

# Affection, environmental education and politics: Encounters with Nita and Paulo Freire

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## *Resumo*

Esse artigo procura focar a influência de Paulo Freire num jovem professor e militante ecologista em São Paulo nos últimos anos da ditadura militar no Brasil (1964-1984). Essa influência continua até os dias atuais e é afetada pelas relações de amizade com Nita Freire. São apresentados alguns apontamentos pessoais escritos durante o curso de Paulo Freire na PUCSP em 1983. São destacados momentos nos quais Nita e Paulo Freire dialogaram com ecologistas, educadores/as ambientais e com novas gerações de militantes, estudantes, professores/as e pesquisadores/as. O autor enfatiza a mútua admiração entre Paulo Freire e o pedagogo francês George Snyders, através de acontecimentos, livros e artigos no qual o autor foi mediador.

## *Abstract*

This article seeks to focus on the influence Paulo Freire had on a young teacher and activist ecologist in São Paulo during the last years of the military dictatorship in Brazil. That influence still remains nowadays and is affected by the friendship with Nita Freire. Personal annotations written during lectures given by Paulo Freire at PUCSP in 1983 are here revealed. Moments in which Nita and Paulo Freire dialogued with and influenced ecologists, environmental educators and a new generation of activists, students, teachers and researchers are also pointed out. The author emphasizes the mutual admiration between Paulo Freire and the French educator George Snyders through the events, books and articles for which he was a mediator.

In an essay about the agreements and disagreements in everyday life, Margaret Chillemi observes affectionate encounters as “becomings,” loaded with potencies that make us stronger and more resistant (Chillemi, forthcoming). It is with

such intensity and characteristics that my professional encounters with Nita and Paulo Freire occurred.

In the afternoon of September the 26th 2011 Nita arrived smiling and tender at the University of Sorocaba, along with Mauricio Massari, to open the *Biobibliographic Exposition 90 Years of Paulo Freire*. She allowed pictures to be taken with the librarians who were organizing the exposition, commented on some of the books on display, as well as on the local and national newspaper clippings covering the time since the arrival of Paulo Freire in Brazil, after his long exile, which the librarians had patiently organized. She carefully read and then commented on the text I had written for the presentation of the exposition, in which I pointed out the influence of Paulo Freire on the constitution of the University of Sorocaba. It was at the old College of Philosophy of Sorocaba that Paulo Freire had presented one of his first conferences after his exile, which resulted in the book *Paulo Freire ao Vivo* (Freire, Vannucchi & Santos, 1983). The initial relationship between Paulo Freire and the University of Sorocaba was established thanks to one of the founders and former deans, Aldo Vannucchi (Germano & Reigota, 2007a).

Once the exposition was opened, we went to the College of Physical Education (where Mauricio Massari teaches) for the conference where Nita would present on the 90 years of Paulo Freire. When we arrived, there was an environment of celebration among students. There was music and great commotion. Before the beginning of the conference, Marta Catunda, presented three of her songs named *Freireanas*.

The intense noise of the young crowd began to cease, attracting everyone's attention to Nita's speech, filled with humor and competence. Those young students and future teachers of physical education were before an affectionate and historical witness of the Brazil from a few decades ago to the present time marked by violence, lack of ethics, opportunism and authoritarianism that still exist and which Paulo Freire so much fought against. The conference, or better yet, the talk between Nita and the students, teachers and professors of various disciplines, reporters, librarians, athletes, researchers, Masters and PhD students, lasted for quite a long time. She seemed tireless and no noise appeared to disturb her. A young girl asked her in which context Paulo Freire had written *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to which Nita replied elaborating on the details, emphasizing the problem Paulo Freire had faced in Chile when being accused of writing a book against the Christian-democrat government of Eduardo Frei. A professor asked her about the relationship between Paulo Freire and Liberation Theology, and Nita talked about her intentions to publish the letters that Paulo Freire had exchanged with some of the main representatives of that movement, as well as the difficulties she had encountered to do so. Nonetheless, she made it clear that Paulo Freire had indeed participated in the pedagogical dimension of the Liberation Theology. Another

person asked her about Paulo Freire's exile, his whereabouts and his lifestyle in those places. Nita, once again, answered elaborately pointing out the cruelty and the violation of human rights by the military and civilians with links to the dictatorship, which deeply affected Paulo Freire along with all his family and many others who dared to defy them. Despite the informal tone of the conversation between people of different generations and academic backgrounds, Nita continuously made use of History, Philosophy, Arts and Political Sciences, always linking such knowledge to everyday life.

She was, as she has always been, an attentive professor and a thorough researcher who, as interlocutress of Paulo Freire, had significant influence on his political and pedagogical thinking, mainly during the last decade of his life when they were married. Nita also made clear her role as a woman and citizen, firm activist against injustice and prejudice, raising the awareness, mainly of the young crowd before her, that citizenship is an everyday practice.

A month later, Nita returned to Sorocaba for a conference at Universidade Paulista, for the evening students of Language, Pedagogy, Law and Psychology, arranged by professors Maria Aparecida Crisostomo and Ricardo José Orsi de Sanctis. Nita highlighted some topics she had already dealt with during the previous conference, commenting on several of Paulo Freire's books, telling some episodes of his childhood, adolescence and youth in Recife and Jaboatão, referring to his relationship with her family, her father's generosity in giving Paulo Freire a scholarship to study, in response to his mother's request. Once again, she emphasized how much Paulo Freire dedicated himself to highlight the political dimension of pedagogical and social practices, and that Freire's pedagogy was not limited to a method. She stated that it was about a philosophical and political theory of education, based on the overcoming of social injustices. Moreover, she also pointed out that the oppressed from previous times did not disappear and that other oppressed ones came to the scene, claiming citizenship, justice and respect, such as women, gays and lesbians, indigenous people, black people, and the Sem Terra (Landless).

Once she had finished her speech, she received a standing ovation, showing that the students did not want the presentation to be over. Nita still answered one more question regarding Paulo Freire's exile and was once again applauded by the audience, who were all standing again. The students wanted to take pictures with Nita and get autographs on their copies of *Pedagogia da Autonomia* (Freire, 1997).

Her presence in Sorocaba, seeing my students, and all her care and attentiveness in regards to them, meant a crucial moment of the re-signification process of *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Freire, 2009) with which I now seek to carry out our activities at the University of Sorocaba.

The recent experiences mentioned above are also a reflection of the relevance and currency of Freire's pedagogy and of its impact on different social groups

with diverse interests. They also reflect the need and desire to rethink Brazil and the world, along with the generation born after the Latin American military regimes which barely makes it to a private higher education, leaving it mostly to become teachers in public schools where the poorest and most marginalized strata of people are.

That is the challenge we face, and it is with such people and in such places that Freire's pedagogy has shown how relevant it is and that it can be recreated. It has affected us in other historical moments and currently affects us in another way, in other cultural, ecological, social and political contexts, in the company of other people.

Toward the end of the 1970s, Brazil was still under the military dictatorship initiated in 1964. Before graduating from the university, I had found a temporary job as an evening teacher at a traditional public school in São Paulo. That was just another one of the temporary jobs I had. I did not intend to be a teacher and I was thinking about studying Paleontology in order to do research on trilobites. Some of the full-time teachers in that same public school were activists opposing the military dictatorship and followers of Freire's pedagogy. My political participation occurred in the students' movement and in the then starting ecology movement. I was also very close to the counterculture movement. My experiences as a teacher with students, who were approximately my age, along with my colleagues who opposed the regime and were readers of Paulo Freire, made me give up on the Trilobitoidea and led me to environmental education.

In 1983 I was registered as a student in the Masters of Philosophy of Education program at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUCSP), for which Paulo Freire was in charge of teaching the course Alternatives in Popular Education.

My expectations of studying with him were enormous. The classroom was packed. The idea of studying with Paulo Freire at PUCSP, which was characterized for being a space of resistance against the military regime (Serbin, 2000), as well as for congregating the most well-known professors pursued by the military regime - such as Mauricio Tragtenberg, Octávio Ianni and Florestan Fernandes - encouraged me greatly. At PUCSP there were some of the best Brazilian and foreign professors who opposed the military dictatorship and researched about authors like Marx, Nietzsche, Trotsky, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Gramsci, Benjamin, Arendt, Bourdieu, Basaglia, etc. Among the foreign professors, the recurrent presence of Félix Guattari among us was the one that mainly marked the actions of a group of students of which I was a part of. We would intensely discuss micro-politics and everyday molecular revolutions (Dosse, 2007, p. 574-576).

The dictatorship was weak, the social movements were rising, and the counterculture in São Paulo was producing music, poetry, literature, theater and plas-

tic arts which would imprint another identity on those times. The biologists Nícea Wendel de Magalhães and Salete Abrahão gathered youngsters interested in environmental education and activists, such as the anarchist Miguel Abellá, a Catalan artist living in São Paulo, added the disputing tone to it. The men and women exiled were returning to the country and among them was Kazue Matsushima, who had attained a Masters degree at the Free University of Brussels where he had written a dissertation on environmental education; he gave presentations and seminars about the topic around São Paulo. The ecology movement was gaining national attention through the texts and interventions of Cacilda Lanuza, Augusto Ruschi, José Lutzenberger, Frans Krajceberg and Fernando Gabeira.

I still keep the notebook containing notes from Paulo Freire's course and some entries about that movement, which I witnessed and took part in. The first class with him was on March the 15th, 1983, in which he elaborated on the expectations of the intellectuals and their misconceptions regarding the popular masses. He discoursed on the authoritarianism and the lies that circulate and are evidenced every day in schools.

He had us write a paper picking up from the speech of a peasant from Maranhão during his encounter with a group of intellectuals. The peasant told the intellectuals: "while you there are interested in the salt, we here are interested in the seasoning. Salt is just a part of the seasoning." The expression and the encounter between the peasant and the intellectuals seemed to have deeply marked Paulo Freire, since he referred to it at different moments and in texts (Freire, 1993, p. 57).

During the second class, on March the 22nd, he said and I wrote: "so that there may be equality, it is necessary that there is difference" (Freire, notes on class, March 22, 1983). This phrase has come to be the core motto of my work since then, the pedagogy of the differences turned to the marginalized groups.

I was very excited during my first classes with Paulo Freire, so I sought to read every suggested book, but constant interruptions by my classmates seemed to arouse discomfort in me and their expectations began to be opposite from mine. There was a certain messianic tone to them, like as intellectual conductors of masses, which made me uncomfortable, since it seemed to me that they were looking for Paulo Freire's endorsement. My colleagues' harassment toward Paulo Freire was intense, and that was the reason why I was only able to speak with him during the first day of class, when we all briefly introduced ourselves.

Such discomfort is registered in my notebook, or even better, in the absence of entries from the third class. That page in my notebook is basically blank and only a single phrase can be found there, certainly of my own authorship, saying "It has been a while..., oh baby, no!" which appears next to the date, April the 12th. But I did not give up and recorded, among the notes of the next classes, comments of Paulo Freire regarding his books, such as *The Importance of the Act*

of *Reading* and *The Letters to Guinea Bissau*. There are also entries and comments that were not related to the topics of the class, but to experienced moments of the alternative culture in São Paulo in the penultimate year of the military dictatorship. One of these comments refers to the first concert of Arnaldo Dias Baptista, which took place in the theater of PUCSP, after the accident that almost took his life.

Music was and still is very important in my pedagogical praxis and that was shown in my final work, which I presented to Professor Paulo Freire. I musically thought out and wrote about the phrase stated by the peasant from Maranhão to the group of intellectuals, using lyrics from the songs *A sede do peixe (para o que não tem solução)* by Milton Nascimento and Márcio Borges, and *O sol da terra* by Beto Guedes and Ronaldo Bastos, seeking to elaborate on the agreements and disagreements between people with great differences and discrepancies from one another (Reigota, 1983).

The first time I saw Nita was in the room set apart for the participants of a roundtable at a Conference of the United Nations for the Environment and Development, which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Organized by Márcio D’Oliveira Campos, the roundtable included Paulo Freire, the poet Patativa de Assaré, the historical ecologist José Lutzenberger and me, as national coordinator of the international project *Voice of the Children*.

It was a source of great pride for me, being able to participate at a roundtable next to people whom I admired so deeply and who had great influence on my work and activism. The public was quite small in the large theater and at a certain point, shortly before my speech, a person from the audience intervened, protesting about something, initiating a small argument. I did not have the opportunity to talk to Nita, nor to be introduced to her.

The second time that I saw her was during the launch of the book *Pedagogia da Autonomia* in São Paulo. I was in the company of Vera Regina Rodrigues, who was editing a book about environmental education (Rodrigues, 1997) and she hoped to count on Freire’s preface. He was very kind and attentive, and told us he had a scheduled trip to the USA in the coming days, in order to teach at Harvard University; but if it were not so urgent, he could send us the preface. Sadly, Paulo Freire passed away a few days later, so the book was dedicated to him. On that occasion, once again, I was not able to talk to Nita, nor was I introduced to her.

Another encounter between Nita and I happened in 1998 at one of the seminars organized by Vera Regina Rodrigues, in Rio de Janeiro, for the team that had written the book *Muda o Mundo Raimundo!: Educação ambiental no ensino básico do Brasil* (Rodrigues, 1997). I told Nita that, despite having some friends in common, it was the first time that I had the chance to talk to her. I let her know that I would like to hear the reasons why Paulo Freire had left the position of Secretary of Education of São Paulo. She replied that he wanted to have more

time to write and his work as secretary was preventing him from doing so. She mentioned the books and texts that Paulo Freire had written since he had left the Secretary, among them being *Pedagogia da Autonomia*.

I always highlight Nita's influence on this book when talking to my students. I also underline the inestimable value of this book, as well as Freire's posthumous ones edited and organized by her (Freire A.M.A., 1999, Freire, 2000, 2001, 2005), to the deepening of the pedagogy of differences and of the environmental education defined as political education.

Our encounters became more frequent. A mutual affection unites us and, on many occasions, she has gifted me with a new book or edition of one of her books or Paulo Freire's, containing dedications in which our friendship is stated.

My students are affected by this relationship, too. One example of that is the long interview Nita gave us when one of my students was concluding her Masters degree research about adult literacy (Germano, 2006). The interview was translated to English by Vera Regina Rodrigues and is available on the website of the *Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy*. It was also translated to Spanish by the environmental educator Edgar Gonzalez-Gaudio and published in Mexico. It was published in Portuguese in the *Revista de Estudos Universitários* (Germano & Reigota, 2006, 2007b, 2009).

After leaving the Secretary of Education of São Paulo, Paulo Freire published his book *Pedagogy of the City*. When that book was published in French, I wrote a review that was published in the *Revue Française de Pédagogie* (Reigota, 1994). The well-known Professor Georges Snyders read it and sent me a package, containing his most recent books and a note telling me about his admiration toward Paulo Freire.

I was very startled and happy to receive such a token of gentleness from Professor Snyders and it is necessary that this is hereby registered, because when I was student at PUCSP the orthodox Marxist professors, who opposed Freire's pedagogy, made us read Georges Snyders' texts using them to fight Paulo Freire.

Some years later, the books I had received were published in Brazil with Paulo Freire's support. He referred to it as follows:

Look at Snyders, for instance, a pedagogue with a Marxist background who dedicated his whole life to a critical pedagogy, causing laughs! Not an irresponsible pedagogy, but a critical pedagogy that proposes, nevertheless, an experience of contentment in the process of knowing, studying and teaching. Right now, while we were working, I received a package from Paz e Terra containing Snyders' latest text, translated to Portuguese, so that I may write a preface for it. Snyders sent me his text in French, and I, then, forwarded it to Paz e Terra, suggesting its publication. The book's title is *Alunos felizes: Reflexões sobre a alegria na escola, a partir de textos literário*. Snyders is a champion of happiness, which does not mean



his pedagogic proposal is weak or improvised (Freire & Guimarães, 2000, p. 42).

When I was at the University of Huelva in Spain, I had the pleasant surprise of seeing that one of its modern buildings was named after Paulo Freire. I wanted to be photographed in front of it. I sent the pictures to Nita, who published one of them in the biographical *Paulo Freire: A História de uma Vida*. The person sitting on the bench in front of the Building Paulo Freire at the University of Huelva is me (Freire A.M.A., 2006, p. 500). Later on, Nita visited the University of Huelva for the official inauguration of the building, uncovering an honorary plaque (Freire A.M.A., 2006, p. 510).

In the last years, it has been my interest to research and discuss with my students the contexts in which the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was written and its impact and relevance nowadays. Therefore, the historical, cultural, ecological, social and political approach of Latin America during the last decades is inevitable. It is in regard to this that I am interested in researching and making public the private, personal and unique aspects, which are the “everyday environment” that produced, made possible and witnessed events of intense collective and planetary impacts, such as the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Paulo Freire’s presence in Chile is well documented and studied, so there is very little that may be added with originality. Nevertheless, in recent visits to Santiago de Chile, I sought to photograph the possible cartography of Paulo Freire in that city, according to the addresses of where he lived and of the institutions where he, along with many other exiled Brazilians, acted before Pinochet’s military coup. Tracing such cartographic movement, a Chilean friend of mine and I went to visit the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos*. As we were concluding our visit, silent and affected by everything we had witnessed there, I saw a photo of Paulo Freire, without any footnotes, wearing a poncho among a group of people. I recognized him immediately and, in a sudden snap, I told my friend: “Mario, that man changed my life.”

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