

In memory

PAULO OF THE OPPRESSED [1921–1997]: ROCK STAR OR MAGICIAN?

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When Paulo Freire showed up to teach at the University of British Columbia in the summer of 1984 there was still a Berlin wall and the Socreds were cooking up Expo '86 to get themselves re-elected. He had written *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* more than a decade earlier and had heard rumblings about inferior English translations. He was just out of exile and not too enchanted by having to leave Brazil yet again. Indeed, after a particularly merry function and good dinner at colleague Kjell Rubenson's house in suburban Dunbar, Paulo gazed out at the leafy but deserted streets and claimed "Vancouver is boring."

Later he might have relished the quiet, because at the university he was variously labeled magician and rock star and there were few opportunities for escape. Paulo was given an office four feet across the hall from me, and I thus bore witness to the line-up of deans, lecturers, administrators, proud Brazilians, adoring back-to-the earthers, and earnest literacy workers who came to pay homage. In the background lurked Ira Shor, notebook in hand and always looking for a chance to get time alone with Paulo. In the end Shor claimed to have spoken with him for seven days—making a three-hour tape recording on each day.

Sometimes I drove the getaway car for Freire, and we'd escape to Spanish Banks. One day I filmed an interview with him just a few feet from naked bodies on Wreck Beach. Paulo found this amusing and was very obliging. Cutaway here, cutaway there. Stand up, sit down, walk. Now another cutaway. Back in the crowded classroom at UBC students sat on chairs and then the floors. Senior university officials didn't think twice about hauling him out of the classroom to important meetings. Our faculty colleague Paz Buttedahl was Paulo's manager. Graduate student Yom-Tov Shamash was the "roadie" who helped Paulo, Paz, and Ira. When Paulo was kidnapped by deans and vice-presidents, Paz Buttedahl taught his class. Students grumbled and Paz had her hands full. Graduate student Shauna

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Butterwick cheerfully reminded Freire gender is a variable that might merit attention. He was always polite and attentive. This was Vancouver but, as we know, this scene was repeated in other Canadian cities.

Contrary to popular wisdom Paulo adored and did little to deflate his guru status. He also escaped criticism because of the enormous affection—and hyperbole—surrounding him. He didn’t have all the answers and, as Weiler (1996) observes, often dealt with difficult questions by invoking grand generalizations, motherhood statements, or an “inspirational message of optimism and love” (p. 355). He had several personas and it is thus no surprise to see others attempting to fold him and his ideas into the labyrinths of, for example, postmodernism (McLaren & Lankshear, 1994; McLaren & Leonard, 1993). Sometimes the admiration leads to a tendency to dramatize his various personas. Hence, McLaren and Giroux (1994) present Freire as “a proud yet humble warrior of the spirit ... engaging in a bohemian pedagogy of happiness ... with ... the wisdom of an ancient sage and the unfailing passion of a socialist revolutionary” (pp. xvi–xvii). If this means Freire was happy to have fish and chips for lunch and got exasperated with recalcitrant photocopiers, I can attest to it. Whilst he didn’t refute such characterizations he found them amusing.

There are parallels between his work and that of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1959, 1965) in New Zealand. Her work preceded him by many years. As well, there is doubt about just how many literacy or cultural circles Paulo ever led. Certainly, the theorising in the later years was far removed from the early practice. And there are scant eyewitness reports of Freire leading a literacy circle. There has been no sustained biography and no consistent meaning attached to the details of his life. Until further work is done, scholars will have to depend almost solely on Freire’s own accounts. There is no shortage of followers and adoring hagiography (e.g., Gadotti, 1994). As well, numerous scholars have provided “readings” of him while friends and admirers have interpreted his work for Spanish and English-speaking readers (e.g., Torres, 1978; 1994). There has also been some adroit analysis of the texts Freire produced (e.g., Taylor, 1993).

One of the most intriguing and thorough analyses is from Weiler (1996) who, deploying a critical and constructivist perspective, likened him to a chameleon that changed its spots depending on the occasion. Despite Freire being the most cited adult educator in the world, Weiler wonders if there ever was a “real” Paulo Freire. She provides persuasive evidence that he would present one persona to this and another to that audience. As well,

students interested in him should now be wary of *Paulo Freire Ltd*—followers who brook no criticism. For them, Paulo was a saint and much effort now goes into containing contrary discourses.

Fortunately, early problems with translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were resolved in subsequent books, and English language versions of his work are now considerably more accessible than in the 1970s. Besides *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972), the earlier books are *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire, 1978), *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (Freire, 1978), and *The Politics of Education* (Freire, 1985). Also there is the “talking book” that arose from the Vancouver summer (Shor & Freire, 1987) as well as Freire and Macedo (1987). In December 1987, Freire visited the Highlander Centre in Tennessee to talk another book, this time with the inimitable Myles Horton (Bell, Gavanta, & Peters, 1990; Horton, 1990). There was also Freire and Faundez (1989) *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*. Later he “talked” a book on higher education (Escobar, Fernandez, Guevara-Niebla, & Freire, 1994). Elias (1994) focused on the religious aspects of Freire’s life and theorising. Prior to his death there were erudite elaborations of his theories concerning literacy and politics, such as *Politics of Liberation: Paths From Freire* (McLaren & Lankshear, 1994), *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (McLaren & Leonard, 1993), *Pedagogy of the City* (Freire, 1993), his *Letters to Cristina* (Freire, 1996), and the autobiographical *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 1994). After his death his publisher brought out essays entitled *Pedagogy of the Heart* (Freire, 1997). Taylor’s (1993) *Texts of Paulo Freire* is useful because, unlike almost every other book, it describes the processes used in literacy or cultural circles.

After being exiled in 1964 Paulo did not return to his native Brazil until 1980. He made the trip to Vancouver in 1984, and subsequently worked as the Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo (see Torres, 1994). In the winter of 1989 he supported his friend Luis Inacio Lulada Silva, a trade unionist in the Workers' Party, in the first popular elections held in Brazil in 29 years. Luis came close to winning and, had he done so, Freire would have been Minister of Education, the post he held before being exiled. Then, aged 68 years, would he have needed the aggravation of being Minister of Education?

Freire’s wife Elsa was with him in Vancouver, and I photographed the pair of them sitting on solid B.C. logs on an island in Georgia Strait. Those who knew them claim she had a crucial influence on his pedagogy. At the age of 21, Paulo had tutored her when she was a nursery school teacher

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studying for an exam. Taylor (1993) felt it was Elza who encouraged Paulo to teach and got him into the Catholic Action Movement. We in Vancouver saw he was deeply in love and frequently brought her into discussions or sought her opinion. However, like the wife of a rock star, she dragged him off to the next engagement when things were getting out of hand (and lateness loomed) because of groupie demands. After Elza's death Paulo plunged into loneliness.

These observations, coupled with his own words in his recent *Pedagogy of Hope* and other semi-biographical accounts (e.g., Freire, 1997) clearly show how love, passion, and relationships were the centre of his life and thus of his theorizing. He was also something of a bon vivant and enjoyed a good gossip over a bottle of wine. Freire was a passionate man. He also loved and married two of his students. In this regard Simon (1995) has theorised that faculty–student relationships are complex and cannot all be dismissed by metanarratives such as “abuse of power” or “patriarchy.” The intimacy of faculty–student relations “is often the locus of a complex circuit of signification and eros that conditions the work of teaching and learning” (1995, p. 95) and, in Freire’s case, brought deep fulfillment and satisfaction not once, but twice.

In Brazil, his participatory methodologies were extremely successful. By the time of his arrest in 1964, there were allegedly more than 20,000 cultural circles in operation, each involving a group of about 30 people. These people were being prepared to reach out to twenty million others within a period of three months. Each circle was equipped with a Polish-made projector imported by the Ministry of Education. After the coup, some were shown on television as “subversive tools.” Here was a case of where an educational method (dialogue), techniques (group discussion), and a device (filmstrip projector), as well as a teacher (Freire) were all subversive. Could there be a more ringing testament to the power and importance of participatory adult education? And isn’t this what the authorities used to say about Jagger and Lennon? Subversive? A threat to the established order?

Freire valued participation and the learner’s experience. During a seminar at OISE (the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), he pointed at the soles of participants shoes and asked “These are what you stand on ... they are different ... some are better than others are ... some are leather, others plastic ... now we see a few holes ... what can we learn from this?” But, unlike liberals who extol experiential or participatory learning as a way of finding voice or manifesting respect for learners, Freire linked

participation to democracy and the politics of culture. In this way he avoided lapsing into the middle-class narcissism of participation without politics.

Many people spent much more time with Freire than we of the Vancouver summer. But, we saw that the gentle man in the red shirt lived what he espoused. This is what I liked most about him. There was no disjunction between what he said and how he lived. Paulo Freire is the kind of man who would have been great company on a kayak trip or some other adventure. With him it was easy to enjoy commonplace activities—a walk on the beach or stroll in the forest. He simultaneously relished and joked about his rock star status but didn't take himself too seriously. It was Freire's ability to speak for the underclass, the generosity of his spirit, and (in his own words) the "soul" of what he said that distinguished him.

In his last years he worried that he would not make it into the 21st century. Rumours said he was sick. In a very un-Freire-like moment I, like many others, learned of his death by e-mail. But his spirit and soul is with us and we are blessed to work in a field where he was our comrade. When he died both the British (BBC) and Canadian Broadcasting Corporations (CBC) did features on him. Definitely a rock star.

Freire did not like leaving Brazil and, with an intense new love in his life, had little interest in dying. He wanted to witness the dawn of the 21st century. But his was a life well lived. "It is not age," he told me during an interview in UBC's Nitobe Gardens, "it is what you did in living."

Paulo Freire, adult educator and rock star, dead at age 76.

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