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STARTING FROM NINA: THE POETIC
SOUL OF PAULO FREIRE

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STARTING FROM NINA: THE POETIC SOUL OF PAULO FREIRE

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Abstract

This is a collaborative and co-authored article exploring the poetics of the work of Paulo Freire, the legendary Brazilian philosopher and educator. All five of the authors are themselves poets or people who have used poetry in their work as adult educators and facilitators of social justice. We believe that this is the first English-language publication of the poem "Recife Forever," written by Freire himself about the city of his birth. It was written in Chile during his years of exile by the Brazilian dictator.

Résumé

Cette œuvre célèbre la poésie et l'apprentissage. La réflexion collective est née quand Budd Hall a demandé à des amis canadiens et des éducateurs sur les mouvements sociaux de sa génération de parler de leurs perspectives sur Paulo Freire et la poésie. Nous avons tous été influencés par Paulo Freire. Nous sommes poètes ou amateurs de poésie, et nous avons eu le privilège de faire sa connaissance et de travailler avec lui. Nous avons ressenti son esprit alors que nous faisons tout notre possible pour assurer la justice. Cette œuvre contient aussi une perle rare : un poème écrit par Paulo. Dans le cadre de cette réflexion collective, nous faisons part de nos pensées sur la poésie, l'apprentissage et la justice sociale. Nous examinons aussi le poème de Paulo afin de trouver des indices qui nous permettront de

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comprendre ses idées sur l'enseignement et le changement. Nous vous invitons à ajouter à la conversation vos propres réflexions sur la poésie, sur Paulo et sur les défis auxquels est confronté l'éducation sur les mouvements sociaux aujourd'hui.

Keywords

Paulo Freire, poetry, activism

Poetry is found at the centre of all social movements. The peace movements, feminist movements, worker's movements, anti-racism movements, movements of sexuality and identity, freedom movements, farmer's movements, and more have all expressed themselves in poetic ways. Sometimes the poets are part of the movements they write about. Augustino Neto, the independence leader of Angola, is an example of a poet in the decolonial movement (Marques, 2003). Sometimes poems are taken up by movements because of how other poets express what is felt by those on the front lines. Shelley's (2008) "Rise Like Lions," taken from "The Masque of Anarchy," written after the Massacre of Manchester, is such a poem. Still other poetry is what Carolyn Forché calls "poetry of witness" (Forché & Wu, 2014). This describes the vast writings of the many, including all of us contributing to this article. We have found poetry as a form of documenting our own journeys, intersecting with and contributing to the social movements of our lives.

Anibal Quijano (1964), the Peruvian intellectual of Freire's generation, tells us:

Poetry is a way of knowledge and communication, of a world that is discovered and constructed at the same time. It implies, therefore, not only the creation of new relationships between the elements of the universe, or of new nuances in them, but a genuine transfiguration of existence. Therein lies the exceptional power and brilliance of poetic language . . . Because poetry is a mode of relationship between man [sic] and reality, the most direct, the most intense, the most profound. The most beautiful.

Joy Harjo (2021), the Indigenous Poet Laureate of the United States, adds that "to imagine the spirit of poetry is much like imagining the shape and the size of knowing. It is a kind of resurrection light; it is the tall ancestor spirit who has been with me since the beginning, or a bear or a hummingbird . . . It is a hundred horses running" (p. 1).

"Poetry is not a luxury," as Audre Lorde (2009) reminds us. "It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (p. 355).

Deborah Barndt, a Canadian scholar-activist influenced by Freire's writings, feels that there are three creative moments that can be seen in Freire's work and indeed in her own work. "I think of these spaces as *la poeta*, *la política*, and *la pensadora*, the artist, the activist, and the academic." She believes that her life's work had to integrate all three of these practices, that they needed each other. Deborah suggests that the *poeta*, or artist, was embodied in Freire's promotion of the use of *codigos* or "codes" that could take the form of theatre, music, drawings, or, in Barndt's case, photographs. Freire's process of "*descodificación*" engaged the learners in connecting with the stories represented in these cultural and artistic forms—because they tapped their bodies, minds, and spirits (as opposed to

the intellectual-dominant form of analysis of European cognitive imperialism). In this way, she uses “la poeta” not to refer narrowly to poetry or poetics, but to an “artistic sensibility and capacity to express oneself in multiple cultural forms that everyone has, but which has been silenced, buried, or discredited by Eurocentric knowledges and ways of knowing” (personal communication).

A Collective Reflection

This reflection began with Budd Hall asking a number of friends for their thoughts about Paulo Freire and poetics. All of us have been influenced by Freire. All of us write or love poetry or support poets. We begin with the story of Paulo’s visit to Toronto in the mid-1970s. In 1976, Rosemary Donegan, D’Arcy Martin, Anita Shilton, and others with the Development Education Centre in Toronto made a film called *Starting from Nina* (Donegan et al.). This film explored the implications of Freire’s thinking for education in the city of Toronto. Barb Thomas reminded us that Paulo told a story about his early work in literacy in Brazil that was beautifully poetic. Edward Jackson, who was a doctoral student in 1976, witnessed some of the filming and described Paulo’s way of working. “He pushed himself to fatigue, to tears, to struggle, his voice rising and falling, sometimes to a whisper, even as he also injected the proceedings with joy, discovery, and good humour” (personal communication).

Paulo’s story about Nina and the early work in literacy can be heard as a poem. To hear it as Paulo spoke it in his Brazilian-accented English in the film adds immeasurably to the emotional content.

Starting from Nina

Because in this process we also perceive some emotions.
 I remember in my first experiment,
 When sometime, a man went to the blackboard and wrote “Nina”
 And he began to smile and smile
 Emotional and excited
 And I asked him, “What’s happening?”
 And he said,
 “Oh . . . , this is the name of my wife!
 This is the first time that I can write it.
 Because of that, I am smiling.”

Paulo the Poet

Paulo’s words didn’t just denote things, like *blackboard* and *smile*. They have inner motion, internal relations, and connections to a wider vision of the world. That is his poetic and dialectical way of expressing what is and what needs to be, both at the same time. Some North Americans find his writing “elusive” as a result, but for people engaged in transformative education it is liberating to find both dimensions in the same phrase. He doesn’t talk about emotions; he talks in emotions, passionately, which connects doubly to readers across cultures who share his values.

Although Paulo's books may be among the best-known works on education and the search for justice anywhere in the world, it may surprise readers to know that he also wrote poetry. His story is a well-known story of exile. Fleeing from a Brazilian dictator, he was in Bolivia, Chile, the USA, and Switzerland before returning to Brazil. "Recife Forever" was written in 1969 during his time in Chile. It is a poem of longing for his birthplace and home, Recife. It tells in poetic form much of the story of his years in Recife and the struggles and experiences that formed the backdrop to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Recife Forever¹

by Paulo Freire

From Santiago I write you, Recife
 to speak of you to you
 to tell you I love you
 deeply, I love you.
 It's been five years since I left you—
 early morning—I was afraid to look at you
 afraid to wound you
 afraid to embitter you.
 Early morning—I didn't say a word
 What to say if you're parting?
 I was afraid to hear myself
 afraid to look at myself
 afraid to wound myself.
 Early morning—crossing the streets
 the airport drawing near
 the moment of departure also
 a thousand memories of you
 crowding my enforced silence.
 From Santiago I write you
 to speak of you to you
 to tell you of my saudade, Recife,
 gentle longing—patient longing
 well-behaved longing.

1 Written by Paulo Freire in Santiago de Chile, February 1969; translated from Portuguese by Peter Lownds, Los Angeles, January 1999; revised September 19, 2021, in commemoration of Freire's centennial. Believed to be the first publication of this poem in English.

Recife, forever Recife,
of streets with such sweet names,
Union Street, which Manuel Bandeira
was afraid would be called
“Somebody or other street”
and which, today, I fear
will soon be called
“Colonel Somebody” street.
Street of the creole girls
Street of the dawn
Street of friendship
Street of the Seven Sins.

Recife forever.
Your men of the people
burnt umber by the sun
rhythmically shouting in the streets:
“Cry baby so mama buys you pitomba fruit!”
“I have a fat sheep’s wool for your pillows!”
“Sweet banana and guava paste!”
It seems so long ago!
For us, boys from the same street.
That man who walked so fast
almost running, shouting, shouting:
“Sweet banana and guava paste!”
At each corner, one of us would say:
“I want banana, sweet banana paste!”

Already smiling at the response to come.
Without stopping
without looking back
without looking to the side
walking fast, almost running
the mechanical man answered us:
“I only have guava—I cry
‘banana’ only from habit:

'Sweet banana and guava paste!
Sweet banana and guava paste!'"

He continued to shout,
walking almost running
without looking back
without looking to the side
our mechanical man.

It was necessary for time to pass
much rain needed to fall
many suns had to set
many tides had to turn from high to low
lots of children needed to be born
many people had to die
many days needed to break
many trees had to bud and flower
many Marias had to fall in love
many fields to become dry
a lot of pain had to exist
I had to look into many sad eyes
in order to understand that
the man we treated like a toy
was my brother,
my downcast brother
my exploited brother
my offended brother
my brother oppressed,
prohibited from being.

Recife, where I was hungry
where I felt pain
without knowing why
where still today
so many, so terribly many
have the same hunger
without knowing why
have the same pain,

I cannot be angry at you.
Recife, where late one day
I was hungry
without knowing why
where still today
so many, so terribly many
have the same hunger
without knowing why
have the same pain,
I cannot be angry at you.
Recife, where late one day
I was hungry and knew not why
I thought so much
about those who were not eating
about those who had no clothes
about those who did not smile
about those who did not know
what to do with their lives.
I thought so much
about the disinherited ones
about the mistreated ones
about those who stood at the gate
but did not enter
about those who entered
but did not remain
about those who remained
but could not be
about the children
who were already working
before they were born
while still in the womb
helping their mothers
beg for alms and
receiving crumbs and
cold-hearted stares.
Recife, I am not angry at you.

I came to know your jails as a grown man.

One two three four

four three two one

forward and back again

whistles—lock step

soldier, do not think!

one two three four

four three two one

right left

halt! left right

soldier, do not think!

what I wanted

what I want,

what I will always want

is that people—all people

may eat

may have clothes

may wear shoes

may have children

and that the children

will not go hungry

will not be in pain

may play

may smile

may sing

may love

and may be loved.

Recife, city of mine

already a grown man

I came to know your jails.

In them I was an object

I was a thing

I was an oddity

Wednesday—four in the afternoon

the iron gate opened.

"Today is visitors' day. Line up!

I'll punish anyone who tries

To sneak in a single chocolate
I'll search all of you."
So said one of our "bosses"
In a harsh voice
A man smaller than his post
Then we marched awkwardly,
without cadence, toward our wounded wives
our afflicted mothers
our startled children.
In those meetings I discovered something new:
In front of Elza, my wife
and the Three Marias,
our daughters
I had many words to say
many things to ask
much hope to express
but a lot of hunger to subdue as well
and thirty minutes to eat and communicate.
In those meetings I discovered something:
words and food collide.

Recife, city of mine,
as a grown man,
I came to know your jails.
"Captain, when this doctor writes Creator,
meaning God, he writes it with a small c!
Creator with a big C is mine alone."
The colonel, who owned the world
who owned the prisoners,
wanted to own God as well.
Wealthy colonel that one!
Poor man that one!
He wanted to make God a jailor
or his flunky
or his spy
to help him hunt subversives.

Recife, city of mine,
As a grown man I came to know your jails.
I dealt with silence
and solitary confinement.
I spent hours in a kind of box—
five feet six inches high
twenty-three inches wide.
Cold walls
rough walls
darkness.

I lived peacefully, I slept peacefully,
I regretted nothing.
Recife, city of mine,
As a grown man I came to know your jails.
One two three four
four three two one
the men learning not to be men.
The clock in my house also tolled
one two three four
four three two one
but it sang a different song.
Singing this way
it only marked men's days.

Recife, city of mine,
in you I lived a sad childhood
bitter adolescence I lived in you.
They cannot understand me if they do not understand you:
my greediness for love
my hope in the struggle
my confidence in the oppressed
all this was forged in me,
through my relations with you:
in the sad childhood,
in the bitter adolescence.
What I do
what I think

what I say
what I write,
everything bears your mark.
I am still the boy who was hungry,
who was in terrible pain
without knowing why.
Only one difference exists
between the boy of yesterday
and the boy of today,
who still lives within:
now I know why I was hungry
now I know why I was in pain.

Recife, city of mine, I say it out loud:
if someone loves me
they also love you.
If someone wants me
they must want you.
If someone looks for me
let them find me in you:
in your nights,
in your days
in your streets
in your rivers
in your sea
in your sun
in your people
in your heat
in your ravines
in your restlessness
in your silence
in the lovingness of those who fought
and who fight still
of those who exposed themselves
and who expose themselves still
of those who died
and who die still

while seeking, with increasing fervor,
 that fewer children
 will feel hunger and pain
 without knowing why.
 That is why I say:
 they cannot understand me
 if they do not understand you—
 what I do
 what I think
 what I say
 what I write
 everything bears your mark.
 Recife, city of mine,
 from Santiago I write you
 to tell you that I love you
 deeply, that I love you.

The Poetry of Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The power of the images, the love, and the violence of the powerful in Recife can also be found in passages, in a few words, in a sentence, or in paragraphs in Freire's brilliant *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2018). We draw, from his prose, segments of his poetic soul. In his Introduction he writes,

From these pages I hope at least the following will endure:
 My trust in the people, and my faith in men and women,
 And in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love. (p. 40)

In writing about the campesino's first image of manhood:

It is a rare peasant who, once promoted, does not become
 More of a tyrant than the owner himself.
 That is because the oppression remains the same
 And the overseer, in order to make sure of his job,
 Must be as tough as the owner—and more so. (p. 46)

And at the core of his vision and his approach to pedagogy:

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one.
 No pedagogy which is truly liberating, can remain
 Distant from the oppressed by treating them as
 Unfortunates presenting for them models from
 Among the oppressors. (p. 54)

Adding his analysis of oppressors:

For the oppressors, “human beings” refer only to themselves.

Other people are things . . .

Oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more

As a privilege which dehumanizes others,

For them having more is an inalienable right. (pp. 57–59)

His words are filled always with the power and necessity of transformation. He draws from Christian language as well as political thought. “Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth” (p. 61).

His poetic soul animates the language that he draws on. “Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word” (p. 6).

Metaphors of Education

Perhaps the best-known metaphor emerging from Freire’s writing is his criticism of education in traditional settings as a form of “banking.”

Education thus becomes an act of depositing,

In which the scope of the action of the students

Are the depositories and the teachers the depositors.

Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable

Upon those whom they consider to know nothing. (p. 72)

And further,

The teacher teaches and the students are taught;

The teacher knows everything and the students nothing;

The teacher thinks and the students are thought about;

The teacher is the subject of the learning and the students mere objects.

(p. 73)

Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy

Between human beings and the world;

A person is merely in the world, not with the world

Or with others;

The individual is spectator, not re-creator. (p. 75)

Whereas in education as a critical practice of liberation,

The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical

Co-investigators of the world with the teacher in dialogue. (p. 81)

A Poem About Paulo

Finding the poetic soul in Freire's work feeds the poetic core of others. In this case, Budd Hall wrote this poem in an attempt to find a way to share something deeper than just the text of Freire's books.

Surf On Pauliño²

by Budd L. Hall

Lire les mots

Lire les textes

Lire les vies

Lire le monde

Lire nos coeurs

I mean picture this

600 street-wise American and Canadian activists

Assembled in the conference hall of the New School of Social

Research in New York City

Where in 1932 the first North American meeting of the Workers

Education Association was held

A birthday conference for Paulo Freire, the most influential

Educational thinker of the 20th century

Academics jammed in next to homeless organizers who are

Jammed in next to Lady Garment Workers who are

Jammed in next to the Puerto Rican Independence underground who are

Jammed in next to kindergarten teachers who are

Jammed in next to high school students who are

Waiting to hear from Paulo Freire

And Paulo, 70 years old, who has come to town to help us all

Celebrate ourselves through him, stands up behind a table on the

Stage

"I'd like to tell you,"

Paulo says in his quiet gentle voice,

2 Previously published in "A Northeastern Brazilian Storm: Memories of Paulo Freire," *Concept*, 9 no. 3 (Winter 2018), pp. 26–30.

“About the best gift that I have had for my birthday.
I received it from a young boy in Recife, in Northeast Brazil where
I was born.
He gave me the gift of a picture which he had drawn himself
A picture of the crashing Atlantic coastal waves
And in the picture was a man riding on what I think is called a
Surf board.
And on top of the board, riding the waves, was an old man with a
white beard and glasses.
That old man was me. It was a picture of me.
And my young friend had written words beneath this picture in his
own handwriting.
He told me ‘Surf On Pauliño’
Surf on little Paul
“And,” Paulo said with a smile that reached out to the entire hall,
“I intend to do just that.”

For Paulo was a transcendent rider of the waves
Waves of respect for the oppressed people of this planet
Waves of intellectual curiosity; lover of words
Waves of exile and loneliness in Chile, Geneva and Africa
Waves of love for his children, his dear Elsa who died before him
Waves of love for the final love of his life, his widow Nita.
And waves of love for his friends in such places as Guinea-Bissau,
Cuba, India, Fiji, France and, yes, for us in Canada.

For if he was a teacher
For if he was an activist
For if he was a writer
For if he was a teller of stories
He was above all a person in the great and ancient tradition of
Brazilian mystics
More than a teacher
More than an activist
More than a writer
More than the teller of stories

He carried with him a warm breeze of historic possibility
 He carried with him the memories of many struggles
 He carried with him vulnerability and need
 He carried with him opportunities for friendship
 He carried with him the new eyes of the young
 He carried with him revolutionary agency
 He carried with him his hand for ours
 He carried with him the electric atmosphere of a Northeastern
 Brazilian Storm

Paulo often apologized for his ways of speaking languages other
 Than his beloved Portuguese
 And yet he held audiences at hushed attention when he spoke in
 English, French or Spanish in every corner of the world
 He found ways through his distinct ways of speaking English and
 French and other languages to draw us in to his speech
 To draw us in to himself
 So much did he seem to need us, his audience, that we hung on his
 Every word and we helped him to reach out to ourselves

So that in the end
 we were his text
 We were his words
 He was our text
 He was our words

Lire les mots
 Lire les textes
 Lire les vies
 Lire le monde
 Lire nos coeurs

Pauliño, surf on

Closing Reflections

The sharing of these ideas of Paulo and poetry has been a lovely way of reconnecting. We have known each other more than 45 years, have all led lives where we built our work in community development, international development, environmental justice, trade union education, and knowledge democracy, doing the best we can to keep our hearts open to imagining a world that can be better and contributing with our skills and networks, however limited, in a poetic spirit that we each have felt though our engagement with Paulo and his ideas.

Deborah Barndt reminded us in our conversation of the concept that Orlando Fals Borda (2009), the Colombian activist scholar of Freire's generation, taught us: that of being or becoming *sentipensante*, a feeling thinker. Transformative learning and knowledge for a better world are created when we do not attempt to separate our emotions, our feelings, and our affective lives from our thinking or cognitive lives. *Sentipensar* is a way of living that allows the heart and the mind to jointly construct the world. Perhaps it is this quality of Freire's work, work of the *sentipensante*, and his poetic ways of being in the world that lie at the secret of the lasting legacy of our very great friend.

We close our eyes and hear Paulo speaking with his poetry

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