

Review

Rita de Cássia Fazzi. 2004 (new ed. 2012). *O drama racial de crianças brasileiras: socialização entre pares e preconceito*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntico. 224 p.

John Burdick
Syracuse University

In 1997, Rita de Cássia Fazzi spent hundreds of hours at two public schools in Belo Horizonte, talking with over one hundred children, aged 6-14, about their attitudes and ideas having to do with color and race. She conducted in-depth interviews with about half of them; played games with them involving dolls of different phenotypes; watched them interact in a variety of settings; and listened carefully to their accounts of interactions in the home. The result is the extraordinary *O drama racial de crianças brasileiras*, one of the most multi-layered treatments of racial prejudice in Brazil that I have seen in a long time.

The book grows slowly on you, moving deftly through three layers of racial stances/understandings. At the first layer, Fazzi describes in fine ethnographic detail the insults, jokes, stereotypes and epithets to which children at the darker end of the Brazilian phenotypical spectrum are subjected (though she is careful to identify individuals not in “objective” terms, but by alternating between self- and alter-identification). The section on the multiple contexts in which children refer to each other as “ugly” and as *macacos* is, to my knowledge, unique in the literature in its detail. Equally important, Fazzi unveils the racial insults that take place inside of families (147), driving home the point that living together as family does not prevent racial stereotyping (149).

The second half of the book allows another layer to appear: that in spite of the insults and stereotypes, the children in her sample hold that “*as características afetivas, morais e de competência devem ser ressaltadas e devem ter maior importância do que as características físicas, aparentes, que, como visto, propiciam ingredientes para a gozação racial.*” (210) Put differently, though the children indulge in racial insults and jokes, they constantly try to hide them from

adults, to apologize for and criticize them. One of the fine discoveries of the book is that children readily deploy both religious and secular discourses that “relativize” racist language. Among other things, the children can be heard saying that “we are all children of God” (188), that “people are all the same”, that character, morality and intelligence are more important than color; and more. One can’t help but be encouraged by such patterns.

Then Fazzi arrives at a third, deeper layer. She argues that all these “relativizing discourses”, while important, are *fragile*, a fragility that becomes apparent as soon as two children classified in different racial categories *come into conflict*. Conflictual situations, she writes “unleash prejudiced behaviors, such as verbal aggression and insults, based on racial characteristics.” (210) This offers is a dialectical model of racial attitudes, as a contested field, in which racist ideas get activated in moments of tension and conflict. While Fazzi does not claim to have solutions, she suggests that children’s existing anti-racist discourses need to be reinforced, before they become mere masks for inequality and prejudice, through instituting anti-prejudice curricula in schools, as early as kindergarten.

The book has weaknesses. While Fazzi points out that her sample of low-income children tends to hold more obviously prejudicial ideas than her sample of middle class children, she never really develops a convincing argument as to why this might be the case. The best she can muster is that the poor kids may be more exposed to Pentecostal associations of the devil with blackness – not exactly a persuasive argument, since a growing percentage of Brazil’s middle class now participate in neo-pentecostal churches. In addition, while issues of race and color are intimately linked to the body, sexuality and gender, Fazzi never really explores these themes. Given the importance of the pre-adolescent period in terms of early gender identification, it would have been illuminating to hear more about how racialization mapped onto gender. Fazzi also does not pay sufficient attention to the location of the children in place and time. While clearly Belo Horizonte is not Brazil, what part of Brazil is it? Is there anything we should know about the history of race relations in this city that might help us understand the specifics of the racial terms kids use? And then, how might we understand the context of 1997? This was, of course, a period of early public articulations about racism, it Fernando Henrique’s early pronouncements, the publication of Raça, and the first stirrings of a public debate about affirmative action. Do

these form part of the backdrop or not? And to what extent and in what ways have things changed since then? (It has after all, been nearly 20 years since the research was conducted).

But these are quibbles. The scholarly literature on color and race relations in Brazil has over the past 30 years focused on showing that life chances are distributed unequally according to phenotype and that self-esteem is routinely assailed in Brazil by Eurocentric aesthetics and ideologies of Euro-superiority. Rita de Cássia Fazzi's book raises the bar of such studies, pushing us to think about the racial ideological field in Brazil not as a simple hegemony, but as a tense, conflictual arena of battling hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. Whatever we may think of Fazzi's policy recommendations, her portrayal of Brazilian children's racial attitudes is among the most subtle and finely drawn in the literature.