

The fake anthropologist: the place of schools in anthropological research with children*¹

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Abstract

This article arises from the following problematization: what is the role of schools in childhood studies? Based on two ethnographic experiments, in different contexts (rural and urban)—the first in a peasant community in Paraíba and the second in stilt houses in São Luís do Maranhão—this article emphasizes schools as opportune places to listen to children and observe their experiences with childhoods in their life contexts. Therefore, the article reconsiders data produced in two disparate fields to problematize the role of schools in anthropological research on/with children. Beyond a legitimate space for cultural production and knowledge mediation, schools are analyzed as a social space for ethnographic research with children, while also assessing the role of the researcher and its implications in the research field. This text aims to support the Anthropology of Education and Childhood Studies by elaborating a critique of the common idea that in addressing children in school they would be considered only as learners. The title of this article is based on comments by Capuxu teachers who found it strange that, when researching children, I did not attend school. The rumors that teachers questioned my absence from school reached me through the children, forcing me to adopt measures so my research would not be discredited.

Keywords

School as ethnographic field – Reflexivity – Children as subjects – Anthropology of education.

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Introduction: Here comes the school without being invited³

This article addresses a reflection elaborated by revisiting two distinct experiences I had with schools throughout my research with children in different contexts. The first occurred in a peasant community in the Paraíba hinterland, therefore in a rural school. The second occurred in an urban school, which served children from stilt houses in Anil River in São Luís do Maranhão⁴.

In almost all ethnographic endeavors with children that I undertook, I used to research outside the school, avoiding contact with the children's school life and their condition as learners, for believing that in the school I would only obtain information about formal means of learning. A recent experience led me to retrace my steps to other situations where the school, unusually and surprisingly, like an obstacle, stood in the way of research. This insight gave rise to this article, which presents an analysis of the place of schools in ethnographies with children and of the place of the researcher and its implications in the research field.

Thus, I chose two experiences with schools, in two distinct studies, in different contexts, to extract from them a lesson: despite being neglected in my studies, the school saved them. In these two experiences, the schools had not been predetermined as a place for research. Neither as physical space, nor as symbolic place, as an institution. This was due, in part, to the Anthropology of Childhood criticism of the fact that, when researching children, we ultimately study them at school or in their condition as students. We argued that schools provided certain facility as to access to children: reaching them in large numbers, the safety of this access, or the ease of resolving the ethical aspects of the research with teachers and the school.

In any case, I understand that ethnography in schools can tell us much about the context of this school—and its children. And that, even at school, what children show us does not only concern teaching and their condition as learners⁵. In the two cases I choose here for analysis, which did not include considering the school, it indicated solutions or paths for important research issues and for the labyrinths we often create in the field. In school, I found relevant aspects of social organization, of the place of residence, or about food, safety, violence, identity, and belonging in each of these contexts.

Thus, this article addresses the following guiding questions: how do schools indicate solutions or answers to research issues? What functions do they assume? What can

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4- Starting in 2008, the Anil River stilt houses became part of an urbanization program aimed at totally eliminating precarious houses built on stilts. The Anil River Project/Anil River PAC (Growth Acceleration Program) was initiated with the objective of building more adequate housing for the riverside and quilombola population that resided there. Aiming to benefit approximately 250,000 people, the Anil River Project directly served people living on the left bank of the Anil River, in the area that crosses fifteen neighborhoods. Currently, some people still live in stilt houses on the banks of the River.

5- I do not neglect the criticism by Illich (1985) of the process he called the escolarization (or schooling) of society, nor do I disagree with the author's idea that the *ethos* of society needs to be deschooled. However, I emphasize that, in attempting not to reduce the idea of childhood to school, we should not empty it of meaning, making it possess only educational processes and subjects in the condition of learners.

schools show beyond learning? Is it possible to learn about a given childhood, whatever the context, without considering schools?

Based on an analysis comparing two ethnographies, adopting participant observation, informal conversations with children, interviews with adults, and the production of drawings, I present this reflection on the importance of considering schools in anthropological research with children. Therefore, this text is both the foundation of a method and the testimony to a journey that led me to the schools of the two fields situated here.

To this end, it was necessary to forgo a predetermined research project. Apropos, it seems to me that the unusual makes ethnography possible. “Because if the knowledge project is omnipresent, nothing happens. But if something happens and the knowledge project is not lost amid an adventure, then an ethnography is possible” (Favret-Saada, 2005, p. 160, our translation).

If I choose to revisit two research situations here, which occurred more than a decade ago, I do so believing that time and intellectual maturity can reveal profound discoveries if we venture to look back from time to time. Or, as believed by Geertz (1989), long or new flights are not taken in anthropology; the truth is that, better informed and conceptualized, we dive deeply into the same things.

Despite the time since the two ethnographic experiments—among the Capuxu people from 2013 to 2014 and in the stilt houses in São Luís from 2005 to 2006—and the changes with the residential buildings the PAC built in place of stilt houses, the reflections I present here are not impacted by the time frame, because they essentially concern the methodological aspects of the two experiments: the choice of spaces for research with children and how schools, as opportune spaces, can provide answers to our research questions in a given context, beyond the teaching/learning binomial.

Therefore, this article addresses the place of schools in anthropological research with children based on a critical analysis of the still recurring tendency to neglect the school institution in research with children. I argue that schools are legitimate spaces for cultural production and knowledge mediation. As I analyze schools as social spaces for research, I also reflect on ethnographic research with children, with the objective that this text may be a contribution to the Anthropology of Education and Childhood Studies.

The title of this article refers to questions raised by Capuxu teachers who found it strange that, when researching children, I did not attend their school. The rumors that teachers questioned my absence from school reached me through the children, forcing me to adopt measures so my research would not be discredited.

The darn school is there: children and schools

In the anthropology of childhood in Brazil, schools have always been fertile ground for reflecting on modes of knowing, learning, and teaching. Several of these studies also seek to understand the multiple modes of being a child in the condition of learner.

Most ethnographies about children or with children almost always choose to access them through schools or in school spaces. Contrary to what may seem, this does not mean that we only have access to children in the condition of learners. Driven by the

right questions, we can access diverse meanings of being a child and multiple childhoods through ethnographies with children in schools.

That is because schools do not preclude a possibility of learning about children; on the contrary, they provide a range of possibilities for observing the diversity of childhoods through the everyday lives of children, by means of a gamut of research techniques that are possible in the production of an ethnography (Sousa, 2015).

In anthropology, several studies are dedicated to thinking about Indigenous children in schools (Alvares, 2012; Benites, 2012; Bergamaschi, 2005; Cohn, 2005; Ferreira, 2019; Ives-Félix *et al.* 2018; Lopes da Silva, 1981, Lopes da Silva; Ferreira 2001; Marqui; Cohn, 2013; Tassinari, 2015, 2009; Tassinari; Cohn, 2012; Tassinari; Gobbi, 2009). This occurs because, in the case of Indigenous children, there is an impasse between Indigenous knowledges and their native pedagogies and the Western modes of teaching and learning incorporated by schools. Both experiences—with Amerindian cosmology and Western knowledge—are incorporated in childhood as previously demonstrated by Tassinari (2001), Cohn (2000), Nunes (2003), and Tassinari *et al.* (2012), among other authors.

Ives-Félix and Nakayama (2018) discuss the presence of school as something that, being imposed by non-Indigenous people, came to occupy children with knowledge that is not proper to their culture. There is a chasm between the school and the universe of the village, which distances children from their proper modes of knowing. This is revealed in the words of a Tentehar Indigenous teacher from Maranhão, who stated that no one learns Indigenous knowledge anymore, but “the darn school is there” (Ives-Félix; Nakayama, 2018, p. 43, our translation).

Also, Sousa (2017) was dedicated to thinking about the differences in ways of seeing the world, learning from it, and teaching it, in knowledge production and transmission among Indigenous peoples, upholding the school as a possible place for dialogue between homogenizing and local pedagogies, and fruitful for diverse forms of knowledge production.

Tassinari *et al.* (2014) argue that there is a tendency to associate education, childhood, and knowledge production and circulation with school spaces and times, as if school education encompassed and subsumed other forms of educating, of producing and transmitting knowledge, of promoting the good development of children. Although I agree with the criticism, I believe that schools do not only present modes to produce and transmit knowledge; as a rule, we are the ones who seek that there, when we could access it to obtain diverse and general knowledge about the everyday lives of the children who attend schools.

Schools in quilombos were analyzed by Amoras and Motta-Maués (2016). Children from riverside communities were studied by Teixeira (2013) and by Pojo and Vilhena (2013), in the Pará Amazon. In rural settlements, early childhood education was analyzed by Carvalho and Silva (2013), who were interested in what the settled children say about family and school.

Romani children, scarcely investigated in Brazilian anthropology, are the subjects of an expressive number of works in the field of Education. These works show the current divergences between the institutional space of schools and the cultural context of these

children, resulting in difficulties in assimilating educational routines and practices. However, these texts include discussions about the ethnic universe of the children, noting gypsy educational practices and knowledge generated within the culture of this group, but emphasizing the challenges faced by the children at school for having a different culture, and due to the rigid and formal aspect of the school setting (Silva, 2012; Reses *et al.*, 2019; Joseth Martins, 2011).

Monique Rodrigues (2019) notes the invisibility of Romani children in basic education and social projects. Other studies address the difficult relation between Romani children and the school setting. Ana Kátia Pinto (2012) presents the school setting reinterpreted by Romani children in Rio Grande do Sul; Luciana Bareicha (2013) addresses education and social exclusion from the perspective of Romani and non-Romani people; Silvia Simões (2007) analyzes Romani education through the school setting and the community located in Palhoça, Santa Catarina, where the relation with the school is fragmented, as Romani people attribute greater importance to their culture.

Rural early childhood education was analyzed by Silva, Silva, and Martins (2013) and by Silva *et al.* (2012), addressing various daily practice issues in daycare centers and preschools serving populations in different rural territories, noting the wealth of practices and knowledges found and the problems faced—such as transportation—that are often neglected by schools and teachers. These authors seek to contribute toward the school getting closer to the actual peasant context, understanding rural children in their various dimensions.

Despite criticism on the use of ethnographies by non-anthropologists (Peirano, 2014), we find excellent school ethnographies produced by educators. Although these studies are mostly dedicated to the analysis of schools, several others aim to analyze the experience of childhood in distinct contexts—peasant, Indigenous, quilombola, Romani, etc.—and appropriate schools by conceiving them as fertile ground to encounter children and access their modes of reading the world.

Research methods, field, subjects, and ethical implications

No ethnographic experience repeats. Although in this text I present two ethnographic endeavors with the objective of demonstrating the status of schools in research with children, the exercises were different in each case. Grounded in the ethnography definitions (Geertz 1989; Malinowski, 1984) and adopting the conventional ethnographic research methods, in each experience the anthropologist positions herself and moves in a given manner.

Among the Capuxu people, I lived at the Santana-Queimadas Ranch for months, with short weekly breaks. I immersed myself in their routines, I accompanied the children to the fields, to mass, to soccer games, to the patron saint's festivals, to the recurring errands on the roads, in the games in all spaces and at all times. I took some of them to school, waited for others after school, interviewed parents, healers, grandparents. They also took me to various places. With the children, I practiced participant observation and had informal conversations. I produced a vast and dense ethnography of how the Capuxu people create the children's bodies, produce the Capuxu person, and how all of this flows into the ethnic identity of the people (Sousa, 2014).

Among the Anil River stilt houses, the ethnography had its peculiarities. There was no place for me to reside there, and the residents said it was not safe. I produced the ethnography through daily observations, arriving early—to follow the children arriving at the daycare—and leaving after nightfall. I started by looking for the children in the stilt houses to understand the experience of a childhood in that place and found silent houses, with few adults, some breastfed babies, and mothers who informed me that the children spent the day away from the stilt houses, in daycare centers and schools.

Then, I initiated the research with free-floating observation (Pétonet, 2008) and mobilized my methods and techniques (Muller; Sousa 2023). I went to the schools, integrated myself, and followed the routine care for daycare children—baths, meals, sleep, and playtime—and the routine of older children in municipal and state schools in the neighborhood. While I expected to obtain insights into a childhood in the Anil River stilt houses, the community led me away from them, and I followed the steps of my research subjects.

I emphasize that, when mentioning the school, I am not referring to it solely as the physical space built and established within the research field—in the case of the Santana Ranch, in Queimadas—or outside of it—in the case of the Anil River stilt houses. Although the place of the school, in both cases, has presumed analytical importance, here I am interested in the place of the school in ethnographic research with children and about diverse childhoods, as a symbolic and relational category for the production of meanings, relevant for understanding the diverse childhoods.

Therefore, I chose—from my various research experiences with children—one rural experience and one urban experience. Through this selection, I sought to present two fields commonly defined in opposition (rural/urban) to reinforce the text's central argument: that schools are powerful institutions for observing the realities of its subjects, showing important aspects of their everyday lives and social organization. Contrary to usual imagination, children's social lives are not “out there,” but enter schools in their multiple dimensions, which makes them mirrors that reflect how these realities are organized beyond their walls.

Having the results of the two ethnographic experiences—a dissertation and a thesis on the Capuxu people and an essay on the Anil River stilt houses presented at an international event—I opted for revisiting the two experiences and reinterpreting them with an emphasis on the schools and on what my initial project did not include.

To this end, I delved into the empirical data and evidence recorded in diaries and field notebooks, observation guides, and transcripts of interviews with adults—mothers, fathers, principals, teachers, and caregivers. I also revisited the records of informal conversations with the children and the diverse scenes photographed, noted, and crystallized in my memories. All these techniques used in conventional ethnographies give an analytical status to the reinterpretation of the two experiences that I present here.

To provide readers with a broader context of the schools analyzed, I present their children based on some social markers, such as age group, economic situation, and a racial classification. Thus, I expect neither to make childhood into something abstract—transforming it into a discursive concept rather than an observable social reality—nor

to generalize children, but to offer a dense reading of children as concrete and socially situated subjects.

The Porfírio Higino da Costa School had children aged 6 to 9 years formally enrolled. However, their trip to school brought along their younger siblings, aged 3 to 5 years, who cried to follow their siblings to the institution. Located at the core of the Ranch, a few meters from most houses, and with children running freely through all spaces of the peasant ranch, the employees could not avoid the presence of the children, who stayed at the windows, on the living room floors, between the legs of older siblings, on the doorsteps. All teaching and all snacks were shared with them.

These children, whose ethnicity is defined as Capuxu, are White, with light brown, slightly almond-shaped eyes. Straight hair and half a dozen common surnames due to marriages between cousins. Their parents are farmers and subsist on cash transfer programs, pensions—due to the number of people with disabilities—and farming or small-scale cattle breeding. This explains the sense of belonging to the country and to the people, as well as the school as a place for the creation of a peasant *ethos*.

The children from the Bandeira Tribuzzi Bridge stilt houses, who were considered in this research, were aged 2 to 6 years. They were mostly Black children of single mothers or raised by their grandparents. Some were cared for by their mothers while their fathers served time at the Pedrinhas Penitentiary Complex. Their families lived on collected sarnambi [shellfish] and on what the mangrove offered them. On cash transfer programs, aid from the Camboa community church, and jobs such as laundry, cleaning, construction help, etc.

Therefore, here we are addressing two diametrically opposed childhood experiences. Far from living in extreme poverty, the Capuxu children have abundant food, extended families, and an entire community where everyone is responsible for the children. There is a school located near home and both places are safe. Their teachers are their aunts, godmothers, and great-aunts.

The children from the stilt houses are dropped off and picked up from daycare centers by their mothers. They seek a safe routine away from the risks of falling into the mangrove and drowning while crawling or playing. Far from violence, stray bullets, police chases of criminals, alcoholism, and many other problems stemming from the place where they live.

These distinctions between the two realities provide the thread of my argument: even in situations where social markers show substantially distinct childhoods and children, in such opposing social organizations, schools have proven an important research place—both spatially and symbolically. That is why these experiences were carefully chosen, for the strength of their differences and for the power of the schools in both cases.

Regarding the ethical implications, I have been involved with the Capuxu people since my graduation in 2000. I was already known for having grown up in the countryside, on a small farm 16 km from where the Capuxu live. There, the references were my parents, recognized by the people. The people were proud to have someone interested in their history and identity, and they demanded that their real names appear in my final products, as well as their photos and the photos of their children. My work has become a cultural

and political manifestation of the existence of a people who would like to give visibility to their particularities.

Therefore, I lived in their homes, was cared for by them, and became friends with the people who entrusted their children to me, while the children took care of me, guiding me along the roads of the ranch, to the homes of the people I needed to interview, herding fierce dogs or cows and oxen that might chase me.

The Capuxu children participated in the entire process, telling me several times what I should photograph or film, questioning me about what would go into the “book” about them (the thesis). They drew sketches, showed me the spaces known only to them, confided secrets to me, swam with me in the waters of the Goiabeira River, taught me how to lead the herds to the corral, how to release well water to the ranch, introduced me to their own belief systems, ways of relating to humans and non-humans, and the saints, these more than human.

In the stilt houses—from 2004 to 2006—far from any dignity, in conditions of misery, socially and politically invisible, these individuals asked me for nothing. With a notebook and some pens, wearing jeans and worn-out sneakers, I introduced myself as a UFMA teacher and said I intended to learn about the children. Small stools were pulled out for me to sit on, wiped clean with their own hands, poverty was laid bare. They received me with downcast heads, answering a few questions objectively, saying that, if I wanted to learn about the children, I needed to leave there, just like them.

Paths were taught, schools were indicated, schedules were described; and, when I asked about access, they answered “you can go there,” “you can knock on the door there.” This is how I arrived at the daycare center where I spent most of this research. I decided, on my own initiative, not to record names or take photos, but only to listen to the children, play with them, and be with them. I offered help and the caregivers readily accepted. I could then comb some of them after their bath, cradle them in my arms to sleep, or place small plastic spoons in their little mouths during meals.

The complex discussion on ethics in research with children has already pointed out current challenges. After ethnographic critique (Clifford, 2005) and the need to assume the co-authorship of our interlocutors in ethnographies, anthropological research with children faces blurred photographs, fictitious names, erased identities, transforming children into an empty and generic category. How to ensure children’s participation in research and texts with informed consent forms signed by adult guardians? With consent request methods adopting an adult-centric standard, made in writing, requiring signatures and an understanding of rights? These protocol hierarchies contribute to making the children invisible in the process and show a conception of science that ignores that data are produced relationally and contextually, through negotiations between the researcher and the children in a space where the researcher is implicated.

We need an ethics that protects children, but considers them as subjects of rights, with the possibility of authorship and participation, guaranteeing their protection without excluding their potential. This ethics should not obstruct the notion of autonomy of children, capable of understanding and responding for themselves (James, 2019; James;

Prout 1990). Thus, researchers must treat children with the same level of respect and ethical consideration given to adults in research, generating an “ethical symmetry,” in the terms of Christensen and Prout (2002).

Among the Capuxu, the visibility of their people, including children, was desired and expected, showing how each context addresses ethical issues in a particular manner. In the Bandeira-Tribuzzi Bridge stilt houses, abandoned by the State and left to their own devices, the families, at the mercy of all kinds of violence, lacked the strength to negotiate any request or manage any participation. Their lives were exposed in printed newspapers, with headlines about poverty, violence, and the death of children in the mangrove.

The fake anthropologist and the Capuxu people: their Ranch and their school

The Capuxu people are an endogamous peasant group that inhabits the Santana-Queimadas Ranch, in the municipality of Santa Terezinha, in the Paraíba hinterland. The Ranch is 18 km in size, housing approximately two hundred inhabitants distributed in sixty-one houses. It also has the Goiabeira River, five small ponds and reservoirs, a school, soccer fields, small businesses, and the Church of Sant’Ana, the local patron saint. The people work in various fields, on hectares of land unequally distributed among them.

As a result of the endogamous kinship system, with preferential marriage between cousins, there are four predominant surnames: Ferreira, Menezes, Lima, and Costa. Their ethnonym refers to one of their predecessors, who was named João and used to hunt bees of the species *Capuxu*.

This setting includes the Porfírio Higino da Costa Municipal Elementary School, located slightly at the entrance of the ranch, which provides education from literacy to the fifth grade. The school has two teachers and two general assistants, who serve two early childhood education classes and classes from the 1st to the 5th grade. Currently, there are 14 students enrolled. From the age of ten, when they start the sixth grade, children begin to attend school in the nearest city.

The institution has precarious infrastructure, consisting of two tiny classrooms, a small corridor, two bathrooms, and a room for games and supplementary reading materials. It lacks any other room or dependency intended for the school office or the principal, for example. There is also no adequate space for playtime. For this reason, during recess, the children are allowed to play in its surroundings.

The experience among the Capuxu people occurred in two moments: the research conducted during the master’s degree program aimed at describing Capuxu childhood and resulted in a trilogy and its ramifications: learning (school and agricultural), work (agricultural, in the field, and domestic chores, around the house), and play (everywhere on the ranch and at all times). In addition to the other discoveries (Sousa, 2004), I note here the school’s relation with the rural area, in complete harmony with the context of which it is part, aligned with rural values of peasant belonging, prominent as an important builder of knowledge, belonging, and ethnicity.

This connection of the school to the entire peasant community and its *ethos* could be perceived through the annual celebration of Peasant's Day or the artworks depicting plants, herbs, or fruit species, produced by students and teachers and hung in the school hallway. Through the numerous seedlings grown by the children, watered and cared for at school. Through the constant science lessons in the fields or the games in the classroom or on the school grounds and its surroundings that explored rural elements. Through the lullabies and songs with rural elements, sung at school, and the school menu aligned with the Capuxu people's diet.

Eight years after obtaining my master's degree, during my doctoral research attempting to obtain insights into how the processes of creating the body and producing the person led to Capuxu ethnicity, I believed that schools would not be fertile ground for research. In search of the individual and collective processes for producing the body and the person, the ethnography took place "out there," following children in all their activities and adventures, but never at school. Sometimes I would wait for them to leave or stay with them until they went in, say goodbye, and then go on to talk with adults or other groups of children who were in the after-school period.

It was then that the school teachers started to instigate me: "You research children and don't go to their school?", "What day are you going to the school?", they asked incredulously behind my back: "what kind of researcher is that who researches children and doesn't come to their school?", a Capuxu boy revealed to me. I started to feel like a fake anthropologist, one of those who, when researching children, do not go to their school.

In order to circumvent the situation, more than out of belief in the benefits that a trip to school would provide for the doctoral topic, I decided to schedule a visit to the establishment. "When can I go?" I asked. "Go on Friday, as there's more free time and there's art class." There, the imbroglio was made. Now, I was an anthropologist studying the Capuxu body, person, and ethnicity, with a scheduled visit to the school in the middle of art class. Me, who can't even draw!

But that was the best idea I came up with. And the most obvious one. Upon arriving, I asked the children to draw freely while I, sitting at my "teacher-for-an-afternoon" desk—since the teacher took the opportunity to stay in the cafeteria drinking coffee and chatting with other staff members—thought about what to do with those children.

I was surprised when one by one the children brought me their elaborate drawings. The response to my "draw freely" proposal was almost twenty drawings with the same theme: the ranch. If I had indicated a thematic drawing about the ranch, I don't think I would have achieved such success. I spent a few minutes looking at those landscapes, almost all the same, of the ranch's grounds. What happened here? I thought. And I decided to ask:

Me: Why did everyone draw the ranch?

The children: Why, aren't you the girl who researches the ranch?

And that is how I found out that my absence from school led the adults in that community to understand that my research was, in fact, about the ranch, and not about the people—namely, the children. Then, researching the ranch meant that: that portion of

roads, fences, animals (named), houses, trees, and weirs. Without people, but permeated by the spaces that were already so familiar to me. The drawings were nothing more than addenda to the ethnography I was conducting “out there.”

Disappointed, I put away the drawings and thought of something more creative. “Shall we go for a walk? Why don’t you take me to the place you like the most on the ranch?” After much discussion, the children chose: “the Dão weir!” I promptly informed the teacher that we were going to the Dão weir, which represented no danger because it was dry during the long drought. “Okay, I’ll register this as a technical visit,” said the teacher.

On this journey, the children taught me about the land, planting, harvesting, raising animals, milking, venomous animals, their tasks in the corrals with the animals and around the house; all these lessons helped me to understand the processes of producing the body and the person that formed the Capuxu ethnicity. Among the Capuxu people, I discovered a school that built a sense of belonging and ethnicity, whose essence was tied to life in the country, to work in the fields, to the relation with the land, plants, and animals. Situated at the core of the ranch, the school is the place where the peasant *ethos* is reinforced in all its strength.

Interestingly, through those drawings produced in the school that I had archived and deemed useless for understanding the issues that produced the Capuxu body and person, I discovered the relation with animals, the onomastic management of the animals, and the spaces that configure the peasant ranch from the children’s perspective: the house, the fenced spaces, and the roads. This configuration challenged the classic dichotomy of rural studies that announced the peasant ranch as marked by the house and the field, the two masculine and feminine dimensions of the ranch, from the perspective of adults (Sousa, 2024).

It was in the school, therefore, that the major discoveries about the production of the Capuxu body, person, and identity were revealed to me. The informal conversations in school spaces, the children’s drawings and writings, the relations with their full names and repeated surnames, and the naming of their household animals—a recurring theme of conversations—provided a universe of clues, indicating solutions for the research questions. Thus, they shed light on the end of the tunnel and on shortcuts to the complex abyss of the production of the peasant *ethos* and the Capuxu ethnicity. If it were not for my trips to school, much more to meet the teachers’ requests and not be disliked by them, I would not have found, perhaps, the answers to the issues built in the thesis I wrote about the Capuxu people.

It remains to be said how the idea of being seen by the Capuxu teachers as a fake anthropologist affected me. This should shed light on the complex discussion about ethnographic authority (Clifford, 2005; Geertz 2002) and reverse anthropology (Wagner, 2010).

Roy Wagner (2010), in his thesis on reverse anthropology, noted that as we formulate impressions and representations of these peoples, classifying and analyzing them, they also analyze us, create impressions about us, classify us, and seek ways to understand our ways of life and of proceeding in the field. That is how the teachers questioned an anthropologist who, interested in children, did not seek them at school. This critique made me reflect on the importance of listening to interlocutors about what they also deem important in our research.

An assumed authority and the exercise of power of the anthropologist become more complex with regard to the final products of ethnography. We are the ones who decide what we will tell and through which narrative strategies. Thus, we select themes and modes for narrating in passages in our field diaries, interview fragments, photographs, and excerpted and edited phrases. In general, we do not attribute to our interlocutors the authorship of the work in the field, we do not allow them to choose the images or drawings produced, nor the fictitious names we will use, denying them participation in the narratives we produce about their cultures.

The Bandeira Tribuzzi Bridge stilt houses and the flooded childhood: A child's place is indeed at school!⁶

The second experience I present concerns the period when I lived in São Luís do Maranhão, between 2004 and 2006. Maranhão is at the top of the poorest states in the country, with one of the lowest GDP per capita. Its capital is marked by extreme social disparity. At the time of the research, the stilt houses were located at the foot of the Bandeira-Tribuzzi Bridge, which connects the Historic Center to the commercial center of São Luís, over the Anil River. Located in the Camboa neighborhood, the stilt houses were close to the city's largest shopping mall.

At that time, the bus I took to university passed over the Bandeira-Tribuzzi Bridge. São Luís is nationally recognized for the large tidal variation, a movement that flows and floods the coast of the Historic Center in the morning and ebbs it in the afternoon. The city is also characterized by the meeting of the river and the sea. The Anil River is a source of food for several families, including those who lived in stilt houses and supported themselves by collecting sarnambi (shellfish) from traps.

From the bus window, daily, the wooden stilt houses built over the mangrove attracted my attention. I wondered what it would be like to experience childhood in that place of extreme poverty, a setting of constant violence and crime, and police chases reported in the newspapers. However, more than that, the headlines that caught my attention were about babies. Every now and then, holes would open in those damp and rotten wooden planks, with true gaps in the cracks. A baby who had just learned to sit or crawl would occasionally fall in them, drowning in the mangrove. After learning that, I could not take my eyes off the stilt houses. Even when the bus crossed the bridge, made the U-turn, and the stilt houses were left behind, I kept thinking about them and their children, about the condition of misery and the risk.

Based on these doubts, I immersed myself in the world of the children who lived in the stilt houses by the Bandeira-Tribuzzi Bridge, and I sought to understand the meanings they attributed to what we call childhood. It is a childhood that changes according to the place and the role that these children occupy in society.

6- I do not uphold the generalizing idea that "a child's place is at school." Beyond universalizing, such assumption seems to contain dangerous premises, as stated by Illich (1985): as if other places were not for children; as if children only learned in school; and as if they could only be taught in school. We need to reconsider the school experience as that which defines childhood in general (Tassinari; Cohn 2012).

My first attempt was promptly unsuccessful. I found no children there and I spoke with their mothers, who were always available and helpful. The second and third attempts were also unsuccessful. So I decided to ask where the children were because I never saw them. A secret was revealed to me: “they only come back to sleep.” That was how I found out that the children from the stilt houses were enrolled in two different schools, one in each shift, ensuring they stayed away from home during the day. I walked the paths of the stilt houses in search of the children, and ultimately all the paths that led me to them led me away from there.

The stilt houses are built with planks placed side by side, leaving several gaps. Caution is necessary to walk between them, always attentive, choosing, between the mud and the trash, a place to put my feet. Children, especially younger ones, need to keep their feet away from the cracks as well, to avoid accidents. Poverty is, definitely, prevalent there. At the end of the morning, the extremely fetid place rests from the waters that flood it. The stilt houses are over these waters and remain, in the hardness and roughness of the wood, indifferent to the ebb and flow of the waters. The residents generally live on collected sarnambi (shellfish). Men, women, and, occasionally, children, go to the river, equipped with their traps, to collect sarnambi. This flooded childhood shifts from collecting sarnambi to parrot games around the favela, in the late afternoons and on weekends. The location is the setting of police chases of criminals, with tragedies that always end with stray bullets with certain targets: people.

To keep children away from the social risks to which they are exposed, both inside and outside the home, parents send them to the community daycare center school. This daycare school appears as a safe place, where they will be fed, bathed, taught to read and write, and have access to playfulness. In the case of the riverside children of the Anil River, at home they are in a situation of risk: exposed to contamination due to the unsanitary conditions of the place and to daily violence. The daycare school appears as the place of childhood, and the home is almost configured as a place of passage.

For children aged under two years, whose age still precludes access to daycare, the safest place is their mother's arms, inside the house, with doors closed with improvised material, letting their little hands be guided between the cracks. It is a childhood that spends time with scrap, old, broken, and repaired toys, or an eight-inch black and white television set.

A few meters from there, the daycare school remains locked, with padlocks and chains, and is situated on firm ground. There, there are children who allow themselves to walk without the necessary care on the stilt houses. On shelves, old toys, some modeling clay shaped into all sorts of objects: a stilt house, a revolver, a toy car like many of those that travel over the Bandeira-Tribuzzi Bridge. In the daycare school, the children are protected, for a few moments, from the flooded childhood out there. This childhood is only flooded by one or another tear due to a slap, push, or bite, nothing they have not already experienced, perhaps also at home, as domestic violence is a constant mark in the discourse and bodies of the children.

The daycare school is supported by the Parish of Our Lady of Remedies and by the Chapel of the Cambua neighborhood. In addition, it requests the children's parents to contribute symbolic amounts, which were systematically collected in the past and became

increasingly scarce over time. Given that, the daycare school began making donations to the families of the children who needed it the most. In an inverse movement, part of the donations received in the form of food and clothing are sent by the children themselves to the neediest parents.

The childhood of the children from the stilt houses happens as a break in the day. The time they are at school, which arises, in this case, as a strategy to ensure the childhood of these children, guaranteeing safety and playfulness, defining elements of the very notion of childhood. The daycare acts as a device that removes children from the poor reality of the stilt houses and enables them to experience that which they understand as childhood.

Thus, in addition to a clean and healthy setting, the daycare is a place for adequate nutrition, learning, socialization, and full playfulness, no longer being merely a means for learning and becoming an end in itself, as a means to guarantee childhood. A childhood that lasts from mornings to afternoons, Monday to Friday.

When I ask these children what childhood is, it appears defined as “going to daycare, eating, playing...”, elements considered necessary for the survival of any individual. Therefore, the daycare school operates as the place of childhood, since, outside of it, the characteristics of childhood, as defined by the children, do not exist.

While visiting the two local schools, I was affected by the anguish of seeing the families and their children neglected. In the daycare school, I observed the children lined up to bathe in a reservoir of cold water. Patiently, the teachers/caregivers bathed the children one by one, in a single line. The nap, after lunch, was on cloths spread on the floor, some children on diapers, without any mattress. At the end of the day, I caught the teachers giving leftover bananas and cookies to a child so they would take them to their elderly grandparents, who raised them.

Affected by the misery of life in the stilt houses and by the children who escaped from there as best as they could, without expecting the school I once again found it as a place of safety, instead of home! Once again, while trying to understand childhood in a given context, the paths of research and of the community's own dynamics led me to school. For the anthropologist does nothing more than follow the paths indicated to her by the social organization of that people.

From the school, I would see, from afar, life on the stilt houses, with hardly any children awake to witness it. On dry land, where it was possible to walk without worries, the school emerged as a lifeline, as a place of safety. The childhood of the children from the stilt houses by the Bandeira Tribuzzi Bridge appears with exact space and time to happen. When the daycare school doors close, especially at 5:00 PM on Friday, they leave the Anil River stilt houses' children outside of childhood, and they return to the reality that expels them every day. A childhood that is as fluid and mobile as the waters where the community settled. A flooded childhood that follows the river's constancy: from the ebb in the morning, with children leaving the stilt houses, to the flow in the afternoon, with them returning from the daycare school.

Final considerations

In this article, I propose to analyze the importance of school in ethnographies about the experience of childhood in diverse contexts, with the aim of contributing to the discussion about the boundaries between school and ethnography. At the same time, I reconsider my role as a subject involved in the field, in the production of ethnographic knowledge with children in their communities and schools.

To this end, I chose two experiences in different settings—rural and urban—in which, while seeking to understand the experience of childhood in those communities, I did not consider school as a possible space for research, reducing the research potential in that setting by believing that research in schools would restrict children to the condition of students.

Among the Capuxu people, I came across a school that was an extension of life on the ranch, in which the elements that characterized childhood and life in the community in general were strongly present. From the school menu to songs sung with elements of the environment, and even on commemorative dates like Farmer's Day, the peasant *ethos* was manifested in all the school spaces, a place where my encounter with the children gave rise to deep reflections on Capuxu identity. It was in the school's space that complex questions guiding my doctoral thesis found answers.

While researching in the stilt houses of the Anil River, I was forced to go to school to be with the children. Refugees from their own homes and from living with violence, from unsanitary conditions, from chases of criminals and from stray bullets, the schools protected the children and guaranteed a minimum of dignity—not just for experiencing childhood but for life. Sleep, food, and play were some of the guarantees the school offered to children whose lives were supported on rotten wooden planks.

Faced with this reality, I could not help but think about the widespread and mistaken notion that home is the safest place for children. In this case, the home appears as the least safe place, a setting of drug use and trafficking, alcohol consumption, domestic violence, crime, and abuse. With constant risk of accidents and death the younger the children were. While interviewing a mother holding her baby in her arms, I asked, looking at that devastating setting and observing the tiny, almost empty wooden house: "What is the safest place to leave him here?" She answered readily and sadly: "in my arms."

Based on these experiences, I argue that schools are important research variables, providing significant findings about children, their families, and their communities. I understand that the reason why schools always appear in ethnographies with children is not due to access to them or the ethical-methodological facilities that the institution provides to research, but rather due to their potential to show elements of these children's life experiences, both inside and outside of school, near and far, guaranteeing them voice and protagonism.

Now, is it possible to learn about a given childhood, in whatever context, without considering the school? Is not the school an opportune place to listen to children? About the societies they live in, identity, poverty, (un)safety, belonging, food, and, why not,

about learning? The school is a place where children speak: about themselves, about the lives they currently have, and about the lives they would like to have. They speak among themselves and to each other. Which is why the school appeared so many times in my research without being invited and solved so many problems for an ethnographer who, in stilt houses or in cities, tried to listen to children.

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