

# *Phenotypes*

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*translated by Daniel Hahn*



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*For my father*

The official came up, opened the door without pausing to ask permission, stepped inside and gestured for me to join him. I stood in front of eight unfamiliar people waiting for me, those eight who made up the commission devised by the new government to find an adequate solution, just the latest in the new government's long list of mistaken adequate solutions, to the chaos that had resulted, suddenly, from implementing a policy of racial quotas for students in Brazil, that sleepwalking country, the giant ex-colony of the Portuguese crown in South America, branded across the world as a place of ethnic harmony, of oh so very successful miscegenation, a place where the practice of white men raping black and indigenous women had been allowed to run wild for centuries, and, as in almost all those lands christened the New World, had been assimilated, mitigated, forgotten, a place where, in the twentieth century, nobody ever dared, let alone seriously, to propose a law forbidding a black from getting together with a white, white with indigenous, indigenous with black, a country that's number one in the rankings of the planet's so-called racial democracies, an emblem of a kind of friendliness that is unique, indecipherable, and which people who don't know any better tend to generalise as being

a sign of the unrivalled warmth of Brazil. Without waiting for me or one of the eight to speak, the official just started right in on introducing me, making a mistake straight off the bat, the same mistake so many other inattentive people make, with my first name, calling me *Frederico* rather than Federico, despite the fact that he was actually looking at an A4 page printed in fourteen-point Arial with a short CV, giving my correct name, a CV that he, disregarding the existence of that old thing called Wikipedia, could only have assembled from announcements he'd picked out of a totally indiscriminate online search. He reported that I had been one of the founders of the Global Social Forum in Porto Alegre, that I was an important researcher into the so-called hierarchy of skin colours, on pigmentocracy and its logic in Brazil, on the perversity of colourism, on compensatory policies and their lack of understanding among the Brazilian élites, that I'd advised NGOs in Brazil, in Latin America and the rest of the world, that I'd consulted for Adidas, oh yes that's right, Adidas, the famous German-founded company making high-performance sportswear, the man was foolish enough to emphasise, as if that were the high point of my biography, and I did consider interrupting him, saying like hell did I ever consult for Adidas, that I'd merely acted as intermediary for an agency that did advertising for them with some graffiti artists from the streets of Brasília for this series of videos they were making to stream on Vimeo, on YouTube, on Instagram, an action inspired by an old campaign produced in the US in the nineteen eighties around the slogan skateboarding is not a crime, but I ended up biting my tongue, I let him continue in the interests of keeping my blood pressure down as

a forty-nine-year-old man already taking five milligrams of Naprix every morning to keep it under control, and the last person to be nominated by our distinguished new President of the Republic to be a part of this group of supposed worthies, and then, only then, when he reached the end, and not till he had given me a little good luck pat on the back, did he, the official who had got my name wrong, withdraw.

I sat down in the nearest chair knowing that the eight were waiting for something from me that might justify my arrival in the closing minutes of their first meeting. In my head, however, what predominated was the discomfort caused by the distance between my chair and theirs, the eight clumped together at the opposite end of the gigantic oval table, and also the contrast between my XXL skateboard freestyle T-shirt that sported the face of Ice Blue, the rapper from the Racionais MCs, Brazil's best rap group ever, printed really big on the chest, my Drop Dead trousers in orange with navy-blue thread and my Rainha VL Paulista sneakers in black with grey that were totally wrecked, which was in no way accidental, and their clothes, not to mention my canine distrust towards them, the flashbacks that were surfacing now and getting all jumbled up in my head, like the talk my mother had with me and my brother Lourenço when I was seven and he was six to try to lessen his confusion at the insults that had come out of the filthy mouths of three of his little bastard classmates from pre-school, classmates who, as early as the second day of school, called him Golliwog, Sambo, Magilla Gorilla, because in a game of tag during recess he hadn't submitted to their commands the way a Brazilian child who was

considered black, according to the imaginary common law of those Brazilian children considered white in that year of nineteen seventy-three, was supposed to submit. Those sermons of my mother's became commonplace in that same year of seventy-three, because I, wanting to defy her, wanting to make her responsible for this difference that hadn't previously existed with any particular aggressiveness in my life and my brother's, a difference that came to be reiterated through the mouths not only of a trio of irrelevant little pre-school demons but the mouths of older pupils, of some employees and possibly even the occasional careless teacher, about how we weren't brothers really, not blood brothers, saying things about one of us being adopted, despite both him and me replying, in that way children do, withholding nothing, that yes we were, we were real brothers, never mind that by the standards of those who were asking, by the standards of Porto Alegre, by the standards of that Brazil of that year nineteen seventy-three, I, with my very fair skin and straight brown hair verging on the blond, was considered white, and he, my brother, with dark skin, dark brown curly hair verging on the black, albeit with the same hooked nose, kind of wide, as mine and the same mouth with a thinner upper lip and thicker lower lip like mine, was considered black, insisting on asking my mother what race we really were, ignoring her responses about how colours and races didn't matter, that deep in our bones we were all the same, paying no mind to her assurances or to the fact that on the birth certificates drawn up at the Zone 2 Notary Office of the Porto Alegre Civil Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, according to the notary criteria implemented in the decade of the nineteen-sixties in the far

south of Brazil, both he and I were registered as being mixed, while for her part, my mother, who knows, perhaps she was acknowledging all the while to herself that this business of one son being subjected to a kind of violence that the other son would never experience was a real piece of bad luck, just a seriously shitty quirk of fate, but of course speaking aloud the same words that would be repeated many times not only in the year seventy-three, but throughout my childhood, that we were all black, that she with her light skin and straight brown hair and my father with his dark if less dark than my brother's skin and really curly black hair, and then my brother and I as well, that our family was a black family, even at my eighth birthday, when my aunt, my mother's sister, showed up with her two kids, both considered white by the standards of nineteen seventy-four, not to mention the decades that followed, and with a cousin of theirs too, a proper little menace, oh so proud of his whiteness at that party of dark people, a kid my age, who, at a certain noisy interval in the process of children bonding at a birthday party, selected me as his adversary and started going on about how, in spite of my having hair that could be plastered down and lightened by the sun, my father's hair was still all fuzzy, all frizzy, and it was only good for cleaning the mud off the sole of his own father's shoe, his father who was white and had proper straight blond hair, and on account of which I watched for the conclusion of the series of games at that stage in the process of children bonding at a birthday party, when everyone was tired, bored or distracted, waiting for the moment when he, the menace, would let his guard down and move away from the area that was subject to adult observation and rescue, to

approach him and, just like in all the thrillers I've ever watched on the three channels Brazil had in those days, bring my hands to his neck, push him against the wall and start choking him, growling I'm gonna kill you, then my dad's gonna kill your dad, and only failing to carry the strangling through to more serious consequences because my two cousins, a few years older than me, if physically far less substantial, grabbed my arms, forcing me to abandon the only reaction that had seemed appropriate to me, that is, to finish that kid off once and for all, to finish off any white who talked shit about my father, and then that start of a long weekend with my father getting ready to leave the house for the Ararigboia Park football pitch where he was going to compete in a four-way contest between the civil police team and the military police team, and my mother asking him to take me along, and him saying there was no way because it was going to be a pretty tense competition, since any interactions between the two police forces were usually pretty tense, and besides there wouldn't be anyone there who could look after me, and her saying she was sure he'd figure something out, and him getting annoyed but ending up surrendering to her request, and then, at the Ararigboia, him, my father, hearing that his team's coach wasn't going to show up because he'd had an attack of kidney stones and he was home on medication, meaning that the only person with enough good sense to take the coach's position, which according to the rules couldn't be left vacant, was my father himself, which meant in turn that he had to leave me with four guys who were already wearing the team kit while he went off to deal with the practical nuts and bolts of the substitution, replacing the name of the coach who

hadn't shown up and writing in the new guy who would be playing in my father's place on the sign-up forms and on the squad list, and then the tallest of the guys wearing the team strip, a balding white guy, the moment my dad moved away to the other side of the pitch, asking hey is this kid really Ênio's boy, and one of the other three answering well he looks like Ênio, the final two keeping quiet, and the tallest balding white one insisting but he's too white, and a fifth guy dressed up in the same kit appearing behind me and immediately saying to the others so we got a new recruit on the team have we, and then, without giving me time to react, asking what's your name kid, and me answering that it was Federico, trying to look at his face but finding it hard because he was standing with the sun right behind him, and the tall balding white guy saying I was Ênio's son, and the new arrival saying whoah, that's cool, a big strong kid, just like his dad, and running his weighty hand over my head saying whoah, Federico, you look like someone who's gonna be a centre-forward-crushing defender, look how thick this kid's legs are, fellas, my money's on him, then heading off in the same direction as my dad, and me turning my attention back to the tall balding white guy, and the tall balding white guy with a dead-fish smile just looking at the other three while he scratched his chin and, at frantic micro-intervals, looking at me too, and what about that day in that week when there was no water for five days in Porto Alegre's eastern zone, including our street, and my father was taking us, for the third night in a row, to one of the buildings where he worked as a civil police forensics expert, where we'd fill up two large containers with drinking water and have a shower, and it was late at night, and my

brother and I were excited, an excitement that came from the fact that it was the fourth day running we didn't have water back home, from it being late, about 11 p.m., but also from this argument we were having, the sort of pointless argument we were always getting into in those days of being brothers in their confrontation phase, an argument that started with an I'm having my bath first, which was answered with a no way you're so not, you had yours first yesterday and the day before yesterday too, today it's me going first, an argument that stretched out and which by the time my father emerged from the bathroom had already turned into shoves and insults, me attacking my brother with go fuck yourself, stupid little black dumbass, and him counterattacking with go shove it up your fat ass, desperate whitey wannabe, my father used to use that word wannabe when he wanted to refer to blacks with lighter skin who straightened their hair and were terrified of being taken for mulatto or of being recognised as black by someone who wasn't black, and this ended up being enough for him to put down his wet towel, grab us by the collars of our T-shirts and drag us to the training and weights room of that civil police building, a mini-gym where in addition to the workout equipment there was a padded-floor ring for judo and boxing matches, for him to turn on the lights, make us climb into the ring, pick up a skipping rope saying that if we wanted to fight then he'd make us fight, tossing two pairs of gloves at our feet, telling us to put them on, telling us if we didn't fight and while we fought didn't keep on insulting one another he was going to wallop us with that rope, me looking at him saying sorry, him telling me not to say sorry to him, saying that I, being the oldest, was the one who had to set an

example, telling us to just put the damn gloves on already and hug, taking the rope and tying us up tight saying we'd be staying there stuck to one another to think about what it was that made one brother belittle another brother like we were doing, turning out the lights of the mini-gym and leaving, locking the door, returning twenty minutes later to find us untied, lying on the floor of the ring, next to each other, or the Wednesday morning when a guy from my eighth-grade class, a shy sort of guy and a good student I actually got on with kind of well, without anybody noticing, put two bananas into the rucksack of a classmate in the break between lessons and she, one of the few black students in that school, when she came back to the classroom with two other classmates, realising her rucksack wasn't in the position or the place where she'd left it, opened the zip and found the brown paper bag with the fruit inside, a paper bag on which somebody had written in magic marker Zoo Express, and one of the girls who was with her screamed oh, Jesus Christ, and went on repeating zoo, bananas, how horrible, so cruel, so disrespectful, ensuring there was no way the situation could possibly pass unnoticed by the rest of the class, a guy who ended up being exposed because he was on the school basketball team and I was also on the school basketball team, and the day after the banana incident, before practice started, when I went into the locker room to change into my kit, I caught him boasting to two other students, two of the ones who were on the handball team, which practised right before us, definitely the two most disturbed kids on the handball team, which was definitely the most disturbed of all the sports teams in the school, and when one of them asked whether she stank a lot

or a little, that was when they noticed me, realising I was there doing nothing except listening to them, and me not bothering about them, and going off to practice like nothing had happened, but the next day, totally cool all of a sudden, walking over to the deputy principal's office and reporting him, which led to his being suspended from school and then my summary exclusion from the circle of basketball team jocks by most of the other guys on the team, guys who started calling me traitor or snitch and freezing me out in every way until, two months later, I, who was basically the toughest bastard in the whole fucking jock hierarchy on the school basketball team anyway, quit going to practice, quit basketball entirely, and then one Saturday in October nineteen eighty-two I lied to my parents and to Bárbara, with whom I was starting to develop the kind of relationship that meant she could perhaps be characterised as my high-school girlfriend, claiming that I was getting a lift with two other school friends to the family house of one of them up in the city of Gramado and that I was going to be coming back on Sunday night, when really what I did was take a bus on my own up to Caxias do Sul for the Cio da Terra festival, an event that was taking place in the pavilions of the Grape Festival Event Park and which had been promoted by the organisers as the first open gathering of the local 'gaúcho' youth, a festival of arts and talk where there would be no censorship, there would be no sexual repression, there would be no police, there would be no military types carrying rifles and being a pain in the ass, and there I got together with some guys I met at the bus station to split a few big bottles of wine, a few German kuchen, a piece of Colony cheese and a few whole pork salamis, sating my thirst, my

hunger, and then I split off from them and wandered among the groups of people scattered around the park, listening to the shows from a distance, observing, trying to learn what it was that those hippies who were all older than me knew and I hadn't figured out yet, and it was only when it was time for Ednardo's set, round about three in the morning, that I decided to go over and watch, standing about fifty metres from the stage, captivated by his lyrics, until, when the performance was nearly over, a white man aged about fifty, in a kind of trance, walked past me saying, on a loop, I'm not seeing all the black youth here, and me, negotiating with the sobriety which in that year was the norm for my life, pretty dull aside from the chaos introduced by Bárbara's insanities, trailing after him, keeping my distance, also saying I'm not seeing all the black youth here, going around and reproducing his words, even after he, realising there was some total pain of a kid following in his footsteps, had given up on his trance, his walking around and his words.

Some of them looked straight at me, others looked at the screens of their phones, probably giving my name to Google in order to discover whatever they could discover about me, since I hadn't appeared alongside them on the nominations list published in haste in the *Federal Gazette* the previous week by the new government, on the list that had been checked over for publication, on the list that in theory was meant to pacify the black students, the indigenous students and the white students who were in conflict in the country's universities, but which, after it was confirmed and released to all the media, ended up having exactly the same effect as throwing petrol

onto a bonfire. And then I felt ready to give at least a partial airing to the ghosts occupying my thoughts, ghosts that had also been those times when I felt uncomfortable being who I was, raised on the idea of being from a black family, an idea that became my identity, but moulded into a phenotype that jarred brutally with that identity, two factors that, when combined, expelled me forever from the generalisations of the game of he's black and he's white, giving me a huge non-place to manage, ghosts that made me, even according to the astonishing short-sightedness of the new government, simply the most convenient person to be there.

I have retained no memory of what I said at the start of my speech, but I do remember the moment when, after a few minutes, noticing in their eyes that, like me, they weren't quite sure what they were doing on that commission, cutting through our ritualistic first interaction, I took a deep breath and said I only had the authority to appear before the eight of them because there'd been a day, an unforgiving August the tenth nineteen eighty-four, which, despite the years that had passed, continued to spin about in my head, a whirlwind in an eternal present, a day when I witnessed and experienced as I'd never witnessed and experienced before all the cowardice of the hierarchisation of skin colours practised in Brazil, all the cowardice of a psychological massacre, of a psychic disturbance of broad social reach, and which wasn't going to be over any time soon, a day that had left me crazy for a good while, but afterwards had made me react, first violently, and then with some clarity. That was when the eight of them started to listen to me.