

Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work (1996)

by Paulo Freire

Letters to Cristina is a type of chronicle of Paulo Freire's life. It especially highlights his childhood and youth, but also includes some of his adulthood's experiences which illuminated his thought and practice as philosopher and critical educator. The book introduces the roots of the critical and reflexive features that would later characterize Freire's work and pedagogical rationale.

In the introduction, Freire talks about his experiences during his fifteen years exile in Chile, the United States and Switzerland. This exilic period was marked by a frequent exchange of letters with friends, students, teachers and family. In the early 1970s, he received the first of many letters from his niece, Cristina, who was curious about his life in Geneva. For years, Cristina continued writing to her uncle in order to satisfy her lively curiosity about his life and work. One day, Freire received a letter from her stating: "I would like for you to write me letters about your life, your childhood and, little by little, about the trajectory that led you to become the educator you are now" (11).

Letters to Cristina is, literally, the response to his niece's request, a pending family debt that results in a thorough reflection of his life and work. The first letters are written in a literary style that resembles the autobiographical novel. Having to (re)think and (re)write his life at seventy-two suggest that the narrative combines early memories that can possibly be read as fictional elements with real characters and historical moments of Brazil. The Freirean narrative uses literary tropes such as icons and metaphors to represent and analyze both the problems of Northeast Brazil, as well as particular issues about authority and domination that marked his life; the Lourde's German piano, his father's neckties, the theft of the papaya, and "Mr." Armada exemplify some of these tropes/images. In the notes to book's foreword, Araujo emphasizes that through the use of these literary tropes/images "to talk about the experiences and frustrated dreams of the people, Paulo talks about distinct facets of Brazilian reality: the lack of hope, the presence of oppression, authoritarianism, exploitation, and domination, the dreams of what is possible, hunger, unemployment; and finally the deprivation of the many and the opulence of the few" (192).

Letters to Cristina constitutes a collection of memories, a text of reminiscence. Freire organized his observations in files and (re)collected data from his remembrances by placing his life in the Brazilian historical context. This anecdotal narrative is not only a look back of recognition, but also a recollection of people and experiences that marked his life: his first teachers, the tree of Recife's house, the big clock in the living room, and the move to Jaboatao, among others. Sometimes the narrative might seem melancholic; but, at the same time, Freire makes it clear he has attempted to take a step back from everything in order to try to be more objective (14).

The book makes visible the development of Freire, the educator. The concreteness of his experiences, such as his life in Recife and Jaboatao, provides an understanding of Freire's approach both to a body of assumptions and apprehension of the world. Through these letters, readers can explore the genesis of his epistemological curiosity, the dialectic understanding of reality, the inclination toward justice, his ethical position as human being and educator rooted in a democratic sense. These letters make recognizable Freire's positions in terms of "how I think, how I always subject my practice to theoretical reflection, how, without martyring or punishing myself, I consistently try to shorten the distance between what I say and what I do" (143). The contemplative introspection, the retrospective search and the reflexive dialogue that characterize this work, provide an insightful understanding and a better comprehension of Freire's thoughts and the evolution of his epistemological and political positions.

Review by Laura Lopez-Torres, associate professor at UCLA.