Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly continually explore the implications of Freire's ideas for teaching reading and writing together. And Dixie Goswami has vastly increased the size of the culture circle with her network of rural teachers. Linda Shaw Finlay and Valerie Faith are the authors of the first article I ever read on Freire and it remains the best: "Illiteracy and Alienation in American Colleges: Is Paulo Freire's Pedagogy Relevant?" (Radical Teacher, December, 1979).

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.

Remembering Paulo Freire

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Indeed, whenever the future is considered as a pregiven—whether this be as the pure, mechanical repetition of the present, or simply because it "is what it has to be"—there is no room for utopia, nor therefore for the dream, the option, the decision, or expectancy in the struggle, which is the only way hope exists. There is no room for education. Only for training.

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope

Occupying the in-between space of the political and the possible, Paulo Freire spent most of his life working in the belief that the radical elements of democracy are worth struggling for, that critical education is a basic element of social change, and that how we think about politics is inseparable from how we come to understand the world, power, and the moral life we aspire to lead.

Freire's belief in democracy as well as his deep and abiding faith in the ability of people to endure under the weight of oppressive institutions and ideologies was forged in a spirit of struggle tempered by both the grim realities of imprisonment and exile and a profound sense of humility, compassion, and hope. Acutely aware that many contemporary versions of hope occupied their own corner in Disneyland, Freire fought against such appropriations and was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope through, in his words, an "understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism" (Freire 91). Marked by the conservativism of the last decade, traditionalists such as Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty have bemoaned the death of romance, inspiration, and hope as casualties of the discourse of power and political struggle. According to Rorty, you cannot "find inspirational value in a text at the same time as you are viewing it as a . . . mechanism of cultural production" (Rorty 13). For Freire, hope was never predicated on so rigid a division between understanding and hope, mind and heart, thought and action. Hope for Freire was a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination that enabled progressive educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. Hope demanded an anchoring in transformative practices, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator was to "unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles
may be” (Freire 9). Underlying Freire’s politics of hope was a view of radical pedagogy that located itself on the dividing lines where the relations between domination and oppression, power and powerlessness continued to be produced and reproduced. For Freire hope as a defining element of politics and pedagogy always meant listening to and working with the poor and other subordinate groups so that they might speak and act in order to alter the dominant relations of power.

Committed to the specific and contingent, Freire offered no recipes for those in need of instant theoretical and political fixes. Pedagogy was strategic and performative: considered as part of a broader political practice for democratic change, critical pedagogy was never viewed as an a priori discourse to be reasserted or a methodology to be implemented. On the contrary, for Freire pedagogy was a political and performative act organized around the “instructive ambivalence of disrupted borders,” a practice of bafflement, interruption, understanding, and intervention was the result of ongoing historical, social, and economic struggles (Bhabha 28).

As a border intellectual, Freire consistently reminded us that political struggles are won and lost in those specific yet hybridized spaces that linked narratives of everyday experience with the social gravity and material force of institutional power. Any radical pedagogy that called itself Freirean had to acknowledge the centrality of the particular and contingent in shaping historical contexts and political projects. Although Freire was a theoretician of radical contextualism, he also acknowledged the importance of understanding the particular and the local in relation to larger, global and cross-national forces. For Freire, literacy as a way of reading and changing the world had to be reconceived within a broader understanding of citizenship, democracy, and justice that was global and transnational. Making the pedagogical more political in this case meant moving beyond the celebration of tribal mentalities and developing a praxis that foregrounded “power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles” (Alexander and Mohanty xix).

But Freire’s insistence that radical education was about the making and changing of contexts did more than seize upon the political and pedagogic potentialities to be found across a spectrum of social sites and practices in society, which, of course, included but were not limited to the school. He also challenged the separation of culture from politics by calling attention to how diverse technologies of power work pedagogically within institutions to produce, regulate, and legitimate particular forms of knowing, belonging, feeling, and desiring. But Freire did not make the mistake of many of his contemporaries by conflating culture with the politics of recognition. Politics was more than a gesture of translation, representation, and dialogue, it was also about mobilizing social movements against the oppressive economic, racial, and sexist practices put into place by colonization, global capitalism, and other oppressive structures of power.
Paulo Freire leaves behind a corpus of work that emerged out of a lifetime of struggle and commitment. Refusing the comfort of master narratives, Freire’s work was always unsettled and unsettling, restless yet engaging. Unlike so much of the politically arid and morally vacuous academic and public prose that characterizes contemporary intellectual discourse, Freire’s work was consistently fueled by a healthy rage over the needless oppression and suffering he witnessed throughout his life as he travelled all over the globe. Similarly, his work exhibited a vibrant and dynamic quality that allowed it to grow, refuse easy formulas, and open itself to new political realities and projects. Freire’s genius was to elaborate a theory of social change and engagement that was neither vanguardist nor populist. While he had a profound faith in the ability of ordinary people to shape history and to become critical agents in shaping their own destinies, he refused to romanticize the culture and experiences that produced oppressive social conditions. Combining theoretical rigor, social relevance, and moral compassion, Freire gave new meaning to the politics of daily life while affirming the importance of theory in opening up the space of critique, possibility, politics, and practice. Theory and language were a site of struggle and possibility that gave experience meaning and action a political direction, and any attempt to reproduce the binarism of theory vs. politics was repeatedly condemned by Freire.

I had a close personal relationship with Paulo for over seventeen years, and I was always moved by the way in which his political courage and intellectual reach were matched by a love of life and generosity of spirit. He once told me that he could not imagine a revolutionary who did not like good food and music. I am not sure if it was the love of food or music or maybe both that allowed his poetry to slip into politics. The political and the personal mutually informed Freire’s life and work. He was always the curious student even as he assumed the role of a critical teacher. As he moved between the private and the public, he revealed an astonishing gift for making everyone he met feel valued. His very presence embodied what it meant to combine political struggle and moral courage, to make hope practical and despair unconvincing. Paulo was fond of quoting Che Guevara’s adage: “Let me tell you, at the risk of appearing ridiculous, the genuine revolutionary is animated by feelings of love. It is impossible to imagine an authentic revolutionary without this quality” (cited in Freire 43). No one I have ever known has embodied this sentiment more than Paulo Freire.

Notes

1Surely, Freire would have agreed wholeheartedly with Stuart Hall’s insight that “It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how
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we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from politics of representation” (Hall 30). At the same time, Freire was as much concerned with what educators do with language as with decoding its meaning.

Works Cited


Paulo Freire Remembered

DONALDO MACEDO

I was in Puerto Rico when, in a sunny afternoon on May 2, 1997, I received the devastating news that Paulo Freire, my friend, collaborator, my teacher, and my mentor, had died. Immobilized by this immeasurable loss, I began to realize that a part of me had also died only to be slowly resurrected in the just as immeasurable hope that Paulo represented for those of us who are committed to imagine a world, in his own words, that is less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanizing, and more humane.

Coincidentally, when I received the news of Paulo’s death, I was correcting the proofs of our book Ideology Matters, which we had just finished a little more than a month ago during his last trip to New York and Boston. As we talked, dialogued, analyzed, and critiqued what we had written, it never crossed my mind that Ideology Matters would be his last book. In his last work, he once again, teaches us and the world—with his hallmark humility—what it means to be an intellectual who fights always against the temptation of becoming a populist intellectual. As always, he teaches us with his penetrating and unquiet mind the meaning of a profound commitment to fight social injustices in our struggle to recapture the loss of our dignity as human beings. In Paulo’s own words:

we need to say no to the neo-liberal fatalism that we are witnessing at the end of this century, informed by the ethics of the market, an ethics in which a minority makes