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 Lordes," 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-strewn 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 Lordes'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 absently from one to other, until Biu, Lordes'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 gather 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 son 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 had 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 shovel 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 susto *into a smirking grin, is not really always laughing. He is outside my door, calling softly, "Nancí, oh, Dona Nancí." 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* mortalha, *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 untouched 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 (Tonieta), 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 Tonieta 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, Tonieta, 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.

Hospital *carnaval.*

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 sprung 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

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 stigmata are generative themes of this book, my own stigmatizing origins in the field seem appropriate.)

Ours was the first group sent into the northeastern (*Nordestino*) 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 Pernambucan 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

Panorama: Bom Jesus da Mata.

Antônio was happy to return to his native Nordeste. But Nailza, a part Tupi-Guarani Indian *cabocla* 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 (piperizine, 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-*

dores 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 politica* 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 groped 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 Nancí," 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 municipal 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 wearing 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 Tonieta and Nailza, worked as *lavadeiras*, taking in the dirty laundry of middle-class, and even working-class, families able to pay a pittance 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."

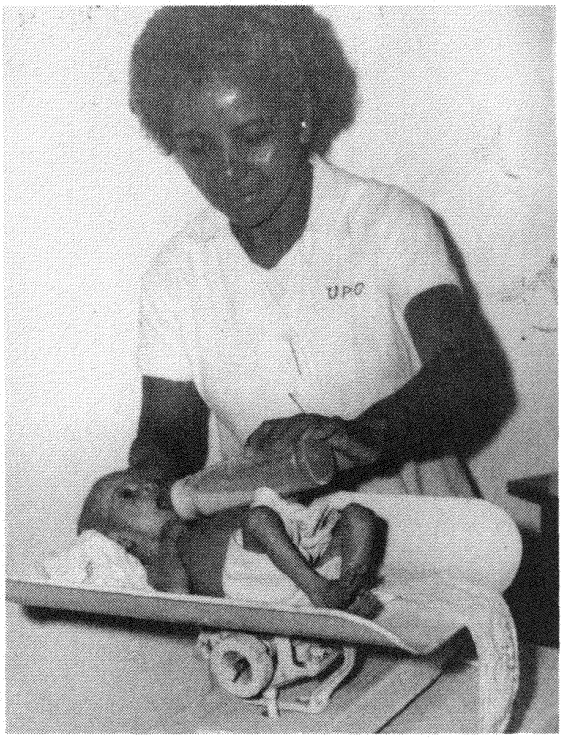
It was this confrontation with sickness, hunger, and death (especially child death) that most assaulted the sensibilities and the conscience of a comfortable-enough outsider and that shaped first my community development work and, many years later, my anthropological research. In the early conversations with Alto women in their homes and in the first open and

Mutirão: building the creche of UPAC, 1965.

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 center, 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 included. Although the military could never substantiate the accusations, the shantytown association was effectively crippled. Large meetings were prohibited.

Nonetheless, the creche opened on July 16, 1966, with some thirty infants, babies, and toddlers and some twenty Alto women participating in the cooperative. 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-



Mother and one of the first UPAC creche babies, 1966.

nition 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 bulgar 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

the creche and move off the Alto and away from Bom Jesus altogether. When she did so, the creche collapsed, and she herself was never seen nor heard from again. Her husband, Seu Teto, died several years later of alcoholism, loneliness, depression, and severe malnutrition.

I introduce this brief history of my first encounter with the people of the Alto to show what these people, struggling constantly against almost impossible odds, are capable of and to indicate some of the political sources of their despair and their seeming paralysis of will. It should serve as something of a corrective to the very different picture of shantytown life that emerges in the following pages, more than twenty years later and following just as many years of political repression and economic madness in Brazil. I am referring to the great *folia/delírio* (mad folly) of the "economic miracle" years and to the disastrous consequences of Brazil's current $112 billion external debt and its effects on working-class *bairros* and rural and urban shantytowns in Brazil.

During this first encounter with Brazil and with the people of the Alto do Cruzeiro, I confess to viewing the occasional anthropologists I ran into as remote intellectuals, overly preoccupied with esoterica and largely out of touch with the practical realities of everyday life in Brazil. It was a humbling experience to read, many years later, Shepard Forman's *Raft Fishermen* (1970) and *The Brazilian Peasantry* (1975) and to discover how very much I had failed to see and understand about the society and culture of Northeast Brazil when, in Bom Jesus, I was so totally immersed in practical activities. Nevertheless, by the time I returned to Bom Jesus and the Alto do Cruzeiro more than fifteen years had elapsed, and it was anthropology, not political or community activism, that was the vehicle of my return. I came back not as Dona Nancí, *companheira,* but as Doutora Nancí, *antropóloga.* As for Lordes, Biu, and Tonieta, they joined my other former neighbors and coworkers in UPAC to become—and I fear there is no good word for it—key "informants," research "subjects," and assistants . . . at least initially.

I had postponed my appointment with Brazil because of conflicts that were both external and internal. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s Brazil became daily more steeped in a military dictatorship that came to rely on torture and threats of torture, imprisonment, and exile to coerce an appearance of popular consensus and to rid the country of its "dangerous" democrats and "subversives" (see Amnesty International 1988, 1990). Meanwhile, the United States maintained (with the exception of the Carter years) courteous and open relations with the brutal dictators, who were described to the U.S. public as enemies of communism and therefore friends of the United States. There was no way I would (or could) return under those conditions. It would not have been safe for the people of the Alto or for

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 expectable, 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 strands 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 Nancí, 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" *despachante* (an intermediary who expedites or hastens projects along) and remained very much "at their disposal." They turned me back into their image of "Dona Nancí." 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 *município.* Likewise, while I 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 *delírio 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 morality 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 *carnaval.* 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 extraordinary 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 ethical 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 concerns 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 ethnographer 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 possible. 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 understanding 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-oneself: "*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, Nancí. 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 tred 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,"[1] 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 *carnavelsco*, 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 woman 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 broken, 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 glumly 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 malaise 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 antropologá*, 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 experience 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 anthropologist 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 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 outrageously 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, contradiction, and absurdity. And so I am not afraid to speak and engage my Brazilian *companheiras* on 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 particular 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 their 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 ethnography 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, controlled, 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 Nancí engaging her Alto friends in a political debate on *nervos* at a base community meeting, later as the quirky anthropologist, Scheper-Hughes, engaging her colleagues in a theoretical discussion 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, sometimes "mutually interfering" levels (Clifford 1988b:117): as a book of voyage 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.