

Episode 30: An Interview with Ira Shor

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Cue music: "Absurdus Rex" by Jovian Year

BK: You're listening to *This Rhetorical Life*, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Hi all - it's Ben - and I'm introducing a two-part interview with Ira Shor, the well-known teacher and writer, proponent of critical pedagogy, and collaborator with Paulo Freire.

Yanira Rodriguez, Tamara Issak, and I met Shor at his home in Monclair, New Jersey.

Ira's son, Paulo, introduced us to his Zebra Finches, who appear in the background of this recording.

In part one of our interview, Shor tells us about growing up in the Bronx, his early experiences of education, joining social movements, practicing critical pedagogy, and his first encounters and early collaboration with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Before we run the tape, I need to make a note about the editing. We could have easily cut the two-hour conversation down to a 30 minute or one hour interview on critical pedagogy and Shor. But we're giving you the whole thing, with very few edits from the original conversation. Shor is a story teller, and we get him talking about the process of making a "talking book" with Freire, a book that became *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, down to the process of recording, transcription, and translation. The conversation opens up a variety of sub-themes that we hope people in the field will use and benefit from, for example, in thinking about how to collaborate on a book between languages and social contexts.

Or if we edited down elsewhere you would miss an interesting story about Freire and race that doesn't necessarily tie into themes raised in part one of the interview, but that gives an insight that is perhaps not available elsewhere.

We hope you enjoy it, and check back next week for part two where we talk about social movements, political possibilities, and the current state of higher education.

Here we go with part one with Yanira asking the first question about Shor's background.

YR: So, I guess this is a little bit of a self-interested question, since I also grew up in the Bronx, born there in the '70s, grew up there in the '80s. So, just wanting to hear from you about growing up in the South Bronx, and kind of how that ended up influencing your path.

IS: The South Bronx that I grew up in was all white and almost entirely Jewish, the neighbors that I grew up with in Brooklyn Boulevard. And we went to public schools—the public schools were pretty mediocre and I found it fairly easy to just do the work, but I did get into trouble until the 5th grade because I was very bored in schools, so my mother had to continually come to school because the teachers were unhappy with me. And, so, that got more and more intense until I finally had to just keep quiet in the 6th grade and swallow my boredom. I think all the kids were bored and the schooling was not interesting enough for children. So, then I got into the Bronx High School of Science, when I was about 13, and that changed anything 'cause I finally got into a school that was very demanding, very high-powered, where the kids who had been going to the private high schools in New York City went, because after they went from K8 to private school, then getting into the Bronx High School of Science at that time, that was the best public school in the country, and their parents wanted them to go there for free. So somehow I managed to join them and I discovered what it was like to sit next to a teenager from an affluent family, and how they dressed, and they had good complexions and I wondered how that happened, 'cause nobody I grew up with had a nice complexion—they all had nice teeth, I had terrible teeth, all my friends had terrible teeth; I wore my brother's clothes, the hand-me-downs, they had their own clothes; so, it was like a very sudden contact with class differences because the schools I went to in the neighborhood, we were all from the same social class. It was an education for me but it also caused me a lot of – I don't know... doubt; anxiety about who I was and I began to feel insecure that I was ugly, badly dressed, that I smelled bad, that my hair was too oily, that my skin was too pimply, my teeth were too cracked, and so on. So that took a while.

But then I decided to leave home and I went to the University of Michigan and I just really enjoyed being away from the Bronx, which I found—not, um—there was no one—I never—when I was a boy, I was expected to become like a college graduate and an MD, and I never met anyone who went to college when I was growing up. Nobody in my neighborhood went to college. My father dropped out of school in the 8th grade. My mother just managed to finish high school. So I felt kind of adrift at sea, you know, I didn't know how to fashion myself, or what does it mean to have this goal, and what to do. And my parents couldn't afford books, there were no books in the house. The only thing they decided to buy were these *World Book Encyclopedia*, and when I was about 12-13 they acquired it; it was the only thing to read in the house, so I read through *World Book Encyclopedia* A to Z twice. I just loved it, I buried myself in it, and so I began to think that knowledge was just the accumulation of facts alphabetically, and so I thought that's how you become smart: you start with A and everything in the world that starts with A to B to C to D, and that if you memorize everything up to Z, that then you were

going places—very strange experience. Then I went off to Michigan, and things changed a lot there 'cause it was very far away.

BK: So, following up from that, kind of, childhood experiences where you were curious about where were you at and to, just, who were you as a person when you discovered critical pedagogy when that became your vocation and your path.

IS: Yes, so, the anti-war movement began when I was about 19-years-old and it spread pretty quickly around the nation. Being an undergraduate at Michigan, I was very drawn to the protests, whatever protests were being raised. And I can't even remember why I felt that, somehow, things were not right and that we had to speak up about them and whatever. So, I started going around 1965 to all kinds of protest and then I, as I mentioned earlier to you folks, I did run across Mario Savio, who was the, you know, iconic leader of the free speech movement at Berkeley in 1964, December; he came to University of Michigan Ann Arbor, March of '65, and gave a talk on the Quadrangle and hundreds of students came, and I thought he was wonderfully articulate, I wanted to be as smart as him, I wanted to be as articulate as him; he looked very handsome, I wanted to be handsome, and so on. So he became one of my heroes there, because of his ability to articulate so clearly what was going on. Then, at Michigan, the first teach-in against the war in the world took place in March of 1965. It was an all-night, 12-hour teach-in, and so I happened to be on a campus that had an historic moment. And teach-ins began to follow all around the nation, after the one in Ann Arbor, 1965. So, it was a very exciting time to be young and I suddenly found myself in protest meetings with my professors, which created a whole different relationship with the teacher than attending a class; and I really enjoyed being in a room on this sort of like-um--with them, for some other project, that we had something in common besides the hierarchy of teacher and student. I found that exciting, and I was just determined that I wanted to become as smart as all the people who were talking up there, and they all seemed so well-informed, and so *confident* in how the world worked, and what was going on and I thought: “boy, I had no idea that this knowledge was available,” and I had to go out and find it and figure it out. So I just kept getting more involved, and by the time I got to graduate school it was constant—I particularly picked going to Madison because it had an active anti-war movement at that time in 1966. When I got out there, I immediately looked for different groups, to join SDS and different anti-war groups, and different student power groups and so on. And Madison was like non-stop protests for years—year after year, after year—it was a wonderful place and a wonderful time to be young, and interested in changing the world, and questioning the status quo; 'cause so many people your age were doing it with you, and—fortunately—there were graduates who were older than me, who were smarter and much, much cleverer at making sense out of what was going on, so I was lucky to have been mentored by a few graduate students then, who I hung out with, and I could listen to the way they talked about things and that helped me move ahead.

When it came to critical pedagogy, I became very active in the English PhD program; we had a graduate student group there, and then I became very active in the teaching assistant association: two projects that were underway then, both of which were treated with great hostility by the English Department administration. So, I went to meetings in the English department and kept raising questions and challenging the chair, and then I was asked to organize the union election for the Teaching Assistant Association in 1969, to certify the union as the sole representative, so I took on that task, went around all departments, got familiar with all the folks in different departments, and we won that election. So that was a big celebration. And then we began negotiating with the university for a contract and they offered really terrible terms, so we rejected the contract, and then we planned for a strike in the spring of 1970, and I was asked to be the marshal of the picket lines; that is, I was supposed to go around to all the doors where the picket lines were and follow the chief of police as he went around to make sure that the police were not provoking any incidents, and to also be the official witness of the TAA—the Teaching Assistant Association—in case anybody was arrested and came to court, my job was to take notes and observe and testify in court, and so on. So, we went on strike for about 5 and 1/2 weeks, and that was a very important episode. We formed then the first graduate student union in America, it was the Teaching Assistant Association and we finally negotiated our first contract and so on. It was a very big education for me. I happened to work with graduate student who I thought were extremely responsible and reliable, and for one of the few times I felt I was part of an organization that you really could count on everybody doing his or her job. That whoever had to do something, they showed up and they got it done—on time. And nobody was trying to push anybody around, or take anybody over, and we actually had a collaborative decision-making and I thought this was wonderful! And I looked forward to, “we gotta do more of it.”

But then what happened? Everybody graduates, and when you graduate—this is what's so unstable about graduate school, everybody graduates and we disperse, you know, all over the universe. That's very disorienting. So after we had accomplished a few things in graduate school, we all wound up in different places. And, in a sense, we took our experiences with us—my problem when I arrived at Staten Island Community College in 1971 is that I felt like I was all alone; I mean, I didn't know anybody there, and, in a way we had to start all over again to figure out this new scene. So there was a really, very difficult lack of continuity that constantly posed problems for us.

BK: Can you talk a bit about starting at Staten Island Community College and your early teaching methods and how that developed?

IS: So when I got to Staten Island College and found myself an assistant professor, and no longer a graduate student, and no longer with the group of comrades, or colleagues, or associates who had spent years together doing this or that, I had to start all over again. And I also had to be a *teacher*. And I encountered working-class white students who were always the least welcome cohort—the working class was always the least welcome

cohort in higher education. These were always the C students in high school who typically before had not gone on to college, they were the first-generation in their families to go to college. So I began teaching for them, teaching freshman comp, which now is called first-year writing, and I was teaching different media courses, and so on. And, I was a very traditional teacher when we started. I thought that what these students never got was good grammar, and I went and I studied grammar books, and I was going to now teach grammar—item by item until they never put a dangling participle on the page again. But, you know, the students were so wonderful, they were so generous. I was totally confused, and totally boring, and they put up with me. I still don't know why they put up with me: maybe because I wasn't much older than them, maybe because I dressed like them, maybe because my Bronx accent was so typically urban working class, like theirs was, and maybe because I brought cookies to class, maybe because I lent them money when they were broke—I don't know. But whatever happened was that they seemed happy to be there even though I was blundering from thing to thing. But I couldn't fool myself and I had to say, “look, I'm really happy to be here,” I was talking to myself in the mirror, “I'm really happy to be here but I don't think anything is working. I don't think this is serious—I don't think I'm delivering a serious education!” so I had to start all over again, and think like, “what does it mean to be an English teacher for working class students who so far have received the worst education available in America?” So I wasn't sure what the answer was—because I hadn't studied education, but I had an intuition that I had to study my own development first; that I had to say, “you began in the working class,” I said to myself, “you began in the white working-class, like they are in now, and you began speaking non-standard dialect like they did, and you did not understand academic discourse and how to write, and you were awkward like they are in the college setting, and you had no table manners, you chewed with your mouth open and so on, and so on, and that you fit right in. So, what are you doing now? How did you become different? And why did you make a decision to question the status quo and join opposition movements and start opposition movements and to raise hell wherever possible? How did that happen to you?” So I first began to study myself: my intellectual development, my political development, my cognitive development, and so on, and how I got to this place I was in. And I started looking at my thinking and drawing diagrams about the way I thought—how I thought about the world. And then I tried to figure out cognitive structures of how my head worked on problems in the world, and then I said, “alright, let me take this cognitive structure—these diagrams to class and see how it works.” If you look at my first book that I finished in 1979 called *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, you'll see that I put in there the first diagrams I came up with, that represent to me how I learned to think critically about the world, and so on. And I began using them in class, and presenting them to the students, and asking them to test this activity, test that activity, and I was very surprised because—they liked *doing* it! I was so *amazed*! It made sense to them, it gave them a way of working in the classroom, where I didn't have to lecture all the time, I put up a diagram and the diagram indicated like a sequence of activities that they undertook. Then they began giving different names to the diagram, I gave my name, and then one of them was suggest—one of them eventually

suggested, as I write in the book, that we call my diagrams “the open donut,” 'cause it was a three-sided structure—I didn’t even remember what I called it, but once he suggested it, I decided open donut was it. Anyhow, that's how I got started in what, I think, we call critical literacy, or critical pedagogy, or critical teaching. I started by examining, as carefully as I could, my own development to the point where I became, like a radical version of a working-class kid—a white working class kid, and now I was teaching in classrooms full of a working-class kids who were not radical, and what did that mean, and so, that's what my first book *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* recorded: that first contact with developing critical teaching methods.

TI: So, first I want you to set the record straight for how to pronounce Paulo's last name [chuckles]

IS: Ok, Paulo's last name is [phonetically] pronounced Fre-ri, and, you know, it's difficult for Anglo speakers but I always comically advice people--'cause I travel to Staten Island Ferry a lot—take the word "ferry" and just an add an r after the f; you'll get the Freiri. And, that's fine: Freiri

TI: So I was wondering if you could describe your first time, or when you first met Paulo Freire and his work.

IS: Yes! So, I was working at Staten Island Community College and getting more and more interested in what it meant to—I began to use a very critical, the words critical literacy: what does it mean to develop critical literacy among—mostly white working-class students who come from a very conservative background? And so, I was testing this method and other methods that I mention and how to use different themes. And I began to stop using textbooks and literature books and I started using materials that were very close to the experiences of everyday life that the students had. I somehow intuited that I had to study their culture, their language, and the way they saw the world, as the material for the syllabus. So I began to bring in different items from Staten Island, from New York City and so on, and to pose them in the classroom, but not lecture them. I would present a situation and ask students to write about it and then have a discussion about it, and then I would talk into the discussion, so I was starting to test what is known as a problem-posing dialogic method; that is, problem-posing because instead of delivering a lecture in some material, I pose a problem that's legible, and meaningful to the students, based in the language and the conditions that are meaningful to them. And then, as that conversation develops, I enter the conversation as it precedes and pose more questions to pull it forward—this is what I found myself intuiting, year-by-year as I tested it. So I began to pose problems about: “ok, who's working? Where? What jobs do you work at?” and then I'd pose questions about: “ok, when you go out dating, what happens?” And, “your family has different rules for the boys dating in the family, than for the girls dating in the family. And, where do folks live? What about transportation? How do you get around?” So, I began to pose these questions about their everyday experience from which

we started to develop texts. And then I began to pose what Pierre Bordieu discovered, later on, called “possible-possibles”; that is, what if I pose a question of something that was just one step outside the student experience? For example, that time the Gay Liberation Movement was very powerful in Manhattan, and ‘cause we had the Stonewall Riots in the June of ‘69, and a Gay Activist Alliance and a Gay Liberation Front starting in New York and two key figures of this happened to be on the department, on the English Department of Staten Island, my colleagues, and one of them became my best friend that I traveled around a lot with and I became friends the other, any-how, so I was just drawn into now posing, into trying to test themes that were not exactly situated in the everyday experience but posed problematic possibilities to the students. Like, for example, [...] the firing of a homosexual teacher in a middle school. So I decided to run a remedial writing curriculum based on that theme of should we, should we, expel gay teachers from our middle school. I asked the students there to study the issue and then to write a script that we would then videotape—we had a small TV studio at the college, and they would write the script, and we would put a homosexual teacher on trial in the script. Now remember this is not happening in their everyday life, so you know, my development year by year was to test new directions. I first started with figuring out how they spoke about things, and what they were talking about in everyday life, then I began to pose their themes as problems and test how far we could go with that, then to move one step out of their concrete experience and pose things just outside as problems, and so on.

And this class of all white guys, mostly from Brooklyn and Staten Island, agreed to make this TV show with me. And I invited my best friend who was a gay activist, I invited him to come and play the homosexual teacher who would be put on trial. And it was a very raw, and very aggressive, exchange that we had because some of the male students are very hostile, very homophobic. Some were very tolerant. And they eventually just, they wrote the script, but then they abandoned the script and just started arguing with each other on tape, on TV. And I had no idea – of course me, I’m like the utopian, I had scripted it that my gay teacher was not fired and kept. That was, that was the end that I wanted the script to show – they abandoned the script and as we kept yelling at each other I had no idea how this was going to end and I thought am I gonna make a homophobic document here that’s gonna travel around and I thought that they might vote to fire the guy! So I just sat there and I wasn’t sure what to say and they argued and argued around and then I said, “Ok, time to vote” and the—the—my friend who was playing the teacher, he survived by one or two votes and he wasn’t fired and I was so relieved; I breathed so deeply, that we were able to produce this video document and he wasn’t fired.

So anyhow, that’s sort of like, what went on in those early years, these, blundering in this direction or testing this option with, with trying to draw students out in the longest critical utterances possible about what things mean and how we should think about this in the world or that in the world. But not substituting the way I think about the world for the

way they think about the world, but joining them in a very prolonged inquiry into problems that made sense to them, but for which we all had different opinions and seeing, where did such a conversation go?

Now, as that conversation went on went on, some other, another friend of mine on the faculty said “you know,” after I was doing this about two or three years, he says “you know what you’re trying to do, there’s this guy in Brazil named Paulo Freire, and he wrote a book about it. You should read it.” So I said, “what’s the book and he says the book is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. So a couple years in I bought the book and I started reading it and I said “Yes! That’s right.” This guy has some of the similar directions. So I had been moving in this direction of what I call critical literacy or critical pedagogy. And Paulo Freire of course, was way ahead, he had been doing it—that was around 1970s, he’d been doing it for over twenty years. So then I began studying his work in earnest and used it as a foundation for writing my first book *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*.

Now, I also was traveling around the country doing workshops with teachers and giving talks at the end of the ‘70s, and I was invited by a community college graduate program at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor in 1981, I think it was, to give a talk and run some workshops for community college teachers coming back to get a new degree that was called the doctor of arts, the DA degree. They were not required to write dissertations but they were going to do a lot of research. I came and I spent a few days out there with them, had a wonderful time, and stayed in touch with some folks. Then about a year or so later someone writes me that they handed Paulo Freire a copy of my first book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, which I thought was wonderful, but I didn’t know what to expect from it.

Anyhow, about a year or so later I open my mailbox in Manhattan, and I see an aérogram with foreign postage and there’s a letter from Paulo Freire directed to me. So you know, I nearly had a cardiac arrest there at the mailbox, thinking, why would Paulo Freire write to me? So I open the letter, and it turns out, he says that somebody gave him a book in Michigan that I had written telling him that there are people in America, and this guy who, you know Ira Shor, who’s trying to do your method here in North America and you might be interested, so he took the book back to Brazil and he *actually read it*. And then he wrote me a letter and he said it was wonderful, and he said, this was his sentence, he says, he thanks me for all the beautiful words, that was the sentence he wrote. And so he said he wanted to know if we could meet sometime, you know because he’s in America a lot. So I wrote him back, and, he travels around a lot, and then I think it was late ‘82, I think it was. I got a call, pick up the phone and it’s Paulo Freire and he says I’m in Stanford and I’m doing, at the Stanford School of Ed, I’m doing a doctoral seminar, and he wanted me to fly in and do the seminar with him, in the summer of ‘82. So I thought this was *wonderful* but I was in the middle of writing another book, and I had a grant to do it and I had a deadline because classes were starting – you see what happens when you work at a working-class college the teaching load is very heavy, the classes are very

large, and the committee assignments and so on you have a lot to do, so you're not allowed to be a scholar and to produce publications, because that's only for the folks who attend elite research universities. So I was trying to do all this stuff while attending like you know a third rate public working class college, and so I was always busy. And I used every day of my time off between semesters and every day of the summer writing 12 hours a day because I had no, couldn't get any grants, any free time. So he calls me in the middle of, I'm writing my second book and I really can't get away, so I said "I can't fly out," so he's, like, he says "alright, in six months I'm doing to be at Amherst. And when I get to Amherst I'm going to be in residence there for a month in the School of Ed" and he says he wants me to come out there and join him. So I said, "alright, in six months I'll join you in Amherst, I figured it was enough lead time for me to get everything in order.

So in February of '83, you know, he arrived at Amherst and contacted me and I found out where he was and I took a bus up there, and that's when I first met him! He told me where he was, and I came and met him at a pizza parlor in Amherst. And I parked my car, and walked through the parking lot, looked through the window of the restaurant, and I saw this bearded man, sitting at a table, sitting with some students. And I came in, and when I entered the restaurant, he stood up and came over and embraced me and I nearly passed out. I don't know how that little man held me up, he's a short guy but I was very overwhelmed. So he immediately made room at the table and so on and so on, and insisted that I had to join him in the sessions he was leading and I was just overwhelmed and honored and really not up to the task, and I had to find ways to make it through it. So I began appearing on stage with him at Amherst. And the first time I appeared, it left me breathless, he introduced me to the crowd as his son... and I thought, "oh my god I'm not going to survive this week," you know. So I had to try and maintain my focus and say things that were worthy of being listened to and this and that. So I spent that month of February more or less coming back three times from New York and working with him in Amherst and we were talking a lot and I listened to every presentation he made. I studied the way he answered the questions, how he framed his understanding of what the problem was. So I was trying to get like a post-doctoral education that I needed very badly, and that I never had the chance to get, and suddenly had this great, great, good fortune to be in a mentoring situation with Paulo Freire, whereby attending his sessions I could actually get pulled forward into how to think about all these issues of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, the politics of education, what does it mean for movements, and learning to intersect, and so on.

And by the end of this month there, I just impulsively said to Paulo, you know, "you and I should, we should write a book together" and then he looks at me and he says, "Let's start today." And I thought, oh my god, I'm not ready, you know, for this. So I said alright look, uh, I tell him that I think that the book should be based on the questions that American teachers ask most often about critical pedagogy. He says, "That's perfect." He said, "Let's do that." So then I went home that night and I stayed up late and I began to write down some of the questions that I heard continually around the country when I was

traveling that teachers were asking *me* about how—What is critical pedagogy? How do we do it? How does it differ from traditional pedagogy? What are our goals? How do we train for it? And how do we handle it in different curriculums, subjects, and so on? Through a whole series of questions that teachers were asking that were very difficult and that I was struggling year by year to teach myself the answers. So I said, “Let’s do it.” He said, “That’s a great idea.” And so you—you can see the book that we wrote together. And he said, “Let’s do—” he—he named it a talking book. He said, “Let’s start with the question and then you and I will have very long conversations and then we’ll edit the conversations and we’ll produce the—a talking book.” And so, the two of us produced the first talking book he ever did with a collaborator. It came out in 1986, called *The Pedagogy for Liberation*, and you’ll notice if you look at the book that every chapter starts with a key question that was being asked at that time by teachers who wanted to know how to practice critical pedagogy. We spent two years in constant work on this book. Every time Paulo Freire came north to North America I would drop everything and fly in wherever he was and we would use every available hour to write and edit the book. And I did this for two years wherever he was showing up in America, and then at the end of two years we agreed that we had a manuscript that was ready for the press. And it came—it came out and it’s still in print thirty years later, and it’s gone through ten or eleven printings. So it’s been a very popular book. It’s got a lot of very wide—very wide circulation so it—for me it did a great deal in forcing me to just, concentrate very carefully on: What was critical literacy? And how did we do it? And *why* did we do it? And what were the unanswered questions in trying to do it?

BK: Yeah. So... Huh?

YR: The tapes.

BK: Oh, yeah. Do you still have the—do you have the tapes for it?

YR: Or talk to us about the tapes.

IS: Oh yes, I do, somewhere. I think—the tapes and talk? Yeah. Let me see where my glasses...

Oh I might have— Well, I was thinking that—I’ve had them for thirty years. I thought I kept them in a drawer at home. They might be, uh, upstairs in a carton.

YR: I found it so interesting when Ben first started talking to me, he’s like “Oh they—they have all these tapes that they exchanged. So just wanting to hear about, like, how that whole process came about.

IS: I still have them somewhere, yeah. And we—the—one of our best friends came up, was our techie. We—we did a lot—we did taping everywhere we went with him. But we did the first major taping in the summer of 1984 in Vancouver, where he was in residence for the summer for adult education. He had 60 adult education students in the summer of

1984. So, with a friend I flew out there and we moved in with him and, uh, every— he— every morning from eight to twelve he had an adult education session with the students and I attended that. And, uh, occasionally he would ask me to answer some of the questions that came up, like, for this scholar or that question, and so on. And at twelve o'clock, uh, both— he went off to all kinds of interviews with the mass media. And then, uh, a few days later I started getting invited to TV and radio, so I started being interviewed also. On radio and TV. I may have a videotape of that, or do I have a photograph? So we we're busy. Then about four or five o'clock his work was over and what we would do is, uh, I would come to his apartment and every night we went to eat at a Brazilian or Portuguese restaurant because Paolo Freire likes three things more than anything: he likes *feijoada*, which is the national bean dish of, uh, of, uh, Brazil. He likes arugula, which I cannot explain. But, uh— and then he likes, um, uh, Beaujolais. So, anyplace— oh, and then liver. So his ideal dinner is uh, liver— fried liver, uh, bean stew, and arugula, with glasses of Beaujolais. And, uh, that's it. If you give it to him he's— doesn't want anything else. So we went every night to eat. First from about five to eight or five to nine every night, for three or four hours we would tape questions. Then we would go to eat a late dinner. And then we would get back about midnight and everybody would fall asleep and then we'd be up at 7am again 'cause the seminar started every day. That went on for about two weeks. Accumulated a lot of, uh, a lot of tapes. And, uh, then I took all the tapes back to New York, uh, in August. And, um, I rented a machine. Oh, I bought my first computer, uh, which— this was like, you know, the new world. I bought a computer and it was this very primitive machine, but it was so much faster than anything you could do on a typewriter that it helped. So I had a computer and then I bought a, um, I forget what they called it then. You had— you put the tape in the thing and you had a pedal on your foot and you had earphones and you could— you listen to the tape and so I listened and then I— I would press, I would press the button— the, uh, foot pedal. It would go on for about twelve— fifteen— twenty seconds. I would hear what he said, then I would type. The— I produced a transcript from all the tapes with this machine that I— I rented. And eventually, all the tapes, I had all the tapes into a transcript. And, uh, then he came back to Amherst. He was kept re— reappearing in Amherst. He went to Michigan once. And I would show up with the tapes. And with the printed transcript and we would go over it page by page. And we would decide if, uh, either of us had answered the question properly. Sometimes he was unhappy with his answers and he wasn't— there was something in Portuguese and he wasn't quite sure of the English version. So, then, what I had to do was I had to find a Portuguese translator who would join us to the editing sessions because, um, I speak Spanish. I didn't understand some— his Portuguese idiom. So then he would say to her, then she would say out loud— the Portuguese translator would give me a literal translation of what he said. Then I would write the literal translation down on a pad and I would then, um, transform it into colloquial English expressions. That is, it would come out sounding like a— a robot. You know, like a literal translation of something. And I wanted it to sound like colloquial conversational speech. So I would come up with a few versions of it and I would read them back to him and then he would pick which conversational version of that I— that I, um— he thought sounded best to him, so then I would enter that into— into the transcript. Sometimes he thought that he, uh, very badly expressed some ideas. He, um— he once at a moment of frustration he said he um, he thought that um, you

know that the restrictions we all live under create sort of life an invisible cage around us that— that set limits on what we think is possible. And that then a country like Brazil, where he lives, uh, the material conditions are so poor and so bad that he would— he would liken Brazil to like an iron cage. Because, uh, life is so hard there. And poor people are treated so badly, he said. But here in America you have such a— a wealthy country and so on and so on. He says, “The difference is that you live in a golden cage, and I live in an iron one.” So, I feel this is very, very beautiful and I— then when he read it over, he thought, “you know, it’s too extreme.” He said, uh, it’s— people are not gonna receive it very well, so he wanted me to take out that— that kind of reference and say it a different— say it a different way. So that was the process of how we kept going back and forth. Sometimes I would take it home and, uh, he had long statements. And, um, uh, at the end of the statement, because he’s operating a lot in English, uh, he would be, uh, linguistically tired at the end of his long statement. So it was not a good time for me to, like, question him further or to enter with my remarks because he was too tired to be a responsive partner. So I would take it home and then I would— I would listen at home and then I would write a response at home. And then when I saw him next I would show him the response I thought fit his comments, and then— course, he was more energetic. The more he used English, for a few hours, he couldn’t function in English anymore. So that’s when we had to go have wine and bean stew. And it was over for the day. So then I would come back early in the session and show him the new content and then ask him, you know, when he was still— he was still, um, uh, fresh. It went on for two years and, uh, was very intense. And, um, I remember one July 4th, it was so— it was so memorable for me because uh, you know, New York City has, uh, fireworks on July 4th that are spectacular. And the barges come up uh— the, uh, Hudson River line up and it’s the— the sky is lit up and so on. So anyhow, um, I woke up very early on July 4th and I had to produce a transcript of the, uh talk, because I was leaving soon the next day for whatever. For meet Paolo up in Amherst or something, so I got up at 8am. And I remember, as I was sitting there typing, mobs of people were coming into Manhattan, and flowing under my window. And I was just—I was sitting there all day in my underwear, typing up these transcripts and then I retyped it three times in that day in over sixteen hours without leaving the chair. And then by the end---at midnight when I found I could barely stand up, the crowds were coming back from the fireworks. It was all over and the crowds were moving in the opposite direction.

TS: So what is your favorite memory of Paulo Freire?

IS: Once, when I, uh, flew out to Michigan to work with him on our book, I landed to discover that Paulo was sick, and that he had passed out on the airplane flying in from Brazil. And, uh, Paulo had a number of conditions that eventually lead to his passing at the end of the ‘90s, but they were developing all along, and he had some kind of blood pressure disorder, and he stood up on an airplane and passed out. They caught him and they sat him down and he recovered, and then they let him go but they insisted that every morning he had to go to the health center in Ann Arbor to have his blood pressure checked, and he agreed to do that. So when I got out there he asked me to accompany him to the health center every morning to—so we would go there, he would get his pressure checked and then we would go have breakfast together and plan the day and

whatever. So, the first time we went there, there was this—very friendly African American nurse. It was early in the morning, not too many people around. It was kinda casual there and she had some time, and Paulo came in, I came in, and we told her what the situation was, so she took care of him. And while she's fitting the—uh, collar on his arm, to check his blood pressure—she looks at Paulo and she says: “Honey. Honey, I loves the color of your face,” she says to him. And, so, he looked at me; he didn't quite understand what she was telling him, so I said it in Spanish to him, 'cause he understands Spanish—I translated it into Spanish. When he realized that this black woman loved the color of his dark skin, he was so happy: he hugged her, she hugged him. He had been mistaken for a black person and, he thought, “what a great day!” you know, like this, because he said—he used to say, he's not quite sure that he's a white man, he used to say frequently. And he liked to identify because the—you know, the Brazilian population, it has a *great* spectrum of color, and there's plenty of white folks from European origin, but there's plenty of dark-skinned Africans—especially in the northeast of Brazil where he comes from. And folks from all colors in between. So for him to be included by this nurse in their people, the rest of the day he was just, happy.

Cue music: “Absurdus Rex” by Jovian Year

BK: This is the end of part one of our conversation. Check back next week for part two where we talk more about critical pedagogy, contemporary social movements, and the state of higher education.

Co-executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Karriann Soto, with additional production and editing from Tamara Issak, Kate Siegfred, Yanira Rodriguez, and Dylan Rollo.