

Curriculum public policies: autobiography and relational subject

Políticas públicas de currículo: autobiografia e sujeito relacional*

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Abstract: The inspiration for this text comes from an “intervention” research project that is being carried out in public schools, in which we argue that public policies in curriculum do not need to be, nor should be, centralized. Throughout the project and in this text, we dialogue with a long tradition of autobiographical studies in the field of curriculum and teacher education. We argue that many of these studies, despite bringing to the discourse of education policy terms linked to the world of life and subjectivities, operate with a metaphysical notion of subject and a belief in conscious reflection as a guarantee of improvement of a subjective experience. In poststructural bases, complicated by neomaterialism, we defend the potentiality of an ontology of the relational subject for autobiographical research and, with it, we conceptualize our version of “intervention”.

Keywords: Curriculum. Autobiography. Poststructuralism.

Resumo: A inspiração deste texto vem de um projeto de pesquisa “intervenção” que está sendo realizado em escolas públicas em que argumentamos que políticas públicas em currículo não precisam nem devem ser centralizadas. Ao longo do projeto e deste texto, dialogamos com uma longa tradição de estudos autobiográficos no campo do currículo e da formação de professores. Argumentamos que muitos desses estudos, apesar de trazerem para o discurso da política educacional termos ligados ao mundo da vida e às subjetividades, operam com uma noção metafísica de sujeito e uma crença na reflexão consciente como garantia de melhoria da experiência subjetiva. Em bases pós-estruturais, complicadas pelo neomaterialismo, defendemos a potencialidade de uma ontologia do sujeito relacional para a pesquisa autobiográfica e, com ela, conceptualizamos nossa versão de “intervenção”.

Palavras-chave: Currículo. Pesquisa autobiográfica. Pós-estruturalismo.

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Resumen: La inspiración para este texto proviene de un proyecto de investigación de “intervención” que se lleva a cabo en las escuelas públicas, en el cual argumentamos que las políticas públicas en el currículo no necesitan ni deben ser centralizadas. A lo largo del proyecto, y de este texto, dialogamos con una larga tradición de estudios autobiográficos en el campo del currículo y de la formación docente. Argumentamos que muchos de estos estudios, a pesar de traer al discurso de la política educativa términos relacionados al mundo de la vida y a las subjetividades, operan con una noción metafísica de sujeto y una creencia en la reflexión consciente como garantía de mejora de la experiencia subjetiva. En bases postestructurales, complicadas por el neomaterialismo, defendemos la potencialidad de una ontología del sujeto relacional para la investigación autobiográfica y, con ella, conceptualizamos nuestra versión de “intervención”.

Palabras clave: Currículo. Investigación Autobiográfica. Postestructuralismo.

Introduction

This text highlights an encounter between two researchers, as well as between a reiterated heritage as *différance* and an ethical-political commitment never totalizable. One of them was born and based in the USA, involved in the reconceptualization movement of the curricular studies of the 1970s, marked by varied feminist theories, including poststructural and neo-material, with which she disturbed the existential phenomenology of the curricular studies in which she was educated. The other, Brazilian, approached curricular studies through critical theory and, not without some reluctance, migrated to poststructural and postcolonial approaches. One came from the field of Literature, the other graduated in Chemistry. Experiences and styles that are entangled, juxtaposed, touched in a text that, instead of hiding its movement of writing, wants to take away the difference of its potency¹.

Inheritance and commitment may say of our (im)possible here-there-now-before-after encounter in the face of a discomfort, metaphorically condensed into global curriculum policies that seek to stifle alterity and thus make lives unfeasible. A discomfort that needs to be answered without the opposition of a comfortable alternative, only possible under the rubble of difference, as our heritage teaches us. Responding in an ethical way to those who are called educators and researchers of the curriculum - in the myriad of possible answers — has brought us closer to our inheritances in the field of curriculum, but also with/in the framework of poststructural and post-colonial studies. This, as *différance*, does not take us to the origin or to the past as such, and, in the relationship, diffracts even more. We recall the heritage of the American reconceptualization of the field which, with its rejection of technical rationality and administrative emphasis, has broadened the understanding of curriculum for everything that surrounds the educational contexts and what happens within them, including political, social, cultural, historical, gender and race dimensions. A movement that, in its non-unity, brought together phenomenology and Marxism in a struggle, and which comes to a Brazil that had just emerged from a long dictatorship, more than a decade later, almost exclusively from its Marxist strand. An inheritance that has been dealing, here-there, with identity movements for rights, poststructural complications, postcolonial claims, theoretical questions to the humanist subject that animated both the phenomenology and the Marxism of reconceptualization.

¹ Here, perhaps, it is relevant to point out that we do not consider that there is first and second author in this text. It is the product of conversations, discussions, many comings and goings between the authors. The references we mobilize read ‘against’ our other texts may indicate here and there only that, sometimes, the theme was brought to discussion by one of us, but pursued together, one reading the references of the other. Even references in English say very little about authorship. Many were even read in Portuguese and referred to in English.

Our memory, here-there-now-before-after, remains displaced by a global ghost, by local demands, by ourselves, by our relationality, among others. It is thus pure diffraction that leads us to respond to the call of the other, rejecting the great solutions that forget that education has to do with subjects and subjectivities. It also leads us to recover autobiography as the primary mode of questioning and curriculum research and, at the same time, to reject the idea of a self-constituted subject. It obliges us, paradoxical as it may seem, to try to continue producing a theory that is at the same time comprehensive, generic and situated, that allows not mechanical or even strategic intervention, but the “maximum intensification of an ongoing transformation” (Derrida, 2010, p. 14).

The call that resonates in our encounter is, therefore, to produce an ethical curriculum theorizing capable of responding to the resurgence of control policies, large-scale tests, which now extend beyond national boundaries. It is a sad irony when, for almost 50 years now, reconceptualization imagined that it was somehow blocking the advancement of Tylerian rationality and the efficiency to which it gave the best form. Exams such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), shaping curricula around the world, is the revenge perpetrated by ghosts who have never actually been dead. Ghosts of control and predictability, which throw the subject into the limbo of good politics for quality education (Miller, 2014; Macedo, 2015). Where is the other, totally another, where the intersubjective relationship, where the unpredictable and the uncontrollable that our heritage impels us to see as the very meaning of educating? Ghosts that continue to remind us of the ethical-political responsibility we have, not only to those who do not fit into the current recognition policies (Butler, 2015c), but to education itself as a debt to the other (Derrida, 2010).

Faithful, as far as this is possible, to the inheritance that inhabits us, we know that it is not possible to produce an ethical theory which, in its totality, presents itself as a solution to the global attack. That would be to kill the potency of the calling that approaches us, it must continue to resonate and instigate us to intervene in contingency and discomfort. It is the ethical-political responsibility of such “intervention” that made us respond, with a group of colleagues, to one of the calls of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) for human sciences projects announced as part of “the national effort to improve basic education” (CNPq, 2016, p. 1). After all, such an effort has been, regardless of whether it refers to Brazil or the USA, one of the commitments that animates the academic life of the vast majority of researchers in the field of education, as well as of the curriculum theorizing of reconceptualization. We therefore believe that more than just having something to say when we seek to produce “knowledge in order to subsidize the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of education policies capable of contributing to the improvement of the quality of Brazilian education” (CNPq, 2016, p. 1, own translation), we have an obligation to do so.

We shuffle our inheritances - with the inheritances of others - into a project of “intervention”² that presents itself as a necessary response demanded by the other without whom there is no education. When echoing Brown’s words (2011, p. 315), we ask ourselves: “how might a historically constructed, disunified, non-self-consistent and non-self-constituting subject stand *ethically* for itself as an ‘I’ and respond *ethically* to another ‘I?’”. We echo there, beyond the lessons of reconceptualization, post-foundational ruptures and challenges to rational and totally conscious versions of the subject that mark us as subjects-in-relation. There is no way of answering this

² We have chosen to use the term intervention in the poststructural sense, aware of the amount of disrespect to the alterity that it carries, as a way of seeking to complicate it rather than deny it. From this moment on, we will eliminate the inverted commas we have used so far.

question except by throwing oneself, with responsibility, more than into the unknown, into what one can never fully know – under the penalty of making it the same.

In this sense, we are currently throwing ourselves into the relationship with the other, subject-teachers “historically constructed, non-unified, non-self-consistent and non-self-constituted” in Brazilian schools of the municipal networks of Niterói (Rio de Janeiro), Rondonópolis (Mato Grosso), Cachoeira and São Félix (Bahia). We intend - and we do not want to erase from this verb the sense of arrogance that the research of decades may allow us - to respond to the public call, first of all by stating that “elaboration, implementation and evaluation of education policies” are not isolated and subsequent processes. Indeed, against this idea, if curriculum theorizing is not enough, the evidence itself can be presented - whatever that means - that there has been no success in “raising the quality of education” by the repeated application of this model. The absence of quality that needs, according to the logic prevailing in public policies (and in the CNPq call), to be attacked has long been produced by this same logic. The revived Tylerian ghost has reinforced the illusion that curricular policies, to be public and universally distributed, must have as their destination a project of abstract subject

Our immersion in the relationship with the other makes explicit our belief in education as a process of subjectivation that can only occur in relation to alterity. True - and subversive - heirs of the lessons of reconceptualization, complicated by a lot of “posts”, we see the supposed crisis of education, as pointed out in the diagnoses of policies, as an effect of control that, in order to be effective, must bet on the destruction of the “historically built, non-unified, non-self-consistent and non-self-constituted subject” to which education refers. Rather than intensify control, we believe that public policies in curriculum must be local, produced in concrete relationships in the school space. Our intervention will therefore occur in schools where curricular processes occur and perhaps produce (only) a theorization that helps to release the interactions invisibilized by political discourse or pedagogical theory itself. In this sense, we intend to produce a political action, as Butler points out (1999, p. 212, own translation), or “[...] to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition” never as the same, of universalized norms. It is not, therefore, an action against centralized policies, but one that seeks to displace them.

Strangely, perhaps the great issue that impels us in this text is to understand what intervention we are proposing after having proposed it. There is no doubt that questioning and creating curriculum with teachers in schools is nothing new and that the idea of doing so using autobiographical narratives has a long tradition. There is also nothing original about assuming such interventions as public policies in curriculum, although this is not always the focus of studies that Cestari (2013) has named autobiographical belief. The potency of what we propose is, we believe, to seek to produce local interventions while maintaining the theoretical dialogue with poststructural approaches. It is not a question of reviving a depositary, knowing and knowable, subject of humanism, in the control of his/her interventions in the world. We want to disturb here a long history of autobiographical research in the field of curricular policy and teacher education so that, from this disturbance, without binary opposition and without overcoming, we think of an intervention that, in a certain way, also presupposes teacher “protagonism”. In other words: how to think “local possibilities of intervention” and autobiographical narratives of subject teachers “historically constructed, non-unified, non-self-consistent and non-self-constituted”?

All we have been arguing for and what we hope to become clear is that this obviously is a rhetorical question which cannot be answered without destroying the own locality or situationality to which it refers. The movement we propose in this text, as well as in research, is to increase the theoretical entanglement that will allow us to always wonder – throughout the duration of the

process - what is being constituted in our intervention. We will start from the humanist traditions we inherited and produced in the field - and contributed to make the place visible to educational theory - by disturbing it; and then move with poststructural thinking and with the complications that the ontological neo-material turn has brought about.

The discursive turn and the autobiographical belief

A notion of situated school reform and research thus refocus my work so that I look for ways that particular situations might enable both teachers and myself to re-write and re-work any discourses of reform and educational research that would generalize, universalize, standardize and reify teacher and researcher identities. We might do this, Butler (1993) suggests, by utilizing the ever-present threat of the “outside” to expose the founding presumptions of the inside, to rewrite the history and the very uses of those terms, and to expand the meanings of what and who counts in particular situations. I believe it is this situated and, yes, even potentially and positively disruptive version of school reform practices that holds promise for “school change” that does not restrict to normalizing or exclusionary or reifying categories the meanings, identities and work of teachers and researchers who wish to create spaces in schools for a multiplicity of selves and knowledges. (Miller, 2005, p. 176).

Our first move to think of a “potentially and positively disruptive” public policy is to dialogue with a long tradition in teacher education, which we will do by taking the liberty of collecting various quotes from different thoughts.

Therefore, we will not guarantee the completeness of each author’s arguments, because what interests us here is only to bring, in an indicial way, the autobiographical belief of which Cestari (2013) talks about. To Cestari (2013, p. 13, own translation), it is a belief in the valorization of “life and experience of the research process as a formative and existential experience [...] and the socializing experience of autobiographies as an affirmative experience”. Among the authors that Cestari illuminates are a whole group of Brazilian researchers in the field of teacher education, as well as European names such as Gaston Pineau, Pierre Dominicé, Antônio Nóvoa and Ivor Goodson. With this already theoretically heterogeneous set, we also want to merge the American discussion of the field of autobiography, developed among others by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, as well as the idea of reflective teacher as Ken Zeichner has been dealing with. From the work of these authors, distinct from each other, life stories, narratives, memories, autobiographies, world of life, experience and voice of the subjects came to form part of a lexicon about education policies and curriculum formerly completely dominated by statistics and “objective interventions”. We will use these terms interchangeably here because we assume them all as “contemporary practices of representation designed to move [the research of teacher education and curriculum] (...) away from the scientificity and the appropriation of others” (Lather, 2001, p. 206).

It might be possible to say that this diverse entanglement of authors moves between Dewey’s phenomenology and pragmatism, producing a theorizing that brings subjective experience into research as well as into the very doing of education. In relation to the American authors, it might be possible to even approach them in what Schubert (2010) calls experimentalism, which, according to Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman (1995) implies sharing the enormous promise to understand curriculum as a lived text. However, such attention, as the different authors recall, with different emphases, does not distance autobiographical studies from the public sphere.

(...) narrative researchers do not only focus on individuals’ experience, but also explore “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individual” experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42).

(...) we tell our story as a speech event that involves the social, cultural, and political relations in and to which we speak (Grumet, 1990a, p. 281).

There is something in the autobiographical belief - which may also be in our “promise of ‘school change’” - that we must distrust. It does not seem sufficient to assert the social character of the “experience of individuals” or “our stories”, without distrusting the transparency of such notions.

As Pollock (2009) pointed out, the representations of the experiences or stories of the self and the other, in a specific research context, with determined intentions, are already “compositional realities,” fabricated on assumptions of a transparent language and a presupposed authority of being present. It is not that teachers do not live experiences that they could narrate, write about, or reflect upon, but that such experiences are neither theirs nor accessible to themselves. In our (also) “belief” in the disruptive potential of “particular situations,” we want to express, not without difficulties, that there are limits, opacities, in the ability of subjects to account for themselves and others.

We start with four examples of how experience works in autobiographical belief to bring to the already old Scott’s (1991) problematization about the character of evidence of experience:

The efficacy of life stories in education procedures is linked, in a constitutive way, to the dimension of socialization inherent in biographical activity, (...) understood as the set of operations according to which individuals write their experiences in the temporal schemas they organize mentally their gestures, their behaviors, their actions according to a logic of narrative configuration. (Delory-Momberger, 2006, p. 369, own translation).

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. (...) Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (...). To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477).

Currere is an attempt to reveal the ways that histories (both collective and individual) and hope suffuse our moments and to study them through telling our stories of educational experience. (Grumet, 1981, p. 118).

By looking at themselves as people who live experiences, they become happier and better teachers because they will be more sensitive to the way students are experiencing the world. This puts them back in touch with themselves and, as they do so, they get in touch with the students in a better way. This would be my argument about the work of reflection on life stories (Goodson, 2007, p. 59, own translation).

Turning specifically to the field of history, Scott³ (1991) was uncomfortable with the authority that experience acquired and with the transcendental and incontestable character it assumed, even when such an experience was presented as historical and contingent. In her words: “The evidence of experience works as a foundation providing both a starting point and a conclusive kind of explanation, beyond which few questions can or need to be asked” (Scott, 1991, p. 790). The fundamental problem, to Scott, was that the “voices” of the subjects, usually marginalized minorities, replaced historical problematization and were taken as authoritative evidence, almost exclusively because they were enacted and felt. In this way, authenticity was given by a kind of

³ This text refers specifically and comparatively to the fields of History and Literature, but it has been used in different areas that draw from narrative research, including cultural studies, anthropology, feminist studies, and queer theory. An example of the impact of this text can be followed in number 9 of the journal *Cultural studies ↔ Critical methodologies*, from 2009.

belonging of the researcher or of the “subjects” of the research to that group or context of which they spoke about.

Contrary to what Scott (1991) understands as a transparent reading of experience, she will argue, drawing from Foucault, in favor of the discursive character of experience: “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (Scott, 1991, p. 779). The experience is discursive, the enacted only makes sense within a discursive order that produces what one speaks of (Foucault, 2009). The lives narrated, written by teachers, or the experiences they reflect on are interpretations strongly influenced by social and cultural discourses, as well as by material conditions that shape how their visions are structured (Foucault, 2009, p. 82).

Our dialogue with Scott intends to problematize narrative or autobiographical research in the field of teacher education in its realism, and also in the idea that narrating is potent for self-understanding and for better professional performance. Here, perhaps, it is also important to put under suspicion the idea of professional identity necessary to erect this belief in the autobiographical narrative. Even if dealing with the narrative of singular subjects, such belief must constitute a collective subject, something universal - professional, in this case. Taking Scott’s warning into consideration, it would be necessary to “understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed” (Scott, 1991, p. 792). The author urges us to consider the re-inscriptions of supposedly shared identities and experiences in a universal way, otherwise we are diluting the difference --with which we are dealing in autobiographies-- in the sameness. The ideas of collaboration and relationality that mark our intervention--and also support autobiographical belief--must be confronted with the exercises of power and authority that permeate them by consolidating identities.

However, our argument is not against something that could be called (professional) experience, which would seem to contradict a project that proposes to produce public policies in schools. With Scott (1991), we take on, for the time being, this “experience” as a “particular linguistic event” that takes place in a discursive (and material) space. If the experience throughout the project will be narrated or written, it will not be as it happened, but “rather becomes that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced” (Scott, 1992, p. 26). Thus, drawing from Scott (1991), we imagine that the narrative of experience may be useful for questioning normativities that have profound implications for “how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (Scott, 1991, pp. 777).

Experience as a linguistic phenomenon also calls into question the notion of subjectivity, and, as we have already pointed out, of identity--an inevitable construct in reference to autobiographical research. Scott’s considerations did not point only to an epistemological discussion of what might be taken as knowledge about the subject, but they also questioned the very ontology of the modern, centered, self-conscious subject upon which autobiographical belief rests:

Claiming that identity is a fiction, postmodernists attribute our scribbles and fantasies to the determinations of genres and codes. (...), the autobiographical method invites us to struggle with all those determinations. (...) to develop in ways that transcend the identities that others have constructed for us (...). (Grumet, 1990b, p. 324).

modern [biographical] practices seem to be driven by the need for formation and the permanent orientation of unfinished subjects to the search for meaning in all senses of the term, sensibility, direction and signification. (Pineau & Jobert, 1993, p. 58, own translation).

For me, self-denial, denial of the subject, denial of identity is merely a postmodern complicity of word games that show that the university is taking on the wrong side. What I accept irrefutably is that there are fragmented “selves,” there are multiple “selves,” there are individualities that do not work. But I still think of a place where individuality is an important space to work (Goodson, 2007, p. 63, own translation).

The collapse of the notion of centered subject has long been announced, and, obviously, autobiographical studies have been responding to poststructural demands and modernity itself in different ways over the years. As Hall (2006) emphasizes, the decentering of the subject has been constituted with the works of Freud and Lacan and with the saussurean structuralism, as well as with the work of critical authors, especially Althusser, reaching Foucault and the feminist theorists in the second half of the last century. With the poststructural linguistic shift, the deconstruction of the unitary, self-centered and conscious subject - the subject of humanism, as St. Pierre (2009) calls it - has been intensified with ontological developments that matter not only for autobiographical research but for the very sense of education. The humanism which St. Pierre talks about is possibly the one that Derrida (1991, p. 154) will recognize as the soil and horizon of a phenomenological ontology, a metaphysical familiarity that is not interrupted, and profoundly marks a substantive part of qualitative - and autobiographical - research in education.

How to speak of a self whose bio would be written when the ideas of subject and identity collapsed? The impossibility of locating experience, life or even what is said in the ontological unity known as the individual or human subject makes it imperative to make autobiographical research complex if one does not wish to abandon it. In this sense, Miller (2005), in a work published for the first time in 1998, emphasizes that

educators who wish to use biography, autobiography, and narrative as forms of inquiry in teacher education and curriculum research (...) must address issues of identity construction, subjectivity, and power relations that circulate through language as well as human interaction (Miller, 2005, p. 50).

With the self hopelessly in inverted commas, the idea of a fully realized, conscious, sovereign, rational subject, whose unitary and coherent voice (Weedon, 1997) only needs to be liberated by a socializing or empowering experience, seems naive. The promise of autobiographical belief collapses with the subject and its representation in crisis. It is not only the fully articulated, transparent and unmediated narratives that are in check, but the fully constituted subjects - knowing and knowable - who institute them. Both narratives and subjects are, if we accept the poststructural lessons, the effects of power relations, and they cannot, from outside such relations, manage them or even be aware of them.

However, there is no autobiography - and we would even say education - without subjects. They have a fundamental role in the intervention proposal that we make, as well as--in a different way--within the studies that we have gathered here under the label of autobiographical belief. How can they be conceptualized in the discursive vision that we assume? Or, more radically, what “teacher” - as a subject and as a professional identity - is this one that we “count on” to defend localized and disruptive versions of school reform practices (Miller, 2005)? Our fastest response is that “the subject” who we talk about - also teacher - consists of dense operations, conflicting discursive networks, and historically situated sociocultural materialities and practices (Weedon, 1997), being simultaneously constituted and decentered by a series of processes and relationalities. It is this ontology of the relational subject, both discursive and material, that we want to explore and complicate to think about the relation between subjectivation and autobiographical practice of teachers far from the humanist subject and also from the belief in “reflection” on the experience as what makes it better (whatever that means) or more conscious.

An ontology of the relational subject and the neomaterial complication

(...) someone else sees our face in a way that none of us can. We are in this way, even as located, always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us. This establishes our exposure and our precarity as well as the ways in which we depend on political and social institutions to persist. (Butler, 2011, p.10).

For some decades, the poststructural demands that we have highlighted have called into question the matrix of intelligibility of autobiographical narrative research - marked by concepts that rest on the metaphysics of presence (St. Pierre, 2009). More than the rejection of a humanist version of the autobiographical, such demands have allowed us to react to the various divisive practices between the “self” and the “other;” that is why they remain present in our ways of responding politically and ethically to the other as such. What we will do here is, therefore, to follow in dialogue with the conceptualization of the subject that we have been formulating and the relational ontology that it implies--complicating it with what has been called the “ontological turn”. Criticisms of neo-materialism (for example, Hekman & Alaimo, 2008; Barad, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010) — and even of Clough’s (2009) new empiricism - will help us, as they have done with poststructural feminist authors such as Butler, to make explicit the materiality and corporeality of those whose lives are narrated. Smith and Watson (2010) highlight such materiality by pointing out that autobiography inextricably binds memory and subjectivity. To them, “the body - its skin, anatomy, chemistry - resonates as both a locus of identity and a register of similarities and differences that inflect social identities” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 51).

Therefore, the movement we seek, when bringing the neomaterial complication, has nothing to do with the abandonment of the linguistic, because, as Hekman points out (2014, p. 162), “in the case of the subject, it seems abundantly obvious that we *are* wholly constituted by language. Positing an “I” apart from linguistic constitution is highly problematic and seems to necessitate a return to the essentialism of modernism.” However, to the author and also to us, it seems “equally unacceptable (to imagine) that language wholly constitutes us and we are, in a sense, social dupes” (Hekman, 2014, p. 162). When recognizing the complex combinations of elements that involve the ontological subject, Hekman (2014) argues that an ontology of the subject must be able to describe intra-actions of multiple factors that constitute subjectivity, including linguistic, racial, material, sociocultural and sexual preferences, among others.

This debate, on the one hand, between the primacy of the linguistic and, on the other, the materiality of the body, although ancient, covered by the dualism between nature and culture, was and has been influential in the theorization of the subject of autobiography. Among other feminist critiques of such dualism, the denunciation of the subordinate association of “woman” to the materiality of her body is no longer recent. Even (feminist) neo-materialism, which has brought the body back into analysis, especially those involving issues of sexual difference, can be referred to works that are over 30 years old. We hear in them the echoes of Haraway (1991), with her cyborg theories – “a fiction that mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” (Haraway, 1991, p. 191) — or Tuana’s theory of interactionism (1983). In it, the author rejected the dualism of nature/culture, concerned with the cognitive impacts of corporeality and with the complex interactions between the body and the world, including the relations between human materiality and the more-than-human world (Tuana, 2001).

Hekman (2014) accompanies these more than three decades of feminist neomaterialism, highlighting some key works in the theorizing of women as a “phenomenon produced by language, science, technology and apparatuses” (Hekman, 2014, p. 159). What is striking about this story is the intricate web in which the subject is constituted, in Bennett’s words (2010, p. 161), “as an impure,

human, non-human assemblage”, in which human agency is an intricate network of humanity and not humanity. Nothing too distinct from Alaimo’s (2010) notion of trans-corporeality, in which the author describes the human as a disordered, contingent and emerging mix of the material world and argues that human and environment do not separate. Or Grosz’s (2004) rejection of any version of biological determinism, in favor of “a politics of affirmation of difference” (Grosz, 2004, p. 72), which reconfigures nature as dynamics and materiality as culturally productive, all escaping from human practices - including language - that try to contain them. Braidotti’s (1994) nomadic subject is one more attempt to situate, to give body, to complexify the subject as a multiple entity that works in a network of interconnections – a culturally differentiated subject, a myth, a political fiction that allows movement between established categories. Finally, Barad’s (2007) well-known studies on the nature of the discursive practices that allow to relate them to the material phenomena, emphasizing that individuals do not have an independent and autonomous existence, but emerge from their entangled intra-actions.

Undoubtedly, the complications of these and other authors of neo-materialism are fundamental to think of another ontology of the subject - not the subject of humanism - without which the use of autobiographical narratives risks dissolving in naivety and producing the dividing practices we want to avoid. More promising than the simple questioning of the nature/culture, material/linguistic binary, such complications have subverted the temporal (chronological and simultaneous) notion, with clear unfoldings for autobiographical research, as well as for a relational ontology of the subject. In this sense, Barad’s (2010) work - influenced by Derrida - has instigated us to consider the “spectral multiplicity,”⁴ described by the author as the phantom rupture of continuity or as relations of inheritance intersected by discontinuities and indeterminations. It is important to note that such multiplicity does not refer to uncertainties about continuous, linear and sequential progress in human understanding - as if there were certainties that could finally be obtained or narrated about a fixed entity like the other or even the self. Barad is referring to boundary indeterminations and their exteriors as impossible closures – the “to-come”. Everything intra-acts as an ethic of alterity, in which respect for the other involves spectral work, disturbing expectations by narratives based on desires for continuity, limits and resemblance.

With a realistic and agential understanding of matter as a “dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations” (Barad, 2007, p. 224), Barad will operate a “performative metaphysics” in which also things - the objects upon which humans are supposed to act – gain agency in themselves, as intra-acting “components” of ontologically inseparable phenomena. “[D]istinct entities, agencies, events do not precede, but rather emerge from/through their intra-action” (Barad, 2010, p. 267) as “co-existing multiplicities of entangled relations of past-present-future-here-there that constitute . . . worldly phenomena” (Barad, 2010, p. 264). These spectral multiplicities generate “continual re-opening[s] and unsettling[s] of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be” (Barad, 2010, p. 264). Such reopenings (and uncertainties) constantly revitalize “irreducible relations of responsibility” (Barad, 2010, p. 265)

Instead of reinforcing binaries (as past/present) and fixed boundaries that produce uniformity and rejection of the other, the ethics of otherness take the (dis)continuities as new openings to entangle new and narrative affirmations of the Other, totally Other. In fact, Barad (2012) argues that:

⁴ Barad (2010) relies on Derrida’s spectrology (hauntology), a term that refers to ontology, with the desire “to introduce the spectrum into the concept construction itself. In every concept, starting with the concepts of being and time” (DERRIDA, 1994, p. 161, own translation).

Inheritance and indebtedness are not only the substance of any particular autobiographical story, but [these] also [go] to the core of the ontology (or rather ethico-epistem-ontology) of agential realism: phenomena do not occur at some particular moment in time; phenomena are specific ongoing reconfigurings of spacetime-matter [wherein matter is performatively materializing time and space rather than unfolding within them]. (Barad, 2012, p. 12).

Thus the phenomena or experiences narrated in the autobiography do not rest in the past or are brought from the past to the present, they are diffracted into a “multiplicity of processes”, simultaneously, in various temporalities. Diffraction, as intra-action, does not signal a “reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – reiteratively intra-acting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (...) that trouble the very notion of *dicho-tomy* – cutting into two – as a singular act of absolute differentiation” (Barad, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, there is no origin in any story; there is no life or memory, perfect or not, to be narrated, there is only a “ongoing openness of the narrative to future re-tellings, (...) [an openness that gestures toward] an inheriting [of] the future as well as the past” (Barad, 2012, p. 11).

Our research movement has not, at least so far, been working with Barad’s ethical-epistem-ontology of realism, but understanding it as a disturbance that has effects on Butler’s thinking, forcing the author to resume her work to reiterate the material dimension. As the poststructural thought teaches us, there is no reiteration or quotation that is not in itself a betrayal of what supposedly was there to be reiterated. Perhaps we could use, freely, Barad’s (2007) subversion of spacetime-matter to highlight that “supercessionary break with the old” (Barad, 2012, p. 13). In our attempt to think about the autobiographical subject, we return to Butler and her ontology of the subject that always exists in relation to and with the social (Butler, 2015a, 2015b). Such a return turns the author’s already twisted thinking into intra-action with the neomaterial complications.

Just like Hekman (2014), we understand that the dialogue with Butler - especially but not only with her more recent preoccupations with the senses of subject, with dispossession and with a performative theory of montage - can be useful to think about this other ontology. With such a dialogue, we want to emphasize the constitutive ambivalence of social forms or that normative categorizations do not define “becoming” or eliminate the possibility of a liminal being that does not conform to the idea of human dictated by specific norms. Any social forms that promise wholeness - of kinship, gender, as well as the fixed and sovereign notion of Self that upholds the humanist ontology - are dangerously attractive, inasmuch as they seek to erase their “promising mutability” (Butler 1999, p. 50) in such ways.

The ontology of the relational subject has long been worked out by Butler from a dialogue with Levinas that gains new understandings in friction with Barad’s “spectral multiplicity”. It is perhaps important to note that Butler’s (1999, 2005, 2015a, 2015b) theorizing about how humans in particular are produced as subjects in relations with others and with the social norms that precede them have understood these others as animate and inanimate⁵. This implies that the ontological condition of the subject is an ethical relation with the other - including the liminal, the monstrous, the nonhuman or the inert - capable of breaking what Levinas termed the primordial “egological” feeling of being (Vassilieva, 2016, p. 52). This ethic demands, to Butler (Dumm & Butler, 2008), the questioning of the subject’s response when “impinged upon [by an other] in ways one never chose, and to think through what this means about how profoundly affected by others’ lives we are” (Dumm & Butler, 2008, p. 99). At the same time, this “requirement of ethics” does not imply any evidence of collective identity as recognition that gives us back to the familiar, fixed notions of

⁵ The very idea that we need to advocate Butler’s poststructural perspective of alleged neomaterial attacks may not make much sense, but for some reason we feel compelled to do so and we did so because that desire might say something like the forms how our theories are seen as successive regimes of insights and positionings (Pickering, 1995).

identity, or an ideal and sovereign self. Instead, Butler argues that relationality forces us to interrogate sociocultural norms, historically situated, and their fundamental assumptions. There are no common ties that constitute a professional identity or identity or that stitch together a narrated story of a particular human subject.

Derrida's (2005) theorizations about openings to the democracy to come- nonlinear, contingent, plural, unexpected, conflicting - and his referral to Levinas's work inspired Butler's ethical sensibilities, as she assumes. The ethics of otherness thus echoes in the author's thought, an ethic that recognizes that the other - because of this same otherness - cannot be reduced to visions and narrations of a shared subjectivity and, therefore, to the sameness. Imagining necessary openings, according to Derrida (1996, p. 3), Levinas argued that opening up to the alterity of the other requires that the recognition of the other be also filled with "unlimited responsibility of an unconditional yes." The conviction of the author of unlimited responsibility, even in the light of his indeterminations - a love never fully achievable, the alterity of the Other, conditioned hospitality, the opacity of the subject - marks Derrida's (2005) democracy to come as well as ethics of relationality as theorized by Butler. It is not there as a regulating principle, an ideal to be attained, but as the opening of the deviation between an infinite promise and the determinate, necessary, but necessarily inadequate, forms of measure with this promise (Derrida, 1994, p. 93).

Butler's exercise of thinking about an ontology of a constituted-decentred subject in the ethical relationship with the other echoes Foucault's critique of the ontological precedence of the subject as a founding, unitary and self-evident category as well as his understanding of subjectivity as "realized in the *material* [sites of production and] practices of everyday life, which are also discursive practices . . . [where] forms of subjectivity – conscious, unconscious, rational and emotional – are produced in and on the body through socially located discourses" (Weedon, 1997, p. 175). If Butler argues that such practices do not determine subjectivity, they constrain it enough that it is not possible simply to tell the eccentric story of an autonomous self. Being a subject, says Butler (2005, p. 64), is to be "implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us", a world of people and things of which we are by no means autonomous. The subject who narrates his/her story is simultaneously constituted and decentered by a web of changing processes and relationalities.

An ontology of the subject, to Butler, would therefore have to start from the presumption that there is a shared precariousness that pervades the materialities of becoming. We exist as subjects in relation to the other - human or not - and with the symbolic. Although this precariousness is constitutive of the subject, it is important to emphasize that some, more than others, are disproportionately exposed to the wound or to early death. The conditions of precariousness to which certain bodies are subjected, which make certain living and non-living entities not liable to produce mourning or to be valued, are unevenly distributed, and this makes one ethics imperative towards the other. We assume, as does Hekman (2014), that this ethics in precarity approaches and distances Butler from neomaterial demands, since there is no human outside of networks of life and that human life is only one of the possible species of life. We are precarious because we are material beings, although dependent on social and political norms for this material existence. Subjectivity would thus be, to Butler, a kind of mixture of material and discursive components that cannot be isolated from one another: "the differential distribution of precariousness is at once a material and perceptual issue (...) [Thus,] the boundary of who I am is the boundary of the body, but the boundary of the body never fully belongs to me (2009, 54)"⁶ (Hekman, 2014, p. 178-179). The exposure of bodies - human, not human, animate and inanimate

⁶ As in the original. Reference to the book *Quadros de Guerra* (Frames of war: when is life grievable?), here quoted as Butler (2015c)

- into public spaces, constitutes any iteration of these bodies as social, vulnerable and even precarious. The effects of intertwining and the interdependence of bodies, never totally separated from the discursive one, have been, in fact, the concern of the author with which we want to construct our proposal of intervention.

Our dialogue with Butler and neomaterial authors, especially Barad, sought here (and throughout the project) to remove the problematic of the subject - and therefore of the autobiographical - of essentialized notions, whether as individual or collective identity. Our intention has been to conceptualize autobiographical practices as immersion in environments, connectivities, relationalities and particular materialities, which certainly complicates the naive simplicity with which subjects are taken as ontological presumably autonomous presences in many autobiographical researches. From the questioning of a metaphysical presence of the subject (Derrida, 1991), we seek to displace the possibility of humanistic versions of self-reflexive experiences that support autobiographical belief. Perhaps the most comfortable conclusion for us now was the impossibility of the intervention we have been proposing as an alternative to public control policies. However, this option is not given to us, the ethical-political responsibility towards the other forces us to respond, even if, as Pillow (2015) points out, in discomfort, producing “practices of confounding disruptions” (Pillow, 2015, p. 192).

Autobiography and the relational subject

The argument is that agency exists in the possibility of a variation within a repetition. In order to be intelligible, we need to repeat the familiar and normalized. The task is not whether to repeat but how to repeat in such a way that the repetition displaces that which enables it. (Lather, 2001, p. 204).

Discomfort and responsibility are the terms with which we produce this text, as well as our research and, why not, our lives. The learning of a modern epistem-ontology weighs upon them, which instigates us, in the name of responsibility, to remove the discomfort. Dis-comfort, un-controlled, in-predictability, the unwanted explicit by the negative prefixes that mark the opposition to the meticulously planned by the responsible subject. That is, here-there-now-before-after, our task has been to unlearn with theory, so as to be able to intra-act with the other more-than-human, shifting the limits with which we are accustomed and that make us intelligible - and comfortable. This seems to us the responsible and necessary agency, not because, as self-constituted, conscious subjects, we have a professional obligation. The responsible agency is imposed by the call of the other, it is the relation that constitutes us in the intra-action.

If, at times, our texts and researches date discomfort, from the conclusions we expect the suspension, at least provisional, of the deferral. As in the humanist versions of reflexive autobiographical practices, a sovereign self, a competent intentionality as a researcher, must be able to transcend what is already known and restore comfort to oneself and to all. However, neither the investigator nor the investigated alterity - human or nonhuman - can be conceptualized as the simple and innocent ontic presence of autonomous, knowing and knowable subjects. As we learn from Butler, subjects do not depend on each other properly, they exist and become in relation to and with the social. They do not preexist and then relate; they arise in the intra-action, depend on the relation and their materialities variables. It is therefore not possible - or desirable - to draw lessons or suggestions on “how to repeat in such a way that the repetition displaces that which enables it” from what we have been presenting. This text is - and purports to be - sheer futility, if the quest is for answers. It only brings with it the theory with which we have unlearned to leave behind any disturbance which brings no comfort.

However, it is necessary to confess its normative intention, not the intention of its authors, but that of every text (theoretical). More than that, as we have pointed out, it is being written as part of an ongoing research and intervention project, which can easily slip into the idea that here is what we intend to do in the research. If the autobiographies of teachers are at the center of the project, they will be produced in a different way, with a methodology that, this text, would help to describe. How to avoid autobiographical belief and humanist ontology in an autobiographical research in which the subject is taken as relational in its materiality? If it is true that we start from this question, this does not imply answering it by producing another onto-methodology, applicable to all sorts of cases. Post-qualitative research - and autobiography - is an “ethico-onto-epistemological project” (St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016, p. 100). It is made of singular and responsible displacements and this text, as the theory with which we relate to write it, is just another piece in the intra-action nominated research.

This is it! As an “ethico-onto-epistemological” project, we like to think of our intervention as a moment of ethical relation to the other-more-than-human, not previously constituted. In Lather’s words (2001, p. 204), research “is resituated as a way into the messy doings [...] via risky practices that both travel across contexts and are remade in each situation inquiry.” It is “a moment of dispersion, a proliferating moment, within the relations of overdetermination” (Lather, 2001, p. 204). We-they-theories-texts-environment-norms entangled, affecting, producing disruptions that constitute-decenter us as effects of the relation. At the end, or when the chronological time of the funded projects has run out, we will have some stories, autobiographies because every text is probably autobiographical. And we will remain subject-in-relationship, still-not, to come.

How can an intervention that only discomforts - or draws attention to hidden discomforts - be public policy in education and curriculum? If by policy we assume an action calculated to achieve a desired and projected end, it cannot, but this seems to us only messianic pretension. Our heritages have taught us to doubt this claim because it does not deliver what it promises – how long have we been betting on policies that supposedly know how to produce quality in education? - and especially because it wants to saturate all possibilities of being and doing politics. With this, we are not, of course, suggesting that projects do not exist or that there may be actions, political or otherwise, outside of any normativity. We only believe that a stance that is always deconstructive in relation to the norms that constitute us is necessary, a movement to let excess happen irrevocably to come. Without romanticizing, knowing the demands of calculation.

In the end, echoes, in this text and in our project - of research, as of life - a belief that education that reduces the other to the same or to the known already kills itself. Educating implies alterity and therefore needs to be done as far as possible, beyond the place we are in and beyond the already identifiable zones (Derrida, 2010, p. 56). Therefore, instead of ordering it, it would be productive for public policies in education to recognize the unpredictable that pops in the intra-actions, because it is this that moves us farther and farther.

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