

WORDS MATTER

Rethinking Vocabulary Acquisition in Light of Critical Pedagogy

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Le lingue non servono propriamente a esporre la verità già nota, ma piuttosto a scoprire la verità che era prima ignota. La loro diversità non è una diversità di suoni e di segni, ma di visioni del mondo.

—Gheno 2019, 155

INTRODUCTION

Celebrated Italian linguist and philologist Luca Serianni (2014), while underlining the crucial importance of plurilingualism in the academic and cultural sphere, reiterated that “una lingua ... non è un cavo telefonico. La lingua svolge una serie di altre funzioni che vanno ben oltre il semplice ruolo di comunicazione La lingua è tante altre cose: è ciò che dà coscienza individuale a ciascuno di noi, è lo strumento che sedimenta la cultura in cui ci siamo formati” (1). Language is a powerful tool charged with a communicative and social function that allows us not only to understand and participate in the society in which we live, but also to open ourselves to a diversity of world views. Therefore, “we are what we say” is not a rhetorical statement, and the language we use to identify ourselves is and should be the result of precise choices that tell our way of being in the world. The very etymology of the word “parola” indicates its inseparable relationship with reality.¹ When we recover words and realities from silence, “noi non stiamo emettendo solo suoni né stiamo agendo come semplici parlanti in una comunicazione, ma stiamo contribuendo a creare la realtà, a donare ontologia a quanto nominato, a permettergli di esistere e essere riconosciuto” (Cristalli 2022, 15). Linguistic knowledge does not operate through subtraction but, on the contrary, through lexical expansion and questioning of the current use and contextualization of words. Vera Gheno (*Potere alle parole*, 2019) proposes a few questions we might ask ourselves when we communicate:

¹ paròla s. f. [lat. tardo parabòla (v. parabola), lat. pop. paraula; l'evoluzione di sign. da «parabola» a «discorso, parola» si ha già nella *Vulgata*, in quanto le parabole di Gesù sono le parole divine per eccellenza]. Treccani (n.d.). The word, as symbolic abstraction, is born alongside the object or action it represents. However, it goes beyond the mere function of signifier over a signified. Like any allegory and metaphor, it is a creative entity: by choosing a specific word, one chooses and/or generates a reality.

In che contesto mi trovo? Chi sono i miei interlocutori, Qual è il mio scopo comunicativo? Chiediamoci e chiediamo a chi ci sta attorno perché stiamo impiegando una certa parola, e come mai un certo uso ci dà fastidio, e che cosa stiamo raccontando agli altri di noi stessi tramite le nostre scelte lessicali, ricordandoci che sono responsabilità di ognuno di noi.... Questo non solo ci fa evitare di parlare a vanvera, ma ci dà la possibilità di diventare dei veri e propri *influenzatori culturali* (158)².

As discussed in this paper, language thus becomes a form of intervention for educators and citizens as they move in this world.

When talking about social justice in the classroom, several thinkers undeniably paved the way toward what we have witnessed over the last decades: the need to rethink what, how and to whom we teach. This lineage is long and far-reaching, but in this paper I will mention pioneers who endeavored to shape a new pedagogical language, starting from Paulo Freire’s (1998, 2018) critical pedagogy to Mezirow’s (2009) transformative learning to bell hooks’s (1994) education as a means of transgression. My contribution is enlightened by the theoretical approach and the pedagogical applications of these intellectuals, and it aims to underscore the urge to bring meaningful language into the classroom, to offer our students the lexicon to grasp and avail themselves of the essential power of language to structure reality. If words really matter, then it is crucial to provide new generations with a language as powerful as the social issues it seeks to address.

PAULO FREIRE’S CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A GATEWAY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the last decade we have been rethinking what, how and to whom we teach, in light of a shift toward social responsiveness that can no longer be ignored within our lives and inside our classrooms. We live in a time in which the concept of “matter” permeates our daily life and language: from the #BlackLivesMatter movement to this idea that our presence – both physical and social – matters: our voices matter, women matter, minorities matter, the LGBTQT movement matters. We all deserve to be visible, heard and understood through a language that describes us without rhetoric, humiliation or victimization. What we have been talking about is social justice, which is “the equitable distribution of power; tangible and intangible resources in a society and inevitably in a classroom; any classroom practice that addresses differences, power, or social stratification in the classroom or in the world” (Johnson & Randolph, 2015, 36). Critical Pedagogy is a

² The argument on the use of language has been further explored in another interesting book by Vera Gheno entitled *Le ragioni del dubbio. L’arte di usare le parole*. Torino: Einaudi, 2021.

crucial component of social justice discourse, based on the work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire – author of two works I used in this contribution: *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2018) and *Pedagogy of freedom* (1998). Freire proposed an innovative pedagogical approach based on critical literacy: teaching the marginalized, the oppressed, and minorities how to navigate their reality and interact with their social and political surroundings in a thoughtful and critically reflective manner. The main objective of this pedagogical process is to shed light on the perpetual struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. “Thus, the central goal of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is to awaken in the oppressed the knowledge, creativity, and constant critical reflective capacities necessary to unveil, demystify, and understand the power relations responsible for their oppressed marginalization and, through this recognition, begin a project of liberation through praxis which, invariable, requires consistent, never-ending critical reflection and action” (Freire 2018, 2).

Freire strongly believed that education was the keystone to freedom, and he proposed new strategies for what he called “conscientization” within the classroom: a pedagogical trajectory in which knowledge and action are actively applied in order to change the world. This process would necessarily entail “the reclaiming of the oppresseds’ own words as a process of coming to voice”, the conquering of (their) people’s right to voice, “of the right to pronounce their word. The right to be [themselves], to assume direction of [their] destiny” (Freire, 2018, p. 16). Here Freire is talking to the poorest population of Brazil. However, his ideas could easily be applied to our own society as, somewhat similarly, we find ourselves prisoners of a social environment that continues to use language in order to distort reality and limit minority rights. Similarly, as Zagrebelsky clarified in his excellent and incisive book entitled *Sulla lingua del tempo presente* (2010), language is a formidable instrument to control the masses and strengthen the political and economic power of those who exercise it at a particular historical moment. Hence, words “‘think with us’ or, to be even more explicit, ‘for us’” (4-5). Like Freire, Zagrebelsky believes that the meanings attributed to certain words can, on the one hand, bring conscious individuals together under a unified system of governance, or they can become tools used by conscious individuals themselves to resist homologation (7). Language is therefore the balance wheel in a game of power and resistance (see also De Mauro, 2018).

Within the perpetuation of oppressor-oppressed dynamics, which represent the cornerstone of Freire’s philosophical and pedagogical thought, words are the keystone of social justice. Words give a political connotation to our presence in the world and above all in the classroom. I will let Freire

speak through two key quotes that underscore the need for a political stance within our pedagogy:

no one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. ... There are insistent questions that we all have to ask and that make clear to us that it is not possible to study simply for the sake of studying. ... For what and for whom do I study?” (Freire 1998, 73)

My very presence in the school as a teacher is intrinsically a political presence, something that students cannot possibly ignore. In this sense, I ought to transmit to the students my capacity to analyze, to compare, to evaluate, to decide, to opt, to break with.... I am, by definition, a subject “destined” to choose. To have options. And all that means being ethical.... Furthermore, we need to learn the significance of being ethical. It becomes a way of life. (Freire 1998, 90)

Social justice in the classroom goes beyond choosing the right materials. It is not only about what we share with our students, but also and especially about how we offer it. Social justice is not merely becoming aware of social injustices; it instead analyzes the language that defines discrimination, that manipulates facts and realities. It becomes *social* because it sparks a political *ethos* of social responsibility and inevitably nurtures a kind of curiosity which Freire calls “epistemological curiosity.”

What I find interesting in the way scholars approach Freire’s pedagogy is their use of words such as “transgress” or “subversive” as keys to access the underworld of social justice. The practices highlighted in *Teaching to transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), to mention bell hooks’s (1994) volume, or again in Postman and Weingartner’s (1971) *Teaching as a subversive activity*, are practices that demand a re-evaluation not only of the way we select pedagogical material, but also our choice of a pedagogical lexicon that enables students to question and interact with concepts and realities within a rapidly changing world. Following in Freire’s footsteps, bell hooks (1994) reiterates that the “classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (12), a space that needs to be deconstructed – first and foremost by calling into question the role of the professor as the primary source of classroom dynamics – and in which an *engaged pedagogy* enables an “ethics of struggle” and the practice of transgression: a journey against and beyond boundaries, which makes education a practice of freedom and teaches us – students and faculty alike – to regard one

another as “‘whole’ human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (15).

In order to embrace nonconformity as the practice of freedom, and in order to conceive teaching as a performative act, it is crucial to reconsider our sense of voice and the way we think, write, and speak. The *engaged voice* cannot afford to be monolithic, but demands continuous evolution in sync with and beyond reality. *Teaching New Worlds/New Words* is the title of a chapter in bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). This title couldn’t be more illuminating in terms of the power words provide for the reconsideration of our own language and self through second language acquisition. It is a learning process that forces us to rethink the meaning of our primary language while discovering new words and new realities; it enables resistance and transformation; it creates the space for otherness in cultural production, perspectives and epistemologies, all of which help to forge a counter-hegemonic worldview (171).

As we are teaching our students how to communicate effectively in Italian, it is important to go beyond the notion of “what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level” (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012, p. 3) in order to offer our students a lexicon with which to grasp and avail themselves of the essential power of language to structure reality. If words really matter, then it is crucial to provide new generations with a language as powerful as the social issues it seeks to address. When utilized in a dialogic context, keeping with one of Freire’s approaches to language, the students’ language becomes political insofar as it shapes their own identity and narrative, helping them to enact purposeful change within their broader society – a change that starts in the classroom. With the term “political” I point to the fact that language enable us to see, to name, and interact with the realities we create. “To exist humanly”, Freire (2018) affirms, “is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*” (p. 88). Thus, in my perspective, “owning the language” of a specific time period means fully understanding the meaning and the applications of a lexicon which students will need in order to make sense of a culture that can no longer be seen only through its folklore. When the lexicon is enriched in a functional and dialogic way, and when it is used coherently and safely, then language makes us aware of our surroundings by allowing us to name and fully understand them.

When we, as language instructors, stand before a text of our choosing, I believe it is crucial to ask ourselves some key questions before we begin to “didacticize” the material.

LANGUAGE AWARENESS THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY

Social justice theory in language education includes several interrelated concepts and intersects with other critical theories such as Mezirow’s *transformative learning theory* – just one of many theoretical intersections with other critical theories like queer theory, critical race theory, multicultural education, etc. Mezirow (2009) describes transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58). Mezirow emphasized the need to interact with new cultural realities, which requires a gradual decentralization from one’s ethnocentric vision of culture. Interacting with cultural perspectives other than one’s own also means pursuing a path of disorientation, reflection and questioning of one’s own cultural habits, followed by a potential change initiated through the dialogic nature of classroom interaction: it therefore means undertaking a transformative cognitive experience. This transformational path begins with the questioning of what Mezirow calls a *meaning perspective* or *habit of mind*: that is, the tendency to see the “other” – what differs from our own ethnic-cultural sphere – as something inferior. Transformative learning, therefore, requires a transformation of the cultural perspectives through which we understand the limitations of pre-existing cultural patterns; we open ourselves to the recognition and inclusion of different cultural perspectives; and we learn to interact in light of this new knowledge.

A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognizes the validity of Freire’s *conscientization*, as opposed to what he defined as “banking education” (“depositing” information into students rather than developing their critical awareness of social reality through reflection and action). Transformative learning focuses on the process of shifting one’s perspective, a transformation process that unfolds in four stages:

1. disorienting dilemmas – an experience of feeling off-balance, out of the comfort zone. Study abroad can be one of the best disorienting dilemmas since students’ pre-held assumptions are completely and abruptly dismantled.
2. critical reflection – students question the nature of their behaviors; the unpleasant internal process through which they assess and examine their assumptions.

3. Action – once students have acquired new knowledge, they need to decide their next steps and how their decisions will change or affect their actions, roles, relationships, and self-confidence.
4. Integration – in which students’ meaning perspective is expanded: they are now aware of their past perspectives as well as their newly acquired ones. This represents a meaningful and crucial growing phase, a “threshold learning moment” that constitutes a paradigm shift in the students’ learning trajectory and understanding of themselves. Once students cross the liminal space that separates the old from the new, they enter a troublesome, transformative, integrative, and irreversible knowledge that will change the way they see and relate with the world (see Land et al., 2016).

Here I will present two topics I like to introduce into my classroom: identity and multiculturalism. I will use the example of a beginning course, keeping in mind that materials can be adapted to the linguistic level at which educators are working (we adapt the task, not the text). Upon opening a typical Italian language textbook, we usually notice a common selection of topics that share many similarities: daily life, food, family, holidays, sports, work, vacations, music, etc. One of the strategies for beginning the phase of disorienting dilemma is to create a counternarrative that questions the way we imagined or understood a specific cultural reality. At the very beginning of a typical Italian language course, when students learn how to introduce themselves and talk about where they come from etc., we address the idea of nationality/identity/culture/language. Oftentimes, I ask: “Who speaks Italian in Italy?” Through this question, I highlight the fact that Italy is a country where many languages are spoken, a country where multilingualism can be experienced. However, Italian is also a “lingua franca,” a mediating language within a cultural melting pot. The disorienting dilemma not only highlights the fact that Italy is indeed a multicultural and multilingual space, but enables students to confront their own limitations as language learners. It is as difficult for them to learn a language as it is for anyone else. Thinking about this difficulty becomes a useful disorienting dilemma and helps students develop empathy and compassion for people who have an accent or are struggling to speak English. Consequently, it makes them see multilingual individuals as strong and brave, people they may want to connect with personally in the future. My point with this exercise is to question the material we utilize in order to create counternarratives at any language level, to interrogate and overcome the Eurocentric perspectives within L2 practices relevant to learners studying Italian in North America. Critical language

pedagogy, which today is guided in practical terms by transformative learning, provides the concept of language as a critical practice that conceives learning as an act of self-consciousness and engagement with others (see Formato 2018, 1119).

Questioning the *status quo* involves proposing alternative ways to see and describe a reality that needs to be named and pronounced. Hence, a multicultural class that intends to incorporate a lexicon to describe physical features, ethnicities, identity and cultures needs an appropriate and diverse language suited to the diversity they themselves represent. Several activities can be utilized during the early stages of the semester or quarter in order to expand the typical vocabulary associated with identity, culture, and gender; these exercises can spark discussion within the classroom and foster connections while generating self-reflection and new knowledge. Here are some suggestions of activities that promote vocabulary awareness and expansion. The image in Figure 1 provides *Culturally Responsive Language* that is not included in typical textbooks and that is crucial for any classroom environment aiming to address diversity and inclusion. Instructors can modify the language provided to best suit their needs and perspectives.

“The Gender Box” (Figure 2), widely used across the education system in the US, is another valuable example of an activity that raises awareness about gender and addresses problems associated with rigidly defined gender roles. It is based on the analysis of images of men and women in the media and how students perceive and experience these images.³ The Gender Box offers a reflection on language and the ways in which it can create false stereotypes. To the right of the box are helpful questions for unpacking language and understanding the origins of a specific use of language, and whether or not this use is socially accepted. Since students are still at a beginning level, both English and the target language can be used. The Gender Box can be used vis á vis numerous topic pertaining beginning learners, including clothing/physical appearance, colors, physical activity, hobbies, sports, dating/relationships, and education/ professions.

The Race Card Project (Norris, n.d.; see Figure 3) is another activity that prompts students to reflect and share their thoughts about race, ethnicity and belonging, expressed minimally in just a few words. With the Race Card Project, students produce short strings of sentences; nevertheless, they are slowly expanding their vocabulary and adding socially charged meaning to their basic writing and/or speaking skills (see also Gorsky, n.d.).

³ An extensive variety and versions of this activity can be found online.

Students are exposed to new vocabulary through contextualized material such as readings and audiovisual materials. Then they will analyze and discuss the new lexicon with their instructor and among themselves, and finally they will recontextualize this lexicon using the race card, which they will share or post on a discussion board. This project, which begins as an individual elaboration of a personal and authentic perception of the self, provides the opportunity for a deeper group conversation about the topic of race as well as the creation of additional vocabulary prompted by the students themselves.

When talking about identity with students at a beginning level, it is useful to post the following questions: are we born into, or do we choose our identity-ies? What are a few adjectives we can use to describe identity – *monolitica, fissa, fluida, eterogenea, sfaccettata*, etc.? **Article 3 of the Italian Constitution** can be helpful to facilitate this discussion (see Figure 4). Since the lexicon and the grammatical functions proposed in Article 3 of the Constitution are highly accessible, students should not have great difficulty understanding the message in the target language and decontextualizing its vocabulary. The video titled *Identità e diversità* (HUB Scuola, 2020)⁴ helps students to clarify and apply the concept expressed in the Article # 3 of the Constitution.

At this juncture, students can consider three categories for critical reflection:

- Linguistic reflection – they will use language to understand and reflect on language.
- Metalinguistic reflection – they will reflect on language as a system, through transposition and manipulation of language.
- Language learning reflection – students will explore their own rational and emotional response to language learning. How can they take what they have learned into a community and take action based on this new knowledge?

While the linguistic and metalinguistic reflections can be carried out in the target language, the language learning reflection should be facilitated in English. With the help of a dictionary, students can analyze the meaning of the highlighted words, can review their etymology and clarify their possible applications. Students can then decontextualize and apply the

⁴ I suggest modifying the title slightly with the following alternative: *Identità e diversità*. In this way, students are exposed to an alternative interpretation of the content through the manipulation of language. In addition, it can be useful to provide students with the transcript of the video so that they can visualize and better contextualize the lexicon presented in the video.

lexicon to their personal and social life. In doing so, students will find similar vocabulary that better expresses their own experience of the lexicon. Finally, the reflection on this experience of language analysis and transposition can be discussed in English through a discussion board or in the classroom, if time permits (see Figure 5).

An additional activity is inspired by an excerpt from Igiaba Scego’s book. *La mia casa è dove sono*, in which the author addresses themes such as identity and integration vis à vis discrimination. In this exercise, students analyze and subsequently manipulate the text to allow for meaningful lexicon acquisition, applied in diverse personal and social contexts (see Figures 6–8). This activity emphasizes the need to offer students a specific lexicon with the aim of building and expanding a linguistic apparatus that is crucial to identify themselves, their peers and the society in which they live⁵.

CONCLUSION

Do we need to view an education that places social justice in the forefront of the curriculum as subversive? Why does it need to transgress in order to be meaningful and liberating? Educators and students who are driven by an “epistemological curiosity” should not feel that this curiosity is transgressive by default. Through language, education becomes a moment for reflection and a means to create realities that demand to be recognized without shame or discomfort: these are feelings we have inherited from a Eurocentric perspective; they are the byproduct of a historical and behavioral colonialism that no longer has a reason to exist and that can be acknowledged and overcome through the power of language to name our past, present and the future we desire. Words matter because they are the matter with which we present the world as a problem we can solve by “re-naming” and reshaping it.

Donaldo Macedo (2018) concludes his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with an enlightening wake-up call and warning to all those who profess a “false benevolence” in wanting to give a voice to all minorities: women, children, people of color, the LGBTQT+ community. These “pseudo-critical educators ... fail to realize that voice is not a gift. It is a democratic right. It is a human right” (6 30). So are our words.

⁵ The topic on cultural identity is fully explored in the chapter titled “La voce transculturale di Igiaba Scego” of the textbook *Voci Italiane*, Oxford:Routledge, 2022, 44-58.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1

Culturally Responsive Language



Figure 2

The Gender Box

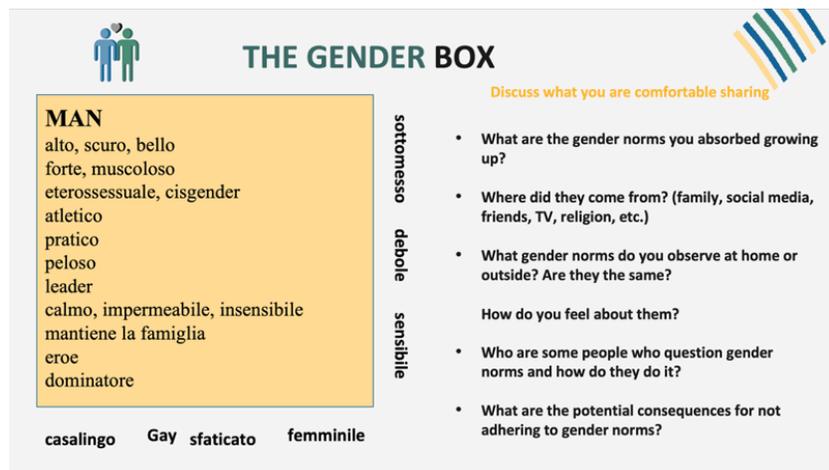


Figure 3

The Race Card Project

La mia carta d'identità

descrizione 1
femmina

descrizione 2
non binaria

descrizione 3
coraggiosa

Luogo di nascita:
New Orleans

Nazionalità:
americana

descrizione 4
vegetariana

descrizione 5
spirituale

descrizione 6
artistica

Think about the word race. How would you distill your thoughts, experiences, and observations about race into a sentence that only has six words? Share and discuss your card and sentence with a classmate or the class.

Figure 4

Article 3 of the Italian Constitution

Articolo # 3 della Costituzione italiana

Tutti i cittadini hanno pari **dignità sociale** e sono **eguali** davanti alla legge, senza **distinzione di sesso**, di **razza**, di **lingua**, di **religione**, di **opinioni** politiche, di **condizioni** personali e sociali.

Figure 5

Why These Words Matter

Why these words Matter

LEXICON:
identità
peculiarità
scelta
dati di fatto
identità oggettiva
identità collettiva
percezione di sé

identità in trasformazione =
incontri
affinità
diffidenza
stereotipi
pregiudizi
discriminazioni
razzismo/sessismo/xenofobia/

- analyze and discuss the following lexicon (the discussion can be carried out in English for the conceptual parts and in Italian for the creation of synonyms of new words).
 - What does it mean? Use the dictionary.
 - How do i see it applied in my life or in the life of others?
 - Why is it important?
 - Why I don't agree?
- write a brief paragraph in which you summarize the idea of identity conveyed in the video AND your idea of identity. Use the lexicon provided and the lexicon you created during the discussion.
- share your work verbally with your classmates.
- Discuss with a classmate potential application of the lexicon in different context.

Figure 6

Igiaba Scego Exercise Part 1

Igiaba Scego
Essere Italiano per me
La mia casa è dove sono

Sono italiana, ma anche no.
Sono somala, ma anche no.
Un **crocevia**. Uno **svincolo**.
Ero un animale **in trappola**.
Un essere condannato **all'angoscia** perenne. [...]
La mia **mappa** è lo specchio di questi anni di **cambiamenti**.
Non è una mappa **coerente**.
È **centro**, ma anche **periferia**.
È Roma, ma anche Mogadiscio.
È **Igiaba**, ma siete anche **voi**.

Figure 7

Igiaba Scego Exercise Part 2

Use the dictionary, reflect on the vocabulary listed, adapting/manipulating it into a familiar context. Re-elaborate the original text.

crocevia /svincolo = non c'è una direzione precisa

animale in trappola/ angoscia= non sono integrato, sono oppresso

angoscia perenne = male di essere/esistere - (mal-essere)

mappa non coerente= multi-lingua; multi-cultura; multi -etnica; diversa, diversificata

cambiamenti= fluidità/fluido

centro+periferia= senza confini - “sconfinata”

Io/Voi = incontro; mondo; gli altri

Figure 8

Igiaba Scego Exercise Part 3

Sono americana, ma anche no.
Sono latina, ma anche no.
Non ho una **direzione precisa**.
Sono **oppressa**.
Con il mio **mal - essere perpetuo**.
La mia mappa: un **melting pot**.
La mia mappa è **fluida** perchè cambia.
È **sconfinata**.
È **NYC**, ma anche **Lima**.
È un incontro tra **me** e il **mondo/gli altri**.