

“Forty Hours of Hope”: An Analysis of Paulo Freire’s 1963 Literacy Program in Angicos

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the results of and claims made about the experimental 1963 literacy program operated in the small Brazilian town of Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte. This program was where the renowned pedagogue Paulo Freire's literacy methods were first attempted at a large scale using government funding to teach nearly 300 adults and adolescents how to read and write in a mere forty hours of instruction. Freire's program utilized what is known as the Paulo Freire Method, wherein instructors taught literacy using images and vocabulary that were determined to be culturally significant to the communities in which courses took place. Through these lessons, instructors would not only aim to provide students with basic literacy skills but with political consciousness and a desire to participate in the democratic system. The program claimed to have had resounding success, leading to the creation of plans to establish Freirean literacy courses, known as culture circles, all over the nation. However, shortly after the program's close, it was deemed to have been bathed in Marxist ideology, promoting subversion among its students. As Cold War political tensions continued to heat up in the country, reaching their peak at the military coup of 1964, the expansion of culture circles was forced to halt and Freire, along with many instructors of his craft, was sent into exile.

Despite the political reaction caused by this program, Freire's method continues to be used in the country today, where his name is celebrated as the patron saint of education. Yet, the experience in Angicos, while being the first of many successes in Freirean education, is largely unknown by the Brazilian public. This thesis considers the lofty claims of this program's success through a critical lens, contributing to the limited scholarly conversation on the Cold War forces at play during the course's operation. Throughout my research, I argue that the claims made about this program cannot be separated from the political narratives they served historically.

Beyond this, I interpret the achievements of the program along with its limitations, paying close attention to its class-centric interpretation of oppression to unite the people of Angicos. Through examining didactic materials, diary entries, newspaper articles, government documents, and secondary scholarship, I provide a historical analysis of the Forty Hours of Angicos that provides important emphasis on the Cold War political context that shaped accounts of the program's results.

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INTRODUCTION

On July 1st of 1964, the now famous Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire was prosecuted for engaging in “subversive” activities with the Cultural Extension Service at the University of Recife, through which he taught illiterate Brazilians how to read and write.¹ He was accused of developing literacy programs that radicalized and indoctrinated their students with Marxist ideas in the states of Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, and Rio Grande do Norte in the early 1960s. His experimental literacy method operated on the philosophy that education was a vehicle for social change. While the program would provide students with basic literacy skills, students would simultaneously gain an awareness of injustice in their communities along with the agency to enact change.

The culture circle— or Freirean literacy program— that generated the most outrage, was that which took place in Angicos in 1963, where 299 students were reported to have learned basic literacy skills in forty hours. These hours were divided into one-hour sessions over eight weeks, though time spent on homework and practice outside of class was not taken into account for this number. The state government-funded pilot program was so successful that it caught international attention, earning Freire the opportunity to expand the creation of culture circles all over the country. Despite the promising results of Angicos, the project attracted negative attention due to increased politicization of students and a workers strike that some students participated in shortly after the program concluded.² Among the claims about the project in Angicos, Freire’s prosecutor stated that a study (of which he did not mention the origin) found a

¹ *Depoimento de Paulo Reglus Neves Freire*, July 1, 1964, 10, Acervo Paulo Freire. <http://acervo.paulofreire.org:8080/handle/7891/2187>.

² Carlos Lyra, *As Quarenta horas de Angicos: uma experiência pioneira de educação* (São Paulo: Cortez, 1996): 17.

20% increase in “Marxism” in the municipality following the short literacy program.³ Found guilty of indoctrinating students with anti-democratic Marxist thought, Paulo Freire was arrested and sent into exile first briefly in Bolivia, and then in Chile.

The accusations of revolutionary activity in the program are ironic, given that this experimental course was chosen by reformist Governor Aluizio Alves specifically to stop any bubbling potential for revolution in the Brazilian Northeastern region. Beyond this, the program was funded by the Alliance for Progress, an American alliance designed to fund development projects in Latin America’s poorest regions and mitigate the threats of communist defection.

How did this experimental literacy program in a small Northeastern town radically subvert these initial expectations? More importantly, how did the activities of Angicos, a municipality with a population of under 10,000, pose such an intense threat to Brazil as a nation?

This thesis offers a historical analysis of the Freirean literacy program popularly known as the forty hours of Angicos. I will examine and interpret the methods, operation, results, and claims of the program. This project consists of three chapters, each of which will explore different facets of the Angicos program and their historical significance. The first chapter establishes the context for the program, analyzing how the conditions of Angicos, program proposals, and Cold War politics explain why this town was chosen for Freire’s first large-scale project. The second chapter will explore how the frenzied rush for development of Brazil’s early Cold War era manifested itself in the literacy course. I argue that the harsh forty-hour deadline, one of the program’s major marketing points, undermined its effectiveness. I will also explore how the goals and results of the program were heavily politicized, noting how reports of its success were spun to fit various political narratives. The final chapter looks more deeply into the

³ *Depoimento de Paulo Reglus Neves Freire*, 10.

content and theory of Freire's method in Angicos, highlighting the program's exclusive focus on class-based oppression for generating consciousness and unity among the students. I conduct a discursive analysis of class, gender, and race using didactic materials from the program, illustrating how its reductive interpretation of oppression excluded some of its students from its vision of liberation.

My choice to research the forty-hour literacy course stems from the fact that there are very few historical studies that deeply explore Freire's early work. The scholarly conversation about Freire has mostly consisted of theoretical analyses, considering the implications and limitations of the pedagogue's theories about education. Freire's most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has been translated into many languages since its original publication in Spanish in 1968, internationally popularizing his ideas for liberation through education. Despite the popularity of his work, his first project in Angicos, where many of his ideas were operationalized for the first time, does not share this same fame. I wish to shed light on the experience of Angicos, exploring how its success allowed for the pedagogue's philosophies to take root and inspired his works to come. In Chapter 3 in particular, I will explore how the limitations of the Angicos program were repeated and amplified in his later works, including *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, suggesting that Freire's work in Angicos should receive greater scholarly attention. This thesis will be the first of its kind, not only exploring the history of Freire's work in Angicos but also analyzing and critiquing the methods of the program and its claims to success.

This project uses primary sources as its foundation, specifically the diary entries and later published book by Carlos Lyra. Lyra was a culture circle coordinator in Angicos who later became a professor at the University of Rio Grande do Norte and worked on many projects preserving the memory of Angicos in Brazil. Throughout the Angicos program Lyra wrote diary

entries about the day-to-day operations of the literacy course, taking note of student phrases generated in classroom discussions. These phrases were from Lyra's own class and from those shared by the other coordinators in their meetings together. He had a sensibility for the importance of this project, candidly writing about the moving stories of success from the program as well as the more human moments of frustration.

The diary entries written during the operation of the program were published as part of a larger source known as *A experiência de Angicos*. This document was published by the Cooperative Service of Education of Rio Grande do Norte (SECERN) in 1963, compiling Lyra's diary entries, transcribed speeches from the program, classroom materials, and testing scores generated in Angicos. Lyra saved this document from destruction during the military dictatorship of 1964-1985 and it was later scanned and uploaded to the Instituto Paulo Freire (IPF)'s repository.

Due to the intense repression of the military dictatorship, most students were encouraged to burn, bury, or destroy their notebooks to avoid persecution.⁴ However, Lyra tried to collect and preserve as many documents from the program as he could, hiding them in his step-uncle's attic. Using the accounts, diary entries, newspaper articles, interviews, cards, notebook pages, projector slides, drawings, photos, recordings, and meeting notes that he saved, Lyra published a more detailed account of the Angicos program thirty-three years later. *As Quarenta horas de Angicos: Uma experiência pioneira de educação* was published in 1996, being the second publication ever to write about this subject following the dictatorship.⁵ This book provides a retrospective account of Angicos, reflecting on its impacts on students' lives and the abrupt halt of culture circles in Brazil due to the military coup. Similar to the aforementioned diary entries,

⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 11-12.

⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 9.

Lyra's book contains details on each day of lessons, including suggested topics for in-class debates, documented student phrases from notebooks or shared by the coordinators, meeting notes, and classroom materials, and transcribed debates from the recorded sessions. There are vivid descriptions of each phase in Angicos which reveal challenges with attendance and harsh climate conditions that the diary entries did not mention. Lyra's book is by far the most cited source in my research, due to its rich story-telling and its compilation of documents and data produced during the program.

I must note that the nature of this source, being one written from the coordinators' perspectives, has shaped the way that I have conducted my analysis. While I would have ideally sought to explore student perspectives more profoundly, many of the details and impressions of the program were filtered through the minds and pens of the coordinators.⁶ I did aim to use many student quotes documented in Lyra's works and I do briefly discuss the oral history accounts collected by the Federal Rural University of the Semi-Arid (UFERSA) in my second chapter. However, the historical questions I have asked are also shaped by the limitations of these sources, and I have examined the content, operation, and claims made about the program more deeply than student experiences.

I should also note that all translations from the Portuguese texts are my own. In Lyra's diary entries, there are many cases of intentional misspellings or grammar mistakes to reflect the cadence and regionalisms in the phrases uttered by the students. I have chosen to provide more straightforward translations for the sake of clarity.

⁶ I had initially intended to travel to Angicos and conduct my own oral interviews with past students. However, I was unable to do so due to issues with my expired Brazilian documents. Having lived outside of the country for more than twenty years, my voter registration and passport have been expired for some time. The bureaucratic process to renew these documents is complicated and requires engaging with outdated online sites that rarely work for long enough to complete a single task. Government budget restrictions coupled with COVID-19 challenges exacerbated these difficulties considerably, making it impossible to acquire a passport in time to complete this thesis.



FIGURE 1: Carlos Lyra (left) and Paulo Freire (right)
Source: Acervo Paulo Freire

I have sourced my primary documents and images from The Paulo Freire Collection. The Instituto Paulo Freire (IPF) created this repository as “a space of formation, the sharing of reflections and practices and production of knowledge.”⁷ The repository contains all of Paulo Freire’s written works, scholarship about the pedagogue, newspaper articles about his activities, photographs, and didactic material produced in many of his culture circles. All of these sources are digitally accessible, thanks to the IPF’s efforts of scanning their entire physical library of documents. I cannot overstate how essential this library has been for my research on Angicos.

⁷ “Acervo Paulo Freire: Apresentação,” Instituto Paulo Freire, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://www.paulofreire.org/acervo-paulo-freire>.

Their effort to provide free digital access to all of Freire's works reflects the Freirean philosophy on the love and need for accessible education for all those who seek it.

I engage with the secondary scholarship of Andrew Kirkendall for his historical study of Freire's literacy programs throughout the Cold War. His insights on the political context in which Freire's work took place and the pedagogue's early beginnings in Brazil were essential in shaping my understanding of his work and its external influences. Kirkendall argues that Freire's literacy campaigns (and external reactions to them) were heavily shaped by Cold War politics that placed importance on literacy as an indication of national progress. Kirkendall is also one of the few scholars to lend attention to Freire's early life in Brazil and his work prior to the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Furthermore, I have used the works of Barbara Weinstein, Sarah Sarzynski, and Jerry Dávila to establish race dynamics in Brazil. Weinstein's *Color of Modernity* analyzes how the formation of racial identities in Brazil was heavily influenced by the economic development of the country's distinct regions. She argues the country's uneven development produced ideas of regional difference and, in turn, led to policies that reproduced these inequalities in favour of the whiter São Paulo region. I have used her study to situate Angicos within Brazil's racial and economic landscape, due to its location in the country's most underdeveloped region, the Northeast. Sarzynski's *Revolution in the Terra do Sol* further explores the racial connotations associated with the term *nordestino*, Northeasterner, which were intimately tied to the region's poverty. She examines how cultural representations of Northeastern poverty created a negative racial trope that popularized the idea of an inherent backwardness, laziness, and fatalism among *nordestinos*. Her study examines how this racial trope was reimagined by the revolutionaries in the *Ligas Camponesas*, Peasant Leagues, in their social movement for agrarian reform. Her

thoughtful analysis of regionalist stereotypes has been helpful in framing my own research about the nordestino students in Angicos and how their racial identity factored into national narratives about the experimental literacy program. Finally, Dávila's *Diploma of Whiteness* provides an insightful look at racialized education policy in Brazil and how education was used as a means of distancing oneself from their racialized identity. He explores Brazil's historic association between education and whiteness which allotted racialized Brazilians, whether black, indigenous, or mixed, the opportunity to break free from the social ideas of their supposed degeneracy. In the case of Angicos, Lyra's diary entries reveal how the students understood themselves as doomed to their presumed genetic backwardness as nordestinos. Meanwhile, the coordinators were immune to these stereotypes due to their education despite being from the Northeast themselves. Dávila's analysis of education and race has enriched my historical understanding of how these discourses shaped the experience of Angicos.

Researching the story of Angicos, I have found that the literacy program was not the site of a revolution as Freire might have wished it to be. Many scholars have celebrated the results of the Angicos program as an uncomplicated success without inquiring about its specific claims and goals. Being one of the first to closely examine the operation of the literacy course, I argue that its bold promise of literacy in forty hours cannot be removed from the political context that saw literacy as the country's path towards modernity. The program's rushed goals caused many students to quit the program and its focus on class-based oppression inhibited students from enacting the transformative change it envisioned. Thus, the course's claim to have achieved its objectives leaves much to be contested. However, student experiences reveal that the program's success was not in its ability to deliver literacy in a mere forty hours; rather, the literacy course afforded students a space where their voices and ideas were taken seriously, a rarity in a country

that dehumanized and disenfranchised illiterates. The program provided Angicanos with educational opportunities where none had existed before and encouraged conversations about aspirations for their lives. Calazans Fernandes, the Secretary of Education in 1963, described the program as the “forty hours of hope” in Lyra’s book, which perhaps more aptly captures the course’s impact on Angicos.⁸

⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 9.

Chapter 1

Angicos: The Reformist's Revolution

In 1963, a group of sixteen university volunteers drove around a sparsely populated municipality in the state of Rio Grande do Norte known as Angicos, inviting people of all ages to participate in an experimental literacy campaign. The loudspeaker rattled on top of a jeep driving around the town announcing “We will teach anyone who is willing, anyone can learn to read and write!”⁹ Through this method, along with knocking on the doors of people in the community, these volunteers were able to recruit 299 students to try a new method of literacy instruction developed by the Director of the Department of Cultural Extension at the University of Recife, Paulo Freire. This method, later coined the Paulo Freire Method, was revolutionary on many fronts: it was completely free for students, extremely cheap to run, required few classroom materials, and did not exclusively focus on literacy as its end goal. Most shocking of all, the method purported to deliver its goals of functional literacy and political consciousness to poor communities in a mere forty hours of instruction. Designed as a solution to the stubbornly complex issues of illiteracy, poverty, and literacy-based voting restrictions in Brazil, the Freire Method’s flexibility and frugality appealed to government officials in the 1960s and was officially tested in a pilot program in Angicos. This program was a small part of a multitude of projects brought about in Brazil’s Northeast, the region in which the aforementioned problems were most acute.

The Brazilian government received U.S. government funding for development projects in this region, aimed towards improving education and hygiene while also discouraging leftist organization, hoping to reform the region before a seemingly imminent revolution. While most

⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 20.

of these funds were funnelled into the region's capital cities and metropolitan areas, the small rural municipality of Angicos was the site of Freire's first government-funded project. It was in Angicos that Freire considered his pedagogical theories to have taken root and led to the creation of many literacy programs to come in Brazil. After the glowing media coverage celebrating the miraculous success in Angicos, the plan for a nation-wide literacy project using Freire's method was shut down due to Freire's alleged involvement with Marxist activity. The pedagogue was sent into exile just months after the program's close.

Why was Angicos, a small rural municipality in the interior Northeast, chosen to undertake such an important project? How was this program able to run so cheaply and quickly? How did Paulo Freire, allegedly involved in "subversive" activity, achieve government funding for the same project that sent him into exile just months after its close? I seek to answer these questions in this chapter, examining the conditions that allowed such a program to begin with such alleged success and end so abruptly.

I will begin by establishing the socio-economic conditions in which the experience of Angicos took place, illustrating the need for such a literacy program in the municipality. Importantly, there are very few sources detailing literacy and poverty rates specific to Angicos due to its size. Thus, I will primarily use data pertaining to Rio Grande do Norte as a whole, paying particular attention to statistics about its rural population. More generally, I will consider how Angicos fit into the larger context of the Northeast and its deeply rooted issues of poverty, pointing out the ways that the rest of Brazil made nordestinos, into the marginalized, stereotyped Other.

After establishing this setting, I will detail the political motives of the governor of Rio Grande do Norte, Aluizio Alves, and discuss the ideological neutrality that made him attractive

to the American funding agency, the Alliance for Progress. I will examine Alves' decisions for development projects and his choice of the polarizing Paulo Freire method for his literacy campaign in Rio Grande do Norte. Following this, I will discuss the objectives of the Angicos program promised by Freire, clarifying potential assumptions about his method which became far more explicitly leftist in the late 1960s, following his exile. Lastly will come the implementation of the Freirean experiment, where I will detail how the program functioned and the preparations necessary for its execution. This first chapter will set the scene for the program in Angicos, outlining how poverty, illiteracy, Cold War tensions, and the use of the Paulo Freire method aligned in such a way that allowed Angicos, an otherwise unremarkable Northeastern town, to be the site of an extraordinary experiment that made international headlines and irrevocably shaped Paulo Freire's career.



FIGURE 2: Map of Rio Grande do Norte with Angicos Highlighted in Red by Raphael Lorenzeto de Abreu
Source: Wikimedia Commons

An Introduction to Angicos

“The angico is a large, leafy tree with good wood. Its bark provides the so-called gum Angico, better than gum Arabic. And its seed when dried and ground, is *paricá*, a medicine and stimulant that Brazilian *indios* often sniffed. In Angicos, there was not a single angico.”¹⁰

Luíz Lobo wrote this passage to introduce the municipality of Angicos in Carlos Lyra’s book *As Quarenta Horas de Angicos*. He did not elaborate on this expositional metaphor, but it perfectly illustrates a complicated duality between the Brazilian Northeast, or *nordeste*, and the prosperous future envisioned for what the region could be. Lobo’s metaphor depicts the municipality of Angicos with the potential for something beautiful that would not grow, mirroring the stark contrast between the conversations of hope that surrounded the nordeste in a new developmentalist discourse that took place in the 1950s-60s and the reality lived by its inhabitants despite the nation’s efforts to improve these conditions. President Juscelino Kubitschek’s “fifty years of progress in five” campaign created what Lyra called a “contagious” optimism for development in the Northeast as foreign funds were being channelled into projects to modernize the region.¹¹ In 1959, Kubitschek created the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE), intended to stimulate heavy industry projects in the country and make his vision a reality.

This excitement was not shared by many nordestinos who saw the numerous projects in their communities, seeds that seemed to be sown blindly and were neglected before they could mature and failed to address the complex problems in the region. I will begin this section with an

¹⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 19.

¹¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 15.

introduction to the situation in Angicos, facing intense poverty problems and extremely low literacy rates. Despite the worrying state of the town, the significance of these numbers was lost in the vast sea of misery throughout the Northeast as many communities faced equally dismal levels of wealth and education. While change in the region seemed an impossible feat for those who lived in it, especially nordestinos in small, remote towns like Angicos, this era brought a number of development projects that aimed to remedy the region with an ambitious urgency that characterized these Cold War projects, including the Angicos program itself. Generally, these projects took place in the capital cities of Northeastern states, such as the *De pé no chão também se apreende a ler* (Even the barefoot one can learn to read) government-run literacy campaign in Natal, the intense urban planning and infrastructure projects in Brasília, or investment into goods industries in greater Recife. The question then remains, how did the rural town of Angicos find a place among these large cities and play such an important part in this vision for an industrialized, modern Brazil?

A partial answer may be found in the sheer hopelessness in Rio Grande do Norte. Rio Grande do Norte was one of the most worrying states in the Northeast, ranking second for political volatility and third for lowest income in Brazil according to US consuls in 1961.¹² Being almost entirely semi-arid, the state suffered from frequent droughts and occasional flooding, making it difficult to cultivate crops, while the majority of its population were still farmers. Angicos was a rural town in the state's interior and was only declared its own municipality in the 19th-century when it was found that there were large enough concentrations of cattle farmers in the region.¹³ The presence of cattle farmers remained into the 20th-century, making Angicos an

¹² Andrew J. Kirkendall, "Entering History: Paulo Freire and the Politics of the Brazilian Northeast, 1958-1964," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 41, no. 1 (2004): 173.

¹³ "História do Município," Prefeitura de Angicos-RN, updated September 8, 2021, <https://www.angicos.rn.gov.br/index.php/historia>.

important producer of leather and meat products in the state. Despite their role in the local state economy, Angicano farmers could rarely afford to eat the food or wear the shoes that they produced. Most *potiguar* agricultural workers, meaning workers living in Rio Grande do Norte, only made up to 2100 cruzeiros each month.¹⁴ In comparison, one kilogram of beef cost about 440 cruzeiros at the time, almost one-fifth the monthly salary of the average farmer.¹⁵

The following statistics from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) reveal equally dismal literacy rates. Illiteracy affected about 74% of the rural population in Rio Grande do Norte, but taking into account “more rigorous definitions of literacy,” this number may have been as high as 80%.¹⁶ Being in the countryside of the state, it is safe to assume that Angicos’ literacy rates were as low if not lower than this. The number of literate women was higher than the number of literate men,¹⁷ likely because men were expected to become farmers or manual labour workers and support their families, not requiring a proper education for these goals. While there were more women than men who had completed basic elementary education in Rio Grande do Norte, opportunities for high school or university education for women were extremely limited. Only about 26% of men and women living in rural Rio Grande do Norte had completed any level of schooling, and those who had were reported to have only received between one and three years of instruction. Comparatively, only 0.01% of potiguar rural dwellers had received five or more years of education. Rates of illiteracy in Rio Grande do Norte were the worst in the country, making its issues with disenfranchisement quite severe as illiterates could not vote. These rates of education coincided with poverty as well. Most employed men and

¹⁴ IBGE- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, *Censo Demográfico de 1960: Rio Grande do Norte- Paraíba*, Série Regional vol. 1, Tomo 5 (Rio Grande do Norte- Paraíba, 1960): 58, <http://memoria.org.br/pub/meb000000363/censodem1960rvol1t5/censodem1960rvol1t5.pdf>.

¹⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 132.

¹⁶ IBGE, *Censo Demográfico de 1960*, 16-18; Kirkendall, “Entering History,” 173.

¹⁷ IBGE, *Censo Demográfico de 1960*, 16.

women who had between one and three years of schooling made a monthly salary of up to 2100 CR\$ while the majority of employed women made between 1-2100 CR\$ regardless of their level of education. As was the trend for most Latin American countries at the time, unemployed women far outnumbered unemployed men, making it so that these 2100 cruzeiros were spread thinly amongst the needs of families each month.¹⁸ Another notable statistic that reveals the adversity faced by Angicanos is the infant mortality rate, which reported that about 600 out of every 1000 infants before the age of one died in 1960 compared to the 420 out of 1000 in the state capital.¹⁹ Luzia Andrade stated this in an interview about living in Angicos in the 1960s: “It was a poor land. Our place was poor... We would peel fruit to sell in the street, and we would make our living off things like that.”²⁰ Rio Grande do Norte felt an intense need for the kind of transformation promised by the Freire program. With about 80% of its rural population unable to vote, the presence of potiguar voices in federal government decisions was minimal. Despite this urgent need, such troubling conditions made it difficult to believe in a government initiative that would resolve these issues with the quickness these projects purported to have.

The conditions in Angicos and Rio Grande do Norte were certainly among the worst in the nordeste, but the long history of poverty, illiteracy, and poor infrastructure in the Northeast had created universalizing racial tropes about all nordestinos. Before I explain what Sarah Sarzynski calls the trope of the nordestino, it is important to clarify the Brazilian notion of race. The population of Brazil is made up of individuals of primarily Indigenous, African, and European descent, with much inter-racial mixing. This mixing has created what many scholars

¹⁸ IBGE, *Censo Demográfico de 1960*, 16-18, 28-30, 58-62.

¹⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas*, 20; Kirkendall, “Entering History,” 173.

²⁰ “40 horas na Memória” produced by TV Ufersa, January 20, 2016, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkN97kOriJc&t=209s>.

believe to be the myth of “racial democracy” in Brazil, creating an illusion of tolerance and equality due to blurred racial distinctions between people. This concept has been heavily criticized by scholars, noting how modernity, civilization, good hygiene, and education have been attributed with whiteness throughout Brazilian history.²¹ The legacy of slavery left Brazil’s more developed regions whiter and its poorer regions with darker-skinned individuals, linking race with region in the nation.

The biggest contrast is that between São Paulo and the Northeast. São Paulo and its abundant coffee plantations allowed for rigorous economic growth in the capital city and wealth among white plantation owners while the Northeast’s history of droughts devastated the potential for such crop production. The Northeast was and is also home to much of the country’s African and Indigenous peoples. The material conditions of these regions became increasingly associated with the races that inhabited them, creating an imaginary causal link between race and prosperity. Thus, as regions were racialized, São Paulo was known as a region shaped and influenced by European ideals while the Northeast was seen as the antithesis to modernity. Barbara Weinstein posits that the social ideas connecting region and race with progress were reproductive, as social inequality facilitated the creation of development policies that favoured whiter regions, leaving more racialized regions behind.²² This connection between race, region, and class is central to the racial distinction of nordestino.

While whiter regions like São Paulo benefited from its racialized stereotypes, the beliefs surrounding the nordeste and its people naturalized ideas of backwardness and impoverishment about its people. Sarzynski argues that the cultural symbols and representations of the nordeste

²¹ Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 11.

²² Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity*, 1-2.

present in films and books as well as popular discourse have played a constitutive role in shaping the Brazilian conception of the nordestino.²³ This trope, as she calls it, created an immutable racial category that harkens ideas of backwardness, superstition, barbarism, poverty, and nonwhiteness. Such ideas were deeply entrenched into Brazilian culture, fostering the belief that the Northeast was a miserable region beyond helping. The cultural representations of the region created the stereotypes about its people, who were seen as not only victims of the issues of poverty and insufficient development, but also with a genetic predisposition towards them. Nordestinos were believed to possess an inherent lack of agency, an apathy that was pitiful and lazy.²⁴

Being in the rural semi-arid region known as the *sertão*, Angicos was in precisely the landscape that Brazilians believed to represent the whole of the Northeast and its problems, despite the region being geographically diverse. Consequently, Angicos could not escape the universalizing stereotypes about nordestinos, their supposed fatalism and hopelessness. In some ways, being in the *sertão* allowed Angicos to be the site of a perfect story about conquering illiteracy where it was most acute. If the program did not effectively bring literacy education to Angicanos, it would simply be a failed effort among many in the region's history, easily chalked up to the essence of being nordestino. On the other hand, a success in Angicos would mean that there was hope for the whole nordeste and subsequently, Brazil. Indeed, the northeast was considered the thorn in the country's side, the region that seemingly inhibited the world from viewing the nation as developed, powerful, and prosperous. It was simultaneously the country's biggest problem and its only solution.

²³ Sarah Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra Do Sol: The Cold War in Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018): 16-18.

²⁴ Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol*, 16-18.

Aluizio Alves and Cold War Tensions

Political leaders were hardly unaware of the dismal circumstances in Rio Grande do Norte, but the shift into developmentalist nationalism of the 1950s-60s brought a hopefulness about the potential for change in this region. Aluizio Alves was elected as governor of Rio Grande do Norte with an impressive 68% majority in 1961, promising to bring education to all *norte-rio-grandenses* (those who lived in Rio Grande do Norte) during his campaign. Alves sought to move past the “traditional northeastern social order,” which he believed was bound to cause violent revolution.²⁵ The long history of misery in the Northeast had brought about concerns during the Cold War about the political volatility in the region. With increased conversations about workers rights and organized protests by the *Ligas Camponesas* (Peasant Leagues) in the late 1950s, the fear for revolution only grew.²⁶ Alves was intimately familiar with the challenges faced by nordestinos, having been born in Angicos himself. Thus, he recognized the need for change in the region, but was committed to doing so through ideologically neutral means. Put simply, he sought reform, not revolution. It was this approach to remedying the complex problems in the Northeast that made Alves “the United States’ man,” attracting American funding and support for his development projects.²⁷

His proposals for change in the northeast appealed to both rural and urban populations as he sought to bring more opportunities for education and thereby increase the presence of *norte-rio-grandenses* in the national voter pool. His “Do in three years what has not been done in three

²⁵ Kirkendall, “Entering History,” 174.

²⁶ Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol*, 9-10.

²⁷ Andrew J. Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014): 37.

centuries” plan reflected a more ambitious attitude than even Kubitscheck with his own twist, calling out the history of neglect in the nordeste.²⁸ This plan sought to drastically change Rio Grande do Norte, stimulating industrial development in a region that historically had few resources to support these goals.²⁹ Alves aimed to deliver urban development projects by creating organizations such as the Companhia de Serviços Elétricos do Rio Grande do Norte (COSERN) and the Companhia Telefônica do Rio Grande do Norte (TELERN). In addition to these infrastructure projects, Alves’ goals for education in the state promised (and indeed, succeeded) to bring 1000 new classrooms and teachers to Rio Grande do Norte.³⁰ While Alves acknowledged the neglect of the deep-rooted issues present in the Northeast, he was careful to keep his distance from opinions supporting any radical form of change, instead opting for a peaceful transition to a more modern nordeste through development projects. His tangible goals for change coupled with an aversion to inflammatory language made his campaign quite popular with the potiguar population.

Beyond winning the favour of Northeasterners with his development plans, Alves was particularly liked by American officials and the Alliance For Progress, an agency designed to strengthen American economic ties with Latin America. The governor’s popularity along with his discouraging the people from taking matters into their own hands made him the perfect man to trust with funds for projects that were in line with American ideological goals. The Alliance For Progress funded modernization projects that were intended to mitigate any bubbling leftist

²⁸ Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 41.

²⁹ Daniela Fonsêca Vieira, “As mudanças da educação do RN nos idos de 1950 e 1960: a prática da Lia Campos” (Master’s thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, 2005), 68, Repositório Insitucional UFRN, <https://repositorio.ufrn.br/jspui/handle/123456789/14369>.

³⁰ Vieira, “As mudanças da educação do RN,” 27.

organization that may have erupted after a long history of stagnancy under conservative governments.³¹

The condition of the Northeast caused much concern for American officials after seeing the success of Fidel Castro's radical social and economic reforms following the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Andrew Kirkendall argues that Castro's literacy campaign was especially worrisome, allegedly bringing illiteracy down from 23% to 4% in less than a year, results that Brazil felt an intense need for.³² Challenging America's depiction of backward communist regimes, Cuba's successful 'Year of Education' made the fear of underdeveloped nations defecting leftward a very real possibility. Organization of agricultural workers in major Northeastern cities had already begun with the aforementioned Ligas Camponesas, fighting for peasant interests and agrarian reform. President Kennedy's solution was to fund American development projects in Latin America, a region rich with natural resources and promising large cities. Brazil, the largest South American nation with an impressively growing GDP at the time, was given particular attention from the Alliance for Progress and received US\$ 1.64 billion in 1961, 55% of which came from American sources.³³ In addition to these funds, in 1962, a USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) mission was created to address Brazil's northeastern region, which was far behind the country's bustling city centres. Attempting to address the extreme poverty and low literacy rates, the nordeste was given 131 million USD in

³¹ Kirkendall, "Entering History," 174.

³² Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 24-25.

³³ Felipe Pereira Loureiro, "The Alliance For or Against Progress? US-Brazilian Financial Relations in the Early 1960s," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46 (2014): 329, <https://doi.org/101017/S0022216X14000029>. This agreement was made with Europe and the IMF, without direct ties to US finance due to negotiations between Quadros and Kennedy. The US funding still fell in line with Alliance for Progress' economic commitments to Latin America.

1962 to fund education, health, and hygiene programs.³⁴ It was this funding that backed each of Governor Alves' projects, including an experimental literacy campaign he chose to run in his hometown of Angicos.

The Paulo Freire Method: Intentions and Reactions

Before I explain the process of choosing and implementing the Paulo Freire method in Angicos, I will clarify the objectives of Freirean literacy circles. It is easy to mistake the Freirean theory of this time with his later, more radical beliefs written in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first published in 1968. In his earlier works, Freire's focus was on education's ability to democratize, seeing as illiterates did not have a legal right to vote in Brazil.³⁵ Freire saw how the interests of poor Northeasterners were not represented in the decisions made by political officials, making apparent that there was an urgent need for the people of this region to act and seek out their own change. In his earliest published thesis, *Educação e atualidade brasileira* (1959), Freire detailed his frustration with top-down government decisions to handle the problems of the Northeast without truly understanding the needs of its people. He accused these solutions of lacking *organicidade* or "organicness," failing to adequately address the issues they sought to resolve.³⁶ Having worked for a social service agency known as SESI (Serviço Social de Indústria), Freire became disillusioned with state attempts to support workers without creating meaningful change to improve their conditions. He asserted the existence of a paradox between the Brazilian reality and the vision for its future both economically and democratically. While Brazilian government officials envisioned a future as an industrialized, market economy

³⁴ Loureiro, "The Alliance For Or Against Progress?," 338.

³⁵ At this time, literacy was defined as the ability to write one's name and a simple sentence. To vote, one had to be able to sign their name at the bottom of the ballot.

³⁶ Paulo Freire, *Educação e atualidade brasileira*, (Thesis, Recife: Escola de Belas Artes de Pernambuco, 1959): 10-11, Acervo Paulo Freire, <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/1976>.

with a flourishing democracy, its reality presented instead a stunted economy at the mercy of external global demand and a democracy that excluded over 25% of its population due to illiteracy.³⁷ Freire believed that democratization was necessary for stability, economic growth, and change in Brazil's most troubled regions. It was not the government who could create solutions for its people, but the people who would determine solutions for their government, necessitating the presence of every Brazilian voice in a proper democracy.

Of course, democracy meant nothing without actively informed citizens who believed in the system to deliver results to its people. Freire believed that education could pave the path for democratization of the country, but only if classrooms were able to make students care about improving the conditions of their own communities. Freire saw many issues with an “anti-democratic” Brazilian education system and theorized on different classroom structures that would enable students to think critically about their own realities and gain the agency to change them.³⁸ The pedagogue believed there to be “fatalistic” attitudes among nordestinos (mirroring common stereotypes about nordestinos at the time), rendering them unable to combat the structures that kept them in the lowest rungs of society.³⁹ In believing that the best solutions to the devastating circumstances in the Northeast would come from the people bearing the brunt of their force, Freire believed this fatalism to be the culprit of stagnancy in the region. Thus, his education model aimed not only to deliver literacy with urgency to push students into the voting booths but also awaken in them a fighting spirit to seek out change.

Crucial to Freirean education was the decentralization of power in the classroom, allowing students to participate in the sharing of knowledge just as much as the teacher. This

³⁷ Freire, *Educação e atualidade brasileira*, 127.

³⁸ Freire, *Educação e atualidade brasileira*, 127.

³⁹ Freire, *Educação e atualidade brasileira*, 53.

would be achieved through dialogue, which Freire believed to be essential in the transformation of passive learners to active creators of knowledge and agents of change. In a training program for Freirean literacy circle coordinators, teachers were taught to resist the individualistic system of education that saw each student's learning journey as independent of one another, opting instead for a learning environment that emphasized the class as a group, engaging in the "creation of thought" as a collective.⁴⁰

Throughout these debates, students would discuss things that they encountered and experienced in their everyday lives, such as their place of work, the food they consume, or the clothes they wear. Students would be asked to consider how these mundane objects and experiences fit into the larger political climate, provoking spirited conversations about, following the same example, their working conditions, the lack of food in their cupboards, or their difficulty affording clothing. In analyzing how their realities were shaped by greater political decisions, students would be able to gain consciousness of their communal struggles and become emboldened to change it together. In Freirean education, instructors became the less "authoritarian" dialogue coordinators, taking the lead on introducing the themes of the dialogues and occasionally directing conversations towards fruitful paths but otherwise allowing students to lead discussions.⁴¹ Classrooms became culture circles, where the deconstruction, reconstruction, and production of knowledge would take place through student dialogue. To Freire the classroom was an inherently political space where it was imperative that students discussed and understood their reality in relation to the world around them.

⁴⁰ Jomard Muniz, "Educação de Adultos e Educação de Grupos," transcript of lecture delivered in Natal, RN, June 15, 1966, <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/3569>.

⁴¹ Freire, *Educação e atualidade brasileira*, 1-5.

While this education model bears quite a resemblance to that described in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it is important to note Freire's reliance on democracy and education as a path towards a more stable and developed Brazilian nation. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* cared far less about the fate of any nation and treated education as a means towards revolution and liberation of the oppressed. While both stages of Freirean theory favoured dialogical classroom environments with the objective of providing students with renewed consciousness of their place in society, Freire's later work outwardly condemned class stratification and supported mobilization and revolution, a stance far less lukewarm than that of his earlier writings. The crucial distinction here is how inflammatory and explicitly Marxist Freire's work became once he was exiled from Brazil. I wish to make this distinction clear because Freire is far more famous for his revolutionary writings in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which may confuse readers as to why the supposedly ideologically neutral Alves chose such a provocative literacy technique. At this point, Freire's education theory focused primarily on bringing literacy quickly to poor Northeasterners with the intention of creating responsible citizens who participated in democracy. To combat what Freire deemed dangerous fatalistic attitudes in the Northeast, his model of education not only empowered students to value their own voices in democracy but encouraged an attitude of questioning why things were the way they were and whether they could be changed.

Carlos Lyra, a coordinator during the program and one of Freire's close friends, outlined in his book *As quarenta horas de Angicos* seven objectives for Freirean culture circles. These objectives were for a plan that aimed to teach 12,000 adults to read and write in Rio Grande do Norte in three months following the end of the Angicos program:

1. Give adults mastery over fundamental abilities in language, reading, and arithmetic;
2. Promote the rebirth or creation of ideas and elevated standards of living;

3. Develop a conviction of man's responsibility (and the responsibility of the state) to educate his children;
4. Allow man to exercise his citizenship, as a voter, as a member of a free nation, and as an active participant of the democratic regime;
5. Promote the elevation of the quality of life in regards to hygiene, comfort, and food.
6. Allow him to administer his finances and life path in a balanced way;
7. Instill in him the notion that he, his wife, and his children have the right to a better life.⁴²

These objectives illustrate how Freire's education theory in the early 1960s prioritized the more practical goals of providing students with literacy skills, voting rights, and empowerment to improve their quality of life. It is also evident how masculinist language dominated these goals, envisioning the fate of Brazil as resting upon the shoulders of its men, whose voices seemed to outweigh those of their female counterparts in value. I will provide a more thorough analysis of how Freire's early work in literacy incorporated sexist discourses of citizenship in the third chapter of this thesis, where I will examine the lessons of the program more deeply.

The details behind the process of choosing the Paulo Freire method for the Angicos experiment are quite fuzzy in both primary and secondary literature. It is unclear whether this method had developed enough of a reputation to be specifically chosen by Alves as Freire's grassroots-organized literacy circles saw success in Pernambuco or if this decision was made by the project's leader, local law student Marcos Guerra. I find the latter hypothesis to be more convincing for two reasons. The first is that Guerra was active in many church-run literacy initiatives in Recife, suggesting that he may have been familiar with new up-and-coming literacy

⁴² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 152.

techniques for poor communities in the area. Secondly, Guerra was attending the University of Recife where Freire was working at the time and was also president of the National Student's Union (UNE). As a result, Guerra was likely aware of the exciting results of Freire's culture circles, which operated on a volunteer-basis, typically by university students. Regardless, Paulo Freire was afforded the opportunity of elevating the scope of his method from small-scale culture circles to a government-funded project, with the possibility of expanding culture circles around Brazil if it was successful.

The decision to use Freire's technique did bring about some tension between both left-wing and right-wing factions in Angicos. Leftists, including some of the university students who were chosen to be literacy instructors for the program, felt uneasy about the use of USAID funding in this program, likely worried that American influence would inhibit the full potential of the Paulo Freire method.⁴³ On the other hand, Freire's work was rumoured to carry radical ideas that some believed could spark revolution—a belief that eventually caused the pedagogue's exile during the military government of 1964-1985. According to Lyra, conservative worries were quelled by the choice of Angicos to house this program since it was a small, remote town.⁴⁴ The Alliance for Progress administrators seemed to have been unaware of these rumours at the beginning of the literacy program, trusting Alves' allegedly neutral goal for progress without violent social upheaval.

Interestingly, Freire was outwardly against the involvement of the Alliance For Progress in this program, stipulating that he would only participate in the project if American involvement was limited to simply providing funding. Lyra's *As quarenta horas de Angicos* contains a

⁴³ Kirkendall, "Entering History," 174.

⁴⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 15.

transcribed interview with both Freire and Lyra conducted in 1982, where the instructors talked about the development of the project:

“Paulo Freire: ... My idea was the following: I will not accept anything from the Alliance For Progress, but I have nothing against using the money that they think is theirs... If I have authority over what will be done in the project, I don’t want to know if this money comes from The Alliance for Progress or the Japanese.

Carlos Lyra: In fact, at the time of signing the agreement, there was a saying from [the Secretary of Education in Rio Grande do Norte] that became famous and exemplified exactly this: “The alliance has ended and the progress has begun.””⁴⁵

Thus, the role of the Alliance For Progress in the Angicos project was, in practice, quite limited. This was not due to any particularly Marxist goals, Freire insisted, but rather to allow for the Freire method to be practiced as it was intended. Freire’s refusal to accept help from the USAID mission made it so that none of the coordinators or the pedagogue himself received monetary compensation for the project. The project relied upon voluntary labour from the coordinators. The “money” he referred to in the interview was used for the few materials required for the project, food for the coordinators, and transportation to and from Angicos.⁴⁶ Alves agreed to Freire’s conditions, though it is unclear whether he did this out of belief in the Freire method or simply for political motives. Regardless, with the governor’s face behind the project, the Alliance For Progress trusted Alves with overseeing the operation of the literacy program.

⁴⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 182.

⁴⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 182-183.

Preparations for the Program and Implementation of Freirean Objectives

Before I begin to describe the preparatory measures for the forty hours of Angicos, a discussion on sources is necessary. My analysis of the program relies primarily on The Cooperative Education Service of Rio Grande do Norte (SECERN)'s *A experiencia de Angicos* containing diary entries written by Lyra, as well Lyra's book with a more detailed account of the experience published 30 years later, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*. These are the only primary sources that detail the events during the program from start to finish. While Lyra's diary entries provide fascinating quotations from students uttered during the lessons, the source is written entirely from the perspective of Lyra and the other coordinators, which impact both the descriptions of the students during the program and which statements uttered by students were chosen to be documented. As a result, Lyra's choices about what details to include and exclude have shaped how we understand this program. Certainly, it is the voice of the coordinators that come through most strongly in these accounts, rather than the voices of the students.

After having chosen both the site of the program and its objectives, preparations were underway to bring literacy to Angicanos. Marcos Guerra and fifteen other university volunteers were trained in Freirean methodology, and each became a culture circle coordinator. The coordinators knocked on doors and drove around the town, announcing the education opportunity and inviting people of all ages and abilities. It was through this process that were recruited for the experimental program. Before the project could begin, the Freirean methodology required that the curriculum be created using knowledge and experiences that were specific to the students in Angicos. Thus, the coordinators interviewed each of the students, asking about their background, everyday lives, and motivations for the program. Curricula for Freirean literacy circles were developed by first creating what he called an *universo vocabular*,

vocabulary universe, a comprehensive list of recurring words or phrases from these interviews that captured the spirit of the community. In Angicos, for example, this list contained mundane words such as “stove,” “heat,” or “hat” as well as words that were more revelatory of living conditions in the Northeast such as “rural,” “sickness,” or “misery.”⁴⁷ While the vocabulary universe consisted of hundreds of words, the coordinators would select eighteen words that they believed to encompass the essence of living in Angicos. The phonemes present in each of these words were just as important, as they would be used to teach students a variety of essential sounds in Brazilian Portuguese. These words were known as generative words, *palavras geradoras*, chosen with the purpose of generating dialogue in the classroom.⁴⁸

In these interviews, students were asked for their name, sex, age, place of birth, marriage status, number of children, profession, religion, goals and hobbies. The document entitled *Universo vocabular* produced during the program details these questions and the answers of the students. Of the 299 students registered, there were 156 men and 143 women, indicating an almost even split between genders. About 61% of the students were between the ages of fourteen to twenty-nine years old, indicating that most of these students were young people hoping to improve their chances of living a better life in the future. In fact, the most popular aspiration for the program noted by students was “to improve their lives.”⁴⁹ The most common profession among students was domestic worker, followed by manual labourers and farmers. Curiously, despite a seeming attitude of hope amongst students stating they wanted to improve their lives through literacy education, the coordinators described skepticism, noting that the

⁴⁷ SECERN, *Universo vocabular*, 1963, Acervo Paulo Freire, 1-2, <http://acervo.paulofreire.org:8080/handle/7891/3567>.

⁴⁸ SECERN, *Universo vocabular*, 4.

⁴⁹ SECERN, *Universo vocabular*, 3.

students were “fatalistic, nonbelievers in relation to the experiment, but curious and some enthusiastic.”⁵⁰ In Lyra’s account, he wrote that “it would have been a fading welcome” had it not been for the “conviction” of the coordinators.⁵¹

From this research, the coordinators created a list of generative words and themes throughout the program. Each day, different phonemes would be introduced to the class using one or more generative words. Each word would be split into syllabic groups which consisted of a vowel and a phoneme, initially simple and gradually increasing in complexity. The students would practice writing the syllabic groups on the board to correlate each symbol with its respective sound. The first generative word was “belota,” a local word that referred to an ornament used on leather whips common in the region.⁵² The syllabic groups in this word were “be,” “lo,” and “ta.” Once the syllabic groups had been written by the students, they would practice combining the phonemes from each syllabic group with every vowel. Thus, “b” would be written next to the vowels “a, e, i, o, u” to make “ba, be, bi, bo, bu.” The purpose of this was to establish a pattern wherein the consonant was always present with the same five vowel sounds, leading students to recognize which symbol made what sound. After these syllabic groups had been mastered, the students could create words using the syllabic groups present in belota and then those created by applying each phoneme with different vowels. From this lesson, students did not only learn to spell belota, but words like *lata*, *bala*, and *tatu*, all derived from the newly created syllabic groups using the consonants from the generative word.⁵³ Syllables were

⁵⁰ SECERN, *Universo vocabular*, 4.

⁵¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas*, 16.

⁵² Moacir Gadotti, “Alfabetizar e politizar: Angicos, 50 anos depois,” *Revista de Informação do Semiárido Edição Especial*1, no. 1 (2013): 51.

⁵³ SECERN, “Diário de uma experiência,” in *A experiência de Angicos*, April 1963, 5-6, <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/3565>.

described as “bricks” or building blocks to students, from which they could construct words.⁵⁴

Soon, the syllables became more complex, using words with more than one consonant in a single syllable, such as *expresso* and *milho*.⁵⁵

The lessons were held in the living rooms of students who owned the largest homes, where the coordinators brought chairs, desks, chalkboards, and projectors before classes began.⁵⁶ Marcos Guerra’s culture circle operated in a prison, bringing literacy education to those who faced even more significant barriers to education. The generative words were accompanied by illustrated images (likely drawn by the coordinators) displayed by a tool that was essential to Friere’s instruction: a kerosene slide projector. While there are few details on how the projectors functioned, a close look at the video created by SECERN in Angicos about the project reveals the use of a device closely resembling what is known in North America as a magic lantern. This device was essentially an oil or kerosene lamp whose light was contained in a dark box and funneled into a tube with a concave lens to intensify its rays. At the end of the tube, one could place a small painted glass or plastic sheet for the light to shine through and project the image onto the wall.⁵⁷ By this time, several kinds of projectors had existed, though Lyra’s accounts reveal that the kerosene variety was most popular in Angicos.⁵⁸ Once having projected the image on the wall, the coordinators would initiate a dialogue or debate about the word and the students would isolate and reintegrate the syllables found within the word, each week learning a new phoneme in Portuguese. The simplicity of this program is what allowed it to run so cheaply and made its operation in underdeveloped regions possible.

⁵⁴ SECERN, “*Diário de uma experiência*,” 7.

⁵⁵ SECERN, *Universo vocabular*, 4.

⁵⁶ “As quarenta horas de Angicos” produced by SECERN, 1963, YouTube video uploaded March 4 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64qUSQbc1fk>.

⁵⁷ “As quarenta horas de Angicos.”

⁵⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas*, 80, 154.



be_lo_ta

ba be bi bo bu
la le li lo lu
ta te ti to tu

FIGURE 3: Images from *Slides da experiência de alfabetização de Angicos*
Source: Acervo Paulo Freire

The question of how the students would be divided into classrooms became important as each student came with a different level of comfort with reading and writing. SECERN suggested the use of the Pierre Gilles Weil Test, a non-verbal intelligence test that would be used to organize the students into classrooms based on results and compare progress at the end of the course. Most of the students expressed much anxiety when surprised with the unexpected assessment, and Lyra reports that almost all of them struggled with the instructions. Two were reported to have abandoned the program entirely, stating “Go drive someone else crazy” or “I’ll never come again.”⁵⁹ While the absence of two students does not make a significant change to a historical evaluation of the results of the program, it may be inferred that those who stayed in the program showed more comfort in a classroom environment where testing was present, which factors into the success of the program. Since many students finished their exams incorrectly or left it entirely blank, the coordinators decided to organize the students by themselves, using their own impressions from the interviews. After it was decided which students would be grouped together, the forty hours of literacy education in Angicos could begin.

Much anticipation accompanied the beginning moments of this program. The use of an experimental technique on a large scale using not only government funds, but American dollars, would turn the country’s attention to this small northeastern town that most people would not have even known existed. Governor Alves, the state Secretary of Education and Culture, a group of São Paulo professors, journalists, photographers, and the culture circle coordinators all attended the program’s opening ceremony, establishing the importance for this experiment. A group of nordestinos who just prior were part of Northeast’s hopeless illiteracy problem suddenly became those leading the revolution against it.

⁵⁹ SECERN, “Diário de uma experiência,” 5.

Conclusion

Angicos experienced an abrupt transition from its anonymity within the vast Northeast to becoming the site of an experiment that would set the course for literacy education in Brazil. The Cold War tensions of the 1950s and 1960s pressured politicians to seek out solutions to the deeply complex issues of poverty and illiteracy in the nordeste, creating many ambitious projects to rapidly transform the region. The feverish rush for development brought about many formidable promises to the country's most vulnerable populations. Angicos, a town that served as the quintessential setting of the racialized trope of the nordestino, was the perfect testing grounds for implementing an experimental literacy technique as part of these development plans. The Paulo Freire method, while controversial, promised the solutions that politicians sought while mirroring their same urgency. Its alleged effectiveness along with its frugality made Freire's program the best choice to fulfill the long list of needs for education projects in the Northeast. In addition to Freire's accelerated approach that matched the desired pace for development projects at the time, the pedagogue's insistence on reforming rather than revolting made his idea attractive to politicians who attempted to resist the leftist political connotations associated with literacy.

Angicos' essence as a small northeastern town that had long suffered from its uneven development, harsh climate conditions, and social immobility made it so that failure would be inconsequential and success would be revolutionary. Should the program have failed to deliver its promises, the blame could have easily been cast on the students' supposed fatalism, disbelief, and backwardness tied to their racialized identity as nordestinos. Success, however, would allow for the rapid transformation of the Northeast, giving Brazil a chance to boost its international reputation and move past the misery of its most troubled region. The students of the forty-hour

program faced stakes higher than any other they had before with political officials leading them to believe that the fate of Brazil rested on their shoulders.

Chapter 2

Literacy in Forty Hours: A Complicated Reality

The classes during the forty hours in Angicos program were accompanied by the presence of journalists and photographers, documenting the execution of Freire's innovative literacy technique. A local newspaper known as the *Pau-de-arara* wrote a piece about the experience, taking direct quotes from student notebooks and detailing what they hoped their future to look like someday. After the story was published, culture circle coordinators excitedly brought the newspaper to their classrooms and tried to read them together. Many students struggled to read the paper, despite having been in the program for two months. The coordinators, at this stage of the program, expressed much frustration with the lack of progress the students had made, accusing some of "mental laziness."⁶⁰ Such frustration was not limited to the coordinators, with a student leaving the course in the middle of the program saying she was "going crazy" from confusion, suggesting the pace of the program seemed to overwhelm her and many other students.⁶¹ The latter half of the program was characterized by this tension. Many coordinators felt disappointed in their students, both because they were not attending classes regularly, if at all, and because the students who were in attendance struggled to recall earlier lessons. Meanwhile, students increasingly had trouble with attending classes due to flooding rains and familial or work obligations. The pressure to meet the forty-hour deadline that would determine the fate of the program and, supposedly, the fate of literacy in the nation, created an exceedingly stressful classroom environment for students and coordinators alike.

⁶⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 81.

⁶¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 81.

In contrast to this account, external reporting about the Angicos program deemed it a resounding success, largely shaping how it has been remembered. The program is said to have had a 70% success rate in literacy and 87% in politicization after the final exams in mid-March (though the metrics by which these percentages were derived are not explicitly detailed anywhere).⁶² President João Goulart was so impressed with these results that there were plans to create up to 3000 culture circles nationwide, attempting to bring basic literacy skills to 90,000 illiterates in 1964.⁶³ Newspaper coverage at the time reported positive student experiences and most Freire scholars celebrate the forty hours in Angicos as the pedagogue's first great success. Very few scholarly sources mention the adversity faced by students throughout the program due to its considerable commitment. The program consisted of forty sessions of approximately one hour each, excluding the first welcome ceremony on January 18, 1963. The number of hours of actual training—that is, excluding testing and practice evaluations—totaled at about 30.⁶⁴ Outside of these counted hours, students were expected to study and practice class lessons. These were taxing demands for the students, considering they were almost all workers. Importantly, the results derived from the final exams are not prefaced with the fact that more than 50% of students were excluded from this figure, given that many did not attend the exams.

What then, can be said of this seeming discrepancy? Do the details revealed in Lyra's accounts interfere with the exceptionally positive legacy of the forty hours in Angicos? In this chapter, I seek to reconcile the two realities that seem to be at odds with each other. I do not aim to 'expose' a hidden 'truth,' but rather I consider how the struggles of the students and coordinators may influence our historical interpretation of this project. Moreover, this chapter

⁶² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 171.

⁶³ *Plano: Círculos de cultura*, 1964, 2. Acervo Paulo Freire. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/2672>.

⁶⁴ SECERN, "Roteiro das 40 Horas" in *Experiencia de Angicos*, April 1963, 1-4. Acervo Paulo Freire. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/3565>.

will discuss how the political climate placed immense pressure on the Angicos experiment to deliver results as quickly as possible. I will begin this chapter by exploring the final moments of the forty hours of Angicos, discussing the tensions present in the classroom as the deadline grew near. In this section, I focus on the challenges faced by the students in their attempts to meet the taxing demands of the program, noting that many students eventually abandoned their studies in the process. Following this, I discuss the parameters and preparations for testing to measure the final results of the program. After interpreting the final exam scores, I discuss the successes of the program as they were understood by its students. Here, I will compare the struggles and triumphs experienced during the program. I will illustrate how despite the positive impacts the program left on its students, the urgency behind this program's ability to produce results concurrently impeded the very results it sought. In the last section, I examine how the political stakes placed upon the success of the Angicos program shaped the ways that its results were construed. To illustrate how the literacy course was heavily politicized, I compare the reports of the culture circles' success with reports of its subversiveness as political tensions worsened in 1964.

This chapter will take the various interpretations of the program's success and synthesize their implications to argue the following: The rushed pace of the program, one of its major marketing points, was detrimental to the learning journeys of many students. While the program's ability to deliver results in a short timeline was internationally celebrated, the historically documented experiences of the students and coordinators illustrate a general atmosphere of heightened anxiety in the classroom leading many students to ultimately cease their participation in the program due to its lofty goals. Politicians, whether right or left, presented the results of the program as part of the narrative of national progress shaped by the

language of Cold War politics, which in effect undermined the goal of delivering literacy education to as many illiterates as possible.

The Paulo Freire Method at Work

The first half of the Angicos program saw many successful moments, with students making significant progress and gradually gaining consciousness of their own capabilities. Even when facing issues such as the delayed arrival of slide projectors to their designated classrooms, students travelled up to eighteen kilometers just to check if the equipment had arrived.⁶⁵ Mané Dez Cruzeiros told culture circle coordinator Marlene, “Look, I’ll come a hundred times, but I’ll only give up when we hear the news that the machine won’t come.”⁶⁶ Exceptional learning progress accompanied this initial motivation, with students quickly picking up on lessons. Lyra described their astuteness as “something magical, provoking stupefaction in [the coordinators].”⁶⁷ Despite an initial timidity, Lyra cheered on the progress of the learners who soon began writing on the chalkboard comfortably in the presence of not only their classmates, but journalists as well. The students wrote poems, journal entries, and letters to loved ones, each enthusiastic about what they could read and write in the future.⁶⁸

While the beginning moments of the program were characterized by exciting revelations and touching learning moments, the students of Angicos struggled to achieve what was asked of them due to the program’s rapidly approaching deadline. Lyra wrote about the difficulties students faced during the forty hours in his book *As quarenta horas*. Since the program purported to achieve literacy in a mere forty hours with a projected end in April, students had to meet at

⁶⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 22.

⁶⁶ SECERN, “Diário de uma experiência,” in *A experiência de Angicos*, 1.

⁶⁷ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 38.

⁶⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 91; SECERN, “Diário de uma experiência,” 13.

least 3 times a week through January, February, and March. These lessons were held during evenings on weekdays for hour-long sessions. For the majority of students, this was a significant commitment to uphold due to their long work hours during the day. Many students came to the lessons from their jobs after having worked since dawn scrubbing the floors or working outdoors in temperatures of 40° C only to travel the long distance to their culture circle.⁶⁹ As the novelty of the program wore off, students began to realize how much time and energy they would have to sacrifice to meet the coordinators' goals. Antônio Trajano, for example, announced his departure from the program because the late evening classes took away from his sleeping hours which were scarce due to his 4am wake-up time for work.⁷⁰ Although he eventually decided to return to the program, Lyra described the students as sharing his weariness, each facing a dilemma: whether to “sate the hunger of the mind or fill the belly.”⁷¹

Attendance became a central concern for the coordinators in every culture circle as student absences steadily increased in the last week of February and moving into March. This is partially explained by the aforementioned difficulty of juggling workplace, familial and scholarly duties. However, as Angicos moved into the flooding season known as *inverno*,⁷² these issues became even more acute. The commute to the lessons became far more challenging, as the harsh rains flooded the streets and the powerful winds tore down trees. The rains forced outdoor manual labourers to manage and prepare for the potential destruction from flooding, increasing their work hours significantly.⁷³ Lyra wrote in his account that in just one week of rains, the program “lost 80 students.”⁷⁴ It is unclear whether Lyra meant that these students left the

⁶⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 60-62.

⁷⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 62.

⁷¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 61.

⁷² Note that *inverno* is also the Portuguese word for winter, but refers to the flooding season in the Northeastern context.

⁷³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 58-60.

⁷⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 59.

program altogether or were simply absent during the week; however, in either case it is clear that the frequency with which the coordinators met with their students was unreasonable given the circumstances. For a program that prided itself on its ability to seamlessly integrate within the community it operated in, the struggles of the students reveal how the inflexible deadline caused many students to either frequently miss their classes or abandon the program entirely.

The coordinators held meetings more frequently in the program's last weeks to discuss new methods of increasing attendance in their culture circles, which saw a significant dip. With the approach of the forty-hour deadline, the coordinators grew anxious about the students' performance in the program. It is important to recall that forty hours only referred to the hours of instruction within the classroom which meant that students were expected to study outside of this time. Thus, the commitment extended beyond just the time spent in the culture circle. Pedro Neves, whose culture circle attendance dropped from fifteen participants to six, "[did] not know what else to do to create different motivations daily," noting that the students who did attend were the ones who struggled the most.⁷⁵ The coordinators seemed deeply troubled about the trajectory of the program thus far, showing some resentment for the students who left the program and even those who stayed. Lyra wrote that those who quit the program were coincidentally the best students, leaving behind students that one coordinator called "a lost cause."⁷⁶ While the coordinators were described as "observing and feeling in the soul and in the heart of the participants, this conflict" between their scholarly goals and their day-to-day obligations, it still seemed that the coordinators believed that the students' barriers were self-imposed, asking if these barriers were "natural or cultural?"⁷⁷ Seemingly aware of the glaring

⁷⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 58.

⁷⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 58.

⁷⁷ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 59.

issue with asking students to prioritize literacy education in such conditions, some coordinators did come to the conclusion that there was “a need for an adjustment of the school calendar to [better suit the students’] reality.”⁷⁸ Despite this consciousness, the deadline approached unchanged and classes met with the same frequency, only now with fewer participants.

Testing For Literacy

Not only did the accelerated nature of the program make it difficult for many students to attend classes, but the pressure to successfully attain literacy skills by the fortieth hour made students acutely aware of the ramifications of their performance in the course. It was difficult to forget about the watchful audience due to the frequent presence of photographers, journalists, and government officials observing the Paulo Freire Method at work. As tensions grew between coordinators and students regarding attendance, another challenge would further intensify the anxiety in the classroom: a final exam.

The students suffered under the pressure that came with the news of the exam. It was likely that the state education administration SECERN required numbers for evidence that the Paulo Freire Method could produce measurable and applicable results, meaning that these tests would be the official measure of the program’s efficacy. Once the coordinators began discussing the possibility of a final exam in their culture circles, the students began to show signs of apprehension. Lyra described instances of students making unusual mistakes or giving up before even attempting to write something on the board, stating that they “[didn’t] know” how to complete fundamental exercises that they successfully completed just shortly before.⁷⁹

Furthermore, students constantly asked about the date of the final session, seemingly in an effort

⁷⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 29.

⁷⁹ SECERN, “Diário de uma experiencia,” 15.

to ensure their absence on the day of the exam.⁸⁰ The coordinators did adjust the pace of their own culture circles to match the progress of their students and incorporated two practice exams to gently introduce testing environments with no weighted consequences, though these practice exams occurred only two days before the final exam on March 15th. While the program would have likely benefited from a slower, more gradual introduction to formal testing, Lyra's accounts do not reveal an effort to increase the length of the program to quell student worries. Instead, coordinators encouraged students to "not waste this opportunity to learn to read, the only of its kind in Brazil," urging that they simply "put in the effort."⁸¹ The success of the program was made out to be the personal responsibility of the students which, consequently, also meant that they would be equally culpable for its failure.

Students were tested in two categories: literacy and politicization. While there is no clear evidence detailing how these exams were graded, the definitions of literacy and politicization that were used during the program suggest some grading criteria. For voting purposes, one would be considered literate if they were able to write their name and a simple sentence.⁸² While the goal of politicization was never clearly defined in the program, Lyra's list of objectives for the program highlighted two goals that are tied to the political consciousness that the Angicos program aimed to generate: (1) the development of a sense of personal civic responsibility through active participation in democracy and education, and (2) an understanding that one has a right to a better life/standard of living.⁸³ From this, we can understand politicization training as developing a consciousness of one's place within the democratic system as well as the power

⁸⁰ SECERN, "Diário de uma experiência," 15.

⁸¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 92.

⁸² IBGE, *Censo Demográfico de 1960*, XIV.

⁸³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 152. Note that these two goals are somewhat of a paraphrase of the list Lyra provided, as the complete list contained overlapping objectives. See Chapter 1 for the full list of objectives.

that the people, *o povo*, possess to bring about change in their own communities. As discussed in the chapter prior, both literacy and politicization instruction were intertwined in the Paulo Freire method through the use of generative words, breakdowns of essential Portuguese phonemes within these words, and in-class debates. In practice exams used to prepare for the final test, literacy and politicization were tested for separately, one focusing more on simple sentence forming, spelling, and syllable separation while the other asked students to provide opinions on issues of education, agrarian reform, and liberation. The final exam combined both categories and consisted of 4 questions:

1. Write about the city (Angicos).
2. Whether God is good or bad for the city.
3. If there is misery in Angicos.
4. After having learned to read, what would you like to be?⁸⁴

While Lyra never explicitly states whether it was the coordinators or members of SECERN who marked the exams, it is likely that the coordinators took on the task themselves given their aversion to help from those outside of Angicos, including the Alliance For Progress and SECERN. Lyra wrote that only the first and fourth questions were answered “satisfactorily,” as the students explained their answers with some detail.⁸⁵ This is partially because the second and third questions were phrased such that students could answer with simply “yes” or “no.” While the fourth question was adequately answered by the students, most repeated their answers from the interviews conducted at the beginning of the program, showing little change following

⁸⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 103.

⁸⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 103.

the program.⁸⁶ Some students did not come to the final exam or did not complete the exam, though precise details of which students and how many were not documented. Lyra's diary entries do not elaborate much on the students' learning beyond these observations. Exam results differed greatly from class to class, the lowest average being 4.02 points out of 10.0 in Pedro Neves Cavalcanti's class and the highest being 8.52 out of 10.0 in Giselda Salles' class.⁸⁷ The averages were calculated from two scores out of 10.0 for literacy and politicization, though the grading criteria for these categories were never specified. Students tended to score higher on politicization, in most cases having an average politicization score two points higher than their literacy score.⁸⁸ The overall average score in literacy was 70% while the average in politicization was 87%. These averages were collected from the scores of the students who were present for the exams, which comes out to only 123 out of 299 enrolled students.⁸⁹

Despite the challenges that Lyra detailed throughout the program, many past students have reported positive changes in their lives following the course. These interview testimonies collected by Federal Rural University of the Semi-Arid (UFERSA) and Freirean historians offer nuance with more positive accounts of the outcomes of Angicos than Lyra's diary entries and the exam results. Maria Eneide de Araújo Melo reports, for example, that her father was able to get a higher-paying job after improving his literacy skills in the program.⁹⁰ Students like Francisca Andrade Araújo recalled further pursuing literacy studies after the course, using the skills she

⁸⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 103.

⁸⁷ SECERN, "Resultados testes" in *A experiência de Angicos*, April 1963, 1, 3. Acervo Paulo Freire. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/3565>.

⁸⁸ SECERN, "Resultados testes" in *A experiência de Angicos*, 1, 3.

⁸⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 166-171.

⁹⁰ Maria Elizete Guimarães Carvalho and Maria das Graças da Cruze Barbosa, "Memórias da educação: a alfabetização de jovens e adultos em 40 horas – Angicos (RN), 1963" in *Alfabetizar e conscientizar* ed. Moacir Gadotti (São Paulo, Brasil: Câmara Brasileiro do Livro): 161. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/90002?show=full>.

learned for the rest of her life.⁹¹ Interviews with ex-students from the documentary produced by UFERSA for the 50-year anniversary of Angicos reveal similar positive accounts of the program. Many shared that the program provided them with improved confidence and a stronger sense of self. As Luzia Andrade put it, “we learned that we could also be people, too,” revealing how the program humanized many illiterates even to themselves. Several students recalled learning to write their own name and the names of their loved ones for the first time, Manoel Bezerra stating it was the most important thing he had learned.⁹² While the literacy skills that were taught in these lessons are referred to as mere seeds by several of the interviewees, each of these ex-students described their flourishing growth after its end.

Maria Eneide’s journey towards becoming an educator also has roots in the Angicos literacy course. While she was just six years-old, her father sent her to the literacy lessons in his place when he was occupied with workplace duties. She would take notes and participate in class discussions for her father, and would teach him the skills she learned once she arrived back home. Maria recalls this experience as the site where she discovered her passion for teaching; “First I learned to teach my dad, then I came to wish to be a teacher. I wanted to be *his* teacher, and I did it.”⁹³ Maria went on to graduate with a degree in Pedagogy and Public Service and works as an educator today.

Idália believes that the program impacted not only her individual life, but the lives of everyone in Angicos. She boldly states that the classes “mobilized the entire city,” and that the experience was “almost a revolution,” in which she wanted to take part.⁹⁴ Most students do not

⁹¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 13.

⁹² “40 horas na memória: Resgate da experiência dos alunos de Paulo Freire em Angicos/RN” produced by TV UFERSA, 2013, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkN97kOriJc&t=366s>.

⁹³ “40 horas na memória: Resgate da experiência dos alunos de Paulo Freire em Angicos/RN.”

⁹⁴ Fernanda Zauli, “1a turma do método Paulo Freire se emociona ao lembrar das aulas,” *GI*, April 3, 2013. <https://g1.globo.com/rn/rio-grande-do-norte/noticia/2013/04/1-turma-do-metodo-paulo-freire-se-emociona-ao-lembrar-das-aulas.html>.

use such strong language about the program, suggesting that Cold War paranoias may have caused a dilution of some of the more spirited memories. Popular accounts of the event tend to share a softer interpretation of the politicization lessons, such as that of Francisca de França, stating students simply became “conscious of their rights and responsibilities.”⁹⁵ Regardless of how this aspect of the program is remembered, students recall that this program encouraged letting go of fear more generally, to accept the vulnerability that comes with learning. While the program reached its forty-hour deadline, many past students emotionally describe how they wanted the program to continue, that they sought out more. For example, Anita Maria believes she might have become “a different Anita” today had she been able to continue the course, believing that she did not “become something better,” seemingly comparing her experience to that of other students.⁹⁶ While the UFERSA interview with Anita is not clear about whether she wished for the continuation of the program simply because she enjoyed it or because she missed lessons due to reasons detailed in the Lyra diaries, her perspective reveals that the brevity of her experience was disappointing.

Interviews with past students of this program provide several insights on the forty hours in Angicos. Many students greatly benefitted from the skills they learned in this program including a fundamental familiarity with the alphabet, common phonemes in the Portuguese language, how to write their own names, and in many cases, improved levels of confidence. Some students saw significant changes in their lives as a result of continued education following the program’s end, such as improved work opportunities, greater ease with personal or creative

⁹⁵ “40 horas na memória: Resgate da experiência dos alunos de Paulo Freire em Angicos/RN.”

⁹⁶ “40 horas na memória: Resgate da experiência dos alunos de Paulo Freire em Angicos/RN.”

expression, and varying levels of political involvement and consciousness. Others, while grateful for the experience, recall learning some basic lessons but felt that the program was cut too short.

Notably, these attempts at piecing together a collective history of student experience in the forty-hour program do not provide any obvious answers to how we interpret the documentation of student challenges in Lyra's book. The descriptions of how difficult it was to travel to these lessons, sacrifice work hours, miss out on some of the week's earnings, or to be observed in such a vulnerable space are not addressed in these oral histories. Regardless, these accounts provide much valuable insight on what students gained from the Angicos program. While many did not emerge with sufficient literacy skills to be allowed to vote, many students were provided with fundamental tools to continue a lifelong educational journey. More than this, they came out of the program with the belief that they were capable of change, both inside and outside themselves. The students' efforts in the Angicos program proved the fatalism associated with *nordestinos* to be a myth, inspiring hope that they could improve their lives if they demanded it.

However, the challenges that Lyra described in his diaries reveal another facet of the story of Angicos. While the students developed many valuable skills that they kept even after the program's end, the coordinators' attempts to feverishly achieve the results required to call the course a success ended up excluding the majority of their participants. The inflexibility of the forty-hour deadline meant that students were expected to sacrifice their familial and work obligations to be part of the triumphant narrative in Brazil's national project to eradicate illiteracy. Certainly, these overzealous goals were shaped by the Cold War rush for development, putting the political goals of the state over the needs of the program's students. These problems

were not inherent to the Paulo Freire method by any means, but a product of the political discourses that shaped the goals of the program.

The Political Uses of Success in Angicos

The literacy experiment in Angicos received glowing media coverage both during and after its operation, praising the innovative method's ability to deliver results. Various newspapers, including the *Tribuna da Imprensa* and the *Jornal do Brasil (RJ)*, called the project a "revolution" even before its finish, reporting immense progress among the students in the first month or two of operation.⁹⁷ Interestingly, the plans for the expansion of culture circles were in the works even prior to the release of the testing scores. An excerpt from this *Jornal do Brasil (RJ)* article reflects the assuredness with which the program would reach its goals: "The progress that is observed among the registrants is not uniform, actually having large inequalities between the percentages [of student performance despite] identical lessons. Regardless, according to the coordinators of the course, the success of the pilot project is *guaranteed* and, by the end of the experience, the results *will* demonstrate the feasibility of the realization of the courses in all of the state."⁹⁸ In the same article, Ivo Cardoso wrote that once the results of the program were finalized, 1000 teachers would be trained by SECERN to take on the literacy education of a projected 100,000 students by 1965. Most newspapers cited Goulart and Alves' plans for culture circles as evidence of the program's success, which had supposedly shown enough potential in the first months. While the testing scores were indeed a part of the story of triumph, the decision

⁹⁷ Luis Lôbo, "A hora e a vez de Angicos," *Tribuna da Imprensa, do Rio*, February 13, 1963. http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/DocReader.aspx?bib=154083_02&Pesq=Angicos&pagfis=12389; Ivo Cardoso, "Angicos faz experiência revolucionária na alfabetização de adultos," *Jornal do Brasil (RJ)*, February 20, 1963. http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015_08&Pesq=alfabetização%20freire&pagfis=36654.

⁹⁸ Cardoso, "Angicos faz experiência revolucionária." Emphasis mine.

to expand the Freire Method across the state seemed to be made before its efficacy was proven to be true.

At the closing ceremony on April 2, 1963 Alves called the experience “victorious,” and unveiled his three-year plan for culture circles to quickly and effectively address illiteracy in Rio Grande do Norte.⁹⁹ While Alves’ speech focused on the expansion of similar literacy programs across the state, Goulart’s speech evoked a more patriotic image of this success:

“... above all, students, young and adult students, all of you will be able to read, too, the grand charter of the Republic: the Constitution of our homeland, that made you citizens and has the duty to provide you with this minimal literacy.

... Today, it is the first letters of the ABCs, but tomorrow it will be the laws that are read by women and men, young and adult, that have finished this course and, in learning to read, have learned, above all, how to defend them.”¹⁰⁰

In this era of Cold War developmentalist nationalism, the positive outcome of this program was loaded with implications for citizenship and education. Firstly, there finally seemed to be a cheap, quick, and effective solution to the nation’s dismal literacy rates in even the most underdeveloped regions. Not only would Brazil be able to build a better reputation on the international stage due to its potentially improved literacy rates, but with the money saved on more expensive education initiatives, Brazil could use the resources saved on other more robust industrial projects. Secondly, the expansion of literacy also meant expansion of the vote, replacing what was perceived to be a sense of fatalism in Brazil’s poorest regions with active, dutiful citizenship. A larger electorate was an important goal in the making of the post-Vargas nation for twenty years, thought to encourage stronger unification of the nation despite its deep

⁹⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 112

¹⁰⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 112-113.

problems with inequality. The speed with which the program seemed to be able to deliver these results suggested that Brazil could reach its dream of modernity sooner than ever imagined, without “[looking] to the left nor to the right, but to God,” the kind of politically neutral approach desired by conservatives in the Cold War era.¹⁰¹

Given the hasty decision to implement the Freire Method throughout the state before the program had even ended, the key political goals that this program served, and Lyra’s reports of student challenges to complete the program, can it be said that the “success” of this experiment was somewhat over-inflated? While there is no clear answer to this question, it is certain that the program was not immune to the politics of the time. The success of Angicos was not only expected, but guaranteed by the coordinators and the government officials involved in the program while the plans for their expansion in Rio Grande do Norte were already in motion. The interference of political agendas becomes even clearer as the public discourse about Freire’s method started to shift in the year after the program’s end.

Though Freire’s innovative technique generated excitement over the potential to drastically reduce literacy rates in Brazil in just three years, by the first months of 1964, the pedagogue’s method was believed to pose a threat to national security. This article from the *Jornal do Brasil (RJ)*, the same newspaper that touted Freire’s victory just a year before in Angicos, published a scathing article about Freire’s method:

“A supposed miraculous literacy method is sung in prose and verse, to justify the use of revolutionary and subversive processes upon illiterate adults: the famous Paulo Freire method does not exist. It consists of a mystification, the kind that appears every now and then, reannouncing the growth of hair on bald heads.

¹⁰¹ “Jango: Nenhuma submissão aos caprichos dos extremados,” *Diário de Natal (RN)*, April 3, 1963. http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=028711_01&Pesq=alfabetização%201963&pagfis=13229.

... What is new about the Paulo Freire method and what had never been done before in Brazil, is the rigorous formation of Marxist monitors, tasked with distilling revolutionary and subversive ideals along with syllables and concepts... It does not represent any kind of achievement of intelligence in the world and the teacher's job serves no purpose."¹⁰²

This quick turn against the Paulo Freire method can be explained by the national panic over João Goulart's presidency, which began to lose its grip on the nation. While Goulart's title was controversial from the beginning, growing tensions between conservatives and leftists reached a peak when Goulart publicly announced his request of the military's support in achieving his reforms. The partnership between Freire and Goulart in the development of the national plan for literacy quickly lost its favour with the people. The supposedly ideologically neutral goal of literacy suddenly became perceived as a leftist attempt to infiltrate and indoctrinate the classrooms of the marginalized, who were most prone to rebellion.¹⁰³ Freire was deemed a Marxist revolutionary, guilty of attempting to instigate workers' strikes in Angicos.¹⁰⁴

These examples of external reporting about the literacy experiment in Angicos reveal how the local political climate greatly influenced the goals of the program and how it was popularly understood. Angicos' success was not simply determined by the level of literacy reached by its students; rather, the program's perceived success hinged upon whether its political implications fit the agenda of those in power. Increasing Cold War tensions radically shifted the public view of the literacy program and its results, explaining how the story of Angicos was exploited for political purposes and later condemned as a leftist conspiracy.

¹⁰² "Sandra vê em Sambaqui "agente da politização das massas"," *Jornal do Brasil (RJ)*, March 15, 1964. http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/DocReader.aspx?bib=030015_08&Pesq=%22Paulo%20Freire%22%20politização%2087%%2070%&pagfis=50842

¹⁰³ *Depoimento de Paulo Reglus Neves Freire*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Depoimento de Paulo Reglus Neves Freire*, 10.

Conclusion

Despite the excitement generated over the possibilities for literacy education in Brazil that came with the expansion of the Paulo Freire method, the story of Angicos had a mere few months of glory. Following the coup, students were encouraged to burn their own notebooks to avoid being sent into exile like Freire and other coordinators.¹⁰⁵ Many other documents recording the success of Angicos met the same fate. Severino Araújo, an ex-student from the Angicos program, reflected on the chaos and confusion of the period in a reunion with Freire, asking him “That thing about everyone being communist... our papers, our notebooks that we had, we burned it all. Can someone explain what happened? What was it that didn’t allow us to continue to learn?”¹⁰⁶

The intense pressure placed upon the students of Angicos to help the state achieve its goal of eradicating illiteracy severely inhibited the program’s ability to reach the results it sought. The course’s rushed pace and inflexible deadlines marginalized over 50% of the students who desired to be part of the revolutionary project, limiting the Paulo Freire Method’s potential to change the lives of many more people. While numerous students who participated in the program emerged with fond memories about their educational journeys and improved quality of life, the inability to accommodate the needs of its students undermined the program’s impact.

The perceived “success,” then, of the program actually had little to do with its ability to bring literacy skills to its students. Not even the coordinators could say if their students really were literate by the end of the forty hours; as Lyra put it, they would only know “in praxis.”¹⁰⁷ Rather, the Freirean literacy course was heavily politicized and valued according to its ability to

¹⁰⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁷ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 108.

serve the national agenda. It must be noted that Freire's method itself was not intended as a tool of control over the country's classrooms. However, the success of the program could be easily exploited as a triumphant tale of national progress, given the plans to expand culture circles across the state even before the outcome of the program was official.

It is challenging to reconcile the varying understandings of the pilot project in this small, northeastern town. While the results of the program were at times twisted to fit the political agendas they served, it is undeniable that many students' lives changed for the better. There were certainly areas for improvement in the implementation of the literacy program, though these adjustments would certainly be in-line with the Freirean philosophies on which the program was based. After all, Freire believed that *organicidade*, organicness, was essential to the seamless implementation of an education program. That is to say, an educational institution must be informed by and adapted to the needs of the community in which it operates.

The impacts of the program are perhaps best understood with one of the program's final moments, at the closing ceremony on April 2nd, 1963. While President Goulart patriotically delivered his speech about the fate of literacy in Brazil, Angicos student Antônio Ferreira spontaneously rose from his seat and asked to speak to the President. Slightly taken aback, the President allowed the student to speak his piece. Ferreira addressed each of the officials present, telling them how satisfied he was with the literacy program, that now he could "read some things, thank God."¹⁰⁸ He requested that the officials maintain culture circles in Angicos, that the program presented a real solution to Brazil's struggles with inequality and illiteracy. Pleading the President to think of the need in the Northeast, Ferreira recognized that he and the other students

¹⁰⁸ SECERN, "Diário de uma experiência," 20.

were the people, the *povo*, that governments aim to serve. His sentiments were echoed in the various letters written by the students to the President, given to him during the ceremony.¹⁰⁹

Ferreira's display of courage reflects the complexity and importance of the Angicos project to its participants and to the Brazilian nation. Interrupting the President's speech about the political successes of Angicos, Ferreira urged the leader to think about the people who had been historically neglected in the Northeast. The program pushed students to not only reflect on the needs of the community, but to have the courage to demand change.

¹⁰⁹ SECERN, "Diário de uma experiência," 20-21.

Chapter 3

Class, Race, and Gender Discourses During the 1963 Angicos Literacy Course

After the first weeks of teaching the fundamental mechanics of literacy, the coordinators shifted the focus of their lessons to include more politicization, having students write down phrases that reflected musings about their own realities. In just three weeks of classes, the culture circles went from simple lessons about letter forms and sounds to debating over workers' rights and income inequality, writing down phrases like "The people go cold and hungry" or "We are the ones who build the roads—yet we eat dust!"¹¹⁰ The powerful statements generated during the program were characterized by the consciousness of the inequality faced by the Angicano students each day. It was Freire's belief that this consciousness would stir an agency in the students to demand change in their communities, whether by the vote or, if need be, through organized protest. By the end of the program, the coordinators observed remarkable progress in politicization as students passionately vocalized how their needs were not being met and outwardly denounced the political leaders and landowning elite that made this so.

As students reflected on their realities, they quickly adopted the use of the term *o povo*, the people, who were united in a struggle against those who oppressed them. To transition from the ignorant *massa* (masses) to the empowered *povo*, one needed education through which they could achieve adequate consciousness and relieve themselves from their supposed fatalism. Throughout the program, *o povo* was synonymous with "the poor", and their greatest enemy was the rich, who profited from their labour. The program encouraged students to fight for their rights as poor workers, demanding the establishment of unions for higher wages and regulated

¹¹⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 80; SECERN, "Diário de uma experiência," 14.

working hours. In this way, the Freire program sought to unify the students under a common conflict which would thus mobilize their efforts towards achieving the same goals. The people's struggle was framed as a class struggle which could only be addressed through education.

Despite this attempt to unify Angicano students, there are some glaring issues with the literacy curriculum's exclusive focus on class. The dualistic distinction of the rich and the poor as the only parties in the conflicts faced by the students could not address the ways that their experiences were shaped by their racial and gender identities. Moreover, the silences present on these facets of oppression fostered tension in the classroom concerning *who* could enact the transformative change envisioned by the program. While curriculum portrayed its path towards liberation as one that could unify all the people of Angicos, the curriculum did not recognize how the means towards freeing oneself were racially and sexually coded. The primary methods of demanding rights for the poor that the program stipulated were education and workers' organization, both of which carried significant racial and gendered implications.

Scholars of Brazilian history have proposed an understanding of education as a means of distancing oneself from the supposed degeneracy that came with more racialized identities. This ability to transfigure race comes from education's historic association to whiteness. Thus, the precondition of education for liberation cannot be understood without its racial context, which caused tension within the classroom as the site of this racial transmutation. It was not the ignorant, fatalistic nordestino that could enact change; rather, it was the enlightened Brazilian citizen whose racial identity was sanitized and redeemed through education. Furthermore, while the mobilization of workers certainly had potential for improving the living conditions of families through unionizing, the worker in this context almost exclusively referred to males. As a result, the Angicos curriculum implied that the path towards transformative change was one that

could only be paved by men, disregarding young single women who worked informally and did not have the numbers nor audience to demand rights. These facets of oppression certainly complicate the program's attempts at unifying the students of Angicos towards one specific cause, because the vague goals of "liberation" or "social transformation" looked different for each person.

This chapter reflects on the reductive discourses of oppression in Freire's literacy program in Angicos. I will begin by conducting a discursive analysis, exploring how the curriculum encountered the issues of class, gender, and race. Each facet of oppression will be discussed in their own respective section in which I will examine didactic materials, transcribed in-class debates, and Lyra's diary entries to determine how oppression was interpreted by the curriculum and whether there were tensions present in the classroom due to Freire's class-centric approach. My findings suggest that the literacy course presented a class-reductionist understanding of oppression that excluded many students from its vision of liberation and failed to acknowledge the hierarchies of power within the classroom itself. As a result, the transformative potential of Freire's pedagogy in Angicos was considerably reduced by these limitations. In the following section, I look to Freire's texts written after the literacy program in Angicos for evidence of how the pedagogue echoed and amplified this class-focused vision of oppression in years to come. Using the works of Katherine Weiler, Chia-Ling Yang, and Cameron McCarthy, I discuss why my observations about the program and the subsequent theories on oppression pose problems for Freire's utopian vision of liberation.

O Povo, o Pobre, and o Trabalhador: Establishing Class Solidarity

Throughout the Angicos program, the coordinators sought to bring consciousness to their students about their social position using the generative words derived from interviews conducted with students before the program's start. Each of these generative words was accompanied by debate "themes" on which coordinators would touch, all of which focused on either class, unionization, or voting. Not only would these themes aim to re-present the struggles of poverty to the students, but also discuss how workers' unions, agrarian reform, and voting rights could be used to end these struggles. This focus on class-based oppression led to debates that very clearly established an "us" and "them" style of rhetoric, wherein the students of Angicos consisted of the downtrodden, exploited "us," and rich agricultural landowners were the oppressive "them." The program sought to establish a sense of unity among its students via these class lines; it was this shared struggle that brought these students together and could mobilize them towards change. This section will explore the ways in which conscientization on the dimension of class fostered unity among students, shaping a dualistic understanding of oppression.

In the program's effort to generate discussions about the students' reality, coordinators sought to emphasize the difference between the rich and the poor. That is to say, not only did coordinators encourage discussions where students reflected on their own experiences, but also compared these experiences with those of greater economic standing. For example, the lesson on the word *cozinha*, or kitchen, had students discuss what they ate, whether they ate at all, and why many did not have sufficient food in their pantries. Suggested subjects for debate revolved around whether students could afford the very goods they were producing or even the plants they

would cultivate in the fields they worked.¹¹¹ This consequently led to discussions of privileged landowners who did not toil the way their workers did, yet could afford to continue feeding their families. Students considered how landowners, through virtue of their ownership, could lay claim to the goods cultivated on the fields, yet those who were tending to them each day did not possess the same right. This lesson thus shaped student understandings of their own struggle as a direct consequence of the privilege of the rich; the excess of one meant scarcity for the other. In the coordinator Madalena's class, a student arrived at the conclusion that "kitchens were for the rich, because the kitchen of the poor is always on the floor."¹¹² As the program progressed, students expressed harsher sentiments of resentment for the rich and their advantages over the poor. In Pedro Neves' class, one student stated "The rich does with the poor what the mosquito does with us: they suck our blood."¹¹³ In shaping the experiences of the rich and the poor as ones that are in opposition of one another, students in the Angicos program were encouraged to understand these experiences as a conflict.

Students were also reminded of painful choices they had grown used to due to their material conditions with words such as *xique-xique*, which referred to a breed of cactus that grew throughout the sertão and was typically fed to cattle, but could be eaten by people in times of drought when there was no other food. The plant is not typically sought after for human consumption in any other circumstance and was seen as a symbol of desperation and misery in the nordeste. Those of the upper classes viewed the consumption of this plant as undignified, creating clearer cultural lines between the poor and the rich than there were between the poor and livestock. Coordinators highlighted that resorting to such measures were not a universal

¹¹¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 56.

¹¹² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 58.

¹¹³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 89.

experience for those living in the nordeste, but unique to the poor as the rich were able to continue feeding their families in times of climate disaster. Students were also reminded of strict landowners who forbade them from eating the xique-xique that grew on the fields they worked on, as they were meant to feed the animals. This lesson generated phrases from the students illustrating the connection between the poor and xique-xique such as “Xique-xique is the salvation of the poor during drought,” and “xique-xique is the friend of the poor.”¹¹⁴ Taken together, these lessons exemplify how the program brought forth the stark differences in experience between the poor and the rich in the Northeast, amplifying a passion against this injustice. In framing the students’ experience as that of “the poor,” the Freirean program was able to unify students under these shared hardships and differentiate them from the experiences of wealthier inhabitants of the Northeast.

Another commonality that the program used to unify students was the workers’ plight. Many generative words were used to inspire discussions about the challenges faced by workers on the job, the necessity of work for the poor, and the importance of unions in preventing abusive labour conditions. In the transcribed debate about the word *chibanca*, or pickaxe, from Marcos Guerra’s culture circle, Guerra brought attention to the significance of work in the lives of the students and whether their work was valuable. Students discussed how they believed their work was as valuable as any other, noting that “everyone has their art,” their own specialized knowledge that cannot be easily replaced.¹¹⁵ Despite students recognizing the value of their own work, many lamented how they were not compensated adequately for their long, arduous hours. For example, Senhor Manezinho pointed out how workers in the nearby city of Macau were earning far more than those in Angicos. “In Macau, one servant [makes] 800 cruzeiros to work,

¹¹⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 79-80.

¹¹⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 120

here they pay 300, maybe. It's absurd!"¹¹⁶ He told the class how his son, who worked as a boatman in Macau, told him that it was workers' unions that allowed for higher wages, since workers' strikes placed pressure on companies to comply with their demands. Guerra added to his point, quite explicitly highlighting the importance of class solidarity in the unionizing process, asking "their work is being more valued because they joined with others of the same class, right?... Would it be possible to do the same things [here] as the boatmen?"¹¹⁷

The class went on to discuss how most workers in Angicos could barely afford food to sustain their families despite working seven days a week for long hours of the day.¹¹⁸ Guerra told students that it was a lack of class consciousness that allowed Angicos to remain this way, that this injustice could only be rectified in demanding that landowners pay higher wages and grant their workers weekly rest days.¹¹⁹ To end the lesson, Guerra and his students ended on a message of unity and hope for change:

“ — So, we have to move towards a solution. Who will find a solution for Brazil? Is it *o povo* who are politicized, or is it people who have the perspective of the masses?

— It is *o povo*.

— And do you, sir, think that Brazilians are already capable of being *o povo*?

— It's beginning now. It's beginning and I am praying to Jesus that he may

achieve this, though I myself may not, but my children... “¹²⁰

I have maintained the use of the word *povo* here to reinforce the use of the singular pronoun “o,” consolidating the plight of workers to that of the singular *povo*, the people. This

¹¹⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 123

¹¹⁷ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 123

¹¹⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 127

¹¹⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 124-127.

¹²⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 135.

was also to avoid confusion from the word *gente* used in the same quote, which also translates to “people,” but without the political connotations of o povo.

Similar to the discussions over chibanca, the debate in Rosali and Pedro Neves’ culture circle about the generative word *goleiro*, or goalie, discussed the importance of worker solidarity in demanding better working conditions and workers’ rights. Rosali and Pedro used a metaphor of soccer teams to represent two forces in opposition to each other, the rich (landowners) and the poor (workers). They also referred to these teams as the “strong” and “weak” teams, illustrating the clear disadvantage that the poor faced.¹²¹ The soccer field was the workplace where this struggle occurred, and though the coordinators never clarified what winning the game meant in this metaphor, it was implied that victory represented a better quality of life. Rosali and Pedro explained that while the strong team had the upper hand over the weak team, the only way that the weak stood a chance was through seamless coordination and synergy. While individual “players” could work tirelessly to win the game, without collaboration, this toil was for naught. Senhor Vicente expressed his frustration with wasted energy that reaped little benefits:

“— When we work a lot, do we always win, sr. Vicente?

— We win a lot of trouble!”¹²²

To win the game alone was a futile effort. The coordinators urged the students that the only way to triumph over the advantaged team was to work together, symbolizing the formation of an effective workers’ union. They warned the students of how the other players may react to a newly streamlined team, that they might take the ball away to prevent the poor from winning the

¹²¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 137.

¹²² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 138.

game.¹²³ Rather than concede, Rosali and Pedro encouraged their students to work together to buy their own ball, that is, to seize control over their own workplace in some capacity. Now, it is not clear here whether the coordinators suggested that workers should seize the means of production in Marxist fashion or if they should simply have equal say over their working terms and conditions. Regardless, the coordinators explicitly denied the proximity of these ideas to communism, stating that they were simply teaching their students how to pave the way towards “making a good living” by informing them of the value of unions.¹²⁴ By the end of the debate, many students were convinced of the power of unions, stating that they were meant to “demand their rights” and for “everybody to be each other’s brother.”¹²⁵

In the various lessons explored above, there are clear indications of the effort to unite the students of Angicos in their common class struggle. Firstly, the coordinators presented the experience of the poor as one in opposition to the rich who benefit from the system that inhibits the poor from improving their material conditions. As the discussion of the *cozinha* and *xique-xique* exemplify, the program’s lessons contrasted the scarcity of resources for the poor with the abundance of resources for the rich to convey that this injustice had clear beneficiaries from the system that oppressed the poor. Throughout these lessons the coordinators used dichotomous distinctions to explain socioeconomic relations in Brazil, such as the rich and the poor and landowners and workers. Such distinctions based on class lines illustrate an attempt to unify Angicanos and mobilize them towards the common goals of greater economic equality, better working conditions, better pay, and the right to a better life. The soccer metaphor in the *goleiro* lesson placed the oppressor and the oppressed in direct conflict with each other, where the

¹²³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 140.

¹²⁴ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 141

¹²⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 144.

victory of the oppressors was the historical precedent. The coordinators urged the importance of class solidarity among workers so that they may triumph over the team that consistently dominated the soccer field. It was these harsh lines between the rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, that allowed the coordinators to foster a sense of unity in their classrooms. This was further enhanced by use of words preceded by the singular pronoun *o* to refer to the students, such as *o povo* (the people), *o pobre* (the poor), and *o trabalhador* (the worker). In encapsulating the collective using singular nouns, the coordinators were able to bring students together in their shared struggle, informing them of solutions to bring about social change.

Workers' Rights or Men's Rights?: Gender and Exclusion in the Path for Social Change

While the transcribed debates and recorded student comments reflect a sense of solidarity amongst students, the use of the workers' plight as a unifying struggle is problematic when considering differences of gender. While there were many female workers in the program, the majority of women worked in domestic spaces as housekeepers, seamstresses, and launderers. Despite this, the conversations surrounding work and its value exclusively addressed the labour experiences in male-dominated spheres. Moreover, the positions that most of the female students occupied were typically informal or independent, meaning that they could not organize in the same way that, say, a group of rural workers could. This section will explore the ways in which the program encountered issues of gendered difference in conversations of labour rights.

To illustrate the ways that the Angicos program failed to address the realities of some of its students, I will provide some context on the program's demographics. The Freirean literacy course had almost even numbers of men and women. Among the 143 women, there were ninety-four housekeepers, ten launderers, three embroiderers, one midwife, one prostitute, and thirty-

four women whose professions were not specified. Of the 156 men, there were forty-six manual labourers, thirty-eight farmers, twenty-four artisans, eighteen bricklayers' assistants, fifteen bricklayers, seven general workers, three carpenters, three drivers, two mechanics, one cattle rancher, one soldier, and one newspaper boy. It must be noted that these numbers add up to more than 156 men, suggesting that some men had multiple jobs at once. Out of all 299 students, only five were unemployed.¹²⁶ Thus, the vast majority of the students were workers and subsequently had the potential to be included in discussions of labour, working hours, and wages. However, the work between men and women differed greatly due to the spaces they occupied. As women worked in domestic spaces, their work was unsupervised, informal, and often bled into their personal lives. Meanwhile, male student labour spheres mostly consisted of physically taxing outdoor work that more directly engaged with the local economy. In short, women's work was confined to private spaces while men's work had greater public visibility.

Given the program's methodology of using the students' reality to generate critical thought about the social structures that shaped their experiences, the even split among men and women would suggest that the experiences of both genders would receive equal representation and discussion. When analyzing the projector slides that were used during the program, we can determine that this is not the case. The slides primarily displayed settings that were male-dominated, such as saltworker facilities, tending to cattle, working on the fields, or a shoe-maker's station, and several more. Female-occupied spaces portrayed by the slides consisted of only the kitchen, a seamstress' station, and the outdoor food market.¹²⁷ Given that the vast majority of employed women who participated in the program worked as housekeepers, we may

¹²⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 163.

¹²⁷ Paulo Freire and SEC, "Slides da experiência de alfabetização de Angicos," Projector slides, 1962, Acervo Paulo Freire, <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/handle/7891/607>.

consider this a partial explanation for the lack of variance in women's settings portrayed in the Angicos program. However, the discussions of labour in male-dominated spaces showed more fruitful debates over workers' organization while the female-dominated domestic spaces seemingly did not generate the same passion for justice. The following paragraphs will explore the bias towards male spheres in the Freirean literacy lessons.

Since the culture circle discussions featured conversations about working conditions and labour organization, women were frequently excluded due to their absence from the spaces represented in the lessons. Interestingly, it was the same method that attempted to bring about unity and class solidarity in the classroom that excluded a significant portion of its members. An example can be found in the discussion of the word *sapato*, or shoe. The coordinators stimulated a debate about the importance of shoemakers and leather production to the local economy, and the importance of shoes in everyone's daily life. Similarly to the chibanca debate, students were encouraged to think about how the work of shoemakers was invaluable to the lives of their clients. In highlighting the value of this work, coordinators sought to show students that they could demand workers' rights and unionize because so many relied on their craft. To relate to the women, they used the example of how women relied on the shoemaker's craftsmanship for their "elegance," because shoemakers created high-heeled shoes.¹²⁸ While many women in the program worked as seamstresses and launderers, work that served a similar function as shoemaking, there were no recorded prompts or comments about the value of this sort of work. While "them, the shoemakers, poor, and humble, together, can influence the destinies of the nation and solutions for their class," the importance of female workers was neglected and unexplored.¹²⁹ Rather than include women in the conversation as workers, the coordinators

¹²⁸ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 39.

¹²⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 39.

illustrated how they relied on shoemakers as consumers for their feminine allure and perceived social capital. This distinction differentiated the experiences of male and female students while neglecting what this distinction implied about the path for liberation for female workers. As a result, we may determine that the term “worker” as it was used in the Angicos program was male-coded and thus exclusionary of female workers in the program. ‘Woman’ and ‘worker’ were treated as mutually exclusive categories.

There were several instances in the program where glaring opportunities for conversations about inequality within the household went unacknowledged. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the women in the program were employed, the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) census of 1960 suggests that they were likely paid far less for their work than men.¹³⁰ In both the sapato and chibanca discussions, students were asked about whether their work was valued.¹³¹ In referring to work, based on the responses in the more detailed transcribed chibanca debate, the coordinators seemed to mean formal, monetized work. Thus, domestic labour, a central theme in the topic of gender equality and the wage gap, was not considered in classroom discussions. While certain slides reflected that some spaces were primarily occupied by women, such as the slides displaying the generative words *cozinha* (kitchen) and *almofada* (pillow) and *bilro* (bobbin), the culture circle debates shifted focus from what the work in these images entailed and instead discussed how they related to class. In the *cozinha* lesson, where there was an opportunity to consider how women primarily occupied domestic spaces and whether unpaid domestic labour was valued, the coordinators discussed the scarcity of food in the students’ pantries. While scarcity was universally experienced by male and female students, and thus, was a more inclusive and unifying discussion topic, this example

¹³⁰ IBGE, *Censo Demográfico*, 58; Kirkendall, “Entering History,” 173.

¹³¹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 39, 120.

illustrates how the program encountered the ways in which gender differentiated and shaped experience.

While the in-class debates about male-occupied labour sectors sparked spirited discussions over the injustices faced by workers each day, there was no documented evidence of such fervor over women's work. Throughout the program, Lyra collected notable phrases from students in different culture circles that reflected their politicization progress. While the lesson mentioned above about *sapateiros* (shoemakers) generated pages of notes over the value of work and necessity of workers for the operation of the world around them, the lesson on generative words *bilro* and *almofada* was just barely mentioned in Lyra's accounts. There were no student phrases documented for the discussions about these generative words, which were present for every other generative word in the program. Unfortunately, unlike the *chibanca* and *goleiro* debates, the discussions of *cozinha* and *almofada* and *bilro* were not transcribed, and thus, it is impossible to know exactly what was said during these debates and whether women's familiarity with these domestic spaces came through in the culture circle discussions.

While the literacy program did encounter instances of gender difference in the representation of the reality of the students, there was a clearer articulation of men's role in social change than there was for women. Discussions of labour and union organization, by virtue of their exclusive presence in male-dominated spaces, excluded women and women's work. While the topic of labour saw an opportunity to unite both men and women under a common struggle, the lessons of the program reveal that its failure to consider how labour was differentiated across gendered lines inhibited the unity that the coordinators sought. As a result, the Angicos program presented a male-centric vision of citizenship that implicitly suggested that women could not enact the kind of transformative change that men could.

Race and Education: “The Darkness of Ignorance on One Side, and Knowledge on the Other.”¹³²

The representations of class and gender were far more explicit than those of race due to the racial homogeneity in the classroom. The curriculum did not directly address the ways in which the students were marginalized being from the underdeveloped Northeast region. Such a racial analysis in the program would have required broader lessons that provided ample historical and geographical background for their students. Since the coordinators aimed to keep the lessons localized and tangible for their students, many of whom did not know what state they lived in,¹³³ this kind of knowledge would not have made its way into the program. Furthermore, the intimate relationship between race and class regarding the racial category of the nordestino made it so that an understanding of “one’s place in the world,” as Freire often put it, could be at least partially understood through a class lens. While there was no observable tension amongst the students themselves on the basis of race, there were instances of tension between the coordinators and the students due to a difference in education. The coordinators themselves were likely from the Northeast, as they attended the University of Recife. But, their identity as educated urban dwellers distanced them from the racialized identity of nordestino, due to a historic association between education and whiteness.¹³⁴ This section will examine how the link between race and education created tensions between the students and the coordinators in the classroom.

The racialized stereotypes associated with nordestinos were closely tied to class, region, and education. As discussed briefly in the first chapter, the slowness with which the Northeast

¹³² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 93

¹³³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 75.

¹³⁴ Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945*, (Duke University Press, 2003): 3-7.

developed (or did not develop) in comparison with the rest of Brazil created regional inequalities in the country. While the metropolitan South excelled economically due to its coffee plantations and rapidly developing infrastructure, the unforgiving landscape and sparse populations in the Northeast made for a stubbornly poor region. With the lighter-skinned South having ample economic means to provide education for most people in urban areas and the darker-skinned Northeast facing stagnant low literacy rates, an association with whiteness and education emerged.¹³⁵ To fully understand the tension between the students and the coordinators, it is essential to understand the historical links between education and race, which Jerry Dávila explores in his book *A Diploma of Whiteness*. Historically, darker-skinned individuals were considered degenerates in Brazil, deemed uneducated, unclean, and poor by upper-class whites. This quote from Monteiro Lobato's 1914 essay about the hypothetical nordestino "hillbilly" Jeca Tatú captured the ideas of inherent backwardness and laziness associated with the region: "It is proved that you have a tremendous zoo of the worst sort in your blood and guts. It is that cruel menagerie that makes you puffy, ugly, slothful, inert."¹³⁶

As race-mixing became gradually more common in the first half of the twentieth-century, racial categories also became more flexible. While those with darker skin or Indigenous or African features were still considered lower in overall social fitness than those with white skin, certain behaviours allowed racialized individuals to distance themselves from their supposed degeneracy. Education, among other things such as wealth and hygiene, served as a vehicle through which darker-skinned individuals could redeem themselves from their condition. In other words, education could increase one's proximity to whiteness despite their skin-colour and

¹³⁵ Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity*, 1-2; Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness*, 3-7.

¹³⁶ Dain Borges, "'Puffy, Ugly, Slothful and Inert': Degeneration in Brazilian Social Thought, 1880-1940," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25 (1993): 250; Monteiro Lobato, "Urupês" in *Urupês*, 9th ed. (São Paulo, 1923): 254.

ancestry.¹³⁷ While the students in the program were likely not much darker or more visually racialized than the coordinators who were also from the Northeast, the lack of education and economic capital further entrenched the students into the racial stereotypes about nordestinos. The coordinators, having had a university education and living in an urban setting, both distanced them from the pejoratives associated with the identity of nordestino, and allotted them greater social capital and likeness to whiteness. As a result, the coordinators were able to engage in perpetuating racial stereotypes about nordestinos, while dodging their impact themselves.

There are several instances within the program that reveal how the coordinators engaged in racial stereotypes despite being from the nordeste. For example, the culture lesson which introduced the students to the Freirean style of pedagogy and philosophy displayed a caricatured image of a nordestino man to the students. He was drawn with sallow cheeks and protruding bones, his face reminiscent of a skeleton to reflect his malnutrition. In response to the image, the students giggled, suggesting the drawing's inaccuracy and insensitivity. What would have been an otherwise troubling image, a reminder of the physical condition in which many lived, provoked laughter instead. The drawing was more likely a reflection of the coordinators' own perceptions of *sertanejos*,¹³⁸ revealing their own prejudices as city folk. Beyond this example are the instances of the coordinators using language fuelled by racial stereotypes to refer to the students. The initial interviews conducted with the students described them as “complacent, conformist, indifferent, fatalistic, unbelieving in experience, malnourished, and prematurely aged,” reflecting a common interpretation of the sertanejo as unwilling and unable to change and improve their life.¹³⁹ Such descriptions portrayed the identity of nordestino as a disposition

¹³⁷ Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness*, 4-6.

¹³⁸ Sertanejo refers to someone from the sertão, the semi-arid region of the Northeast.

¹³⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 155.

towards poverty, stagnancy, and misery. The region and its people were often depicted within a toxic cycle, where the land took away its people's wealth and life force and the people, once immiserated, were left without agency to change this way of life.¹⁴⁰ As an article from the *Tribuna da Imprensa (RJ)* put it, “Nordeste da peste!”, Northeast of the plague!¹⁴¹

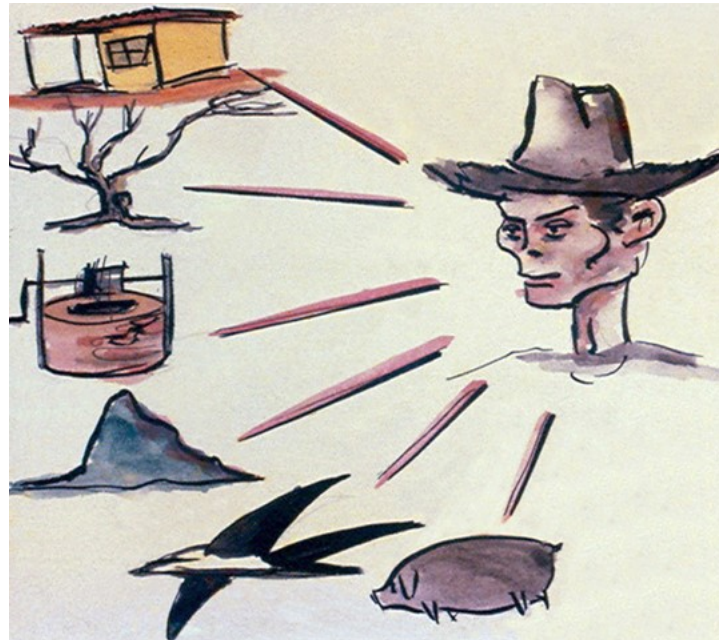


FIGURE 4: Illustration of a Nordesteño man from *Slides da experiência de alfabetização em Angicos*

Source: Acervo Paulo Freire

As tensions began to build in the program with the approach of the forty-hour deadline, the coordinators seemed to more directly engage with racial stereotypes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, coordinators grew frustrated with their students as attendance dwindled and many began forgetting fundamental knowledge from the beginning in the course, accusing them of “mental laziness.”¹⁴² Nearing the end of the program, Pedro Neves expressed much

¹⁴⁰ Sarzynski, *Revolution in the Terra do Sol*, 17.

¹⁴¹ Lôbo, “A hora e a vez de Angicos.”

¹⁴² Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 81.

disappointment with his class, believing that less than 70% of his students could read anything. In his words, his students were “backward people.”¹⁴³ This frustration revealed the coordinators’ belief in the stereotype of fatalism in the Northeast, that the region was doomed to misery because of the complacency of its people. Although the coordinators’ belief in bringing education to the Northeast seemed to be an effort to resist the stereotypes of fatalism in the nordeste, in practice, the coordinators resorted to explanations of supposedly racially predisposed behaviours as a major limiting factor in reaching the program’s goals.

While the coordinators were not antagonistic to their students, their reactions to the challenges in the program were certainly shaped by the historic racialized rhetoric of the time. The responsibility of taking care of the persistent issues of poverty and illiteracy in the region were thrust upon nordestinos, seen as the very obstacles inhibiting change in the Northeast. An excerpt from Freire’s speech to the students following the culture lesson illustrates how the fate of illiteracy in the Northeast was believed to have hinged on their success in the program, consequently placing the responsibility on them had it failed:

“Brazil, my friends, cannot continue with this large number of our fellow Brazilians that do not read or write. So, we must resolve Brazil’s problem, as in Angicos as in our entire country. We must, then, end this story of the Brazilian man not reading or writing, and through reading and writing, give to the Brazilian man the possibility of acquiring culture...Beginning to quickly learn to read and write, you are actually helping us all to prove to Brazil, that it is possible to read and write more quickly, like this.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 81.

¹⁴⁴ SECERN, “Diário de uma experiência,” 4.

The attitudes of the students, too, were shaped by the common racialized rhetoric of the time. Throughout the program, the students, while creating new words with the syllabic blocks they had built in their literacy lessons, wrote disparaging words about themselves on the board. “*Bobo*”—dumb, “that’s what we are,” one student wrote on the board in Gizelda’s culture circle.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, one student made the word *pateta*, meaning fool, to refer to herself and her classmates in Valquíria’s class.¹⁴⁶ While the coordinators worked to uplift their students and convince them of their own agency, this task came with the racial assumption that they were not aware of it in the first place. Considering the students’ comfort with writing such self-deprecating phrases on the board for the class to see, it may be said that these racialized assumptions about intelligence and agency were part of their reality, to put it in Freirean terms. The students did not perceive these comments to be an admission of low self-esteem but rather, a fact about their being and degeneracy as sertanejos.

These examples illustrate how the program encountered instances of racial tensions in the classroom due to historical links between race and education. Despite being from the same region, the coordinators’ social status as urban students both distanced and immunized them from the racial stereotypes surrounding the nordestino identity. While the coordinators’ efforts to bring education to the students of Angicos challenged the myth of fatalism in Northeast, they succumbed to the temptation of this racial stereotype as pressures over meeting the forty-hour deadline began to build in the classroom. This suggests that emancipation via education was heavily shaped by racial discourses of the time, allotting nordestinos the opportunity to distance themselves from their racialized identity through literacy. Contrastingly, those who failed to learn at the desired pace of the coordinators were cast off as backward peasants, unable to

¹⁴⁵ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 37.

¹⁴⁶ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 40.

overcome their supposed genetic behaviours. It is clear that the coordinators themselves did not apply Freire's technique of critical inquiry towards their own racial prejudices, internalized from a historical precedent that disparaged nordestinos for their skin-colour and poverty. We can observe, here, that the coordinators' failure to address and understand the dynamics of race in Brazil generated tensions in the classroom. The meek attitudes of the students throughout the program reveal how racial stereotypes shaped their realities, demonstrating the lost opportunity for Freire's methodology of problem-posing education to seek liberation from these disparaging tropes.

Freire and Class-Reductionism

The issues present in the Angicos program regarding its interpretations of class, gender, and race did not stop at the literacy course's close. Freire's work in Angicos generated much academic buzz over the potential for cheap, quick, and effective literacy programs that provided students with a political education. Promptly after the program's finish, Freire began writing about his experiences in adult education and published books where he theorized on education more abstractly. The pedagogue stated in a 1993 interview with Cabugi TV "I consider Angicos one of the points, one of the moments, one of the places where much of my work, my thought, took root."¹⁴⁷ Thus, the observations and experiences from the Angicos program went on to influence Freire's future work, including his most famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This section will examine how Freire's writings repeated and amplified the problems with race and gender encountered in the forty-hour literacy program in Angicos. I will begin by outlining how the Angicos program influenced Freire's education theories in his *Alfabetização e*

¹⁴⁷ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 13.

conscientização and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I will then introduce secondary scholarship to help illustrate how these later, more refined education and liberation theories carried over the class-reductionism of the Angicos program.

Freire's early work tended to focus on how education could make a more authentic democracy out of Brazil, as those who suffered under oppressive social structures could use their vote (which was restricted to literates) to inhibit such structures from expanding. *Alfabetização e conscientização*, published shortly after the Angicos program in 1963, detailed Freire's reflections on his experience in adult education in Brazil. In this source, Freire presented his vision of the process of literacy education and conscientization, which he understood to be a mutual process. The pedagogue wrote about the importance of adopting a "critical attitude" as a learner to understand the problems that shaped their reality and eventually, once having achieved consciousness, taking "critical action" to change this reality.¹⁴⁸ Critical action in this case simply refers to participation in the democratic system, which would resist the "anti-dialogical" decision-making of top-down governments.¹⁴⁹

Throughout this publication, Freire made reference to the elite few who sat atop the hierarchy and benefited from the system that excluded the voices of the marginalized. He did not establish the clear class lines as depicted in the Angicos program; however, he did evoke the language of "o povo" and those who take advantage of them. It is quite possible that his reluctance to use language oriented towards class stemmed from the fear of being accused of Marxism, which was especially intense in 1963, less than one year before the right-wing military coup. Although, the pedagogue's work in Angicos illustrated how he interpreted o povo to be synonymous with "the poor," indicating that his understanding of social stratification was class-biased. The dualistic

¹⁴⁸ Paulo Freire, *Conscientização e alfabetização: Uma nova visão do processo*, (Universidade de Recife: 1963): 8.

¹⁴⁹ Freire, *Conscientização e alfabetização*, 9.

distinction between o povo and the elite reflects the reductive notion of oppression that does not recognize how people can participate in the role of the oppressor while experiencing oppression of another kind. For example, the coordinators' wealth and education in comparison to their student's distanced them from the social situation of Angicanos which leaves the question of whether the coordinators were part of this elite whose voices were favoured in democracy. Thus we can see how the blindness to oppression on the basis of gender and race from the Angicos program manifested itself in Freire's *Alfabetização e conscientização*, primarily through the lines between the elite and the people.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed reiterated this dichotomy between the elite and those who suffered under them with the harsher categorizations of oppressor and oppressed. This book was written during Freire's time in exile in Chile while he worked with the Christian Democratic Party to deliver literacy education in the countryside and bring about the support of *campesinos*, peasants, for development projects in the nation.¹⁵⁰ Not only was he able to refine some of his theories on literacy education, but due to Freire's distance from the conservative Cold-War paranoia in Brazil, the pedagogue was able to more outwardly announce the revolutionary potential of education in a way that was at least initially perceived as working towards the Eduardo Frei administration's vision for positive social change.¹⁵¹ While the Frei administration was later denounced by Freire and other leftists for being too conservative, Freire's work in adult education with *campesinos* in Chile along with his initial ventures in Angicos fuelled much of his writing about the oppressed being placed at the margins of society by their oppressors.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 63-65.

¹⁵¹ Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 80-82

¹⁵² Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 80-82

Pedagogy of the Oppressed begins by establishing the relationship between the oppressed and their oppressors, stipulating that the path towards liberation for the downtrodden can only be paved by the oppressed themselves. While the oppressed have been stripped of their humanity, seen as no more than animals by those who have pushed them to the lower rungs of society, Freire believed that it was only the oppressed who can liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor. This vision of liberation is one that breaks free from the mould of oppression that has been set historically, avoiding the pitfall wherein the oppressed mistake liberation for an individualistic endeavour where breaking free from their oppression simply means becoming an oppressor themselves rather seeking out a new system entirely. Thus, Freire acknowledged how the oppressed may behave as an oppressor due to their internalization of this social order; however, this analysis of oppression maintains that the oppressed can emerge from their oppression as an oppressor, taking on the inverse role. As a result, Freire created an oppressor/oppressed dichotomy that does not consider whether degrees of oppression can exist in different spaces on the basis of different social categories. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* thus presented an analysis of exclusively class-based oppression. This reductive analysis of oppression was carried over from the categorization of the elite and o povo in Freire's earlier work, which stemmed from student experiences in Angicos.

The object of the pedagogy envisioned by Freire was for the oppressed to reclaim their full humanity, a result of the "critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization."¹⁵³ Freire believed schools to be the sites where this critical discovery could be achieved; however, the pedagogue deemed the traditional model of education counter-productive to the liberational potential of education. He introduced the "banking"

¹⁵³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000): 48.

concept of education as an instrument of oppression, wherein teachers are authoritarian and static at the top of the classroom hierarchy. In this model, teachers dominate the conversation in the classroom in lecture-based education, closed off to questions and discussions from students. They “deposit” information into the minds of students as if they were simply receptacles, having students simply accept these ideas without thinking critically about their origins or implications.¹⁵⁴ As a result, classrooms become anti-democratic and students are not permitted to outwardly and confidently question the ideas that are taught. Student passivity in turn leads to apathetic acceptance of the status quo, a practice that allows oppressors to continue benefiting from the oppressive societal structures in place. Freire proposed an alternative model, where power in the classroom is decentralized and the teacher/student barrier is abandoned. Both students and teachers become learners in a dialectical process of debate and discussion of ideas. The classroom became a site of knowledge-sharing and questioning, where there is a dialogue among students and teachers that generates “a constant unveiling of reality.”¹⁵⁵ Rather than feeding information to students as unquestionable truth, this “problem-posing” education understood reflection and discussion as essential to the learning process. Freire deems this process *conscientização*, conscientization or consciousness-raising. Only through thinking critically about the way we exist in the world may we be granted the agency to change it and liberate the oppressed from rigid, anti-dialogical systems that exclude the voices of the marginalized. In the joint effort by the student and the teacher, the classroom was the site for critical analysis of the political reality in which it was situated and considered alternative paths for a liberated future society.

¹⁵⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81.

While the feature of critical reflection on hegemonic structures that oppressed the marginalized in this education model did not limit one's ability to consider alternative expressions of oppression, the Angicos program's vision for liberation was grossly oversimplified. Contemporary scholars on social justice-centered pedagogies have long critiqued Freire's disproportionate focus on class as the primary oppressive force in society. The dichotomous classification of oppressor/oppressed, often articulated as the simplified "haves" and "havenots," has faced criticism from scholars like Weiler and Yang, due to its failure to consider race and gender within the equation of oppression.

The emergence of cultural studies in the 1980s lent greater consideration to the racialized and sexualized facets of oppression, understanding these social categories as neither entirely independent nor entirely dependent on each other. In understanding the ways that race, gender, and class interact to create unique experiences of oppression in different spaces, some cultural theorists have stressed the importance of understanding the complexity and contradiction of oppression on the basis of each category simultaneously.¹⁵⁶ For example, Weiler critiques Freire's theory of oppression for its class essentialism, arguing that the failure to consider oppression on the basis of race and gender leads to unaddressed tensions in the classroom for those who are marginalized in those social categories. As a result, this analysis of oppression overlooks the ways in which one may be oppressed in one regard, but be an oppressor in another—a contradiction to the dualistic distinction that urges deeper thinking beyond the binary. Weiler's analysis on the vision of oppression disrupts the Freirean vision in which the organization and unification of the oppressed relies on common experience. Her reflections on feminist pedagogies reveal that resisting the idea of an "inevitable unity" evoked by any term of

¹⁵⁶ Cameron McCarthy, "Rethinking Liberal and Radical Perspectives on Racial Inequality in Schooling: Making the Case for Nonsynchrony," *Harvard Educational Review* 58 no.3 (1988): 274.

identity (poor, woman, etc.) and valorizing differences in personal experience may better address heterogeneity in the classroom while still standing against oppression more generally.¹⁵⁷ Yang's case study in a women-only adult education institution in Sweden similarly illustrates how diverse experiences with oppression in a classroom of migrant and non-migrant women do not come together to create a unified vision of liberation. She asserts that understanding these differences is essential in deconstructing the hegemonies that perpetuate the hierarchies of oppression, as the unifying and liberatory power of education "lies not inherently in the category of the oppressed, nor in the students' and teachers shared histories or identities as 'migrants,' nor in their experiences with discrimination."¹⁵⁸

Taken together, these critiques outline how Freire's reductive understanding of oppression complicates the vision of liberation outlined by his publications. The tendency to universalize oppression as one common experience on class lines can generate tensions within the classroom wherein each student's experience with oppression is shaped by their identity. Such tensions were present in the Angicos program, whether they were between students themselves or between the coordinators and the students.

Conclusion

In an interview with *Mémoria Viva* with TV Universitária in Natal in 1983, Paulo Freire told the reporter a story about a construction worker who stood up on his feet to comment on a speech that the pedagogue gave at an event for the parents whose children attended his primary school.

¹⁵⁷ Kathleen Weiler, "Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference," *Harvard Educational Review* 61 no.4 (1991): 459.

¹⁵⁸ Chia-Ling Yang, "Encounters between the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor': rethinking Paulo Freire in anti-racist feminist education in Sweden," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 19 no. 4 (2016): 851.

“—Your speech was very beautiful doctor superintendent... Doctor, I don't know the house you live in, but I will venture to describe it. You must live in a house that, first, is loose on both sides (a detached house on the plot). You must have a room just for you and your wife. How many kids do you have?

— Two boys and three girls.

— One room for every girl and, at least, then, one room for the two boys, inside the house.

[Freire:] Man, it was like he had gone there himself! I responded:

— That's exactly right!

— You have a bathroom, you have these things that all connect to electricity and melts things and juices them... You go out in the morning, your children bathe, eat. If they have any old minor sickness, the doctor comes. At night, when you come home, they are well because they've eaten. They are happy, wearing clean clothes. So you can talk to them, you can kiss them, ask them how their day was at school. When it's seven o'clock, they go to sleep soundly, your head doesn't worry about them at all. Now at my house, doctor, it's not like this at all! Our house is a house that has only one room, in which we all sleep, all mixed together. The boys don't eat, the boys don't even have water to take a bath, the boys don't have, doctor, they don't have anything. When I get home from work, doctor, the boys are crazy because they're hungry, they're tired, they're irritated. It turns out the other day, at four in the morning, the noise from the factory wakes me up!

[Freire:] Yes! It is because the factories, in this country, wake up all the communities with their whistles, they give themselves the right to wake up an entire city whistling, because it is calling out that which belongs to them, which is manpower, which is the force of labour. And he said:

— Now you see sir, if in your house you did not have this dialogue you preach, you would deserve all the criticisms. But even to have dialogue at home, doctor, doesn't cut it. Because what I need is to sleep, and I bang on their doors for them to shut up, for them to calm down and for me to sleep.”¹⁵⁹

Freire shared this quote to convey the importance of “reflecting on your own class position” as an educator, to understand how this could impact the reception of your message.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 184-185.

¹⁶⁰ Lyra, *As quarenta horas de Angicos*, 185.

His interview revealed how his own status, despite being from the nordeste himself, had people question whether his efforts for workers' solidarity and class-unity were genuine. The construction worker's comments on Freire's values suggest how the pedagogue's goals for emancipation through education were likely perceived as overly romantic by those who required this liberation the most. While the educator's inspirational works about the transformative power of education certainly had their merit, the vagueness with which liberation was defined generated frustration amongst those who continued to suffer from poverty in different ways.

Freire's categorization of his students as o povo who faced a common struggle failed to address the ways that individual experience shaped each person's path towards liberation. In attempting to mobilize the students towards demanding "workers'" rights, the exclusive focus on male-dominated labour inhibited the same class-consciousness for female workers.

Consequently, there was no articulation of how female workers could participate in enacting social change that impacted their spheres of labour, despite facing similarly long working hours, even lower wages, and family responsibilities. Moreover, the coordinators' negligence of racial tensions in the classroom resulted in their own complicity in the oppression towards nordestinos. The universalizing tendencies of the Angicos curriculum in effect excluded many students from its vision of liberation, inhibiting the transformative potential of the literacy program.

CONCLUSION

Despite the technique's supposed potential for Marxist indoctrination, some aspects of the Paulo Freire method continued to be used in Brazil immediately following the pedagogue's exile. The military government established the Brazilian Literacy Training Movement (MOBRAL) in 1967 which used the Freirean technique of generative words, though these were not determined through the community-specific research conducted for culture circles. The generative words used by MOBRAL were universal across the country, deemed ideologically neutral, and meant to foster a sense of national unity and citizenship.¹⁶¹ Literacy programs implemented by MOBRAL brought illiteracy rates in the country down from 40% to 25% between 1970-1980.¹⁶² While these figures are significant, it is important to recall that MOBRAL was federally funded and widespread, unlike Freire's culture circles which were never attempted at a similar scale.

Freire's influence in the country returned in full force after his return to Brazil in 1979. His ideas about literacy and adult education inspired the creation of literacy centres nationwide. These programs did not share the kind of urgency displayed in Angicos, prioritizing literacy over the speed with which the courses were completed. The Paulo Freire Education Centre in Ceilândia, for example, has taught 15 million adults and elderly people how to read and write since its opening in 1985.¹⁶³ Since Angicos, the prolific educator has built an international reputation and has had several monuments erected in his honour in Brazil.

¹⁶¹ Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 157.

¹⁶² Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War*, 158.

¹⁶³ "Inspirada em célebre educador, estudante aprende sobre a vida ao ensinar adultos a ler," Ministério da Educação, updated September 23, 2016, <http://portal.mec.gov.br/component/%20tags/tag/39711-metodo-paulo-freire>.

However, it would seem that the motives and efficacy of Freire’s method remain as hotly contested today as they were back in 1963. With the rise of right-wing populism in the country and the election of Jair Bolsonaro, the public discourse on Freire’s legacy has shifted once again to depict the pedagogue as a communist radical. Bolsonaro appeared on *RedeTV!* in 2022 stating that Brazil’s embrace of the Paulo Freire method has created a “factory of militants.”¹⁶⁴ Evoking the Cold War language of modernity, he stated it was necessary to remove the use of this technique from the country because it “did not lead Brazil to any progress.”¹⁶⁵ The former President has been reported calling the pedagogue an *energúmeno* (ignorant imbecile) while denouncing the Ministry of Education’s public broadcasting channel that aired documentaries and news about Freire’s life and method.¹⁶⁶ Despite the overwhelmingly positive strides in adult literacy since the widespread implementation of the Paulo Freire method, Bolsonaro has publicly criticized the achievements of the “leftist idol.”¹⁶⁷ To further strip the titles away from the famed educator, Bolsonaro has halted the dissemination of the Medalha Paulo Freire, a medal awarded to exceptional teachers and institutions in the Brasil Alfabetizado literacy program.¹⁶⁸

While the right continues to attack the Paulo Freire method, educators and students in Angicos celebrate the legacy of the forty-hour program as a “symbol of the fight against illiteracy.”¹⁶⁹ As decades have passed since the closure of the Angicos program, the Instituto

¹⁶⁴ Taísa Medeiros, “Bolsonaro critica método Paulo Freire: ‘Fábrica de militantes’,” *Correio Braziliense*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/politica/2022/09/5033893-bolsonaro-critica-metodo-paulo-freire-fabrica-de-militantes.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Medeiros, “Bolsonaro critica método Paulo Freire.”

¹⁶⁶ Guilherme Mazui, “Bolsonaro chama Paulo Freire de ‘energúmeno’ e diz que TV Escola ‘deseduca,’” *GI*, December 16, 2019, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/12/16/bolsonaro-chama-paulo-freire-de-energumeno-e-diz-que-tv-escola-deseduca.ghtml>.

¹⁶⁷ Mazui, “Bolsonaro chama Paulo Freire de ‘energúmeno’.”

¹⁶⁸ Agência O Globo, “Governo retoma programa para alfabetizar e acaba com a medalha em homenagem a Paulo Freire,” *Folha de Pernambuco*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.folhape.com.br/noticias/governo-retoma-programa-para-alfabetizar-e-acaba-com-a-medalha-em/215212/>.

¹⁶⁹ Francisco das Chagas Fernandes, “Brasil celebra os 50 anos de Angicos” in *Alfabetizar e conscientizar* ed. Moacir Gadotti (São Paulo: Instituto Paulo Freire, 2014): 14.

Paulo Freire has commemorated milestones of progress in the small Northeastern town. In 2005, then President Lula Da Silva visited Angicos to speak at the graduation of 3000 students from the Brasil Alfabetizado literacy program in the municipality. Given the population of just over 11,000 at the time, this was an unbelievable feat. In 2010, the IBGE reported that 96.5% of people aged six to fourteen have received or were enrolled in primary education, a rate even higher than capital city Natal's 96.3%.¹⁷⁰ Such numbers would have been absolutely unimaginable in 1963 and have only been possible because of the work of Freire. Angicos has seen huge improvements in education since the pedagogue's work in the small town, which turned national attention toward addressing the problems in Brazil's most vulnerable regions.



FIGURE 5: Guaraci Gabriel's iron sculpture of Paulo Freire and the words "40 Hours" erected in Angicos
Photographed by Raiane Miranda
Source: *GI*

¹⁷⁰ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, "Angicos: Educação," 2010, *IBGE*, <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/rn/angicos/panorama>.

The efforts of right-wing politicians like Bolsonaro to inflame the political debates surrounding Freire's work in the country have inspired passionate claims about his encouragement of either leftist revolution or radical subversion. This is also true of claims made about the program in the past, with Alves and Goulart using the test results of just over 100 students as evidence of their political successes while right-wing reactionaries panicked over mere discussions of class and one workers' strike following the end of the course. In either case, the outcomes of the Angicos program have been hyperbolically portrayed as the beginning of complete transformation in Brazil, whether in the "right" or "wrong" direction. My thesis has argued that these representations of the Angicos program's results are misleading. The complicated history behind how this program came to be known as a success (or an omen for the country's downfall) reveals how its ability to deliver literacy had little to do with its perceived impact. Rather, it was the political discourses that surrounded the course's accomplishments that magnified its potency.

The story of Angicos has always been and continues to be subject to the political tensions of the time. The transformative change that the program promised could have never been apolitical, for it threatened to disrupt the status quo that allowed the region to remain underdeveloped for most of its history. Despite the efforts of politicians to keep literacy education "neutral" from external politics, the ideas of progress and modernity were themselves profoundly political. However, the improvements to the lives of Angicanos throughout the years suggests that the significance of the program's outcomes go beyond being simply politically symbolic. The increased attention to the needs of the municipality and the Northeast as a whole brought essential resources to Brazil's most vulnerable regions. The forty-hour literacy program in Angicos may have not been a revolution, but it drew attention to the fact that the town was in

dire need of one. As former Angicos student Maria Eneide put it, “ The paper was burned, everything was burned. But the words remained. The seeds had already been planted. And they grew.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ “40 horas na memória.”

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