

Keys

I first met Antonio Candido in 1996 when then-Consul João Almino asked Berkeley to join with the San Francisco Consulate in organizing an international symposium honoring the celebrated literary scholar. Although Candido was unable to attend the event, he sent a note inviting me to visit him and his wife and fellow scholar Gilda whenever I was in São Paulo. This encounter was the first of many that would take place over a period of some twenty years.

I usually spent a few days with Antonio Candido and Gilda de Mello e Souza just before returning to the U.S. following my summer research in the Northeast or the Amazon. One of the visits I remember best, however, occurred in 2007 when I spent over three weeks in São Paulo as an international advisor to the Brazilian Ministry of Culture's Pontos de Cultura program. The "Culture Points"—which I'd already seen in the Northeast and Brasília—were local arts organizations that the Ministry had begun to forge into a digitally-connected national network that could offer marginalized young people an alternative to gangs and drugs. When I told Antonio Candido what I would be doing, he expressed enthusiasm for the project and offered me the guest room of his spacious apartment.

The invitation was in part an affirmation of our continuing friendship following the painful loss of Gilda, whose firsthand descriptions of Mário de Andrade had brought this writer—and so much else—to life for me and others. At the same time, it reflected Candido's curiosity about the Pontos as an initiative of the Workers' Party that he had helped to found in the early 1980s. His interest in the evolution of the project made me remember that time four years earlier when I, by chance, was present for a barrage of phone calls to him from friends

doubtful about the appointment, minutes earlier, of Gilberto Gil to the Ministry of Culture. The ease with which Candido would go on to dismiss his former qualms, expressing admiration for Gil and Célio Turino's creation of the Pontos, remains with me as proof of his open mind.

My visits to selected Pontos in these weeks usually started early in the morning and went on into the evening. By the time I returned to the apartment, Antonio Candido was in his study, watching news reports or else tapping away on the ancient typewriter that sat on a desk near the sofa. Once he had finished what he had been doing, we would move into the kitchen where he would make tea and ask about what I had seen and heard that day.

My descriptions of the Pontos generally triggered comments that mingled historical facts with personal memories. When, for instance, I told him about the run-down nineteenth-century mansion that now served as a residence for the squatter families who frequented one of the Pontos in the port city of Santos, he described his own reactions as a young man to the imposing homes of the coffee barons. The day that I got back from a Ponto in Campinas devoted to the music of steel drums from Brazil and the Caribbean, he began to talk about a drummer he had known back in the 1940s whose grandfather had been a slave. A few days later, when I returned from a visit to a Ponto close by the *favela* that was home to the writer/rapper Ferréz, he launched into a commentary on the shifting representations of these communities and their residents in the Brazilian mass media. Looking back, I cannot think of a single place I visited that he did not help me to better comprehend.

Though I often wished that Antonio Candido would simply go on talking, he was genuinely eager to hear about the Pontos. I can remember, for instance, his pained reaction to my account of a tenement in Santos in which a multitude of beetles had chewed their way into the once-handsome wood. After I then described how one woman insisted upon serving me a

cafezinho on the bed that doubled as a chair in her small room, Candido asked if the front door of the mansion had one of those carved escutcheons that he remembered seeing as a boy in his home state of Minas. When I said “yes” he wanted to know what the residents of this decaying, but still stately, building, felt about these sharp reminders of a wealth in which they would not have shared.

Above all, Antonio Candido enjoyed listening to pieces of the conversations that I had recorded on my Ipod. From time to time, he would ask me to replay a passage so that he could then repeat particular words or phrases. I can remember thinking that he was observing the people I had taped with the same respectful, intensely clear-eyed attention that he had displayed in his assessments of the characters in some of Brazil’s most famous literary works.

The day that I remember best from these intense weeks in São Paulo began with a visit to a Ponto in the nearby Mariana district known for the fabrication of traditional string instruments of a sort long used by folk and popular musicians. The plaintive, distinctly Northeastern-sounding music that some of the young participants began to play at one point was mesmerizing and I would have stayed much longer if a persistent drizzle had not made me start to shiver. Since the Pontos driver had the day off, I hailed a taxi and as soon as the car halted before Antonio Candido’s building, I hopped out and paid the fare. The guard buzzed me in and when the elevator stopped at the fifth floor, Antonio Candido opened the door, a bit surprised to see me back so soon. He was in the midst of something so I went to curl up beneath the blankets in my room. First, however, I engaged in my usual ritual of fishing out the house key from my book bag so that it would be at hand when the driver showed up the next day.

Since the key did not immediately surface, I dumped the contents of the bag out onto the bed. When there was no telltale clink, a wave of alarm swept over me. How, I asked myself,

could I have been so careless when Antonio Candido and Gilda had always treated me with so much trust? São Paulo had a reputation for violent break-ins and now I had gone and placed Candido in jeopardy. Beyond this, I was going to have to ask him to unlock the door that he had just opened so that I could hurry out onto the sidewalk in the hope that someone else had not already pocketed the key.

“What’s wrong?” Antonio Candido demanded when he saw my face.

“I think that the key must have fallen out of my book bag when I paid the taxi driver,” I told him in a raspy voice.

“Oh, the key,” Antonio Candido said, clearly relieved that I was not sick. “Wait a moment and I’ll help you look.”

Candido put on his favorite old gray sweater and we went down the elevator and out the door into what was now a full-fledged rain. It was the end of the day and people were heading home. In the growing darkness, I could barely see the sidewalk. Then, all of a sudden, the headlights of a passing car caused something on the ground to glint.

I scooped up the key and Antonio Candido and I went back up the elevator. He unlocked the door and we sat down at the kitchen table set with the mustard-colored placemats from Provence that Gilda had always loved. I began to apologize profusely for the nuisance but he shook his head and went over to the stove to put the water on for tea. He then sat back down and launched into various stories of the differences among the instruments that he’d heard people playing in the interior of Minas and São Paulo many years ago. In the middle of these memories, he suddenly jumped up and began to imitate an old-style fiddler whose jerky movements with the bow made me laugh until the water began to boil away.

People who knew Antonio Candido are likely to speak with special warmth about his kindness—a quality that underscored his respect and innate courtesy. This same kindness signaled the presence of a yet deeper vein of empathy that complemented his formidable intelligence and tempered, without weakening, the ways that he expressed his strong ethical positions. Most of all, this empathy made him able to lend courage and support to his fellow humans—be this in a classroom, at the center of a rally, beside the bed of a sick friend, or upon a sidewalk in the rain.

Candace Slater

UC Berkeley