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ABSTRACT

For Paulo Freire, a democratic education could not be conceived without a profound commitment to humanity and a recognition of the dialectical relationship between cultural existence as individuals and political and economic existence as social beings. Freire believed that to solve the educational difficulties of students from oppressed communities, educators have to look beyond the personal to the historic realm of economic, social, and political forms. To embrace a pedagogy of freedom, Freire further believed, educators need to see how the domesticating power of the dominant ideology causes teachers to become ambiguous and indecisive in the face of injustice. Critical educators need to struggle against punitive and threatening methods used within schools to instill a fear of freedom. In his writings, in his work with the illiterate in Brazil and elsewhere, and in his own life, Freire possessed an unwavering faith in the oppressed, and he identified this respect for and commitment to the oppressed as an essential ingredient for the cultivation of democratic schooling. (SLD)

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TEACHING AS AN ACT OF LOVE

In Memory of Paulo Freire

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For days, I have reflected on Paulo Freire's life. And with every turn of ideas, I'm brought back to the notion of love. But, let me quickly say that I am neither speaking of a romanticized or liberal notion of love nor the long-suffering and self-effacing variety. For nothing could be further from the truth. If there was anything that Paulo consistently sought to defend, it was the freshness, spontaneity, and presence embodied in what he called an "armed loved—the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce."[1] A love that could be lively, forceful, and inspiring, while at the same time, critical, challenging, and insistent. As such,Paulo's brand of love stood in direct opposition to the insipid "generosity" of teachers or administrators who would blindly adhere to a system of schooling that fundamentally transgresses every principle of cultural and economic democracy.

Instead, I want to speak of the love I came to know through my work and friendship with Paulo---a political and radicalized form of love that was never tied to absolute consensus, or unconditional acceptance. Instead, it was a love that I experienced as unconstricted, rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with an emancipatory purpose and to intimately connect that purpose with what he called our "true vocation"—to be human.

Hence for Paulo a democratic education could never be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity---a humanity that was not merely some psychologized notion of "positive self-esteem," but rather a deeply reflective interpretation of the dialectical relationship between our cultural existence as individuals and our political and economic existence as social beings. From Paulo's perspective, if we were to solve the educational difficulties of students from oppressed communities, then educators had to look beyond the personal. We had to look for answers within the historical realm of economic, social, and political forms, so that we might better understand those forces that give rise to our humanity as it currently exists. In so many

ways, Paulo bore witness to the dehumanizing consequences of injustice. In the tradition of Antonio Gramsci, Paulo exposed how even well-meaning teachers, through their lack of critical moral leadership, actually participate in disabling the heart, minds, and bodies of their students—an act that disconnects these students from the personal and social motivation required to transform their world and themselves.

There is no question that Paulo's greatest gift to the world was his capacity to be a loving human being. His regard for children, his concern for teachers, his work among the poor, his willingness to share openly his moments of grief, disappointment, frustration, and new love, all stand out in my mind as examples of his courage and unrelenting pursuit of a coherent and honest life. I recall our meeting in 1987, six months after the death of his first wife, Elza. Paulo was in deep grief. During one of his presentations, he literally had to stop so that he could weep the tears that he had been holding back all morning. For a moment, we were enveloped by his grief. I don't believe anyone left the conference hall that day, as they had arrived. Through the courageous vulnerability of his humanity—with all its complexities and contradictions—Paulo illuminated our understanding of not only what it means to be a critical educator, but what it means to live a critical life.

The next year, I was to experience another aspect of Paulo's living praxis. To everyone's surprise, Paulo remarried. Many were stunned by the news of his marriage, while his public gestures of affection and celebration of his new wife Nita were met with a mix of suspicion and fear. Despite these reverberations, Paulo spoke freely of his new love and the sensations that now stirred in him. He shared his struggle with loneliness and grief, challenging us to *live and love* in the present—as much personally as politically.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,*[2] Paulo wrote about the *fear of freedom* that afflicts us, a fear predicated on prescriptive relationships. As critical educators, he urged us to question carefully our ideological beliefs and pedagogical intentions; and to take note of our own adherence to prescription. He wanted us to recognize that every *prescribed behavior* represents the imposition of one human being upon another—an imposition that moves our consciousness away from what we experience in the flesh to false abstractions of our ourselves and our world. If we were to embrace a pedagogy of liberation, we had to prepare ourselves to replace the conditioned fear of freedom with sufficient autonomy and responsibility to struggle for a way of life that could support revolutionary dreams.

In Paulo's eyes, fear and revolutionary dreams were unquestionably linked. The more that we were willing to struggle for these dreams, the more apt we were to know intimately the experience of fear; but also how to control and educate our fear, and finally, how to transform that fear into courage. Moreover, we could come to recognize our fear as a signal that we are engaged in critical opposition and transformative work to bring to life our revolutionary dreams.

In many ways, Paulo's life showed us that facing our fears and contending with our suffering are inevitable and necessary in our quest to make and remake a new world. Often, he likened our movement toward greater humanity to *childbirth, and a painful one*. For Paulo this *labor of love* constituted a critical process in our struggle to break the *oppressor-oppressed* duality and the conflicting beliefs that incarcerate our humanity.

Paulo firmly believed that to embrace a pedagogy of freedom, we had to step out of this duality. We had to come to see how the domesticating power of the dominant ideology causes teachers to become ambiguous and indecisive, even in the face of blatant injustice. Critical educators had to struggle together against a variety of punitive and threatening methods used

within schools to instill a fear of freedom. For if this domestication was not rejected, even progressive teachers could fall prey to *fatalism*—making them each day more politically vulnerable and less able to face the challenges before them.

Throughout his life, Paulo adamantly denounced fatalism. At every turn, he emphatically rejected the idea that nothing could be done to halt the consequences of social injustice. If the economic and political power of the ruling class denied subordinate populations the space to survive, it was not because "it should be that way."[3] Instead, the asymmetrical relations of power that fuel fatalism had to be challenged. This required teachers to problematize the conditions of schooling with their colleagues, students, and parents, and through a critical praxis of reflection, dialogue, and action, become capable of *announcing justice.*

In defining issues of justice, questions of culture and power were tied to class—a dimension of Paulo's work that is often negated or simply ignored by many who embrace his ideas. Nevertheless, when Paulo spoke of the *ruling class* or the *oppressors*, he was referring to historical class distinctions and class conflict within the structure of capitalist society—capitalism was (and is) the root of domination. As such, his theoretical analysis was fundamentally rooted in notions of class formation, particularly with respect to how the national political economy relegated the greater majority of its workers to an exploited and marginalized class. However, for Paulo, the struggle against economic domination could not be waged effectively without a humanizing praxis that could both engage the complex phenomenon of class struggle and effectively foster the conditions for critical social agency.

Although heavily criticized on the left for his failure to provide a more systematic theoretical argument against capitalism, Paulo 's work never retreated from a critique of capitalism and a recognition of capitalist logic as the primary totalizing force in the world. This is

to say that he firmly believed that the phenomenon of cultural invasion worldwide was fundamentally driven by economic imperatives. During my early years as a critical educator, I, like so many, failed to adequately comprehend and incorporate this essential dimension of Paulo 's work. For critical educators of color in the United States, we saw racism as the major culprit of our oppression and insisted that Paulo engage this issue more substantively. Although he openly acknowledged the existence of racism, he was reticent to abandon the notion of class struggle and often warned us against losing sight of the manner in "which the class factor is hidden within both sexual and racial discrimination."[4] Our dialogues were often lively and intense, for in many ways, Paulo questioned the limits of cultural nationalism and our blind faith in a politics of identity. When educators of color called for separate dialogues with him, Paulo told us that he could not understand why we insisted in dividing ourselves. With true angst, he explained: "I cannot perceive in my mind how Blacks in America can be liberated without Chicanos being liberated, or how Chicanos can be liberated without Native Americans being liberated, or Native Americans liberated without Whites being liberated." Paulo insisted that the struggle against oppression was a human struggle in which we had to build solidarity across our differences, if we were to change a world engulfed by capitalism.

Paulo deeply believed this the rebuilding of multiethnic solidarity among educators was a vital and necessary radical objective, for such solidarity moved against the grain of "capitalism's intrinsic perversity, its anti-solidarity nature."[5] Throughout his writings, Paulo warned us repeatedly against sectarianism. "Sectarianism in any quarter is an obstacle to the emancipation of [human]kind."[6] "While fighting for my dream, I must not become passionately closed within myself."[7] (Freire, 1998, p. 88). In many instances, he linked our ability to create solidarity with our capacity for *tolerance*.

At a critical scholars' conference in Boston during the summer of 1991, I came face to face with Paulo's profound belief in the political necessity for tolerance. The meetings had been quite intense, particularly with respect to the concerns of feminist scholars within the field. In my frustration, I stood up and fired away at one of the participants. This same frustration also fueled my critique of academic notions of multiculturalism the following day. In response, Paulo besieged me to be more tolerant in the future. With great political fervor, I rejected his position, making the case for greater *intolerance* to oppression and social injustice! For years, I licked my wounds over being *scolded* in public by Paulo. But in retrospect, I must confess that I recognize the wisdom in his advise. Despite my undeniable political commitment, I was lacking the virtue of revolutionary tolerance—the wisdom of being able to struggle with [reconcilable political differences], "so as to be able to fight the common enemy."[8]

It is significant to note, that just as we all face political differences among ourselves, Paulo, too, had to deal with his share of conflicts. In 1964, after launching the most successful national literacy campaign Brazil had ever known, he was imprisoned and exiled for almost 16 years. But despite the pain and hardships he and his family experienced, Paulo's work as an educator and cultural worker continued unabated. And although Paulo would speak openly of the pain and suffering he endured in exile, he refused to reduce his life to grieving alone. "I do not live only in the past. Rather, I exist in the present, where I prepare myself for the possible."[9]

As Paulo's work became more prominent within the United States, he also grappled with a variety of issues that both challenged and concerned him. For almost three decades, feminists across the country fiercely critiqued the sexism of his language. In some arenas, Marxist scholars criticized him brutally. To the dismay of many scholars, educators, and organizers of color, Paulo seldom engaged with much depth and specificity, the perverse nature of racism and its particular

historical formations within the United States. Nor did he readily accept the identity politics of the Chicano movement and its emphasis on a mythological homeland, Atzlan. Paulo also questioned the uncompromising resistance (or refusal) of many radical educators of color to assume the national identity of "American"—an act that he believed fundamentally weakened our political position and limited our material struggle for social and economic justice. Beyond these issues, he also harbored serious concerns over what he perceived as the splintered nature of the critical pedagogy movement in the United States. Yet, most of these issues were seldom discussed substantively in public, but rather were the subject of private dialogues and solitary reflections.

Nevertheless, it is a real tribute to Paulo, that in *Pedagogy of the Heart* written shortly before his death, he showed signs of change and deepening in his views on these issues. For example, the language in the book finally reflected an inclusiveness of women when making general references, which had been missing in his earlier writings. He spoke to the issue of capitalism more boldly than ever before and considered the nature of globalization and its meaning for radical educators. Paulo also addressed issues of diversity and racism, acknowledging that although we cannot overlook class in formulating our understanding of different kinds of discrimination, neither can we "reduce all prejudice to a [class] explanation." [10] And more forcefully than ever, he spoke to the necessity of moving beyond our reconcilable differences so that we might forge an effective attack against the wiles of advanced capitalism in the world.

I share these examples with you, not to diminish the memory of Paulo's work, but rather to remember his totality as a human being. Beyond the conflicts and contradictions he faced, Paulo had an expansive ability for sustained reflection, inquiry, and dialogue and an enviable

capacity to reconstruct and *begin always anew*. I'm convinced that this quality served as the foundation for his unrelenting search for freedom and his unwavering hope. In the tradition of Marx, he believed that we both make and are made by history and thus, knowledge could not be divorced from historical continuity. Like us, he would explain, "history is a process of being limited and conditioned by the knowledge that we produce. Nothing that we engender, live, think, and make explicit takes place outside of time and history."[11] And as such, educators had to recognize that "it was when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated."[12]

Moreover, Paulo was convinced that this historical process needed to take place within schools and communities, anchored in sustaining relationships of solidarity. Paulo urged critical educators to build communities of solidarity---networks to help us problematize the debilitating conditions of globalized economic inequality and confront the devastating impact of neoliberal social policies on the world's population. He saw these critical networks directly linked to the practice of democracy and an expanded notion of citizenship. Paulo urged us to strive *for intimacy with democracy*, living actively with democratic principles and deepening them, so they would come to have real meaning in our everyday life. Inherent to this politic is a form of citizenship that could not be obtained by chance. Such citizenship required that we fight to obtain it---a fight that required *commitment, political clarity, coherence, and decision.*

Paulo possessed an unwavering *faith in the oppressed.* As he saw the gap widening between the rich and the poor everywhere, he would argue that "Never has there been a deeper need for progressive men and women...to give testimony of their respect for the people."[13] Paulo consistently identified this respect for and commitment to the oppressed as an essential ingredient to the cultivation of democratic schooling. This implied a critical posture, as well as a

preoccupation with the meanings that students used to mediate their world. He believed it was impossible to teach without educators knowing what took place in their students' world. Teachers "need to know the universe of their [student's] dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it." [14]

In *Teacher as Cultural Workers*: *letters to those who dare to teach*, Paulo argued passionately that teaching was a task that required a love for the very act of teaching; for only through such love could the political project of schooling become transformative and liberating. Hence, it could never be enough to teach only with critical reason. Instead, Paulo fervently argued that we must dare to do all things with feeling, dreams, wishes, fear, doubts, and passion.

Paulo Freire was an exquisite human being. He placed great faith in our ability to live joyfully, despite the multitude of external forces that constantly challenge our humanity. *Living with joy* personifies for me the ultimate purpose of both Paulo's work and life. In retrospect, I am filled with wonderful memories—the beauty of his language, the twinkle in his eyes, his thoughtful and respectful manner, the movement of his hands when he spoke, his lively enthusiasm when contemplating new ideas, and his candid expressions of love and gratitude. In his words and his deeds, Paulo persistently invited us to fully embrace the dignity, beauty, and power of a revolutionary life.

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[1] Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach.* (Colorado: Westview), p.42.
[2] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury.
[3] Freire, P. (1997) *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum) p.41.
[4] Ibid. p.86.
[5] Freire, P. (1998) op.cit. p.88.
[6] Freire, P. (1970) op.cit. p.22.
[7] Freire, P. (1998) ibid.
[8] Freire, P. and Faudez, A. (1989) *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (New York: Continuum) p.18.
[9] Freire, P. (1998) op.cit. p.67.
[10] Freire, P. (1997) op.cit. p.86.

[11] Freire, P. (1998) op.cit. p.32.
[12] Freire, P. (1970) op.cit. p.125.
[13] Freire, P. (1997) op.cit. p.84.
[14] Freire, P. (1998) op.cit. p.73.

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