

# Situating Pedagogy of the Oppressed after Nita Freire

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## Resumo

Neste artigo, *Contextualizando a Pedagogia do Oprimido Pós-Nita Freire*, defendo que a obra de Paulo Freire *Pedagogia da Autonomia* jamais teria sido escrita sem a presença marcante que Nita Freire teve na vida de Paulo Freire – uma obra que Stanley Aronowitz considera como o melhor trabalho de Freire, o seu “último testamento centrado na problemática da liberdade.” Neste contexto, Nita Freire não só re-inspirou Freire para que este voltasse a libertar toda a sua indignação e rebeldia de uma forma mais aprimorada e acessível, como também o influenciou substantivamente para que Freire abraçasse ‘uma linguagem mais apelativa, menos densa e ainda mais poética’. Em suma, a última década da vida de Paulo Freire com Nita é de longe a moldura conceptual mais justa através da qual podemos perceber o que é que na verdade significa, -para o homem que ofereceu ao mundo a *Pedagogia do Oprimido* - estar no mundo e com o mundo e com os outros no mundo.

## Abstract

In this article I argue that without the presence of Nita Freire in Paulo's life, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, would not have been written—a book Stanley Aronowitz considers his best work, his “last testament [which] focuses [once again] on the question of freedom ... [in which] ... Freire holds that a humanized society re-

quires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and rules of conduct that violate conventional social norms, and, in political and civil society, requires the full participation of *all* of its inhabitants in every aspect of public life” (Aronowitz, 1998). Thus, Nita Freire not only re-inspired Freire to re-unleash his indignation and rebelliousness in a more direct and accessible manner, but she also influenced him to embrace “a language that is more inviting, less dense, more poetic.” In essence, the last ten years of Paulo’s life with Nita Freire is by far the best window through which we can see what it meant for the man who gave the world the classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to be in the world and with the world and with others in the world. *Situating Pedagogy of the Oppressed after Nita Freire* attempts to capture the meaning of Paulo’s life with Nita Freire by providing readers with the opportunity to fully understand Paulo’s insistence on viewing history as a constant possibility – a perspective that almost eluded him with the sudden death of his first wife, Elza, in 1986.

Running the risk of falling into cliché, there is always a great woman behind a successful man and, without the presence of Nita Freire in Paulo’s life, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, would not have been written—a book Stanley Aronowitz (Aronowitz, 1998) considers his best work:

[his] last testament [which] focuses [once again] on the question of freedom ... [in which] ... Freire holds that a humanized society requires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and rules of conduct that violate conventional social norms, and, in political and civil society, requires the full participation of all of its inhabitants in every aspect of public life. (p. 18, 19)

Thus, Nita Freire not only re-inspired Freire to re-unleash his indignation and rebelliousness in a more direct and accessible manner, but she also influenced him to embrace, according to her:

a language that is more inviting, less dense, more poetic. In the end, I have to say this because I was very modest with my role in Paulo’s life, and Paulo used to say that false modesty was one of the worse things in the world. I have to say this because Paulo became more himself to the extent that he re-saw himself in each context in which he used to live, moving from country to country, and after he changed wives, he became a widower, and we were married. Hence, Paulo re-saw himself as a man and because of this coherence as a man who wrote what he was thinking; his writings became so different in that he adopted a new language that solidified his radicalization.<sup>21</sup>

In essence, the last ten years of Paulo’s life with Nita Freire is by far the best window through which we can see what it meant for the man who gave the world the classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to be in the world and with the world and with others in the world. The last ten years of Paulo’s life with Nita Freire provides

us with the opportunity to fully understand Paulo's insistence on viewing history as a constant possibility – a perspective that almost eluded him with the sudden death of his first wife, Elza, in 1986.

After Elza's death, many friends, colleagues, and admirers of Paulo Freire began to see a radical and rapid change in a characteristic that had always marked Paulo and his work: his tremendous idealism. It was the kind of idealism that shields people – even those who are experiencing the worst historical obstacles, social injustice, and discrimination – from losing faith in their capacity as agents of history and from falling prey to cynicism and fatalism. Many of us feared that the death of Elza had cracked the very foundation of this idealism, which had not only attracted us to Paulo and his writings but had also motivated many of us to embrace his challenge to make this world, in his own words, more beautiful, less ugly, more democratic, and less inhumane. Many of us also feared that Paulo had lost his *joie de vivre*, his intense desire to be in the world and to transform the world.

In the winter of 1988, I visited São Paulo to see Paulo, hoping to begin again our collaborative work that had stretched for many years. I remember perfectly the long plane trip from Boston to São Paulo – a trip filled with doubts, fears, and much uncertainty. On the one hand, I wanted desperately to see Paulo and resume our usual conviviality. On the other hand, I was afraid I would no longer find, in Paulo's beautiful and penetrating eyes, the vibrancy that had so marked his ways of being in the world. I did not want to see Paulo without his unyielding belief in utopia as a possibility.

I arrived in São Paulo in the morning and I immediately telephoned Paulo. My initial hesitation disappeared almost completely when Paulo's voice beamed with energy and joy. Even though I was very tired from the twelve-hour trip, Paulo insisted that I come to his house for lunch. As usual, I accepted since it was always difficult to say no to his generous and loving invitations.

When I arrived at this house, Paulo introduced me to a very beautiful – almost classical – woman, who I thought was his colleague at the university. In introducing her to me, he spoke almost passionately about “her fantastic contributions to the Brazilian history of education” and her superb intellectual intuition.

When we sat at the table to have lunch I felt a great joy to see Paulo again happy. I noticed his insistence that this attractive, elegant, and eloquent woman sit next to him. During this memorable lunch I realized once again that Paulo always maintained a great coherence between his words, deeds, and ideas. I vividly remembered during that afternoon something that Paulo had shared with me many years earlier: “Never let the child in you die!” His playful gesture toward Nita, his loving smile, his undivided attention while she was explaining her doctoral thesis to us, the frequent gaze, and his almost nervous attempt to hold her hands, made me want to imagine him as a teenager in love.

Many years later, as Paulo and I were walking in New York, we finally talked about the concern that many of us had felt regarding his lack of desire to live after Elza's death. I told him how happy I was to see him again filled with joy, renewed by an incredible hope, able to dream and love again. I remember clearly when he stopped, and turned slightly toward me, put his hand on my shoulder and said softly:

Yes, Donaldo. I was also fearful that I did not want to live anymore. What Nita gave me was fantastical, magical! She not only made me rediscover the joy of life but she also taught me a great lesson that I intellectually knew but, somehow I emotionally could no longer remember: to always view and accept history as possibility. It is always possible to love again.

As we walked on Lexington Avenue, Paulo stopped again and said:

Nita not only taught me that it is possible to love again, but she gave me a new and renewed intellectual energy. I feel reenergized intellectually. For example, my new book *Pedagogy of Hope: A Reencounter with Pedagogy of the Oppressed* could not have been written without her. She not only gave me new intellectual energy but she also impressed upon me the importance of revisiting my earlier ideas so as to reinvent them. Her keen understanding of history enabled her to make compelling arguments concerning the importance of rethinking those historical contexts that had radicalized my thinking and that had given birth to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Her important notes to this book and other books that I have written since gave readers an important insight into the historical conditions that made me the thinker, the writer that I am today. This is fantastic! Nita is without a doubt one of the few people who truly and completely understand my work. It is almost scary. Sometimes I think she understands my ideas better than I do.

In a dialogue I had with Nita during a trip to Recife in March, 2010, I again gained important glimpses into the type of intimacy Nita shared with Paulo. It was an intimacy without borders or constraints; in it, both of them gave witness to the world as to what it means to love unconditionally, to be vulnerable without fear, to learn from one another, to support each other, and to intellectually commit themselves to an almost quixotic struggle to make this world a more just, less ugly, and more humane place. Nita remains today, by far, the most competent Freirean scholar not only because of Paulo's work but also because of her intimate conviviality on a daily and hourly basis. They were almost inseparable: Paulo once told me he missed her even when she had simply gone out to run an errand. It was a conviviality that ranged from soccer matches to the most sophisticated and complex philosophical issues with which they would struggle so as to later share with the world. Because of her complete mastery of Paulo's ideas, Nita is, without

a doubt, his heir; even though Paulo himself often said he did not want to leave heirs to carry out his work. He always passionately encouraged and challenged us to re-invent and re-create him. Heir or not, I still strongly would posit that there is no one in the world more equipped than Nita, not only because of her intellectual capacity but also because of her burning passion to reinvent Paulo Freire. Paulo once told me, “Nita made me rediscover myself.” From her illuminating notes in several of Paulo’s books to the most comprehensive biography of Paulo to date, Nita Freire is certainly the most pointed intellectual to carry Paulo’s torch, to create structures that would “make a utopia possible where each of us, man and woman can be more.”

Ironically, Paulo and Nita had crossed paths many years before. That was when Paulo’s mother frantically walked the streets of Recife looking (and sometimes begging) for a high school that would give Paulo the opportunity to study for free. Paulo’s family had fallen into a deep economic crisis that not only made the continuation of his education impossible but also made him experience “during the greater part of his childhood” the problem of hunger. As he recounted,

It was a real and concrete hunger that had no specific date of departure. Even though it never reached the rigor of the hunger experienced by some people I know, it was not the hunger experienced by those who undergo a tonsil operation or are dieting. On the contrary, our hunger was of the type that arrives unannounced and unauthorized, making itself at home without an end in sight. A hunger that, if it was not softened as ours was, would take over our bodies, molding them into angular shapes. Legs, arms, and fingers become skinny. Eye sockets become deeper, making the eyes almost disappear. (Freire, 1986, p. 15)

It was under the circumstance of hunger and the loss of dignity that Paulo’s mother walked into Oswaldo Cruz School, owned by Nita’s father, and begged for a scholarship for her son. The generosity of Nita’s father, Dr. Aluísio Araújo, made it possible for Paulo to continue his high school studies. As Paulo would write about it many years later, his mother

had left Jaboatão early that morning with the hope that, when she returned in the afternoon, she would bring with her the happiness of having gotten me a scholarship for my high school studies. I still remember her face smiling softly as she told me the news while we walked from the train to our house. (Freire, 1986, p. 63)

Had it not been for Dr. Aluísio Araújo, Nita’s father, it would have been almost impossible for Paulo to continue his studies; perhaps *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* would not have been written. Paulo never forgot his debt to Nita’s family and never missed an opportunity to highlight his gratitude for Dr. Aluísio Araújo’s generosity. I would also venture to say that had it not been for Nita’s unconditional love and her constant presence in Paulo’s life, *Pedagogy of Hope*,

Pedagogy of Freedom, and Paulo's many other works during the last ten years of his life would not have been written.

After he finished his high school studies, Paulo remained at Oswaldo Cruz School as a Portuguese teacher and became Nita's teacher in her early grades. Nita still talks with much emotion of the great admiration she had for Paulo as her Portuguese teacher – an admiration that would turn many decades later into an intense love. It was most certainly the intensity and honesty of their love for each other that motivated Paulo in his last years to dare all of us, “in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific” (Freire, 1998, p. 3). It is this lack of fear that fueled Paulo to write love notes to Nita almost daily—notes that captured his abandonment, respect, and love for her:

Nita, my beloved woman, whatever power that I may have beyond my possibilities,  
naturally, I would never transform your life into a sea of roses. To do that, would mean  
fracturing the legality of your human nature, it would mean falsify your existence. One  
thing that I promise you, in this city of New York, is that I love you so much, all that needs  
to be done to co-create with you the happiness that we deserve and that should not be denied  
to us. There is no project that fulfills me more, which ties me to you, than to make you  
happy, smiley, lovingly open to life, smiling. I love you, my beloved woman.<sup>2</sup>

As the personal note above illustrates, Nita's presence in Paulo's life not only taught him that to love again is always possible but her presence in his life prevented him from losing what characterized him and his work most: hope. In his last writings, perhaps as a tribute to Nita, he continually returned to the theme of hope, challenging us to embrace it as an essential part of our human condition:

In truth, from the point of view of the human condition, hope is an essential component and not an intruder. It would be a serious contradiction of what we are if, aware of our unfinishedness, we were not disposed to participate in a constant movement of search, which in its very nature is an expression of hope. Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. Hope is an indispensable seasoning in our human, historical experience. Without it, instead of history we would have determinism. History exists only where time is

problematized and not simply a given. A future that is inexorable is a denial of history. (Freire, 1998, p. 3)

Visiting Morro de Saúde with Nita during my trip to Recife, Brazil in March 2010, gave me new insights into the material conditions that led Paulo to write *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—a book that is not only a classic but continues to be relevant in the twenty-first century as it always dares us to imagine, as Paulo Freire would usually say, a less discriminatory, more just, less dehumanizing and more humane world. I had the great good fortune of working with Paulo for fifteen uninterrupted years, first translating many of his books into English and, later, collaborating with him on other book projects. I have read and re-read the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* so many times and, with each re-reading, I gain new insights in my understanding of our ever-changing world—a world that is marked by manufactured wars, expanding human misery, and obscene greed.

Without falling into false modesty, I have always felt I understood Freire's leading ideas, the subtleties and the nuances, that characterized the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. But I did not really fully capture the layered complexity of Freire's leading ideas until, along with his widow, Nita Freire, I visited Morro de Saúde, an impoverished community in the outskirts of Recife.

Freire's family had moved there after the great economic crash of the thirties that unceremoniously yanked the middle-class rug from under Freire's family. No longer able to afford housing in Recife as the economic situation worsened, Freire's family moved to a modest house in Morro da Saúde where Paulo, his siblings, his parents, and other close family members took refuge. I immediately began to see new dimensions and the *raison d'être* of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As I entered the small, dark, four rooms, without an indoor bathroom and with non-existent ceilings, I began to put into perspective the traumas that must have overwhelmed Paulo as he came face to face with a new form of schooling called life—life created and sustained by a cruel system that uncaringly relegated millions and millions to half citizenry and subhumanity. I also took a short walk along a shrinking river where Paulo and his friends used to take baths alongside neighborhood women who religiously washed clothes on a daily basis. The sun was the only towel available to Paulo to dry his skin.

Paulo learned quickly that a psychological class wall enveloped his new reality as he began to get acquainted with his new friends and neighbors—their humanity enabled him to empathize with his Aunt Natércia's preoccupation with keeping their poverty “hidden” and to understand “why the family would not let go of Lourdes's German piano or [his] father's neckties” (Freire, 1986, p. 22) even when his father was doing manual chores in the workshop. Paulo soon learned that his family's clinging to middle-class markers and mores did little to alleviate their pain—“a pain almost always treated with disrespectful language ... [as his mother] would leave the shop to look for another one, where new offenses were

almost always added to these already suffered” (Freire, 1986, p. 41) in that she was always denied groceries on credit since the family was never able to pay. In an effort to protect his mother from such daily blows to her dignity, Paulo would often wander into the backyards of neighbors to steal chickens that would frequently be that day’s only family meal since all of the town’s merchants had by then refused to grant his family credit. To protect his family’s middle-class sensitivities, Paulo would euphemize his backyard thefts as “incursions into a neighbor’s yard.” Paulo’s mother was a Christian Catholic who no doubt viewed such “incursions” as violations of her moral principles, but she must have realized that

... her alternatives were either to reproach [Paulo] severely and make [him] return the still warm chicken to [their] neighbors or to prepare the fowl as a special dinner. Her common sense won. Still silent, she took the chicken, walked across the patio, entered the kitchen, and lost herself in doing a job she had not done in a long time. (Freire, 1986, p. 24)

Paulo’s mother knew that stealing a neighbor’s chicken was morally wrong and constituted a crime, but she also knew that there was an a priori crime committed by society.

It is against this form of violence that Paulo Freire angrily and compassionately wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The reading and rereading of Paulo’s insights in both his denunciation of dehumanizing conditions and his announcement that change is difficult but it is possible, unleashed in me a complexity of emotions that ranged from the reconfirmation of a tremendous loss—a loss infused with “anguish, doubt, expectation, and sadness,” (A. Freire, 2004, p. xxvii) as his widow Nita Freire so poignantly wrote in the introduction of Paulo’s *Pedagogy of Indignation*. At the same time, she also announced that through Paulo’s writings “we can celebrate in joy [Paulo’s] return” (A. Freire, 2004, p. xxvii) as he, over and over again, energizes and challenges us to imagine a world that is less cruel, more just, and more democratic. However, as Paulo Freire so energetically insisted in his writings, the announcement of a more just and humane world must always be preceded by the denunciation of the dominant forces that generate, inform, and shape discrimination, human misery, and dehumanization.

Against a world backdrop of increasing human suffering, where a preemptive war was waged based on a web of lies that has killed approximately 600,000 innocent Iraqis, the work of Paulo Freire, forty years later, challenges us to courageously denounce any and all forms of authoritarianism—such as that clear abuse of raw power witnessed in the atrocity of the Iraq war. In defiance of “a spectacular display of public morality [when] ten million people on five continents marched against the war on Iraq,” (Roy, 2004, p. 13) President Bush dismissed the worldwide protests by cynically declaring he does not make policies based “on focus groups.” The expressed outrage of 10 million people against a cruel and illegal war did not prevent Bush and his junta from launching their crusade on Iraq



in the name of freedom, democracy, and civilization—a civilization that sanctions human exploitation, murder, rape, humiliation, dehumanization, and animalization of Iraqis—this last as captured on camera when a young American soldier paraded a naked Iraq man on a leash at Abu Ghraib prison. The wanton killing of civilians in Iraq did not begin with the military invasion and Bush’s attempt to occupy and recolonize this oil-rich country. The killings began summarily with the wielding of another weapon, that of corporate greed and globalization, which is part and parcel of “the project of New Racism ... [that leads invariably to] New Genocide.” (Roy, 2004, p. 12). According to Arundhati Roy (2004),

New Genocide means creating conditions that lead to mass death without actually going out and killing people. Dennis Halliday, who was the UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq between 1997 and 1998 (after which he resigned in disgust), used the term genocide to describe the sanctions in Iraq. In Iraq the sanctions outdid Saddam Hussein’s best efforts by claiming more than half a million children’s lives. (p. 13).

Unlike reactionary and many liberal intellectuals, who often view anger as a form of pathology to be contained through psychologized behavior modification, Paulo Freire sees anger as the appropriate response to obscene violation of human rights and social injustices. He sees it as a tool that enables all those who yearn for social justice to recapture human dignity while avoiding falling into cynicism, even when confronted with inescapable injustice and cruelty as is now unleashed under the banner of the “new world order” and guided by neoliberal policies and determined globalization. We see, for example, in India, that globalization guaranteed “Enron profits that amounted to 60 percent of India’s entire rural development budget. A single American company was guaranteed a profit equivalent to funds for infrastructural development for about 500 million people!” (Roy, 2004, p. 13). Paulo Freire passionately insists on his right to be angry a “just ire [that] is founded in my revulsion before the negation of the right to ‘be more,’ which is etched in the nature of human beings.” (Freire, 2004, p. 59). Freire (2004) further emphasizes:

I have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as my motivation to fight, just as I have the right to love and to express my love for the world, to hold it as my motivation to fight, because while a historical being, I live history as a time of possibility, not of predetermination. (p. 58-59)

While Paulo views anger as the appropriate response to the violation of our humanity—a violence that needs to be denounced before our rehumanization can be announced—many liberal pseudo-Freireans prefer to denounce through euphemisms that, on the one hand, fail to address reality and, on the other, allows them to save face even as they are complicit with the very structures of oppression they claim to denounce. They use a language of politeness with no purpose

other than to white wash the dehumanization of the oppressed. This was evident in Peter Lucas's review (Lucas, 2004) of Paulo's last book, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, where he criticized me for naming people who vulgarize and pimp Paulo's work:

Macedo, a professor of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, vents his own frustration with the exclusion of Freire at elite schools such as Harvard. On one hand, I find Macedo's shaming of certain professors by name a bit distasteful, but this is not the first time Macedo has named people for their inconsistent and partial understanding of Freire's project. On the other hand, I share Macedo's fury as I look around at my closest colleagues in the academy, and I am shocked at the absence of ethics behind the façade of progressive education. (no pages, website)

Instead of falling prey to a language that does not name reality for what it is and is a form of cynicism that paralyzes, Paulo Freire (2004) reiterates the importance of anger as part of a constitutive matrix, along with hope, that animates ... rebelliousness [which] is the indispensable starting point; it is the eruption of just ire, but it is not enough. Rebellion, while denunciation, must expand into a more radical and critical position, a revolutionary one, one that fundamentally announces [a more humanized world]. Changing the world implies a dialectic dynamic between denunciation of the dehumanizing situation and the announcing of its being overcome, indeed, of our dream. (p. 61, 62)

Thus, before announcing that "another world is possible," we must first, for example, denounce the pillars of neoliberalism and globalization whose whole purpose is, according to Arundhati Roy (2004),

to institutionalize inequity. Why else would it be that the US taxes a garment made by a Bangladeshi manufacturer twenty times more than a garment made in Britain? Why else would it be that countries that grow cocoa beans, like Ivory Coast and Ghana, are taxed out of the market if they try to turn them into chocolate? Why else would it be that countries that grow 90 percent of world's cocoa beans produce only 5 percent of the world's chocolate? Why else would it be that rich countries that spend over a billion dollars a day on subsidies to farmers demand that poor countries like India withdraw all agricultural subsidies, including subsidized electricity? Why else would it be that after having been plundered by colonizing regimes for more than half a century, former colonies are steeped in debt to those same regimes and repay them some \$382 billion a year? (p. 13)

Paulo Freire's keen understanding that hope "is the very matrix for any dialectic between hope itself, anger or indignation, and love," (A. Freire, 2004, p. xxx) not only makes his political project timelier in view of the dehumanizing

policies the world is now facing through neoliberalism and hot-button cowboy militarism, but hope also makes it indispensable for all those who claim to embrace Freire's leading ideas and view themselves as having an "ontological vocation for humanity" as they position themselves as agents of change. Paulo's work is "drenched,' as he might say, in his humanistic love and his political anger or indignation" (A. Freire, 2004, p. xxxi). Given his yearning for social justice and democratic ideals, Paulo himself was well aware that his pedagogical proposals would be outright rejected by reactionary educators, for, according to him, "only the 'innocent' could possibly think that the power elite would encourage a type of education that denounces them even more clearly than do all the contradictions of their power structures" (Freire, 1985, p. 125). In a dialogue we had concerning the challenges faced by progressive educators in the present world conjuncture, he lovingly cautioned me: "Donaldo, don't be naïve, the ruling class will never send us to Copa Cabana for a vacation."

Paulo Freire would also caution us to not be at all surprised that schools of education, as well as other disciplinary departments at universities, with a few exceptions, would demonstrate an aversion toward critical theory and the development of independent critical thought. He would not be surprised that in a lecture at Harvard, given by Ramon Flecha from the University of Barcelona, Spain, that analyzed his theories, a Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral student approached me and asked the following: "I don't want to sound naïve, but who is this Paulo Freire that Professor Flecha is citing a lot?" Then again, how can one expect this doctoral student in education to know the work of the most significant educator in the world during the last half of the century when the Harvard Graduate School of Education offers a graduate course entitled Literacy Politics and Policy without requiring students to read, critique, and analyze the work of Freire?

It is this form of academic selection of bodies of knowledge that borders on censorship of critical educators that is partly to blame for the lack of awareness of Paulo Freire's significant contributions to the field of education worldwide. Even many liberals who have seemingly embraced his ideas and educational practices, often reduce his theoretical work to a mechanical methodology. According to Stanley Aronowitz (1998),

In fact, in concert with many liberal and radical educators, some teachers have interpreted liberatory education to chiefly mean instilling humanistic values in a nonrepressive way. The school seems to be a massive values clarification exercise. (p. 4)

He (Aronowitz, 1998) continues,

Many read Freire's dialogic pedagogy as a tool for student motivation and cannot recognize that for him dialogue is a content whose goal is social as much as individual change. In Freire's educational philosophy the first principle is that the conventional distinction between teacher as expert

and learners as an empty bio-physiological shell is questioned. Education takes place when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue. But both participants bring knowledge to the relationship, and one of the objects of the pedagogic process is to explore what each knows and what they can teach other. A second object is to foster reflection on the self as actor in the world in consequence of knowing. (p. 8).

The vulgarization of Freire's leading ideas was denounced by Ann Berthoff (1997) who pointed out that her colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, Boston,

... went on and on about the pedagogy of the oppressed without a clue about the role of dialogue, with no idea of the heuristic uses of syntax, to say nothing of the heuristic value of composing in paragraphs. Theory and practice remained alien to one another because the theory had not been understood. (p. 307)

Although Ann Berthoff was correct in pointing out that many of those who claim to be Freirean often do not understand his theory, she is soon betrayed by her own ideological blinders when she declares that Freire's "writing is often graceless, suffering the effects of seeing things in both Christian and Marxist perspectives." (Berthoff, 1997, p. 307). What she failed to realize is that one cannot understand Freire's theories without taking a rigorous detour through a Marxist analysis, and her offhand dismissal of Marx is nothing more than a vain attempt to remove the sociohistorical context that grounds the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Perhaps, for Ann Berthoff, a more "heuristic use of syntax" is to transform the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into the *Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised*—a euphemism that dislodges the agent of the action while leaving in doubt who bears the responsibility for the oppressive actions. This leaves the ground wide open for blaming the victims of disenfranchisement for their disenfranchisement. While the *Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised* may be more palatable to many liberal educators, it fails to unveil the dialect relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed in that if you have oppressed you must also have oppressors. The first title utilizes a discourse that names the oppressor whereas the second fails to do so. What would the counterpart be of disenfranchised? In addition to the "heuristic use of syntax," we must also, according to Freire (2004), embrace

methodological rigor, a reading of the world founded in the possibility men and women have created along their long history to *comprehend* the concrete and to communicate what is apprehended undeniably constitutes a factor in the improvement of language. The exercises of apprehending, of finding the reason or reasons for what is apprehended, of denouncing apprehended reality and announcing its overcoming, all are part of the process of reading the world. (p. 17)

The misunderstanding of Paulo Freire's leading theoretical ideas goes beyond "seeing things in both Christian and Marxist perspectives" (Berthoff, 1997, p. 307). The misunderstanding of Paulo Freire's theories, even by those who "claim to be Freirean" is not, however, innocent. It allows many liberal educators to appropriate selective aspects of Freire's theory and practice as a badge of progressiveness while conveniently dismissing or ignoring the "Marxist perspectives" that would question their complicity with the very structures that created the human misery in the first place. It also allows them to hide their class privilege while slumming as defenders of the disenfranchised. In Freire's (1985) own words,

... theoretical praxis is only authentic when it maintains the dialectic movement between itself and that praxis which will be carried out in a particular context. These two forms of praxis are two inseparable moments of the process by which we reach critical understanding. In other words, reflection is only real when it sends us back, as Sartre insists, to the given situation in which we act. (p. 124)

The misunderstanding of Paulo Freire's leading theoretical ideas is also implicated in a facile dismissal of Freire's legacy and his influence in shaping a vibrant field of critical pedagogy that has taken root throughout the United States and the world in the last two decades or so. It is precisely this vibrancy and energy that was conveniently ignored by Ann Berthoff (1997) when she states that

[t]o my knowledge, one place where Freire has not been misunderstood is in the field of ESL. I am thinking of the work of Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein. Patricia Laurence, Ann Raimés, and Vivian Zamel know very well what it means to say 'Begin with where they are'—as meaning makers. Also in the field of composition pedagogy: Beth Daniel understands the importance of the spiritual dimension of Freire's philosophy of education ... The fact that all these teachers are women should give pause to anyone who has taken seriously the recent condemnation of Paulo Freire by obtuse feminists. (p. 307)

By dismissing "obtuse feminists'" critique of Freire, which he addressed with humility in "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," published by *Harvard Educational Review* (Freire and Macedo, 1995), Ann Berthoff forecloses the opportunity to engage critical feminists like bell hooks who, while critiquing Freire, acknowledges the depth of Freire's contributions in shaping her theories regarding gender and race and how these factors always cut across class. By ignoring the enormous contributions of scholars such as Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michele Fine, Antonia Darder, Linda Brodkey, Joe Kincheloe, Shirley Steinberg, and Peter McLaren, among others, all of whom have, in various ways, been influenced by Freire and write about his theories, it creates spaces where the misunderstanding of Freire is guaranteed and vulgarly reproduced. In other words, after reading Ann Berthoff (1997), one is left with the false idea that Freire's

leading ideas are taken up seriously only in ESL and composition fields—fields that, by and large, suffer from a lack of criticism and the democratic radicalism espoused by Freire. Although Freire inspires some individuals in the field of ESL, they are often reduced to SIGs (Special Interest Groups) that operate largely in the margins. To a large extent, the presence of Freire’s theories has done little to alter the highly racist composition of the field of English as a Second Language that continues to exhibit racism in the markedly white ESL teacher population that serves a markedly nonwhite student population. If one attends the annual conference of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), one will find oneself in a sea of whiteness sprinkled with islets of nonwhite teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), given the international nature of the conference. However, if one moves to conferences in the United States sponsored by state ESL organizations, the islets are almost totally submerged by the all-white composition of the ESL field. Contrary to Ann Berthoff’s assertion, the field of ESL is largely atheoretical and acritical and most ESL teacher-training programs emphasize the technical acquisition of English, and most ESL teachers, even those with good intentions, fall prey to a missionary zeal to save their students from their “non-English-speaker status.” They seldom realize their role in the promotion and expansion of English imperialism and racist policies that is brilliantly documented by Bessie Dendrinos in her work titled “Linguoracism” (Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari, 2003). I am not aware of any substantive anti-racist project designed to bring to the fore the present English hegemony reproduced by ESL, as well as by most English teachers, that would attempt to alter the field by infusing ethnic and racial diversity and celebration of languages other than English. Neither am I aware of a swell of Freirean proposals to transform an otherwise mostly formalistic and technicist field of English composition where the “study of textual representation and signification has increasingly become a means to erase ‘the political economy of knowledge’ and to ‘reinstall the subjects in the discourse of dominant knowledges’” (France, 1994). Even progressive composition experts such as David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, who want to elevate students to a position of textual critic, end up promoting a higher level of literacy as a form of textual specialization that functions to domesticate the consciousness via a constant disarticulation between a narrow reductionistic reading of the text and the “material realm” that generated the text to begin with. By adopting a truly Freirean approach to writing, writing teachers would have to cease viewing subjectivity and knowledge as mere “idealized textual practices (signification, representation, interpretation)” (France, 1994) divorced from the material contexts that forms, informs, and sustains these textual practices in the first place. However, it is precisely this form of anchoring “those rhetorical practices that privilege the critical experience of textuality” (France, 1994) (the mechanics of signification) in the “material and historical situation of experience” (France, 1994) that even

liberal composition experts like Ann Berthoff, David Bartholomae, and Anthony Petrosky often avoid—since it calls for a Marxist analysis. One should not be overly surprised that liberal composition theorists in the United States such as Berthoff, Bartholomae, and Petrosky would “waver somewhat in their commitment to a Marxist critique [by appearing] to avoid all but the most superficial definition of key terms of Marxist analysis.” (France, 1994). The unmentionable “M” word has such ideological power that it structures an academic reality that brooks no debate. That is to say, to be labeled a Marxist analyst provokes generally a negative effect that attempts to disqualify all those who use a Marxist critique framework as a form of counterdiscourse to the present cultural and English hegemony.

Part of the problem with some of these pseudo-critical educators who selectively appropriate Freire as a badge of their progressiveness is that, in the name of liberation pedagogy, they reduce Freire’s leading ideas to a method. This takes place even with a facile adoption of the dialogic approach that is often turned into a mechanistic turn taking of experience sharing. According to Stanley Aronowitz, the North American fetish for method has allowed Freire’s philosophical ideas to be “assimilated into the prevailing obsession of North American education, following a tendency in all human and social sciences, with methods—of verifying knowledge and, in schools, of teaching, that is, transmitting knowledge to otherwise unprepared students.” (Aronowitz, 1993, p.8). I have even witnessed contexts where teachers claiming to be Freirean would use a flow chart specifying numbers to groups of students and arrows connecting neatly arranged boxes identifying issues to be discussed in the dialogue.

This fetish for method works insidiously against educators’ adherence to Freire’s own pronouncements against any form of pedagogical rigidity. Freire’s leading ideas concerning the act of knowing transcend the methods for which he is known. In fact, according to Linda Bimbi, “The originality of Freire’s work does not reside in the efficacy of his literacy methods, but, above all, in the originality of its content designed to develop our consciousness”<sup>3</sup> as part of a humanizing pedagogy. Freire (Freire and Frei Betto, 1988) wrote:

A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others. (p.36)

A humanizing pedagogy is not a process through which privileged teachers, in their simplistic attempt to cut the chains of oppressive educational practices, blindly advocate the dialogical model that would allow oppressed students to share their experiences and state their grievances without creating educational structures that would enable these same students to equip themselves with the necessary critical tools to unveil the root cause of oppression, including the teachers’ complicity with the very structures from which they reap benefits and privi-

leges. Without the development of their critical capacities, the dialogical model is often turned into a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression—all done under the guise of democracy, with the sole excuse that it is for the students' own good. This is evident when white, privileged teachers adopt minority students to mentor and then parade them around at conferences to share their experiences as a process for giving the students a voice. In fact, these white teachers often speak with great pride of their benevolence—a form of paternalism that turns the minority students into trophy minorities—a badge of the teachers' anti-racist posture so long as the relationship remains asymmetrical and issues concerning the teachers' class and privilege are always kept out of the dialogue. It is not unusual for these same white teachers to have difficulty in working with minority students who have in fact empowered themselves, or with minority teachers who consider themselves equals. In such cases, it is common to hear the white teachers complain of the minority students' ungratefulness or the uppity nature of the minority teachers. Not only do these white teachers feel hurt and betrayed by what they perceive as "ungratefulness," they often work aggressively to undermine the now-empowered minority since they cannot envision themselves outside the role that their privilege has allowed them as representatives or spokespersons for the community and minority students. This overly paternalistic posture is well understood by bell hooks, as evidenced by her criticism of white feminists when she wrote: "You don't need to speak since I can do it so much better than you can" (hooks, 1990, p. 30).

The position of many white liberals in the United States, including those who claim to be Freirean, is similar to that of the leftist colonialists who, in not wanting to destroy their cultural privileges, found themselves in an ever-present contradiction. This contradiction surfaces often when white liberals feel threatened by the legitimacy of a subordinate group's struggle—a struggle that not only may not include them but also may demand that their liberal treatment of oppression as an abstract idea must be translated into concrete political action. In other words, a struggle that points out to those white liberals who claim to be anti-racist that an anti-racist political project is not a process through which they can "become enamored and perhaps interested in the [groups] for a time" (Memmi, 1991, p. 26), and yet always shield themselves from the reality that created the oppressive conditions they want ameliorated in the first place. That is, many white liberals need to understand that they cannot simply go to the oppressed community to slum as do-gooders while preventing community members from having access to the cultural capital from which these white liberals have benefited greatly. A do-gooder posture always smacks of the false generosity of paternalism, which Freire (1994) aggressively opposed:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, animated by authentic humanist (not humanitarian) generosity, presents itself as a pedagogy of humankind.



Pedagogy which begins with the egotistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanization.” (p. 36)

To the degree that a false generosity constitutes oppression and dehumanization, an authentic pedagogy of the oppressed, not a pedagogy of the disenfranchised, needs to denounce the paternalistic pedagogical attitude embraced by many white liberals—an attitude that not only represents a liberal, middle-class narcissism that gives rise to pseudo-critical educators who are part of and responsible for the same social order they claim to renounce. It also positions these liberal educators as colonizers whose major *raison d’être* is to appropriate all that the colonized have to offer, including their language, culture, and dignity.

Let me end by inviting you to feel a sense of indignation and just ire given the exponential human sufferings unleashed by so-called civilization, including our own—a civilization marked more by greed and cruelty designed to exploit, dehumanize, and condemn more than 50 percent of the world population to subhumanity—a subhumanity that should be denounced by courageously naming the perpetrators while embracing a humanizing pedagogy.

However, a humanizing pedagogy requires both humanity and humility—a humility that guides and shapes the act of reading the word while giving the necessary coherence to the reading of the world. And this humility was exemplified by a Mexican Indian teacher, Sara Zuguide, who risked her life in Oaxaca attempting to protect the rights of Mexican Indian children. In a speech at Las Jornadas Conference at Loyola University in Los Angeles, Sara shared that she did not want to be a teacher. She agreed to teach for one year because of her mother’s insistence that teaching was the best way to save their endangered culture and language and safeguard their battered human dignity.

Sara recounted that from the first time she walked into a classroom filled with thirty Mexican Indian children, all she could feel was the sadness and intensity of sixty young eyes upon her, of children whose hopes hinged on her ability to teach. At that moment, she knew she couldn’t let these children join the ranks of the wretched of the earth. At that moment, she also knew she had to be a teacher who would embrace a humanizing pedagogy through which the helplessness and the obscene human misery experienced by these children could be turned into hope—a path through which their human dignity would be recaptured and celebrated. She ended stoically by stating: “I would gladly give my life to create the necessary structures so that Indian children who have been sentenced to a life of subhumanity would again have the opportunity to know what it means to be human.”

The movement from subhumanity to humanity must invariably adhere to Paulo’s political project, which also requires that we recognize our own human-

ity in others. The recognition of our humanity in others would also require us, according to my late friend and collaborator, Paulo Freire, to imagine that while change in the current dehumanization is difficult, it is possible. We should always remain transformative agents of history, understanding that “in truth, the dominated popular classes generate knowledge and culture, and they experience different levels of exploitation and the consciousness of the exploitative order. This knowledge becomes, in the final analysis, an expression of resistance” (Freire, 1986, p. 16) which, in turn, means that the oppressed are actively exercising their human agency.

<sup>1</sup> Donaldo Macedo and Nita Freire, “Reflection on the Life of Paulo and Nita: A Dialogue,” Recife, Brazil, March, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Note by Paulo Freire written to Nita Freire in New York City, April 4, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Bimbi, cited in Moacir Gadotti (1989) *Convite a Leitura de Paulo Freire* (São Paulo, Brazil: Editora Scipione), p. 32.

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