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## Deciphering Babel: Dis/locations of the Professional Self and the Second Language Curriculum

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## Deciphering Babel: Dis/locations of the Professional Self and the Second Language Curriculum

### Abstract

In the following (auto) ethnographic study, I draw from Burdick's (2012) analogy of qualitative research as "auto - archeology" and from parrhesia (Foucault, 1988) as a rhetorical device of self - definition and preservation to explore the interplay of power and identity within the context of second language education discourses. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which, through the creation of particular performative strategies, two educators working within the context of Liberal Arts institutions negotiate, construct and resist the everyday pressures and implied prejudices often associated with the curriculum and instruction of second languages in the United States. I conclude this study by arguing that the examination of how institutional power is reflected in teachers' narratives is essential to the achievement of a better understanding of the lack of solidarity among the professoriate as well as the disconnect between authority, theory and praxis in the exercise of the second language profession

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Language Education and Democracy, Identity, Parrhesia

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## Deciphering Babel: Dis/locations of the Professional Self and the Second Language Curriculum

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*In the following (auto) ethnographic study, I draw from Burdick's (2012) analogy of qualitative research as "auto-archeology" and from parrhesia (Foucault, 1988) as a rhetorical device of self-definition and preservation to explore the interplay of power and identity within the context of second language education discourses. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which, through the creation of particular performative strategies, two educators working within the context of Liberal Arts institutions negotiate, construct and resist the everyday pressures and implied prejudices often associated with the curriculum and instruction of second languages in the United States. I conclude this study by arguing that the examination of how institutional power is reflected in teachers' narratives is essential to the achievement of a better understanding of the lack of solidarity among the professoriate as well as the disconnect between authority, theory and praxis in the exercise of the second language profession. Keywords: Autoethnography, Language Education and Democracy, Identity, Parrhesia*

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We are all collateral damage of someone's beautiful ideology, all of us inanimate in the face  
of the onslaught.  
(Benjamin Alire Sáenz, "Confessions: My Father, Hummingbirds, and Franz Fanon")

The understanding of the social is always determined by the understanding of individuals.  
(Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the World and the Word*)

You don't know a thing about their lives / They live where you wouldn't dare to drive / You  
shake as you think of how they sleep / But you write as if you all lie side by side / Reader,  
meet Author / With the hope of hearing sense / But you may be feeling let down / By the  
words of defense / He says "No-one ever sees me when I cry" ("Reader, Meet Author," S.  
Morrissey)

### Prelude

Like many academic *braceros* before me, I was welcomed as a graduate student to the United States almost fifteen years ago. At the time I was interested in studying Chicano literature, a cultural phenomenon about which, as a Brazilian, I knew very little. My real "American" education on Hispanic otherness began, nonetheless, not at the university as I had previously envisioned, but at the Atlanta International Airport where, immediately upon my arrival, I was interrogated as to the true purposes of my presence in the country. A customs officer, examining *mis papeles/meus papéis* – a word that since then has come to signify so much to me – surprised, and quite suspiciously, asked, "Are you coming to the U.S. to study Spanish?" I knew that my answer had to be a confident and economical "yes," meant to leave underdeveloped any kind of complex response and self-revelation. I distinctly remember wondering why my visa and the bureaucratic *via crucis* I had undergone months prior to my arrival did not suffice. I was still being called upon to endorse what my papers already told about me, the truth about the legality of my existence, thereafter always to be caught in a "neither here nor there" moment.

## **Re-Humanizing Language Educators and Language Education**

In what follows I am interested in reflecting upon how language teachers, particularly teachers of Spanish, are institutionally dispossessed of their rights to practice and perform as educators outside normative parameters characterizing the dichotomous institutional “life” of the Spanish curriculum (i.e., its distinctive literature vs. language paradigm, the debates surrounding second languages as a discrete skill vs. their quality as a national language, etc.) While the following sections of this essay convey the experiences and reactions between another educator and me working at different Liberal Arts institutions, the insights and conclusions to be drawn from our exchanges are not limited to a specific locality.

The qualitative data presented in this paper highlights the difficult challenges that the field of Second Language Curriculum and Instruction faces amidst postmodern skepticism concerning how knowledge is conceptualized. Some of these challenges relate directly to questions such as, How to include and recognize subaltern populations in the construction of knowledge within institutionalized education (Freire 1987)? How to identify those agents involved in the decisions about what counts as knowledge in the curriculum, its purpose and “worth” within capitalism’s structure (Apple 1990; Giroux 2001; McLaren 2005)? What constitutes knowledge that is in service of power within education (Pinar, 1995)? Certainly, throughout the vignettes that follow, it will become clear to reader that the field of Second Language Instruction – whether English as a Second Language or Foreign Languages – has been unable to move beyond a “stuck” place within multiculturalism’s discussions, which confirms the aforementioned questions as part of a problematic reality. The role of language in a pluralistic society continues to be dichotomized and displaced to a “foreign” reality in which English is reaffirmed as the sole language of the nation’s identity. The modernistic impetus of Second Language Teaching continues to be that of reinstating ideological practices through the forging of linguistic cartographies more interested in framing reality as an inescapable truth rather than as an exercise in possibility.

### **Notes on Method**

My desire herein to produce what Burdick (2012) has termed the “auto-archeological” text derives, at least in part, from what I believe to be language educators’ responsibility to bear witness to those ideological constraints present in the curriculum. It is my experience that these constraints have been leading educators to hopelessness, powerlessness and the perception that things cannot change for the better. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of the historical, genealogical nature of knowledge, Burdick stresses that any project of locating and analyzing one’s past through writing restructures revelatory experiences, ideas, and emotions at play within biographical texts. These texts look for “latent desirous impetuses in the language one produces” (Burdick, 2012, p. 15). The auto-archeological text, however, does not represent, an “attempt at imposing a final, analytical/critical reading of [one’s] past as a heuristic for the rest of the text, but rather, as a means of foregrounding and reflecting upon ... memory of being inside/outside of schooling and culture ... the psycho-social forces that potentially undergird [one’s] critical perspective” (p. 15).

The narratives that follow constitute a textual space in which my “self-examination and the fleeting impressions it produces upon readers are capable of exploring the certainties of my consciousness in relationship to the objective of my writing” (Goodall, 2000, Loc. 42). My intention in claiming – and to a certain extent disclaiming – auto/ethnography as a methodological approach corresponds to a desire to determine the performative nature of a text that derives from my confessions while disclosing the pleasure that results in the revelation of my Self through writing. In this sense, auto/ethnography constitutes a public

performance in which the “outsider” perspective sees him/herself “*through and as the other*” (Alexander, 2005, p. 423). As Goodall (2000) notes, the goal of writing any type of ethnographic work is to express patterns recognized during fieldwork (Loc. 44-45). Likewise, the disclosure of the counterpoint between the voice of the producer and his or her text critically reveals the epistemological limitations present in the relationship between researchers and writing precisely because of the author’s inscription as subject and object of research. The analysis of the counterpoint between text and writer buttresses the auto/ethnographical space’s openness for intervention against the rigidity of positivist scientific discourses that often deny performance’s existence through the elusive distance between subject and researcher. On this matter, Diversi and Moreira assert that,

the body of the researcher-writer is always present in the research-writing act. And this presence ... is always shaped by how the researcher-writer’s body is treated in the physical world. Merely claiming to be a postcolonial researcher-teacher-writer isn’t enough to achieve a decolonizing praxis. This claim needs to come from an embodied narrative. If your scars are in places you can’t show, as in the mind, then tell us the story of your scars. Your body, in-between the colonial and postcolonial experience, will then become present in your narrative praxis. (p. 208)

Apart from the skepticism that the ethnographic tradition in its various strands might suggest, which is still under stern epistemological scrutiny (Hughes et al., 2012), the genre does play an important role in decolonizing curricula claimed as “scientific,” because it underscores the flux of power in the agency of truth-telling. The mapping of truth-telling as an academic praxis delineates a world existing “between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouncement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection and [possibility of] change” (Jones, 2005, p. 764). The episodes portrayed in the following sections, therefore, illustrate my conscious attempts to speak and write from within the tension present between the “incomplete personal evolution and the desire for complete scholarly arrival” (Goodal, 2000, loc. 43).

### **Notes on Data Collection and Analysis**

The data gathered for this study encompasses registered conversations, notes and personal electronic communications. Otherwise indicated as email exchanges, all the remaining texts are transcribed from interviews and informal conversations that took place in the course of an academic year (2012-13). I have translated these texts from their original in Spanish. When selecting data for this study, I was particularly interested in exchanges that conveyed meaningful insights, feelings and impressions related to the institutional pressures characteristic of the Second Language Teaching’s positivist tradition. I was attentive to moments where our discussions reported problems that educators face when attempting to adhere to the prescriptivism of methods and traditional scholarship, the skepticism towards peer-review systems and the emotional impact of performance evaluations on classroom decisions. My colleague featured in this study was fully aware of my intentions to use our professional and social interactions in an auto/ethnographic study. She gave me her full consent before and after reading the final versions of this paper. Hence, no IRB approval was necessary. All names cited herein are pseudonyms.

It is my hope that the reader will identify within the corpus of this study the linguistic artifices that characterize the textual *jornadas* as meta-narratives. The episodes recounted here are driven by oscillating categories of speech that allow rigorous analysis to emerge

from the accounts themselves, as is commonly the case of arts-based research and auto/ethnographies. These research modalities purposefully reflect upon culture departing from how the researcher embodies it in full disclosure, “witnessing experience and testifying about power without foreclosure – of pleasure, of difference, of efficacy” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765).

It is well to acknowledge, however, that the data presented throughout this paper corresponds to analytical instances to be ultimately sanctioned or rejected by the reader’s very involvement in the process of interpretation. I do obviate in the concluding remarks section a brief summary of my self-reflective notes, which will underscore my own perspective on the meaning of the Second Language Teaching profession and my own place within its institutional “life.” This act constitutes a form of Foucaultian parrhesia that dares to exercise – without moral trepidation and aware of the risks involved in such a task – a counter-discourse to what language created for education does when left unchallenged by either fear or deliberate acquiescence to normative paradigms in teaching within institutional settings.

### **A Note to the Reader**

Since beginning my life in the academic world of *El norte*, I have undertaken the arduous task of writing through my Other’s language as a way to reflectively understand my own history as an educator; not because writing is necessarily required of me, or because I am particularly good at it, but rather because I desire to translate to my ir/rational self, my immigrant dis/continued self, those feelings I can only express in my mother tongue. I also write to my Other in hopes of making sense of the complexities of my dialectical existence between languages, belonging and not belonging, ciphering and deciphering my many identities while negotiating my existence within the spaces I come to inhabit. In many ways, what follows constitutes an exercise in sense-making out of those problems currently inherent to the language teaching profession.

In the several drafts that anteceded the “final” version of this essay, many colleagues in the Language Arts inquired if the problems I was describing here were different from those faced by many educators when teaching first language literacy. As this essay will illustrate, most of the struggles in language curricula and instruction are not specific to first or second languages. Yet, I do not wish to generalize any particulars, but rather denote how the particularization of what is perceived as general (i.e. traditional scholarship and views on language normativity) affects individuals’ sense of professional selfhood. The narratives of my own struggles with/in the post-coloniality of the language profession will hopefully underscore some of the patterns that reveal those subtle ideological issues contributing to what Skuttnab-Kangas (2000) and others denounce as “linguistic genocide.” This unwarranted ideological component that is characteristic of the language education curriculum today, if left unexamined, represents a real a threat to the civic pluralism and linguistic biodiversity essential to our communal life and attempted democratic living.

### **(Auto) Biographical Jornadas**

#### ***Whose language is it anyways?***

The funny thing is they are trying to teach us how to teach our own language,” said Leila.

I nodded; after all, I was as frustrated as she was, even though the “our language” statement bothered me a little. Who does language belong to? What did “language” even mean, according to her? What did its deliberate use do to us? What could it do?

Leila and I had come to the United States almost two decades ago to build our careers as intellectual *braceros*, as my classmates and I jokingly referred to ourselves during graduate school. Back then, as T.A.s, we taught Spanish to the masses for eight hundred dollars a month. We were rich, comparatively speaking, since teachers in our respective countries earned less than half of that amount and taught twice as many classes than we did.

Throughout the years that Leila and I have been friends, exchanges on the meaning of our profession, what we had done and would be doing with our lives, our multiple statements on “that’s it, I am leaving academia” became liturgical. We resisted what at times appeared to be invisible institutional pressures in hopes that we would not be like “them.” We took pleasure as self-proclaimed outsiders, attempting desperately not to identify with the majority of our colleagues. This made us feel superior; it legitimized our search to become professionals outside the norm, to retain a sense of integrity through our rebellion, our youth. We both had doubts on the nature and curricular organization of the very subject we taught. Yet we moved within curricular and institutional boundaries wondering how the grammar of our professional selves turned more and more into some form of alien semiotics each day that went by, disciplining and punishing our professional beings in most unexpected and unperceptive ways.

### ***I Want to Teach Language as a Literary Critic***

“*Ridículo*,” Leila writes to me on my Facebook’s private message board. Facebook chats these days have become a therapy room for us, both going through the motions of the tenure process at different institutions. We were awkward bodies working within an awkward system.

“These people reviewing us,” Leila continued, “they have this idea on what a good instructor should be and then they wish you to be like them, you know? It’s like they *rewrite* us as they judge us as ‘peers’. The whole process is never dialogical; it always involves secrecy in the name of an alleged protection. You are never good enough. You can never do everything right, even if remotely rightly. The system is designed for this. Have you stopped to think why language [teaching] is so concerned with methods? They told me in my peer-review evaluation that I gave too much homework and that I should ease up on those kids because they have too much to do, that they are too busy! And then there is the “communicative approach” this, that, effective on this, and that... All this crap not only sanctioned but also endorsed by ACTFL [American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages]. What approach isn’t communicative? I don’t know, to me language teaching was always about management and defeat of linguistic phenomena and their realities, not the constant testing and the predictability of imagined scenarios that may never come to materialize when language happens in the real world. Shouldn’t we be providing opportunities and support for students to heuristically deal with problems that emerge in the unknowing, providing themes and managing their readings, questioning their realities? I don’t believe in what they define as ‘technique;’ there’s no space for being critical; students just learn things in the realms of ‘kind of have an idea about what I’m saying.’ Sancho, I don’t believe in most of these methods created for ESL classes. I teach Spanish! I want them to learn how to be researchers, to learn how to learn, to be independent enough that one day they will be able to design challenges on their own and all I have to do is to defeat their perception, problematize their answers, help with connections...”

### ***We are not a civilization***

“I’m teaching Latin American Civilization next semester,” said Leila in a sarcastic tone during one of our meetings. “Civilization, that’s rich! We are now a civilization, the Latin American Civilization. We got our own status quo now concerning historical validity. Check us out. I wonder, is this a step up from... what did we use to be? A tribe?” Leila continued indignantly, “there were no pyramids in my country last time I checked...”

“But if we refuse to teach this course, as out of place or idiotic as it may be within the curriculum, we would be fired upon review,” I refuted.

“I am fed up with this s---,” said Leila. “This profession’s either killing me or I am contributing to the ‘foreign’ languages death. Quite frankly, I don’t know what I am doing anymore. Meanwhile, I keep asking myself, what’s happening to my teaching? What’s happening to my learning?”

“Probably the same that’s happening to mine”, I replied matter-of-factly. “But cheer up; at least we’re not high school teachers. They got it much worse than us these days.”

“Do they, really?” she asked.

### ***“We Teach Culture,” said the Language Professor***

“We teach culture. The administration and the whole faculty in this school must understand that this is what we do. We teach culture!” said Suely, one of Leila’s colleagues, in the middle of her departmental meeting. Leila and I had been talking about the absurdities of Departmental meetings, their lack of direction and, quite often, leadership.

During the “I teach culture” meeting Leila kept wondering how it was indeed possible to teach culture. As a junior faculty member she was often apprehensive about voicing her opinions against those of the senior faculty. On more than one occasion our names had been mentioned in collusion with the word “junior,” and that made us feel somewhat uncomfortable.

“I am 38, for f—‘s sake! They call me Junior, as if I were a child, the son of someone and not my own person!” I said.

“Semantics,” she replied. Back in our countries we were not juniors but rather “*asistentes*” or “*adjuntos*.”

According to Leila, professors at her department self-identified as educators of a “teaching institution” while being clueless themselves about educational scholarship, never having picked up an article on the very subjects they discussed. “Aren’t we supposed to do something about this knowledge business at the University?” she asked. “I understand scholarship may take various forms, but we are to produce knowledge, no? Isn’t this at the core of who we are? Otherwise why would we be in college rather than, say, grade school?”

I knew it all too well. We all knew how these happenings we called meetings worked and how the lip service to research was often vague at our institutions.

On one occasion, I told Leila how I got fed up with the curricular discussion the department had been having for years – or decades, according to some of her colleagues. Once, in a moment of pure impulsiveness, I got up and, using a purposeful self-deprecating rhetoric – my assumedly fake self-modesty constituted “the shield” of the untenured – I argued:

“Excuse me. I know I am new here, but what do you all mean by teaching culture? I mean, beyond factoids that some of us ask from students in exams, what do we really mean by ‘teaching culture?’ I told them that I am comfortable teaching the culture of language, but the language of culture seems to me another business altogether. We all went to school to be

literary critics, to learn how to analyze discourse, and this is a specific culture in itself that cannot be disassociated from the modern State ideology. This is already something problematic in itself, especially in the twenty-first century. Claiming that we teach culture, well, it's a complicated affair, no? Folks in anthropology have been redefining what this means, and quite frankly, we teach literary, erudite language, the language in/of power through literature, culture as discourse, etc. But culture as a totalitarian subject, representing the whole of particular geographies, like, say, tacos, El Día de los Muertos? Well, that's kind of dangerous and disingenuous, no? We risk confirming stereotypes albeit denying doing so. We have the English Department and the Modern Languages Department in this school. What is that? Is that logical?"

I told Leila that I wish I had used a different word than "disingenuous," but apparently it was too late.

As she communicated to me her frustrations with her colleagues' assumptions on language and identity, I wondered how many knew how this curriculum they spoke of so authoritatively had come into being, how the foreign languages profession, the academic foreign languages departments, were battling their connotation as service-driven units by further putting themselves into a messy situation. What are we these days? Cultural Studies? Literature? Languages? What's the difference? Should these disciplines even be different?

I wondered how many language and literature folks knew how their identity crisis as service providers in the curriculum was generating the wave of low self-esteem among the faculty. Sure, it was fancier to state that one taught Chinese or Spanish culture and literature rather than language, because the "brand" language in field was so limiting, so technocratic – at least the way we do it – so beneath college professors with Ph.Ds. in literature. No one will admit to this, but could it be that secretly most of us buy into the idea that anyone who speaks a language can teach it, somehow, but to teach literature? No. Literature was special, specialized: literature was for intellectual giants. I understood Leila's colleagues' "culture claim" to mean that they wanted to be giants, feared like those folks in the Economics Department. Nobody feared the foreign language class. It was a fun class, after all.

### *Of student opinion surveys and their technologies of control*

Leila had told me that her students wrote in their evaluations they could not understand her. *Las malditas evaluaciones* reflected a lack of communication of difference that she was consciously aware of. She purposefully modified her lesson plans to bring out her heritage. It was her world, one she knew well. But somehow Spanish was something else that she gradually had to learn without ever quite grasping what that "normativity" really meant.

"Why do they hate me, Sancho? What have I done to deserve this?" asked Leila humorously alluding to Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's 1984 film.

"Don't take it so personal," I interjected. "You just need to keep pushing play, keep the dialogical channels open."

"Dialogical channels? Bella, mind you, came to observe me today. Look at what my 'esteemed' colleague wrote in my evaluation – and this is coming from my peer. Leila opened an envelope and showed me a report in which the following was written: "*I am concerned about your skills in time management. I feel all in all that you didn't give them the bang for their bucks, that you did not conduct the class with the variety of activities required for effective teaching. I urge you to pay attention to...*"

The text sounded all too familiar. I had myself been observed numerous times, and I also had been told in more than one occasion throughout my academic life that my classes didn't give students "enough bang for their buck." I was reminded of a colleague of mine at

another institution who observed me once saying this phrase, “enough bang for their buck.” He happened to be the head of my department at the time, and I remember thinking then that he understood what was necessary to please our customers. He mentioned that if you promised a vacuum cleaner to students, you should deliver on exactly what you promised. He was referring to my customary habit of changing syllabi, a practice that I still hold necessary to this date, as I usually negotiate syllabi based on topics, communicative goals and common interests. He thought it would be advisable not to change syllabi so frequently, because it was, after all, a contract to be respected, and language is to be learned sequentially. I disagreed. Recent studies do as well.

I kept my eyes on Leila’s text. I proceeded to count the many times the words “efficiency” and “time-management” appeared on her observation. I felt precisely as discouraged as she did, because I too cared about what my “superiors” said and I too was afraid of becoming a horrible caricature of an Almodóvar character.

I distinctly remember sharing my own evaluations and peer observations with Leila. My students often thought that there was no routine, no “structure”. So many contradictions were expressed in the evaluations every semester that it was difficult to know exactly what I was doing right or wrong. It was always fifty-fifty with my courses; some loved the freedom, others hated it passionately. This confused me. Throw in grading in the mix and we would have, at the end of every semester, an explosive incongruous combination: freedom and grading. “We have to have fun,” students demanded in some of their evaluations, “so that we can learn better.” Fun? It was not my role as an instructor to be fun, but rather to show that the information we presented had the potential to become whatever students wanted it to be, including fun. The mythology of the Spanish circus language classroom went on in spite of my best efforts to dissipate this aura surrounding the discipline.

“Today Bella played Bingo with her college students and boasted to everyone how effective it was to have students learn new vocabulary through games. I swear to you. In college! Are we doing something wrong?”

“I wish,” I responded.

### ***J’accuse!***

“Sancho, I got my Departmental Personnel Committee’s evaluation about my tenure case today,” Leila wrote to me on Facebook’s chat. “Discouraging. They basically stated that I should be mindful of students who don’t care about learning Spanish and make things less challenging for them. Read for yourself. I just sent you the attachment.”

I began reading the document. It struck me as contradictory and written in many voices and styles. At Leila’s institution all tenured faculty participated in the reviews; her department had twelve, full-time tenured instructors. One particular section of the document she sent me struck as odd:

*“In SPAN 456 (senior seminar), the timing of assignments and evaluation drew criticism from several students, such as the following: “She piled on extensive coursework. The workload in this course was so heavy that many students found themselves overwhelmed to such an extent that catching up seemed impossible.” Of a mid-term exam, one student writes, “we were expected to bring new articles to class and incorporate them into an hour-long essay. Due to the variance of the articles selected and the nature of the questions, I found that I, and virtually all of my peers, were not given enough time to correspond with the requirements of the exam.” Of the same exam another student explains that “the test itself would have been okay as a take-home exam, but the format most definitely resembled a research paper - citing 2 in class sources and 2 outside sources- and using the MLA format - and writing two essays in the period of one hour was unrealistic....” Another student of the*

*seminar concludes the following: "There is nothing wrong with having high expectations, but I don't think most of us were willing to put in the effort that she wanted us to put into class." The DPC feels that this last comment is worth considering as Leila plans future courses. There may be a small minority of highly dedicated, autonomous learners who take her courses and thrive, but Leila needs to better accommodate those students who represent the majority in her classes, who may have less than ideal motivations and aspirations, yet are still deserving of benefitting to the fullest extent possible from their in-class experience."*

"You see, Sancho?" Leila typed indignantly. "You see? They say, "*Leila needs to better accommodate those students who represent the majority in her classes, who may have less than ideal motivations and aspirations, yet are still deserving of benefitting to the fullest extent possible from their in-class experience.*" Can you understand this? Is this real? Ethical? The DPC had my syllabus in hand, my teaching rationale too. The class was a seminar, supposed to be challenging! They have to show that they earned that degree, for God's sake. And you know the amount of work is manageable. They know it too. But no, they side with the students. And these are our colleagues! I can expect that from administrator, but from our colleagues?"

"This is clearly my WTF moment of the day, *colega*," I typed.

"I live my WTF moment every single day when I step inside my classrooms," she replied. "They call me *Señora Martínez*, you know? My students... You see how respectable? I am a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman in her forties with seven children and living with my husband in a plantation. I explained what that *señora* meant to me, in certain contexts. They don't care. They called their Spanish teacher in high school *señora* and they will continue to treat me like their old mom or their high school teacher. Why will I fight them on this? God, I feel old."

### ***En gard! Emailing Despair as Defense against the Dark Arts***

Querido Sancho,

Bella is still mad at me because I don't send my students to her movie showings; she even included a buffet on Sunday to attract an audience.

Spanish films on Sunday night, good enough for me.

Bella told me I should ask questions about the film on the test. It is a good way to have them come. Control, control, control... She says they will thank me later in life. How does she know the future? Is that some superpower tenure affords us?

I am sick and tired of this coercion. I can't do anything because she is on my tenure committee. No wonder even professors want to get rid of tenure, with bullying and all. It's not because I don't get what I want that I am unhappy; it's because I can't become what I wish to inside the classroom.

But I won't generalize. Most of my colleagues are really good people, but they seem so beat up by the system that I can't help but to feel sorry. I can see they once had the pleasure to fight for their truth, the pleasure I seem to be gradually losing. I am getting tired, you know? I think this tenure process is all about the loss of our hope for a better world. I keep wondering, How am I emptied? Is it all the grading I am doing? Is it satisfying this image of an Other that I have to uphold as a competent teacher?

\*\*\*

Sancho,

I just told a few students of my seminar yesterday that they CANNOT PLAY JEOPARDY for their oral presentation on Carlos Fuentes, even though they think that is

more engaging (they didn't even know or researched how to say 'engaged' in Spanish. I imagine what would happened if I, as a Spanish speaker, behaved like that in my English-speaking classes, if I demanded to be heard in my own language, refused to learn a word...) This is what they think of Spanish. Sad, Sancho, my friend. Sad...

\*\*\*

Leila,

Here I go again. Angustias parachuted in my classroom a couple of times to say how I did things wrong, and that I needed improvement. I remember thinking that someone must have been particularly cruel to her in her past. I remember wishing that I wouldn't end my days as a teacher as intellectually neglectful as her, stuck in a liberal arts college without an ounce of research done to further my own knowledge, enveloped in the assessment mentality dictated by quizzes and papers, the learning of an other to the expense of my own learning (is that even learning?), an institutional slave at best, one whose notion of service was organizing food festivals and *El día de los muertos* celebrations, maybe film showings. Here we go again, Mexico as the holy synecdoche, we Latinos must turn into "pagan" Aztecs before becoming whomever we were, are, wish to become... But you know the drill: *Más bananas! Más! Ay...*

\*\*\*

Sancho,

I am watching Sor Juana's movie to discuss it with my students tomorrow. I feel like her when she had to defend herself from the Church's attacks on her desire to write profanely; this was me during my Interim Review. I would look at my colleagues, their judgment of my work, and I would ask, "Why thou accusest me?"

Ahhhh! I was so depressed today, all day long correcting quizzes. I have to change this strategy. My students' proficiency for this level is really bad, but I don't even know what is to expect because people around here don't talk as a team. Alas, I am not going to turn into one of those 60s actress, doped because she can't handle *los pendejos de la vida!* But I did take some barbiturates and I am still awake. Charly García is singing on the computer... Tomorrow's menu: committee work. If they put me in another one I will cut my veins with a spoon, and they can serve themselves with my blood! What do I care?

Off I go now. I have to meditate to calm myself down prepping for these stupid meetings, because if not one of my senior colleagues, who is allegedly going through menopause (and that's an excuse now to make our whole lives a living hell) will say something awful and I will lose my patience and my job. God, I can't stand her. We should give her a last name, like Falklands. This was my specialty in graduate school, did you know? Yeah, I gave people last names and claimed that circus monkeys had sodomized them to explain their bitterness. It didn't matter if they were men or women. They were victims of my own perversions. Call it 'Fifty Shades of Leila'. That's Harry Potter compared to what I used to write. I used to be free...

Well, I am going to bed and dream that I'm happy.

### ***You Can't Miss a Day***

One evening, Leila and I had been talking about academia over the phone, as always, about our sanity, wandering through conversational topics, wondering about our future.

“We all suffer from low self-esteem. This is why I take pills, and that takes care of that,” said Leila when I expressed my astonishment at learning that a great percentage of academics are on antidepressants or have been for most of their academic lives.

When she mentioned the efficacy of medication in the context of our professional lives I understood her really, really well. I understood her technologies of selfhood (and I had my own), the institutional demands requiring from us cunning decisions, compelling us to decide what kind of educators we ‘can’ become by forcing us to negotiate with the weight of tradition in order to fit into particular institutional profile. Yet, there were prices to pay and coping needs to be met in this careful crafting of our professional selves. Thankfully, technology has evolved to the point of good medication saving academic lives, except when they fail, of course, as was the case of a Science professor in Huntsville, who shot dead three of her colleagues when denied tenure.

“Clearly her meds weren’t working,” I told Leila.

“You can’t miss a day,” she said.

### *Apotheosis*

As I entered the Faculty Colloquium that evening, I reviewed the words I was to use in my presentation. I was scheduled to talk about technologies of control in language teaching and learning. ‘How can I keep this professional?’ I wondered. ‘How to state the facts and yet be sensitive to those who unconsciously (?) oppress, who do not realize (?) that we are living in a different moment in the teaching of languages, that we already went through, and perhaps past, postmodernism? Yet, Applied Linguistics still attaches itself to modernism’s episteme.

Surely I wanted to unmake the image of junior faculty either as too acquiescent or too defiant, a potential academic enfant terrible that somehow manages to isolate him/herself from the world by shutting down avenues for conversation with more experienced [old] colleagues. But what I really wanted was Anzaldúa’s *nepantla*, that alternative path of struggle and creativity enabling the construction of strategies for survival AND transformation by simply demanding that I was met halfway. I wanted to walk, somewhere, anywhere, and build bridges while going forth towards the unknown. I was tired of asking questions to which I had already the answer, but nevertheless felt compelled to by what I understood as science. I did not want to attack; I wished to critically reflect upon the weight of tradition and I wanted to understand how it became part of me in the first place. I wanted to talk about human interaction, Freire, relationships, the role of the learner and the teacher in dialogue, which cannot be but the core of language learning. I wanted to find method in the historical encounter of every classroom by stressing the results of choices as derived from those problems posed as intellectual challenges, complexified and then transcended only to encounter more problems through language and *because* of language. I wanted to free myself and announce, that evening, that I would do what I thought was ethical in my classroom, while calling forth an agreement on professors’ commonalities of goals aligned within those of the institution for which we worked. I began:

Teaching as a purely methodical exercise has become the norm in language education, foreign or otherwise. Language teachers, even in college level courses, are constrained in the development of their own scholarship whether due to academic consensus or to the muting of dissident voices by institutional powers of control such as review, peer attitudes, isolation (i.e., teaching is seldom seen as “teamwork”), etc. Those muted voices of dissidence, however, denounce that what we advance ideologically as language in the classroom, in spite of our best efforts, constitutes nothing but a representation of a representation dictating what’s best within a modernist technocratic impetus. The methodological impetus in second

languages learning disregards languages' location as well as globalization's fragmentation of the modern nation State's ideology, specifically concerning language for created for learning. There are those who will defend the laurels of the so-called "communicative approach" to language learning without questioning the interested nature and history of the methods working under this label, their original evolution and contextual design. And I would argue, what language learning and teaching practice isn't communicative by nature, whether oppressive or not? Why don't we hear more about alternative views on language? Why critical language awareness remains tangential to the goals of language education because of the desperation to teach and have others learn *in* the language fails to acknowledge the pragmatic possibility of first language use in the learning of a second? Why to continually propagate the "myth" of the native speaker that so narrowly conveys language and meaning as our doing in places?

Institutional technologies of control over language and teachers, such as antiquated notions of what grammar means, control through grading, methodological sponsorships, peer-review systems inherent in the tenure process, or even the increase of adjuncts in the language teaching workforce reestablish fear of deviation and discouragement in creative experimentation. Language education will continue to fail if the fetishism of normativity and the methods through which learning is framed incessantly disregard the act of learning as a consciously political incursion into the lives of others. This stance presents serious consequences to the acknowledgement and acceptance of diverse manifestations of linguistic citizenship that deviate from nationalistic/monolingual prerogatives. The merciless Methods Police arrive at our untenured minds striving to control and colonize, whether through the legitimization of particular sciences or through institutional policies in the form of the so-called peer observations. We are told ours is the task to motivate students, but motivate them to do what, exactly? What we want them to do? This constitutes a dangerous proposition, because it places in our hands the responsibility for the learning of the Other when our position is to create conditions for that learning to take place and aid others in the process of negotiating the meaning of educational goals. Upon our shoulders, then, rest affective responsibilities over which we have little control. Instead, shouldn't we examine alongside our students our own interests and bias manifested through the language we employ in the classroom? Certainly, the many variables in teaching make the process complex and deprived from any type of panacea or magic bullet. Some of us resist "the best method" idea. We give in, we give up, and we lose, feeling somehow that with tenure we have won.

I went on for more than half an hour. I hoped my colleagues wouldn't take it too personally. It wasn't about them, but in a way, conversations such as these always are.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Any critical examination of the curriculum and instruction of Spanish as a Foreign Language in the United States today should yield an analysis of its responsibility in underwriting not only the slow death of Spanish as a national language, but also the many ethical and practical problems arising from literacy in general. Yet, while English literacy and English as a Second Language have, to a certain extent, been theorized and assessed from a plethora of critical positions in collusion with bilingual education for minorities (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; Canagarajah, 1999; Crookes, 1997; Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2007; Kumaravadilevu, 1994; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Pennycook, 2001), Spanish has escaped this scrutiny, at least with the same intensity. In fact, when language acquisition for the general more privileged English-speaking population is brought to the fore in curricular discussions, the largely positivistic and a-critical character of the field's epistemology often reverts to conversations surrounding "the pursuit of the best methodology"

(Kumaravadilevu, 1994).

When Spanish is contextualized socially within curricular discussions in the United States, it is seldom argued outside a white savior educational complex framing language either as charitable work (i.e., “service learning”), as a discrete skill to serve abstract market ideals (i.e., enhancement of employability), or as an idiomatic characteristic of the poverty found in the ghettos (as voiced in a commentary made by former House speaker Newt Gingrich, which resurfaced during his presidential bid in 2012). In service of this ideological context, the Spanish curriculum reproduces itself within a sanitized multicultural discourse that constantly “dances with bigotry” (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999), that often invokes the learning about national differences while disregarding difference’s own terms, its own language. In this sense, the Spanish and other “foreign languages” curriculum have been engineered not as much as to address inherently issues of injustice and citizenship in collusion with minority rights but rather to promote an emotional experience about otherness that validates linguistic privilege of certain groups over others.

Language educators do struggle *within* and *against* this aspect of the curriculum in order to carry out their intellectual agendas, whether through teaching or research. As the biographical accounts (re)presented in this essay suggest, beyond discontent, there is a genuine concern over the *status quo* of language instruction that extends beyond the University level, since Leila and I admit that in our everyday practices there is little difference between how language education materializes in college and in high school. Yet, the resistance suggested by our discourse constitutes more a survival strategy than an act of subversion, which confirms the individualistic Foucaultian notion of the technological self-fashioning (Foucault, 1988). In spite of the professional solidarity expressed between Leila and me, our conversations were geared towards finding ways to psychologically cope with an inherited curriculum, being dissatisfied with it, and attempting to change it individually. We do not strategize to change the very source of our professional dissatisfaction as activists; we merely react and adjust in order to “survive,” which reaffirms the systematic promotion of individualism within the foreign languages discipline, if not academia in general.

While the exchanges between Leila and me could be seen as a counter-discourse to standardized assumptions leading to second language research, our exchanges reveal, in fact, attitudes that “reinforce and reproduce, rather than dismantle or depart from, those notions that are themselves indelibly tied to the problems we need to overcome” (Pennycook, 2001, pp. 11-12). For both Leila and I cannot conciliate our selves, represented by our ideals on language education and its politics, with the institutional pressures we confront on a daily basis as untenured faculty. The source of our dissatisfaction derives from a perceived lack of autonomy and trust within a system that precludes experimentation in a location specifically designed, albeit idealistically, to be experimental and risk-taking: the educational realms of higher learning. The intellectual kinship expressed when a critical mass of individuals consciously challenges and works as a team is absent from our professional lives. Our proclaimed “outside-looking in” position is rather misleading, because in reality we are hardly outsiders. Rather, we articulate ourselves as entities struggling against centripetal forces within the institutional domains of education that impose accommodation or professional suicide. The source of our perceived dissatisfaction derives, indeed, from an inability to coalesce as a group, to find intellectual kinship in our institutions and others in order to promote what we view as meaningful changes in the second language curriculum and instruction.

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