http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1984-6398202218426
Data de recebimento: 31/05/2021. Data de aprovação: 22/08/2021

In my shoes: empathy and critical emotional literacy in EFL lessons

Em meu lugar: empatia e letramento emocional crítico em aulas de inglês como língua estrangeira

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ABSTRACT: Part of an autoethnographic research project, this article reflects on two English lessons in which my undergraduate students were invited to discuss empathy in times of Covid-19 pandemic. I begin by arguing for the relevance of empathy and contextualizing my interest in the investigation of emotions in ELT, as well as my theoretical framework, which draws on the convergence of emotional and critical literacy theories. Next I provide an account of my lessons, based on an art installation entitled "The Empathy Museum". My analysis of the lessons seeks to investigate the extent to which they were able to promote what Boler (1997) has termed a "semiotics of empathy". I conclude by stressing the importance of emotional and critical literacy theories for formulating educational policies committed to political and social changes.

KEYWORDS: English language teaching; empathy; politics; emotions; critical literacy.

RESUMO: Parte de um projeto de pesquisa autoetnográfica, este artigo é uma reflexão sobre duas aulas de inglês em que meus alunos de graduação discutiram empatia em tempos de pandemia de Covid-19. Começo argumentando a favor da relevância do tema e contextualizando meu interesse em investigar emoções no ensino de língua inglesa, assim como meu quadro teórico, baseado na convergência de teorias de letramento emocional e crítico. Em seguida faço um relato de minhas aulas, baseadas em uma instalação de arte intitulada "O Museu da Empatia". Minha análise das aulas busca investigar em que medida elas promoveram o que Boler (1997) chamou de uma "semiótica da empatia". Concluo reforçando a importância das teorias de letramento emocional e crítico para a formulação de políticas educacionais comprometidas com mudanças sociais e políticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ensino de língua inglesa; empatia; política; emoções; letramento crítico.

> Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.
>
> (Roman Krznaric)

> How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.
>
> (Benedictus de Spinoza)

> Don't bring out the General in you! Don't have just ideas, just have an idea (Godard). Have short-term ideas.
>
> (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari)

1 Introduction: Empathy matters

Arguably our reliance on digital technologies has increased exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether mediating teachers and pupils' online interactions, offering remote work tools for professionals working from home or simply helping people keep in touch with their families and friends, digital technologies have become indispensable resources for performing professional and academic activities, or compensating for the lack of physical interaction. Nevertheless, our increasing dependence on digital gadgets is a matter of concern for a number of researchers, such as neuroscientists investigating cognitive and emotional development. This is pointed out by Carr (2011), in his examination of how the Internet influences the brain. Carr (2011) investigates the importance of deep thinking in our neurological development, and how it is impaired by the Internet. According to Carr (2011), deep or meditative thinking, which is what defines us as humans, could be endangered by the profusion of visual and aural stimuli that dispute – and disrupt – our attention every time we navigate the Internet: "The tumultuous advance of technology could, like the arrival of the locomotive at the Concord station, drown out the refined perceptions, thoughts, and emotions that arise only through contemplation and reflection" (CARR, 2011, p. 222). As a result, "we are welcoming the frenziedness into our souls" (CARR, 2011, p. 222).

Carr contends that it is not only deep or meditative thinking that requires an attentive mind, but also empathy. He draws on the research of neuroscientist

Antonio Damasio, who maintains that higher emotions like empathy and compassion arise from neural activities that are intrinsically slow. This finding resulted from a series of experiments which demonstrated that "the more distracted we become, the less able we are to experience the subtlest, most distinctively human forms of empathy, compassion, and other emotions" (CARR, 2011, p. 221). In other words, the more time we spend in front of computer and smartphone screens, overwhelmed by fast-moving flows of multimodal stimuli, deprived of time for meditation, reflection or even idle contemplation, the more distracted and therefore the less likely we are to develop empathy, among other emotions related to deep thinking. This includes the "inability to fully experience emotions about other people's psychological states" (CARR, 2011, p. 221). Carr concludes that "it would not be rash to suggest that as the Net reroutes our vital paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, it is altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts" (CARR, 2011, p. 221).

On a similar note, Raphaël Hitier's documentary (cf. GÉNÉRATION..., 2020) about the so-called "screen generation" investigates the possible damages of prolonged exposure to television, computer, and smartphone screens to the neurological and emotional development of children and young adults. A long-term survey carried out across the United States with 12,000 children suggests that digital addiction could have negative impacts on their emotion management, decision-making and impulse control. This seems to be especially the case of infants with long-term exposure to screens before the age of three, who later may experience difficulty in grappling with such emotions as frustration or rejection, let alone character, language acquisition and sleeping disorders, or impaired cognitive development; hence the suggestion that parents limit the number of hours their children spend in front of them. The documentary also suggests there is danger for adults, who, by engaging in time-consuming activities like watching videos or surfing the Internet, might be losing physical interaction opportunities, oblivious to the possible effects of long-term online exposure on their own neural cognitive and emotional processes.

Both Carr (2011) and Hitier (GÉNÉRATION, 2020) raise the alarm about the influence of prolonged exposure to digital technologies on our emotional, cognitive and neural development. Drawing on recent neuroscientific research, they warn that not only can digital technologies lead to language or character disorders, but they could also hinder the development of empathy. This latter point deserves the attention of all educators, especially those involved with the teaching of the English language, still regarded as the world's lingua franca

for international communication. In my case, although I have been an English teacher for over two decades, it was only recently that I became aware of the importance of empathy in ELT. What sparked my interest in the topic and helped to raise my awareness of the decisive role of emotions in English lessons was an embarrassing incident that occurred in one of my lessons two years ago, which I describe in the next section of this paper. By that time I had just started working on an autoethnographic research project, aimed at investigating the contributions of critical literacy and multiliteracies theories to ELT, both in terms of how these theories can help us to make sense of current meaning-making processes and of how they can account for social change, bearing in mind the complicity between language and power. The pandemic has brought digital literacy practices to the fore, and renewed the debate over the role of empathy in times of technological "frenziedness in our souls" (CARR, 2011).

The publication of Sara Ahmed's *The cultural politics of emotion* (2004) stressed the importance of the historicity and opacity of emotions. Based on Ahmed's construal of emotions as social constructs closely associated with cultural politics, a number of theorists have been envisioning ways in which educational practices can foster social change and strengthen democracy, among whom Benesch (2012; 2020) and Boler (1997; 2018). For Benesch, "attention to emotions and affect theorizes critical teaching not for implausibly grand liberation, empowerment or transformation, but, rather, as small and subtle shifts in perception or understanding that cumulatively might lead to social reform" (BENESCH, 2012, p. 134). Of all emotions, empathy is often considered as being of paramount importance in the maintenance of democratic regimes. Nevertheless, as Boler (1997) warns, not all forms of empathy can promote significant change, least of all what she terms "passive empathy", a component of popular emotional literacy programmes in American schools aiming for a "behavioural modification" (BOLER, 1997, p. 254) through which negative emotions can be controlled. This classification of emotions as positive or negative for learning is, to say the least, reductive, and informs emotional literacy practices which do not contribute to critical education in democratic societies, as I suggest below. First, however, I would like to provide an account of a teaching experience through which I gained greater awareness of the role of emotion in ELT.

2 A lesson I will never forget

It had never really dawned on me how emotions can play an important part in language teaching and learning. Perhaps I had always taken students' emotions for granted, supposing they did not really deserve much attention unless they got in the way of learning. This began to change two years ago, a few days before the latest presidential election in Brazil, in 2018. Never before had the presidential debates been so polarized between a right-wing candidate aligned with family, conservative values, and a left-wing candidate who fiercely opposed the former's beliefs. It was Tuesday morning, when I was teaching an English conversation class. Unlike the previous lessons, there seemed to be a general feeling of sadness as well as concern over the latest polls. It was as if you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. To break the ice, I began by asking one student looking especially downhearted to share her feelings with the group. She answered that she dreaded to think of Brazil being governed by a right-wing president, notorious for making sexist or homophobic jokes. Other students voiced similar concerns, in a growing chorus of disapproval. At that point, however, there was one dissenting voice. One student said that she would rather vote for a sexist and homophobic president than elect a left-wing president that would turn Brazil into some kind of Venezuela. This drew a lot of criticism from her colleagues, who began trying to bring her round. They argued that the right-wing candidate's bigoted ideas represented a menace to democracy, but to no avail. The girl who was clearly in the minority seemed uncomfortable and defensive as her colleagues kept glaring at her with resentment. The tension was escalating until one student snapped at her and burst out crying. She claimed that as a homosexual woman she had always lived in fear and suspected her own personal integrity would be at risk if the right-wing candidate was elected president. Then she leapt to her feet, accusing the student in the minority of being insensitive to LGBTQIA+ issues, and stormed out of the room, followed by another classmate trying to console her. An awkward silence followed. I was at a loss and speechless. The student in the minority broke the silence, visibly embarrassed. "I had no idea anyone could feel so deeply distressed by the thought of having a right-wing president. But isn't she overreacting? Or could it be me who didn't realise that his bigoted speeches could be so offensive?". As we listened to her, underneath we hoped that she was genuinely touched by her classmate's emotional distress and, who knows, might even change her mind?

My students' fears were confirmed, as were the suspicions that the elected president would not stop disseminating fake news or displaying attitudes of political

and religious bigotry. To add insult to injury, since the onset of the pandemic the Brazilian president has been downplaying the present sanitary crisis and stating his opposition to mandatory vaccination. This has aggravated the polarization characteristic of the 2018 campaign, causing social media to be inundated with angry posts both in favor and against the present head of state in Brazil.

It remains to be seen how empathy could thrive for the benefit of democracy in an atmosphere of conflict and intolerance, abounding with examples of fascistic attitudes[1]. This conflict is often fueled by social media, as the example above illustrates. As an educator, English teacher and critical literacy researcher, I strongly believe that we should all be concerned with the development of empathy, and that empathy plays a crucial part in emotional literacy, especially in times of ubiquitous digital technologies. In the next section, I reflect on the concepts of emotion and emotional literacy theories, which I believe can converge with the critical literacy theories I subscribe to.

3 Molar and molecular lines of change: towards a critical emotional literacy

The time is ripe for a reappraisal of the importance of developing empathy in EFL classrooms, and acknowledging the centrality of emotions in TESOL research and practice. Such reappraisal could start from the recognition that a considerable number of studies on emotions or emotional literacy has given individual and cognitive aspects of emotions priority over social and contextual factors, such as gender or ethnicity. This emphasis on cognition has reinforced the concept of the mind as the origin of emotions, overlooking the role of the body in experiencing them. In contrast, Barcelos (2015) and Benesch (2020) have long been arguing for the inseparability of emotion and cognition, or body and mind, calling for a reconceptualization of emotions as social, embodied processes. This allows for a renewed, robust view of emotional literacy which I find particularly relevant to contemporary research on emotions in TESOL, as well as congruent with the critical literacy theories I endorse. Emotional literacy in this view is defined as "a set of emotional practices related to how individuals

[1] As we will see below, the danger of fascism, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2013, p. 215), lies in the microfascisms that may inhabit our mundane, everyday attitudes, no matter how leftist we may appear to be: "Leftist organizations will not be the last to secrete microfascisms. It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you".

and groups of people read and write the world emotionally in their social contexts" (BARCELOS, 2015, p. 71). Barcelos therefore calls our attention to the social and discursive aspects of emotions, proposing that we conceive of emotional literacy as a discourse-mediated process whereby we attempt to *make sense* of our emotional landscape as we interact with others; in other words, a process whereby we are expected to *navigate* – rather than manage or control – our emotions. The term "navigation", according to Zembylas (2005), not only highlights the complexity and multitude of emotional states and changes, but it also "includes the possibility of both radically changing course and making constant corrections in order to stay on a chosen course" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 470).

Emotions are thus posited as social and discursive constructs located at the intersection of mind and body. This view of emotions as socially embedded, meaning-making processes is radically different from the one adopted by cognitive researchers, for whom emotions are construed as psychological, privately experienced states that can unproblematically be labelled as positive or negative. For Benesch (2020), describing emotions only as positive ("good for language learning") or negative ("bad for language learning") is, to say the least, reductionist. It overlooks the fact that "emotions are not static or monolithic, but, instead overlap, move, and shift" (BENESCH, 2020, p. 133). To think of emotions as monolithic means overlooking the historicity of emotional change, or the fact that "emotions are the very site of the capacity to effect change" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 470). Hence the author's opting for a "historical-ethnographic" approach to emotion – one which can help *make sense* of "the political bases of changes". At the core of this approach thus lies the belief that emotions are political and inextricably linked to their social and political contexts, which suggests they cannot be investigated without relating them to issues of power and resistance.

Bringing the political implications of emotions to the fore sheds light on the normative character of the "emotional regimes" that regulate teachers and learners' emotions, determining "what is considered appropriate to do and feel and what is not" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 474). The author proposes that these norms should be challenged or subjected to a critical examination that can unveil "the multiple, heterogeneous and contingent conditions that have given rise to these rules". This could, however, prove to be rather uncomfortable or painful (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 483):

> To analyze these rules and be subjected to discomfort and emotional suffering through challenging them is to reveal their historicity

> and contingency that have come to define the limits of teachers' understandings of themselves, individually and collectively. By doing so, it is to disturb, destabilize and subvert these rules, to identify some of the weak points and lines of fracture where structures of feeling (as counter-hegemonic) might make a difference. (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 483).

Uncomfortable as it might seem, the critical, genealogical analysis of emotional regimes proposed by Zembylas can underscore the historical character of emotions and hence pave the way for a revision of the rules "according to which teachers" – and, by extension, students – "should act, feel and think", as well as an overhaul of the way emotions are conceptualized. Such an overhaul should underscore teachers and students' potential for agency and desire for political change, both of which are at the heart of Benesch's (2012) critical teaching research and praxis. According to Benesch, critical teaching can bring together concern for social justice, in the form of equitable public education, and focus on teachers and students' emotions, in such a way as to envisage social and political change – however slight or subtle:

> Attention to emotions and affect theorizes critical teaching not for implausibly grand liberation, empowerment, or transformation, but, rather, as small and subtle shifts in perception or understanding that cumulatively might lead to social reform (BENESCH, 2012, p. 134).

Benesch (2015) suggests that critical teaching theory and praxis be undertaken with a careful examination of emotions and affect, which, in her view, can be used interchangeably[2]. This can reveal "subtle shifts" in our perception of the world – for instance, in the way we conceive of classrooms, the relationship between teachers and students, or the role of the school in the community – which may be conducive to social or political change, however small they might seem to be. In other words, significant social change can start small, from an investigation of emotions connected to the institutional constraints affecting students and teachers alike, for example. This kind of examination requires a "more calibrated way of working" through which we can *navigate* several emotions, "rather than

[2] Benesch shares Boler and Davis's view (2018) that the distinction between emotion and affect should not be unduly emphasized, with the risk of polarizing them. Boler proposes instead that we conceive of affect as "emotions on the move" (BOLER; DAVIS, 2018, p. 80).

demanding political purity, maintaining hope when goals are not achieved or even when gains are reversed" (BENESCH, 2012, p. 18). Based on the assumption that exclusion at schools is not owing to personal failure but ultimately also a political move, and that teachers and students experience conflicting emotions as a result of institutional pressures, Benesch brings her concern for social justice to the core of her proposal of critical teaching: one in which we acknowledge the limitations of emotional literacy studies which highly praise positive emotions and overlook "the emotional complexities of language acquisition in the neoliberal age of public sector defunding" (BENESCH, 2012, p. 35). Indeed, construing emotions as positive or negative for language learning, as cognitive approaches[3] do, is a utilitarian manoeuvre in the service of neoliberal interests, according to the author. In this sense, this cognitivist appraisal of positive emotions is likely to promote language learning, not unlike what proponents of the so-called functional literacy understood as minimal levels of reading and writing competencies that individuals should possess in order to function optimally as productive members of neoliberal, capitalist societies.

Benesch's, Zembylas' and Barcelos' contention that emotions are connected to larger social issues partly overlaps with Janks (2012)' and Souza (2011a)'s suggestion that literacy practices be investigated in close connection with their social and cultural contexts. Their understanding of critical literacy entails attention to the political and historical aspects of situated language use that complement the social dimension underscored by other literacy researchers. For Souza (2011), a critical understanding of the locatedness or historicity of meaning-making processes reminds us that all values and interpretations are context-bound, locally produced. This is a powerful reminder that conflict is inherent to all semiotic processes, since differences in interpretation cannot be overcome; hence the need to negotiate with the difference of the Other, in a process of "inward-looking" (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2012, p. 148) whereby one is compelled to listen[4] to oneself and subject one's own interpretations to critical

[3] According to Benesch (2012), cognitive approaches tend to construe emotions as "internal states that are either negatively or positively correlated with language learning" (BENESCH, 2012, p. 21), originating inside learners' minds or bodies.

[4] The role of listening is also highlighted by Boler (1997), for whom listening plays a crucial part in the practice of "testimonial reading" – one which stresses the reader's responsibility for reading, in the development of a "semiotics of empathy". We will return to Boler's problematization of empathy below.

scrutiny as one interprets the Other's words. This, according to Souza (2011, p. 140), characterizes critical literacy:

> Criticality then is not just listening to the other in terms of their socio-historical context of the production of meaning, but also *listening to hear* the other. The result of this process of listening is the perception of the futility of wanting to impose oneself on others, to dominate them, silence them or reduce their differences to the similarities of our "I's"; careful and critical listening can lead us to perceive that nothing of this kind will eliminate the difference between ourselves and others, and can lead us to seek other forms of interaction and peaceful coexistence with the differences that will not go away in direct violent confrontation nor in a possibly harmonious process of elimination.

Critical literacy thus entails seeking forms of peaceful coexistence with different perspectives[5]. This can pave the way for "empathetic understanding", or "a non-verbal 'resonance' that allows for empathetic communication across possible gaps" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 479). Developing empathetic understanding can enable teachers to *navigate* a vast array of emotions, recognizing the contingency of the rules governing their professional behaviour and feelings. As a result, these rules could be subverted, making way for "counter-hegemonic structures of feeling", as mentioned above. Hence Zembylas' claim that "emotions are of the highest political significance" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 474). The author's interest in the political aspects of emotions converges with critical literacy's concern with the interconnectedness between language and politics. As a critical literacy researcher, Janks proposes that critical literacy studies take account of politics on two levels: *politics with a capital P and politics with a little p*. The former is relative to the macropolitics of governments, national health policies regarding the current pandemic, globalization, climate change, wars, or neoliberal capitalism and its harmful effects, such as the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, and the genocide of Indigenous populations in Brazil, whose lands are being appropriated

[5] Lynn Mário T. Menezes de Souza and Vanessa Andreotti successfully coauthored a study programme devised in a critical literacy perspective entitled *(Learning to read the world) Through Other Eyes* (2008). The programme intended to encourage participants to "examine the origins of their own perceptions and cultural logics (their values and assumptions), to develop self-reflexivity, to re-evaluate their own positions in the global context and to learn from other local ways of knowing and seeing". (ANDREOTTI; SOUZA, 2008).

by landowners, logging and mining companies. On the other hand, *little p politics* refers to the micropolitics of everyday life and how we relate to other people: "it is about the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are. It is about desire and fear; how we construct them and how they construct us" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 151). Janks appears to imply that it is on this level that emotions seem to play a more fundamental role in our lives. Yet a number of theorists, including Benesch (2012) and Boler (1997), suggest that emotions could run through both levels.

For Deleuze and Guattari (2013), politics pervades every aspect of our lives, be it on an institutional, *molar* or macropolitical level, or the mundane, *molecular* or micropolitical level of day-to-day life. According to them, these molar and molecular segmentarities differ not in terms of size or scale, but depending on the *system of reference* in question. Yet they are also inextricably linked because they coexist and presuppose each other. Deleuze and Guattari exemplify this correlation between micro and macro, or molecular and molar, with reference to fascism: if, on the one hand, fascism has historically given rise to totalitarian states, on the other hand it feeds on the proliferation of *microfascisms* in interaction with each other. Hence their warning that "it's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2013, p. 215). Thus Deleuze and Guattari point out that the micro or the molecular is not distinct from the macro or molar on the basis of size, for "although it is true that the molecular works in detail and operates in small groups, this does not mean that it is any less coextensive with the entire social field than molar organization" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2013, p. 215). For Deleuze and Guattari, gender and class are examples of such organizations. Despite the apparent rigidity of molar, binary categories such as male and female, for instance, they allow for a variety of molecular combinations that account for multiple gender identities: "not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but the relation of each to the animal, the plant, etc.: a thousand tiny sexes" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2013, p. 213). In this sense, all politics – including the politics of gender and the politics of emotions, for that matter – entails *macropolitics* and *micropolitics* simultaneously:

> Take aggregates of the perception or feeling type: their molar organization, their rigid segmentarity, does not preclude the existence of an entire world of unconscious micropercepts,

> unconscious affects, fine segmentations that grasp or experience different things, are distributed and operate differently. There is a micropolitics of perception, affection, conversation and so forth (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2013, p. 213).

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that although perception and affection may constitute molar aggregates, they still persist as micropercepts or microaffects that segment reality according to a less rigid *modus operandi* than that characteristic of molar organizations such as class, gender or feeling. Not only does this explain the complexity of conflicting emotions experienced by teachers and students when faced with molar, institutional forces, but it also allows us to envisage molecular breaches of the "emotional regimes" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 474) that regulate teachers and learners' emotions, as mentioned above.

It is my belief that ELT could reach new heights by incorporating the critical teaching principles put forward by Benesch, Janks and Souza. These principles might help develop a critical emotional literacy which, rather than focus on emotions associated with successful language learning, could encourage teachers and students to navigate their own emotions, bearing in mind their political significance – both on macro/molar and micro/molecular levels. In the next section I present an account of an English lesson about empathy which I prepared and taught this year, with a view to promoting a debate about emotions.

4 *A mile in my shoes*: The Empathy Museum Project

I have been conducting research on the contributions of critical literacies and multiliteracies theories to ELT for a number of years, investigating the increasing complexity of contemporary meaning-making processes. More recently my research has focused on emotions as well as digital literacy, in times of remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. Last semester I taught a subject for English undergraduate students in their first year at the university where I teach. This subject aims to give students an overview of the English language grammar, from its phonological to its syntactical aspects, as well as providing them with opportunities for skills practice and development. Having introduced the concepts of morphemes, suffixes and prefixes, in the subsequent lesson I began by asking students how they had been feeling for the past weeks. "Bored", "anxious" and "sad" were some of their answers. Then I presented a list of words describing feelings such as "anxiety", "depression", "hope", "frustration", among others, and asked them again which words from the list described their feelings during the pandemic, and

why. One of the students answered "frustration", and went on to explain that the pandemic had frustrated his plans to discover academic life in his long-awaited first year at university. Another student answered "empathy", saying she felt sorry for people who had caught the disease or died from it. After a brief discussion I drew students' attention to the morphology of those words for feelings, eliciting the most common suffixes and prefixes, differences between nouns and adjectives, among other morphological aspects. Next I resumed the discussion about feelings by asking students if they also felt empathetic, as their colleague had pointed out. One student commented that the pandemic emphasized the importance of empathy, and another added that it was sadly lacking. I then told students that former American president Barack Obama had once given a speech in which he urged American people to make an effort to overcome an "empathy deficit" in order to address the needs of those at risk. I also commented that this speech had inspired English artist Clare Patey to create an art installation entitled "The Empathy Museum" in 2015. Its main exhibit – "A mile in my shoes" – comprised 250 pairs of shoes donated by anonymous collaborators from all over the world, and audio life stories recorded by the previous shoe owners. Visitors to the exhibit could put on one of these 250 pairs and take a walk in them, listening to a podcast recorded by its previous owner. This was expected to help visitors see the world through someone else's perspective, giving them the opportunity to ponder a wide array of issues such as social inequality, gender gap or prejudice (cf. EMPATHY MUSEUM, [2022]). Next I asked students to click the link to the exhibit (cf. A MILE..., [20--?]), read some introductory information and choose one of the podcasts to listen to. After this jigsaw listening, students were invited to report what they had learnt about the shoes' owners to their classmates, pointing out what had struck them about the owners' lives. This took up the remainder of the lesson. As I had anticipated it, by the end of the lesson the students seemed genuinely interested in the topic. Therefore I suggested that for homework they visit another exhibit (cf. FROM..., 2020) from this virtual museum, featuring audio stories and portraits of people discussing personal and professional experiences during the pandemic – people like Ben, for example, a learning disability nurse who admits that his biggest Covid lesson is that "I don't like people as a rule". I explained that they would have to choose at least three stories to listen to and report back to their colleagues.

In the subsequent lesson a week later I invited students to exchange information on the stories they had listened to and their overall impressions of The Empathy Museum in general. One student described the experience as an eye-opener, since he sometimes thought he was the only one with real problems,

but while listening to the stories he realized that people from different countries and walks of life were also grappling with stressful jobs and challenging life situations ("the problems posed by the pandemic are the same all over the world, but they affect each one differently", added one of his colleagues). All in all, he had found it an opportunity to understand what makes people tick, and develop as a human being. Another student added that the experience had caused her to step outside her comfort zone and think differently. A third student referred to it as an exercise in empathy, through which he could reflect on his own prejudices, biases and actions, and experiment a desire for transformation, "even if it is the desire to change yourself in general". A fourth student commented that he had felt emotional while listening to a story told by a frontline physician working with Covid patients. According to him, stories like this could lead people to act more conscientiously, recognizing the need for cooperation. He concluded by pointing out that art installations like The Empathy Museum are always welcome, for only by being empathetic to each other at all times – not only during pandemic crises – can we respect everyone's differences and live harmoniously.

Despite the students' positive response to the Empathy Museum lessons and their active participation in the discussion that ensued, I have qualms about the potential of the Empathy Museum activities for the development of a *critical emotional* literacy concerned with social and political change. Is the desire for transformation mentioned by one student ("the desire to change yourself in general") conducive to the development of empathy or a mitigation of social and economic inequalities? How can the knowledge of "what makes people tick", as mentioned by one student, promote empathy? What do we mean by "empathy"? Can we expect it to foster respect for differences aiming for "harmonious living", as pointed out by another student? How inclusive can this harmonious living be? In this day and age of global, digital communications and ubiquitous information, has empathy lost its reach or even become commonplace? Can it be appropriated by neoliberal discourses in order to serve the interests of private corporations, in the guise of some "live-and-let-live" respect for individual differences – provided we keep consuming? Can empathy entail anything more than "the numb *consumption* of another's suffering, grateful for distances that seem to confirm our safety" (BOLER, 1997, p. 298)? I intend to address some of these questions in the next section.

5 Conclusion

Important as it might seem to the development of critical emotional literacy – one which does not prescribe "the numb consumption of another's suffering" or the harnessing of positive emotions for learning – empathy alone does not guarantee profound changes, be they on a micro, molecular or a macro, molar level, or bring about an overhaul of power relations. In fact, Boler (1997) contends that "one can only hope then that empathy is not the only viable route to inspiring change" (BOLER, 1997, p. 255), especially when working with texts raises only a form of "easy identification and flattened historical sensibility" or "passive empathy" incapable of changing the reader's interpretative framework. This passive empathy "produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection" (BOLER, 1997, p. 259). In other words, not only does passive empathy fail to challenge the Western reader's beliefs and interpretations – often taken as universal, disembodied or neutral –, but it also reinforces their power and privileged status as "the judging subject". Presumably this passive empathy can do little to implement Benesch's critical teaching, develop critical literacy practices in which readers can "listen to themselves hearing" (SOUZA, 2011a) or engage in an "inward-looking" process (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2012) through which readers could "cast their gaze at their own reflection" (BOLER, 1997).

As an alternative to this neoliberal, passive empathy limited to "the numb consumption of another's suffering", Boler proposes a "semiotics of empathy" in the work with texts, reflecting a semiotic understanding of emotions. Based on the assumption that "empathy is produced within networks of power relations represented by reader and text, mediated by language, narratives, genres and metaphors" (BOLER, 1997, p. 261), this semiotics of empathy would pose such questions as "who benefits from the production of empathy in what circumstances? Who should feel empathy for whom?" (BOLER, 1997, p. 261), or "what crisis of truth does this text speak to, and what mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result? (BOLER, 1997, p. 266)". These questions could inform "testimonial reading" practices by means of which "the reader accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one's views are challenged" (BOLER, 1997, p. 261). The key concept in Boler's testimonial reading proposal is *responsibility*[6], which

[6] Boler's emphasis on the responsibility of listening is not dissimilar to Mikhail Bakhtin's

starts from the reader's awareness of their own locus of power and complicitness in "the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront" (BOLER, 1997, p. 257), and can ultimately infuse the reader with the desire or readiness for change:

> I suggest that unlike passive empathy, testimonial reading requires a self-reflective participation: an awareness first of myself as reader, positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task. This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views (BOLER, 1997, p. 263).

Boler's construal of testimonial reading as a confrontation of affective obstacles following a self-reflective examination of one's assumptions implies the notion of conflict, which is reinforced by such words as "challenging" and "mass of contradictions and struggles". This conflict is more explicitly formulated by Boler in her contention that testimonial readers recognize themselves as a "battleground for forces raging[7]" (BOLER, 1997, p. 265) to which they must pay attention so as to confront their own "relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading" and to investigate the power relations set-up that influences the way they think, feel and interpret. Thus the testimonial reader idealized by Boler not only empathizes with the characters' fate but also acknowledges their responsibility for "inward-looking" (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2012) as a means to critically examine the imbrication of power, language and society, and how this affects the relationship between the reader and the text, and between different readers. In this sense, testimonial reading, according to Boler, enables us to "recognize that a novel or biography reflects not merely a distant other, but analogous social relations in our own environment, in which our economic and social positions are implicated" (BOLER, 1997, p. 266). This kind of recognition may have led one of my students to state that "the problems posed by the pandemic are the same all over the world, but they affect each one differently". Perhaps a more empathetic

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and Emmanuel Levinas' views on responsibility as a key concept in ethical human life and the foundation stone for the relationship between self and the Other. I have written elsewhere about responsibility, ethics, power and literacy. (TAGATA, 2017; 2019).

[7] Boler's formulation of testimonial reader as "battleground for forces raging" overlaps with Bakhtin's notion of the statement as an arena of class struggles and conflicting forces.

response, as conceived of by Boler, would have resulted from this student reflecting on how their status is implicated in a social and economic context which also determines in whose interests and in what circumstances empathy is produced, or who is expected to empathize with whom. For Boler, these questions should guide a "semiotics of empathy", as mentioned above. Interestingly, they seem to converge with a seminal question running through Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013), namely what kinds of statements – and we could add emotions – are made possible in certain societies in given historical contexts and why.

Deleuze and Guattari's question is a powerful reminder to critical language and literacy researchers as well as emotion and affect theories of the importance of bearing in mind the historicity or contingency of statements, interpretations and emotions. This led Foucault – following Nietzsche – to call for a genealogical approach to the investigation of social phenomena, one which examines the historical conditions of possibility of discourses, having become influential among the critical literacy theories which I subscribe to. Similarly, Boler proposes a semiotics of empathy that allows for a genealogy of emotions wherein I, as a reader, might ascertain "the taken-for-granted social values and structures of my own historical moment which mirror those encountered by the protagonist" (BOLER, 1997, p. 266). A genealogical inquiry in the work with texts, as conceived of by Boler and also envisioned by Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, could yield critical insight into how our emotions, thoughts and political attitudes can mirror fascism on a micro or molecular level; these "microfascisms", Deleuze and Guattari warn, is what makes fascism dangerous: "every fascism is defined by a micro-black hole that stands on its own and communicates with the others, before resonating in a great, generalized central black hole" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2013, p. 214). For example, the belief in universal meanings and interpretations can foster fascistic attitudes towards difference/other readings. Hence the importance of developing critical emotional literacy while working with texts. This could be achieved by posing questions about the contexts of production and reception of texts, the ways in which the contexts differ, and how these differences affect our understanding (these questions, according to Souza (2001b) can help to promote students' critical literacy). Likewise, we could also ask how they feel about the characters, and how these emotions are connected with their reading context. "What do these emotions say about you as a reader?" In what ways do they reflect – and refract – certain power structures and relations? How do they evoke social roles (in terms of gender, profession, social class, ethnicity, etc.) and reinforce patterns of relationships? Unfortunately the Empathy Museum lessons did not address

any of these questions in depth. While listening to the two exhibit stories, some of my students may have experienced nothing but "passive empathy", unable to reflect upon their own microfascisms or responsibilities for the sanitary crisis, their privileged reading status, or problematizing the notion of living harmoniously.

Reflecting on the relationships between context, power and emotion seems to be at the core of the critical literacy and emotion theorists mentioned in this paper, all of whom concerned with how education can promote social, political or economic changes. In present times of remote teaching and learning, our increased reliance on digital technologies may be impairing our capacity for deep, meditative thinking, as suggested by Carr and Hitier in the beginning. This should stress the importance of attention to emotion and affect in critical, testimonial reading practices such as the ones advocated by Boler. She maintains that testimonial reading can trigger an analytic process in which the reader may "self-reflectively evaluate the complex relations of power and emotion" (BOLER, 1997, p. 255) that permeate the act of reading, thus highlighting the reader's ethical responsibility – for example, the responsibility for navigating their emotions and grappling with "the crises of truth that texts speak to", while interrogating what "mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result". The resulting semiotics of empathy, according to Boler, may be more conducive to social change than passive empathy and, as I have attempted to suggest, can yield insights about the historicity of emotions similar to the understanding of meaning-making processes as context-bound that guides critical literacy theorists mentioned in this paper. In other words, by undertaking a genealogical investigation of our emotions and interpretations – which Zembylas claims can be uncomfortable or painful, as already mentioned above – we can begin to fathom how emotions and interpretations operate on molar/macropolitical and molecular/micropolitical levels simultaneously, acknowledging their contingency. Only then will we be able to assume full responsibility for a world that is in the making; a world of short-term ideas where, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire suggested, we might avoid "bureaucratizing the mind" and understand life as a process of ***becoming***.

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