Death
Without
Weeping
The Violence
of Everyday Life
in Brazil

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Introduction

Tropical Sadness

1965

I don’t remember the blood, except that later on, much later, I was trying to rub it off with spit and the palm of my hand. But my mouth was dry and the blood kept escaping me, sliding further up my arm, so that it wasn’t until that night, when Dalina the water carrier came, that I could finally erase it.

It was noon when they came to get me, the time when I could pull the wooden shutters closed and fasten the bar against the split doors and shut out the heat and the suffocating push and shove of Alto life. But they got to me this time anyway, even though the thick smell of coffee and black beans filled my hut and the clatter of tin plates announced the start of the midday meal, because it was my comadre Tonieta who was banging on the back door, which meant that she had had to squeeze herself along the ledge of the house balanced precariously on an eroded niche of Cruzeiro hill.

“It’s Lorde,” she cried, “her time has come, and the parteira hasn’t returned from Saturday market. You’ll have to help.” And then we were running, tripping up the hill, through litter-stream backyards, under barbed wire clotheslines, past exposed latrines, digging our fingers into the moist dirt for leverage, knowing I shouldn’t do that, all the while arguing with Antonieta: “Why didn’t you warn old Mariazinha that Lorde’s time was near?”

And I hardly remember saying, “Força, força, menina” (push hard, girl), give it all you’ve got, because she didn’t have to, really, and suddenly the slippery, blue-gray thing was in my hands, cold and wet as it slid over them.

I had to pull the tight, tense rope away from its scrawny neck, but the rope resisted and coiled in my hands like an angry telephone cord. “Scissors, scissors,” I begged, but the old neighbor women shook their heads, looking absentmindedly from one to other, until Biu, Lorde’s second half-sister, arrived sheepishly with a pair that looked suspiciously like the ones that had disappeared from my medical kit some weeks earlier.
Lordes wasn’t crying, but the other one, the oh so little one, made pathetic, little mewing sounds. So little, I couldn’t look. We had celebrated when Lordes found the job in the tomato fields, where she met Milton, but soon after, she came home with this belly. “Worms,” she said, but, of course, we knew better.

I laid it out on the lumpy straw mattress between Lordes’s spread legs, which had gone limp. It was dark; no windows, no door, just sticks and mud, with an opening at one side covered by Food for Peace bean sacks. Too dark to read the expression on Lordes’s pinched-in little face with her matted, sweaty hair pasted against cheeks and forehead. But not too dark to see that her hurt mouth hung, like her legs, loosely open and expectant of more pain to come.

The smell of hot flesh and dried blood filled the single room of the lean-to, trapped in by the scrap-metal roof. But there was no water in the big clay jug, just the pebbles and slime that gathered at the bottom. Meanwhile, Valdimar slowly and patiently dug outside, and on hitting a rock, he stopped to call out, “Is it here yet?” The old women, in a semicircle around the fire and bent over a faintly squawking chicken, laughed and called back, “Stop digging, Valdimar. She’s only a small woman, you know.” Inside the wings flapped madly one last time, knocking against a tin can. Then silence.

The cord lay thin and cool, pulsating between my fingers. “Where’s De-De with my medical kit?” I asked, but the women were more interested in bleeding the rest of the chicken for the birthing meal. Lordes squirmed on the mattress and began to thrash her arms about. I wouldn’t wait for De—Nego De, as the moradores affectionately called the charcoal-black, impish little piece of Black Irene—but I needed a piece of string. There was my old key string, knotted and dirty, but it would have to make do.

Antonieta stood over me, anxiously biting her lips. My hand didn’t want to cut, but even under the dull edge of the scissors the cord was less resistant than I had expected, and the sensation of cutting hidden flesh was at my fingers and up my spine, and I couldn’t stop the pounding in my ears. . . .

I called for help because the rest wouldn’t come and Lordes’s insides hadn’t gone slack. The old women were gathered around the baby now, tying it up in scraps of satin, ribbon, and torn lace. So little I could not look. Outside, Valdimar’s shovels again scraped against rock. My hands forced down on her soft belly, while Antonieta tugged. Lordes’s mouth was still open, but no sound emerged as the rest finally slid out. I took it up in my hands, whole, yet still in parts where it folded in toward the center, and handed it to the old women, who wrapped it in a cloth, cleaner than what we had used to stop up Lordes’s bleeding, and they passed the placenta through the opening to the waiting Valdimar. As if he were the father, so tender he was for her.

And it was blessedly cool and dark where I slid down. Cool and dark and wrapped up in the hollow, hidden in branches of green and brown. Safe at last . . .

Valdimar, his black face twisted by a suso into a smirking grin, is not really always laughing. He is outside my door, calling softly, “Nanci, oh, Dona Nanci.” He has come to break the news, to tell me what I already know. My head hurts, and the wet cloth feels cool against the dense afternoon air. Will I come and eat chicken with Lordes and the others? No, I’ll eat later, after we bury the baby in its mortal shell, its little patchwork shroud. So tiny I still won’t look. Lying in its cardboard shoe box, covered with purple tissue and a silver paper cross. (Valdimar has prepared it.) I am not deaf, gentle Valdimar. I have heard the bells of Nossa Senhora das Dores, “Our Lady of Sorrows,” and they, at least, have touched the void: de profundis clamavi ad te, Domine.

What time is it? Has more than a day been lost? There is still so much to be done. My papers lie untouchéd where the wind has scattered them on the dirt floor. From the open shutter I can see Antonieta’s wash caught up in a pretty white bundle, cradled in a tin basin outside her hut. And it is June, the time of corn, and the tomatoes, too, hang ripe and heavy on their vines.

So I slowly pick up the papers, and I watch Valdimar limp painfully up the hill. It is good to hear the milk goats knocking on the rocks outside my door. And even better to hear Antonieta’s husky singing, raggedly off tune, her hips swinging in time to the erratic rhythm, on her way down to the river, the laundry poised gracefully on her head. And it is very good, indeed, to imagine Valdimar laughing and pretending to dance the forró to make Lordes smile. But it is best of all to hear the sound of the fat tomatoes as they split and fall, unpicked, from their vines.

1989

Lordes, who was sixteen years old at the time of my story, had eleven more pregnancies, several of these by the rascal Milton, before she finally left him for an elderly widower. Only five of her children survived early childhood, and one of these, an initially rejected and neglected little boy named Zezinho, grew up to become his mother’s favorite, her "elect" son, only to meet a tragic end later on.

Gentle Valdimar established a family of his own, not with Lordes but with her hapless older sister, Severina (Biu). who, was, for much of her life, a female worker in the cane. Biu had five children by Valdimar, two of whom died before Valdimar, unemployed, alcoholic, and depressed, hung himself from the short rope he often used to tie up stray goats in their backyard.

Biu, stranded after the death of her common-law husband, left the shantytown with their three remaining children and traveled some sixty
kilometers to the capital city of Recife, where they lived for a while as beggars near the bridge in the center of the downtown area. Before the month was out, she had lost two of those three children, one an infant who “collapsed,” she said, from the strain of living on the streets, and the other, an older girl, who ran off with a band of “wild” street children. Later, Biu returned to Bom Jesus and to the Alto do Cruzeiro, where, while working on a small plantation, she met Oscar, by whom she had ten more births and six surviving children. During the São João festivities in June 1987, Oscar deserted Biu, taking their bed and stove with him to set up housekeeping across town with a younger woman who, he explained to Biu, still had her teeth. Biu was forty-three years old at the time.

Antonieta (Toniete), the eldest of the three half-sisters, married “well” to a stable and devoutly religious rural man who left his parents’ little roçado (rented garden plot) in the countryside to try his luck in the interior town of Bom Jesus. He proved himself extraordinarily lucky indeed. The couple eventually moved off the hillside shantytown and into a more respectable working-class bairro in town. Antonieta’s family of ten children includes three filhos de criação (foster children), one of whom was rescued from Biu when her half-sister seemed “determined to kill” all of her children, as Toniete put it, on the streets of Recife.

Nego De (like Zezinho, his mother’s favorite son) grew up a malandro, a petty thief and a glue sniffer. After several run-ins with local police, time spent in the Federal reform school (FEBEM) in Recife, and a half dozen visits to the municipal jail in Bom Jesus, De turned himself around at the age of twenty. He got a job cutting sugarcane for a large plantation, and he joined the enthusiastic new padre’s “youth group for young criminals” at the local church. The local police were unimpressed, however, and they continued to harass Nego De and his distraught mother’s household.

Lordes, Toniete, Biu, and their families and friends were my immediate neighbors when I first lived and worked in the hillside shantytown called the Alto do Cruzeiro from 1964 through the end of 1966, and their life experiences serve as a kind of divining rod that pulls me back always to a phenomenologically grounded anthropology, an antropologia-pé-no-chão, an anthropology-with-one’s-feet-on-the-ground. My experience of this small and tormented human community now spans a quarter century. And this ethnography has its origins not in certain theoretical conundrums (although these are found here as well) but in practical realities and dilemmas—in the everyday violence that daily confronts the moradores of the Alto do Cruzeiro. And so it is best that I make the origins of this book, and of my relations to the people of the Alto, explicit at the outset.

My story begins, then, in a specific relationship to the community, one generally thought of today in critical and enlightened anthropological circles as something of a stigma, just one step removed, perhaps, from having been a Christian missionary: I was a twenty-year-old public health/community development worker with the Peace Corps. (Because stigma and stigmatization are generative themes of this book, my own stigmatizing origins in the field seem appropriate.)

Ours was the first group sent into the northeastern (Nordeste) state of Pernambuco, and we arrived on the coattails of a “bloodless” and “peaceful” military coup in the spring of 1964 that turned out to be not so bloodless or blameless as time wore on. Contracted to work as rural health extension agents for the Pernambuco Health Department, we were assigned to health posts in the “interior” of the state, the women to work as visitadoras, the men as “sanitary engineers.” Visitadoras were door-to-door frontline health workers in poor and marginalized communities, a concept not too far removed from Chairman Mao’s “barefoot doctors.” The engineers were “backyard” health workers mainly employed in digging pit latrines, although monitoring trash disposal and water supplies was also part of the job description.

My first assignment, however, was not to a community per se but to a large public hospital in a town that I call Belem do Nordeste, located in the sugarcane plantation zone, the so-called zona da mata. The hospital served the impoverished cane workers (and their families) of the region. For the first few weeks I slept on a fold-up cot in the emergency rehydration clinic, where small babies mortally sick with diarrhea/dehydration were brought for treatment when it was usually too late to save them. That first encounter with child death left its mark on me, indelibly so.

The hospital in Belem do Nordeste functioned without a qualified medical staff (and often without running water as well) for most hours of the day and night, and the patients, both young and adult, were treated largely by untrained practical nurses with the assistance of hospital orderlies, who, when they were not washing floors, helped to deliver babies and suture wounds. My one lasting contribution to that first assignment, before leaving in a state of considerable ignominy, was to organize in February of that year a fated carnaval ball in the back wards of the hospital where the terminally ill, the highly contagious, and the stigmatized ill were isolated from other patients. When a hospital administrator arrived unexpectedly to find some of the more “animated” back-ward patients dancing in the halls and spilling out into the enclosed courtyard dressed in borrowed surgical garb and masks for their carnaval costumes, he was not pleased.

My next assignment was to a more lively town in the extreme north of
the sugarcane region, one bordering the state of Paraíba. This town, which I call (and not without a hint of irony) Bom Jesus da Mata, is the locus of this book. After living for a few weeks in the home of the laboratory technician of the state health post, I moved into a small quarto (room) of a mud-walled hut near the top of a hillside “invasion” bairro that had annexed itself to the town. The shantytown of some five thousand rural workers was called the Alto do Cruzeiro, or simply O Cruzeiro, a reference to the large crucifix that dominated the top of the hill.

The hillside was first “occupied” in the 1930s but began to grow rapidly in the late 1950s when many rural workers in the canavieira, the sugarcane region, were forced off their traditional small holdings, where they had lived for generations as “conditional squatters” (moradores de condição) on marginal plantation lands. Shantytowns sprang up throughout the plantation zone during this particularly accelerated phase in the “modernization” of the sugar industry. The couple with whom I lived, Nailza and her husband, Zé Antônio, had just returned from the state of Mato Grosso, where they had migrated following word that new lands were available to those willing to “colonize” them. But it had not been a successful venture, and Zé

Antônio was happy to return to his native Nordeste. But Nailza, a part Tupi-Guarani Indian caboca from Mato Grosso, despised the Nordeste and the “spineless dependency” (as she saw it) of the sugarcane workers. And she longed to return again to her native region.

There on the Alto do Cruzeiro I was able, finally, to actualize my work as a visitadora and as an animadora do bairro (community organizer). I was ridiculously proud of my official uniform—a black skirt, white nylon blouse, thick cotton stockings, and large brown handbag that contained the essential paraphernalia of the visitadora: a single glass syringe and a few hypodermic needles, with a pumice stone to sharpen the blunt points from time to time; a portable sterilization mess kit; a bottle of alcohol; a pair of surgical scissors; gauze; a bar of yellow soap and a roll of extra-strength toilet paper. Visitadoras were expected to pick up various vaccines (against smallpox, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and tuberculosis) as well as a small array of basic medications (piperazine, aralan, antibiotics, painkillers, and so on) from the local health posts to which they were assigned. Often these medical supplies were lacking.

During daylight hours I “walked the Alto” immunizing infants and babies, giving glucose shots to all the “weak” and dispirited adults who wanted them, and administering penicillin injections to the dozens of mora-
douros with active cases of tuberculosis. I was, in effect, a kind of “injection doctor” and a popular one among the young mothers of the Alto who particularly appreciated the care I took in swabbing every infant backside with alcohol and with my swab marking the upper right quadrant where it was safest to apply the injection. “Oh, chê!” the women exclaimed. “What a doutora santa—she makes the sign of the cross on every baby’s behind!” In addition, I took feces samples from children whose bellies were particularly pregnant with parasites and blood samples from the mulheres da vida (prostitutes), and I established a record system whereby each prostitute was registered with the local health post and her health status periodically monitored. Each bore a card that certified, where appropriate, a clean bill of health. Finally, I dressed wounds, rubbed down the bodies of those tormented with tropical fevers, and very occasionally (and reluctantly) delivered babies if one of the local midwives could not be found. Not infrequently, visitadoras were called on to assist in preparing the bodies of dead children for burial.

In some localities visitadoras also worked as community organizers. In rural Pernambuco the model for community organization, before the penetration of the military presence into every nook and cranny of social life, was Paulo Freire’s method of conscientização (critical consciousness) through literacy training (see Freire 1970, 1973). And so my evenings were often spent in small “cultural circles,” as they were called, where by the light of smoky and flickering kerosene lamps, residents and squatters of the Alto learned to read while simultaneously organizing around the founding of a shantytown association, which was known by the acronym UPAC (União para o Progresso do Alto do Cruzeiro, or the Union for the Progress of the Alto do Cruzeiro). I served as a founding member and orientadora política of UPAC, and I worked with members in the collective construction of a headquarters for “local action,” a child care center that also served at nights and on weekends when the creche was closed as an adult literacy school, a game room, a dance hall, a house of Afro-Brazilian spiritism, and a large meeting room for the boisterous “general assemblies” of the shantytown association. Often I gropped blindly to understand and act within a context of radical, sometimes opaque, cultural difference as well as within a situation of economic misery and political repression in which my own country played a contributing and supporting role.

In 1964–1966 about a third of the residents of the Alto do Cruzeiro lived in straw huts, the remainder in small homes constructed of wattle and daub. The mayor of Bom Jesus (the long-reigning prefeito, whom I refer to as Seu Félix), had gradually come to understand that the urban squatters of the Alto were now permanent residents of the town, and he began to extend certain

minimal public services to the shantytown. Municipal street lamps were provided along the two main roads, front and back of the hill, and those moradores living close enough to them to do so “pirated” electricity to their homes. But the vast majority of residents relied on kerosene lamps, which resulted in frequent fires that were particularly catastrophic to the simplest homes made of straw. Many older residents today carry serious burn scars that resulted from such accidents in childhood. There was a single source of running water, a public spigot, a chafariz, installed at the base of the hill, and Alto women lined up twice a day (between 4:00 and 6:00 in the morning and again at night) to fill five-gallon tin cans and then carry them home gracefully on their heads. Those who arrived late, or at the end of the long line, often went home empty-handed and were forced to fetch water at the banks of the chemically and industrially polluted Capibaribe River, which ran through the town carrying debris from the sugar factories as well as from the local hospital and the tanning factories of Bom Jesus. For those moradores who lived near the top of the Alto, the burden of carrying heavy cans of water up the hill was a daily source of misery. It was what people most often had on their minds when they referred to the everyday luta (struggle) that was life.

Most Alto men and boys worked as seasonal sugarcane cutters for various plantations during the harvest season and were unemployed in the interim. Some men and a few women worked in the municipal slaughterhouse on the eves of the large open-air market (feira) held in Bom Jesus on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The feira of Bom Jesus served the entire município, the town and its rural surrounds (including several large sugar plantations and mills), and scores of rural workers and their families arrived by truckloads to do their marketing or to buy, sell, or trade horses and jackasses. Some Alto men were employed by the município to sweep the streets following market days. In an early journal entry in 1965 I described the feira of Bom Jesus. It has hardly changed since that time.

There is a steady, manic beat to the market, and one must learn how to fall in with the crush of humanity and with the din of street cries, whistles, catcalls, and beggars’ laments. Today, however, the winter rains, pounding off the tops of the canvas stalls, all but muffled the usual sounds, so I was caught unaware by a hand attached to a long, thin arm that tugged at my skirt. It was a tall, skinny, sallow-faced boy with eye rims and fingernails that were morbidly white. “Dona Nanc,” he rasped in an eerie, faraway voice, “estou morrendo [I’m dying].” He repeated this several times with no other intent than announcing his obvious condition. I escaped this ghost in the crowd only to have a strange vendor thrust a large
wedge of ripe farmer’s cheese in my face. “Here, moça [girl, but also
virgin], have a smell of my pungent cheese,” he said with a hint of
malicious mischief. I quickly elbowed my way into the indoor mu-
unicipal market, trying not to breathe while passing the stalls with
their coils of entrails and slightly rotting, fresh beef. From their
overhead perch the urubus [vultures] flexed their greasy, black
wings, slowly and deliberately casting their ominous shadows on the
stands below. Were I a butcher, I wouldn’t tempt the birds by wear-
ing the same blood-soaked apron day after day.

Alto workers earned little, about forty or fifty cents a day in the mid-
1960s, not nearly enough to feed, house, and clothe a family. What saved
many Alto households were the rented garden plots, their small roçados,
often a few kilometers outside of town, where women and men cultivated
basic foodstuffs to feed their families. In addition to tending their roçados,
most Alto women with large families had to work outside the home for
wages. Some were domestics in the “big houses” (casas grandes) of the
wealthy on country estates and in town. Many more women, such as
Tonietta and Nailza, worked as lavadeiras, taking in the dirty laundry of
middle-class, and even working-class, families able to pay a pitance for the
grueling work. Without public washstands, the only recourse was to wash
clothes in the schistosome-infested river, dry them on the sand or over
bushes, and carry the bundle home for starching and ironing with heavy
cast-iron irons filled with burning charcoal.

Whether they worked on the plantations or in the homes of the rich, Alto
women had to leave their babies (even newborns) at home unattended or
watched over by siblings, sometimes barely more than babies themselves.
These constraints on infant tending, imposed by the economic realities of
Alto life, contributed to an exceedingly high infant and child mortality. To a
young and naive North American, the situation was frightening, as can be
seen in this journal passage: “Smoky, fly-infested huts, hungry toddlers,
and hungry goats competing for leftovers served in tin plates on the dirt
floor. Men stripped to their sunken chests, sucking on pipes to quiet the
raging within. Women squatting by their twig or charcoal fires, stoop
shouldered and sagging in toward the middle where, inevitably, another
tongue lay coiled, waiting to be born and to strike. Each descending circle
of the Alto, like Dante’s Inferno, worse than the last.”

It was this confrontation with sickness, hunger, and death (especially
child death) that most assaulted the sensibilities and the conscience of a
comfortable-enough outsider and that shaped first my community develop-
ment work and, many years later, my anthropological research. In the early
conversations with Alto women in their homes and in the first open and
chaotic meetings of the shantytown association held in various “public”
houses on the Alto (in the little barracas, or dry goods shops, that served the
hill and in the homes that also served as terreiros, centers for the practice of
Afro-Brazilian possession religion), the idea for a permanent meeting cen-
ter, and for a creche, a cooperative day nursery for the vulnerable babies of
working mothers, was born.

After eighteen months of collective and participatory action (see chapter
12), the construction of a creche, which also served as a community center,
and the installation of water pipes, a water pump, a storage tank, and a
community-owned chafariz for the Alto were actualized, despite the open
hostility of the local power elite—the traditional planter families—to the
projects. Accusations of Marxist subversion and infiltration, however, led to
a six-month-long military police investigation of UPAC and to the arrest
and questioning of several leaders of the shantytown association, myself in-
cluded. Although the military could never substantiate the accusations, the
shantytown association was effectively crippled. Large meetings were pro-
hibited.

Nonetheless, the creche opened on July 16, 1966, with some thirty infants,
babies, and toddlers and some twenty Alto women participating in the coop-
erative. The women elected Dona Biu de Hollanda as their leader and as the
director of the creche, a position she held for nearly three years. Eventually,
Biu de Hollanda was paid a small “subvention” from the município in recog-
tion of her pivotal role in the day-to-day operations of the cooperative, the only one of its kind in Bom Jesus. Several months later the town council awarded small subsidies allowing the creche to maintain a part-time practical nurse, a traditional midwife from the Alto, and a kindergarten teacher for the oldest creche children. But the creche was mainly dependent on the mothers themselves, each of whom contributed one day of work at the creche each week. And until the completion of the UPAC water project, each creche mother had to bring a five-gallon can of water to the center each morning.

Infant mingaus, milky gruels similar to pap, were made from donated Food for Peace powdered skimmed milk that we fortified as best we could with vitamin A drops. Very sickly infants were fed mingaus made from fresh goat’s milk donated by Alto women who kept the animals in their little backyard quintals. The midday meal for the older babies and toddlers was an eclectic “stew” made from Food for Peace bulgur and flavored with as many onions, carrots, potatoes, and squash as mothers could contribute from their roçados. Occasionally, local meat vendors donated scraps of beef and entrails, and these were relished by the toddlers and older creche babies.

Alto babies “thrived” in the creche. Most arrived sickly and malnourished, and all were tested and treated for parasites. Many, like little Zezinho (see chapter 8), had to be coaxed into eating. Younger Alto mothers learned new methods of infant care from older and more experienced mothers, and all learned from the attempts of the nurse-midwife to introduce basic, hygienic practices to the creche so as to prevent infant diarrheas and other infectious diseases from spreading wildly among the babies and toddlers. Moreover, communal child care was fun, and many “prestigious” elites of Bom Jesus climbed the stigmatized hillside for the first time in their lives to witness, with their own eyes, “the miracle” that had seemingly transformed the shantytown. For a brief period at least, the people of Alto came to be seen by townspeople as full of vitality, creativity, and initiative.

My Alto friends have never been able to agree on the exact nature of the events that brought about the closure of the creche and the final dissolution of the shantytown association in the late 1960s, a few years after I left the community. But malicious interference from the outside was largely responsible. Essential Food for Peace foodstuffs were diverted from the creche by the underhanded maneuvers of a powerful right-wing faction in Bom Jesus. When the “opposition” gained control of the prefeitura (town hall) and town council, and Seu Félix was temporarily removed from office, the small subventions for Dona Biu, the nurse-midwife, and the teacher were discontinued. After the military investigations of UPAC, open meetings of the shantytown association were no longer possible. Consequently, dissension resurfaced among the creche mothers and between the active women leaders of the creche and those Alto males who had once been active in the outlawed diretoria (governing board) of UPAC. In the absence of the open community meetings of UPAC, which had served as an important vehicle for airing complaints and mediating differences, there was no way for the men to express themselves and address their anger at their loss of power, voice, and “face” on the Alto. The men no longer had a function in UPAC, and they were jealous of the women and expressed it in destructive ways. They refused, for example, to “police” the creche at night; eventually thieves broke into the building and stole equipment and food supplies. Before long, homeless men and youths began to occupy parts of the creche building, sleeping there at night, building fires to cook their meals, and generally making the premises dirty and unsafe.

Seu Teto de Hollanda, who had taken over the installation of the water project after Valdimar hung himself, was left without a role or a say in the activities of the creche, which was all that remained of UPAC. Meanwhile, his wife, Dona Biu, as creche director, grew in prestige and influence in her own quiet and efficient way. The couple began to fight, and Dona Biu accused her husband of stealing flour from the creche storeroom and selling it to a bakery in town. The couple split up acrimoniously, and Dona Biu suffered many reprisals from those who sided with Seu Teto and felt that she had been unfair to her husband. The malicious gossip surrounding the very “public” separation of a once “model” Alto couple forced Dona Biu to leave
me or my family. I was also concerned about exposing my three then very young children to the considerable health hazards of fieldwork in an impoverished shantytown. Moreover, I squirmed at the thought of returning to a place where I had been so actively and politically engaged as one of the remote intellectuals I had arrogantly dismissed years before. Could one be both antropóloga and companheira? I doubted that this was possible, and I wondered about its ethical and political implications as well.

Instead of Northeast Brazil, then, I began my anthropological career in a tiny mountain community of peasant farmers in western Ireland, a place that could not be more removed in spirit and in tempo from the Alto do Cruzeiro. My fascination with the Irish (and with madness) led to further research among Irish-Americans in south Boston interspersed with brief periods of fieldwork among Spanish-Americans and Pueblo Indians in Taos, New Mexico. But all the while I continued to puzzle over crucial questions about human nature, ethics, and social relations, especially as these are affected by chronic scarcity and loss, questions and issues that had emerged within the specific context of Northeast Brazil and among the people I felt that I knew best of all on the Alto do Cruzeiro.

In 1982, with the Brazilian government’s announcement of its commitment to a new politics of abertura—a democratic “opening” and political “awakening”—I was convinced by a Brazilian colleague to return, and quickly, for no one knew just how long the abertura would last. I did so, accompanied by my husband and children, for the first of four field expeditions to Bom Jesus between 1982 and 1989, a total of fourteen months of anthropological fieldwork.

The original, and in many respects still the central, thesis of my research and of this book is love and death on the Alto do Cruzeiro and specifically mother love and child death. It is about culture and scarcity, both material and psychological, and their effects on moral thinking and practice, particularly on “maternal thinking,” a term I have borrowed from Sara Ruddick (1980, 1989). What, I wondered, were the effects of chronic hunger, sickness, death, and loss on the ability to love, trust, have faith, and keep it in the broadest senses of these terms? If mother love is, as some bioevolutionary and developmental psychologists as well as some cultural feminists believe, a “natural,” or at least an acceptable, womanly script, what does it mean for women for whom scarcity and death have made that love frantic?

This research agenda was set during those earlier years, when immediately following the Brazilian military coup, I witnessed a wholesale “die out” of Alto infants and babies. More than three hundred babies died during 1965 alone, and for each one that did the bells of Nossa Senhora das Dores in Bom Jesus da Mata tolled. Many of the deaths from hunger, thirst, and
neglect were senseless and unnecessary. Had I not been so traumatized then, I might not have written this book today. At the time and with the gentle coaching of my Alto friends, I eventually learned to “distance” myself from the deaths and to pick up and continue, as they did, with the strains of my life and work in the shantytown. I learned, as they did, to “conform” and to tell myself that, after all, perhaps it was “meant” to be so. (Or had God deserted the Alto do Cruzeiro altogether?) In all, those years provided a powerful experience of cultural shaping, and it was only after I returned “home” again that I recovered my sensibilities and moral outrage at “the horror, the horror” of what I had experienced. The horror was the routinization of human suffering in so much of impoverished Northeast Brazil and the “normal” violence of everyday life.

In 1982 my initial goal was to reacquaint myself with the people of O Cruzeiro. We had lost contact with each other for many years. Letter writing was complicated by my friends’ illiteracy, and after a few years both sides desisted. And if many of my Alto friends were peripatetic rural migrants, I was even more so during the early years of life “in the academy,” when my family and I constantly moved back and forth across the country. Nonetheless, prior to my return in 1982 I sent dozens of letters to everyone I could think of and received no response. I feared returning to a social void and felt that I might as well begin my research anywhere at all as in Bom Jesus da Mata, for clearly the social world I once knew had evaporated. But curiosity and my saudades, as Brazilians call the pull of nostalgic longings, led me to persist in the plan to return to Bom Jesus. In my letters I had mentioned the approximate date of my arrival in the capital city of Recife but had given no other details. Yet when we stepped off the plane, there in the crowd waving madly to us was my old friend and sometime adversary, Seu Félix, still the reigning prefeito and “boss” of Bom Jesus. “Did I forget to send you a reply?” Félix asked in his usual distracted way. I had indeed come home.

A small but neat hut near the base of the Alto was waiting for us, as were many of my old friends from the days of the creche and UPAC. I need not go into the details of those touching reunions. Time was short and precious. At a community meeting held in the now abandoned and dilapidated creche, I introduced my family and explained why and how I had managed to return. As I had always worked closely with women and children on the Alto, it came as no surprise that I wanted to learn more about the lives of women and of mothers in particular. With the help of an old friend and creche mother, Irene Lopes da Silva, one of the few semiliterate residents of the Alto, I was able to interview close to a hundred women of O Cruzeiro. I gathered essential information on their family and reproductive histories, migration and work histories, domestic and conjugal arrangements, many loves and almost as many losses, and hopes and wishes for themselves, their husbands or companions, and their children. I learned how essential long-term research was for understanding lives that looked like roller-coaster rides with great peaks and dips, ups and downs, as women struggled valiantly at times (less valiantly at others) to do the greatest good for the greatest number and manage to stay alive themselves.

What of my personal relations with the people of the Alto? The sixteen-year hiatus between the time I left Bom Jesus at the close of 1966 and the initial return in 1982 meant that all of us had changed, some almost unrecognizably so, and there were many instances of mistaken identities before I could eventually sort everyone out. Meanwhile, Dona Nanci, the moça, was now both a mother and an anthropologist. Even though my old friends were gracious and willing “informants,” they soon became restless with the interviews and with the monotony and repetitiveness of fieldwork. When I observed something once in a clinic or a home, asked Irene, or when I learned something in an interview, why did I have to repeat the experience again and again before I was satisfied? And so I tried to explain the rudiments of the anthropological method to Irene and several other women who worked with me as assistants.

Most of my old neighbors and friends were anxious to be interviewed, and they were fearful of being the only ones “left out” of my research. They understood the basic lines of inquiry, and they did not consider the questions I asked irrelevant. But they wanted to know what else I was going to do while I was with them again. Shouldn’t we have UPAC meetings again, they asked, now that grass-roots organizations and squatters’ associations were no longer outlawed or seen as a subversive threat to the democratizing social order? What about the old cultural circles and literacy groups? Shouldn’t they be revived now? Many adults had forgotten the basics of the alphabet that they had learned years before. And what about the creche? Even more women, they said, were working than in years previously, and the need for a child day care center was more pressing than ever. Finally, the old headquarters of UPAC and the creche was in a dangerous state of disrepair, its roof tiles broken, its wooden crossbeams rotting, its bricks beginning to crumble. Shouldn’t we organize a mutirão (collective work force) as in the old days to get the building back into shape as a first step toward reviving UPAC? But each time the women approached me with their requests, I backed away saying, “This work is cut out for you. My work is different now. I cannot be an anthropologist and a companheira at the same time.” I shared my new reservations about the propriety of an outsider taking an active role in the life of a Brazilian community. But my argument fell on deaf ears.

On the day before my departure in 1982, a fight broke out among Irene
Lopes and several women waiting outside the creche where I was conducting interviews and gathering reproductive histories. When I emerged to see what the commotion was about, the women were ready to turn their anger against me. Why had I refused to work with them when they had been so willing to work with me? Didn’t I care about them personally anymore, their lives, their suffering, their struggle? Why was I so passive, so indifferent, so resigned, to the end of UPAC and of creche, the community meetings, and the festas? The women gave me an ultimatum: the next time I came back to the Alto I would have to "be" with them—"accompany them" was the expression they used—in their luta, and not just "sit idly by" taking fieldnotes. "What is this anthropology anyway to us?" they taunted.

And so, true to their word and mine, when I returned again five years later, for a longer period of fieldwork, a newly revived UPAC was waiting, and I assumed willy-nilly the role of anthropologist-companheira, dividing my time, not always equally, between fieldwork and community work, as it was defined and dictated to me by the activist women and men of the Alto. If they were "my" informants, I was very much "their" despatchante (an intermediary who expedites or hastens projects along) and remained very much "at their disposal." They turned me back into their image of "Dona Nanci." I have had to occupy a dual role ever since 1985, and it has remained a difficult balance, rarely free of conflict. The tensions and strains between reflection and action can be felt throughout the pages of this book.

But more positively, as my companheiras and companheiros of the Alto pulled me toward the "public" world of Bom Jesus, into the marketplace, to the prefeitura, to the ecclesiastical base community and rural syndicate meetings, the more my understandings of the community were enriched and my theoretical horizons and political orientations expanded. The everyday violence of shantytown life, and the madness of hunger, in particular, became the focus of my study, of which the specific case of mother love and child death was one instance. And so although this book treats the "pragmatics" and the "poetics" of motherhood, it concerns a good deal more than that. To understand women as mothers, I needed to understand them as daughters, sisters, wives, workers, and politically engaged beings. My original questions gradually brought me out of the private sphere of wretched huts and into the cane fields and the modern sugar refineries, and from the mayor's chambers to the state assembly of Pernambuco, and from the local pharmacies, clinics, and hospital of Bom Jesus to the pauper graves of the municipal cemetery and even to the public morgue at the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Recife. In all, I simply followed the women and men of the Alto in their everyday struggle to survive by means of hard work, cunning, trickery, and triage, but, above all, by means of their resilience, their refusal to be negated.

Chapter 1 traces the colonial history of the local plantation economy of the Brazilian Northeast and that bittersweet commodity, sugar, up through its cultivation on the engenhos and usinas (sugar plantations and mills) of the present time. The chapter culminates in an ethnographic tour of the largest sugar plantation and mill in the cane region of Pernambuco, Usina Agua Prêta outside Bom Jesus da Mata. Chapter 2 looks at the meaning of thirst as a generative metaphor for people inhabiting a region, O Nordeste, continually plagued by threat of drought, the seca. Chapter 3 introduces the market town of Bom Jesus and the shantytown of Alto do Cruzeiro as a complex social world dominated by the multiple social realities of three separate but intersecting realms: the casa (the house), by which I mean the remaining feudal world of the plantation "big house," the casa grande: the rua (the street), by which I mean the new world of industrial commerce and capitalism found on the streets and in the factories and supermercados (supermarkets) of Bom Jesus; and the mata (the forest, the countryside), by which I mean the precapitalist, rural world of the traditional squatters who have come to live on the Alto do Cruzeiro as stigmatized matutos, or "backward country people."

Bom Jesus da Mata is a pseudonym, although anyone with more than a passing interest in the Pernambucan zona da mata will be able to identify this town. The Alto do Cruzeiro, however, is not a pseudonym, and it appears here very much as itself. Like most shantytowns the world over, the Alto do Cruzeiro is anonymous enough as it is; most of its tangle of streets and dirt paths cannot be located on the official maps of the municipio. Likewise, while we have disguised the names and, to some extent, even the personalities of key public figures in Bom Jesus who would easily be recognized, I use the actual first names and nicknames of the moradores of the Alto and for similar reasons. Their social invisibility in Bom Jesus da Mata diminishes and protects them. Moreover, the women and men of the Alto have enjoyed seeing their names in print in the obviously irrelevant scholarly journals where I have previously published fragments of their narratives.

Chapters 4 and 5 treat the explosive subject of hunger in O Nordeste, tracing the gradual transformation of nervous hunger from the popular idiom delirio de fome, the "madness of hunger," into the ethnomedical idiom nervos, "nervous frenzy," a condition that is now treated with tranquilizers and sleeping pills. Chapter 6 explores the political tactic of "disappearance," which, originating in the military years, continues to this day in a new and even more disturbing form. Death squad "disappearances" form the back-
drop of everyday life and everyday violence on the Alto do Cruzeiro, thereby confirming people's worst fears and anxieties: that of losing themselves, their ownership of their bodies, to the random forces and institutionalized violence of the modern, even democratizing, state.

These first chapters, constituting the first part of the book, situate the people of the Alto do Cruzeiro in their larger context—O Nordeste—land of sugar and hunger, thirst and penance, messianism and madness. But this strong interpretation of the miséria morta of the Northeast is not solely my own. Ethnographers, like historians, do not write on a blank page. There is a long and deep history to the study of the Northeast emerging from a specific Brazilian literary tradition and sensibility to the troubles of that region. I have learned, and been enriched by, a generation of Brazilian writers from Euclides da Cunha, Gilberto Freyre, Graciliano Ramos, the early Jorge Amado, through to Josué de Castro, and their presence can be felt in these pages. I have had the good fortune of being able to stand on their shoulders, especially because, like the people of the Alto, I am rather small myself, and without their help I might not have had a broad perspective of the lay of the parched land I am trying to survey.

The remaining chapters (7 through 12) treat the central thesis of the book as well as the subject of resistance. I argue that in the absence of a firm grounding for the expectancy of child survival, maternal thinking and practice are grounded in a set of assumptions (e.g., that infants and babies are easily replaceable or that some infants are born “wanting” to die) that contribute even further to an environment that is dangerous, even antagonistic, to new life.

Chapter 7 treats the routinization of infant death in the creation of what I call an average expectable environment of child death, meaning a set of conditions that place infants at high risk, accompanied by a normalization of this state of affairs in both the private and public life of Bom Jesus da Mata. What is created is an environment in which death is understood as the most ordinary and most expected outcome for the children of poor families. Chapter 8 explores the various meanings of motherhood, the poetics and the pragmatics of maternal thinking. It also treats the subject of women's mortality by examining close up the triage-based choices that women of the Alto must make; these choices lead to the mortal neglect of certain presumed-to-be-doomed babies. Chapter 9 looks at the role of disappointment in shaping the reaction to child death, specifically the failure to mourn. It also reveals the spaces where attachment and grief are “appropriate” and where they may be expressed.

Chapter 10 poses the question of resilience to adversity and follows the life histories of the half-sisters Biu and Antonieta. Chapter 11 traces the attempts of one sister, at least, to try “forgetting” herself and her difficulties in the celebration of Brazilian carnavaal. Chapter 12, the conclusion, reflects on the everyday tactics for “getting by” and “making do” in the shantytown that are occasionally punctuated by religious rituals and dramas of resistance and celebration that enhance the lives of the moradores and that hint at the possibilities of a new world, one free of hunger, social injustice, and violence.

Moral Relativism and the Primacy of the Ethical

Everyday violence, political and domestic horror, and madness—these are strong words and themes for an anthropologist. Although this book is not for the faint of heart, it returns anthropology to its origins by reopening—though in no way claiming to resolve—vexing questions of moral and ethical relativism.

For much of this century anthropological relativism has been taken up with the issue of divergent rationalities—with how and why people, very different from ourselves, think and reason as they do (see Tambiah 1990 for an excellent summary of this history). The study of magic and witchcraft provided a springboard for anthropological analyses designed to reveal the internal logic that made magical thinking and practice a reasonable, rather than an irrational, human activity. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's 1937 book on Azande witchcraft as an alternative explanation of unfortunate events is a classic in this regard. But his functionalist interpretation of sorcery and countersorcery in Azande society sidesteps entirely the question of the ethical. How might one even begin to evaluate witchcraft as a moral or an ethical system? What does witchcraft presuppose in its relations between self and other—"the other" as the bewitched but also "the other" as the accused bewitcher? The "othering" of others takes place within (not only across) societies and cultures. But these questions have generally been disallowed in contemporary anthropology, where "reason" and the "ethical" are often collapsed into each other, thereby producing an untenable sort of "cultural relativism" for which our discipline has often been criticized (see Mohanty 1989 for a critical review of cultural relativism and its political consequences). Moreover, the anthropological obsession with reason, rationality, and "primitive" versus "rational" thought, as these bear on questions of cultural relativism, reveals largely androcentric concerns.

A more "womanly" anthropology might be concerned not only with how we humans "reason" and think but also with how we act toward each other, thus engaging questions of human relationship and of ethics. If we cannot begin to think about cultural institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless. The problem is, of course, how to articulate a standard, or divergent standards, for the
beginnings of a moral and an ethical reflection on cultural practices that
takes into account but does not privilege our own cultural presuppositions.

One specific instance that I treat in the following pages, the relations of
shantytown women toward some of their small babies, is troubling. It
disturbs. One wonders, following Martin Buber, whether there are extraor-
dinary situations that not only signal a kind of moral collapse but that
actually warrant a "suspension of the ethical" (1952:147–156). He referred
to the Old Testament story in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his
only, and beloved, son, Isaac, clearly a brutal and unethical act. But Abraham
submits and obeys the Divine command because Yahweh alone may break or
suspend the ethical order that He Himself ordained. For Buber the dilemma
of the modern world (a world in which "God has gone into hiding") is how
men and women can distinguish the voice of the Divine from the false
prophets, who imitate the voice of God and continually demand that humans
make various kinds of human sacrifices.

The theologian Buber confronted the "suspension of the ethical" in
accordance with the will and purpose of something "higher," the Divine; here the anthropologist confronts a "suspension of the ethical" in accordance
with a will and duty to self-survive, as it were. There are many analogues in
the moral dilemmas of those victimized in wartime, famine, slavery, or
drought or incarcerated in prisons and detention camps. I have stumbled on
a situation in which shantytown mothers appear to have "suspended the
ethical"—compassion, empathic love, and care—toward some of their weak
and sickly infants. The "reasonableness" and the "inner logic" of their
actions are patently obvious and are not up for question. But the moral and
edethical dimensions of the practices disturb, give reason to pause... and to
doubt.

How are we to understand their actions, make sense of them, and respond
ethically ourselves—that is, with compassion toward the others, Alto
women and their vulnerable infants and small children? The practices
described here are not autonomously, culturally produced. They have a social
history and must be understood within the economic and political context of a
larger state and world (moral) order that have suspended the ethical in
their relations toward these same women and within the religious order (or
disorder) of a Catholic church that is torn in Brazil, as elsewhere, with moral
ambivalence about female reproduction.

Anthropologists (myself included) have tended to understand morality as
always contingent on, and embedded within, specific cultural assumptions
about human life. But there is another, an existential philosophical position
that posits the inverse by suggesting that the ethical is always prior to
culture because the ethical presupposes all sense and meaning and therefore
makes culture possible. "Morality," wrote the phenomenologist Emmanuel
Levinas "does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it" (1987:100).
Accountability, answerability to "the other"—the ethical as I am defining it
here—is "precultural" in that human existence always presupposes the
presence of another. That I have been "thrown" into human existence at all
presupposes a given, moral relationship to an original (m)other and she to
me.

A Note on Method

"Methodologists, get to work!"
C. Wright Mills (1959:123)

This book, and the research on which it is based, obviously departs from
traditional or classic ethnography in a number of ways. The first concerns
the way the self, other, and scientific objectivity are handled. Another con-
cerns the explicit values and sympathies of the anthropologist herself. For
generations ethnographers based their work on a myth and a pretense. They
pretended that there was no ethnographer in the field. In treating the self as
if "it" were an invisible and permeable screen through which pure data,
"facts," could be objectively filtered and recorded, the traditional ethnogra-
pher could exaggerate "his" claims to an authoritative science of "man" and
of human nature. And in so doing, the ethnographer did not have to examine critically the subjective bases of the questions he asked (and of those he failed to ask), the kinds of data he collected, and the theories he
brought to bear on those assorted "facts" to assemble and "make sense" of
them, to make them presentable, as it were.

I do not wish to get into a tortured discussion of facticity, empiricism,
positivism, and so on. Our work as anthropologists is by its very nature
empirical; otherwise we would not bother to go into the "field." Obviously,
some events are "factual." Either 150 or 350 children died of hunger and
dehydration on the Alto do Cruzeiro in 1965; here the ethnographer has a
professional and a moral obligation to get the "facts" as accurately as possi-
ble. This is not even debatable. But all facts are necessarily selected and
interpreted from the moment we decide to count one thing and ignore
another, or attend this ritual but not another, so that anthropological under-
standing is necessarily partial and is always hermeneutic.

Nevertheless, though empirical, our work need not be empiricist. It need
not entail a philosophical commitment to Enlightenment notions of reason
and truth. The history of Western philosophy, thought, and science has been
characterized by a "refusal of engagement" with the other or, worse, by an
"indifference" to the other—to alterity, to difference, to polyvocality, all of
which are leveled out or pummeled into a form compatible with a discourse that promotes the Western project. And so the “Enlightenment,” with its universal and absolute notions of truth and reason, may be seen as a grand pretext for exploitation and violence and for the expansion of Western culture (“our ideas,” “our truths”). Ideally, anthropology should try to liberate truth from its Western cultural presuppositions.

A new generation of ethnographers (see Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Cushman 1982; Rabinow 1977; Crapanzano 1977, 1985) has suggested alternative ways of dealing with the self in the field. One of these is to document the fumbling path of the ethnographer in her own gradual process of misunderstanding and misrecognition, occasionally illuminated by small beacons of recognition and clarification, of cultural translation. But far more difficult and vexing questions concern the ethnographer’s ways of dealing with the “other” in the field.

If theology entails a “leap of faith” of oneself toward an invisible, unknowable Divine Other, anthropology implies an “outside-of-myself” leap toward an equally unknown and opaque other-than-myself, and a similar sort of reverential awe before the unknown one is called for. Following from the theologically driven phenomenology of Levinas, the “work” of anthropology entails, at base, the working out of an ethical orientation to the other-than-one-self: “A work conceived radically is a movement of the Same toward the Other which never returns to the Same” (Levinas 1987:91). Anthropological work, if it is to be in the nature of an ethical and a radical project, is one that is transformative of the self but not (and here is the rub) transformative of the other. It demands a “relationship with the other, who is reached without showing itself touched” (Levinas 1987:92) . . . or altered, violated, fragmented, dismembered.

But how can such a utopian premise be translated into a real “work” of anthropology, especially an antropologia-pé-no-chão? We cannot (nor would we want to, I think) deceive ourselves into believing that our presence leaves no trace, no impact on those on whose lives we dare to intrude. We are, after all, human, and we can hardly help becoming involved in the lives of the people we have chosen to be our teachers. As Seu Fabiano, the local journalist of Bom Jesus, once said with a wicked grin (referring to my “unsavory” political leanings): “We’ll forgive you, Nanci. After all, no one here is innocent” (i.e., indifferent to politics and power). So although I reject as “unreasonable,” perhaps, the monastic demand that ethnographers leave the sands on which they tread without a trace of their sandals, what may never be compromised are our personal accountability and answerability to the other.

This work, then, is of a specific nature, both active and committed. Anthropology exists both as a field of knowledge (a disciplinary field) and as a field of action (a force field). Anthropological writing can be a site of resistance. This approach bears resemblances to what Michael Taussig (1989b) and others called “writing against terror,” what Franco Basaglia (1987b) referred to as becoming a “negative worker,” and what Michel de Certeau (1984) meant by “making a perruque” of scientific research. The latter tactic refers to diverting the time owed to the factory or, in this case, to the academic institution into more human activities. We can, offered de Certeau, make “textual objects” (i.e., books) that “write against the grain” and that signify solidarity. We can disrupt expected roles and statuses in the spirit of the carnivalesco, the carnivalesque (see chapter 11). And we can exchange gifts based on our labors and so finally subvert the law that puts our work at the service of the machine in the scientific, academic factory.

My particular sympathies are transparent; I do not try to disguise them behind the role of an invisible and omniscient third-person narrator. Rather, I enter freely into dialogues and sometimes into conflicts and disagreements with the people of the Alto, challenging them just as they challenge me on my definitions of the reality in which I live. To use a metaphor from Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), the ethnographic interview here becomes more dialogic than monologic, and anthropological knowledge may be seen as something produced in human interaction, not merely “extracted” from naive informants who are unaware of the hidden agendas coming from the outsider.

Even though I make no claims to a privileged scientific neutrality, I do try to offer a fair and true description and analysis of events and relationships as I have perceived and sometimes participated in them. By showing, as I go along, the ways that I work in the field, offering glimpses behind the scenes, I hope to give the reader a deeper appreciation of the way in which ethnographic “facts” are built up in the course of everyday participation in the life of the community. In this way the reader should be in a better position to evaluate the claims made and the conclusions drawn.

As a woman and a feminist, although not a conventional one, I am drawn (but I won’t say “naturally”) to the experiences of women, and their lives were initially more open to me than the private worlds of Brazilian men of the Alto. This ethnography, then, is centered, as is everyday life in a shantytown marginalized by poverty and set on edge by what I describe in chapter 5 as “nervous hunger.” Mothers and children dominate these pages even as they dominate, numerically and symbolically, Alto life (a feature of the shantytown recognized ruefully by Alto men). I turn to the fragility and “dangerousness” of the mother-infant relationship as the most immediate and visible index of scarcity and unmet needs. Hence in the following chapters I return again and again to the lives of Lordes, Biu, Antonieta, and their neighbors on the Alto do Cruzeiro to illustrate in a graphic way the
consequences of hunger, death, abandonment, and loss on ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and being in the world.

Finally, as a "critical medical anthropologist," I may be seen as something of a pathologist of human nature who is drawn to illness, both individual and collective, as these shed light on culture, society, and their discontents. The view through this lens is skewed, for I am slicing, dissecting, and holding up to the light the diseased tissues of the social body gone awry. The anthropologist-diviner names ills and speaks of taboos, of deadly words spoken, of human passions and weaknesses, of distortions in human relations, all of which can produce suffering, sickness, and death. The anthropological "hand trembler" points to the troubled organs, individual and social, while the healing itself lies outside her sphere and in the collective will and good faith of the larger community. Nonetheless, with an eye toward social healing, I conclude the book with a search for the paths of resistance, healing, and liberation in Bom Jesus da Mata today.

Fraternity and Recognition:
The Anthropologist as Clerk of the Records

The mood of contemporary anthropology, and not just of this book, is somber, its poetics guided by a complex form of modern pessimism rooted in anthropology's own tortured relationship to the colonial world and that world's ruthless destruction of native peoples. This remains so even as anthropologists branch out to study the lives of peasant and urban peoples more like "ourselves." Because of its origins as mediatrix in the clash of cultures and competing civilizations in the colonial world, nineteenth-century anthropological thinking was guided by a particular metaphysical premise governed by the priority of keeping, conserving, maintaining, and valuing what was at hand. This fundamentally "conservative" position looks grimly on the ravagings enacted in the names of "progress," "development," "modernization," and the like, slogans that have been used against those traditional, nonsecular, and communal people who have stood in the way of various Western colonial and postcolonial projects.

In a book critically evaluating the nature of ethnographic authority, James Clifford (1988a and b) questioned the alienated nostalgia of traditional anthropologists pursuing lost worlds in an anxious, fragmented, postmodern age. This theme was taken up again by Renato Rosaldo (1989) in his book Culture and Truth. Although I agree with their perceptions of the ethnographic "mood" as one of intense longing, saudades, after an unspoiled, primitive world, a world now hopelessly "on the wane" (Levi-Strauss 1961), to dismiss the ethnographer's malaese as originating in a personal sort of existential, postmodernist alienation misses the mark. The longing and sense of loss also derive from the perceptions of what Western imperialism (including the checkered history of their own discipline) has extracted from the bodies and the communities of the peoples that anthropologists study. Herein lies the dilemma of the tristeza antropologó, the "anthropological melancholy." One need only read Levi-Strauss's poignant reflections on urban blight amid the monumental beauty of the natural forests of coastal Brazil to grasp the source of the anthropological malaise.

When Levi-Strauss went to Brazil in the 1930s, he did so to carry out the overdetermined "mission" of the twentieth-century ethnographer: to study the natives "before they disappeared." For Levi-Strauss, the lifeways of Brazilian tribal peoples—of the Bororo, Nambiquara, the Tupi-Kawahib, and the Caduveo—were as precious and as intricate as the geometrical designs they painted on each other's faces and bodies. Against the natural order and beauty of primitive thought, aesthetics, and social life, Levi-Strauss reflected on the dirt, disorder, and decay of Brazil's modern cities. By the time Levi-Strauss arrived among the Nambiquara Indians in 1935, less than two thousand of the original twenty thousand remained, and these were a fairly miserable group, reduced and disfigured by tuberculosis, syphilis, and malnutrition. Their nomadic way of life was over, and they were reduced to a humiliating dependency on the fringes of "Western civilization." No wonder the Brazilian tropics were, for Levi-Strauss, so mordantly sad. But Levi-Strauss also idealized the tropics in his writings on the elegance and beauty of "primitive thought" and mythologies (see C. Geertz 1988).

I find no comparable beauty to celebrate in another part of the Brazilian "tropics," in the sugar plantation zone near the coast where the history of Brazil begins. In the zona da mata, a doomed plantation economy, one born of one kind of slavery and maintained to the present through slavery of another form, the tropics are also "sad." And, as with the Amazonian rain forests, the old plantation world almost tenderly described by Gilberto Freyre is on the wane in response to the vagaries of a ruthless world economic order. But in the passing of this tropical world, what is there to lament, save what might come next, the fire next time?

What is the value of ethnography in such a sad contemporary context? Many young anthropologists today, sensitized by the writings of Michel Foucault (1975, 1980, 1982) on "power/knowledge," have come to think of ethnography and fieldwork as unwarranted intrusions in the lives of vulnerable, threatened peoples. The anthropological interview has been likened to the medieval "inquisitional confession" (Ginsberg 1988) through which church examiners extracted "truth" from their naive and naturally "heretical" peasant flocks. We hear of anthropological observation as a hostile act that reduces our "subjects" to mere "objects" of our discriminating, incrimi-
nating. scientific gaze. Consequently, some young anthropologists have given up the practice of descriptive ethnography altogether in preference for
distanced and highly formalized methods of discourse analysis or purely
quantitative models. Others concern themselves with macrolevel analyses
of world economic systems in which the experiential and subjective experi-
ence of human lives is left aside. Still others engage in an obsessive, self-
reflexive hermeneutics in which the self, not the other, becomes the subject
of anthropological inquiry.

I grow weary of these postmodernist critiques, and given the perilous
times in which we and our subjects live, I am inclined toward a compromise
that calls for the practice of a “good enough” ethnography. The anthropol-
ist is an instrument of cultural translation that is necessarily flawed and
biased. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the
field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears, and skin through which we
take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have
entered. Nonetheless, like every other master artisan (and I dare say that at
our best we are this), we struggle to do the best we can with the limited
resources we have at hand — our ability to listen and observe carefully,
empathically, and compassionately.

I think of some of the subjects of this book for whom anthropology is not
a hostile gaze but rather an opportunity to tell a part of their life story. And
though I can hear the dissonant voices in the background protesting just this
choice of words, I believe there is still a role for the ethnographer-writer in
giving voice, as best she can, to those who have been silenced, as have
the people of the Alto by political and economic oppression and illiteracy and as
have their children by hunger and premature death. So despite the mockery
that Clifford Geertz (1988) made of anthropological “I-witnessing,” I believe
there is still value in attempting to “speak truth to power.” I recall how my
Alto friends grabbed and pushed and pulled, jostling for attention, saying,
“Don’t forget me; I want my turn to speak. That one has had your attention
long enough!” Or saying, “Tá vendo? Tá ouvindo?” — “Are you listening,
really understanding me?” Or taking my hand and placing it on their abdomens and demanding, “Touch me, feel me, here. Did you ever feel
anything so swollen?” Or “Write that down in your notes, now I don’t want
you to forget it.” Seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with
care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity.
Above all, they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to
record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away.

If I did not believe that ethnography could be used as a tool for critical
reflection and as a tool for human liberation, what kind of perverse cynicism
would keep me returning again and again to disturb the waters of Bom Jesus
da Mata? What draws me back to these people are just those small spaces of
convergence, recognition, and empathy that we do share. Not everything
can be dissolved into the vapor of absolute cultural difference and radical
otherness. There are ways, for example, in which we are not so indefinably
“other” to one another, my friends of the Alto and I. Like them, I in-
instinctively make the sign of the cross when I sense danger or misfortune
coming. But also, like some of them, I sit in the back of the church and mock
the visiting bishop of nearby Belem do Nordeste when he arrives out-
rageously decked out in scarlet silk and lace, calling him a parrot, a peacock,
and a transvestite baiana (an exotically dressed Afro-Brazilian food vendor).
But when the same bishop-shepherd raises the staff in his perfumed hands,
I’m on my feet with the rest: head bowed, fingers crossed, I take on Pascal’s
wager … with the rest. In other words, I share the faith with the people of
the Alto and of Bom Jesus da Mata in all its richness, complexity, contradic-
tion, and absurdity. And so I am not afraid to speak and engage my Brazilian
companheiras in matters of faith (in the broadest sense), morals, and values
where these are at least partially shared.

There is another way to think about fieldwork. I am taken with a particu-
lar image of the modern ethnographer, one borrowed from John Berger in
his book A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor (Berger & Mohr
1976). Berger described John Sassall, general practitioner to the “foresters”
of an isolated and impoverished English countryside, as the “clerk of the
records.” The clerk, or the “keeper,” of the records is the one who listens,
observes, records, and tries to interpret human lives, as does the traditional
country doctor. The clerk can be counted on to remember key events in the
personal lives and in the life history of the parish and to “keep trust,” not
betray confidences shared in private — that is, the clerk can be counted on
to know the difference between public and private, between casa and rua.

The ethnographer, like the country doctor, knows the personal history of
the community. She is her genealogist, and because of her privileged
presence at births and deaths and other life cycle events, she can readily call
to mind the fragile web of human relations that binds people together into a
collectivity. Both ethnographer and country doctor should know when to
speak and when to keep silent. Although class and upbringing separate the
country doctor from his “disadvantaged” patients, like the ethnographer,
the perennial stranger and friend, the physician is sometimes shocked by his
recognition and almost intuitive understanding of lives so very different
from his own. “I know, I know …,” they nod in empathy and recognition
with their subjects’ stories. This is the image I suggest for the ethnographer-
anthropologist: like John Sassall, a keeper of the records, a minor historian
of ordinary lives of people often presumed to have no history (Wolf 1982). In
the context of Bom Jesus da Mata, there are many lives and even more
deaths to keep track of, numbering the bones of a people whom the state
hardly thinks worth counting at all.

The answer, then, is not a retreat from ethnography altogether or eth-
nography written only by native sons and daughters (who often turn out to
be equally distanced from the people they study in terms of class, education,
and experience); rather, the answer is an ethnography that is open-ended
and that allows for multiple readings and alternative conclusions. In literary
criticism this is called the search for multiple voices in the text, including the
dissident voices that threaten to deconstruct the notion of a single, con-
trolled, third-person narrator. Some of these “dissident voices” are my own
as I move back and forth between third-person narrator and first-person
participant, now as Dona Nanci engaging her Alto friends in a political
debate on nervos at a base community meeting, later as the quirky anthro-
pologist, Scheper-Hughes, engaging her colleagues in a theoretical discus-
sion or debate. Just as the dissident and multiple voices of Lordes, Antonieta,
Biu, Black Irene, Terezinha, Amor, and others show little agreement and
consensus about what it means to be bem brasileiro, “really Brazilian,” in
Bom Jesus, the narrator is not always in agreement with them or with
herself throughout a work that has tried to keep the cuts and sutures of the
research process openly visible and suppress the urge to smooth over the
bumps with a lathe. This hopefully good-enough ethnography is presented
as close to the bone as it was experienced, hairline fractures and all.

Like all modern ethnographies, this one may be read at various, some-
times “mutually interfering” levels (Clifford 1986b:117): as a book of voy-
age and discovery, as a moral reflection on a human society forced to the
margins, as a political text (or as a Christian passion play) that indicts a
political economic order that reproduces sickness and death at its very base.
Finally, it may be read as a quest story, a search for a communal grail and for
a roundtable here envisioned as a great Bakhtinian banquet where everyone
can find a place at the table and a share in the feasting.
Death
Without
Weeping
The Violence
of Everyday Life
in Brazil

NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES
6 Everyday Violence

Bodies, Death, and Silence

What's true? What's false? Who knows how to evaluate anymore?

Seu João Gallo, morador, Alto do Cruzeiro

This chapter takes my various reflections on nervous hunger, delirium, and the mindful bodies of Nordestino sugarcane cutters to their final and logical conclusion. I ground my discussion in the problem of the “disappeared,” for the specter of missing, lost, disappeared, or otherwise out-of-place bodies and body parts haunts these pages even as it haunts the imaginations of the displaced people of the Alto do Cruzeiro, who understand that their bodies, their lives, and their deaths are generally thought of as dispensable, as hardly worth counting at all. In this context even the most interpretive and qualitative of ethnographers becomes an obsessive counter, a folk demographer, her function that of the village clerk, the keeper of the records recording and numbering the anonymous dead and disappeared.

And yet short of a theological meditation on the passions of the soul, what meaning have these empty spaces, these missing and disappeared bodies? I hope to show the difference they make when the everyday, lived experience of a large number of threatened people is introduced into current debates on the state, the politics of fear, and the problem of the disappeared.

The Breakdown of Consensus

The multiple and contradictory social realities of Bom Jesus and its surroundings contribute to fleeting perceptions of the community as a ruthless, unstable, amoral place. There is a sense of almost desperate vitality and of chaos threatening to unleash itself, so that Bom Jesus sometimes feels like a place where almost anything can happen. If there are rules to discipline and govern public interactions, they appear to exist only in the negative, to be violated, scoffed at. Only fools would obey a stop sign; never mind that the slow and fussy solteirona (old maid) of the Chaves family was knocked down by a speeding Fiat as she tried to cross the main praça of Bom Jesus on her way home from Mass. The obvious contradictions do at times rise to the surface and threaten a social consensus that is, at best, tentative and fragile. The guise of civility is rent by sudden explosions of violence, some apparently calculated, others merely reactive.

In 1986 the children of one of the wealthiest landowners in Bom Jesus were kidnapped in front of their home in broad daylight by masked despedados—angry “social bandits” from the interior of the state—who later demanded, and received, a huge ransom. The band of unemployed field hands then declared “war on the greedy latifundistas.”

During the 1987 drought hungry rural workers throughout the zona da mata began looting stores, warehouses, and train depots, thereby forcing the governor of Pernambuco to send emergency rations to divert the looters. In an interview with the press the governor blamed the looting on the expulsion of rural workers from their roçados, which led to a “savage, violent, and disorderly urbanization” (Riding 1988:1-A4), an “occupation and siege” mentality evidenced in the social geography of shantytown “invasions” and squatter camps throughout the state.

Several young men of the Alto do Cruzeiro, each of them black, young, and in trouble with the law for petty theft, drunkenness, vagrancy, glue sniffing, and other infractions, were seized from their homes just after Christmas in 1987 by unidentified men “in uniform” and were “disappeared.” A few weeks later two of the bodies were found slashed, mutilated, and dumped between rows of sugarcane. The police arrived with graphic photos for family members. “How do you expect me to recognize meu homem [my man] in this picture?” Dona Elena screamed hysterically. Similar events were repeated in 1988 and 1989. Finally they came late one night for the teenage son of Black Irene, the boy everyone on the Alto knew affectionately as Nego De. The existence of paramilitary “death squads” with close ties to the local police force is suspected, but on this topic people are generally silent; if and when they do speak, it is in a rapid and complicated form of sign language. No one else wants to be marked.

In February 1987 Evandro Cavalcanti Filho, a young lawyer for the Pernambucan rural workers syndicate, representing 120 peasant families in dispute with local landowners in the area of Surubim, was shot dead in front of his wife and children on the patio of their home. One of the gunmen (a suspected informant) was shot and killed by military police.

One year later, in February 1988, a small group of posseiros, traditional squatters using the abandoned and marginal fields of a local plantation called the Engenho Patrimônio, a few miles outside of Bom Jesus, were ambushed by capangas, hired gunmen in the employ of the senhor latifundário. The
peasants were quietly tending their roçados when the gunmen opened fire without warning. One peasant was maimed; another, a twenty-three-year-old father of a small family, was killed.

In 1989 rumors surfaced concerning the disappearance of street children, meninos da rua and moleques, several of whom lived in the open-air marketplace, took shelter at night in between the stalls and under canvas awnings, and helped themselves to bits of produce from crates and baskets. Even though many of the vendors were tolerant of the hungry street urchins, others enlisted the help of the local police in a local “pest control” campaign.

Throughout all, Bom Jesus da Mata continued to perceive itself as a quiet, peaceful interior town in the zona da mata, far from the violence and chaos of the large cities on the coast. As the initial excitement of each incident blew over, life resumed its normal course. The kidnappers were apprehended and the frightened children returned to their parents, but only a fraction of the ransom money was recovered. The sacking and looting of markets continued throughout the zona da mata, and a state of emergency was declared just before Holy Week in 1988, when suddenly the skies opened and torrential rains swept many Alto residents from their homes, which disappeared down rushing ravines of the shantytown. The castigo of drought was replaced by the castigo of floods. “Life is harsh. Man makes, but God destroys,” said the moradores of the Alto do Cruzeiro philosophically.

The hired gunmen from the Engenho Patrimônio were arrested and then freed immediately on bail. The owner of the engenho was never cited or brought to trial. As of 1989 three ex-military police officers were in prison awaiting trial for the murder of Evandro Cavalcanti, but the special investigator appointed to the inquiry had resigned from the case, and another one had not been appointed. The disappearance of young black men continues on the Alto do Cruzeiro and in other poor bairros of Bom Jesus and is treated as a nonissue, not even thought worthy of a column in the mimeographed opposition newspaper of Bom Jesus. “Why should we criticize the ‘execution’ of malandros [good-for-nothings], rogues, and scoundrels?” asked a progressive lawyer of Bom Jesus and a frequent contributor to the alternative liberal newspaper. “The police have to be free to go about their business,” said Mariazinha, the old woman who lived in a small room behind the church and who took care of the altar flowers. “The police know what they’re doing. It’s best to keep your mouth shut,” she advised, zipping her lips to show me exactly what she meant.

Padre Agostino Leal shook his head sadly. “Is it possible that they murdered Nego De? What a shame! He was in reform. I trusted him. He even attended my Wednesday night Criminals’ Circle.” Then, after a pause, the good padre added ruefully, “I guess it was just too late for Nego De.”

Violence and the Taken-for-Granted World

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight... One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.

Walter Benjamin (cited in Taussig 1989b:64)

Writing about El Salvador in 1982, Joan Didion noted in her characteristically spartan prose that “the dead and pieces of the dead turn up everywhere everyday, as taken-for-granted as in a nightmare or in a horror movie” (1982:9). In Salvador there are walls of bodies; they are strewn across the landscape, and they pile up in open graves, in ditches, in public restrooms, in bus stations, along the sides of the road. “Vultures, of course, suggest the presence of a body. A knot of children on the street suggest the presence of a body” (9). Some bodies even turn up in a place called Puerto del Diablo, a well-known tourist site described in Didion’s inflight magazine as a location “offering excellent subjects for color photography.”

It is the anonymity and the routinization of it all that strikes the naive reader as so terrifying. Who are all these desaparecidos—the unknown and the “disappeared”—both the poor souls with plucked eyes and exposed mutilated genitals lying in a ditch and those unidentifiable men in uniform standing over the ditches with guns in their hands? It is the contradiction of wartime crimes against ordinary pacetin citizens that is so appalling. Later we can expect the unraveling, the recriminations, the not-so-guilty confessions, the church-run commissions, the government-sponsored investigations, the arrests of tense and unyielding men in uniform, and finally the optimistic reports—Brazil, Argentina (later, perhaps even El Salvador) nunca mais. Quoth the raven, “Nunca mais.” After the fall, after the aberration, we expect a return to the normative, to pacetin sobriety, to notion of civil society, human rights, the sanctity of the person (Mauss’s sōzum morale), habeas corpus, and the unalienable rights to the ownership of one body.

But here I intrude with a shadowy question. What if the disappearance, the piling up of civilians in common graves, the anonymity, and the routinization of violence and indifference were not, in fact, an aberration? What if the social spaces before and after such seemingly chaotic and inexplicable acts were filled with rumors and whisperings, with hints and allegations of what could happen, especially to those thought of by agents of the social consensus as neither persons nor individuals? What if a climate of anxious
ontological insecurity about the rights to ownership of one’s body was fostered by a studied, bureaucratic indifference to the lives and deaths of “marginals,” criminals and other no-account people? What if the public routinization of daily tortures and little abominations, piling up like so many corpses on the social landscape, provided the text and blueprint for what only appeared later to be aberrant, inexplicable, and extraordinary outbreaks of state violence against citizens?

In fact, the “extraordinary” outbreaks of state violence against citizens, as in Didion’s Salvador, during the Argentine “Dirty War” (Suarez-Orozco 1987, 1990), in Guatemala up through the present day (Paul 1988; Green 1989), or in the harshest period following the Brazilian military coup of 1964 (Dassin 1986) entail the generalizing to recalcitrant members of the middle classes what is, in fact, normatively practiced in threats or open violence against the poor, marginal, and “disorderly” popular classes. For the popular classes every day is, as Taussig (1989b) succinctly put it, “terror as usual.” A state of emergency occurs when the violence that is normally contained in that social space suddenly explodes into open violence against the “less dangerous” social classes. What makes the outbreaks “extraordinary,” then, is only that the violent tactics are turned against “respectable” citizens, those usually shielded from state, especially police, terrorism.

If, in the following ethnographic fragments, I seem to be taking an unduly harsh and critical view of the “state” of things in Brazil, let me hasten to say that the outset that I view this interpretation as generalizable to other bureaucratic states at a comparable level of political-economic “development” and in a different form to those characterized by a more “developed” stage of industrial capitalism such as our own. Violence is also “taken for granted” and routinized in parts of our police underworld operating through SWAT team attacks on suspected crack houses and crack dealers in inner-city neighborhoods. And state terrorism takes other forms as well. It is found in the cool jargon of nuclear weapons researchers, our own silent, yet deadly, technicians of practical knowledge. Carol Cohn (1987) penetrated this clean, closed world and returned with a chilling description of the way our nuclear scientists have created a soothing and normalizing discourse with which to discuss our government’s capacity for blowing populations of bodies to smithereens. “Bio-power,” indeed.

I share with Michel Foucault his suspiciousness of the state as a social formation that spawns what Franco Basaglia (1987a) called the official and legalized “institutions of violence.” Yet Foucault (1979) believed that public spectacles of torture and execution had gone the way of the ancien régime. The use of torture by the state, associated with criminal proceedings, was abolished throughout the Western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so that Victor Hugo could confidently announce in 1874 that “torture has ceased to exist” (Peters 1985:6). In Foucault’s analysis, the mutilated body as the icon of state repression and control gave way to the more aestheticized and spiritualized character of public discipline, regulation, and punishment. The retreat from the body allowed for new assaults on the mind and the moral character of citizens. The new objects of discipline and surveillance were the passions, will, thought, and desire.

In advanced industrialized societies and in modern, bureaucratic, and welfare states, the institutions of violence generally operate more covertly. A whole array of educational, social welfare, medical, psychiatric, and legal experts collaborate in the management and control of sentiments and practices that threaten the stability of the state and the fragile consensus on which it claims to base its legitimacy. We can call these institutions, agents, and practices the “softer” forms of social control, the gloved hand of the state. But even the most “advanced” state can resort to threats of violence or to open violence against “disorderly” citizens whenever the normal institutions for generating social consensus are weakening or changing. I think that this is the situation we are rapidly approaching today in the United States with respect to the general tolerance of violent police actions in our urban inner cities on behalf of combating the “drug war.”

The Brazilian state has been thrown into considerable turmoil in recent years by the democratic “awakenings” of previously excluded and alienated populations to new forms of political praxis and mobilization in the proliferation of highly politicized shantytown associations, mothers clubs, squatters unions, rural workers defense leagues, and so on; many of these supported by the clergy and hierarchy of the “new” Catholic Church. The changing allegiance of the Catholic church, which, following the Latin American Bishops’ Conference at Medellín withdrew much of its traditional support from the traditional landowning and industrial political-economic elite of Brazil, produced a crisis. Bishops and clergy throughout the country have in the last decade increasingly taken the side of peasants, squatters, Indians, and small landholders in disputes with latifundários and multinational companies, and they have publicly denounced the use of violence in extracting forced labor from plantation workers and in evicting peasants from their traditional holdings. In 1980 the Brazilian National Bishops’ Conference released a statement that implicated not only landowners and hired pistoleiros in perpetrating the violence but also the state itself: “There is ample proof that such violence involves not only hired thugs and professional gunmen, but also the police, judges, and officers of the judiciary” (cited in Amnesty International 1988:3). The result was a stepped-up campaign of police-initiated harassment culminating in the murder of priests
and religious sisters associated with rural trade unions, land rights claims, and shantytown associations throughout Brazil.

Northeast Brazil is still at a transitional stage of state formation that contains many traditional and semifudal structures, including its legacy of local political bosses (coronelos) spawned by an agrarian latifundista class of powerful plantation estate masters and their many dependents (see Lewin 1987). To this day most sugar plantation estates are protected by privately owned police forces or at least by hired pistoleiros. The web of political loyalties among the intermarried big houses and leading families of the interior leads directly to the governor and to the state legislature, which is still controlled by a traditional agrarian oligarchy. Consequently, civil police, appointed by local politicians, often collaborate with hired gunmen in the employ of the plantation estates owners and sometimes participate themselves in the operations of the "death squads," a widespread and pernicious form of police "moonlighting" in Brazil.

One could compare the semifudal organization of contemporary Northeast Brazil with Anton Blok's (1974) description of the state and state terrorism in Sicily in the early decades of the twentieth century. In both cases state power is mediated through a class of landholding intermediaries and their hired guns: the coronelos and their capangas in the Brazilian case and the gabelotti, the wealthy leaseholders and landlords who supported the rural mafia, in the Sicilian case. The Sicilian mafia evolved in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the modern state superimposed itself on a marginal peasant society that was still feudal in its basic features. The mafia served as a kind of modus vivendi mediating the claims of the new state apparatus with traditional landowners and big men. Acts of graphic public violence underscored the authority of the traditional power elite and of the newly emergent state as well.

Similarly, Northeast Brazil has not yet produced the range of modern social institutions, scientific ideologies, or specialized "technicians of practical knowledge" (a term first used by Sartre) to manage and individualize (and so contain) public expressions of dissent and discontent. The health and social welfare agencies, psychiatric clinics, occupational therapies, or varieties of counseling that help to bolster a wavering consent to the prevailing order of things are not yet completely in place. Clinical medicine in the interior of Brazil is, as we have seen, fairly brutal and unsophisticated in its goals and techniques. In the interior of Northeast Brazil there are only the police, a judiciary that has generally failed to prosecute cases of police brutality, the prison, the FEBEM federal reform schools for criminalized or simply marginalized youth, and the local death squads, all of them violent institutions.

There are three public security and law enforcement institutions in Brazil: the federal, civil, and military police. The federal police, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, supervises immigration, protects the national frontiers, and investigates the black market and drug contraband in the country. Civil police are generally under the jurisdiction of the municipio, and the chief of police (delegado de polica) is usually appointed by the mayor and is financially dependent on him and the town councilmen. In addition to the officially appointed civil police, a large number of ex-officio vigias (night watchmen) are nominated or tacitly approved by the chief of police. Vigias patrol virtually every bairro of Bom Jesus and are supported by weekly "dues" collected (or extracted) from each household on their beat. All vigias and most civil police have no formal training, and most are recruited from the poorer social classes. Often civil police and vigias are difficult to distinguish from thugs and vigilantes. In addition to these is the military police, which, under the jurisdiction of both the army and the state, is responsible for maintaining public order and security. It is the military police that is usually called on to enforce, often with violence, the evictions of traditional squatters. Throughout the years of the dictatorship (1964–1985), military police officers were heavily implicated in the disappearances, tortures, and deaths of suspected subversives in Bom Jesus as elsewhere in Brazil. The process of democratization has been painfully slow and has yet to challenge the local presence and the fearful psychological hold of the military police over the poorer populations (Amnesty International 1988, 1990). Consequently, poor Nordestinos have been living for many years with state violence and threats of violence. The alternative to "softer" forms of persuasion and control is direct attack on citizens: arrest and interrogation, imprisonment, disappearance, and, finally, torture, mutilation, and killing.

At certain levels of political-economic development—and the sugar plantation zone is one of these—violence and threats or fear of violence are sufficient to guarantee the "public order." In any case, violence is the only technique of public discipline available to a military government such as the one that ruled Brazil for twenty-one years and that still plays an important role in the state today. The military is not an educational, charitable, or social welfare institution; violence is intrinsic to its nature and logic. Violence is usually the only tactic the military has at its disposal to control citizens even during peacetime (see also Basaglia 1987b:143–168).

One of the ways that modern military dictatorships have legitimized the use of violent acts against citizens is through the legal loophole of the crimen exceptum—that is, the "extraordinary crime" that warrants extraordinary and often cruel punishment. The concept may be extended to extraordinary situations warranting extraordinary measures to protect the state. And so,
paradoxically, during an era of expansion and centralization in which the
Brazilian state commands great strength and power to mobilize vast re-
sources, state policy is nonetheless based on a concept of extreme vul-
nerability. The fear of subversive or simply of criminal activity can become
obsessional (see Suarez-Orozco 1987), and torture may be used in an at-
tempts to assert, as Elaine Scarry put it, the “incontestable reality” of a
particular state’s control over the population. “It is, of course,” she con-
tinued, “precisely because the reality of power is so highly contestable, the
regime so unstable, that torture is being used” (1985:27). And so I have
borrowed Franco Basaglia’s notion of “peacetime crimes” as a way of ad-
ressing the routinization of violence in everyday aspects of contemporary
Nordestino society.

What, then, is the rationale for turning a military, wartime arsenal
against private citizens. What crimes have they committed (or do they
threaten to commit)? What makes some citizens assume the character of
“threats” or “dangers” to the state so as to make violence an acceptable form
of social control, the legitimate “business” of the police? (Remember the
words of Mariazinha, the religious spinster: “The police have to be free to go
about their business.”) The “dangerousness” of the poor and marginal
classes derives directly from their condition of desperate want. Hunger and
need always pose a threat to the artificial stability of the state. Following
Basaglia (1987a:122), we can say that the marginals of the Alto do Cruzeiro
are guilty of “criminal needs.”

In the specific instance of the posseiros (peasants who, by Brazilian law,
acquire legal tenures in unused, though privately owned, plantation lands)
who were ambushed by hired gunmen working for the owner of Engenho
Patrímônio, the squatters were “executed” by criminals who were never
brought to trial. The “crimes” of the poor, of the desperate—of the posseiro
whose very way of life stands as a negation of “modern,” bourgeois notions
of property rights or of Nego De, whose petty thievery helped maintain his
mother and siblings after the murder of his father—are understood as
“race” crimes and as “naturally,” rather than socially, produced. Nego De
and other poor, young black men like him steal because it is thought to be in
their “nature,” “blood,” or “race” to steal. They are malandros, and they are
described in racist terms as bichos da Africa. Their crimes can be punished
with impunity and without due process. Posseiros, with their precapitalist
notions of “the commons,” are viewed as dangerous retrogrades, and the
gunmen contracted to kill them do so with the full, often explicit, under-
standing and tacit approval of the local police. Those few gunmen who are
apprehended usually escape from jail with the help of local prison guards.

Meanwhile, the violent crimes of the wealthy classes are understood and
(forgiven as socially produced. Landowners must “protect” their patrimo-
nies; politicians are “put into” totally corrupting situations. Lies and bribes
are endemic to politics; they are part of the “game” of power. People are
surprised to find an honest political leader or a fair and just employer. There
is no such cultural and political immunity for the peasant squatters who
occupy lands because they have no other way to survive or for Nego De, who
was better able to sustain a large and desperate household by stealing than
by “honest” work for one dollar a day in the cane fields. Although these are
crimes of need, they are neither excused nor understood in social terms.
Instead, they are seen as base, instinctual crimes that are natural to an
“inferior” and “mulatto” population.

Increasingly today race and racial hatred have emerged as subliminal
subtexts in the popular discourses that justify violent and illegal police
actions in shantytown communities. Remnants of the older racial “harmony
ideology” of Nordestino plantation society still render it “impolite” for the
powerful and educated classes to comment in public on racial differences
(while in private and behind closed doors racist discourse is rampant and
particularly grotesque and virulent). But this same “polite” society can
thereby fail to see, fail to recognize, that police persecution is now aimed at
a specific segment and shade of the shantytown population. Even my radical
black friend, João Mariano, was profoundly embarrassed when I raised the
question of the racial nature of Alto disappearances at a study group formed
by the small, literate, leftist intelligentsia of Bom Jesus, and the discussion
was tabled.

Here we can begin to see the workings of a hegemonic discourse on
criminality/deviance/marginality and on the “appropriateness” of police
and state violence in which all segments of the population participate and to
which they acquiesce, often contrary to their own class or race interests.
How is this extraordinary consensus forged, and how is it maintained in the
face of living (and dying) contradictions? Why is there so little expressed (or
even submerged and seething) outrage against police and death squad terror-
ism in the shantytown? Why is there no strongly articulated human rights
position among even the most progressive forces and parties of Bom Jesus?
What has made the people of the Alto so fearful of democratic and liberal
reforms?

In an attempt to answer these questions my analysis proceeds in two
directions: ideology and practice. The first, relying heavily on the writings
of contemporary Brazilian social scientists, concerns the political ideology of
democracy, the state, and citizenship in Brazil. The second, based on my
observations of everyday life in Brazil, explores the mundane rituals and
routines of humiliation and violence that assault the bodies and minds of the
moradores as they go about the complicated business of trying to survive. Both tend to reinforce an acceptance of “terror as usual.”

Citizenship and Justice in Brazil

We tend to think of the Western political traditions and concepts of democracy, citizenship, and the modern state—as well as the necessary preconditions for their existence—as universally shared among modern nations. But as the recent events in Eastern Europe indicate—especially the difficulty with which newly liberated citizens are attempting to “reclaim the public” and recreate civil society following the “fall” of repressive and totalitarian communist regimes—the concepts of democracy, equality, and civil society may have very specific and different cultural and historical referents. In Eastern Europe the relationship between civil society and the state was perceived not in terms of collaboration and consensus but rather in terms of mutual hostility and antagonism (see Kligman 1990:394).

In Brazil the political traditions of republican democracy and equality, influenced by both the French and American revolutions, have always been mediated by traditional notions of hierarchy, privilege, and distinction. The Brazilian constitution, like the American constitution, was adopted before slavery was abolished, and by the end of the nineteenth century the public sphere had been constituted exclusively for a very small, elite group (Schwartz 1977; Caldeira 1990). Liberty and democracy became the exclusive preserves of the dominant minority, those educated and landed men (and, later, women) of breeding, culture, and distinction. Civil liberties and human rights were cast as “privileges” and “favors” bestowed by superiors on subordinates within relations structured by notions of personal honor and loyalty. “Favors” included everything from personal protection, material goods, jobs, and status to the right to vote. Consequently, up through the first half of the twentieth century in the Northeast, votes and elections were controlled by a few local big men and their clients.

Roberto da Matta pointed out that although Brazilian law is based on liberal and democratic principles of universalism and equality, its practice often diverges from theory and it “tends to be applied in a rigorous way only to the masses who have neither powerful relatives nor important family names.” He went on to state that “in a society like Brazil’s universal laws may be used for the exploitation of labor rather than for the liberation of society.” Those who are wealthy or who have political connections can always manage to “slide under or over legal barriers” (1984:233).

Brazil’s system of criminal justice is a “mixed system” containing elements of both the American and the European civil law tradition (Kant 1990). Contrary to the American system, there is no common-law tradition whereby precedents and jury verdicts can actually participate, in conjunction with the legislature, in making the law. And in addition to many modern, egalitarian, and individual rights protected by the Brazilian criminal justice system (such as the right to counsel and to ampla defesa—that is, the right to produce any possible evidence on equal footing with the prosecution), there are other, more traditional, and less liberal traditions. First among these is the tradition of progressing from a position of “systematic suspicion,” rather than from an assumption of innocence, and, relatedly, the judge’s “interrogation” of the accused relying on information produced by prior police investigations that are “inquisitorial” in nature. In the words of one police chief interviewed by Roberto de Lima Kant, police interrogations entail “a proceeding against everything and everyone to find out the truth of the facts” (1990:6). Within this inquisitorial system, “torture becomes legitimate—if unofficial—means of police investigation for obtaining information or a confession” (7). In all, “Brazilian criminal proceedings are organized to show a gradual, step by step, ritual of progressive incrimination and humiliation, the outcome of which must be either the confession or the acquittal. The legal proceedings are represented as a punishment in themselves” (22).

Within this political and legal context, one can understand the moradores’ awesome fear of the judicial system and their reluctance to use the courts to redress even the most horrendous violations of their basic human rights. And, as Teresa Caldeira (1990) noted, the first stirrings of a new political discourse on “human rights,” initiated by the progressive wing of the Catholic church and by leftist political parties in Brazil in the late 1970s and early 1980s and fueled in part by the international work of Amnesty International, was readily subverted by the Right. Powerful conservative forces in Brazil translated “human rights” into a profane discourse on special favors, dispensations, and privileges for criminals. Worse, the Brazilian Right played unfairly on the general population’s fears of an escalating urban violence. These fears are particularly pronounced in poor, marginalized, and shantytown communities. And so, for example, following a 1989 presidential address broadcast on the radio and over loudspeakers in towns announcing much-needed proposed prison reforms in Brazil, the immediate response of many residents of the Alto seemed paradoxical. Black Zulaide, for example, began to wail and wring her hands: “Now we are finished for sure,” she kept repeating. “Even our president has turned against us. He wants to set all the criminals free so that they can kill and steal and rape us at will.” It seemed to have escaped Black Zulaide that her own sons had at various times suffered at the hands of police at the local jail and that the prison reform act was meant to protect her class in particular. Nevertheless, Zulaide’s fears had been fueled by the negative commentary of the police, following the broadcast, on the effects these criminal reforms would have on the people of Bom
Jesus but especially on those living in “dangerous” bairros such as the Alto do Cruzeiro and needing the firm hand of the law to make life minimally “safe.”

Similarly, Teresa Caldeira offered two illustrations of right-wing ideological warfare that equated the defense of human rights with the defense of special privileges for criminals. The first is from the “Manifesto of the Association of Police Chiefs” of the state of São Paulo, which was addressed to the general population of the city on October 4, 1985. The manifesto takes to task the reformist policies of the then-ruling central-leftist political coalition, the PMDB:

The situation today is one of total anxiety for you and total tranquility for those who rob, and rape. Your family is destroyed and your patrimony acquired with much sacrifice is being reduced. . . . How many crimes have occurred in your neighborhood, and how many criminals were found responsible for them? . . . The bandits are protected by so-called human rights, something that the government considers that you, an honest and hardworking citizen, do not deserve. (1990:6)

Her second example is taken from an article published on September 11, 1983, in the largest daily newspaper of São Paulo, A Folha de São Paulo, written by an army colonel and the state secretary of public security:

The population’s dissatisfaction with the police, including the demand for tougher practices . . . originates from the drummed up philosophy of “human rights” applied in favor of bandits and criminals. This philosophy gives preference to the marginal, protecting his “right” to go around armed, robbing, killing, and raping at will. (6)

Under the political ideology of favors and privileges, extended only to those who behave well, human rights cannot logically be extended to criminals and marginals, those who have broken, or who simply live outside, the law. When this negative conception of human rights is superimposed on a very narrow definition of “crime” that does not recognize the criminal and violent acts of the powerful and the elite, it is easy to see how everyday violence against the poor is routinized and defended, even by some of the poor themselves.

Mundane Surrealism

In Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta, the Peruvian narrator comments on the relations of imagination to politics and of literary fiction to history:

Information in this country has ceased to be objective and has become pure fantasy—in newspapers, radio, television, and in ordinary conversation. To report among us now means either to interpret reality according to our desires or fears, or to say simply what is convenient. It is an attempt to make up for our ignorance of what is going on—which in our heart of hearts we understand as irremediable and definitive. Since it is impossible to know what is really happening, we Peruvians lie, invent, dream, and take refuge in illusion. Because of these strange circumstances, Peruvian life, a life in which so few actually do read, has become literary. (1986:246)

The magical realism of Latin American fiction has its counterparts in the mundane surrealism of ethnographic description, where it is also difficult to separate fact from fiction, rumor and fantasy from historical event, and the events of the imagination from the events of the everyday political drama.

The blurring of fiction and reality creates a kind of mass hysteria and paranoia that can be seen as a new technique of social control in which everyone suspects and fears every other: a collective hostile gaze, a human panopticon (see Foucault 1979), is created. But when this expresses itself positively and a state of alarm or a state of emergency is produced—as in the epidemic of susto discussed in chapter 5—the shocks reveal the disorder in the order and call into question the “normality of the abnormal,” which is finally shown for what it really is.

Peacetime Crimes

The people’s death was as it had always been: as if nobody had died, nothing, as if those stones were falling on the earth, or water on water. . . . Nobody hid this crime. This crime was committed in the middle of the Plaza.


What makes the political tactic of disappearance so nauseating—a tactic used strategically throughout Brazil during the military years (1964–1985) against suspected subversives and “agitators” and now applied to a different and perhaps an even more terrifying context (i.e., against the shantytown poor and the economic marginals now thought of as a species of public enemy)—is that it does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, the disappearances occur as part of a larger context of wholly expectable, indeed even anticipated, behavior. Among the people of the Alto, disappearances form part of
The backdrop of everyday life and confirm their worst fears and anxieties—that of losing themselves and their loved ones to the random forces and institutionalized violence of the state.

The practices of “everyday violence” constitute another sort of state “terror,” one that operates in the ordinary, mundane world of the moradores both in the form of rumors and wild imaginings and in the daily enactments of various public rituals that bring the people of the Alto into contact with the state: in public clinics and hospitals, in the civil registry office, in the public morgue, and in the municipal cemetery. These scenes provide the larger context that makes the more exceptional and strategic, politically motivated disappearances not only allowable but also predictable and expected.

“You gringos,” a Salvadoran peasant told an American visitor, “are always worried about violence done with machine guns and machetes. But there is another kind of violence that you should be aware of, too. I used to work on a hacienda. My job was to take care of the dueño’s dogs. I gave them meat and bowls of milk, food that I couldn’t give my own family. When the dogs were sick, I took them to the veterinarian. When my children were sick, the dueño gave me his sympathy, but no medicine as they died” (cited in Chomsky 1985:6; also in Clements 1987:ix).

Similarly, the moradores of the Alto speak of bodies that are routinely violated and abused, mutilated and lost, disappeared into anonymous public spaces—hospitals and prisons but also morques and the public cemetery. And they speak of themselves as the “anonymous,” the “nobody” of Bom Jesus da Mata. For if one is a “somebody,” a filhão (a son of a person of influence), and a “person” in the aristocratic world of the plantation casa grande, and if one is an “individual” in the more open, competitive, and bourgeois world of the new market economy (the rua), then one is surely a nobody, a mere fulano-de-tal (a so-and-so) and João Pequeno (little guy) in the anonymous world of the sugarcane cutter (the mata).

Moradores refer, for example, to their collective invisibility, to the ways they are lost to the public census and to other state and municipal statistics. The otherwise carefully drafted municipal street map of Bom Jesus includes the Alto do Cruzeiro, but more than two-thirds of its tangle of congested, unpaved roads and paths are not included, leaving it a semiotic zero of more than five thousand people in the midst of the bustling market town. CELPE, the state-owned power and light company, keeps track, of course, of those streets and houses that have access to electricity, but the names the company has assigned to identify the many intersecting bicos, travessas, and ruas of the Alto do not conform to the names used among the moradores themselves. The usual right of the “colonizer” to name the space he has claimed is not extended to the marginal settlers of the Alto do Cruzeiro.

The people of the Alto are invisible and discounted in many other ways. Of no account in life, the people of the Alto are equally of no account in death. On average, more than half of all deaths in the município are of shantytown children under the age of five, the majority of them the victims of acute and chronic malnutrition. But one would have to read between the lines because the death of Alto children is so routine and so inconsequential that for more than three-fourths of recorded deaths, the cause of death is left blank on the death certificates and in the ledger books of the municipal civil registry office. In a highly bureaucratic society in which triplicates of every form are required for the most banal of events (registering a car, for example), the registration of child death is informal, and anyone may serve as a witness. Their deaths, like their lives, are quite invisible, and we may as well speak of their bodies, too, as having been disappeared.

The various mundane and everyday tactics of disappearance are practiced perversely and strategically against people who view their world and express their own political goals in terms of bodily idioms and metaphors. The people of the Alto inhabit a world with a comfortable human shape, a world that is intimately embodied. I have already suggested that the moradores of the Alto “think” the world with their bodies within a somatic culture. At their base community meetings the people of the Alto say to each other with conviction and with feeling, “Every man should be the dono [owner] of his own body.” Not only their politics but their spirituality can be described as “embodied” in a popular Catholicism, with its many expressions of the carnal and of physical union with Jesus, with His mother Mary, and with the multitude of saints, more than enough for every day of the year and to guide every human purpose. There is a saint for every locale, for every activity, and for every part of the body. And the body parts of the saints, splintered into the tiniest relics, are guarded and venerated as sacred objects.

Embodiment does not end with death for the people of the Alto. Death is itself no stranger to people who handle a corpse with confidence, if not with ease. (“When you die, Dona Nanci,” little Zefinha used to say affectionately, “I'm going to be the first to eat your big legs,” the highest compliment she could think of to pay me.) On the death of a loved one, a local photographer will often be called to take a photo of the adult or child in her or his coffin. That same photo will be retouched to erase the most apparent signs of death, and it will become the formal portrait that is hung proudly on the wall. The deceased continue to appear in visions, dreams, and apparitions through which they make their demands for simple pleasures and creature comforts explicit. As wretched almas penadas, "restless souls" from purgatory, the dead may request food and drink or a pair of shoes or stockings to cover feet that are cold and blistered from endless wandering. Because the people of the
Alto imagine their own souls to have a human shape, they will bury an amputated foot in a tiny coffin in the local cemetery so that later it can be reunited with its owner, who can then face his Master whole and standing "on his own two feet."

Against these compelling images of bodily autonomy and certitude is the reality of bodies that are simultaneously discounted and preyed on and sometimes mutilated and dismembered. And so the people of the Alto come to imagine that there is nothing so bad, so terrible that it cannot happen to them, to their bodies, because of sickness (por culpa de doença), because of doctors (por culpa dos médicos), because of politics and power (por culpa de política), or because of the state and its unwieldy, hostile bureaucracy (por culpa da burocracia).

I am not going so far as to suggest that the fears of mutilation and of misplacement of the body are not shared with other social classes of Brazil, which also "privilege" the body in a culture that prides itself on its heightened expressions and pleasures of the sensual. What is, however, specific to the marginal classes of the Alto do Cruzeiro is a self-conscious sort of thinking with and through the body, a "remembering" of the body and of one's "rights" in it and to it. The affluent social classes take for granted these rights to bodily integrity and autonomy to the extent that they "go without saying." The police oppressors know their victims all too well, well enough to mutilate, castrate, make disappear, misplace, or otherwise lose the bodies of the poor, to actualize their very worst fears. It is the sharing of symbols between the torturer and the tortured that makes the terror so effective (see Scarry 1985:38-45; Suarez-Orozco 1987).

The unquestionability of the body was, for Wittgenstein, where all knowledge and certainty began. "If you do know that here is one hand," he began his last book, On Certainty, "we'll grant you all the rest" (1969:2e). And yet Wittgenstein himself, writing this book while he was working with patients hospitalized during the war, was forced to reflect on the circumstances that might take away the certainty of the body. Here, in the context of Nordestino life, I am exploring another set of circumstances that have given a great many people grounds to lose their sense of bodily certitude to terrible bouts of existential doubt—"My God, my God, what ever will become of us?"—the fear of being made to vanish, to disappear without a trace.

It is reminiscent of the situation described by Taussig with reference to a similar political situation in Colombia: "I am referring to a state of doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said—something even while it requires the normal in order to make its impact, destroys it" (1989b:8). The intolerableness of the situation is increased by its ambiguity. Consciousness moves in and out of an acceptance of the state of things as normal and expectable—violence as taken for granted and sudden ruptures whereby one is suddenly thrown into a state of shock (susto, pasmo, nervios)—that is endemic, a graphic body metaphor secretly expressing and publicizing the reality of the untenable situation. There are nervous, anxious whisperings, suggestions, hints. Strange rumors surface.

The Disappeared: Traffic in Organs

And so the moradores' feelings of vulnerability, of a profound sort of ontological insecurity, are manifested in a free-floating anxiety and in rumors (that are never publicly squelched or denied) about the disposability, anonymity, and interchangeability of their bodies and body parts. They imagine that even their own chronically sick and wasted bodies may be viewed by those more powerful than themselves (by os que mandam, those who give the orders) as a reservoir of "spare parts." I am referring to a rumor that first surfaced on the Alto do Cruzeiro (and throughout the interior of the state) in the mid-1980s and that has been circulating there ever since. It concerns the abduction and mutilation of young and healthy shantytown residents (especially children), who are eyed greedily for their body parts, especially eyes, heart, lungs, and liver. It was said that the teaching hospitals of Recife and the large medical centers throughout Brazil were engaged in an active traffic in body parts, a traffic with international dimensions.

Shantytown residents reported multiple sightings of large blue or yellow vans, driven by foreign agents (usually North American or Japanese), who were said to patrol poor neighborhoods looking for small stray children whom the drivers mistakenly believed no one in the overpopulated slums and shantytowns would ever miss. The children would be nabbed and shoved into the trunks of the vans. Some were murdered and mutilated for their organs, and their discarded bodies were found by the side of the road or were tossed outside the walls of municipal cemeteries. Others were taken and sold indirectly to hospitals and major medical centers, and the remains of their eviscerated bodies were said to turn up in hospital dumpsters.

"They are looking for 'donor organs,'" my clever research assistant, Little Irene, said. "You may think that this is nonsense, but we have seen things with our own eyes in the hospitals and in the public morgues, and we know better."

"Bah, these are stories invented by the poor and illiterate," countered my friend Casorte, the new socialist manager of the municipal cemetery of Bom Jesus, in August 1989. "I have been working here for over a year," he said. "I
arrive at six in the morning, and I leave at seven at night. Never have I seen anything. Where are the bodies or even the traces of blood left behind?"

When overnight the life-sized body of Christ disappeared from the huge cross that gives the shantytown of Alto do Cruzeiro its name, the skeptical and the irreverent wondered aloud whether the same kidnappers were responsible. They suggested that community leaders search the dumpsters of the local hospital to find out if the Christ had had His organs removed. But among the devout and the more simple, the "missing Cristo" of the Alto increased people's sense of threat and physical vulnerability. Dona Amor wiped a stray tear from her wrinkled cheek and confided in a hoarse whisper, "They've taken Him, and we don't know where they have hid Him." "But who?" "Os grandes," she replied. "But why?" I persisted, and she answered in a word: "Política." Dona Amor was referring to the politics of power, to all the inchoate forces summoned by the poor to explain and account for the misery of their lives. Whereas for us politics is something remote that happens elsewhere and in a separate discourse with its own vocabulary and etiquette, for the Nordestino peasant-workers política is imminent and omnipresent. It accounts for and explains everything, even the size of one's coffin and the depth of one's grave.

The body-snatching rumors were so widespread in the favelas and poor neighborhoods of Pernambuco that local journalists soon picked up the story and went to great lengths to expose the credulity of the population, sometimes cruelly satirizing people's fears as bogeyman stories. But to the illiterate, or partly literate, the newspaper and radio coverage only added further validity to the rumors. "Yes, it's true," insisted Dona Aparecida, pacing anxiously in front of her house on the Rua do Cruzeiro. "I heard it on the radio yesterday. They are reporting it in Recife. Now what will become of us and our poor children?" And she started to cry.

The stories had reached such proportions that my attempts one morning to rescue little Mercea, Biu's perpetually sick and fussy three-year-old, backfired when I attempted to get her into the back seat of a taxi, even as she was carried in the arms of Xoxa, her older sister. As soon as I gave the order "To the hospital and quick!" the already terrified little toddler, in the midst of a severe respiratory crisis, began to choke, scream, and go rigid. "Does she think I'm Papa-Figo [the Brazilian bogeyman]?" the annoyed cab driver asked.1 No amount of coaxing could convince Mercea that her tormented little body was not going to be sold to the ghoulish doctors. Biu had instructed her little girl well: "Don't let anyone take you outside the house." Even more children than usual were kept out of school during this period, and others were sent away to live with distant kin in the mata. Meanwhile, small children, like Mercea, who were left at home while their mothers were at work in the cane fields or in the houses of the wealthy found themselves virtual prisoners, locked into small, dark huts with even the wooden shutters securely fastened. On several occasions I had to comfort a sobbing child, through a crack in a door or shutter, would beg me to liberate her from her dark and lonely cell.

As a result of these organ theft rumors, there are a fascination and horror with autopsy, plastic surgery, and organ transplant operations, which are sometimes understood quite fantastically. "So many of the rich are having plastic surgery and organ transplants," offered an older Alto woman, "that we really don't know whose body we are talking to anymore." As the people of the Alto see it, the ring of organ exchange proceeds from the bodies of the young, the poor, and the beautiful to the bodies of the old, the rich, and the ugly and from Brazilians in the Southern Hemisphere to North Americans, Germans, and Japanese. The people of the Alto can all too easily imagine that their bodies may be eyed longingly as a reservoir of spare parts by those with money.

It was just this perceived injustice of unfair and unequal exchange of organs and body parts that kept Dona Carminha in search of extraordinary medical help for her only living son, Tomás, who was blinded when he was eight years old because of a poorly treated eye infection. Secondary scar tissue had grown over the cornea of both eyes, and the boy, entering adolescence, lived in a world of impenetrable blackness to which his mother refused to let him make the slightest adjustment or accommodation. She was convinced that the boy’s blindness was temporary and would someday be reversed through an eye transplant. The obstacle, as she understood it, was that the “eye banks” were reserved, like everything else in Brazil, for os ricos, those, she said, who could afford to pay “interest.” She had taken the boy to Recife and then by bus, to Rio, where she lived in a favela with distant relatives while she relentlessly pursued one impossible option after another. Although she could not read and was terrified of the city, she learned to make her way, she said, and went from hospital to hospital and clinic to clinic until she finally exhausted all possible options there. Yet she persisted in her belief that there was still hope for her son, that somewhere she would find a doctor of conscience, um doutor santo, who would be willing to put his hands into the till and come up with a new pair of eyes for her son. (Her story put me in mind of the images I knew as a child of Santa Lucia, with her plucked eyes resting on a dish held in her hands.) Didn’t they give new eyes to the rich? Carminha asked me. And wasn’t her own son gentes (a good person) just like them and equal before the “eyes” of God? How could the doctors not “see” what they were doing, she continued. They were they so “blind”? Her husband, patient and long-suffering Seu Evanildo, sighed, shaking his head at me.
“Maybe,” I said gently, “maybe, Carminha, it is, as the doctors have told you, too late for your son’s eyes. Maybe he will have to learn how to walk in the shadows.” “Never,” she said, “I will never give up as long as I have the strength to walk the streets and I have a mouth to speak. I will take him to Texas if that is the only solution.”

The rumor that the “rich are eating us” or “eating our children” is not exclusive to these impoverished Nordestinos. One can find similar stories in other places and historical periods—for example, in the “blood libel” stories that European Catholic peasants spread against Jewish merchants, who were accused of using the blood of Christian babies for Passover rituals, and in the contemporary Pishcaco myths found among Andean Indians. The Andean version, held widely from the colonial period to this day (see Oliver-Smith 1969; Taussig 1987b:211–241), maintained that sugar mills could not be started up at the beginning of the milling season without being greased with human fat, normally Indian fat and preferably Indian children’s fat. The mills ran by feeding on human bodies, an apt enough metaphor. The Indians mistrusted all aspects of the milling industry—the factory with its heavy machinery, electric power plants, and engineers who managed them. The Indians had reason enough to be suspicious because mill and factory owners had both exploited the labor and mistreated the bodies of the Indian population since the beginning of the conquest.

There are modern versions of the Pishcaco tale. In the 1950s Peruvian villagers told Eugene Hammel (personal communication) that airplane jet engines could not be started up without human fat and that Indian children were stolen to provide it. It was also rumored during a famine in the southern highlands of the Andes in the 1960s that U.S. grains and other surplus foods that were being sent to Peru through the Food for Peace program were designed to fatten up Andean babies for the U.S. Air Force. When USAID programs began to provide Andean children with a nourishing school lunch, the Indians stopped sending their children to school altogether. Finally, in the 1980s Bruce Winterhalder, a biological anthropologist from the University of North Carolina, found his attempts to study the physiological effects of high altitude on Andean Indians stymied by the rumor that the anthropologist and his team of assistants were modern-day Pishcacos. They believed that the researchers were measuring the fat folds of adults and children with calipers to select the fattest for their nefarious, cannibalistic purposes.

The Nordestino rumors about kidnapped children and organ theft for medical procedures are more complicated than the blood libel or Pishcaco myths. Even though beliefs about greasing the engines of sugar mills and jet planes with human fat vividly express people’s fears of exploitation by the rich and powerful, they remain metaphorical, speaking only to symbolic, not to actual, truths. Nordestino fears and rumors of body and organ snatching by medical institutions are grounded in a historical reality going back as far as Renaissance anatomists and surgeons (see Lindburgh 1975) and in a new biomedical technology that is real and in some respects monstrous enough. The “Baby Parts Story Just Won’t Die” (see San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, September 30, 1990, B-7) because the “misinformed” shantytown residents are onto something. They are on the right track and are refusing to give up on their intuitive sense that something is seriously amiss.

Certainly the scarcity of organ donors for transplant surgery and the development of new techniques for the medical use of fetal tissues have created a gruesome market for human “organ harvesting,” one with international dimensions. There are several sources of human organs and body tissues for transplant surgery and for basic medical research. The primary source of “spare parts” comes from “neomorts”—that is, brain-dead hospital patients whose vital organs may be kept “alive” and “available” for days, even weeks, via machines that can push and pull oxygen out of lungs, electrically shock the heart into beating, and keep the blood warm and circulating through body tissues. This process of maintaining life-in-death is fairly routinized today in American hospitals. Another source is from still living, yet doomed, anencephalic infants, and a third comes, relatively, from the brain tissue taken from aborted fetuses. In Berkeley, California, the Hana Biologics Company is currently developing techniques to produce insulin-producing cells from aborted fetuses to transplant into patients with diabetes. The company hopes to accomplish the same for Parkinson’s disease. Craig McMullen, the president of the company, deals with the ethics of this procedure rather curiously: “We take a waste product of society and use it to find a cure for diseases affecting millions of people” (San Francisco Chronicle, October 6, 1987, 6).

Information and misinformation about these and other seemingly magical medical innovations are rapidly picked up by the media and disseminated worldwide. Consequently, the organ theft rumor has spread rapidly throughout the Third World, even in the absence of literacy, newspapers, and television sets. Perhaps the medical practice that most reflects the anxieties underlying the organ theft rumors is the use of living, healthy, unrelated donors who are paid to “donate” a spare organ, most commonly a kidney. The business of organ transplants is conducted today in a multi- and transnational space. For example, between 1984 and 1988, 131 patients from three renal units in the United Arab Emirates and Oman traveled of their own accord to Bombay, India, where they purchased, through local brokers,
kidneys from living donors, most of them from impoverished shantytowns outside Bombay. The donor’s "extra" kidney was surgically removed for transplant, and the "donor" was compensated between $2,600 and $3,300 for the missing body part.

This subject was treated in a recent issue of *The Lancet*, perhaps the premier medical journal in the world. A. K. Salahudeen et al. (1990) analyzed the high mortality among the Arab recipients of the purchased kidneys. There was no parallel follow-up or discussion, however, of the possible adverse effects on the health and morality of the organ donors. The authors did, however, comment on the ethics of organ sale. While they condemned the practice of "rampant commercialism" in Bombay (without mentioning the rampant commercialism of the Arab participants), they considered ethically "acceptable" the practice of "rewarded gifting" or "compensated gifting" whereby living, unrelated donors are "rewarded" for the inconvenience of the procedure and for the loss of earnings during the period of recovery. Citing studies by C. T. Patel (1988) and K. C. Reddy et al. (1990), *The Lancet* authors concluded that financial incentives for living organ donors may be considered "moral and justified" on the grounds that "kidney donation is a good act. It is a gift of life" (1990:727).

The language of *The Lancet* article evoked an early and formative essay by Talcott Parsons, Renée Fox, and Victor Lidz in which the authors drew on religious imagery and the biblical idea of self-sacrifice as the ethical basis underlying the then still very experimental medical technology that made heart transplants possible. The donation of an organ, they wrote, was the "most literal gift of life that a person could offer or receive:

The donor contributes a vital part of his (her) body to a terminally ill, dying recipient, in order to save and maintain that other person's life. Because of the magnitude of this gift exchange...participating in a transplantation can be a transcendent experience for those involved...It may epitomize for them man's highest capacity to make the sacrificial gift of life-in-death, that is supreme love, commitment, and communion. In this sense...deep religious elements, some of them explicitly Christian, are at least latently present in the transplant situation. (1972:412)

Obviously, there are many ethical and political dilemmas involved in the question of organ transplants that are being creatively addressed by shantytown residents. While Western Europeans and North Americans persist in thinking of organ transplants as "gifts" donated freely by loving and altruistic people, to the people of the Alto, whose bodies are so routinely preyed on by the wealthy and the powerful (in economic and symbolic exchanges that have international dimensions), the organ transplant implies less a gift than a commodity. In place of the gift of life, there is a suspicion of a theft of life in which they will serve as the unwilling and unknowing sacrificial lambs.

The body parts rumor is so persistent and widespread today among poor and vulnerable people living in urban shantytowns on the fringes of modern social life that in November 1988 the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning the "traffic" in Central and South American children for international adoption, an undersupervised commercial as well as a charitable activity that sometimes involves such children in prostitution and pornography and possibly even, as the rumor suggests, in a covert traffic in baby parts (see R. Smith 1989; Raymond 1989).

At the very least the organ theft rumor should give pause to those medical technicians and political leaders in the United States who have sometimes made indecent proposals for the acquisition of scarce donor organs. The Brazilian rumors express poor people's perceptions, grounded in an economic and biotechnomedical reality, that their bodies and the bodies of their children may be worth more dead than alive to the rich and the powerful.

And so the rumors of the "medically" disappeared and mutilated bodies continue unabated, coexisting, of course, with actual cases of politically motivated abductions and mutilations of Alto men and young boys, about which people are too afraid to speak, so that when touching on *this* subject *moradores* are suddenly struck mute. The rumors of "what can happen next" express, albeit obliquely and surreallyistically, the *moradores* implicit and intuitive understanding that something is amiss.

The Disappeared: Traffic in Children

Por este pão pra comer For this good bread to eat
Por este chão pra dormir For this hard ground on which to sleep
Por me deixar respirar For letting me breathe
Por me deixar existir For letting me exist
Deus lhe pague! God reward you!

Chico Buarque, popular song (cited in Pires 1986:39)

The anxious stories of shantytown children snatched up for their organs may also be a reflection of the active roundup of small street urchins, thousands of whom disappear each year into Brazilian prisons and federal correctional and education reform facilities that are viewed with suspicion and horror by shantytown residents (see Fonseca 1987). But the stories of physical and sexual abuse of children detained in Brazil's correctional institutions are matched by equally horrible stories of abuse, battering, mutilation, and death on the streets (see Allsebrook & Swift 1989). Benedicto
Rodrigues dos Santos, the head of the Brazilian National Street Children’s Movement, reported the violent deaths of 1,397 street children between 1984 and 1989 alone. Many of these were the victims of one version of “urban renewal,” and similar to the death squad assassinations of adult marginals, the bodies of some of these “lost” street children were also mutilated.

It is curious to note how the official public discourse about street children has changed in Brazil (and more widely in Latin America as well) over the past two decades. In the 1960s street urchins were accepted as a fairly permanent feature of the urban landscape, and they were referred to affectionately as moleques, that is, “ragamuffins,” “scamps,” or “rascals,” or any small black child. Moleques were “streetwise” kids, cute, and cunning, sometimes sexually precocious, and invariably economically enterprising. They tried to make themselves useful in myriad small ways, some of these bordering on the deviant. Think of Fagin’s “boys” from Oliver Twist, especially the Artful Dodger, and you have it. Many moleques survived by “adopting” a particular affluent household, where they often ate and slept in a courtyard or patio. Hardly a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil in the 1960s didn’t have a special moleque, who attached himself or herself to the volunteer for the duration of the stay. A few of these “loose” and “excess” children were adopted and brought back to the United States.

Today, street children in Brazil tend to be viewed as both a public scandal and public nuisance. They are now referred to either as “abandoned” children or as marginals. The first connotes pity for the child (and blame for the neglectful mother), whereas the second connotes fear. But both labels justify radical interventions and the removal of these all too public “pests” from the landscape of modern, congested cities in Brazil. Yet today’s abandoned and criminalized street children seem no more neglected and no more (or less) dangerous than yesterday’s playful moleques. Most of the children are today, as they were in the 1960s, “supernumerary” children of impoverished single mothers. And although they may be quite on their own economically, most are still emotionally and socially attached to a larger family unit. In fact, street children, most of them boys, are quite sentimental on the topic of mothers, their own mothers in particular. When asked why they begged, stole, or lived in the streets, the children often replied that they were doing it to help their mothers. Most shared a percentage of their earnings with their mothers, whom they visited each evening. “Fifty-fifty,” said Giomar proudly with his raspy, boy-man voice. “Oh, ché!” his nine-year-old friend Aldimar corrected him. “Since when did you ever give your mother more than a third?” (I was more impressed, however, with the math skills of two street children who had never been to school.)

A band of street children who had attached themselves to us in 1987 liked nothing better than to be invited indoors to use our indoor toilet, to wash up with soap and water, and, afterward, to flop on the floor and draw with magic marker pens. Their sketches were curious. Given free hand to draw whatever came into their heads, most drew self-portraits or conventional nuclear family portraits, even when there was no “papa” living in the house or when the child himself had long since left home. The street children also liked religious themes, the crucifixion in particular, colored in with lots of bloody red. But their self-portraits tended to be smiling and upbeat, like the one that eleven-year-old Luiz sketched of himself, posing with his beggar’s sack.

The main shadow that is cast over the lives of street children today is their fear of the police and of the FEBEM children’s asylums in Bom Jesus and in nearby Recife. “You won’t ever turn me in to FEBEM, will you, Nanci?” I was made to answer many times over. “They kill children there,” Luiz insisted. The more I denied that this could be so, the more the children ticked off the names of friends who had been “roughed up” or hurt at one of the Federal Schools for the Well-Being of Minors, as the FEBEM institutes are misnamed. “Why do you think that they built the FEBEM school so close to the cemetery of Bom Jesus?” asked José Roberto, aged 12, with a quiver of
fear in his voice. No one can tell these experienced street children that their fears for their physical safety are groundless.

By the same token, one cannot suggest to Alto women that their fears of child snatching are fantastic and groundless in light of the active domestic and international black market in Brazilian children (see Schepers-Hughes 1990). The thriving trade in babies has affected the lives of a dozen or more Alto women with results that are complex and ambiguous. In the absence of any formal child protective service, with the exception of the punitive FEBEM asylums, child arrest, child stealing, and child saving are hopelessly muddled. When coercion, bribery, and trickery are involved in Brazilian child adoption, the humanitarian gesture is easily unmasked as little more than institutionalized reproductive theft that puts the bodies of poor women in the Third World at the disposal of affluent men and women in Brazil and elsewhere. But regardless of the form it takes, the trade in babies has contributed to the chronic state of panic that I am describing and to Alto residents’ perceptions of bodily destinies that are out of their control.

When Maria Loredes, the mother of five sickly and malnourished children living in a miserable hovel on the hillside path called the Vulture’s Beak on the Alto do Cruzeiro, was approached by her wealthy patroa, the woman for whom she washed clothes for less than one dollar a week, who asked to “borrow” her pretty little four-year-old galega (fair-haired, fair-skinned child), Maria readily agreed. The woman said she would keep the child overnight just for amusement and would return her in the morning. Maria sent her little girl off just as she was: untidy, barefoot, and without even a change of clothes or her little pink comb with its missing teeth.

That night passed and then another. Maria was worried, but she assumed that her child was happy and having a good time, and Maria did not want to anger her boss by appearing anxious or mistrustful. After almost a week had gone by, Maria’s husband, Manoel Francisco, came home from the plantation several hours to the north where he had been working as a sugarcane cutter. When he returned to find that his favorite daughter was missing, he pushed Maria against the wall of their hut and called her a “stupid woman.” He went frantically in search of the little girl, but on arriving at the house of his wife’s patroa, he learned it was already too late: the little girl had been sent by bus to Recife to an “orphanage” that specialized in overseas adoption.

“I did your wife a favor,” the patroa said to Manoel. “Leave your daughter alone and soon she will be on her way to America to become the daughter of a rich man. That pretty galega of yours had no future in your household. Don’t be selfish. Give her a chance.” The woman would give no further information, and when Manoel became insistent, she called on one of her houseboys to have him forcibly removed from her patio.

Had they lodged a complaint with the police? I asked. “And do you think that the police would take a complaint from us, Dona Nanci?” I was told. No, said Maria, adding that although she was still very angry at having been tricked, she had come to accept what had happened, to se conformar (adjust) to her and her daughter’s fate. Marcela was most certainly better off where she was now. Later Maria withdrew into the little back room where the members of the family slept crisscrossed in hammocks of various sizes and colors, and she emerged with a small plastic basket that contained all her daughter’s earthly possessions: a couple of tattered cotton shifts, her chewed-up pacifier on its string, a pair of plastic flip-flops, the comb, and a tiny mirror. “Marcela was so vain, so proud of her blond hair and fair skin,” her mother said wistfully, “and look what happened to us because of it.” Maria’s oldest daughter picked up the objects and turned them over. There were tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. “Does she miss her little sister often?” I asked. “Don’t mind her,” Dona Maria replied, pushing the girl away roughly. “She’s only crying for herself, that it was her bad fortune not to have been stolen!”

“But do you still miss your little girl?”

“I don’t think of her too often now. But when I go into her things, it makes me sad. I feel so bad to see the little bit that she left behind, and I think to myself, ‘Why don’t you just throw the things out? Even if by some miracle she would walk through that door, she could never use them anymore.’ When Manoel catches me looking at her things, he starts up again, arguing about my stupidity. But now I yell back at him: ‘What are you saying? Do you want Marcela back here amid all this want, all this abuse and maltreatment? Let her escape! What can we do with another child when we already have too many? Don’t cry for her. We are the ones to be pitied, the ones who were left behind.’” Later Maria added that sometimes when she was alone, she could get really wound up and she would curse the American who changed her life, saying, “Damn that rich woman! Why doesn’t she come back and get the rest of us as well!”

Each year close to fifteen hundred children leave Brazil legally to live with adoptive parents in Europe (especially Italy, Scandinavia, and Germany), the United States, and Israel. But if one counts the more clandestine traffic that relies on the falsification of documents and political and bureaucratic corruption at the local, state, national, and international levels, the number of children leaving Brazil has been estimated at three thousand per year, or about fifty children per week. The clandestine and black markets work through murky channels by relying especially on employers and patroas to put pressure on female workers and to exploit the ignorance of poor, rural women, like Maria, whose children are living in a state of real poverty and
neglect. On what grounds could Maria defend herself? She was afraid of the police and received no sympathy from her patra, who dismissed her complaint by saying, "You already killed two of your children by neglect; did you want to finish off your pretty little blonde as well?"

Child protection, such as there is on the Alto do Cruzeiro, often takes the form of child theft. And even where a radical intervention may be justified to save a child’s life, the unpredictable form it takes attacks women at the core of their fragile existence and increases their feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. The bad widow Maria José came within a hair’s breadth of losing her youngest child, a fair-haired and rosy-cheeked little cherub. Although the little tyke was generally filthy and often left to play with stray goats and in the rubbish pile behind the unfinished mud lean-to where the family lived, he was healthy enough and better fed than many Alto toddlers. He was also better cared for than his lice-infested older sister and scaredcrow-skinny brother. The brunt of scarcity falls in unequal proportions on children in any given Alto household, and this one was no exception.

The Franciscan sister, Irmã Juliana, made a visit to the young widow only to find her smoke-filled hovel empty, save for a couple of pigs rooting about in a pile of dirty rags near the twig fire. Fearing a possible fire hazard, Juliana kicked the pile of rags away from the flames only to have them respond with a howl. When she realized that inside the bundle was a little boy covered with dirt and feces, the nun scooped him up and was about to leave with him when his older sister arrived home and begged Juliana not to take her baby brother away, for her mother would surely “kill” her for having left him unattended. Juliana relented when the girl promised to wash the baby and take better care of him. When the nun returned the next day, she argued with Maria José to give her child to a Franciscan home for abandoned children in a nearby town. The widow adamantly refused; threats followed.

Sister Juliana vowed she would do nothing more for the widow, not help her with weekly food baskets or with bricks and cement to construct a proper home. The widow replied angrily, “I may be a poor and miserable cur, but I am not so depraved as to trade my beautiful baby for a basket of food and a roof over my head.”

Stories like these circulate wildly among the moradores of the Alto, who take from them the lesson that they are powerless before the big people of Bom Jesus, who can dispose of them and their children as they wish. True, the women of the Alto agreed, Maria José was not a particularly doting mother, but it was “wrong” of the nun to force the widow to choose between food and a house or her child.

Nonetheless, each year many thousands of children change parents in Brazil. Some of this “circulation of children” is traditional and voluntary, as

in the pattern of the informal fosterage of filhos de criação discussed in chapter 3. Some of it is formal and bureaucratically, much of the exchange, as we have seen, remains coerced, illegal, and covert. One of the reasons that moradores so fear the asylums of FEBEM is that these institutions also serve as intermediaries in the domestic adoption process, transferring poor and “abandoned” children from their neglectful birth mothers to adoptive mothers elsewhere in the country (see Fonseca 1987:22). Meanwhile, temporary and informal fosterage is problematic because of the ease with which any middle-class woman can go to a civil registry office and limpar a certidão—that is, be issued a new birth certificate with her own name listed as the child’s natural parent.

One young Alto mother told of the unfortunate day when, on her way to the post office, she stopped at the front gates of a big house in town to ask for a cup of water for herself and her one-year-old daughter. The dona da casa requested that the child be brought inside for a few moments. The cup of water was brought out to the thirsty woman, but her baby was not. The mother cried out in protest, but the wooden door and the gates were slammed in her face. The woman was told to leave or the police would be called. Before the week was out the mistress of the big house had registered the child in her own name. The wealthy woman had taken advantage of a Brazilian law that allows for the transfer of legal rights in a child from its birth mother to another woman at the latter’s request (see Código Civil 1916; Lei 4655, 1965; Código de Menores 1979). Local courts in Brazil favor the rights of the middle class to adopt, almost at will, the needy and often neglected children of the poor.

And so these incidents feed bizarre rumors, such as the organ theft stories, and the rumors feed a culture of fear and suspicion in which ambiguity contributes to the experience of uncertainty and powerlessness, which then present themselves as a kind of “fatalism” and despair. The privileging of rumor over reality, of the fear of what can happen over the reality of what has already come to pass, may be seen as a kind of collective delirium. Or by way of another analogy, it is not difficult to drive people crazy by telling them that their fears or beliefs are groundless or that they are “paranoid” when, in fact, everyone is actually talking about them behind their backs.

The elements of reproductive trafficking in poor women and children that I describe here contain, as Janice Raymond recently put it, “all the worst elements of human rights violations” (1989:245). This trafficking involves the barter and sale of human beings, coercion, and the uprooting of children from their homes and sometimes from their cultures and countries of origin. Finally, we cannot eliminate the suspicion, kept alive in the form of a strange and outrageous rumor that refuses to die, that within the clandestine inter-
national black market in babies, there are some violations resulting, more often than we may know, in the medical abuse or death of such children.

Everyday Violence: Hospital Clinics

The body and organ theft rumors also have their basis in poor people's mundane encounters with a clinical and medical reality that does view and treat their bodies and body parts and those of their children as "dispensable." When Seu Antônio, a rural cane cutter from the Alto do Cruzeiro, appeared in a local clinic following a series of small strokes that left his eye damaged and his vision impaired, the clinic doctor said, without even bothering to examine the afflicted eye, "Well, it's not worth anything; let's just have it removed." While the wealthy indulge themselves in the very latest medical technologies—plastic surgery and body sculpting are now almost routine among the middle-aged and middle class in this region—the frequent accident victims among the cane cutters and mill workers on the plantations return home from the hospital with grotesque scars and badly set bones that leave them permanently disfigured or disabled.

Seu João Gallo was one of the young leaders of the shantytown association in the 1960s. He was spirited and lively, known as a particularly good dancer of the Nordestino forró, a sexy version of the two-step. Often in those days João would try to teach me to dance after UPAC meetings, and I would stumble along to everyone's amusement except my own. My feet and hips simply would not move to the complicated and smooth steps he so effortlessly made. "Is that you, João, truly?" I asked the defeated-looking man with deep furrows cut into his brow. He was seated uncomfortably on a chair outside his hut set into a niche of the Alto that looked out over the mata. He greeted me with the taunt that perhaps I was now altogether "too grand" a person to recognize an old beau who today was a "cripple." His story was a not uncommon one. While away working in São Paulo on a road construction gang, he'd been knocked down by a car that came speeding out of nowhere. He never knew what hit him. As a temporary worker without proper documents, he had been treated as a "charity" patient in the general hospital, which explained the ugly and botched repair work on his leg that left it both useless and ugly. Not even minimal cosmetic surgery had been attempted to hide the brutal effects of the trauma, although Brazilian plastic surgeons practicing in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are considered among the finest in the world.

The frequency of sudden and violent death in this vulnerable population leads to a confusion between killing and dying so that the people of the Alto speak routinely of relatives "killed" by pharmacists who prescribed, knowingly or not, the wrong medication or by surgeons in Recife whose steady hands slipped fatally during the course of otherwise routine operations. It is hardly surprising, then, that one encounters among the poor a nagging and persistent anxiety about what can happen to their bodies, anonymous enough in Bom Jesus, once they leave the município. No one from the Alto travels beyond Bom Jesus, especially not to the capital city of Recife, without his proper identification papers. There are too many stories of companheiros and family members who were transported to Recife for medical treatments and then were "lost" in the web of exchanges of charity patients among public, private, and teaching hospitals. On several occasions I was recruited in the search for a "missing person," a hospitalized patient who had gotten lost, as people say, "in the bureaucracy" and discovered that it was next to impossible to trace "anonymous" bodies attached to "generic" interior names such as José or Maria da Silva.

I think of Nilda Gomes, who in 1982 suddenly found herself mother to four grandchildren after their mother "disappeared" into a hospital in Recife. "And now these poor children are orphans," sighed Nilda as the two youngest ones put their heads in their grandmother's lap and cried pitifully. In her desperation Nilda had "arranged" some money from the prefeito to cover her bus fare into Recife, where she went to find her missing daughter or at least, she said, to find out what had been done with her body. ("I am afraid they gave her up to the medical students. She was burned all over her body from the house fire, and she would certainly be a great curiosity to them," Nilda commented sadly.) But when she arrived at the Hospital das Clinicas in Recife, the old woman was made to wait many hours. Finally Nilda was told that there was no record of her daughter ever having been registered at the hospital. "Liars!" Nilda accused the nurses. "Murderers!" And for her troubles she was physically pushed out into the street.

"It's always like that with the poor," said Nilda somewhat philosophically. "Our lives and our deaths are very cheap. The nurses and doctors look at us and they say, 'Well, what does it matter, one more or one less?' And when we arrive in the city in our ugly clothes without knowing how to speak properly or how to behave, they make us wait and tell us nothing. It's for this reason that we are so afraid of hospitals and why we fight with the prefeito to let us travel in the ambulance with our family members."

Maria Luiza, the "good widow," would most certainly have agreed. Maria's husband, Cosmos, was a popular handyman on the Alto. When a badly infected sore on his leg failed to heal ("It was so deep," Maria said, "that you could see to his bones"), Cosmos went to the local hospital, where Dr. Francisco gave him a half dozen ill-advised injections, one each week. "But he didn't get any better," the patient little woman said without a trace of rancor. "Cosmos would scream at night with the pain so it would freeze
your blood." Finally, they took Cosmos by ambulance to the Hospital das Clínicas in Recife, but he was rejected by admitting staff that did not want to take responsibility for a man who was so close to death. Later, Cosmos was taken to the Hospital de Restauração, where his leg was amputated. Nonetheless, a few days later Maria received an order from the hospital to get her husband’s body if she did not want him sent to the Medical-Legal Institute, the ML, as people called the public morgue in Recife. The prefeito refused to send the municipal ambulance. “You are entitled to only one trip,” Seu Félix scolded the widow, “and the municipal ambulance is not a hearse”—a phrase I was to hear on several occasions.

“Cosmos died screaming and banging his head,” Maria Luiza continued. At least, that is what a nurse offered her for consolation when she arrived at the hospital in a battered, rural taxi cab with a recalcitrant taxi driver who did not want to carry a “stiff” back into the interior. “But I was firm,” the widow concluded. “I told him that a deal was a deal and that he had already agreed to the fare in Bom Jesus.” “But you didn’t tell me about him,” the driver muttered. “And if I had,” replied the stoic little woman, “would you ever have agreed to take me?”

“Because the poor believe that those who arrive deathly ill to public hospitals, without medical insurance, official documents, or without family members to identify and protect them, often become fodder for medical experimentation and organ theft, it is hardly surprising that so many moradores resist hospitalization altogether. Above all, the poor fear dying in the charity wards of urban public hospitals where their remains may be ‘donated’ to medical students as a way of canceling their unpaid medical debts. ‘Little people like ourselves,’ Little Irene cautioned, ‘can have anything done to them.’ Stories like the following one, told by a washerwoman from Recife, confirm some of those suspicions.

“When I was working in Recife,” she began, “I became the lover of a man who had a huge, ugly ulcer on his leg. I felt sorry for him, and so I would go to his house and wash his clothes for him, and he would visit my house from time to time. We were going along like this as lovers for several years when all of a sudden and without warning, he died. The city sent for his body. I decided to follow him to make sure that his body wouldn’t be lost. He didn’t have a single document, so I was going to serve as his witness and as his identification papers. But by the time I got to the public morgue, they had already sent his body to the medical school for the students to practice on. So I followed him there, and what I saw happening at the school I could not allow. They had his body hung up, and they were already cutting off little pieces of him. I demanded the body back, and after a lot of arguing they let me take it home with me. It’s true, he was only a beggar, a tirador de esmolas, who sometimes did magic tricks on the bridge in Recife to amuse people. But I was the one who washed his clothes and took care of his wound, and so you could say that I was the owner of his body.”

And when Biu’s little girl, Mercea, who had been sick for a very long time, finally died in late February 1988 just as they arrived at the emergency room of the hospital, Biu and her half-sister Antonieta wished the child’s body away despite the protest of the clinic staff. They buried Mercea hurriedly that same day, as is customary. I accompanied Biu to the cartório civil, where she and Antonieta registered the child as having died at home unattended that morning. I was asked to sign as a “witnes.” I did so but later asked for an explanation. “We were afraid of the state,” Antonieta said simply. “We didn’t want an autopsy or Mercea’s body tampered with. She is our child, and we are the donas of her body.”

But Mercea, like most of the more than three hundred children who die in Bom Jesus each year, was buried in an unmarked grave, although in her own little coffin purchased on credit. In less than six months her grave was cleared to make room for another “little angel,” and her remains were tossed in the deep well that is called the “bone depository” (deposito de ossos). And so Mercea’s older sister, Xoxa (who was away working on a plantation at the time of her baby sister’s death), could not on her return home locate the little grave. This made it difficult for Xoxa to offer her sister the pretty white stockings that Mercea told Xoxa in a dream that she wanted. “Your vision was a true one,” Biu told her eldest daughter. “In our rush to bury Mercea we had to put her into the ground barefoot.”

*Everyday Violence: The Social World of the Cemetery*

Alas, poor Yorick!


*Nenhum dos mortos daqui vem vestido de caixão.*

*Portanto eles não se enterram tão derramados no chão.*

*Cemitérios Pernambucanos* (citados de Castro 1966:vi)

While going throughout the death registry books in the cartório civil in Bom Jesus, I came across the following handwritten entry. There were many others just like it. It encapsulated something about the violence of hunger, exclusion, and marginality in this community:

*Died: September 18, 1985, Luíza Alvez da Conceição, female, brown, aged thirty-three, unmarried*
Cause of Death: Dehydration, acute malnutrition

Observations: The deceased left behind no living children and no possessions. She was illiterate. She did not vote.

I was later able to determine that she died in the municipal hospital, that she was carried to the graveyard in a borrowed coffin, and that she was put in her shallow grave wrapped only in a worn hospital sheet. Within the year her remains, too, would be exhumed, and she, too, would be permanently disappeared.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the anonymity and disposability of their bodies and their lives made more explicitly clear to the peasant-workers of Bom Jesus than in the symbolic violence directed to their remains in the municipal cemetery, a social space that in microcosm reproduces the social and political structure of the community. The bodies of their loved ones accumulate in unmarked graves and in the municipal graveyard's bone depository, while the wealthy and middle classes build family vaults and elaborate marble tombstones that are privately owned, permanent, and inviolate, even when fallen out of use for many generations.

"It's bad enough for the poor who die in the hospital," said Seu Jaime, a hospital orderly and servant. "Their families have to come and pick them up and wake them at home. But those who are hurt on the highways or on the plantations and are brought here without any documents, coitados, they are just thrown outside on the stones in the back of the hospital. After a few days the prefeito's men come with the bandeja [a tin-lined coffin that is returned to the prefeitura] and take the body to the cemetery. They won't even have a grave. Those who are too poor to buy their own plot, and all the 'unknowns' are put together in the same place. Their bones are all mixed together." Lordes interrupted Jaime to ask anxiously, "Do you think that Jesus will be able to sort all of them out on the day of the Last Judgment?"

Although the bodies of the poor have, as Thomas Laqueur (1983:109) noted, always been treated with less care and buried with less splendor than the bodies of the rich, it is only in fairly recent times—if Laqueur is correct, between 1750 and 1850—that the idea of a proper and well-appointed burial came to signify the sum total of a person's social worth (see also Aries 1974; Urbain 1978; Rodrigues 1983). With the advent of bourgeois society and values, death—rather than the great "equalizer" of men and women—became the ultimate discriminator. Eventually, the social distinctions that separated the living were brought to bear on the architecture and geography concerning the disposal of the dead.

The social history of the Brazilian funeral begins in the colonial plantation casas grandes of the Northeast with the extravagant displays of splendor with which the feudal patriarchs and their family members were put to rest. The masters and mistresses of the great estates were buried in "silks, religious robes, decorations, medals; the babies all painted with rouge, clusters of blond hair, angel's wings; the virgins dressed in white, a garland of orange flowers and sky-blue ribbons" (Freyre 1986a:440). Their remains were placed in family vaults in private chapels, with their portraits kept in glass cases in the sanctuary among the images of Christ and the saints. Votive lamps and fresh-cut flowers were offered to both. A dead woman's braids or an infant's curls might be preserved in the chapel as if they were holy relics. Freyre interpreted these practices as a cult of the dead that put him in mind of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Of course, for the plantation slaves there were no elaborate funerals, and their bodies were simply wrapped in palm leaf mats and buried in the space reserved for slaves in the small graveyard outside the chapel.

By the mid-nineteenth century the competing domains of casa and rua, the world of the traditional rural aristocracy and of the modern town, came into direct conflict over the treatment and disposal of the dead. The traditional elite of the feudal casa grande began to lose out to the new, liberal, progressive bourgeoisie of the town, which sought to "modernize" and "rationalize" all aspects of social life, including burial customs. This new class drew for support on the rhetoric of medicine and public hygiene. The traditional customs of burying the elite in partly open vaults and catacombs in family chapels or churchyards and the disposal of the urban poor in pauper trenches were both condemned as unsanitary. "How long can the dead continue to enjoy the unhappy perogative of poisoning the lives of living persons?" asked Jose Martins da Cruz Joaamin righthorically on the occasion of the installation of the Medical Society of Rio in 1830 (cited in Freyre 1986a:439). At about this time the first cemeteries for slaves, paupers, and heretics were founded by the Misericordia, but a public health report prepared by the Medical Society of Rio de Janeiro (1832) considered these charitable ventures to constitute a veritable public health hazard. The corpses "were thrown in heaps in a huge trench...barely covered over with earth, the layers of earth being poorly pressed down...so that the bones would come out with the ligaments and membranes still clinging to them" (cited in Freyre 1986a:441, n. 92).

Eventually, even the remains of the elite that were once preserved as precious family relics came to be viewed as dangerous sources of contamination through the emissions of foul airs and gasses called "miasmas" that were believed to cause sickness when inhaled. And so new municipal codes were passed that regulated the disposal of the dead, introducing death certificates, mandating the construction of walled public cemeteries, and in
general transferring power and control from religious to secular authorities. Every município was ordered to construct a public cemetery enclosed by high, white walls at the outskirts of town (see Rodrigues 1983).

These new cemeteries were truly "public," and all citizens—including heretics, paupers, and unbaptized babies—were to be buried there under law. Forced to rub shoulders with the public, the wealthy and middle classes sought to distinguish their resting places from those of the common lot. Those who could afford to do so purchased private spaces within the public cemetery for the construction of elaborate family catacombs reminiscent of the plantation mausoleums. Those who could not afford either a catacomb or a modest individual grave were buried at the expense and at the mercy of the município. In this way the cemetery became the final arbiter of one's individual, family, and social identity.

The Good Death: "Six Feet Under and a Coffin"

This grave you lie in, measured by hand, represents the small space you occupied in life. But it's a good-sized grave, neither wide nor deep. It's all you'll ever get from this plantation. It's a large enough grave for your small bit of flesh. When it's a pauper's grave, you can't complain.

João Cabral de Melo Neto, "Morte e Vida da Severina" (as recited by Dona Amor, Bom Jesus da Mata)

And so the cemetery became a mirror world, a symbolic representation of the social world that the dead had presumably left behind. And the image of the handsome burial (a bom enterro) came to play on the popular consciousness against the abhorrent image of the "ugly" or mean burial, the enterro dos pobres, the "poor people's funeral." "It is to die," said Dona Amor, her voice quivering with emotion, "no pior desprezo no mundo, in the greatest contempt in the world."

The good burial was equated in the popular mind with the idea of the "happy death," one that liberated the soul from its wretched sufferings on earth. No matter how mean or miserable the conditions of one's earthly existence, the "good" Catholic who lived and died in the state of grace was guaranteed a "good death" and an eventual reunion with Jesus, Mary, and the saints. But even the best Catholics might die with some debts to be squared with the Almighty, requiring a period of "detention" in purgatory. All the more important, then, to be served a "decent" burial in a well-marked grave where loved ones could light a candle and offer a prayer to help liberate the soul from purgatory. But the proper burial also had its social referents as well, and to "go into the hole without a coffin" represented the worst kind of social stigma: "Abandoned in life, abandoned in death," again noted Dona Amor.

But before the people of the Alto had come to live in the rua, they lived and died in the mata and were usually buried there as well. Dona Xiquinha, a local "praying woman" (i.e., an older woman who cures minor ailments by prayer) who also prepares the dead for burial, explained how it was when she was a little girl living on an engenho.

"In the old days, the dead were put back into their redes [hammocks] when they died. In those days it took only two people to carry a man to his grave: one took hold of the cords in front, and one took the cords at the other end. For an adult the rede was closed, the sides were thrown together, but if it was a moça or a moço [i.e., virgin, male or female, young or old, as in the case of some elderly women], the rede would be open because they had no sins to hide. Babies always had open redes, of course, and their eyes were left open because soon they would be able to see God. Those who could would put their loved ones no chão [into the ground] wrapped up in their redes. But if the need was great, the body would have to go into the ground wrapped only in a sheet, and the rede would go back to the family, poor things."

The rural people of the zona da mata always struggled to assure for themselves and their loved ones a decent burial, and eventually this came to mean, in the words of Zé de Souza, a founding member of the Peasant Leagues, "six feet under and a coffin of one's own" (de Castro 1969:7). This slogan became the rallying cry of the Peasant Leagues, which adopted one of their first projects a rural mobilization around the burial needs of the dead: land rights for the dead, rather than for the living. "Before the leagues," Zé de Souza explained, "when one of us died the coffin was lent by the município, and after the body had been carried to the common grave, the coffin went back to the municipal warehouse." He continued, "Today the [Peasant] League pays for the funeral, and the coffin is buried with the dead. That's what the League did for us, meu filho" (cited in de Castro 1969:12).

In fact, funeral societies have been common in Northeast Brazil throughout this century. They were formed in rural communities so that people might avoid the humiliation of a poor people's burial. The horror of the pauper's funeral in which the coffin stopped at the mouth of the grave
remained strong among the people of the Alto. The travesty of the poor people's burial was the supreme humiliation, a mortification that seemed to the peasants to carry over into eternity.

One of the reasons for the relative popularity of Seu Félix, an otherwise much criticized mayor, was his inauguration of the municipal coffin factory and coffin distribution program in the 1960s, which local radicals had satirized as "a baby for every hovel and a coffin for every baby." Until that time, however, there was only the despised boxeiró, the undorned and unlined (hence, "chin-knocker" or "jaw-breaker") borrowed municipal coffin, or a more elaborate charity coffin donated by some local benefactor. Dona Clarice recalled the latter custom well: "When I was a girl there were always a few rich patrons in Bom Jesus who would request in their wills that they be buried like paupers in the ground and that their own coffins be left at the cemetery and loaned out to those poor souls who had no one to bury them. It was a blessing for the poor to be carried to the cemetery in grand style, but it was still shameful to have to dump the body in the ground without its coffin. Today, thanks to our 'godfather,' Seu Félix, we all go into the ground, each with his own, proper box. Only babies are sometimes buried without a coffin because their parents think that a coffin is wasteful for a little angel."

Anxiety about a "good burial" was keen enough to appear as a common theme in Alto children's drawings as well as in their TAT stories. When ten-year-old Giomar was asked to draw a panoramic scene of Bom Jesus, he sketched the three shantytown hills that encircle the town, but he neglected to draw the "downtown" of Bom Jesus. Instead, he drew the municipal graveyard located on the outskirts of town. Similarly, in his response to card 13MF (the picture of a man turning away from a partly nude woman in bed), Giomar told this story: "This man in crying because 'his woman' just died. He's worried about a lot of things. He is wondering if he can find enough money to bury her good."

I wondered how so young a boy had come to be so preoccupied with death and burial. It did not take very much probing to learn that Giomar's father had been shot by nameless people as they were breaking into his mother's house one night. The município had sent for the body, and it was buried in a "charity" coffin. "But in a pretty spot under a mango tree," Giomar assured me, fiercely wiping the tears from his dirt-stained face. Later that day Giomar and I went to visit his father's grave, but when we got there we could not locate the place where he had been buried. "They even took the mangueira away," said Giomar angrily. On our way home Giomar "slipped" me to scale the wall of a private, enclosed garden. He refused to respond to my calls. He was "picking mangoes," he told me. I made the Brazilian gesture

Dona Amor: "If our sweet Savior could come into this world resting in hay, my sweet mother can leave this world in a pauper coffin lined with paper."

for washing my hands of the matter and went home thinking about the boy's anger in the cemetery.

Laqueur wrote that in nineteenth-century England "the pauper funeral had become perhaps the dominant representation of vulgarity, of the possibility of falling irrevocably from the grace of society... It was an image which worked on the poor... who would sell their beds out from under them sooner than have parish funerals" (1983:125). Indeed, much the same could be said of the moradores of the Alto. Black Irene, for example, admitted that the only thing capable of forcing her back into domestic service for her bad boss, Dona Carminha, was her even greater fear of dying a pauper. "Even a bad and abusive boss," said Irene, "must still, in the end, act like a mother and bury her miserable child. Yes, I would go back to my patrão and die with her if there was no other solution in the end."

But it was Dona Amor, herself nearing ninety years, who perhaps had the most to say on the subject of the good burial, and she took up the better part of a long rainy afternoon in 1988 to record for me, in her grand oratorical style, the story of the death and burial of her mother. What follows is a much reduced and edited transcription of that narrative.

"My mother, may Jesus and His angels embrace her, lost a bunch of children. Only a few of us survived. We suffered a lot in growing up, until
everyone left and there was only me working to keep my mother housed and fed in her old age. We went on and on like this until finally one day, I walked out of the house and I prayed, ‘My Heavenly Father, excuse the weakness of my flesh for saying this to You—if I sin it is only because of the misery I am living in—but if I have to live only to see my old mother slowly die of hunger, I would prefer her to die now. The future is in Your hands. You have the power. Do with me whatever it is I deserve, for I am a miserable sinner.’ I cried some more, and I said, ‘Take her or take me; take her or me. It’s in Your hands. But as a matter of fact, if You take her, it would actually be a little bit better for me because I am still strong and I can work for a living. She, poor thing, can no longer live without me.’

“Well, it turned out that it was only a week before my mother suffered the terrible fall that was to claim her life. . . . She called me to her side and said, ‘My love, I am not going to escape death this time, so don’t forget about the little brass box where I have hidden away the money for my funeral.’ She wanted me to go and order her coffin and her mortaia [burial clothes and coffin decorations]. ‘My God,’ I thought, ‘what will I do now?’ You see, my little saint, I had to spend a long time nursing Mama after the fall, and during that time I could not work. So from time to time I had to take out a few notes and coins from the brass box. I took out only what was needed, not a penny more. I could recognize the value of the bills from their colors. After all, was I going to let her and me die of hunger, querida, knowing all along that there was money set aside?

“I was always a long-suffering woman, and all the suffering I accepted with goodwill as sent by God. It often fell to me to take care of sick people on the Alto, not only my mother but anyone who needed a prayer recited or a sponge bath. All these things I did with pleasure and satisfaction. But I have to confess, I did take that money without telling my mother.

“When mother’s end grew near, my brothers and sisters came home from the mata to be with her. While I was out she told them, ‘It gives me some satisfaction to know that the money for my burial is carefully put away. Before I die I would like to see my coffin.’ When I came home my sisters asked me, ‘Where is mama’s money for her funeral?’ ‘Well, let’s get it down and see,’ I said. When we opened the box there were only three or four mil reis [worth about $2]. My sisters accused me of hiding the money to keep for myself after mother died. Then I explained what had happened, but they refused to believe me.

“I felt very bad after this, and I walked the streets all that afternoon. When I came home my mother was very, very weak. I said to her, ‘Mama, I am not going to be seeing you very much any more.’ And we both cried.

And all I could think of was that my mother would die without anything put aside for her burial. But I lied to her: ‘Don’t worry, Mãe. I will go down into the street and order your funeral things.’ ‘That’s a good girl,’ she said. My mother was a simple person. It never would have entered her head that I could have spent the money from her special brass box.

“I went to my old boss’s house. ‘What is it?’ he said. ‘Has your mother died?’

‘Not yet,’ I said, ‘but she is at the portals of death, and I’m here to borrow the money I need so I can arrange her funeral.’

‘I don’t have any money here,’ he said. Imagine that! And he was the manager of a big bank! But he said, ‘Just take this check, and with it you can buy what you need.’ Well, minha santa, ignorant race that I am, did I understand anything about bank checks? I thought my patron was tricking me, and so I took the check from him, but outside I tore it up and threw it away. Before I left the house of my patron, his wife said to me, ‘Now run off quickly to the coffin shop, and pick out everything that you need.’ But I thought to myself, ‘How could I ever do that with my mother still alive in her bed? God deliver me!’

“On the way home I was full of agony. What was going to happen to me after my mother died? Who would be left to worry about how I went into the ground? I thought of my unmarried cousin who died a pauper no pior desprezo no mundo, in the worst kind of neglect and disregard. How much worse off was myself, who had nothing and no one left in the world!

“Finally the night arrived when my mother died in my arms, just like a little baby. She didn’t weigh very much anymore. When the end finally came, I was calm. God finally brought some peace into my heart, and I decided that I would make the best of it. So I made up a good fire of twigs, and I sent a neighbor’s child to borrow a plastic pan. Imagine! I had to wash my mother with a borrowed basin. Excuse me for telling you, but I washed every part of her body. I washed her gown with nice hot water. Straightened her up and warmed up her feet, and I combed her hair. I even put a little cologne on her head. I took out her own best clothes, which I had washed, mended, and ironed, and I dressed her up. Then I wrapped her up nice and tight in her covers. I did everything without the help of a single person.

“I left her in the bed, and I went to look for someone to help me move her out into the front room. As my luck would have it, there was a gravedigger’s apprentice who was passing along the street. ‘Hey, hey,’ a neighbor called to him. ‘Go inside that house because Amor’s mother has died and she needs help bringing her bed into the front room.’

“The boy thought that my neighbor was making fun of him because he
worked at the cemetery, and so he came into the house full of jokes. Well, he was plenty surprised to see my mother lying there all right! But he was a good boy, and he helped me move her, and he sat up with me until very late that night.

"I was waiting for the coffin to arrive. I had sent for one from the old folks home run by the Vicentinos. It was very late by the time the assistant came carrying the coffin on his head up the hill. And the shameless boy greeted me saying, ‘Come and look at the piece of crap the Vicentinos have sent you!’"

"Porcaria, nothing!’ I replied. He was talking about my mother’s coffin, and I told him that anything the Vicentinos sent us was good. But he insisted that it was a piece of rubbish because it was a charity coffin, decorated with paper and not with fabric and ribbons.

‘Mother’s coffin has nothing wrong with it,’ I said. ‘It is just the way she wanted it to be. Didn’t she tell me before she died that she wanted to be buried the same as my own father had? And his coffin was just like this one. So I am content. If our sweet Savior could come into this world in a manger lined with hay, then my mother can surely leave this world in a coffin lined with paper!’

"The boy said, ‘Well, is she going to be buried in her old tattered clothes, then?’ At this I began to me endoidar [go mad]. ‘No,’ I thought to myself, ‘I can’t put her into the ground with her old, patched clothes.’ So I told him to wait, that the mortalha was coming. I ran to my sister-in-law and I said, ‘Hey, there, do you have five mil reis to loan me until tomorrow?’ ‘I have,’ she said. ‘Well, give it to me then so that I can bury my mother properly. With the money in my hand I ran to a woman who cut out the cloth to put in the coffin, and she quickly sewed some new clothes for my mother. She even came and helped me dress her in the coffin.

‘Finally, everything was just right. But my brothers and sisters said that I had fooled everyone and that I still had my mother’s funeral money hidden away. Poor things! Poor things! God above forgive them! God Almighty save them! For I am the victor! I am still walking around on this earth, and long ago they have left it!’

I did not ask Amor how she would be buried or whether she had a nest egg with her funeral money squirreled away. But I do know that Amor, like the other moradores of the Alto do Cruzeiro, does not remember the dead—not even her own mother—by visiting the local cemetery. There is no point in doing so, not even on November 2, All Souls’ Day, the universal Day of the Dead in Latin America. The local cemetery, like Potter’s Field in New York City, is a place to be avoided. It stands as a forceful reminder of the fragile inexistência of the poor, their socially constituted being and nothingness.

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Pauper Funerals, Misplaced Bodies, and the State

Today in the small, compact, walled enclosure of the municipal cemetery of Bom Jesus, the conflicting social realities of casa, rua, and mata—the colliding worlds of the feudal casa grande, of the “streets” of the modern town, and of the peasant countryside—and their accompanying definitions of person, individual, and anonymous nonentity are graphically reproduced. In the municipal cemetery of Bom Jesus one is immediately struck by its density. At the entrance is the vila nobre, as Casorte refers to the aristocratic section of the graveyard with its huge, white stone mausoleums, family homes that are miniature reproductions of the plantation society’s casas grandes. Here the coffins rest on cement benches above ground, the preferred form of burial in Bgm Jesus, as throughout Brazil.

People in Bom Jesus have a marked fear, as they say, of “going into dirt” or “going into a hole” and being eaten by bugs, and so they prefer above-ground entombment. They also fear being buried alive. These fears are shared with the people of the Alto. Dona Xiquinha, the elderly praying woman of the Alto who prepared bodies for burial, offers, “Those who can afford to, have their own catacombs. Nobody wants to go into the hole, into the dirt, to be eaten by insects. But the poor, cortados, they have no choice.”

On the fear of being buried alive Xiquinha had this to say: “We became afraid after the time of the cholera, the sickness that took so many people there were hardly any living left. They buried so many and so quickly that they even buried some people who were still alive. So for this reason we like to leave the coffin unsealed, and we want to have a velório [wake] for one night. It is prohibited to bury a person on the same day he dies, but infants can go into the ground right away.”

Some of the mausoleums are constructed to look like family chapels complete with altar and votive lamp. With the passage of time the disintegrated remains are swept into an urn or pottery container and placed to the side, making room for a new occupant. The family remains are treated collectively but are never removed from the family vault. They are the property of the family. With the transformation of rural society and the consolidation of family plantations into large industrial sugar mills and refining factories, many of the original big families of the sugar estates have left the município, and their family vaults have fallen into a state of disuse and disrepair, thereby projecting the image of aristocratic families now fallen on hard times.

Leaving the vila nobre, one comes on the graveyard’s rua burguesa, a representation of the modern town with a paved street alongside of which are individual graves with personalized tombstones. At once the traditional
The Bone Depository: “They have counted my hands and feet; they have numbered all my bones.”

notion of the “person” gives way to the modern notion of the “individual” freed from familialistic constraints. These new marble niches are also built above ground, and some carry air vents.

Beyond the vilas nobres and the ruas burguesas of the cemetery lies the mata, the field where small mounds of earth cover the new graves of the anonymous poor, which are marked, if at all, by small white wooden crosses and decorated with stalks of corn rather than with fresh or plastic flowers. No individual or family names grace these graves. Anonymous in life, they carry their inexistência (as Casorte puts it) with them into the grave. Into the looking glass that is the funeral space, the poor and humble classes are destined to be unreflected.

For the poor of Bom Jesus and of the Alto do Cruzeiro, who are buried at the public’s expense, their graves are not their own. Because of overcrowding, they can expect to keep their spaces only for a year for an adult, six months or less for a child. Pauper graves are shallow—two feet is common for a child—and when the site is needed again, the order is given to exhume the remains. The partly disintegrated coffin, made of plywood and cardboard, is tossed over the west walls of the cemetery, where it is burned. What remains (“hair and all”), says Casorte, making an evil face, is tossed into the deep well that is called the depósito dos ossos.

The rapidity of the transfer from shallow, individual grave to collective bone depository is understood by all as a necessary (i.e., a hygienic) evil, one
that entails a certain violation of the bodies of the deceased. “It’s not ugly,” Casorte says, trying to persuade me to come closer to the bone well, to overcome my reluctance to “examine” its contents as he pulls off the stone cover to expose the multitude of the anonymous dead of Bom Jesus. “They have counted my hands and my feet”—the words of the Easter psalm returns to me—“they have numbered all my bones.” My eye catches sight of cloth, and I turn away. “Socks,” Casorte says, “socks last forever. It’s because they’re synthetic.” And I think back to little Mercea and her bare feet.

“Shall I jump in?” Casorte offers teasingly. And then he pulls out a small fibula that must have belonged to a very young person. “Enough, Casorte,” I say, and we return to his “office” at the back of the cemetery to go over his books to see if his burial figures matched the deaths recorded that year at the cartório civil. I ask Casorte how many of the 162 children buried in the cemetery in the first six months of 1989 (it was July of that year) were “bourgeois” children, falling into his preferred usage. Only two babies, he replies, were not buried as paupers that year. The others would all soon join the multitude of skeletal angels in the bone depository. “Is that any way to treat angels?” I ask, for we have both descended into a devilish sort of gallows humor, united by our politics and by our anger.

As we speak a middle-aged, working-class woman raps on the open door of the office. She enters apologetically, explaining that this is her fifth attempt to talk to Casorte about a “personal matter” of great importance. She asks to purchase the space where her father and husband are both buried so that no one could “mess” with their remains. She adds, “I don’t want anyone to arrancar eles [drag them up, as though by the roots].” Casorte is gentle with the woman and asks her to fill out a form, reassuring her that her wishes can be arranged. She leaves, with relief evident on her careworn face.

As Casorte accompanies me out to the front gate of the cemetery, he offers to show me the antique bate-queixo or quebra-queixo (jawbreaker), as the old borrowed pauper coffin is called because of the way the bones rattled on its hard surface without so much as a piece of felt or cloth under the body. But just then Seu Cristavão, a local coffin maker, appears. Sweating profusely and mopping his face, he stops to lean on a tombstone. Next to him he places a tiny child’s coffin that he has been carrying in the crook of his arm. The shoe-box-size coffin is decorated in a dark blue fabric, with silver paper stars glued across the top. “It looks like the American flag,” quips Casorte, and then he adds, “Here’s another little angel going into the pit.” “But where,” I asked, “was the procession of the angels? Sometimes, Casorte explains, the mother or father will pay Seu Cristavão or another owner of a casa funerário to deliver the coffin for them. And once in a while a cab driver will “deliver” a baby in his or her coffin as a favor to the mother, who was,
perhaps, too ill to arrange a proper funeral. "But the saddest thing of all," he says, "is to see a matuto, dressed in his one good suit, arrive from the country in the back of a hired cab, with the baby coffin resting on his knees." Seu Cristavão and I have crossed paths on many other occasions. "Why the pesquisas [research]" the coffin maker taunts. "Just put down that they all died of hunger." I promise to quote him.

I return the following morning to complete the count of child burials for 1989. Casorte is late, and while I am waiting for him at the front gates, a municipal truck pulls up quickly, and two stocky young men jump out of the cab, slamming its doors. They immediately engage the disabled gravedigger in a mock fist fight and then ask him to run and get the bandeja (serving plate), a euphemism for the tin coffin that is used to pick up and deliver unidentified bodies. "This one," says the older of the two men, "is a real mess, a morte desastrada," the victim of a "violent assassination." His remains had been found in the fields of an engenho outside the town. He had been shot and mutilated. The body had lain unclaimed for two days in the "mortuary" of the local hospital. The mayor now requested the body, which was "already beginning to offend the hospital workers," be brought to the cemetery and kept there for another few days. If by the weekend no one showed up to claim it, the judge would give the bodies for it to be buried as a desconhecido, an "unknown person."

"Is it possible," I ask, "that no one really knows who the man was?" The municipal workers look away, offering no reply. Later, Casorte explains that with assassinations like these, in which no one knows exactly what is involved, the relatives and friends are afraid to show their faces or to have anything to do with the body. "They are afraid"—and here Casorte brings the conversation to a hurried conclusion—"that they could be the next ones marked."

The Public Morgue / Bureau of Missing and Disappeared Persons

But what the moradores of the Alto fear most of all is the police summons to appear in Recife at the ML to identify the body of a loved one who met a violent or precipitous end. Here the bodies of the unknown, the unregistered, and the pauperized rubber with the bodies of the assassinated, the murdered, and the disappeared. Of the two—the unknown and the violently killed—the latter are more stigmatized because theirs were "sudden deaths," mortes de repente, and by definition "bad deaths" as well. People say of them that they died alone, sem dizer a Jesus, "without calling on Jesus."

As Casorte says, it takes a considerable amount of courage to appear in the morgue of the local hospital, the holding space in the back of the municipal cemetery, or the dreaded cavernous underworld of the ML in Recife to identify and claim a lost, unknown, or disappeared body. It is not a job for the faint of heart or the weak of stomach. Among the moradores of the Alto do Cruzeiro it is a job for women, for wives and mothers in particular.

Elena Morena did not want to go to the ML for a second time when notified by her sister in August 1989. Elena rocked back and forth on her little stool with her arms crossed and beat her fists against her hard, small breasts. The tears rolled down her cheeks, but not a word escaped from lips pressed together so tightly they seemed to lose all their color. Two years before Elena's husband had been murdered by local policemen. "In uniform," she said. They came to Elena's door in the dead of night, dragged her husband, Sérgio, from the house, and murdered him, dumping his mutilated remains on a country road. A few days later more police officers appeared with photos, asking Elena to identify the body as it was when it was found, and they carried the collapsing, grieving woman to the morgue, where she was forced to make the identification in person. She was given no explanation for the assassination by the police, but it was widely rumored on the Alto do Cruzeiro that Sérgio was a thief.

Sérgio was, in fact, a local guard, a vigia chosen by the delegacia of Bom Jesus to police his immediate vicinity near the top of the Alto. He was murdered within a few days of having given up guard duty to work for himself. Sérgio was not the first vigia to die on the Rua da Cruz of the Alto in 1989. He had come into his position following the murder of the previous vigia during an argument with some off-duty policemen on the street at the base of the hill where pineapples were sold at Saturday feira. The shots could be heard halfway up the Alto.

After Elena reported the murder to the judge of Bom Jesus, demanding justice but merely the widow's pension that had been denied her, police harassment of the family continued. Elena began to fear for the safety of Jorge, her eldest son. She urged Jorge to take up residence with her sister, who lived in a poor neighborhood in Recife. On a quiet Tuesday night, just a few days after Jorge had moved to Recife, he went to a corner stand to buy a Coke and talk with some of the local boys. Two men rushed up to him, hit him across the head, and shot him twice in the back. They left him lying in the street. Within minutes children and stray dogs formed an agitated circle around him. Jorge was dead before the ambulance arrived.

As soon as her sister sent word, Elena rushed to the city to identify and claim her son's body, which meant another descent into the hades of the ML. Elena shuddered in the telling: "It is a place, Nancí, that no human wants to
enter, not even once in her life. But two times..." Her one consolation was that her friends had taken up a collection so that Elena could get the body from the morgue and back to Bom Jesus for a proper burial, one fitting a handsome youth, the joy, she said, of her "old" age. Elena was forty-two at the time.

"And what would have happened if you hadn’t the money?"

"Those who can pay for the burial get to take the body home with them. Those who can’t, lose it."

"Where does it go?"

"The doctors get it, and they can take from it what they want."

"And the rest?"

"Who knows what they do with the bones? Maybe the urubus [vultures] get them. This is the fate of the poor, Nanci. Nem donos do corpo deles, eles estão [They don’t even own their own bodies]."

It is no coincidence that the Brazilian filmmaker Marcel Camus retold the Orpheus legend around the magical disappearance of Orpheus’s beautiful lover, Euridice, during carnavalesque celebrations on a hillside shantytown, a favela, of Rio de Janeiro. In the 1959 masterpiece Black Orpheus (Orfeu Negro), Orfeu searches frantically for his "disappeared" lover amid the frenzied crush of Rio’s streets during the four days of the festival. He is directed to the Department of Missing Persons on the thirteenth floor of a modern high-rise building. But, of course, during carnavalesque the corridors are deserted, except for a minor clerk—poor, black, and illiterate—who is sweeping up pieces of shredded and discarded paper. Confetti? Reports of missing persons?

"Is this the Missing Persons Department?" Orfeu asks anxiously.

"It is," replies the old man, "but I have never seen a missing person here."

And he opens the door to an office that is stacked with papers.

"Here are your missing persons. You see? Nothing but paper. Fifteen floors of it, and all for nothing. Can you read? I can’t, but you may look through them if you like. But if you ask me, you’ll never find a lost person in papers. That’s where they get lost forever. . . . Do you think that papers are ever sorry for a man?"

From the Missing Persons Bureau, Orfeu goes to a Xangô meeting to contact his dead lover through spirit mediums. He fails, and from there he must go to the public morgue, where, like Elena Morena, Black Irene, and many other women of the Alto do Cruzeiro who have had to face the same, he is met by a cold, unfeeling functionary who tries to dissuade Orfeu from carrying the body of his loved one away.

"You know a body is always useful for science. And if you just left it here, it would save you a lot of money."

Orfeu roughly pushes the functionary aside and kisses the cold lips of his beloved Euridice, who is lying on a stone slab among the anonymous dead still in their carnaval costumes, here in the underworld of Rio.

These brief, potent scenes evoke, even thirty years later, some key themes of shantytown life: the anxious, ontological insecurity of the favelados and their worst fears—separation, loss, disappearance, and violent, inexplicable physical assault on the body. Camus also captured the images of an indifferent bureaucracy that turns a deaf ear to the cries of the people, transforming their misery into mountains of paper that are discarded and swept away by the illiterate custodian to whom the words are meaningless.

Postscript

On the last day of the liberation theology missions in mid-August 1989, on the evening of the ritual bonfire into which effigies and images of the "social sins" of the community were thrown and burned, the Alto women whose husbands or adult sons had disappeared were called forward. Tentatively, a half dozen women made their way to the front of the makeshift altar under the still empty gaze of the crucifix of O Cruzeiro. One of the women was Black Irene, whose scream on the night that the men came to take away her eldest and favorite son, Nego De, was heard up and down the length of the Alto and all along the Rua da Cruz. It is said to reverberate there still.

But on this night Irene was silent, stunned by her own daring in coming forward to make her dangerous loss public. The simple prayers recited, an Ave Maria, a Pãe Nosso, the deeds silently recorded, the people of the Alto returned to their homes, mulling these events over in their hearts.

Later that same night a little street urchin, a moleque known to everyone on the Alto as Pitomba (after a fruit he frequently stole and then resold in the marketplace) disappeared from the steps of the church where he normally slept. The next morning it was said that someone reported seeing his body, eviscerated and tossed outside the west wall of the cemetery, in the place where the partly disintegrated coffins of recently exhumed infants were buried. The Franciscan nuns of the chapel of Santa Lúcia, who occasionally ministered to the street children of Bom Jesus, fervently prayed that the boy's itinerant soul might be received, indeed welcomed, by his heavenly Father.

But the boy's body, like that of the missing Cristo, was never recovered, and the story remains unverified.