

**From excitement to refusal: affective entanglements with
generative AI in academic research*****Do entusiasmo à recusa: entrelaçamentos afetivos com a IA
generativa na pesquisa acadêmica******Del entusiasmo al rechazo: vínculos afectivos con la IA
generativa en la investigación académica*****Francesca Peruzzo**

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Abstract

This paper examines how academic researchers engage with Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) from within specific affective, institutional and geopolitical conditions. Drawing on an autoethnographic dialogue between two scholars based in the United Kingdom and Brazil, we trace an affective trajectory from techno-solutionist excitement, through disillusionment, to practices of refusal. We argue that this trajectory reflects the conditions of academic labour and the colonial matrix of power shaping GenAI. To analyse these dynamics, we combine three theoretical perspectives. First, affect is used to examine how emotional intensities reveal the systems within which AI is encountered. Second, decolonial theory shows how GenAI reproduces epistemic hierarchies by privileging Global North data, dominant languages and Eurocentric frameworks, with uneven effects across contexts. Third, neo-material assemblage thinking and the concept of cruel optimism explain how AI functions as an object of promise that simultaneously reproduces the performative pressures it appears to alleviate. Our analysis draws on six vignettes from everyday research practice to illustrate these dynamics. We conclude by proposing five conceptual tools for researchers, affect, assemblage thinking, cruel optimism, coloniality and refusal, which reframe AI policy enactment as an affective, situated and power-laden process.

Keywords: GenAI; affect; higher education; coloniality; refusal.

Resumo

Este artigo examina como pesquisadores acadêmicos interagem com a Inteligência Artificial Generativa (GenAI) a partir de condições afetivas, institucionais e geopolíticas específicas. Com base em um diálogo autoetnográfico entre duas pesquisadoras sediadas no Reino Unido e no Brasil, traçamos uma trajetória afetiva que vai do entusiasmo tecnossolucionista, passando pela desilusão, até chegar a práticas de recusa. Argumentamos que essa trajetória reflete as condições do trabalho acadêmico e a matriz colonial de poder que molda a GenAI. Para analisar essas dinâmicas, combinamos três perspectivas teóricas. Primeiramente, utilizamos a noção de afeto para examinar como intensidades emocionais revelam os sistemas nos quais a IA é vivenciada. Em segundo lugar, a teoria decolonial demonstra como a GenAI reproduz hierarquias epistêmicas ao privilegiar dados do Norte Global, línguas dominantes e estruturas eurocêntricas, gerando efeitos desiguais em diferentes contextos. Em terceiro lugar, o pensamento sobre agenciamentos neo-materiais e o conceito de otimismo cruel explicam como a IA funciona como um objeto de promessa que, simultaneamente, reproduz as pressões performativas que parece aliviar. Nossa análise baseia-se em seis vinhetas da prática cotidiana de pesquisa para ilustrar essas dinâmicas. Concluimos propondo cinco ferramentas conceituais para pesquisadores — afeto, pensamento sobre agenciamentos, otimismo cruel, colonialidade e recusa —, as quais ressignificam a implementação de políticas de IA como um processo afetivo, situado e permeado por relações de poder.

Palavras-chave: GenAI; afeto; educação superior; colonialidade; recusa.

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo los investigadores académicos interactúan con la Inteligencia Artificial Generativa (IAGen) en el marco de condiciones afectivas, institucionales y geopolíticas específicas. A partir de un diálogo autoetnográfico entre dos académicas radicadas en el Reino Unido y Brasil, trazamos una trayectoria afectiva que va desde el entusiasmo tecnosolucionista, pasando por la desilusión, hasta llegar a prácticas de rechazo. Sostenemos que esta trayectoria refleja las condiciones del trabajo académico y la matriz colonial de poder que configura la IAGen. Para analizar estas dinámicas, combinamos tres perspectivas teóricas. En primer lugar, utilizamos la noción de afecto para examinar cómo las intensidades emocionales revelan los sistemas en los que se experimenta la IA. En segundo lugar, la teoría decolonial muestra cómo la IAGen reproduce jerarquías epistémicas al privilegiar datos del Norte Global, lenguas dominantes y marcos eurocéntricos, generando efectos desiguales según el contexto. En tercer lugar, el pensamiento sobre ensamblajes neomateriales y el concepto de optimismo cruel explican cómo la IA funciona como un objeto de promesa que, simultáneamente, reproduce las presiones performativas que parece aliviar. Nuestro análisis se basa en seis viñetas extraídas de la práctica investigadora cotidiana para ilustrar estas dinámicas. Concluimos proponiendo cinco herramientas conceptuales para los investigadores — afecto, pensamiento de ensamblaje, optimismo cruel, colonialidad y rechazo — que permiten replantear la implementación de políticas de IA como un proceso afectivo, situado y atravesado por relaciones de poder.

Palabras-clave: AIGen; afecto; educación superior; colonialidad; rechazo.

1 Introduction

Across higher education systems worldwide, the conditions under which academic knowledge is being produced have become increasingly strained. Internationally, academic work is described by intensifying regimes of performativity, with research productivity, competitive funding capture, and the production of high-impact projects operating as key metrics of academic and professional survival (Ball, 2003; Shore; Wright, 2015). We write as scholars working within accelerated temporalities, dense administrative systems and relentless cycles of evaluation, in which academic labour is increasingly defined by exhaustion, fragmentation and the need to optimise cognitive abilities and time to remain ontologically valid subjects within this system.

Scholars working in many contexts of the Global South can also encounter longstanding structural inequalities, which may include, for example, chronic underfunding, institutional instability and uneven access to research possibilities in terms of funding and administrative support. These material problematics are often accompanied by persistent forms of epistemic violence and ontological invalidation (Castro-Gomes; Martín, 2002), whereby locally produced knowledge is devalued within global academic hierarchies dominated by Global North, and specifically Anglophone, publication circuits and Eurocentric epistemological norms and theoretical frameworks. As Quijano (2000) poignantly stated, these hierarchies are not incidental but are rooted in the enduring structures of coloniality, part of a matrix which continues to organise power, knowledge, and legitimacy on a global scale. Building on this, Grosfoguel (2016, p. 123) highlights how epistemic authority remains concentrated in Eurocentric institutions, generating “epistemic extractivism” and producing a stratified global order of knowledge in which certain voices, knowledges, modes of enquiry and of being are systematically privileged over others. In such contexts, pressures of productivity are burdened by ongoing struggles for epistemic recognition and legitimacy.

It is within these uneven and politically charged landscapes of knowledge production that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) has rapidly entered academic research practices. Since the public release of large language models such as ChatGPT, AI tools have become increasingly incorporated into academic work as support to drafting, summarising, analysing and organising research processes. However, despite this rocketing use of GenAI, institutional responses across higher education institutions have been fragmented and often contradictory, oscillating between prohibition, regulation and sometimes enthusiastic adoption (Williamson; Macgilchrist; Potter, 2023; Selwyn, 2024).

Much of the emerging debate has framed AI either as a threat to academic integrity or a tool for enhancing productivity, obscuring the conditions under which these technologies are encountered and taken up in practice.

In this paper, we argue that GenAI cannot be understood outside the affective and institutional contexts that shape contemporary academic labour, as researchers do not engage with AI from neutral positions and encounter these technologies amidst the pressures, uncertainties and asymmetries that define their everyday work. To explore these tensions, we mobilise affect as an analytic, drawing on work by Sara Ahmed (2004) and Margaret Wetherell (2013), alongside neo-material approaches to digital education research (Grimaldi; Ball, 2021; Perrotta; Selwyn; Ewin, 2024; Stark, 2019). Here affect is understood as a set of relational intensities that circulate through academic environments, orienting subjects towards particular actions, attachments and refusals.

To conceptualise how these affective engagements unfold, we draw on Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism", which describes attachments to objects that promise to improve one's conditions of existence while simultaneously reproducing the very structures that constrain them (see also MacGilchrist, 2019). In higher education GenAI can be understood as such an object, appearing to relieve the pressures of academic labour while simultaneously reinforcing the systems that generate them.

Across our experiences as scholars working in the United Kingdom and Brazil, we trace an affective trajectory whereby engagements with AI unfold, moving from techno-solutionist excitement to disillusionment and, in some cases, refusal. In the UK, Francesca's initial encounters with AI were often accompanied by a sense of relief and heightened possibility. AI initially appeared as a means of coping with the demands of academic productivity before becoming entangled with concerns around authorship, epistemic reliability, and scholarly labour. In the Brazilian context, Marina faced a somewhat similar trajectory, encountering AI as a potentially useful tool, though entangled with concerns around epistemic dependency, ontological marginalisation, and reinforcement of global inequalities in knowledge production. Here disillusionment is both tied to the limitations of the machine itself and to its positioning within global academic matrixes that privilege Northern data, languages, and epistemologies.

However, both of us found that these processes of disillusionment can give rise to practices of refusal. We mobilise refusal borrowing Foucault's understanding of it not as a simple rejection of technology but as a critical practice, an "art of not being governed" in certain ways, emerging as an affectively charged response to the conditions under which AI

is being normalised within academic work. Refusal can take multiple forms, from selective disengagement to explicit critique.

Our analysis is developed through six vignettes grounded in our everyday academic research practices, which do not aim to provide a representative account of AI use in academia. Rather, they offer situated insights into how affective engagements with AI emerge within specific institutional and geopolitical contexts. We centre affect and geopolitical location, hoping to contribute to debates on AI in higher education in two ways; first, by reframing AI policy enactment as an affective and situated process that unfolds through everyday academic practices rather than solely through formal institutional frameworks; and second, by highlighting the uneven conditions under which AI becomes thinkable, desirable or resistible across different contexts of knowledge production. In doing so, the paper intends to offer a relational account of how AI is deeply entangled with the enduring structures of coloniality, performativity, and epistemic inequality that shape contemporary research (and academic) life.

2 Theoretical framework

Here we weave together affect theory, decolonial perspectives on knowledge production, and neo-material approaches to digital education to analyse how GenAI is encountered and negotiated within contemporary academic labour. We see GenAI as part of a broader assemblage of institutional pressures, epistemic hierarchies, and everyday scholarly practices, and in doing so we reject the current trend in evaluative approaches that conceive AI as a discrete technological object or as a neutral tool whose effects can be evaluated independently of context. Foucault (1978) once said the truth is never detached from the context of its production, and although the production of AI may appear as a black box of algorithms, encounters with AI are shaped by our positionalities, locations, histories and entanglements within broader relations of power. In what follows, we develop three interlocking analytical moves; first, we mobilise affect as our primary analytic; second, we situate that analysis within the uneven global dynamics of knowledge production; and third, we draw on neo-material and Deleuzian frameworks, including Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, to theorise the specific trajectory through which researchers engage with, and ultimately refuse, AI.

2.1 Affect as analytic

We mobilise affect as an analytic to explore how relations between subjects, technologies, knowledges, institutions, money and local expertise are organised and modulated. Following Ahmed (2004, p. 119), affects here can be understood as orientations: they “do things”, they shape how connections are formed, and “they align individuals with communities — or bodily space with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments”. Affect here is “an intensity corresponding to the passage from one state of the body to another”, and it implies “an increase or decrease in the body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze; Guattari, 2020). Wetherell (2013) aligns with Deleuze and Guattari by conceptualising affect as emerging through practices, as patterned and socially organised rather than purely internal or psychological.

By framing affect this way, we problematise how we as researchers engage with GenAI, how it modulates intensities such as relief, anxiety, discomfort, disillusionment, refusal; themselves shaped by the conditions of academic and research labour. In this way, we use affect as both a diagnostic and an analytic to examine the “dangerousness of AI”, moving beyond dichotomous “good” or “bad” positions (Foucault, 1984a). Most importantly, affect makes visible the moral and epistemic dimensions of AI use, where feelings and practices such as shame, discomfort, or refusal embody the tensions around authorship, legitimacy, and the limits of scholarly practice. Here affect provides a way of tracing how academic practices are being reconfigured through encounters with emerging technologies.

2.2 Global dynamics of coloniality and epistemic hierarchy

We also acknowledge that the emotions and experiences materialised by AI are not evenly lived and distributed. Rather, they are shaped by a colonial matrix of power that “pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism” (Quijano, 2000, p. 533). This matrix of power aligns global hierarchies of knowledge and labour, and crystallises how authority persists, organising which forms of knowledge are recognised as valid and which are marginalised or discarded. Grosfoguel (2012) extends this analysis by demonstrating how epistemic authority remains concentrated within Global North institutions, producing a global order in which knowledge is stratified along racialised, linguistic, and geopolitical lines.

In a present in which universities are increasingly growing as “large systems of

authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties” (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30), the standards set and knowledge created in Global North institutions make them privileged apparatuses that naturalise Eurocentrism by colonising knowledge, such that coloniality, and its power hierarchies, can be relentlessly regenerated (Restrepo, 2018). The imbalances created by the widespread diffusion of GenAI are entering a situation in which problems and solutions become framed within universities in countries that previously were “centres of overseas empires and [are] now the ‘core’ of the global economy” (Connell, 2011, p. 1371; see also Castro-Gómez, 2007).

Within this framework, GenAI cannot be understood as a neutral or universally accessible technology. It is embedded within infrastructures disproportionately trained on Northern data, operating predominantly in dominant languages, and reflecting existing epistemic hierarchies. As such, GenAI participates in what can be understood as a form of epistemic reproduction and ontological erasure, in which existing inequalities in knowledge production are not only maintained but potentially intensified.

These dynamics shape how GenAI is experienced across contexts. While it may appear as a productivity tool within highly resourced institutions, in other settings it becomes entangled with questions of epistemic dependency, marginalisation and ontological violence. The affective assemblages examined in this paper therefore emerge within, and are shaped by, unequal global conditions of knowledge production.

2.3 Assemblages, deterritorialisation and cruel optimism

To conceptualise how these affective and geopolitical dynamics unfold through encounters with AI, we draw on neo-material approaches that understand technologies as part of relational assemblages rather than as external tools. Assemblages are dispositions of things, constituted of lines that connect and productively interplay heterogeneous components including political orientations, institutional arrangements, formal and informal knowledges, subjectivities, pedagogies, and affects (Youdell, 2015). Thompson and Cook (2015, p. 732) describe them as “topological spaces”, “surfaces that are spaces in themselves and ... their self-organization brings being and knowing, ontology and epistemology, into new kinds of relations” (Lury *et al.*, 2012 *apud* Thompson and Cook, 2015, 732). Following Grimaldi and Ball (2021, p. 394), we acknowledge how GenAI is part of multiple assemblages modulated by a neoliberal rationale which mobilises methods and practices of government and “interacts with situated sets of elements and circumstances” (Ong, 2007, p. 5). From this perspective, GenAI is not simply used by researchers, it co-produces forms of knowledge,

reorganises writing practices, and reconfigures what counts as legitimate academic work. It becomes entangled with institutional demands, platform infrastructures, and individual strategies of coping and survival. This is particularly relevant in contexts of performative academia, where the pressure to produce outputs intersects with the affordances of AI systems that accelerate and standardise writing.

Within this Deleuzian assemblage framing, the encounter with GenAI can also be understood as a process of deterritorialisation, whereby established academic practices, such as writing, authorship, and knowledge production, are partially dislocated from their conventional boundaries. GenAI unsettles the sedimented relations between thinking, writing, and producing knowledge by redistributing cognitive and linguistic labour across human and machine assemblages. However, this deterritorialisation is neither total nor inherently liberatory, but always connected to processes of reterritorialisation, as these newly opened possibilities are quickly reabsorbed into existing institutional logics, including performativity, standardisation, and the reproduction of dominant epistemic norms. GenAI simultaneously disrupts and reinforces the territorial organisation of academic knowledge, generating new capacities while also re-inscribing existing constraints. Reterritorialisation is thus not a return to a previous state but a reorganisation of “differential relations internal to deterritorialization itself” (Deleuze; Guattari, 2020, p. 592).

To theorise the specific affective trajectory through which researchers engage with GenAI, and to give this deterritorialising dynamic its lived, temporal dimension, we draw on Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept of cruel optimism. For Berlant, individuals often become attached to objects or systems that promise to improve their conditions of life while simultaneously sustaining the structures that constrain them. Berlant describes “cruel optimism” as those moments in which something we desire is actually an obstacle to our ability to attain it (Berlant, 2011, p. 1; see also Macgilchrist, 2019).

In the context of higher education, GenAI can be understood as such an object. It offers the promise of relief from the pressures of academic labour through efficiency, speed, and assistance while at the same time reinforcing the performative logics that generate those pressures. As the vignettes later illustrate, our attraction to GenAI emerges from real conditions of strain and overwork. This is the promise of techno-solutionism: the utopian belief that technologies can fix problems that should otherwise be tackled through more comprehensive public, social and educational policy.

However, as we engage more deeply with GenAI, this attachment becomes destabilised. The potential of being affected, or the act of being affected as part of a

performative assemblage, becomes remodulated through disillusionment. Disillusionment emerges through encounters with the limitations of AI-generated writing, the flattening of voice and the reproduction of biases embedded in algorithmic systems. This reckoning with the techno-solutionist order of academic life in the age of AI can, in turn, give rise to forms of refusal.

Refusal here is conceived as a critical practice of “not being governed” (Foucault, 1982, p. 785) in certain ways, a refusal of what AI makes of us as academics within the present performative system. It does not necessarily entail complete disengagement from technology: it can in fact involve selective use, strategic avoidance or explicit critique of the conditions under which AI is being normalised. In this sense, refusal is not external to the system but emerges from within it, as a line of flight, an alternative instance in the deterritorialising process (Deleuze; Guattari, 2020), a creative, provocative, exhausted response to the tensions and contradictions that shape academic labour. In the following section, we explain the analytical process that underpinned the thinking, writing and analysing of this paper.

2.4 Methods: autoethnographic dialogue

This paper is grounded in what we describe as autoethnographic dialogue, or dual autoethnography, a methodological approach that draws on our situated experiences as academic researchers engaging with GenAI across two distinct institutional and geopolitical contexts. We approach our experiences as analytically generative sites in which broader structures of performativity, coloniality and epistemic power become legible through the affective textures of everyday scholarly practice.

Autoethnography proceeds from the premise that personal experience is constitutive of knowledge production (Ellis; Adams; Bochner, 2011), treating embodied and situated encounters as data while maintaining analytical rigour through theoretical engagement. In this paper, we extend this logic dialogically. By placing our two accounts in conversation we can trace both the shared affective trajectory of excitement, disillusionment and refusal, and the ways in which that trajectory is inflected differently by our respective positions within global academic hierarchies. The dialogue between our experiences makes visible asymmetries and resonances that a single-situated account could not.

Our positionalities are central to the analysis. Francesca writes from within a UK research-intensive university, navigating the accelerated demands of a highly performative system in which metrics of productivity (publications, grant capture, impact) operate as conditions of professional survival. Marina writes from Brazil, working within a public

university context also marked by metrics of productivity, as well as chronic underfunding, precarious infrastructure and the persistent pressure to compete within globally benchmarked standards not designed with Southern contexts in mind. These are not simply biographical details but the very conditions of possibility for the affective engagements this paper traces. They shape which GenAI promises feel compelling, which limitations produce discomfort, and which forms of refusal become thinkable and necessary.

At the same time, we are both women working in fields shaped by structural inequalities of gender, class, ability and geography. These intersecting positionalities deepen the stakes of our engagement with AI systems that reproduce, often invisibly, the dominant patterns of the corpora on which they were trained. Our methodological commitment to situating our experiences within these structures is therefore also an ethical one, as we try to resist the individualisation of what are fundamentally systemic conditions and make visible how the ways in which AI shapes emotions that affect us is always a question of where, who, and what you are.

The analysis is developed through a series of vignettes drawn from our research practices, which we present and discuss in the following section.

3 From promise to scepticism and refusal

GenAI has reorganised our work. Our relationship and affective entanglements with GenAI have been shifting since the beginning of our engagement with it; at first, buying into the hype and hoping for solutions to deeply structural social issues; then, gradual disillusionment leading to refusal. This affective trajectory interplays with social contexts, as we explore in the following sections. It is, we argue, a trajectory that is neither accidental nor merely personal, but patterned by the conditions of academic labour and the colonial matrix of power within which GenAI circulates.

The vignettes below are situated and lived accounts of our encounters with GenAI. They describe specific moments, fragments, practices and experiences that move from excitement, to disillusionment and then refusal. We mobilise affect, decolonial and assemblage thinking and cruel optimism to make sense of them.

3.1 Hopeful excitement: AI as promise and relief

ChatGPT was launched at the end of 2022 and the hype immediately set in. The narrative was that people now had a tool that could solve all problems, addressing everything

from mundane tasks to complex analyses, able to disrupt entire sectors. The promises varied, reaching all fields, from engineering to health and education. It did not take long for the hype to reach academic research, with hopes to change how researchers write, edit, review literature, analyse data and so on.

ChatGPT is an example of, and emerges in a context of, widely disseminated techno-solutionism. The promises modulated by GenAI do not emerge in a vacuum, they find us as researchers who are already navigating institutional pressures, in social contexts marked by neoliberal productivist practices in universities, with competitive environments and intersectional inequalities.

Vignette 1

At first, I played with it a bit, using it as a tool that could give me cues into how to proceed with a paper, systematise my written English as a non-native speaker and cut words from abstracts and short sections of writing. Conscious of the environmental problems connected to its use, I tried to minimise the need for it. But it was hard. I was working on multiple projects at the same time and struggling to find enough time to write, teach, apply for funding, and complete administrative tasks. The interaction produced a small but perceptible shift in intensity and writing felt lighter, more fluid. My writing seemed so neat, so clear, it was like my brain could be augmented by the machine. I had been using AI for many of my previous works, to correct my English, for example, but GenAI was like a powerhouse.

What the vignette makes visible is how the encounter with GenAI is an encounter within an assemblage that connects cognitive labour, institutional demand, platform infrastructure, language hierarchies, and the material conditions of a precarious academic contract. The sense of relief is not generated by the technology in isolation but emerges from within this wider configuration, from the intersection of an exhausted body, a performative system, and a machine that promises to bridge the gap between the two. Affect here does things (Ahmed, 2004), directing us towards objects that appear to offer ease and belonging, aligning individual exhaustion with a promise that is structurally produced and collectively circulating.

This is where Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism begins to take hold. Our initial attraction to GenAI was not naïve but emerged from real conditions of strain, an attachment that felt rational precisely because the pressures it promised to relieve are real. The machine appeared as an object of promise, something that could improve our conditions of existence within performative, or underfunded, academic systems. That this promise was also, structurally, a reproduction of those very systems only became visible later.

The attraction of GenAI was not limited to just one of our geopolitical contexts, and across both our experiences it appeared as a potential solution to everyday academic pressures, although these pressures emerged from different material and institutional

conditions. The vignette below illustrates how this promise unfolded within a context marked by limited resources and uneven access to research support. We encounter GenAI from gendered, racialised, classed and geopolitically unequal experiences, and these experiences shape how technological promises are received and what forms of relief appear desirable or necessary.

Vignette 2

I often feel the pressure of producing as much as colleagues in universities in the Global North while working with more limited institutional resources and support. When I got funding for a research project that did not include resources for research assistants, I thought AI tools could give me the support I needed to execute a large project. I hoped AI tools could operate as my research assistants, aiding with basic online data collection and literature review and, maybe, level this global academic playing field.

The vignette points to a different configuration of the same assemblage, one in which the components include chronically underfunded research infrastructure, the absence of institutional support for research and teaching assistance, the global citation economy, and a machine marketed as a universal equaliser. A technology trained predominantly on Global North data, operating in dominant languages, and accessible in its fuller versions only through payment cannot straightforwardly level a playing field that it was not designed to address. The assemblage into which AI enters in the Global South is shaped from the outset by the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000), and the same hierarchies that determine whose knowledge counts also determine what the machine knows.

Although the conditions differ across contexts, the attraction of AI emerges within broader political economies of academic labour. In both Global North and Global South settings, researchers encounter increasing demands for productivity, output and visibility, albeit through different institutional arrangements and unequal distributions of resources. In the Global South, similar dynamics are enacted, with the aggravating factor of imposed global competition despite having lacking infrastructure and support. Researchers experience an unfair globally competitive academia, which counts research outputs and citations but does not consider the chronically unequal circumstances, including limited funding for research, challenges to attend international conferences, the lack of access to recent papers and books, the number of hours dedicated to teaching and administrative tasks and the precarious infrastructure of universities that worsens scholar's working conditions. Researchers routinely navigate a tension between constrained resources and the pressure to meet internationally benchmarked standards of productivity, often sustaining their work through resilience and ingenuity rather than systemic support. Techno-solutionist promises of AI-driven efficiency arrive as hope for performance and relief, and yet it might lead to

acceleration, absorbed into existing regimes of performativity, with little regard for the conditions that make such a pace unsustainable in the first place. Here, as Grosfoguel (2012) makes clear, the asymmetries are structured by the same colonial matrix of power that determines whose knowledge, and whose labour, counts.

3.2 Gradual uneasiness and disillusionment

The initial experience of using generative AI systems such as ChatGPT often seems to take the form of cognitive amplification. Drafts appear more quickly, sentences seem clearer, and the system produces formulations that resemble established academic discourses. For many researchers, the first encounters with these tools generate a sense of intellectual acceleration. Yet, sustained use can produce a more ambivalent experience, with a growing uneasiness that emerges from the interaction with GenAI. More specifically, we identify issues concerning authorship, AI mistakes and bias, and lacking institutional guidelines.

Vignette 3

In the early stages of experimenting with ChatGPT, I approached it cautiously, using it occasionally to refine short sections of text. I would paste a paragraph I was struggling with and ask the system to “improve clarity” or “restructure the argument”. The responses were quick and, at first glance, convincing, smoother, more linear, more aligned with expected academic style. One time, I asked the system to reorganise a paragraph that felt particularly difficult to articulate and, within seconds, it produced a coherent and well-structured version. The ideas were recognisably mine, yet something felt off. The paragraph was detached from the process of thinking I went through. The tensions and uncertainties that had made the writing difficult had disappeared and were replaced by a polished argument that seemed to resolve so quickly what I had not yet fully worked through. Then I tried to revise it, to bring back the messiness I wanted to solve, and I realised I was responding to the system’s version of the text rather than developing my own. I started becoming increasingly frustrated. The point of reference was shifting and I was losing control; instead of working through the problem, I was editing a solution. Over time, other limitations also became visible. The system would occasionally generate plausible but non-existent references or repeatedly privilege familiar scholarship while overlooking less visible authors. What initially appeared as clarity increasingly required verification.

Regarding authorship, amid quick and good results, there is also the feeling that the text no longer fully belongs to the author who signs it. The affective tone of the interaction shifts. The more we used the system to articulate arguments, refine phrasing, or generate conceptual transitions, the more the boundaries of authorship become blurred. As Francesca retells above, what initially appears as assistance can gradually produce a subtle displacement of voice. Because these systems are trained on vast corpora of text, they reproduce statistically-plausible forms of language that mirror the sedimented patterns of institutional discourses. When interacting with such systems, we effectively interface with a computational approximation of the linguistic archive of academia. Here, GenAI does redistribute

authorship rather than only assist with writing. The system produces text that is grammatically correct, rhetorically coherent and recognisable as belonging to academic discourse. However, you can feel it as detached from a stable, centred, speaking subject as the text still appears in some way authoritative, though somewhat departing from the author's own intellectual trajectory.

This entanglement mobilises Foucault's (1984b) argument that the "author" is not merely an individual but a function that organises discourse and regulates its circulation. Generative AI exposes the fragility of this author function by enabling the production of legitimate discourse without a clearly identifiable originating subject. From this perspective, the unease that can emerge from intensive writing assisted by AI is ethical and procedural, but above all it is epistemic.

GenAI can also incur serious limitations in its academic work, as well as dangerous mistakes. As we worked with GenAI tools, we started to notice it would not fulfil the hoped-for disruptive and transformative promises for our academic practice, as GenAI has invented or "hallucinated" references and limits references to western canons, even when asked for references for a Brazilian audience, as described in the vignette below.

Vignette 4

In different occasions, I have tried to identify scholarly references through GenAI tools. I asked an AI platform for literature recommendations while working on a new module. Whilst some were useful, it excluded less-known authors, especially from the Global South. When questioned about it, it apologetically added different names. I have also asked for sources to define some terms when writing a paper. Using real and appropriate authors' names, it completely created references, demanding considerable research to discover what was real and what was created. In a different exercise, when trying to write an abstract in a rush, I wrote a list of topics and asked it to produce an abstract. The result looked fine at first, with a clear structure and elegant sentences. However, after careful review, it became clear that sentences were vague and the abstract was meaningless. With uneasiness, I kept thinking that students would not easily be able to spot these issues of bias, fake references and misleading outputs. I realised that working with AI requires more than critical thinking, it actually requires a strong dose of scepticism to deal with the answers.

These limitations are not neutral, the systematic exclusion of Global South scholars from AI-generated reference lists is not a random error but a reflection of what the system was trained on, an archive of knowledge that, as Grosfoguel (2012) and Connell (2011) have argued, is organised along racialised, linguistic and geopolitical lines. The machine does not merely make mistakes; it reproduces epistemic hierarchies with fluency and confidence, making them harder, not easier, to see.

These issues demand what Sperber *et al.* (2010) call epistemic vigilance. The challenge is not simply that AI produces errors, but that those errors are often presented through a fluent and persuasive discourse that encourages trust. Researchers interact with

systems that are routinely anthropomorphised as assistants, collaborators or critical peers (Buzato, 2023), and the coherence of the generated text can obscure the need for verification. The result is a tension between convenience and scrutiny, in which the apparent authority of AI-generated outputs may reduce the likelihood that their assumptions, omissions or inaccuracies are questioned (Maynard, 2026).

Another emerging issue concerns the costs and viability of using AI in research. Many of the most powerful systems are available only through paid subscriptions or operate through tiered access models. With limited funding, researchers might need to personally pay for these tools, especially those with precarious contracts and/or those located in underfinanced contexts. Rather than reducing inequalities, AI may therefore deepen existing disparities in access to digital resources and research support. GenAI thus operates as part of a broader socio-technical assemblage that does not simply reflect inequality but actively modulates it, redistributing access and capacity along already existing lines of power.

Lastly, the excitement of AI also crumbles in the context of lacking institutional guidance. With universities, funding agencies and journals being unsure and slow in responding to the AI hype, providing training and guidelines for scholars and students, researchers are left adrift with the conundrums around AI in research. Questions remain concerning the acceptable uses of AI across different stages of the research process, from idea generation and literature reviews to data analysis and writing. Uncertainty also persists regarding authorship, accountability and academic integrity. This institutional void is itself affectively significant, and the absence of clear frameworks might just produce anxiety and a quiet pressure to use AI invisibly.

3.3 Refusal

Our uneasiness slowly led to the decision to break away from AI, or, more precisely, to refuse certain cognitive and practical affordances it offers. This refusal did not arrive as a clean break or a principled declaration. It emerged gradually, affectively, from the accumulated weight of disillusionment, from our experiences of the alienation of voice, the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies, the institutional silence, and the growing sense that our engagement with AI was producing not relief but a more insidious form of exhaustion.

We understand this refusal through Foucault's (1982) notion of the "art of not being governed" in certain ways, which is not a rejection of technology as such, but a critical practice of declining particular forms of subjectivation. To refuse AI, in this sense, is to refuse what it makes of us as academics, that is, efficient producers of plausible discourse,

indistinguishable from the algorithmic archive, optimised for the metrics of performative systems we did not choose and do not endorse. Refusal is therefore affective, epistemic, and ontological at the same time, shaped by the entanglement of voice, institutional pressure, epistemic traditions, language, and the material conditions within which each of us works. Crucially, this refusal takes different forms across our two contexts, shaped by the same asymmetries that inflected our initial excitement.

Vignette 5

Refusal, for me, did not take the form of a clear decision to stop using AI, but it emerged through small adjustments in how I approached my work. While AI-assisted editing could make my writing appear more polished, I increasingly felt that GenAI was removing all the hesitations and imperfections of my process of thinking. Gradually, I started keeping sentences that felt slightly awkward and resisting the impulse to “clean up” the text (how modernist, modernism has never really left us!). The writing became slower — well, it went back to what it was before GenAI — but it felt more connected to my own reasoning and voice. This shift reminded me of an earlier decision in my academic life, when I chose not to have my doctoral thesis professionally proofread, as I understood my writing, with its imperfections, as part of my positioning as a non-native English speaker. AI made me realise how easily that specificity could be erased, replaced by a neutral academic voice, rather, normal — where the norm is being able to write in a “received English” with all the implications that this ability carries with it. Refusing AI in writing thus became a way of holding onto that trace. This did not mean abandoning AI altogether, I just limited its use to more bounded tasks, and I avoid relying on it for writing or conceptual work. I have also become more open about when I use it, countering the quiet expectation that its use should remain invisible. These probably are only my initial practices of refusal, they are partial and ongoing, but they have changed how I engage with GenAI in my academic work.

Refusal is here entangled with a question of voice, a conscious choice to preserve the messiness, the difficulty, the particularity of writing as thinking, even when that makes the work slower and less polished by institutional standards. It is a refusal to be reterritorialised into the standardised outputs that performative academia demands, a line of flight that insists on the value of scholarly labour that cannot be automated, as also discussed in the vignette below.

Vignette 6

I started to notice AI was not necessarily making things easier or my texts better. It created a new layer of work with additional requirements of criticality and epistemic vigilance. It became more difficult to revise and edit AI texts than to work on my own, with a continuous search for mistakes, biases, and overly linear analysis. My original ideas felt flatter and too homogeneous after being rewritten by AI, with the persistence of organising things that are messy, particularly when analysing education policy. My creativity and engagement with my own locality, with its own social complexities and political economic aspects, as well as theoretical and epistemic traditions, were curtailed, and I felt further alienated from them (in a continuous move of longstanding existing struggles with coloniality).

With growing discontentment, I slowly started to move away from it. I increasingly found myself avoiding AI for significant analytical work. I also started sharing my concerns with colleagues and students, encouraging them to adopt deeper reflexivity when using AI. It is not, however, a complete abandonment of AI tools, or an anti-technology instance. I started to be much more deliberate and selective with what stages and tasks involve AI, and which do not.

Here, refusal carries the additional weight of epistemic resistance. To refuse AI is also to refuse a machine that consistently marginalises certain knowledge traditions, a machine that defaults to Northern canons, dominant languages, and Eurocentric frameworks, and, in doing so, reproduces the very hierarchies that Southern scholars are already fighting to be legible within. Here the assemblage includes the global knowledge economy, the citation circuits, the linguistic and reasoning hierarchies, the funding structures, and the historical traces of coloniality that shaped the archive on which the machine was trained. To disengage from this configuration is to refuse a particular order of things and knowledge and insist that what the machine cannot see is not therefore absent.

In both cases, refusal is not external to the system but emerges from within it, as Deleuze and Guattari (2020) would suggest, not a return to an uncontaminated outside but a differential relation internal to the deterritorialising process itself. It is a creative, exhausted, politically charged response to the conditions under which AI has been normalised within academic work. And it is, as the analytical discussion above has shown, irreducibly affective, felt before it is theorised, lived before it is named.

4 Conclusion: Towards a situated engagement with GenAI in educational research

This paper set out to examine how academic researchers engage with GenAI not from neutral positions, but from within specific affective, institutional and geopolitical conditions. Through autoethnographic dialogue, we have traced a trajectory, from techno-solutionist excitement, through disillusionment, to refusal. We have argued that this trajectory is structured by a colonial matrix of power, the performativity regimes that govern academic labour, and the assemblages within which GenAI is encountered differently depending on where and who you are.

Finally, rather than concluding with a simple judgement on whether GenAI should or should not be used in research, through our dialogue five interconnected insights that may support more critical engagements with GenAI in educational research have emerged. These insights are invitations to think more carefully about the conditions under which GenAI becomes thinkable, desirable, or resistible, and about what those conditions manifest and modulate.

First, affect operates as a diagnostic. The trajectory traced in this paper, from excitement, through disillusionment, to forms of refusal suggests that affective responses are not incidental to GenAI adoption but reveal how researchers negotiate the changing

conditions of academic labour. Feelings of relief, anxiety, shame, disillusionment and exhaustion (to name a few) tell us something about the tensions that may otherwise remain hidden within narratives of efficiency and innovation.

Second, GenAI is best understood as part of an assemblage rather than as a discrete tool. The effects of GenAI emerge through its entanglements with institutional pressures, funding structures, linguistic and epistemic hierarchies, disciplinary norms and everyday research practices. Focusing solely on the technology risks obscuring the broader conditions that make its use desirable or necessary.

Third, the appeal of GenAI can be understood through cruel optimism. The promise of reduced workload, enhanced productivity and greater access to scholarly practices responds to genuine pressures experienced by researchers and this promise can simultaneously reinforce the performative systems that generate those pressures in the first place.

Fourth, coloniality remains central to understanding the uneven implications of GenAI. The systems discussed through this paper are not trained on neutral archives of knowledge, they are in fact trained on datasets shaped by existing geopolitical hierarchies. Questions of language, visibility and epistemic legitimacy therefore must remain central in debates about GenAI in educational research. An AI system that defaults to Global North canons and dominant languages is not merely imperfect; it is enacting, with considerable fluency and confidence, a particular ordering of epistemic and ontological worth. Researchers in the Global South encounter this not as an abstract structural problem but as a lived affective reality.

Finally, refusal should be understood as a legitimate scholarly practice. Refusal does not necessarily imply rejection of technology, but it can represent a critical practice of “not being governed” in certain ways (Foucault, 1982) and deserves recognition as a form of scholarly freedom. It is a form of epistemic and ontological resistance that insists on the value of situated, imperfect, irreducibly human scholarly labour. These insights suggest that what needs to be relentlessly questioned is not whether GenAI is inherently beneficial or harmful but how we as researchers might engage with it while continue to problematise the affective, political and epistemic conditions under which it operates.

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