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Reading Ourselves: Placing Critical Literacies in Contemporary Language Education

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Ler-nos lendo: o lugar dos letramentos críticos na educação linguística contemporânea

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RESUMO: Este artigo problematiza o lugar dos letramentos críticos (LCs) na educação linguística contemporânea. Para tanto, indaga: Em tempos educacionais neoconservadores, onde colocamos a crítica no currículo? O que fica para os professores em relação ao seu comprometimento em educar cidadãos críticos? Os LCs **são suficientes? Para responder a** essas questões, partimos de cenas do mundo contemporâneo, desvelando as angústias marcadas pela complexa política do "nós" versus "eles". Em seguida, revisitamos os entendimentos de LCs circulantes no campo para, então, nos lançarmos à leitura de nós mesmos em relação às nossas próprias teorizações e práticas. Nas (in) conclusões, esboçamos algumas orientações que realocam os LCs para além da visão dicotômica entre o micro e o macro, como estratégia educativa no lidar com as frustrações desses tempos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Letramentos Críticos, educação linguística, políticas, formação docente.

ABSTRACT: This article problematizes the place of critical literacies (CLs) in contemporary language education. In doing so, we ask: Where do we place critique within the curriculum in neoconservative times? What is left to teachers in their commitment to educate critical citizens? Do critical literacies suffice? To respond to these questions, we bring a set of contemporary snapshots, unveiling all the anguish brought up by the complex politics of "us" versus "them". Some understandings of CLs within the field are then reviewed, preparing the terrain for the reading of ourselves in relation to our theories and practices. To (in)

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conclude, we outline a few orientations which seek to relocate CLs beyond the dichotomic view of the micro versus macro as a formative strategy in dealing with our frustrations in such dark times.

KEYWORDS: Critical Literacies, language education, politics, teacher education.

1 Pressing start: snapshots of a spinning world

> *Because, like you, like seemingly everybody, I have also felt* as though the world is spinning out of control and there's nothing we can do about it. I'm exhausted from all the stories of shootings and attacks and bombs and the constant stream of awful stuff that is happening out there. I, too, feel desensitized and dejected from the seemingly constant carnage raging across the planet.
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> Mark Mason, Blogger, Author, Thinker, Life enthusiast, 2016[1]

June 2016: "UK votes to leave EU after dramatic night divides nation". September 2016: "High school reform proposal has reverberations in Brazil". November 2016: "Donald Trump wins presidential election, plunging US into uncertain future". January 2017: "Trump signs order to begin Mexico border wall in immigration crackdown". February 2017: "Paint it grey: the controversial plan to 'beautify' São Paulo". April 2017: "São Paulo Councilman Fernando Holiday to apply School Without Party project by force". April 2017: "Brazil launches The National Common Core Curriculum". May 2017: "Brazil's president struggles to retain power as political crisis deepens". May 2017: "São Paulo Ramps Up 'War On Drugs' - Police Raid Signals Crackdown Under New Mayor".[2]

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[1] Available at: <https://markmanson.net/crazy-world>. Retrieved on: April 5, 2017.

[2] Headlines available at/translated from: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/britain-votes-for-brexit-eu-referendum-david-cameron>; <http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/geral/noticia/2016-09/high-school-reform-proposal-has-reverberations-brazil>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/donald-trump-wins-us-election-news>; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/25/donald-trump-sign-mexico-border-executive-order>; <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/feb/23/sao-paulo-street-art-paint-over-joao-doria-brazil-graffiti>; <https://theintercept.com/2017/04/09/fernando-holiday-do-mbl-quer-aplicar-escola-sem-partido-na-marra/>; <http://basenacionalcomum.mec.gov.br/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/24/brazil-president-struggles-protests-leaked-recording>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/25/sao-paulo-ramps-war-drugs>. Retrieved on: May 25, 2017.

Would Mark Mason's anguish, frustration, and exhaustion refer to snapshots of this kind? Would the anguish, frustration, and exhaustion felt by many of us in recent times be consequence of any of these snapshots as well?

Take a deep breath. We are afraid we have some bad news – very bad news from these hard times. Any educational project aimed at a critical perspective must depart from the pain and the complexities, regardless of the lack of prompt responses. As Dion (2009, p. 55) has stated: "Talking about traumatic events and one's connection to the suffering of Others is 'dangerous' work. However, we cannot use our fear of saying the wrong thing as an excuse for not doing the work."

Bearing this in mind, this paper aims to question the very place of Critical Literacies (CLs) in contemporary language education in face of recent restraining neoconservative policies in global and local spheres. Despite all the contributions from recent debates in Philosophy and, for the purposes of this special issue, Critical Applied Linguistics, this paper is an attempt to unveil tensions, ambiguities, and dilemmas when such a framework is meant to be put into practice in teacher education. To do so, our own pedagogical practices with student teachers in two different Teacher Education programs in Southern Brazil have brought us to the need to respond to the following: How do we conceive of critique and CLs as we approach this framework in our local teacher education contexts? Have we altered our own understandings? Have we accounted for social transformation as informed by CLs in our local teaching practices? In other words, do such questions seem to bring to the fore the very dilemma of conceiving of CLs as a problematizing practice carried out on a microlevel and to what extent does this micropolitics seem to "suffice", bearing in mind the threat against critical perspectives posed by recent neoliberal policies. Responses will be drawn under a self-critical literacy move in which, as we read the other (our student teachers, so to speak), we critically read ourselves.

This paper is organized as follows: section two brings into the spotlight the notion of "us" versus "them" in today's political and social conflicts as evident in some of the snapshots from contemporary life. Section three presents a brief state-of-the-art of CL research in which international and national researchers´ different perspectives are brought to the fore as a way of clearing and disturbing the ground. In section four, based upon our experiences as teacher educators in two Southern Brazilian universities, we

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read ourselves through a dialogic meaning making process surrounding the notion of critique. In section 5, we address some orientations, attempting to combine both micro and macropolitics in critical language education if one wishes to bring some change in such an anguished society.

It is important to restate that beyond presenting prompt answers to the questions that have been raised here, this paper wishes to acknowledge the very self-critical literacy move in which we read ourselves as we read the other (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011) by unveiling tensions, ambiguities, and dilemmas in our own meaning making processes as teacher educators. This might imply ending up the paper still surrounded by anguish, frustration, and exhaustion, along with a pinch of hope in Freirean terms.

2 The politics of "us" versus "them"

Has the world gone mad? Or has it become right? Even though the category "world" brings along many of the generalizing connotations this paper wishes to problematize (universalism, neoliberalism, citizenship, culture, identity, literacy education), there are many reasons to think that this world (still Western, Eurocentric/ *USAcentric*, capitalist) we live in – the Modern/Colonial world (MIGNOLO, 2000) – has reached levels of violence of all kinds – discursive, symbolic, physical, and planetary – which mostly affect the "underdeveloped"/colonized beings. In this sense, Appadurai (2006, p. 49) asks "Why kill, torture and ghettoize the weak? This may be a relevant question for ethnic violence against small groups at any time in history."

This very same world is made up of complex and complicated binary relations in which the dominant epistemology (Western, Eurocentric/ *USAcentric*) perpetrates the idea of "us" (dominant) versus "them" (the others), rejecting the perspective that "a world that is epistemologically diverse – far from being negative – represents an enormous enrichment of the human capacities to bestow intelligibility and intentionality to social relations" (SOUSA SANTOS, 2010, p. 18, our translation[3]).

The dichotomy "us" (Western, Eurocentric/*USAcentric*) versus "them" (non-European/*USAcentric,* the rest of world), understood as lines (abyssal lines for Sousa Santos), has been constructed and naturalized in

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[3] From here on, the mentioned authors who published in Portuguese will be translated by the authors of this paper.

order to separate some epistemologies that sustain "the world of us and them": rich and poor, center and periphery, developed and underdeveloped, North and South, Western and Eastern, civilized and barbarians, high culture and low culture, Christians and non-Christians, modern and primitive.

These binary oppositions reverberate in religion, culture, politics, and education. Many of the religious conflicts we have witnessed nowadays (intolerance, fights, protests, attacks, suicide bombing, shootings, execution) – apart from portraying human beings' vicious capacity to take other human beings' lives – depict the lack of dialog and understanding of the "us versus them" when it comes to religious plurality, as in the cases of September 11th and the following 'War on Terror' (2001)[4] or the Charlie Hedbo massacre[5] claimed by Al Quaeda in 2015. For Reychler (1997, p.1), there is a "Western incomprehension and misconception of Modern Islam." The fundamental mistake is the assumption that there is a separation of religion and political decision-making in the Middle East. By the same token, Said (2007) critiques the fact that the Western nations consider themselves the world of knowledge, of critique, of technical know-how and of institutions that work, whereas Islam is their furious and retarded dependent.

As for cultural aspects, under the (problematic) paradigm of "us" versus "them", culture is usually perceived as materiality (objects) or abstraction (high, low culture). Furthermore, culture as a representation of nation states can be a very dangerous concept. Nonetheless, seeing culture (one's own and another's) as something that represents a nation-state no longer suits contemporaneity. In other words, in the modern world, national cultures constitute one of the main sources of cultural identity, and "identities are not literally imprinted in our genes. However, we do think of them as if they are part of our essential natures" (HALL, 1992, p. 611). Hall (Ibid) goes on to argue that "national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to representation. We only know what it is to be 'English' because of the way 'Englishness' has come to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture."

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[4] Available at: <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/245/war-on-terror>. Retrieved on: April 4, 2017.

[5] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30708237>. Retrieved on: April 4th 2017

Finally, the politics of "us" versus "them" proves to be at stake in recent political decisions. In this respect, the snapshots presented in the introductory part of this paper somehow echo this dichotomy inasmuch as they seem to share a common ground based on a revival of homogeneity, normatization, and universalism. Those headlines reveal that the world has taken dangerous shortcuts when attempting to respond to the new complexities arising in global societies, instead of trying to cope with what or who is different (BIESTA, 2006). The shortcuts comprise political decisions founded on segregation and exclusion, either by leaving political and economic unions, such as Brexit, or by building or redesigning walls, as instilled by American President Donald Trump, in North America, and city mayor of São Paulo, João Dória, in South America, more specifically Brazil.

Most of the news and statistics about Brexit – acronym which stands for the "British Exit" from the European Union – have been based on financial and political analysis, such as that put forward by van Reenen (2016, p. 6), to whom "(…) the UK will be poorer in the long-run from leaving because we will trade less with our closest neighbors, losing full access to the largest Single Market on the planet." However, this paper is more concerned with a more genealogical perspective as brought by Martins (2016, p.1), who affirms that one must not forget the genesis of this referendum:

> [P]ressured by the right wing of its Conservative Party, heavily Euro-skeptical, and threatened by the growth of a populist, isolationist, xenophobic and Islamophobic right party that has always defended the country's exit from the EU, Prime Minister David Cameron promised the referendum in the election campaign.

This somehow resonates one of the US president´s most recent White House decisions: the building of "an impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern border wall between the US and Mexico."[6] As shocking as this piece of news can be for many – for Trump´s supporters this is the right thing to do – and even if the motion put forward by Trump does not pass, it is clear that "the world of us" (US, powerful nation) needs to be separated from "the world of them" (Mexico, dependent nation).

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[6] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37243269>. Retrieved on: April 4, 2017.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, walls have not been destroyed but, actually, repainted by the new mayor of São Paulo, João Dória, in an attempt to replace colorful popular graffiti art with plain grey towards a project aimed at sanitization and beautification. The same hygienist approach was adopted in the most recent sad event in which police officers detained drug dealers and brutally expelled all crack addicts (and the poor community) from "Cracolândia" ("Crackland"), in the downtown area, by using excavators to demolish buildings be means of a Municipal Ordinance. Some people were injured, for they did not have the proper time to leave their provisional homes. Local shelters, churches, and stores were also not notified and therefore failed to host and relocate all expelled people. This has been the first initiative of the "Redemption" project signed by this neoconservative mayor, which has replaced the former "With Open Arms" project run by former Labor Party mayor, Fernando Haddad.

In line with Ferreira (2017),[7] rather than the politically incorrect notion of "hygienization", the displacement of drug addicts – "them" – from São Paulo downtown area might be interpreted as gentrification, that is to say, a euphemism attempting to legitimate dislocation under a discourse of development through the restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban spaces, a process that eventually serves the interests of a real estate market elite – "the us", so to speak.

As we can see, the snapshots discussed so far reveal a trend in which recent politics and policies at global and local levels seek to find prompt alternatives for complex social problems by recuperating one of the three strategies currently used by nation states in their traditional process of becoming a unitary territory, that is to say: assimilation, expulsion, or extermination (GELLNER, 1983). Globally, in the case of Brexit and Trump's walls, the "us" are represented by the European/American, white, English-speakers against "them", the colored, multilingual migrants, and refugees who have been expelled (either by referendum or walls) or requested to properly assimilate local culture if they are to stay. As for local actions (in the city of São Paulo, in particular) 'poor, low culture, dirt, and addiction' features constitute 'them', who must be 'fixed' under categories such as 'high culture, neatness, and redemption.' In this respect,

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[7] Available at: <http://jornal.usp.br/atualidades/higienizacao-outrora-gentrificacao-agora/>. Retrieved on: May 30, 2017.

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socially-oriented projects do not seem to suffice, paving the way for hostile paintbrushes and excavators to do their job, undemocratically.

Having a dreadful attack of vertigo towards this spinning world? Feeling the same anguish, frustration, and exhaustion as revealed by Mark Mason in the epigraph of this paper? Take a deep breath once again. It is time to evaluate how educational policies and practices have responded to this in order to, later on, critically discuss the place of CLs in the face of this fast-changing scenario. To do so, we trace three of those snapshots referring to education, that is to say, the National Common Core Curriculum, the High School Reform, and the controversial School Without Party movement to see how homogeneity, normatization, and universalism function as their founding principles under a neoconservative/rightist agenda.

The National Common Core Curriculum, recently launched by the federal government, has triggered much controversy among scholars and citizens. Regulated by law, its final version has received strong criticism for being founded on the the discourse of competence for its neoconservative orientation. Although the establishment of a common core curriculum on a national basis was expected by law, the historical moment in which it has been launched responds to a mushrooming of common core curricula in different parts of the world. In this respect, Apple (2009, p. 242) advises us on the risks of falling intro the traps of a supposedly well-intended initiative, connecting this new wave to the neoliberal agenda:

> Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that the school curriculum has become a battleground. Stimulated in large part by neo-liberal complaints about 'economically useless' knowledge, neo-conservative laments about the supposed **loss of discipline** and lack of '**real knowledge**,' and by religious authoritarian populists' relentless attacks on schools for their supposed loss of God-given 'traditional' values, discussions of **what should be taught** in schools and **how it should be taught** are now as contentious as at any time in our history (our emphasis).

The aspects brought by Apple reinforce our argument that a common core curriculum is based on homogeneity (consensus), normatization, and universalism, and does not seem to give room to dissent as an inherent human condition in a diverse world. It is still worth mentioning that common core curricula, such as that recently launched in Brazil as well as

those adopted in the United States and in the United Kingdom,[8] for instance, end up worsening inequality inasmuch as they tend to privilege the interests of "us" instead of "them" under an unfair meritocratic orientation due to a lack of policies aimed at the improvement of teacher preparation, working conditions, and infrastructure. As Apple (2004, p.15) has stated:

> Today is no different than in the past. A "new" set of compromises, a new alliance and new proper bloc has been formed that has increasing influence on education and all things social. This power bloc combines multiple forms of capital who are committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a "return" to higher standards and a "common culture", authoritarian populist religious conservatives who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally-oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology of accountability, measurement, and "management".

A similar neotechnicist orientation might be seen in the recent High School Reform, for the reduction of the Humanities in the curriculum and the monolingual orientation as English has become the foreign language to be taught. Although the contents and skills to be covered in High School have not been established yet (to date, the Common Core curriculum covers Elementary Education), we might presume that a competence-based structure will be adopted, leading us to attest to its instrumental vein.

The last snapshot to be discussed is surely one of high concern as it refers to the impending risk of censorship in school contexts through the School Without Party movement. By advising society that teachers are not supposed to show their own ideological, religious, moral, political interests, opinions, conceptions, or preferences during class as well as by establishing that teachers must present the main versions, theories, opinions, and conflicting perspectives in a fair way (that is to say, not favoring one perspective to the detriment of others), the movement encourages students and parents to formally report professionals who would be "indoctrinating" pupils. Many Brazilian citizens (as attested to in many personal accounts in

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[8] For further information on the Common Core State Standards and the UK National Curriculum, see also <http://www.corestandards.org/> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>.

social media) interpret the movement positively as neutrality is supposed to be at the heart of this initiative. However, a genealogical and critical analysis of the School Without Party movement leads us to its very discriminatory nature, highly based on traditional religious values, in which a moral appeal to families is called upon as an attempt to avoid or deny dissent, antagonisms, agonisms, tensions, contradictions within school contexts, especially in relation to gender and sexuality (which, by the way, has faded away throughout the new Common Core curriculum).

If, on the one hand, difference has been brought into the spotlight by recent academic studies, as well as affirmative social and educational policies, on the other, we have been witnessing a wave of neoliberal/neoconservative policies at global and local levels whose founding principles and purposes function as harsh restraints. From a neotechnicist, instrumental common core curriculum to a School Without Party movement with fascist characteristics, where do we place critique within the curriculum? What is left to teachers in their commitment to educate critical citizens? What is the place of CLs within a curriculum that seems to privilege consensus, obedience, efficiency in order to have their citizens "function well" in society?

Despite all the anguish, frustration, and exhaustion many of us might feel – be it as educators, teachers, or citizens – this paper states that CLs do play a pivotal role within this scenario, for they challenge the very premises of traditional education. By assuming CLs as a way to enable students to "live peacefully with what and with whom is different" (BIESTA, 2006, p. 15) by constantly dis/relocating "us" and "them", the following section briefly discusses the different understandings of CLs as brought by different scholars. Instead of tracing a stabilizing state-of-the-art, we intend to randomly bring the different perspectives on the subject, followed by our own understanding.

3 Critical literacies: clearing, then disturbing the ground

Literacies studies[9] have considerably emerged as a fruitful field of study among Brazilian scholars in recent decades. This might be attested by the many events that have taken place throughout the country, in which

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[9] A state-of-the art in this issue as well as recent research trends in Brazil can be found in Duboc and Gattolin, 2015.

(multi)literacies now feature as a recurring conference theme. For the purposes of this paper, we will not be discussing the different terminologies arising from the word *literacy*, for the aim is to define and problematize CLs, in particular. Still, it seems important to pinpoint the different understandings of the notion of "critique".

A critical perspective to the traditional notion of **literacy** emerged in the 1980s through the pioneering works of Barton (1994), Gee (1990), and Street (1995) which culminated in a movement known as ***New Literacy Studies***. Special acknowledgement should be addressed to the contribution of Street's distinction between the autonomous model and the ideological model of literacy, the former referring to literacy as if cultural and ideological assumptions were neutral (leading to a concept of reading as decoding), whereas the latter conceives of literacy as a cultural and social practice (in which reading is no longer a neutral or "technical" skill).

A similar debate around the concept of literacy occurred in Brazil in the 1980s through the pioneering works of Soares (2004) and Kleiman (2005). In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the terms literacy, new literacy studies, and critical literacy might entice some confusion when translated into Portuguese. Indeed, the word "letramento,"[10] in its singular form, encompasses a sociocultural orientation that goes beyond the traditional notion of "alfabetismo"[11] and its underlying view of language as a code. In other words, the Portuguese word "alfabetismo" seems to be equivalent to the traditional notion of "literacy", defined by Snyder (2008, p. 11) as "a cognitive ability" in which reading would simply imply the "cracking the alphabetic code, word-formation skills, grammar, and comprehension skills. To differentiate from the conventional "alfabetismo", Brazilian scholars have coined the term "letramento", which, despite its singular form, seems to share the concerns brought by the new literacy studies" (particularly with the contributions from Street).

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[10] The deliberate use of Portuguese words is made necessary, for the word *literacy* might be assumed as an expanding view of the Portuguese concept of "alfabetismo", much like its expansion in relation to the notions of "reading instruction" or "beginning literacy" in English literature (SOARES, 2004).

[11] In line with Rojo (2009), we have used the term "alfabetismo" rather than "alfabetização" as the former encompasses the state/condition of being literate, whereas the latter refers to the process of becoming literate.

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As for the term **critical literacy**,[12] in particular, we acknowledge the seminal publication *Constructing Critical Literacies*, edited by Muspratt, Luke, and Freebody (1997). In a broad sense, the book situates CLs as an emerging concept stemming from Critical Theory and the Freirean Critical Pedagogy. In this respect, Luke and Freebody (1997, p.13) claim that:

> Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the term critical literacy was probably most strongly affiliated with the work of Freire and colleagues, first in neocolonial contexts and later in the United States and other nations. Freire outlined an orientation to education that began with the proposition that language and literacy, and control over how issues, problems and aspects of the world are named, are directly tied to issues of political power, and that, reconstructed, literacy education could therefore be used as a force for political liberation and emancipation for disenfranchised social groups.

Freebody (2008), for instance, conceives of CLs as the development of abilities that would enable people to read the institutional and social practices critically by acknowledging the situated and social text and language construction. This would imply investigating text production issues (sources, purposes, author's interests, audience, and the like) as a way to "unveil" supposedly vested meanings. That seems to explain the use of the modifier "critical" along with the noun "literacy" in order to highlight the very nature of these studies, that is to say, a kind of reading that aims to critically question the status quo, as attested to in the Freirean project.

In the same edited book, Lankshear and Knobel (1997, p. 96) begin the discussion on the complex plurality of literacies and advocate for a deeper investigation that would focus on the epistemological differences among literacies rather than their common basis in technology (e.g. print, alphabetic script). By conceiving of literacies as "socially created constitutive elements of larger human practices – discourses – that humans construct around their myriad purposes and values," the authors (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 1997, p. 107) bring an insightful study as they connect CLs to the

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[12] The term critical literacy(ies) can be translated as *letramento(s)* or *letramento(s) crítico(s),* being those plural forms a very recent use, distancing themselves from the genesis of the studies on "letramento", which was first connected to research on Portuguese (as a first language).

notion of active citizenship, in a process that enables people to "disentangle the multiple layers of their identities and political loyalties."

Along with Luke and Freebody, Norton and Toohey (2003, p. 15) contend that "critical approaches to language education will require commitment to social transformation, justice, and equality." For them, it is essential that critical language education not only open the door to new sources of knowledge and understanding, but also involve the investigation of whose knowledge has historically been privileged, whose has been disregarded, and why.

Similar understandings of CLs with a high influence of Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy, in particular, can be seen in the works of other authors. Shor (1999), for instance, has stated that CL is an orientation that attempts to challenge the status quo, enabling people to understand and transform their own social and historical place in society. By addressing a critical curriculum from a CL perspective, Kincheloe (2005) also emphasizes a notion of critique related to a "disclosure" of the constructed nature of knowledge. Such a prevailing notion of CL as strongly attached to its very origins in Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy has recently been problematized. If, on the one hand, such an understanding has clearly advanced in comparison to the traditional notion of critique from the modern paradigm, on the other, new social and cultural complexities in postmodern societies have brought the necessity to revisit the notion of critique once again, within the field of CLs, under more recent philosophical contributions.

Indeed, the social and political orientation to CLs has been preserved in recent agendas. As Snyder (2008, p. 11) puts it, more recent understandings see literacy as social practice, in which reading and writing are understood only within the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical practices to which they are integral, be they at school, in the workplace, or in everyday life. By stating that "the ability to do critical literacy gives us potent ways of reading, seeing, and acting in the world", Janks (2014, p. 2) brings a more practical vision of CLs to the fore by inviting us to reflect on questions such as "Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by the position on offer? Who does it include? Who does it exclude? Are there other possible ways to interpret what took place?" (JANKS, 2014).

Departing from the contributions of the above-mentioned authors, this paper seeks to emphasize the more recent discussion on CLs, in

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particular, the expanding views on the understanding of CLs as "being critical" seems to have moved from an emancipatory agenda to the problematizing of givens (PENNYCOOK, 2001), in which we read the other as we read ourselves (MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011).

In practical terms, this leads us to three conclusions regarding more recent studies on CLs: i) the expansion of the notion of "critique" itself, ii) the emergence of a different kind of questioning which dislocates both the reader's and the author's hitherto stabilizing status, and iii) the fostering of a new agentive capacity situated in less totalitarian movements and more localized practices. To discuss each of these aspects, we seek support in recent fruitful discussions, as brought by Brazilian scholars in the field of foreign language education/research (in particular, the works of JORDÃO, 2013; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2011; MONTE MÓR, 2009), along with the seminal works of the Critical Applied linguists Morgan (2010, 2014) and Pennycook (2001, 2004). We believe that such contributions might highly benefit a new understanding of CLs in contemporary societies.

As for the emergence of a different kind of questioning – as summarized in the phrase "reading the other as reading ourselves" – this paper seeks support in the seminal works of Jordão (2013) and Menezes de Souza (2011), as they both conceive of CLs as distancing from a notion of critique still attached to this "unveiling" exercise as if meanings were "out there" in the text materiality, "doing their job". The authors also see as problematic the still binary view imbued in this very "unveiling" exercise, as the vested privileges and interests would be attributed to the oppressor-author as opposed to an oppressed-reader. Reading, in this sense, despite being critical, leads to a consensus, as the critical readers would unveil the very same privileges and interests displayed in the text.

To put it differently, a revisited concept of CLs, as claimed by both aforementioned scholars, places higher emphasis on the meaning making processes, which implies that both the author's (the other) and the reader's (the self) epistemic intermediaries (that is to say, sense impressions, values, ideas) are put under scrutiny, in which the stabilizing oppressor-oppressed positions are contested. Under such a concept, reading is seen as dissent, as multiple interpretations are likely to occur. As we can see, the "unveiling" of meanings occurs differently in both perspectives: whereas in the traditional critical reading, meanings are unveiled within the text materiality, the unveiling of meanings in a revisited notion of critical literacy occurs in the

very encounter between the self (reader) and the other (author), along the social and cultural contexts both belong to.

Lastly, we wish to discuss the kind of agentive capacity fostered by CLs. If once a critical orientation to literacy might have been related to a more emancipatory agenda in which social transformation was envisioned, we tend to embrace a less revolutionary stance by welcoming localized practices towards a critical perspective in education. In this respect, a few metaphors within the Applied Linguistics field seem to favor the local in place of totalitarian projects.

Morgan (2010, p. 36), for instance, has called for the fostering of change through critical perspectives in language education by legitimating those small places within the classroom in which the teacher's agency arises vigorously despite restraints or difficulties of all kinds:

> It would be less of an option for teachers who have little decision-making power over their working conditions or are overwhelmed by the demands of high-stake testing. Still, I would invite readers to think about those small spaces, places, and moments in which we do have "wiggle room" – that is, opportunities to ignore or **re-interpret language policies, curricula, and classroom materials** in ways that better reflect the local needs and realities of our students (our emphasis).

In a similar vein, rather than searching for critique in broad curricula, syllabi, or instructional materials, Pennycook (2004) has privileged those instants or points of significance in a classroom as critical moments cherished by an attentive teacher who wisely conceives of critique as those potential moments of transformation.

By addressing the importance of CLs in education, Duboc (2013, 2014), in turn, advocates in favor of a critical attitude between the gaps (or between the cracks) of the curriculum by deconstructing discursive practices which constantly arise in the classroom, be they in language textbooks, curricular guidelines, or the students' and the teacher's perceptions, ideas, and values.

In a broad sense, we have seen elsewhere (FERRAZ, 2015; DUBOC, 2013) that CLs comprise educational movements or philosophical attitudes which re-envision literacy practices by widening the scope of language perspectives (going beyond structure, grammar as compartmented bits); approaches to teaching (expanding teaching towards cultural, social,

ideological, and critical dimensions); and epistemologies (acknowledging new ways of being, knowing, and acting in a fast-changing society marked by a new complex global condition).

Having said that, one might ask: what are the potentialities of a critical literacy-oriented approach to Teacher Education programs? How has the notion of "critique" and "critical literacy" been perceived in these contexts? In the following section, interpretations regarding a work based upon CLs will be made as we read ourselves out loud in our main quest as educators to address alternatives towards a critical education that might actually make a difference.

4 Reading ourselves: the place of CLs in language education

As this paper departs from the anguish, frustration, and exhaustion felt by many in face of contemporary life snapshots, we begin this section by unveiling our own dilemmas, ambiguities, and tensions as teacher educators willing to foster a critical perspective in language classes. Although our students' voices are not the focus of this section, they are implicitly present, for the pedagogical practices and theorizations claimed here are an integral part of our daily classrooms, planning, and curricula. Reading the other, but also reading ourselves, should be in the spotlight in face of language education. As educators, we are accustomed to reading (many times labelling, levelling, and judging) our students. Nonetheless, however painful, unveiling, and denuding, 'reading ourselves' should also be a sine qua non attitude of an educator who is committed to social/educational transformation.

For Freire (1996, p. 89), we cannot think for others or without others, nor can others think for us. Thus, thinking *with* others and with *oneself* might constitute a process in which change is provided, for it consolidates the very idea of dialog. In this sense, it is important to state that we favor an understanding of CLs less oriented by the unveiling of privileges in a given text – as it seems to be conceived of in certain contexts as previously discussed – and more closely engaged with a problematizing practice. What does one consider in such an orientation? The text, the other, ourselves? What are <u>we</u> privileging in our reading of the other as we read ourselves? Our understandings of the student teachers' perceptions, ideas, practices; our own understandings of CLs (which might have altered a couple of times throughout our academic and professional experiences); and our own

understandings of the teaching practice we have carried out in our local contexts **make** a difference. To read our practices (and ourselves), we think through two recurrent concepts: the concept of critique per se, as well as the difficulties and dilemmas arising from such practices.

Firstly, it seems to be paramount to bear in mind the different understandings encompassed by the term "critical/critique", given that it has been one of the fundamental discussions put forward in our practices. Critique has been envisioned in a plethora of meanings. Monte Mór (2013), for example, leads us to a genealogical exercise on the word "critical" by attesting that such a notion has been revisited in the new literacy studies inasmuch as these see language as a social practice. Under such a premise, critique is no longer limited to the canon and all its encompassing complex thought; instead, a social critique – that living thing in people's social practices – is to be acknowledged. The way we see it, by placing critique within the social realm, Monte Mór seems to acknowledge our agentive capacity as critical citizens/readers, echoing Pennycook's notion of critique as a problematizing practice.

For Freire (2008) critique has to do with being conscious of the world around oneself (the process of reading the word and the world): "the *conscientização* is not based upon awareness, on the one hand, and the world, on the other; it is not a separation. On the contrary, it is based upon the world-awareness relationship" (FREIRE, 2008, p. 31).

Even though Pennycook (2001, p. 16.1) has affirmed that "The use of the term 'critical' (with its problematic claims and divisions) has perhaps reached saturation level," this paper claims that in some contexts – such as those studied here – designing pedagogies based upon critical perspectives in language education is imperative if we wish to deal with micro (classroom, curriculum, pedagogy) and macro relations (society, politics, culture, citizenship).

Secondly, little attention has been paid to 'what goes wrong' in our practices. Along with 'what goes wrong', difficulties, dilemmas, frustration, strangeness, disagreement, and criticism are some of the feelings to be avoided, for they compromise "the quality of education." Moreover, they would reveal lacks, gaps, and flaws in the educator's praxis, whcih is another reason why 'what goes wrong' is out of the educational agenda. It seems that the binary relation 'us' (teachers, educators, knowledgeable) and 'them' (students, ignorant) prevails. That being said, Jordão and Martinez (2015,

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p. 69) affirm that when we think of educational settings, especially schools, we perceive a process based upon the existence of a founding difference between "me" and the "Other". This difference is "conceived in binary terms which presupposes homogeneity." Based upon Mouffe (2013), the same authors go on to argue that this us-them relation, when understood in an antagonistic manner, has the potential to become a friend-enemy relation (JORDÃO; MARTINEZ, 2015, p. 70).

Allowing students to critique our theories and practices means we are encouraging a pedagogy of dissent, in which conflict is productive. In other words,

> Instead of desiring a world without conflicts – something that would deny the possibility of our being in the world – conceiving them (conflicts) as agonistic, as suggested by Mouffe (2013), promotes the negotiation of meanings in the middle of dissent, and the possibility of establishing new practices. (JORDÃO; MARTINEZ, 2015, p. 71).

Having briefly explored critique, difficulties, and dilemmas as key concepts departing from our pedagogical practices, it is high time we took a deep breath again and read ourselves by asking ourselves, out loud, some problematizing questions:

i)   What is critique/critical thinking/critical education after all? Are we (educators) the ones who determine (even if unconsciously) what critique means? Are we aware of our own ignorance and limitations? Is it important to unsettle the idea that **we** are the ones who provide critical work/education? For Pennycook, Sousa Santos, and Menezes de Souza, these questionings are the first and foremost attitudes of any work within critical perspectives.

ii) When we meet complimentary accounts in most of students' discourses, is it not a matter of pleasing one's professor by saying or writing exactly what she/he wants to hear if we consider that they are usually aware of the play imbued in regulatory evaluative practices? Taking a step further, do we eschew/shun/disregard our students' criticisms? To what extent do we not contradictorily make them echo our own voices in their responses to what they read in our classes?

iii) All too often, the dichotomy of methodological versus epistemological perspectives on CLs are left unexplored. Thus, have epistemologies been sidestepped in favor of methodological/practical views of CLs or has it

been the other way around? Have we turned CLs into another language teaching buzzword? For Monte Mór, the philosophy-epistemology-pedagogy-practice relations are crucial understandings in a work based on CLs.

iv) The fact that students rarely position themselves in relation to their own difficulties and dilemmas reveals a lot about the way we – the educators – have dealt with subjectivities and identities in the classroom. Do we allow the copresence of consensus and dissent in our classes? Do we see conflict, difficulties, dilemmas as productive? As we have stated throughout this paper, to avoid conflict, we often prize homogeneity, consensus, and the positiveness of the educational process.

v) Finally, how can we panhandle – together with our students – the feelings of anguish, frustration, and exhaustion of these recent, dark times as more and more snapshots arise every single day, everywhere? How do our feelings intersect? In this respect, our understandings of CLs acknowledge that the most valuable aspect to bear in mind here is the commitment to constant dislocation. If, on the one hand, in section two, we had instantly put ourselves in the other's shoes ("them"), on the other, we are now positioning ourselves as "us". Although this seems contradictory, being aware of those blurred and fluid identity formations seems to be a pre-condition for a self-critical literacy exercise. As Sousa Santos claims (2006, p. 462), "we have the right to be equals whenever difference makes us inferior; we have the right to be different whenever equality decharacterizes us."

All these questionings reveal the tensions of overlaps that lead to our probably most striking question: Do CLs suffice in face of new social, political demands? Do they have to? This is to be addressed in the last section.

5 (In)conclusions on Critical literacies: do they suffice? Do they have to suffice?

Our contemporary situation thus finds us between the modern and the postmodern, the old and the new, tradition and the contemporary, the global and the local, the universal and the particular, and any number of other competing matrixes. Such a complex situation produces feelings of vertigo, anxiety, and panic, and contemporary theory, art, politics and everyday life exhibit signs of all of these symptoms. To deal with these

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tensions, we need to develop new syntheses of modern and postmodern theory and politics to negotiate the novelties and intricacies of our current era.

Best and Kellner, 1998, p. 298

This paper attempted to discuss the very place of CLs in contemporary language education in the face of recent restraining neoconservative policies. Having departed from some sad and worrying snapshots in global and local spheres, we wished to address the issue by sharing our own anguish, frustration, and exhaustion as teacher educators in two different universities: What are we doing here? Is this the kind of critical work that has to be done towards a more just, democratic society? Would this CL orientation in my teacher education program suffice? Do CLs mean acting through the gaps in the curriculum in micro-relations (our very limited classroom borders)? Are we not safekeeping the status quo that has been conspicuous in promoting neoliberal-neoconservative forms of education? Would the macro-relations, the national movements which indeed reach educational policies in a broader sense, not be necessary at that moment? Is it a safe bet to assume that policies that institutionally include CLs and so many other educational perspectives – not only in language education, but most likely all curricular structures and teacher training – should be provided urgently? Instead of keeping them out of sight, those are the kinds of questions we constantly ask ourselves in our daily teaching practices which, actually, compelled us to this collaborative writing as a way to "face" ourselves, in Todd's terms (TODD, 2009).

There comes a moment in which some conclusion has to be drawn. In this respect, take a deep breath once again, deeper than the ones taken before. We are afraid we have some bad news, for now comes a new disturbance to the ground.

Indeed, we do not find ourselves able to list a series of answers to respond to the very dilemmas posed by this paper. Yet it is not enough to say nothing. For this reason, after having analyzed our local teacher education practices, we have come up with four orientations that seem to suit ourselves in the meantime, in our efforts to foster a critical orientation to language education that might contribute to some kind of social change. A brief comment on each of these is made here below:

i. *Opening up to the very contradictions within the field of CLs by acknowledging, "from the inside out", what has worked so far and what needs to be revised so as to overcome any dichotomist view of micro and macropolitics in education.*

Back in the late 1900s, Best and Kellner (1998) had compared and contrasted the features concerning both modern and postmodern politics. As they claim:

> The modern emphasis on collective struggle, solidarity, and alliance politics gave way to extreme fragmentation, as the "movement" of the 1960s splintered into various competing struggles for rights and liberties. The previous emphasis on transforming the public sphere and institutions of domination gave way to new emphases on culture, personal identity, and everyday life, as macropolitics were replaced by the micropolitics of local transformation and subjectivity. (BEST; KELLNER, 1998, p. 285).

According to these authors, although micropolitics and local struggles have positively replaced utopian and totalitarian political projects, some postmodern studies seem to neglect the fact that their major targets to be combated (such as political power and oppression) had once been precisely the major targets in some modern projects. Such an understanding has led the authors to advocate in favor of a politics of alliance and solidarity that builds on both modern and postmodern traditions. In other words, Best and Kellner claim that a new politics needs to overcome the "either/or" logic under the binary opposition micro versus macro by conceiving them as both important for the struggles of the present and the future. The one-sided position which only favors local struggles does not seem to suffice insofar as:

> [W]hile today we need the expansion of localized cultural practices, they attain their real significance only within the struggle for the transformation of society as a whole. Without this systemic emphasis, cultural and identity politics remain confined to the margins of society and are in danger of degenerating into narcissism, hedonism, estheticism, or personal therapy, where they pose no danger and are immediately coopted by the culture industries. (BEST; KELLNER, 1998, p. 285).

By bringing the authors' argument closer to CL studies, we do acknowledge the value of CLs as a problematizing local practice, developed in the gaps of the curriculum (DUBOC, 2013, 2014), in those small spaces and places (MORGAN, 2010), in the very instants or points of significance

being transformed into critical moments (PENNYCOOK, 2004), much like those that we have been fostering in our own teaching practices. Still, we also find ourselves in a moment in which we end up questioning whether such localized practices suffice if one considers that one of the key responsibilities regarding critical education is related to justice, democracy, and social change. Does that mean we will stop unveiling and deconstructing values, ideas, perceptions, and practices among our student teachers in the very gaps within the curriculum? Certainly not! Nevertheless, we cannot deny a certain degree of anxiety and frustration whenever we face every another snapshot taken directly in front of us and constantly leading us to question ourselves in relation to the real impact of our pedagogical choices.

ii. *Infiltrating key institutional agencies and spaces (educational planning and policy making, the textbook industry, and Teacher Education programs) towards a strategic systemic change.*

If CLs as problematizing practice within the school or the classroom realm does not seem to suffice for some, it is therefore time to seek room for a systemic change, as advocated by Best and Kellner (1998). In this respect, we see broad aspects, such as educational planning and policy making, the textbook industry, and teacher education programs as potential institutional agencies or spaces for a CL-oriented and planned action in which CLs might become the founding principle in discussions regarding language, culture, identity, and education. Although the term might sound problematic, the word "infiltrate" has been deliberately chosen, as we witness a great deal of teachers[13] and teacher educators acting subversively in face of a neoliberal educational agenda clearly founded on homogeneity, normatization, universalism, and censorship.[14] It is high time we found those institutionalized agencies and spaces so that CLs can begin to circulate as a legitimate framework aimed at an inclusive, democratic language

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[13] An example of such an infiltrating, subversive action might be seen in the recent curriculum design project run by the right-wing Secretary of Education of the city of Sao Paulo in which teachers who had been co-authors of a former critical, decolonizing curriculum are now facing the hard task of designing a homogenizing and linear curriculum. According to personal accounts, despite all difficulties, some of the teachers are joining the process in order to try to preserve the founding principles of the former curriculum.

[14] As it seems to be the case of the National Common Core Curriculum, the High School Reform, and the polemic School Without Party movement, as previously discussed.

education. Without such a systemic change, the epistemic breaks advocated by Kumaravadivelu (2012) against the dominant Western-based framework will hardly come to pass.

iii. *Making strategic use of the potentialities brought by social media with regard to knowledge production, circulation, and consumption by embracing new ways of activism in digital societies.*

Besides acknowledging CLs as micro-resistances within the classroom, as well as advocating in favor of strategic agencies in policy making, the textbook industry, and teacher education programs, the place of CLs in today's societies seems to gain momentum when one considers the potentialities of social media and the new ways of activism.

Considering that the news apparatus is today "a many-headed hydra with literally millions of channels, websites, social media feeds" (HARSIN, 2015), CLs scholars must take part in this new participatory social media politics inasmuch as social media now functions as a potential space for critique and intervention.

Ciberactivism, net-activism, online activism: those are some of the emerging neologisms that focus on the new social action in digital contexts. As Di Felici (2012) explains, this kind of media activism sees new communication technologies as a valuable asset for the strengthening of local and global organizations, community/collaborative fundraising, protests of many kinds, petitions, and the like. Ciberactivism, thus, refers to a strategic way of using the Internet to support global movements and local causes. An important aspect to bear in mind is the fact that:

> What constitutes a characteristic of cyber-activism, or online activism, is not the simple incorporation of the Internet into the activism communicative processes, but the inclusion of the ways in which this communicative technology has substantially transformed activism itself and the concepts of participation, democratic space, collective identity and political strategy, implying a significant change in the forms of social action put forward by cyber-conservative movements (McCAUGHEY; AYERS, 2003 *apud* Di FELICI, 2012).

From our viewpoint, CL scholars could highly benefit from ciberactivism by creating collective online spaces to share ideas and practices. Beyond the creation of personal blogs or webpages or restricted Facebook communities, we are referring to open spaces in which CL knowledge

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production would freely circulate among researchers, teachers, and student teachers seeking to reflect on theories and practices regarding a critical orientation to education.

iv. *Fostering a sense of belonging among the language teacher professional community with an emphasis on its agentive capacity.*

Our last orientation is of an intersubjective nature as it refers to the need to foster the notion of a "professional community" among language teachers as a pre-condition for agency. In this sense, we believe the more the teacher wishes to belong to a professional community, the more he/ she is able to engage and act critically. Our argument seeks support in Kumaravadivelu (2014, p. 15-16), in particular, his claim for the "subaltern teachers" to act otherwise:

> If the professional community is serious about disrupting, if not dismantling, the hegemonic power structure, it must resolve not only to think otherwise, but also to act otherwise. (…) In other words, merely tinkering with the existing hegemonic system will not work; only a fundamental epistemological rupture will. To begin to effect this rupture, the subaltern community has to unfreeze and activate its latent **agentive capacity**, and strive to derive a set of concerted, coordinated, and collective actions based not on the logic of coloniality but on a grammar of decoloniality.

Birds of a feather flock together, says the proverb. It is not high time we attentively read ourselves as we read the other so that we can discuss, problematize, and revise our own understandings of CLs and correlated themes; it is high time we humbly listen to the other as we listen to ourselves whenever we pose our own understandings of CLs as given truths, as if any different understanding of ours would not suffice. In this respect, do CLs have to suffice? Probably not. Meanwhile, by the time we are about to finish this paper, a new striking snapshot must be on the news feeding the anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion felt by many of us. Did you think that we were ending this paper with our breaths taken away due to such a pessimist view on us and everything? Not exactly. Paying justice to one of the pillars of CLs, we find some shelter in Freire's wise words of hope:

> Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and become a distortion of that ontological need. When it becomes a program, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We

succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will recreate the world. I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative.

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