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# "How did you become political?": Narratives of junior researcher-practitioners in applied linguistics

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is based on a set of short narratives from four researchers in applied linguistics, who adopt the descriptor "junior political researcher-practitioners." These individuals shared and analyzed these narratives relating to their personal experiences and an emerging political identity in the academy under investigation in this study. The study was methodologically inspired by collective memory-work, a research framework with transformative aspirations that integrates narrative writing and group analysis and dissolves the boundaries between theory and method as well as researcher and research participants. The study itself enacts an inquiry. The narratives are presented for readers to read and respond to. They constitute the joint object of an inquiry by the coauthors and their readers. Other language educators with goals for personal and sociopolitical development may find themselves in this study and be encouraged into embracing their own political potential.

Language educational research is political because it is involved in the processes by which language education allocates resources in society. Education maintains, or in some cases changes, aspects of who gets what, when, and where (to take up Lasswell's [1936] classic definition of politics). As critical language education researchers, we can and should problematize our own roles within this understanding and field of action and be reflexive, which includes asking ourselves questions such as, "How did we come to this point and position?" and "How can we have a voice?"

In this piece of writing, "we" are mostly a group of doctoral students, and that is already a challenge to the dominant author position to be found in academic journals such as this one, which while having a political mission nevertheless usually conforms to a large extent to mainstream academic writing conventions. Also, our group *we* is a legitimate response to the danger that political work cannot be done by individuals acting independently, though mainstream academic structures still implicitly favor individualistic positions (the academic star, the famous author or researcher). Building coalitions and

long-term networks of collaborators may be more useful. We are interested in telling our own stories as a way of understanding ourselves, in the hope that other junior researchers may learn from hearing something like their own voices sounding off in print. We want to hear more stories told, both because they are encouraging and because their very existence problematizes political aspects of the process of doing (or at least reporting) political language research. Here, we have created a narrative that represents the process of the political socialization or conscientization as we have experienced it—which we have developed, not individually, but together through sharing our stories, discussing them, and following through rewriting them and the entire narrative to make some, admittedly conflictual, sense of it.

Applying this to research methods, politically oriented research techniques and orientations have been taken up by the in applied linguistics field, and have been present in educational and social research for a long time. Principles for carrying out research consistent with an emancipatory goal have been presented and analyzed, and cases reported in various parts of the social sciences, though not to a very great extent within applied linguistics (but see Crookes, 1993; Davis, 2011; West & Crookes, 2017).

But then, how do researchers in applied linguistics come to take up this kind of (political) orientation to research? In the following article, we undertake some memory-work (Haug et al., 1987) to tap into the reservoir of moments, trajectories, and stories that we have come to see as influential in our ever-evolving political identities in applied linguistics. After we have shared some substantial extracts from narratives produced with this article in mind, we will collectively draw attention to some key similarities before we continue our conversation with some of the challenges and silences that we noticed accompany this journey.

## Narrative, memory-work, and politicization

Sharing our personal stories initially was a move toward deepening current understandings of the conditions and processes under which junior researchers develop a commitment to political research practices. Narratives appeared particularly suitable for this purpose, given the interdisciplinary attention they have received in the study of political socialization (Niemi & Hepburn, 1995; Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009), conscientization (Freire, 1985), and social movements (Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016). Not only is storytelling important in itself (to promote feelings of camaraderie, say), but also storytelling is important to compel the sharing of further narratives and thereby build the momentum for individual or collective action (Polletta, 2006). This productive and empowering capacity of narrative was also the motivation behind Torres's (1998) collection of biographies of critical scholars. Their sharing of how personal trajectories, dreams, and challenges become intertwined with critical theory and a political

practice sparks further exploration of this format with an applied linguistics focus. Certainly, life-story narratives have been used for academic study at least since Freud (1911/1958; cf. Atkinson, 1998). A newer line of Marxist-feminist scholarship beginning to develop in the 1980s around sociologist Frigga Haug's use of narrative writing as a vehicle for emancipatory goals, particularly "to find ways of articulating the personal sphere in political terms" (Haug et al., 1987, p. 43). Convening women in a writing collective to compose, tell, and analyze personal stories was a strategy to challenge individualized and patriarchal power structures the participants were facing in society. *Memory-work*, the term coined for this methodological approach, essentially engages with conscientization, a process "where common sense no longer speaks for itself, but becomes subjected to critical interrogation (Giroux, 2001, p. 153). The group discussions, intertwined with writing and revising stories on "female sexualization," provided a safe and caring venture in which linkages could be discovered and clichés and "vulgar-analytic models of interpretation" (Haug et al., 1987, p. 57) were actively resisted. The methodology has gained increasing popularity in recent years for reflexive research and writing. In particular, Davies and Gannon (2006) experimented with poststructural autobiographies, giving consideration to the relationship between identities and writing as tentative, fragmented, and unfinished. Only in retrospect, and thanks to a reviewer's comment, we realized that our own approach to this endeavor showed significant overlap with this strand of collective biographical memory-work and we were glad to come across an observation that resonated with our own improvised strategies: "[T]here might well be no single, 'true' method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work," Haug et al. noticed, "What we need is imagination. We can, perhaps, say quite decisively that the very heterogeneity of everyday life demands similarly heterogeneous methods if it is to be understood" (pp. 70–71). In this article, then, we are drawing on the productive tension between harmonizing our experiences and continuing individual struggles to experiment with unconventional and possibly transgressive writing practices, which we present in the following section.

## Transgressive writing practices

Our project began in response to a suggestion by the editors of this special issue of *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*. Graham proposed to us that we tell our stories. Through these stories, we (re)present our own lived experiences and participate in the co-construction of ourselves through sharing the analysis of each other's narratives. Perhaps this is one stark difference from conventional narrative inquiry research where the researchers attempt to make sense of their participants' complex stories. Here, all of us are tellers and researchers. We have known each other for a number of years. Sharing a common interest in critical pedagogy and being graduate students of the same department, we had often

met, talked, and thought together, most often during our student-led critical applied linguistics discussion group. Our shared critique of society probably helps us to feel somewhat comfortable sharing quite intimate aspects of our lives. In telling our stories, we have been "able to bring out feelings and experiences that are forgotten, ignored, or suppressed" (Canagarajah, 2016, p. 2).

We might have wished we could have met under less work-related circumstances (like the teachers who met over tea with Su Motha, 2014) but it was mostly Graham's office, Angela's office, or Priscila's home, wherever it made most sense based on our schedules, with Gordon skyping in from several different parts of the world. Scheduling was sometimes a challenge. Angela, Jayson, and Priscila were all but dissertation and juggling their respective dissertations with other commitments (i.e., Graduate Assistantship for Angela and Jayson and motherhood for Priscila), Gordon was in the process of moving from South Korea back to continental United States to start a PhD program, and Graham was fulfilling his duties as professor and department chair. Although not all of us were present in all 15 meetings, Angela and Jayson were constant.

Our first meetings[1] were concerned with planning collectively how we were going to carry out this study. We decided that each of us would write a narrative about our individual political becoming and that, before regrouping, we would then exchange these narratives with each other via Google docs for further comments and feedback. And so we talked, we thought, we went off and wrote (and Priscila researched), and then we regrouped, to make sense of what we had said, and again, of who we are. Telling our stories was somewhat emotional. No one cried, but there was a fair amount of reflective silence.

Our collaboration started out with a struggle over the term *political researcher* and, surprisingly, it was much easier for us to come together under the label "political" than to embrace the category of a "researcher identity." The term *researcher-practitioner* lends recognition to our teacher identity, which, not only was developed long before we became graduate students, but also continues to influence our research. "Political" expressed for us a shared sense of assuming responsibility toward our students in the fast-paced context of the neoliberal university where teaching has been turned into casualized, precarious labor and learning a debt-ridden, impersonalized undertaking.

Once this tension was resolved and based on how we were socialized into the practice of qualitative research, our initial impulse was to look for common threads. To put it more formally, we engaged in paradigmatic cognition and narrative cognition (Bruner, 2006). The former, paradigmatic cognition, entails "classifying a particular instance as belonging to a category or concept" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 9)—the analyses of themes, categories, etc., particularly as appearing in narratives. We had already engaged in narrative cognition, which "organizes experience temporally, seeking

explications that are context sensitive and particular" (Bruner, 2006, p. 116), as all the original narratives sought to establish trajectories (for each of us) that make sense of our lives so far. Moreover, during the process of externalizing our experiences, verbalizing and writing them, we were already engaged in the process of analysis in relation to our experiences' evolving selves (Canagarajah, 2016). This means that our narratives, even in their first, apparently raw form (short pieces of reflective and analytic narrative writing that we subsequently went over together and developed orally), were already the product of some analysis, some reconstruction, some attempt to focus on key memories and distill important essences.

We are sufficiently aware of the nontransparent nature of discourse to know that a speaker's or writer's internalized sense of forms may twist their words into shapes that were not there at first. Angela was alert to the power of genre, resisting it in her narrative writing, and saying that we should use postmodern insights to prevent prematurely closing down that which is still open. In fact, Barkhuizen (2011) called attention to the pressing need for alternative forms of reporting when narratives are used for knowledge creation in applied linguistic research.

One alternative we use here is signaling the highly constructed, authored, nature of the work, with at least two levels of narrative construction. In this section, a singular authorial voice (the product of some collective writing and reflection) now briefly narrates the story of us telling stories in such a way that it still should carry some degree of authority, or better, believability. And soon, the collective authorial voice will conjure back into existence the previously recorded voices of the junior researchers, as we in turn recreate their identities in this text.

## Narratives

### Angela: From moments of rupture to response-able strategies

Being political, in my experience, is unthinkable without vulnerability (Butler, 2016; Nagar, 2014): both the experience of being vulnerable and the act of making oneself vulnerable to others. Vulnerability is a personal and relational experience of manifold ways of oppression, of which linguistic violence is only one manifestation. Remember the feminist tenet "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1968)? It may well be a source for our political becomings.

I am a woman.                                                    I am haole.

**I am working class.** *I am Bavarian.*    English...
                                                          and
                I speak                            German
                      marked versions of

Making oneself vulnerable can be a creative practice of political engagement, forcing us to search for affinities, friendships, and solidarities; sort through our own privileges and precarity; and experiment with disagreement and dissident. In fact, making ourselves vulnerable is grappling with and exposing our own complicitness in systems of power and exploitation, of which neoliberalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, and linguicism are just a few.

It means to recognize and spell out to ourselves and the world our voluntary and involuntary participations in power, and to care enough to draw a distinction between the two.

> ... know French, Italian, Spanish, Latin.
> ... learning Hawaiian.

**I am European. I am white. I am cisgender. I pursue academic privilege and economic stability. I want to approximate American English in speaking and writing.**

To illustrate the role of linguistic vulnerability in my own political becomings, I will open a window to the past, when I was sitting in the practicum office of my former university in Southern Germany, to discuss my application for a teaching practicum in German at our American partner university. Meetings like this always made my heart race, not due to their high-stakes nature, but because they were charged with classism, a display of the old ideological rift that used to separate the industrial North from the bucolic South; Northern bourgeois intellectuals and Southern backward farming folk, slick Northern Standard speak and stubborn Southern double Dutch. The practicum adviser started the advising session in perfect pitch television German one can only produce if growing up North. Although the conversation was friendly, I could not help picking up cues that seemed to discourage me from submitting my application. While I was sitting quietly but increasingly irritated, the advisor suddenly switched from her hinging mode to a crystal-clear statement: "I'm sorry, but I have bad news for you. Americans really want German native speakers to teach German. You can't apply for this position." Boom. There it was, again. Expropriated from my own language. From my citizenry. My teaching credentials. "But I am a native speaker," I responded with hesitation. "What do you mean?," the adviser, now irritated herself, came back. "I may have a Southern accent, but I am a native speaker of German, just like you."

This story has followed me from continent to continent and further on while pursuing my doctoral studies in Hawai'i. It was a limit experience, not the first one linguistically, but one that mudded my sense of self more radically, showing that we never are able to reach complete certainty or take full control over who we are. "Am I a 'native speaker' of German?" I always thought so, but maybe not. How do we become "speakers," "native," "researchers," "activists"? In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler (2005) characterizes this struggle for subjectivity, which

always, to a certain degree, eludes language, as source for engagement and ethical responsibility. She writes, "I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (Butler, 2005, p. 84). Put differently, these repeated revelatory experiences of being *Other*, at any given time and without control, nurtured a growing sense of responsibility in me toward those whose differences also fall outside the norm—my family who passed down to me my mother's and grandmother's tongue; my regional (Lechrainer) community and dialect, which is losing its distinct way of speaking and its cultural memory, just like many other groups whose places in society are threatened by an imposed standard way of being. There's a sensed urge to be an issue and ally activist whose concern and care for fellow vulnerable Others won't stop once a manuscript is submitted or a thesis completed; a constant push to remain susceptible to difference, to the *Other* that may as well be our own yet unknown self. It results in a desire to find affinity across diversity among people I share a life with in Hawai'i and in Europe; a search to forge unlikely alliances, between a German dialect speaker and a Hawai'i Creole speaker; and a yearning for collective responses in our teaching and research, for instance, to a campus administrator in California who tells me, "Can you repeat what you just said? We are not used to White people speaking with an accent." Becoming politicized, in my experience, is what Donna Haraway (2008) described as cultivating an ethics of response-ability, a commitment to using our accumulated (here academic) privilege and our experience of being *Other* to create possibilities not only to point out the problem with such a statement, but to act in relation with others upon it. My own sense of response-ability took shape within the supportive structure of a critical pedagogy class in Hawai'i where I found space and strategies to grow from a critical spectator to what I call a response-able risk-taker. Asking Freire's mother of all questions, "Why?" when a student insists "I speak Ilokano but you can't really find a job with that" now has become the first response-able step for exploring together possibilities for action and resistance. Whether this is, indeed, "political"—I am not sure, and I don't want to be, because settling for an answer would limit the responses.

## Priscila contemplates

### Prologue

> "*Fortunately science. . . is neither limited by time nor by space. . . The more we know, the more we feel how much remains unknown.*" Humphry Davy, 1827, p. 116

While preparing to write this narrative, I asked myself, "what moment was critical to my becoming a political researcher-practitioner?" I do not know. What I do know is that a collection of moments, converged in times and spaces, led me to it. I present here a glimpse of three of these moments.

## Act I

At the age of 15, I lived abroad in the United States for six months. When I returned to Brazil, it was the middle of the academic year and I didn't go to school for that semester. And so, I spent a lot of time on my newfound hobby, chatting online with English-speaking strangers. One of them was a Norwegian, middle-aged man, and we developed a friendship. He had three teenage sons; I was one of three daughters. He was a psychologist; I was going through reverse culture shock. He was well-educated; I was an avid reader. We would talk about life and death, question morals and values, and philosophize what it meant to be 'good'.

For my 16th birthday, JR mailed me the book *Sophie's World* by the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder (1996). In the book, a teenage girl, Sophie, befriends an old philosopher who teaches her about the history of philosophy, from pre-Socrates to Jean-Paul Sartre. This book and this friendship in this period of my life were significant in my own awakening to inequities, privileges, and social responsibilities.

## Act II

During my undergraduate program in Brazil, I was introduced to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogia do Oprimido*. It was like a spiritual experience; it felt like I had found something I didn't know I had lost. However, this feeling and knowledge became dormant (perhaps because I pursued a career outside of education for the next 14 years).

It wasn't until 10 years after graduating, during my master's program in Arizona, that the term *critical* came back into focus. As a weekend, English as a second language (ESL) volunteer-teacher at a local community center, I taught immigrants, most of them undocumented. It was then that Freire and critical pedagogy resurfaced. Why must I teach beginner English using children's textbooks when my learners are all adults? Why must I teach what to order in a restaurant when my learners can barely afford their groceries? Why can't I just teach based on topics from the students' everyday lives?

## Act III

I used to think that by teaching English to marginalized, immigrant populations I was providing them with *the* tool for social mobility. I shared this discourse as new PhD student with a professor. "Actually, have you considered that there may be other factors that play into whether a person has the opportunity to 'break the cycle of poverty' or not?" she said. Or something along those lines. Cue in the buzzer sound. That moment was the beginning of a new era for me. An era where I'd be personally, and academically, interested in investigating how we—language teachers—develop critical consciousness, or, in the words of Freire, the ability to "perceive social, political,

and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements of reality" (1970/2005, p. 35).

A seminar titled Critical Pedagogy during my first semester in the PhD program encouraged me to harmonize my personal values with my scholarship. It was a time and space where I could join and learn from other graduate students interested in teaching language for social justice and where I could further explore, articulate, and integrate my values with my teaching and research.

I had a lot to learn (and continue to) from my politically active, outspoken peers. I was awakened by their knowledges to consider other "oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970/2015, p. 17) besides the discourse I was now too familiar with (that English language equals social mobility). My peers were my mentors, and our casual conversations in and out of the classroom were the time and space in which seemingly unrelated ideas about justice and pedagogy converged.

I often wonder why some language teachers develop critical awareness and others do not. It's almost as if everything needs to converge for one's "awakening of critical awareness" to happen (Freire, 1974/2015, p. 14). Freire contended that critical awareness "must grow out of a critical educational effort based on favorable historical conditions" (Freire, 1974/2015, pp. 15). In other words, time and space must converge in and as favorable conditions. The seminar did just that for me.

## Jayson focuses on oppression

Growing up in a working-class family in rural Bukidnon in the Philippines, there were times when I would wish my family had books at home.

After having improved my condition and achieved certain privileges (e.g., tenure at a university, financial stability, and the cultural and social capital that come with those privileges), the idea of losing those acquired privileges brought some fears and doubts when I moved to Honolulu to pursue doctoral studies. I recall a somewhat similar experience early on in my life. In seventh grade, I received a scholarship to study in a private school in a nearby city only to be transferred the following year to a public school after my family had difficulty supporting me because the scholarship only covered tuition. Then after high school, I got a scholarship to study in one of the elite universities in our region, but I always had fears that what happened in high school would happen again because of my family's financial insecurity.

Being political, for me, requires critical consciousness, resistance, and actively taking up one's agency to fight oppression and resist power. While at university, I joined various protests either to question and fight unreasonable tuition hikes, to protest policies made by an incompetent student body leader, and to oust former Philippine President Estrada. I also resisted the

English-only policy at my former university. Despite the threat of being penalized for using Cebuano in the classroom, I decided to allow codeswitching in my ESL classes and took up local literature written in Cebuano to fight linguistic discrimination and marginalization of minority groups and to promote regional literature (Parba, 2010). One time, I posted on my department's bulletin board an article about the value of the L1 in ESL classrooms and how the dominance of English in the Philippines has turned it into a nation of immigrants. I remember giving a copy of the same article to a senior university official, with whom I shared that code-switching should not be stigmatized as there are studies out there that demonstrate its potential contributions in ESL classrooms. And I wondered why most of my colleagues did not speak up against an oppressive language policy. This experience was an eye-opener for me; we need critical educators in the Philippines who are able to disrupt the status quo discourses. And equally important, we need critical administrators for social justice (Marshall & Oliva, 2006).

I also recall working as a research assistant one summer when I visited and interviewed the indigenous peoples in Miarayon, Bukidnon, whose lands were taken away from them by educated, rich lowlander Christians. That experience exposed me not only to oppression but also to resistance; the indigenous peoples shared with us then that resisting oppression through the use of guns was not enough, so they decided to send a few of their most promising youths to university. Everyone in the community had chipped in to pay for the school expenses of their youths. And, after university, the youths went back to their village and volunteered to teach in the school they all built. Perhaps, that was the time when the value of education became even more pronounced to me. I realized that education is indeed power, and it can be used to either oppress others or to challenge the oppressor. And perhaps, this realization came to me because it was like seeing firsthand what I learned from reading Marx at university. It was seeing social injustice done to people like my family. It also made me ask, *What could I do to help the indigenous peoples? Don't their stories of resistance deserve to be told? Don't researchers have a political and ethical duty to help them alleviate their sufferings?*

Doing my own research a few summers ago, I went back to the Philippines to look at how teachers' and students' language ideologies (re)shape the way the mother tongue–based multilingual education policy gets enacted in Philippine classrooms. I found that despite the Department of Education's effort to promote multilingualism, a few teachers resisted the mother tongue–based multilingual education because they did not fully understand it. Some even continued to implement the English-only policy in their classrooms. I was faced by a dilemma: As a researcher, did I have the right to interfere? Or should I just keep my distance, collect data quietly, and then leave in peace once done? While I was not so sure at first if I should engage the teachers for fear of being rejected (or judged for intruding), I found that

many teachers actually appreciate other people's perspectives, especially from someone they think could help them become more reflective of their own teaching practices.

From these past experiences, I realized that even before formally becoming a student of critical pedagogy, I already had a sense that there are invisible power structures that systematically position people in certain ways, and that research, like education, is political and can be used to transform the status quo.

## Gordon transforms the way he teaches

For as long as I can remember, politics have been important. My grandmother worked for the Republican party, and there were often political discussions growing up. In a family of conservatives, I became an outspoken liberal for reasons even I am not sure of. My political identity developed further in high school, when I understood how politics and education are intertwined and very personal.

Our small, rural school district was composed of four towns pooling resources to offer students a richer experience than many small rural districts can offer. One town decided to leave the district, however, and a fight erupted over how to distribute the depleted resources best. The first proposal involved cutting several teachers who had served the district the longest, following the logic that the money saved on their higher salaries could be used to hire younger, less expensive teachers with less experience. It also included a provision to eliminate the German language classes. As a member of student council, I created a petition and gathered signatures from nearly all students at our school to protest these moves, presented the petition at a school board meeting, and wrote op-eds for the local newspapers against the district split and cuts. In the end, the vice principal ended up sacrificing his job to save several teachers, giving up his salary and taking a reduced early retirement, and the German program was saved thanks to the petition and show of support at the school board meeting.

This experience made clear to me that politics are not only something to talk about and observe, but something that we engage with, and need to engage with on a daily basis.

During university, my political involvement grew, and I worked as an activist with several groups, organizing mainly against policies put forward by then–U.S. president, George W. Bush. After graduating in 2008, I moved to South Korea. I exercised my privilege to escape the recession in the United States at that time, a situation that many I was working with as an activist could not escape. All that was required of me to get a job as a teacher was my degree, and my status as a White, male, "native speaker" of English. As a teacher, I had little idea initially of what I was doing. I worked teaching

English to children from relatively wealthy families. After the initial adjustment, I felt a sharp disconnect between my previous self and the self I felt I was becoming. Although I loved the children, I began to question what I was doing and my motivations for doing it. I felt complicit in a system that existed to help the wealthy maintain a privileged status by providing a better education for their children than less privileged families could afford to provide. I also became aware of my own complicated position and privilege as a teacher with little background or qualification in comparison with my Korean counterparts, who often had much more experience and training, yet earned a much lower salary. At the same time, all of us (the teachers) were clearly in a lower socioeconomic class than the majority of our students.

I turned to my activist friends for advice, and they referred me to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2015), which in fact one friend had recommended before I left for Korea). I also found Mary Cowhey's (2005) book, *Black Ants and Buddhists*, for ways to teach children that were consistent with my personal values. For me to continue as a teacher, I could no longer allow a disconnect between my personal beliefs in democracy and equality, and my professional work as a teacher, where I felt as if I were acting as a dictator running my classroom. Through the influence of those two books, I began to transform the way I was teaching and practice critical pedagogy.

Working on this on my own made me realize that I needed help and guidance, which led me to seek out other critical practitioners in language education for graduate school. Given my orientation entering graduate school, and that of my advisors, research for me was always political in the same way that education is political. Sitting now at a relatively higher position of privilege, I see research as a tool for social change, and feel a responsibility to use my knowledge and position to help further social justice.

## Working through our political potential

In this section, we first consider the framing of our narratives. Space limitations forced a form of self-restraint and sense of completeness in both our stories and identities. When looking for anchor themes (i.e., overlapping sociopolitical or cultural conditions in our stories), we noticed only later an ongoing discovery of our political potential as a group. Upon reflection, these themes include the following: (a) Did all of us experience upward movement through our educational choices/opportunities?; (b) Did all of us have a feeling of, on the one hand, uneasiness, or tension, when crossing class lines and, on the other hand, a sense of responsibility or desire to give back to our communities or improve the learning environment and life conditions for those who are with and come after us?; and (c) What role did access to critical reading material play?

### Awareness (and perhaps also a context for it) of privilege and of marginalization

In our group discussions, we found that personal values and the crossing of boundaries, whether socioeconomic or geographical, were two key factors for conscientization (cf. Darder, 2017), and followed from a more general desire to (re)position ourselves within the dominant structures of society. How did this develop, for us?

It could be that relevant personal values are present quite early on in one's life; if these values develop, then it has to do with gradually realizing how they can be actualized or acted upon in the specific circumstances we find ourselves in early adulthood. The presence of a school with a mission seems to have been quite influential for Jayson both early on and at university. Priscila, too, experienced an institutional educational context that had elements of a mission, or at least committed professors and some politically relevant curriculum.

Angela and Jayson's political awareness became more pronounced with the crossing of socioeconomic class lines through education, and the resulting struggle to reconcile responsibilities towards their communities' linguistic rights and cultural roots with the accumulation of academic prestige. For Gordon, it was the experience in school-level politics with one particularly serious problem burning-in a political commitment at an early age. But the transformation came when he was teaching wealthy kids, which was contradictory to his political views (that were not being manifested in his teaching).

### Access to critical resources: *The* book

Graham has encountered the same story of how someone got started with critical pedagogy surprisingly often. Henry Giroux describes how, almost at the same time as he was experiencing frustration as a teacher, a friend passed him a copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire Project, 2007). Ira Shor reports a similar adventitious encounter with the same book. Shor wrote that his first year teaching writing as an assistant professor at a working-class community college in New York had been unsatisfying to him as a teacher and activist. He explained, "I decided to experiment with approaches based in episodes, themes, and materials from the students' everyday lives. Many experiments down the road, my work there became very interesting to me" (I. Shor, to Bluth, personal communication, October 5, 2006).

Similarly, Priscila shared an encounter with a book that had considerable impact on her conscientization and contributed to critical ideas, although they were not acted on until much later. Priscila said the ideas (including those of Freire) were initially dormant, and only became active when a more productive space was sought out or opened up later. And that is also what Gordon says in

his narrative. In common across these stories is a deceptively simple short discourse with two parts: "I was a frustrated (or almost aware) junior educational practitioner" and "someone gave me a copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and then I knew what to do." This tends to mask an emotional, difficult journey between the two points, and as that is a rather difficult book, Graham remains surprised how often this seems to have been the resource around which ideas and experiences crystallized. It may be that inspiration, rather than strict guidance, and a sense that there is an alternative, is more important for critically leaning practitioners or researchers (Crookes, 2013). Allowing for a plurality of practices through general principles releases people to interpret the book in more powerful ways; as we see our practices individually differ, they are still held together by a common understanding of education and research as political acts.

Graham's role in our collective is clear throughout this analysis as someone who helps to give our work and individual stories perspective and locate them in a broader narrative history of the field. This, in turn, helps us to further understand ourselves as working not in an isolated space but within a continuum and continuation of critical praxis.

## *From individual to collective struggles*

By the time we enrolled in the same graduate course on critical pedagogy (separately, at different times), we had already developed a certain receptiveness for political perspectives, including on language and education, and we were keen to find answers to the question "how the political becomes pedagogical" (Giroux, 2004, p. 499). It is a shared feature of our narratives that our individually struggling, political selves now had a community of allies who shared our concerns for pedagogies with a social impact. In Angela's case, courage to experiment with critical pedagogy in her classroom was an outcome of access to such community of allies. For Gordon and Jayson, such community offered access to real-life examples of critical pedagogy which in turn helped them to continue to apply its principles in their own practice. For Priscila, it was a sense of appreciation in meeting others who allowed themselves to imagine different futures. "Being able to imagine alternatives is a first step towards attaining them" (Crookes, 2013, p. 194). Together we hoped, yearned, and imagined how to contribute to change.

## Continuing the conversation

If autobiographical narratives, like identities, are indeed always shaping and never finished, then the analysis part of this paper must reflect that; otherwise, it would impose a sense of finiteness where there is none. Memory-work (Haug et al., 1987) must "contain an element of practical questioning; it is not concerned purely and simply with a search for new insights" (p. 69). Mobilizing

commonalities among our narratives was an instinctive move toward harmony —a desire to affiliate with people whose political perspectives on language education resonated with each other. After all, a political project like social change is not accomplished in isolation. Rather than interpreting these themes under the label of "sameness," however, it may be better to look at them as moments of intensification from where collaborative relationships and transformative capacities can spring. There is a productive relationship between commonalities and singularities: the common, they assert, "is based on the *communication* among singularities" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 204), that is, our individual voices. The following section, therefore, should be read as an invitation to communicate with us: to join us in dialoguing, questioning, struggling and experiencing potentially new moments of intensification. For this purpose, we move away from the regimen of a single narrative voice to aggregate further momentum from sharing responding to our individual struggles as political researchers and practitioners in applied linguistics.

**Jayson:** Looking forward, I am a bit worried about sustaining my political researcher-practitioner identity, especially under unfavorable circumstances. How does a junior political researcher sustain the energy of keeping a critical sight if, for instance, the surveillance power of the state extends even to the classroom or to one's personal space? How does one, who is doing research in a minority language in the United States, resist the dominance of English in the applied linguistics scholarship and profession? Based on where I am now, while I think that researching and publishing about Filipino language teaching and learning in the U.S. context deserves attention, I am sometimes tempted to shift my focus to English language teaching because the field continues to be dominated by English language teaching scholarship which is regarded as more valuable in the job market. Sometimes the urge to become part of the mainstream is very strong, especially when one feels that he or she needs to always prove the worth of his work. Are finding allies and working with like-minded people enough to sustain our commitment for social justice, language rights, and diversity?

**Angela:** "Are we political enough?" is a question I have found myself wrestling with, too, for some time. Hardt and Negri (2004) emphasize the importance of not merely being different in order to participate in a revolutionary project, but the commitment to becoming different, infinitely. What if what you describe is not giving in to the mainstream but a contemplation of where your own revolutionary potential is able to thrive most under the

current circumstances—a temporary alignment to remain action-able? At the same time, maintaining our critical and political momentum seems to benefit from networks like our writing collective here, where we can offer each other support to sustain ourselves without being pulled apart by the webs of power in which our political work is inevitably situated.

**Gordon**: In the writing of our narratives, especially as researcher-practitioners, we cannot help but construct images and position ourselves so as to be seen as we would like to be seen, by you, the reader, as political actors, whatever different meanings of criticality our different works hold. In writing as a collective, though in some ways we have managed to interrupt our individual positionings and images for something, it gives us more depth and appreciation for the variety of ways in which we can be political in our work. It feels less lonely and reaffirming to be part of a collective, and this connection is for me vital to constructing and maintaining a political identity in my work. This is especially important as we move through throughout our careers. How do we remain political given shifting circumstances and shifting connections to place? Connection to a broader collaborative community may be one way to sustain this positionality. No matter where we move or where we end up, "Citizenship is not obtained by chance: It is a construction never finished that demands we fight for it" (Freire, 1998, p. 90). Our political identities are not obtained by chance either, but they also seem like something we have to fight to maintain. How we can do so in meaningful ways as we ourselves relocate throughout our careers is an open question, it seems.

**Priscila**: Jayson, when I read your words "sometimes the urge to become part of the mainstream is very strong" it immediately led me to an image I've seen depicted quite often in nature documentaries as well as in cartoons. It is the image of the salmon run. Salmon live their early years in the river and migrate to the ocean to live their adult life, only to return to their natal river to spawn and die. Their death has important consequences. As "keystone species," salmon "exert a disproportionately important influence on the ecosystems in which they live" (Helfield & Naiman, 2006, p. 167). Nutrients from their carcasses are transferred from the ocean to land and this transfer has repercussion beyond the next generation of salmon, but to every species living in the area between a river and land. Now, I wonder how many salmon give up when it is time to swim upstream. How many give up the opportunity to bring forth the next generation? How many deny their carcasses to nourish other beings? You see, it is much easier

to go with the flow, to follow the mainstream. We must "swim" against the (main)stream and thus learn, improve and be strengthened by the journey—each in our own pace. I'm not advocating our premature death, but I relate the image of the consumption of nutrient-rich carcasses to a time when we reach some visibility—whether in our classes, schools or communities, and are able to be part of, to touch, to inspire others.

Angela: "Where does the body and soul remain in political research?" I want to ask, feeling the weight of SOCIAL JUSTICE and EQUITY, and the questioning of POWER molding me into an identity frame and vocabulary that outweighs reason and explanations over the affective logics of instincts and loving attachments to people, places, ideas, in fact, languages. Drawing attention to linguicism, native-speakerism and other manifold forms of social oppression may not be sufficient for engaging students in their own politicization. Getting people out of their chairs is not merely a habit of thought. It virtually is a corporeal act carried out by a body scripted with memories, sensibilities, and relational capacities. Making space in research literature and practice for affective modes of apprehension from where respect, dignity, reciprocity, and dare I say it, LOVE can offer us insights into the embodied articulations of the political. They deserve affirmative attention just as they require critical scrutiny. As Michael Hardt (2009) noted, "Keeping ideas and knowledges private hinders the production of new ideas and knowledges, just as private languages and private affects are sterile and useless." This link between languages and affects is not accidental. To me, it shows that, as applied linguists, we are uniquely positioned to nurture affinities and solidarities that are capable to drive social action and possibly change.

Priscila: I really wish we had space left to continue this conversation! The question of where the body and soul remain in political research is something that has occupied my mind (and heart) for quite some time. And so is the question of spirituality, both largely excluded from research in applied linguistics or often swept under the labels of emotions, values and morals. What do you say we continue this conversation at www.GradLifeInParadise.com?

## Envoi

In sharing our trajectories of politicization, each of us participated in reducing the silence that tends to mask our work: the cracks, marginalization, and disorientation, but also the bonds we build, through which our work as applied linguists comes into being. The act of mobilizing our life experiences

for this article, all embedded in different geopolitical and emotional locations, essentially became more than coauthorship for an academic publication. It evolved into an exercise of relationship building in which we undertook careful negotiations of intersectional difference, interrogated and resisted institutional vocabulary, and braided voices together that spoke and listened from different places of knowing marginalization and privilege. Not only is the personal political, but also our research is deeply personal. Getting to know the person inside the "political" in our work: why is it important? Let us consider some possible answers.

For some aspects of the junior researcher-practitioners' development, simple if unusual conditions involving the availability of conceptual resources and their coupling with challenging or contradictory experiences were essential. Finding a space where students, junior practitioners, teacher-researchers, or academics can reflect on their individual experiences collectively, experiment with pedagogical interventions, and develop a voice and be supported (in applied linguistics as elsewhere) is important. This article has contributed to maintaining that space, for ourselves as well as for others.

As to its effects: The long-term effects of action in a human realm are inherently unpredictable. One person may have the opportunity to take up and act on the implications of another's words only decades later (like Priscila did). This suggests that whatever it is we are doing to foster political research in applied linguistics, indeed however little it appears to be at the moment of the endeavor, it is still worth sharing. Now, isn't all academic writing really storytelling? When are you going to share with us your story?[2]

## Notes

1. We audio recorded some of our meetings to capture our discussions and referred back to them often.
2. Visit www.GradLifeInParadise.com to share your story the website works as a space for a collection of other academics' stories).

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