially the same. Everyone who looks alike are the same, that's like saying that all women of color are the same. We're not the same. It's like saying all black people are the same. They're not the same. All Indigenous people are the same. They're not the same. So essentialism basically is sort of body of belief that argues that – or that's premised on the idea that people who look particular way or who share a particular characteristic are the same.

When I argue against essentialism, the idea is for us to be able to rupture that notion that all people who look a particular way or share a particular characteristic are the same. That's not to say that I don't believe in what's called "strategic essentialism". Strategic essentialism is a concept that was introduced by Gayatri Spivak and she talks about it in terms of the necessity for people who occupy a particular social location to be able to engage in particular forms of resistance. So, when I say that not all people of color are the same or not all black people are the same, I'm not discounting the fact that it's very necessary at times for those groups of people who share a particular – social location, a particular history, to be able to engage in counter

tactics that resist power and oppression. So, for instance, “Black Lives Matter.” That’s a form of strategic essentialism.

Rose-Eva: Mm-hmm. Something that stood out to me when you gave those definitions is that essentialism seems like a projection that is often put onto a group and someone else from outside that group is saying that they’re all the same, whereas strategic essentialism seems like it’s more of a self-label, it’s people who are organizing to help themselves.

Dr. Jiwani: Exactly. Essentialism comes from the top. It comes from power leveraging that. It’s a form of leveraging power as well. The strategic essentialism comes from the ground up. It’s groups organizing around a particular feature. Around the characteristics that actually are being used to stigmatize and separate them out and to allocate to them behaviors or resources that are considered to be less than.

Rose-Eva: Mm-hmm. As we are talking about how essentialism is put onto a group, can you talk about the effects that essentialism has when media uses essentialism when they talk about categories of people?

Dr. Jiwani: In the terrain of the media, because the media mediate, in fact they take up something and they mediate it and the way that they do it is they take up things that will immediately make sense to us. So, they’re like these stereotypes. Stereotypes are one dimensional, so those things are sort of like trades have brought together and it’s the stereotype that I see gets used. But what the stereotype does, it’s kind of a shorthand device which invokes in people a particular understanding of that particular group or issue. So, what the media does is it’s in the very mediation of the message, it picks up all of those stereotypes in order to be able to assemble a meaningful message that it can communicate within a very short period of time, using you know, a lot of visual languages, and if not visual, then at least metaphors and metonyms that actually invoke in us what the meaning is supposed to be.

So, that’s the ways in which the media transfers or transmits a particular understanding of the world. In doing that, what he does is when he creates those assemblages, it actually draws on the stereotypes that have long histories. And he brings them together in such a way that by putting something together with something, it invokes a particular meaning. So, for instance, the issue that “Black Lives Matter” has taken up, which is different forms in which different black bodies are attached to particular signal forms of crime, for instance. So that the black body becomes almost a symbolic reference to crime and then instigates a whole series, a chain of associations. Stewart Hall has talked about this in terms of how in Britain, the media constructed what was known as the crisis around mugging by attaching it to a black body. So that it became “black muggers” and other forms of muggers didn’t even get recognized or mugging itself didn’t get recognized as a crime until it got attached to a black body.

Rose-Eva: From what you’re saying about the media in general is that not only does it have a racial lens but it also has this gendered lens.

Dr. Jiwani: And it has a religion lens, too, because of how in fact Islam is being portrayed. So, when I talk about how media representations play a role in terms of factoring our understanding of

violence and how particular groups are seen as being prone to particular kinds of violences and others are absented from that, then one of the things that comes to mind is how in the economy of the media, if you were to think about the media in terms of sort of like an alphabet, then how are the contrasts maintained, how is meaning made? So if you think about how meaning is made, one very powerful way in which meaning becomes apparent to us is through this element of contrast. So, white against black, brown against red, you know, this is the way in which meaning is generated. But at the same time, the recent economy of these representations, as I mentioned before, so if you are looking at how meanings around what constitutes worthiness or credibility, how do we understand that? How is it that every time the media wants to present a credible side to a particular truth, they tend to interview people who have positions of power? So, how are these positions of power even communicated?

By this implicit contrast to positions that don't have power. So, what are the positions that don't have power? Well, who doesn't get to talk in the media? Think about that. So, whenever there are like policies that are being introduced – say, for instance, policies about equity seeking groups, then who gets to be interviewed is a good criteria. It's a good way for us to look at who is considered credible.

But another way in which the media do this is through these kinds of contrasting representations. So, a very you know, common way, is, for instance, how some researchers have talked about language. How angels are always considered white and devils always black. So, you don't need to have a devil present to know what an angel is. You only have to think about the color white and the connotations around purity, innocence, beauty, all of those things, to then sort of like implicitly think in the back of your mind about black. Because it's the blackness that gives the whiteness its meaning and vice versa.

So, when I'm employing a lens like that and I look at the media, then I also look at how in fact particular kinds of youth being represented and what is the element that is unstated. What is there in the middle? And this is something that I sort of like picked up on when I was doing some work on young women of color, girls of color. And there was a very interesting study that was done in the U.S. and in that study, the researchers actually looked at how young Asian American students were you know, kind of understood themselves in relation to white students. So what would happen is that they had created a hierarchy within the school. And in the school what they would do is that anybody who had just come in, who was a recent immigrant, was somebody who was considered fresh off the boat, but on the other hand, anybody who had internalized white societal values to an extent of mimicking those values and that kind of behavior and physical presence was considered to be somebody who was – what's the word for it? A banana. Yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Or a coconut. Or you know, any – we've seen – we've all heard these things, so then they raised the question that okay, what about the normative middle that remains silent but that is a middle that obviously has the power to define what the extremes are?

So, bearing that in mind, when I was looking at youth representation in the Globe and Mail, I began to notice how, in fact, certain kinds of troubles that youth had, because the literature shows that youth are often talked about in terms of youth as trouble, youth in trouble, youth creating trouble, or troublesome youth. So, there's always a trouble associated with this category

“youth” and part of it has to do with the fact that youth is a period of time when there are so many changes happening that there’s a societal unease about that, and so society through its various mechanisms like education, religion, family, media, tries to communicate to youth what is the right way to be, the right way as in “how do we make you into a good youth?” One who contributes to society. One who fits in and one who imbibes by the dominant values.

So, I noticed in fact, that the kinds of problems that this middle group had, this kind of sort of silent group, were youth that – that engaged in trouble that was generally understood to be a good sign or a sign of youth, sort of like a common-sense notion of what youth lives are like. So, you know, playing hooky from school. Well, that’s pretty common. That’s what youth are like. On the other hand, youth who are you know, very successful, who have developed new acts, who have done all these things, become the good youth. And they’re there in this sort of middle category.

And so, then I started looking at okay, so if they’re in the middle and they’re exerting this kind of power, who’s at the edges?

Rose-Eva: Can you tell me what, if you know or what you think, any of the effects of this would be on the youth themselves? When youth consistently see themselves being portrayed this way in the media, what kind of effect does this have on them?

Dr. Jiwani: If you are constantly represented with this message that you will only be accepted if you belong and belonging or being able to fit in requires you to marshal particular kinds of resources, then you will actually do that. Because it’s survival. So, for instance, you know, in order to fit in, you do imbibe dominant societal values, which are often not very different by the way, from the values of your own community. So, if you think about like economic success, that’s shared. If you think about independence, that’s shared between these different communities. It’s not like we’re so different.

On the other hand, the differences that actually mark us as being different have to be privatized. It’s like they have to be removed from the public sphere in order for us to be accepted, and that, in itself, is a kind of violence. So, why is it that the woman who wants to wear a hijab can’t wear a hijab when she goes out to school or work. Why is it that, you know, we can have certain kinds of differences, say for instance, miniskirts and tank tops, but we can’t have women who wish to wear saris outside? So, it’s that kind of thing. We learn to survive by looking at these different values that are pronounced and that are presented to us as ways of belonging. And yet we can never really belong. This is the irony of it. That even though we may dress like, talk like, and so forth, and succeed, to have that sense of belonging that is really powerful and that grounds you is not something that society will easily provide.

And this is where I see the impact of these kinds of mediated messages because it’s like how is it that we can turn these around so that we can be fully have a sense of belonging? And in that sense of belonging actually create a better society for everyone.

Rose-Eva: Mm-hmm. Definitely. And when you speak about these differences that stand out as differences that folks have to adopt, one thing that stood out to me is language. And how in some

of your research you talked about how speaking the dominant language fluidly is an important factor for youth in the sense of belonging.

Dr. Jiwani: To me, the critical thing is when I think about language, I don't just think about language as in words. I think about language as in deciphering the ways in which power works. I think about language in terms of what is the language of power? How do we, you know, if we want to resist this, we have to know how this operates, how it works, and how do we do that? Well, the only way you can do that is when you know what a language is. What is the language of power and how is it being used? And what are the crevices and cracks in there that we can actually insert ourselves into? So, that kind of resistance is really – and you can see this, actually, in terms of music. The danger is that it can become commodified. The danger is that it can now be sort of like taken in as signs of exotica, packaged and resold back.

So, if you think about Rap music or you think about hip-hop, its roots are very much based on that kind of resistance. It's like claiming a difference, celebrating the difference, identifying with the difference, but the commodification of this now turns it around so that it gets absorbed as this kind of what – bell hooks has a very good word for it, which is “eating the other.” It's like it becomes commodified into these digestible bits that are removed from a powerful context. And that's the context of resistance. So, for me, when I talk about learning the language, it's learning the ways in which power operates in order to be able to contest that power.

Rose-Eva: That's a great example, thank you. In one of the articles, there was talk about how a lot of newcomer youth are placed in remedial classes with younger students. So, I was wondering if you could talk about the effect that has?

Dr. Jiwani: When newcomer youth come in, you know, one of the biggest sort of like I think absences that's there is in terms of the school system. Which again, how it compartmentalizes, regulates, and with the kind of stereotypes and the ways in which particular representations work, that influences policy. The school system will look at this newcomer youth and say, “Well, clearly, you know, they're not going to know everything that we know” or “They're not going to be at the same level as our kids so we're going to immediately put them into something that's less than – the remedial program.” What a lot of schools don't seem to realize, and I think this is something that a lot of systems don't realize, is that by 1914, 85 percent of the world was colonized by the European powers, which means, in fact, that colonization works in the ways in which it imports systems of education, religion, economic systems, it actually breaks down that Indigenous, you know, cultural knowledge.

So, if I were to think of myself, for instance, then I would say, “Okay, I grew up in Uganda, which was a British colony until 1967, a Crown colony.” So what does that mean? Well, it means that my teachers came from Britain. It means that I learned more about British history. It means that the language, the official language, was English. So, when I come into say, for instance, if I were to come into Canada, then how – where would I be placed in this system? They wouldn't look at all of that. They would actually just see me as a brown body with an Indian background. And therefore, in their imagination, it would be like what that body represents and put me in a place that might not even be equivalent to what I know. By putting people into that kind of remedial program based on this rather than sort of based on a

multifaceted kind of approach inferiorizes those people. Especially because remedial programs aren't given the same kind of attention and resources as those in the center. So, now you've got a youth who or a girl or a boy, a child, in that program who feels this immediate lack of fit. And feels like he needs to get down to a level where he may or she may be or they may be actually at a level that's much higher.

So, this is what I mean about placing people. And there's a kind of inferiorization that goes with remedial programs because I mean, just think about it. They're called remedial programs. They're not called anything else. And they're not integrated in.

Rose-Eva: So, can you explain what biculturalism means and what a bicultural identify is like for youth?

Dr. Jiwani: Off the top of my head, biculturalism also refers to the policy in this nation, which is multiculturalism within a bicultural framework. Recognizing the primacy of the English and the French. Right? But biculturalism is often seen to be this kind of sort of this hybridity as if – and this is why I have a problem in a way with it – because what it does is it breaks the person down into two. That's like saying that I'm mixed race, I have this background and this background, and the two don't fit. The two don't meld together. And yet, in terms of subject formation, who you are as a person, you're a whole person. You're not two people in one body. So, there's a problem with talking in that language, I think.

But the other part of it is also how, in fact, these sort of elements are imposed. It's kind of like an – because it breaks essentialism up, you can't have one monolith category with a person who comes from multiple or two cultural backgrounds. And this is what actually causes – the fact that the systems can't do that, they can't deal – they can't handle the fact that this is not an essentialized category, it cannot be essentialized, causes unease, which is also communicated to the person that is in that position. Because they internalize it. The question becomes “Where do I fit? Which part of me is made acceptable?” Right? Rather than saying, you know, “You're a unique individual. You have a blending of all of these cultures and you have – your cultural formation is really unique. So, there is this sort of like – there's a problem with even conceptualizing it like that, and there was a lot of work actually done around bicultural identities because these were seen – the people that were in that position were actually the ones feeling this kind of – this real anxiety about who exactly are they? They don't fit into that category. They don't fit into that category.

But really it would be amazing if one were to step back and say, “Wow. Those categories are in fact, so constructed. So constructed and what I am is so unique in terms of being able to be – to fuse so many different aspects. The fact that I don't belong. The fact that I might be rejected from one culture and accepted into the other, well, that again is a societal thing. And I have a choice of whether to internalize it or not”. The problem becomes when you have kids, mixed race kids, growing up in schools where there is this kind of shunning of that difference, another form of violence, right? And how, in fact, they're made to feel. So, I've – they're – in fact, in the US it's a really, it's a different thing, because there, if you have a bicultural identity in terms of being mixed race, black and white, then the state has made it so that even if you have a little bit of blackness in you, you're considered black. You know, and the whiteness in you is rejected by

white society. Here, there's another kind of sort of like play that's happening, which is you don't fit into either category. And because the categories are hierarchically arranged with connotations of superiority and inferiority, the tendency is to shun that category of that part of you that is considered inferior. And to embrace that which is considered superior or that is considered normal. And that causes a lot of pain. It's a lot – it's a very painful position to be in.

But one way out of this, is again, you see, were to change the system so the difference is hybridity gets recognized and valorized for what it is.

Rose-Eva: Mm-hmm. And in your rejection of those terms, I really – like how you talk about rejecting that structure, I'm wondering if there is any writing that you've come across or if there are any terms that you think have a better way of kind of representing that cohesive identity?

Dr. Jiwani: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, there's a whole thing about blended identities, hybridity is a word that's been used often. There's a term in Spanish that talks about this kind of sort of like this mixedness, but it's to taste that mixedness as a point of strength, it's how we – this is where, you know, the power of youth comes – is really clear to me because this is the point at which you decide whether you're going to hang onto the dominant society's ways of seeing you and who you are, calling you in terms of a particular construction of you, versus your own power to be able to say, "This is what I am." Right? And these are my strengths. And that kind of sort of internal diversity is a form of strength. Much like people, you know, youth who or kids who talk so many different languages are much better off than the people who talk only one language.

Rose-Eva: Definitely. And I really like what you said about the power of youth. Because I think there is a lot of power in youth's identity. And I was wondering if you could talk more about what you think are some of the powers of youth? Or what are the strengths that youth culture has?

Dr. Jiwani: In the present context, I think youth culture has a lot of power. I look at the innovations that come out right now in the realms of music, art, podcasts like this, for instance, so many different ways in which youth really imagine the world. And you know, when you go into platforms like YouTube, which I know monetize these things, there are so many youth voices that are actually challenging these sorts of like stated truths about how they should be. And so many making really amazing innovations that – and I don't want to sound like so celebratory that I'm not aware of the fact that there are all kinds of other elements of youth culture, but there is so much power there. And it's the power to be able to change so many things. And I think it's – to me, the biggest thing is how do you create solidarity amongst different components of youth culture? How do you bring people together? Because it's only through bringing people together, it's only through developing those networks of solidarity, can you actually make change, as opposed to being, you know, confined or doing it within little areas that might provide sort of like reassurance or reaffirmation, which is a very good thing, it's the first step, but that need to go further. That need to extend. That need to power out, so to speak.

So, when I think about youth culture and I think about the uprisings that have happened, whether it's the Maple Spring uprising here where youth got together to contest tuition fees, or whether

it's the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, or whether it's youth in Sweden, or any one of these places, you can see, in fact, that amazing power of creating change.

Rose-Eva: Mm-hmm. No, that's really wonderful. I really think it's important to celebrate youths' achievements and I think that's a really wonderful way of putting it. I was wondering if you had any opinions on how can adults help support youth culture?

Dr. Jiwani: How can adults help support youth culture? That's a very interesting question and one that kind of leaves me befuddled. Because I'm not sure. I think part of it is sort of like being able to recognize youth as a force and not be afraid. Because I think many adults are afraid of youth. I think partly it's that. Partly it's the fact of some kind of nostalgia of when we were young what did we do. Partly it's that. Partly it's the fact that's kind of sort of like fear that if youth are not guided along the right path they will end up on the wrong side, so to speak. But it's true and all of those fears are, in a way, quite grounded in common sense. But at the same time, if there were avenues, you know, where that kind of youth culture, the positivity in youth culture, was celebrated. Where they were made center stage. Where the kinds of things they had to tell about the world were, in fact, validated, I think it would make a big difference. And I mean, I see that in my classes. So, I, you know, again, it's a matter of that's not to discount the fact that there are real dangers. There are – with the kinds of violences that operate in their lives, there are a lot of vulnerabilities and it's very easy to sort of like succumb to those but I think the contestation of dominant ways of being, I think, is a good start. And I think this is where we need to really engage with youth and support youth initiatives around all kinds of things. Like for instance, you know, challenging the ways in which different models, for instance, are being featured. Those same waif-like models that challenge actually did result in some – in some very progressive moves. But to continually examine the ways in which these sort of like dominant norms and values can be contested in order to be more accommodative of difference and in order to be able to celebrate life for what it is.

Rose-Eva: Wonderful. Thank you so much. Yes, I think that's exactly what my aim is to do in this podcast, is like you said, to feature those youth voices and to really honor what those youth have to say because they have many incredible contributions.

Dr. Jiwani: Right.

Rose-Eva (hosting): Thank you so much to Dr. Jiwani for speaking to me about how media can shape the way that we perceive our own identity. I think that what I really appreciate about Dr. Jiwani's work is that her research is based off of real conversations that were had with newcomer youth. Similarly to the podcast, Dr. Jiwani is focusing on what youth have to say and ensuring that their voices are represented.

Seeing as this is the last episode in this series of the Unheard Youth Podcast, we wanted to end with some reflections on the experience and who better to ask than the youth themselves? Through our experience on the podcast, we got to know Edmonton Youth Group Sky Club quite well. I got the chance to ask them what was your experience with the podcast? Here's what Juan, Juru, Sarah, Hanifa, Aisha, and Lorit had to say.

Aysha: I was – I started podcasting at the Stay WOC Festival. I was kind of scared, to be honest. I thought I sounded awkward. I would like to say it got a little bit easier because like I think it did. I feel like more open to talk to the mic now. Kind of allow conversation to flow through. You know.

Lorit: This is Lorit. I've never podcasted before. The only podcast I know of are like Apple Music and like that can't really help me here but like I'm really excited to start and to start learning and just gain more insight about the people around me.

Hanifa: I started the podcast in the summertime, that was like our first recording. And like ever since then it's been pretty easy. I actually enjoy doing it a lot, being able to have different types of conversations and just relate with one another at a young age and yeah.

Juru: I started podcasting in the summertime, same time around. Same as Sarah and Hanifa and Juan, you know. When we first – when I first started it was really awkward because I'm not used to having you know, a mic close to my face really, just listening to me speak. And yeah, now I'm really used to it because I'm a lot comfortable and it's fun.

Juan: This is Juan speaking and I started podcasting with Hanifa, Sarah and Juru and it was nice hearing their stories and just connecting with them.

Sarah: I started recording the podcast, too, like when we met in the summer and at first, I felt so uncomfortable. I don't know, I just felt really awkward about it but now I don't think it's as awkward anymore. Like I'm not thinking as much as I do it, like my head was so hot when we first did it. Yeah, I really enjoy it. I like it a lot more than I thought I would and it's just nice to like sit around with a group of people and just talk about a common issue that you guys all deal with and like how you feel like it should be dealt with and stuff like that.

J: That was deep

Rose-Eva (hosting): That was the youth from Sky Club talking about their experience with the podcast. In terms of my own experience with traveling across Canada to record and hear from newcomer youth, I have to say that I really feel like it's been a great privilege. And I can't thank all of the youth who participated enough. I learned so much from making this podcast. I hope that everyone listening has enjoyed learning and laughing along with me and has appreciated getting to know these youth just as much as I have. And that's it for this episode, entitled The Language of Power, youth media representations. Thank you so much to Dr. Jiwani for speaking to me about how media can shape the way that we perceive our own identity. We would also like to thank our friends and partners at CJSR 88.5 FM and the Edmonton Community Foundation. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. Ce Project a été rendu possible en partie grâce au gouvernement du Canada.

We also wanted to say thank you to Chivengi for providing the music featured on the podcast. Speaking of media representations, we'd love to know what you have to say about us on social media. Please let us know your thoughts on our Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us @unheard youth podcast.

I have been your host and producer of this episode, Rose-Eva Forgues-Jenkins. We produced this show at the Centre for Race and Culture, Edmonton, Alberta, Amiskwaskihikan. The Centre for Race and Culture acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 Territory, traditional homelands for many indigenous peoples including the Nêhiyaw, Sauteaux, Niitsitapi, Metis, Dene, and Nakota. We pay our respects to the ancestors past and present who call this land home.