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The Activism of an Educator and Writer: Iracema Furtado Soares de Meireles and the Vargas Dictatorship (1937–1945)

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Abstract: This article is situated at the intersection of the History of Education and biographical history, adopting a theoretical and methodological perspective grounded in culture, politics, and education. Focusing on the life stories of women writers and educators as essential themes for renewing Brazilian educational historiography, we seek to examine the historical and biographical aspects of Iracema Furtado Soares de Meireles (1907–1982), author of the primer *A Casinha Feliz* (1970), in dialogue with her condition as a woman, a leftist activist, a teacher, and a writer of educational materials. The objective is to problematize, in particular, the professional trajectory of this Pernambuco-born author in light of the alliances, confrontations, and forms of resistance she established and experienced during the presidency of Getúlio Vargas, with emphasis on the *Estado Novo* (1937–1945), a dictatorial period marked by persecution, imprisonment, torture, exile, and death. The temporal scope extends back to the early decades of the twentieth century, given Iracema's complex relationship with Marxist thought and the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). This article proposes a reflection on a life marked by struggle and various forms of political activism through protests, confrontations, and other engagements. Sources include interviews, biographical records, and the periodical press, revealing the experiences, constraints, choices, and conditions Iracema faced along the arduous paths shaped by patriarchy and dictatorship.
Keywords: History of education; biographical history; women's political activism; educator; Vargas's dictatorship.

1 Introduction

> What is history, after all, if not an immense gap, an endless question, a boundless silence, its possible margins found only in the noise of time, reached through a few draft pages, some veiled inscriptions, elusive traces of the human? (Navarro-Swain, 1996, p. 131, our translation).

If what history has never told, means it never existed, then narrating resistance amidst oppression becomes imperative. The book *A História em Migalhas* (1992), by François Dosse, was presented as a critical reference to the historiography of the Annales. It also serves as a counterpoint to a possible universe saturated with apologetics and trends stemming from the New History movement. As this writing states: "Clio shattered. Clio dismembered. Clio mutilated. The 'newest history' reigns supreme in the world of capital." (Rago Filho, 1992, n.p., our translation)

The French historian defended the idea that this very Clio, although deeply questioned, became a muse inspiring a growing audience eager to understand their own past. History, by filling in the gaps, began to break the isolation of memoryless suburbs of the past, and extraordinary times gave way to the everyday lives of ordinary people. “We have imperceptibly moved from the grand biographies of history’s heroes, from Louis XI to Napoleon, not to mention Charles V, to the biographies of obscure heroes of everyday life.” (Dosse, 1992, p. 14, our translation) In any case, it is worth highlighting the persistence of heroes, in the masculine form.

Dosse’s claims were published in the aforementioned book, a decade after the death of the educator whose life is the subject of this article. This observation is significant, as it is essential to understanding where women’s Histories have been, and where they are, within the defense of plasticity, mobility, and theoretical integration proposed by a History that challenges hegemonic and exclusionary discourses. It has likewise been championed by many intellectuals.

The so-called ordinary people, in Hobsbawm (1998), are those who have never occupied the institutional center of power, yet were extraordinary in their collective actions. The author considers valid the criticism raised by women and directed at male historians for grossly ignoring them, and argues that the best history is written by those who have lost something. If that is indeed true, we may infer the theoretical and methodological strength of a history written by women and about them, especially when we consider the many periods of obscurantism they have endured.

The explanations presented here prompt us to reflect on several questions. However, one specific inquiry deserves to be recorded: in the face of so many calls, prompted by diverse contributions and intellectuals, in the name of a History that would consider new testimonies and actions, what has actually been done for women's lives? On which pages are their extraordinary actions or their everyday lives written? Where is the part made by women, emerging from a possible rupture with Clio?

Obviously, the theoretical movement established by scholars of Women’s History and the feminist movement must be considered. It is impossible to delegitimize the theoretical and practical contributions of authors such as Michelle

Perrot, bell hooks[1], Rachel Soihet, and many others. Vital efforts for any writing about women.

But the truth is that their lives, voices, names, actions, relationships, and experiences also came to be narrated through the most difficult form of doing history (Le Goff, 1999): biography, which, for a long time, served exclusively to glorify great men and their great deeds, or more precisely, clergymen, military officers, politicians, intellectuals, among others. Not every man, but always a man, especially one from the elite. "The point is that both men and women have suffered exclusion and discrimination due to class. But no man has ever been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, whereas all women have." (Lerner, 2019, p. 29, our translation) There is no better moment to say that biography itself has grown tired of representing more of the same, excessively glorifying certain paths and postures.

And, in an extraordinary way, biography takes its place at its origin. That is, in the feminine, produced by other women. Biographies are being written by Conceições, Carolinas de Jesus, Chimamandas, Antoninas, Constâncias, Marias, Lilias, Djamilas, Adélias, Zélias... And in their reflections, these women give special attention to the unknown, to resistance, to what remains unspoken. As Rosa Montero (2020) aptly put it:

> [...] today the topic is in vogue, and there are dozens of titles of all kinds — illustrated and non-illustrated, with photographs or in comic form, for adults or for children — all attempting to recover part of our past that has been hijacked by prejudice. It is an editorial profusion we should celebrate, for there is, in my view, no better indicator of the change that the so-called "women's cause" has undergone over the past 24 years". And I say "so-called" because it is more than time we stop thinking of the deconstruction of sexism as a girls' issue, when in fact it is a common cause, one that concerns all of us. (Montero, 2020, p. 11, our translation)

The biographies being produced may represent a possibility, as Constância Duarte (2022) explains, to heal the serious harm inflicted on the cultural archive and on female identity, harm caused by the erasure of names, which has led to social amnesia and widespread ignorance regarding the oppression and resistance inherent to women's lives. As Lerner (2019) aptly stated, women were prevented from contributing to the making of History. That is, the past as recorded and interpreted.

[1] bell hooks, written in lowercase letters, was the pen name chosen by feminist writer Gloria Jean Watkins in honor of her grandmother. The chosen name, written in lowercase, was a political stance against intellectual ego. hooks wanted the focus to be on her work, on her words and not on herself.

> Women “made history,” even while being prevented from knowing their own History and from interpreting history, whether their own or that of men. They were excluded from the initiative to create systems of symbols, philosophies, sciences, and laws. They have not only been deprived of education throughout history in every known society, but also excluded from the development of theory. I have called “the dialectic of women’s history” the tension between women’s actual historical experience and their exclusion from the interpretation of that experience. This dialectic propelled women into the historical process. (Lerner, 2019, p. 29, our translation)

Tania Navarro-Swain (1996), in reflecting on the meanings that emerge from discourses about and within the past, invites us to analyze the representations of women and how historiography interprets them. In this sense, the author asserts that unveiling the social and political roles of these women is the task of a history written in the feminine; thus, silence is political, and failing to speak of these discoveries or erasing non-patriarchal social constructions constitutes a strategy of power. In this sense, women’s biographies, as a political choice, record what women have done and experienced, ensuring that their actions and ideas are no longer neglected or ignored. Now, at last, we can dare to speak of a universal History of humanity.

Indeed, the problematization of exclusion and invisibility has been gradually gaining prominence in academic writing focused on the feminine, especially on gender issues and the feminist movement. Such reflections strongly provoke the need to unveil voices as a fertile and indispensable movement. In any case, amid the theoretical and methodological discussion and the growing body of research on women’s histories, much still needs to be done, challenged, and questioned in the name of an authentic and plural History.

Sabina Loriga (1998) emphasizes that biography is important to history because it allows us to understand how individuals are situated within and act upon broader historical contexts. The author argues that by studying individual trajectories, historians can analyze how personal experiences intertwine with social, political, and cultural structures. According to Loriga (1998), biography reveals the tension between the singular and the collective, helping us reflect on the relationship between individual agency and historical constraints. Thus, far from being merely a personal narrative, biography is a critical tool for interpreting the past.

Bringing biographical history into the field of the History of Education is tied to the inherent enrichment of historiography, as well as to the discomforts observed and the burdens and concealments of memory. In other words, much of it concerns the

social and political importance attributed to the biographed person and to those who chose to speak, or not to speak, about her.

Thus, it becomes important to question what Brazilian academic production, particularly in our case within the field of the History of Education as a scientific discipline, has been doing. In the face of the silences imposed and perpetuated in so many political contexts. Who were the female educators and writers who studied, taught, and wrote throughout so many historical contexts — and where were they? Where there is repression, there is resistance, and it is resistance that this article seeks to explore. The resistance of a teacher named Iracema Furtado Soares de Meireles.

This paper considers the case of an educator and author of a literacy primer that reached exceptionally high levels of circulation throughout the country, especially during the final decades of the twentieth century. Even though her work was widely adopted and disseminated for years, her name remained on the margins. The record of her life remained muted or obscured in comparison to the recognition gained by her works, especially in the case of the primer *A Casinha Feliz* (1970). Iracema's life became a research theme due to the lack of knowledge about her personal history, especially when contrasted with the recognition of her works.

We may approach various explanations for the intentional concealment of her life story, as well as that of so many other women writers and educators, across different forms of writing — academic, journalistic, and literary. However, this persistent invisibility must be called into question, especially when we consider the central role her works occupy in studies about the history of books and reading. Aware of the efforts to break with established canons, we affirm the importance of going further, with research agendas and teaching curricula that challenge historiographical gender exclusions.

The purpose is historical construction, with attention to disputes, effects, and versions. "[…] to dismantle monuments, to 'demythologize' official and consolidated memories about the characters we analyze, a task that undoubtedly requires extensive research and, frequently, courage." (Schmidt, 2017, p. 48, our translation) The intention is to consider the character not as a model to be followed or avoided, but as an inspiration "[...] for creating new projects for the future, in order to break

with the presentism that characterizes contemporaneity […]" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 49, our translation). There is a need for scholarly writings that offer not only new information, but also shed light on contexts, normative systems, the plurality of institutions and groups, especially those often treated as homogeneous, as well as the discourses and boundaries of freedom assigned to individuals within specific historical times and spaces. (Avelar, 2015; Schmidt, 2014)

In these terms, the core issue lies in questioning the singularity of a life immersed in political and historical weight: that of Iracema. It is also an exercise characterized as "[...] a new concern with the study of singularity and a particular attention to emerging phenomena considered as proper objects, to be thought through their complexity and through the impossibility of reducing them to mechanical schemes," as Dosse (2015, p. 406) explained. (our translation). As Schmidt (2014) emphasized, it is important to be clear that biographies,

> are not intended to uncover previously hidden secrets, but rather to historically understand the trajectories of certain individuals in order to grasp, for instance, the functioning of specific social mechanisms and normative systems; the plurality within groups and institutions usually regarded as homogeneous; the discursive and non-discursive construction of individuals; and the margins of freedom available to people in different historical periods, among other issues. (Schmidt, 2014, p. 140, our translation)

This article is substantially structured around the historical-biographical presentation of Iracema Meireles, taking into account her life path and professional trajectory, and highlighting the journey of a woman who defended socialist ideas, maintained a degree of proximity to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), authored textbooks and literary works, taught both adults and children, and was active in various regions of the country. However, her life did not enjoy the same notoriety as her creations, possibly due to the political position she occupied, the discourses circulated by the press at the time, or broader social incomprehension. The methodological approach, in turn, was based on the use of materials drawn from the periodical press, especially those gathered from the Digital Newspaper Archive (*Hemeroteca Digital*), as well as written accounts provided by Eloisa Meireles, Iracema's daughter.

This article aims to problematize the professional trajectory of the Pernambucan educator Iracema Meireles, with particular attention to her experiences during the Vargas dictatorship (1937–1945), a period marked by intense state

intervention in education and the repression of dissenting voices. By reflecting on her trajectory, this study seeks not only to highlight the strategies of survival and action within an authoritarian political context, but also to examine the silences produced by certain official narratives.

In addition to the individual analysis of Iracema Meireles's trajectory, this study also aims to examine the experiences she shared with her husband, Silo, as an inseparable part of the historical experience lived by the couple. By considering the conjugal dimension of her biography, this study seeks to understand how the effects of Vargas-era authoritarianism extended beyond the public sphere, penetrating intimate and affective domains. In a period historically recognized for political persecution, ideological surveillance, and the suppression of freedoms, the experiences of Iracema and Silo reveal the concrete and lasting impacts of state repression on the life and work projects of individuals who dared to act critically or independently. Thus, the articulation between the personal and the political becomes essential for a more complex reading of history, allowing biography to go beyond individual narrative and function as a privileged field for analyzing the multiple forms of violence imposed by authoritarian regimes.

2 Between Bonds and Memories: The Personal Dimension of Iracema Elisa

> Imagine living in a world where women are considered so inferior, so diminished, so confined to the domestic sphere, so irrelevant, that they are not even deemed worthy of study. A world in which women are not deemed worthy of having their stories told. Terrifying, isn't it? Because that is exactly the world we lived in until just a few decades ago. And if that condition has changed, it is thanks to women's struggle. (Aronovich, 2019, p. 19, our translation)

Iracema Elisa da Silva, author of the primer *A Casinha Feliz* and creator of the Iracema Meireles method, was born in Recife, Pernambuco, on March 17, 1907. She was the daughter of Maria Joana Guerra da Silva and Tito Lívio da Silva, and the granddaughter of Amélia Elisa Ramos da Silva and Raimundo Honório da Silva. Eulália and Luiz were her older siblings. She was born and raised in a predominantly Catholic family considered part of the elite. The educator began using the surname Furtado Soares de Meireles after marrying Silo Furtado Soares de Meireles. The couple had two children: Eloisa da Silva Meireles and Silo Meireles Filho. (Campos, 2002)

In an interview conducted for this paper[2], Eloísa Meireles (2024) highlighted originality, intelligence, and tenacity as the main characteristics of her mother, Iracema. The account provided by Eloísa, described below, suggests that Iracema may have been fortunate in her Northeastern childhood, growing up surrounded by affection and play. The natural environment she inhabited served as a space of instruction and experience — a place that educated her, fostered her learning, and stimulated both creativity and intellect.

> She was a frail child [...] many people would say, "this girl won't make it — she's weak, scrawny, and plain." She spent much of her childhood playing in the backyards of her home and only started school around the age of eight, already knowing how to read. Her favorite place was the treetops. She loved picking the fruit and eating it right up there in the treetops. Up there, she played house, make-believe, and imagined travels and read books filled with adventures and fairy tales. She enjoyed listening to and telling stories from Trancoso. Iracema had six or eight siblings who died in childhood from diseases such as typhoid, diphtheria, and others. There were no vaccines like the ones we have today, and many children died from those diseases. One of those deaths marked her deeply — that of her sister Helena. (Meireles, 2024, p. 02, our translation)

Death was present from an early age, given the illnesses that affected her brothers and sisters. It so happens that, in the early twentieth century, Brazil was marked by outbreaks of diseases that affected children across all geographic regions. A combination of factors, especially those related to public health, living conditions (such as hygiene, malnutrition, and sanitation), and incipient medical advances contributed significantly to the high rate of infant mortality, particularly in rural areas of the country. The terrible fate of her sister, who had been healthier than she was, had a profound impact on her. In addition to not understanding why it happened, she was likely also haunted by the fear of being more fragile herself.

> Helena's death affected her so deeply that she still spoke of it well into adulthood. The girl was strong, beautiful, and stood out for her liveliness. She contracted typhoid and died. Iracema was deeply shocked. It was the strong girl who died. She, the frail one, the one people said wouldn't make it, survived. She was puzzled; she couldn't understand. But she stayed silent, she didn't ask anything. She must have been four or five years old. (Meireles, 2024, p. 02, our translation)

Beyond nature, Iracema's family was also a source of learning, especially through Luiz, her companion and accomplice in curiosity and imagination. "[...] at the

[2] This refers to an interview conducted by the author, not officially published, and used with the interviewee's permission.

age of eight, she began a deep friendship with her brother Luiz, four years her senior, who until then hadn't paid her much attention." They became playmates and remained close friends and confidants throughout their lives. (Meireles, 2024, p. 02)

In particular, the periodical press from the 1940s onward reveals some traces of Iracema's paternal grandfather, father, uncle, and husband, while offering little mention of her, her sister, her mother, or her grandmother. Some printed materials examined included death notices and seventh-day mass announcements for the men in Iracema's family. In all of them, one finds information about the deceased, tributes, expressions of mourning, and genealogical sequences that arbitrarily exclude the names of the women in the bereaved family, thus affirming the discourse of a patriarchal society.

Figure 1 – Iracema Elisa da Silva
Left: Graduation from the Normal School; Right: In Germany (1928).

Source: Private family collection. Provided by Eloísa Meireles (2023).

Lerner (2019) defines patriarchy not as something "natural" or biologically determined, but as a historical and social construct. According to the author, patriarchy is a system of domination in which men exercise power over women in all spheres of life: economic, political, social, and symbolic. Lerner argues that this

system was gradually constructed over millennia, especially beginning with the organization of the first agricultural societies and the institutionalization of private property, a moment when women came to be seen as part of male property, including through the control of their sexuality and reproduction. The historian also emphasizes that patriarchy is perpetuated through culture, religion, and social institutions, being learned and internalized by both men and women. Rather than being a given of human nature, patriarchy, according to Lerner (2019), is a historical invention — and, therefore, can be deconstructed. In other words, it is not a static system, but a form of social and symbolic organization of male domination. One that reconfigures itself according to historical contexts, including in modern and contemporary regimes.

Therefore, a woman of the twentieth century, like Iracema Meireles, can and should be understood as someone whose life and professional trajectory were shaped within a patriarchal system. Even in contexts of apparent legal or political advancement, gender hierarchies continued to operate deeply, whether through limited access to positions of power or through the symbolic control of female representations in both public and private spheres.

The key, according to Lerner (2019), is to understand that patriarchy is not a homogeneous and unchanging structure, but a system of domination that adapts to historical transformations, while nonetheless maintaining its fundamental logic of female subordination. Therefore, applying this concept to the twentieth century is not anachronistic, but rather legitimate, and crucial to uncovering the layers of oppression often naturalized or rendered invisible in historical discourses.

The name of the teacher from Pernambuco appears in only a few writings. These same announcements make it possible to affirm that this was a Catholic family, based on certain clues, such as religious language, the locations of the burials and ceremonies, and the fact that Iracema was the niece of Dom Augusto Álvaro da Silva, Archbishop of Bahia.

The funeral notices, when mentioning Maria Joana and Iracema, refer to them as the wives of Tito and Silo, respectively. This was a consistent pattern in the records identified, a characteristic of the historical period studied: the erasure of women’s names. This was possibly a historical pattern in which a woman’s identity was tied to her marital status, that is, being “someone’s widow” served as a way to reinforce the notion of belonging and property, thereby limiting and obscuring her

individual significance. Women were seen as belonging to these men, and being mothers or daughters did not imply having an independent identity, only being the property of some male figure. In contrast to the wealth of information available about Tito Lívio, no evidence was found regarding the personal or professional life of Maria Joana, the biographee's mother, who was presented in most of the family's funeral notices only as the widow of Tito Lívio da Silva.

The *Jornal do Brasil* (1945) reported Tito's death, stating that he died at home, belonged to a traditional Pernambucan family, and was the son of the renowned educator and humanist Raimundo Honório da Silva. Iracema's grandfather, Raimundo Silva, was presented as one of the leading educators in the country at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and was responsible for the Pôrto Carrero School and the Pestalozzi School (Mariano, 1968).

In addition to his career as an accountant, Tito worked as a bookkeeper in his hometown in Bahia and later in the city of Rio de Janeiro, "[…] where he left examples of remarkable probity and unwavering dedication to his official and personal duties." (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1945, p. 08, our translation) Iracema's father's fraternal relationships were reiterated, revealing that he was a man who held various roles and maintained multiple bonds: "[…] The deceased was surrounded by a wide circle of friends and admirers, especially in Pernambuco, where his death will resonate more painfully than anywhere else." (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1945, p. 08, our translation) In that newspaper note, Iracema's name was mentioned, but her profession was not; once again, her brother Luiz's occupation was included, while she was identified only as the wife of Silo Meireles. Tito's personal relationships, the extensive trajectory of Augusto Ivaro, and the information about her paternal grandfather indicate not only religious connections. They also indicate the integration of the writer's family into the educational and school landscape of Pernambuco, Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro.[3] This author, teacher, activist, and creator of a reading

[3] Solange Alves (2003) wrote about the relationships established between the Bahian Catholic Church and the State after the 1930 Revolution, in which the Archbishop of Bahia and Primate of Brazil, Augusto Álvaro da Silva, Iracema's uncle, was the main architect. The clergyman was born in 1876, spent his childhood in Rio de Janeiro, and studied at the Pestalozzi School, which had been founded and directed by Iracema's grandfather. Augusto studied at the Olinda Seminary, where he completed courses in Philosophy, Theology, and Humanities. He became a priest, took over the leadership of a parish, was granted the title of Monsignor and Papal Chamberlain by Pope Pius X, was elevated to bishop, and appointed to a diocese. He organized catechism programs, took part in the Vatican

and writing method during a time of high illiteracy rates. Who lived and worked across Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and beyond. Passed away in the same month she was born, seventy-four years later, in 1982.

3 From Learning to Action: The Intellectual Formation of Iracema Meireles

Biographical writing in the History of Education requires the analysis of women's educational and professional trajectories, connecting them to the historical contexts of their time. This approach highlights the contributions of women who, through their work in Brazilian education, challenged the boundaries of the domestic and familial sphere, and forged social and political roles beyond the home. Her public actions reveal active participation in society, breaking away from traditional models of motherhood and marriage, and opening new possibilities for women's lives.

As mentioned earlier, Iracema was a frail child, which is why she only began attending school when she was older and already knew how to read. The School Group was established as a model for primary education in the early twentieth century; however, its implementation was not uniform across Brazil, especially outside the Southeast region. It is possible that Iracema did not attend a school group, as the evidence suggests she spent much of her childhood in the family environment and was enrolled in a convent school.

> As a teenager, Iracema studied at the *Colégio das Damas da Instrução Cristã*, a traditional Catholic school that remains highly regarded in Recife to this day. She continued her studies at the Pritaneu School, a secular institution, and kept an album from that time in which, based on her teachers' notes, she is remembered as an outstanding student. In the 1920s, her family moved to Salvador. There, Iracema attended the *Escola Normal da Bahia* and graduated as a teacher in 1927. Due to health issues, she was sent to spend a season in Europe with her mother. She consulted doctors in Portugal, France, and Germany. She underwent hydrotherapy treatments in Portugal and France. Despite the treatments, she carried a fragile digestive system throughout her life. Back in Recife, she took a civil service exam and began working as a teacher in the public school system. At the same time, she began studying medicine. (Meireles, 2024, p. 03, our translation).

Inserted into these spaces, Iracema became part of a women's movement imbued with "modernizing" ideas about the inclusion of women in the public sphere. It is important to highlight that she completed her studies at the *Escola Normal* during

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Council, carried out apostolic work, founded associations and literacy schools for adults, published a book, established a newspaper, and more.

the same period in which the *Federação Baiana pelo Progresso Feminino*, the first organized feminist movement in Bahia, was founded.

Upon graduating from the *Escola Normal*, we may infer that she experienced firsthand the effects of the Anísio Teixeira Reform, Law No. 1846, enacted in August 1925. According to Silva (2022), the *Escola Normal da Bahia*, from its founding until 1937, represented a space of intellectual, professional, and economic advancement, even for women from less privileged backgrounds.

Boaventura (1982) states that this school was a model institution whose goal was to confer the student-teacher diploma. It was intended for both female and male students, but in order to avoid “promiscuity,” there were separate entrances and exits designated for the young women. The researcher explained that the institution was influenced by the mutual teaching method as well as by the structure and curriculum of the École Normale in Paris.

Iracema pursued her education at the Escola Normal during a time of historical effervescence, when the first sparks of intense debates over Brazilian women’s social rights began to ignite public consciousness and transform the very structures of society. It was a time when women’s voices, until then, silenced, began to echo, challenging the foundations of an unequal order. Iracema found herself immersed in pressures and challenges that shaped her choices, her responses, and her own forms of resistance, building a legacy that still resonates through the pages of Brazilian educational history.

Regarding her studies at *Colégio Pritaneu*, located in the capital of Pernambuco, it is worth noting that it was a private, elite school, with a faculty composed of foreign teachers, including publicly recognized intellectuals. In that environment, Iracema stood out as:

> [...] a brilliant student who drew the attention of her teachers, who admired her for her intelligence and her ability to raise thoughtful questions. She would then engage in debates about the roles society assigned to men and women. She expressed solidarity with those excluded from society. She stood out for her way of speaking, her perspectives, and the deep respect she showed to every person, regardless of how they were or how they positioned themselves in the world (Campos, 2002, p. 500).

Her studies enabled her to secure several positions, including placing 10th in the competitive exam for fourth-tier teaching posts, approved by the Secretary of

Justice, Education, and Internal Affairs in April 1932, in the city of Recife. (*A Província*, 1932). In that same year, she was appointed—by Ordinance No. 296, dated August 8—to teach Chair No. 223 within that tier. (*Diário da Manhã*, 1932). In 1937, she worked at the Maciel Pinheiro School Group, also in Recife, as a teacher for the 4th and 5th grades. (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 1937).

> At a very young age, she took the public examination for primary school teachers and began teaching in the public school system of the state of Pernambuco. She also gave private lessons to the children of the intellectual elite, which led her to meet a variety of people and take part in gatherings where issues of all kinds were discussed. This may explain her inclination toward political and social issues. (Campos, 2002, p. 500, our translation).

In 1957, Iracema was appointed to the position of teacher within the Occupational Group: Primary Education in the Capital. In 1958, the then-governor signed an official decree appointing Iracema Elisa da Silva and two other teachers to "[...] temporarily serve in the role of Head of School Group and Special School, level 12, within the Occupational Group: Primary Education in the Capital." Service: Education and Culture [...] (*Diário de Pernambuco*, 1958, p. 04).

Campos (2002) reported that, after this period, in the rural area of Uberlândia, Minas Gerais, the teacher gave private lessons to some people in the neighborhood and taught her daughter, Eloisa Meireles, how to read and write. In Rio de Janeiro, in 1948, "[...] she tried, unsuccessfully, to enter the public education system of the Federal District." "There was no public examination, no possibility of transfer, as she had been dismissed in her home state." (Campos, 2002, p. 502, our translation).

> Starting in the 1950s, literacy became the core of her academic interests. She read everything she could on the subject, followed the pioneering experiences of the Guatemala School, and began putting her ideas into practice with a group of children. She had a keen sensitivity and the necessary classroom experience to understand that teaching literacy to a group is quite different from teaching a single child. (Campos, 2002, p. 502, our translation).

According to a report in *Jornal do Brasil* (1970), Iracema's first experience in the Rio de Janeiro public school system was at the Artur Ramos School, located in the Gávea Proletarian Park. In 1961, according to Campos (2002), it was in this setting that she carried out her experience with literacy classes, where she applied the method she had developed: "The initiative had great repercussion, and the head of the Educational District sent a report to the Guatemala School, an experimental

center and research hub of the Department of Education." (Campos, 2002, p. 503, our translation).

At the First Brazilian Congress on Speech Therapy, held in Rio de Janeiro in October 1969, Iracema Meireles delivered a speech about literacy in Brazil. The congress was held at the Museum of Modern Art and was attended by several politicians, as well as professionals from the fields of health and education. (*Correio da Manhã,* 1969). On that occasion, Iracema expressed criticism of the harsh educational landscape in Brazil, particularly with regard to adult illiteracy.

> In a country like ours, where illiteracy unfortunately reaches well-known and disheartening rates, the problem of adult literacy emerges as a matter of utmost importance. It can and should be regarded as a true matter of national interest and defense. As an old primary school teacher, dedicated in recent years especially to literacy, I cannot help but look with sadness upon the adult illiterate of our land, still so numerous, nearly at the doorstep of the final quarter of the twentieth century. (Meireles, 1969, p. 01, our translation).

The sources investigated revealed that the literacy educator worked with children referred to at the time as "exceptional," a term used during that period, and that this type of experience was foundational and motivating in the development of her literacy materials. The teacher's work expanded beyond children, encompassing efforts focused on adult literacy, initially in the state of Bahia.

> I worked with a dyslexic student, both as a primary school teacher and a speech therapist. I became so deeply interested in literacy methods — due to the boy's difficulty in articulating words and learning to read — that I began researching other children, both typical and exceptional.
>
> After teaching both typical and exceptional children to read, and gaining public recognition and fame, Ms. Iracema, with nearly 40 years of teaching experience, still found time and interest in adult literacy: her method, based on Conditioned and Repeated Phonation, promised to teach even a 63-year-old man to read in just 40 hours. (Jornal do Brasil, 1970, p. 05, our translation).

The first attempts were carried out in the favelas of Praia do Pinto and Cantagalo, in 1962. Iracema proudly stated:

> Here in Rio, the experiments began in the favelas and later continued at the Curicica Sanatorium, in Jacarepaguá, with tuberculosis patients in the recovery phase. Later, the work was extended to the Sampaio Regiment, after Brigadier Faria Lima requested the same initiative at Parque dos Afonsos, which led to the authorization for printing the Primer, along with the Instructor's Guide, both of which are now adopted throughout the National Army. (Jornal do Brasil, 1970, p. 05, our translation).

Reflecting on being a teacher in Brazilian favelas means considering a context marked by fear, conflict, and specific challenges. The Marielle Franco Dictionary of Favelas explains that the Praia do Pinto favela existed in the neighborhoods of Leblon and Lagoa, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, until 1969. It was a horizontal favela, inhabited mainly by migrants from the Northeast of Brazil. The favela ceased to exist after a violent process of real estate appreciation and speculation triggered during the administrations of Carlos Lacerda and Negrão de Lima.

Many of those lives, stripped by the indifference of public authorities and abandoned with ruthless cruelty, found refuge in the teachings of Iracema, a teacher who, with quiet courage, sowed knowledge just a few years before the tragedy that would bring everything down. More than the act of teaching literacy, what powerfully resurfaces is Iracema's choice to work within a reality marked by poverty, where pain and exclusion are deeply intertwined. Iracema threw herself, without hesitation, into a minefield of stigma and multiple forms of violence, where society, embodied by the police, the justice system, and the State itself, erected walls of discrimination. Indeed, it was not easy to choose to challenge the system, to weave a path of integration and social transformation in a landscape where the traps of oppression lay in wait at every step.

During the military dictatorship, "At the Cócio Barcellos School, she taught literacy to adults enrolled in the supplementary education program, in 1966. Between 1967 and 1970, she continued her work involving children, adults, the elderly, civilian staff, and soldiers." (Campos, 2002, p. 504, our translation). In 1954, Iracema founded and directed a kindergarten, the *Escola de Brinquedo*, in Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro. From that point on, until the end of her life in 1982, she devoted herself more and more to issues related to Education, especially Literacy." (Meireles, 2024, p. 03, our translation).

In her spare time, the primary school teacher used to write children's stories and create educational games. She spoke about the vastness of the world and the freedom of choice available to children, who had their whole lives ahead of them and so much to learn. (Jornal do Brasil, 1971, our translation).

> From 1948 onward, all of Iracema's professional and political choices focused on the literacy of Brazilians, both children and adults. She paved a long path and created a literacy method. She traveled across Brazil, from north to south, from east to west, presenting her work. She worked in

> hospitals, such as the *Sanatório de Curicica* in Rio de Janeiro, which treated tuberculosis patients; she also worked with juvenile offenders at the Bombeiro Geraldo Dias School in Rio; and at APAE-RJ, an institution for people with intellectual disabilities. She visited Army and Air Force barracks to assist in the literacy of recruits, which earned her the publication of the Soldier's Primer and the *Medalha do Pacificador* (Peacemaker Medal). (Meireles, 2024, p. 03, our translation).

Meireles (2024) reported that Iracema devoted herself tirelessly to study and continuous training in the field of Education, including a course in Speech-Language Pathology. Her career was marked by active participation in conferences and seminars, where she shared her Method and adapted it to the needs of both children and adult, whether in full development or facing learning difficulties. All these contributions were carried out voluntarily, driven by her passion and commitment to educational transformation. Her relationship with work was one of total dedication and great simplicity in how she presented herself. She neither became famous nor wealthy." (Meireles, 2024, p. 03, our translation).

Campos (2002) stated that Iracema was enthusiastic about mathematics and was concerned with finding different alternatives for solving problems in the field. According to the illustrator, the educator "appreciated the effectiveness of games that playfully drive problem-solving." Her social and human sensitivity gradually led her to reflect on literacy—especially for those who were unable to learn in school." (Campos, 2002, p. 501–502, our translation).

But Iracema did not walk the path of education only, she was also a literacy teacher, a trainer, a speaker, and a writer. She was also a medical student, a degree she did not complete due to the repressive political climate of the Vargas regime. At the time, the teacher had been dismissed from public service in Pernambuco and was fully engaged in the struggles and issues related to securing the lives of political prisoners. (Campos, 2002, our translation).

The issue No. 219 of *Diário da Manhã* (1935) reported that Iracema Elisa had been summoned to appear at the Secretariat of the Recife School of Medicine, along with three other students: Amaury Vasconcellos, Walkiria de Uzeda Costa, and Pedro Buarque Gusmão Filho. In a context of repression and intolerance, typical of the dictatorship in force in 1935, we question the reasons behind such a summons.

And thus were her actions carried out in favor of Brazilian education. She was, in Campos's (2002) view, a leftist activist, a defender of public education, deeply committed to social issues and concerned with the country's future, so much so that "She spent her entire life traveling to the most remote places to respond to calls from across Brazil. She trained teachers and community agents, always sensitive to the political dimension." (Campos, 2002, p. 505, our translation). She categorically stated that her struggle was with the literacy of the Brazilian people. (Meireles, 2001, our translation).

> Wherever there was someone willing to learn, she would go in order to teach. According to her, there was no child, youth, or adult who could not be encouraged to learn how to read. She was skilled at discovering each person's unique way of learning. She traveled across the entire country, bringing her message of enthusiasm to everyone who invited her. […] Her only and constant platform was the classroom; and when it wasn't one formally, she made it so. Thus, she taught literacy on porches, under trees, and by the seaside. Her ability to listen and respect others was remarkable. She worked with close attention to her students' individual difficulties and differences. Those who lived alongside her on a daily basis witnessed the coherence between her thoughts, actions, and way of life, starting with the delicacy with which she treated those who served her. She was constantly troubled by the marginalization of those with little or no purchasing power. (Campos, 2002, p. 505, our translation).

Iracema Elisa's professional activities extended beyond the classroom; one example was her involvement in the Pernambuco Teachers' Club, an organization aimed at reflecting on and defending teachers' interests. Founded in 1935 and composed of dozens of teachers from the state, as reported by *Diário da Manhã* (1935), Iracema was not only a member of the club but also held a leadership role, serving as first secretary. This information supports the view of a teacher actively engaged in social movements and concerned with the interests of the working class. Her daughter Eloísa (2024) explained that her dedication to Brazil and its people was reflected in a political-ideological commitment that permeated both her life and her work. Although she was never formally affiliated with any political party, she consistently expressed her identification with socialism, revealing a clear and committed political stance. The teacher from Pernambuco enjoyed reading, studying regularly, and staying up to date with debates on Brazilian education, especially literacy.

4 The Political Scene in Action: Iracema Meireles's Choices and Convictions

In addressing Iracema Meireles's personal relationships, we navigate the underlying political connections that revolved around four key figures in her life: Raimundo Honório, Augusto Álvaro, Tito Lívio, and Silo Meireles. It is clear that political, religious, and educational matters permeated Iracema's life and that of her family, with regard both personal and professional decisions. Between the 1930s and 1940s, Iracema and her husband, Silo, were directly affected by the repressive triad of surveillance, censorship, and state persecution under the Getúlio Vargas government, particularly its actions targeting the communist movement in Brazil. They also suffered consequences in their professional lives. One of the consequences was Iracema's dismissal from the public service in Pernambuco, highlighting how a woman's political choices were and can still be a reason for her social marginalization.

> Iracema was a public school teacher in the state of Pernambuco while also actively engaged in political party activities. She was likely reported and subsequently subjected to persecution, which ultimately led to her dismissal from public service. She became unemployed. She was subjected to veiled threats and followed on streetcars or through the streets. She was never arrested […] Due to Silo Meireles's political background, finding work in the nation's capital was difficult […] Already in Rio, she unsuccessfully attempted to join the public school system and that was when André appeared, the boy who couldn't learn to read. André was the starting point for the creation of her literacy method (Meireles, 2024, p. 03).

This final section aims to problematize the political and social choices of Iracema Meireles, who, throughout her life, was more than a wife, a mother, and the author of a literacy method. Her actions went beyond the walls of the school, defying imposed boundaries and taking risks in a context of oppression. Iracema recognized the social inequalities around her and, with courage, refused to conform to the authoritarian and exclusionary state. Her resistance was not merely ideological, but practical and profound, building a legacy that stood against the silencing of voices that dared to question the established order. Her engagement was a cry against the denial of diversity and human dignity, echoing the possibilities of another Brazil, one that is more just and respectful of the actions of a woman educator.

In 1937, following a coup d'état, Getúlio Vargas dissolved the National Congress and suspended elections. The *Estado Novo* had been established, a

period marked by authoritarianism, press censorship, repression of political opponents, and the centralization of power in Vargas's hands. The idea of "novelty" was rooted in the literal proposal of a New State, with new social and political institutions, as well as a new constitution — A Polaca — inspired by Italian fascist ideals. During the Vargas dictatorship, various forms of violence driven by political motivations were not uncommon, including executions carried out by military forces and members of the Brazilian Integralist Action (AIB), beatings and murders perpetrated by Getúlio's police, and the torture endured by political prisoners.

At the time, conservative views about women were widely propagated, upheld by politicians, religious leaders, intellectuals, and others who believed that a woman's rightful place was in the home, fulfilling her designated duties. According to a study conducted by Natascha Ostos (2012), women became a primary target of:

> […] Educational and moralizing measures which, when disseminated in the family environment, would help shape a different kind of population, less ignorant, sick, and indolent. This way, this procession of the miserable could be transformed into a productive group, capable of working and consuming, thereby boosting the nation's economic forces and promoting social order (Ostos, 2012, p. 337, our translation).

This historical period was marked by the State's ideological discourse aimed at deeply persuading women to withdraw from the public sphere, especially from political activism, and return to the domestic private realm: the goal was to glorify the housewife, idealize the mother, and exalt the role of the wife. Female artists, for instance, were marginalized or regarded as prostitutes. The authoritarian state operated through repression, mechanisms of social control, and a focus on propaganda and mass entertainment (Nahes, 2007).

Sesquim (2021) investigated a legislative context that restricted women's access to paid public activities, making female labor extremely expensive. In her view, all the regulations were fundamentally aimed at keeping women within the private sphere, confined to marital relationships and motherhood. In this sphere,

> the working woman wore the cloak of motherhood, and the discourse on her working conditions was, in fact, a discourse about the family. The family fulfilled a role in the unifying project of nation-building, assigning to women a place of economic dependence and moral submission to men and husbands. (Sesquim, 2021, p. 554, our translation).

Thus, what emerges is a context shaped by a combination of political manipulation and oppression. To remain in power, Vargas resorted to various strategies, especially censorship and the restriction of individual freedoms. Women who became politically involved, especially those who opposed the ruling dictatorship, faced severe repression; in other words, physical and symbolic violence marked the lives of many activists affiliated with leftist political movements or simply engaged in the struggle for democracy.

Moreover, the aim is not to depict a scenario in which women were entirely submissive, powerless, and defenseless, left at the mercy of an oppressive and authoritarian society (Ostos, 2012). They were present in demonstrations demanding amnesty for political prisoners, in actions involving the concealment of weapons, sheltering militants, translating foreign newspapers, and serving as leaders of various organizations.

Repressive and catastrophic practices, aimed at eradicating any sign of resistance, authorized and fueled the silencing of many of them. Women were born, survived, and bled across different historical periods and places, and these are memories Brazil must reckon with, an overdue responsibility that academia can no longer evade. To this end, it becomes necessary to recount lives, names, voices, actions, and acts of resistance long swallowed by a forced silence.

Iracema married Silo Furtado Soares de Meireles, who was born on October 23, 1900, in the city of Ribeirão, in the state of Pernambuco. According to Eloísa, the couple's daughter, they met during one of the Communist Party's political meetings:

> A young woman sensitive to social issues and outraged by the cruel inequality that has long plagued our country, Iracema gravitated toward people who shared those same convictions and, from then on, began attending political meetings and carrying out liaison duties among members of the Communist Party. During one of these liaison tasks, she met Silo Meireles, and they fell in love (Meireles, 2024, p. 01).

Amid her studies in the field of education, her Catholic family background, and her travels to Europe, the educator grew closer to Marxist thought and became a supporter of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). She had friends and comrades in the Party and was aware of its discussions and actions, as recorded by Campos: "Due to the trust placed in her, Iracema took on the responsibility of renting a house for a clandestine comrade who had arrived from the Soviet Union with the mission of

helping to organize the communist movement in Pernambuco" (Campos, 2002, p. 501).

We cannot regard the participation of male and female activists as analogous, because it was not, and possibly still is not. A collective and political space, even one aligned with leftist ideals, did not treat women and men equally, nor did it eliminate the influence of a patriarchal society. One cannot argue that Lenin (1919) defended women as loyal, intelligent partners in struggle who should always be included in activism. Even if he claimed that a female Communist Party member would have the same rights and duties as a male comrade, his view overlooks the multiple barriers that prevent women from fully participating in party movements. The feminist struggle cannot be reduced to a mere call for the proletarian revolution, as the reasons that prevent a woman from engaging are profoundly different from those that affect men. We must consider the intolerance, dangers, limitations, and structural violence that shape women's experiences in a society marked by prejudice, within a historical context of oppression and conflict.

Campos (2002) recorded that Iracema "was not a radical, but she sincerely committed herself to a democracy that extended from the political to the economic and social levels. And she believed that the path was socialism. She never joined the Communist Party, but her friends and ideological partners respected her opinions" (Campos, 2002, p. 500, our translation). We could problematize this issue by seeking documents related to party affiliations from that period; however, this would not be possible for several reasons, such as the confiscation of these records during the Vargas dictatorship, the possible use of codenames in party membership, and other relevant considerations. We understand that, even though Iracema was not formally affiliated, she shared ideological affinities with the Party, and her views were both seen and heard. Not being formally affiliated or holding a membership card does not delegitimize one's alignment with a political ideology or active participation within a party's framework.

Ferreira and Lins (2015) explained that the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) historically relegated women to secondary roles, confining them to peripheral tasks that had little to do with party leadership. The Party failed effectively to challenge the sexist values that upheld male domination, ignoring the contradiction between gender and class relations and neglecting the social condition of women. Despite that, the

way women were portrayed in newspapers revealed their inclusion in the project of working-class emancipation, although shaped by conservative cultural influences that reflected both societal and leadership values. Power relations within the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) must be analyzed not only in the public sphere, but also within the domestic and familial domains. If the political invisibility of women is a failure of leftist organizations, it is important to remember that other groups did not even commit to organizing women or denouncing female exploitation, unlike the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). The evidence, marked by the contradictions of history, allows us to believe that Iracema was a politically active woman, despite the repression promoted during the *Estado Novo*. As Alves (2018) explained, women continued to take action in their own ways during that period, 'certainly facing far greater difficulties, as, in addition to the obstacles of a sexist culture, they also had to contend with the repressive apparatus of the *Estado Novo* regime' (Campos, 2002, p. 450).

The article entitled "Pernambucan Action Against Fascism" Manifesto to the Nation, published in 1933, reports a publication request made by a diverse group of intellectuals, which included the name of Iracema Elisa da Silva. The manifesto warned about groups seeking to seize power by manipulating a naïve and easily deceived public, influenced by foreign movements and political strategies, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

> Also in the name of the absurd notion of a "Brazilian race" a ridiculous claim in a land of polyethnic miscegenation still in progress and far from witnessing the emergence of a defined human type, racial hatred is being cultivated, under the guise of antisemitism and other forms of xenophobia, expressions of hatred that barely conceal their origin: the basest commercial rivalries and jealousies." In the name of a supposed national religious unity, an "auto-da-fé" is being staged against all reverberations among us of the masterpieces of human thought freed from chains, aiming to silence every influence they may have left behind (p. 04).

The educator took part in social and political debates during a period of repression, facing persecution and violence. By joining a predominantly male group and having her name appear in a political manifesto during the Vargas Era, she demonstrated both courage and resistance. Based on Nunes' (2022) writings, we understand that Iracema's life was marked by struggles and different forms of militancy, "[…] and the way each of them is remembered, reified, and re-signified is

fertile ground for reflecting on the processes of framing memory […]" (Nunes, 2022, p. 262, our translation). In other words, it is worth considering yet another eclipsed form of activism within, and in relation to, the Party.

Based on an entry available in the archives of the Center for Research and Documentation of Contemporary History of Brazil (CPDOC), Silo was the son of Francisco Ribeiro, a state senator, builder of railroads and sugar mills in Pernambuco; great-grandson of Maria Tomásia do Livramento, known in the history of Ceará as a liberator of enslaved people; brother of Ilvo Meireles, a doctor, member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and participant in the 1935 uprising, also known as the Communist Uprising; brother of Rosa Meireles, also a member of the Party, married to Carlos da Costa Leite, a military officer and member of the National Liberation Alliance (ANL); and brother of José Meireles, a merchant navy pilot It is possible to find clues that characterize Silo as a military officer, journalist, author, political prisoner, rebel, friend of Luís Carlos Prestes, member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), underground activist, defender of Indigenous rights, employee of the *Fundação Brasil Central*, and husband of Iracema Meireles, educator and author of one of the most widespread literacy methods in the country. Iracema was not a member of the Brazilian Communist Party, nor was she imprisoned or exiled, but Silo's decisions and affiliations influenced her reality in various ways.

Zimbarg (2001) explained that Silo Meireles, alongside his brother-in-law, Carlos da Costa Leite, was a prominent participant in the *tenentista* uprisings of the 1920s, as they strongly advocated for an alliance between the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and the majority of opposition movements against the *Estado Novo* regime. Silo's trajectory stands out at certain historical moments, particularly due to his close ties with Luiz Carlos Prestes. According to the author, Silo was an armed forces officer who held a leadership position and maintained frequent contact with Fernando Lacerda, a former communist leader. He took part in the revolt at the Military School of Realengo, in support of the 1922 uprising at Fort Copacabana, during which he was arrested and remained in detention until 1927. That, however, was not the only time he was imprisoned:

> With the defeat of the 1935 movement, **Silo was arrested**. Repression intensified significantly, and, as Silo Meireles's fiancée, himself known for his political engagement, **Iracema was dismissed** from her teaching post She was forced to interrupt her medical studies and then went through a **difficult period marked by threats and insecurity**. Shortly after Silo's arrest, Iracema openly acknowledged their relationship by marrying him by proxy and adopting his full name, as a way to take a stand and show that someone was standing by his side Many **prisoners disappeared**, and if no one demanded their whereabouts, nothing would be done. A **long period of struggle** then began for her on two fronts: keeping track of her husband's life from afar and **fighting the fear** instilled in the families of political prisoners through the daily **psychological harassment** of the news media. **"Will they be executed by firing squad or not?" "Will they be deported or transferred to an unknown prison?"** She moved to Rio de Janeiro to assist her husband, who had been transferred to the Frei Caneca prison in that city (Meireles, 2024, p. 04, emphasis added, our translation).

The civil marriage, held while Silo was still imprisoned, reinforced the image of an Iracema who was fully aware of her decisions. In this regard, Campos (2002) stated:

> Due to her husband's health condition, who had been transferred to a prison hospital in Rio de Janeiro, Iracema managed, through friends, to obtain a special permit to accompany him, in her capacity as his wife. The couple spent their wedding night at *Casa de Saúde São Jorge*, in the Andaraí neighborhood. It was in this same hospital, in 1940, that their first daughter was born, who would later become her companion in educational work and the continuator of her legacy. In an apartment rented by her brother Luiz in the same neighborhood, Iracema was able to provide greater support to Silo, who was both imprisoned and ill in the hospital (Campos, 2002, p. 50, our translation).

By adopting Silo's name and publicly tying her fate to his, Iracema not only sealed an affective commitment but also inscribed her presence in history as a witness and keeper of records that, without her action, might easily have been erased. Her gesture was an act of resistance and courage in the face of a climate of fear. Iracema could not leave him at the mercy of fate. Waiting became a trench: on one side, the silent vigil over her husband, whose whereabouts remained a suffocating uncertainty; on the other, the intimate battle against the daily terror that crept into households through headlines steeped in uncertainty and threat. The news reports, with their wavering verdicts, sounded like instruments of psychological torture, draining hope and eroding certainty. Each day was a thread stretched over the abyss of the unknown, and as Iracema walked upon it, she turned fear into strength, absence into struggle, and love into a form of resistance that neither time nor silence could erase.

> **Fear** and **insecurity** made many prisoners **fall ill**. **Some died, no one knows how. Some died, no one knows how. Some were tortured.** News circulated, and the atmosphere was one of complete **helplessness.**45 Iracema put herself at risk in search of news, seeking out friends and eventually finding out who was still alive and who had died. **She was tireless**. Silo was held incommunicado for two years. He could not be visited, and not even the guard who brought him food was allowed to speak to him for two years, she wandered in search of people and news, devising strategies to obtain information through allies, reaching out to influential figures, lawyers, and journalists who could and would be willing to defend the lives of political prisoners. She was not alone, many others were going through the same situation. (Meireles, 2024, p. 04, our translation, emphasis in the original).

This period consolidated an atmosphere of fear, in which State violence was not confined to the torture chambers but extended into the daily lives of political prisoners' families. The silence imposed on the imprisoned, as was the case with Silo, functioned as a form of punishment that transcended the body, striking at the very core of one's identity and deeply affecting the family. Disappearance and incommunicability were weapons that turned the search for news into a battlefield. Not knowing whether someone was alive or dead, not even having the right to recognize a body or to claim the memory of a loved one, was a mechanism of dehumanization aimed at breaking both those behind bars and those left on the outside. By embarking on a tireless search for information, Iracema defied this erasure, refused to be merely a spectator of terror, and became a voice against the silencing imposed by the Vargas dictatorship.

The struggle waged by her and so many others who resisted during that period was not only for the release of the imprisoned, but also for the preservation of truth in the face of a system that used secrecy and falsehood as its primary tools of domination. The Estado Novo dictatorship was not merely a set of arbitrary rules enforced by force, but a political project that aimed to turn fear into a norm and hopelessness into a permanent condition. However, history is also shaped by the persistence of those who refused to accept that order, who defied the logic of submission, and who, like Iracema, refused to abandon their loved ones to the darkness of uncertainty.

> At the end of two years, Silo's period of incommunicado detention came to an end Visits were allowed again, and families could bring items to the prisoners, provided they passed inspection. Iracema would bring many pencils to Silo… She told me she used to open the pencils, remove the graphite, and insert tightly rolled strips of tracing paper with tiny handwritten notes for her husband. She was careful to leave a small piece of graphite at

> each end, so no one would notice the pencils were hollow. (Meireles, 2024, p. 04, our translation)

We believe that the physical separation between Iracema and Silo was devastating for both of them, but despite all the hardships, she acted like many other women of her time: conscious, courageous, and willing to face any confrontation. How could we think otherwise, when faced with a woman who risked herself to deliver information to prison? By visiting Silo and his comrades, informing them of the events unfolding in the country, the teacher took a stand, demonstrating awareness and clearly asserting her political and social commitment. As Campos (2002) explained, this was how she found a way to keep her imprisoned friends informed about the political situation at the time.

> It was six or seven years of a woman's life spent fighting to stay strong and support her husband. From prison to prison, from Recife to Rio, from Rio to Ilha Grande on the coast of Rio de Janeiro. Silo was finally transferred, still under arrest, to a hospital where they could be together. Then came the struggle in the National Security Court; she sat in the audience, watching the trial. The defense and prosecution were there deciding the fate of her husband and his comrades. Iracema would leave from time to time to breastfeed her daughter, who stayed in a nearby square with an aunt. Silo was released in 1942. In 1944, their second child was born, and they named him Silo. (Meireles, 2024, p. 04, our translation).

Her path of struggle, which spanned years of constant displacements and visits to places of confinement, reveals how deeply the political repression system fragmented the most fundamental human relationships. From Recife to Rio, and from there to Ilha Grande, the geographical movement of Silo's imprisonment and Iracema's struggle reflected a form of incarceration that transcended the physical limits of prison. A form of imprisonment that disrupted the rhythm of everyday life. Even amid pain and physical and emotional exhaustion, Iracema did not yield to fragility; instead, she continued to grow stronger, becoming a woman who not only supported her husband but also embodied the spirit of the struggle for freedom and dignity.

Like all the women whose lives were devastated by the atrocities committed against political prisoners, Iracema lived between fear and hope, and her presence in the courtroom audience was not merely a gesture of support for her husband, but a daily act of bravery. By breastfeeding her daughter in the midst of such a scenario,

Iracema was not only nourishing the child physically, but also sowing in her a memory of resistance, a legacy of courage passed down from generation to generation.

Iracema and Silo, along with their two children, eventually moved to the cities of Caiapônia (Goiás) and Uberlândia (Minas Gerais) due to job opportunities. They returned to Rio de Janeiro only in 1948. Silo passed away on July 3, 1957, due to cancer, after being hospitalized for several days at the Air Force Hospital. It was in that year that Iracema suffered the greatest blow of her life (Meireles, 2024). The Rio-based newspaper *Tribuna da Imprensa* (1957) dedicated a section to briefly recount Silo's life and death, from which we highlight:

> On the eve of his death, when his condition was already desperate, Silo Meireles remained good-humored and laughed heartily when someone suggested he go to confession. Dom Hélder Câmara, who was by his side, also laughed and said it wasn't necessary. "Men like him," he explained, "speak directly with God" (*Tribuna da Imprensa,* 1957, p. 05, our translation).

The stance of the religious leader Dom Hélder Câmara, a Catholic bishop from Pernambuco and a defender of human rights, captures, in part, what Silo represented in the struggle for democracy under an authoritarian estate. We must resist the temptation to romanticize the bond between Iracema and Silo, yet it is impossible to deny that their relationship carried an intensity that echoed through their choices and destinies. More than a passionate love, it was a turning point in the life of the teacher from Recife, shaping the possibilities that unfolded before her. Alongside Silo, Iracema did not merely live; she sailed through the echoes of a feeling that, far from being immune to time, became a force capable of forging, or dissolving futures. The impact of this union is not measured solely by its intensity, but by the marks it left on the decisions she made. Silo was honored by his wife, who named the educational institute she founded the *Instituto Sylo Meireles*.

5 Final Considerations

Iracema's trajectory extends beyond the confines of the private sphere, entering public spaces, and her presence does not conform to the norms imposed on women of her time; on the contrary, it reflects the tension of a constant search for inclusion and transformation. In this trajectory, articulation, intervention, and the sharing of knowledge become tools of resistance. The education she received was

not merely a means of legitimization, but a foundation for the construction of an intellectual project that, in many ways, became inscribed in the development of Brazilian educational thought. Iracema, by appropriating knowledge, did not confine herself to the path of submission imposed by male canons; instead, she transformed education into a key to liberation. Overcoming subordination, she not only completed her education but forged her own vision, taught, and rewrote the parameters of teaching with an originality that resounds as both an act of insurgency and affirmation.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, women were expected to remain confined to private life, but Iracema defied that destiny. By entering the public sphere, she both faced and imposed resistance, breaking away from the traditional female roles that had preceded her. In a time that required audacity, the educator not only conquered the public space, but also affirmed her identity in a sexist universe, marking a presence in the history of Brazilian education.

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