8 (M)Other Love

Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking

Maternal practices begin in love, a love which for most women is as intense, confusing, ambivalent, poignantly sweet as any they will experience.

Sara Ruddick (1980:344)

The following chapters are about culture, scarcity, and maternal thinking. They explore maternal beliefs, sentiments, and practices as these bear on child survival on the Alto do Cruzeiro. The argument builds on an earlier and controversial article I wrote on this topic (1985), which I have since restudied, rethought, and mulled over with the women of the Alto on three return field trips since 1987.[1] I trust I can do better justice to it than when I began. If, however, I cannot establish here some basis for empathy, for a shared understanding of sentiments and practices that seem so very different from our own and therefore so profoundly disturbing, I shall have failed. One difficulty is that over the years I have come to participate in the worldview expressed by these women, and their sentiments and practices now seem to me all too commonsensical and expected. I must struggle to recapture a sense of its initial "strangeness" so as to identify, at least initially, with the reader and his or her reluctance to accept a set of practices driven by an alternative womanly morality, one that will be experience-distant to a great many. It is a dilemma common to all ethnographic writing: how do we represent the other to the other? But here the stakes are very high indeed.

The subject of my study is love and death on the Alto do Cruzeiro, specifically *mother* love and *child* death. It is about the meanings and effects of deprivation, loss, and abandonment on the ability to love, nurture, trust, and have and keep faith in the broadest senses of these terms. It treats the individual and the personal as well as the collective and cultural dimensions of maternal practices in an environment hostile to the survival and well-being of mothers and infants. I argue that a high expectancy of child death is a powerful shaper of maternal thinking and practice as evidenced, in particular, in delayed attachment to infants sometimes thought of as temporary household "visitors." This detachment can be mortal at times, contributing

to the severe neglect of certain infants and to a "failure" to mourn the death of very young babies. I am *not* arguing that mother love, as we understand it, is deficient or absent in this threatened little human community but rather that its life history, its course, is different, shaped by overwhelming economic and cultural constraints. And so I trace the gradual unfolding of maternal love and attentive, "holding" care once the risk of loss (through chaotic and unpredictable early death) seems to have passed. This discussion is embedded in an examination of the cultural construction of emotions, and it attempts to overcome the distinctions between "natural" and "socialized" affects, between "deep" private feelings and "superficial" public sentiments, between conscious and unconscious emotional expressions. In its attempts to show how emotion is shaped by political and economic context as well as by culture, this discussion can be understood as a "political economy" of the emotions.[2]

A second goal of this discussion is rather more abstract and theoretical. It represents an attempt to forge a dialogue between competing views of maternal thinking and practice. My analysis and findings challenge the psychological infant attachment and maternal "bonding" theorists *and* those cultural feminists who argue for a singular conception of women's goals, interests, and moral visions. I am referring to those who emphasize an essentially "womanly" ethic and ethos of maternal responsiveness, attentiveness, and caring labor. In its most reductionist form this appears in the developmental and clinical literature on maternal "bonding" understood as a universal maternal script. In its more complex and "socialized" form it surfaces in the writings of those feminists who argue for a "poetics" of motherhood and for a specifically female moral voice and sensibility expressed in an "ethic of care." The latter, in attempting to recover the muted and marginalized voices of women, can paradoxically do violence to the different experiences and sensibilities of poor and Third World women whose moral visions may not conform to the feminist paradigm. In arguing for a common female ethic, the cultural feminist analysis can doubly marginalize poor women. Sara Ruddick, for example, has posited certain universal "interests that appear to govern maternal practice throughout the species" so as to make "mother love appear altogether natural" (1980: 347–348). Her persuasive writings on "maternal thinking" and "maternal practice" (Ruddick 1989) provide the touchstone for the following set of critical reflections.

Mother love is anything *other* than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments, and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced. In place of a poetics of motherhood, I refer to the pragmatics of motherhood, for, to paraphrase Marx, these shantytown

women create their own culture, but they do not create it just as they please or under circumstances chosen by themselves. Consequently, mother love is best bracketed and understood as (m)other loves. The following discussion obviously makes no claims to universality. Nor is it an argument for a "culture of poverty" addressed specifically to the situation of shantytown mothers and children. Although it does not surprise me to discover some resonances and resemblances with mothering practices at other times and places, it is to the particularities of the Brazilian situation that the following is addressed.[3] The women and children whose painful lives I dare to expose here are the end in and of themselves of my analysis.

What I discovered while working as a medic in the Alto do Cruzeiro during the 1960s was that while it was possible, and hardly difficult, to rescue infants and toddlers from premature death from diarrhea and dehydration by using a simple sugar, salt, and water solution (even bottled Coca-Cola worked fine in a pinch), it was more difficult to enlist mothers themselves in the rescue of a child they perceived as ill-fated for life or as better off dead. More difficult still was to coax some desperate young mothers to take back into the bosom of the family a baby they had already come to think of as a little winged angel, a fragile bird, or a household guest or visitor more than as a permanent family member. And so Alto babies "successfully" rescued and treated in the hospital rehydration clinic or in the creche and returned home were sometimes dead before I had the chance to make a follow-up house call. Eventually I learned to inquire warily before intervening: "Dona Maria, do you think we should try to save this child?" or, even more boldly, "Dona Auxiliadora, is this a child worth keeping?" And if the answer was no, as it sometimes was, I learned to keep my distance.

Later, I learned that the high expectancy of death and the ability to face death with stoicism and equanimity produced patterns of nurturing that differentiated those infants thought of as "thrivers" and as "keepers" from those thought of as born "already wanting to die." The survivors and keepers were nurtured, while the stigmatized or "doomed" infants were allowed to die *à míngua*, "of neglect." Mothers sometimes stepped back and allowed nature to take its course. This pattern I first (and rather unfortunately) labeled "ethnoeugenic selective neglect" (Scheper-Hughes 1984:540). Today I simply call it "mortal neglect." Both are unhappy terms, and it is little wonder that some critics have been offended by what they saw as a lapse in cultural relativism or as a failure of solidarity with my female "subjects." Claire Cassidy's (1980) earlier notion of "benign neglect" perhaps comes closer to the women's own perceptions of their actions. Nevertheless, translated to the North American context, "benign neglect" conjures up images of unkempt and unsupervised, yet otherwise happy and carefree, older street

urchins riding subway trains on hot summer nights in New York City. The mortally neglected infants and babies I am referring to here are often (although not always) prettily kept: washed, such hair as they have combed, and their emaciated little bodies dusted with sweet-smelling talcum powders. When they die, they usually do so with candles propped up in tiny waxen hands to light their way to the afterlife. At least some of these little "angels" have been freely "offered up" to Jesus and His Mother, although "returned" to whence they came is closer to the popular idiom.

Because of the difficult subject of this research, I am forced to create a pact with the reader. These are not "ordinary" lives that I am describing. Rather, they are often short, violent, and hungry lives. I am offering here a glimpse into *Nordestino* life through a glass darkly. Hence, the reading entails a descent into a Brazilian heart of darkness, and as it begins to touch on and evoke, as Peter Homans noted (1987), some of our worst fears and unconscious dreads about "human nature" and about mothers and babies in particular, the reader may feel righteous indignation. Why am I being served this? Conversely, what is an appropriate and respectful distance to take with the subjects of my inquiry, one that is neither so close as to violate their own sense of decorum or too distanced so as to render them the mere objects of anthropology's discriminating, sometimes incriminating, "gaze"? I begin, then as always, with stories (some of them stories within stories) because storytelling, intrinsic to the art of ethnography, offers the possibility of a personal, yet respectfully distanced, rendering of events from the "once upon a time" or "long ago and far away."

Lordes and Zezinho: The Ambiguities of Mother Love

In 1966 I was called on for a second time to help Lordes, my young neighbor, deliver a child, this one a fair and robust little tyke with a lusty cry. But while Lordes showed great interest in the newborn, she ignored Zé, who spent his days miserably curled up in a fetal position and lying on a piece of urine-soaked cardboard beneath his mother's hammock. The days passed and with Lordes's limited energy and attention given over to the newborn, Zezinho's days seemed numbered. I finally decided to intervene. In taking Zé away from Lordes and bringing him to the relative safety of the creche, I repeated the words that Alto women often used when deciding to rescue a *criança condenada* (condemned child) from a relative or neighbor. "Give me that child," I said, "for he'll never escape death in your house!" Lordes did not protest, but the creche mothers laughed at my efforts on behalf of such a hopeless case. Zezinho himself resisted the rescue with a perversity matching my own. He refused to eat, and he wailed pitifully whenever anyone approached

him. The creche mothers advised to leave Zezinho alone. They said that they had seen many babies like this one, and "if a baby *wants* to die, it *will* die." There was no sense in frustrating him so, for here was a child who was completely "lifeless," without any "fight" at all. His eyes were already sinking to the back of his head, a sign that he had already begun his journey into the next life. It was very wrong, the creche mothers warned, to fight with death.

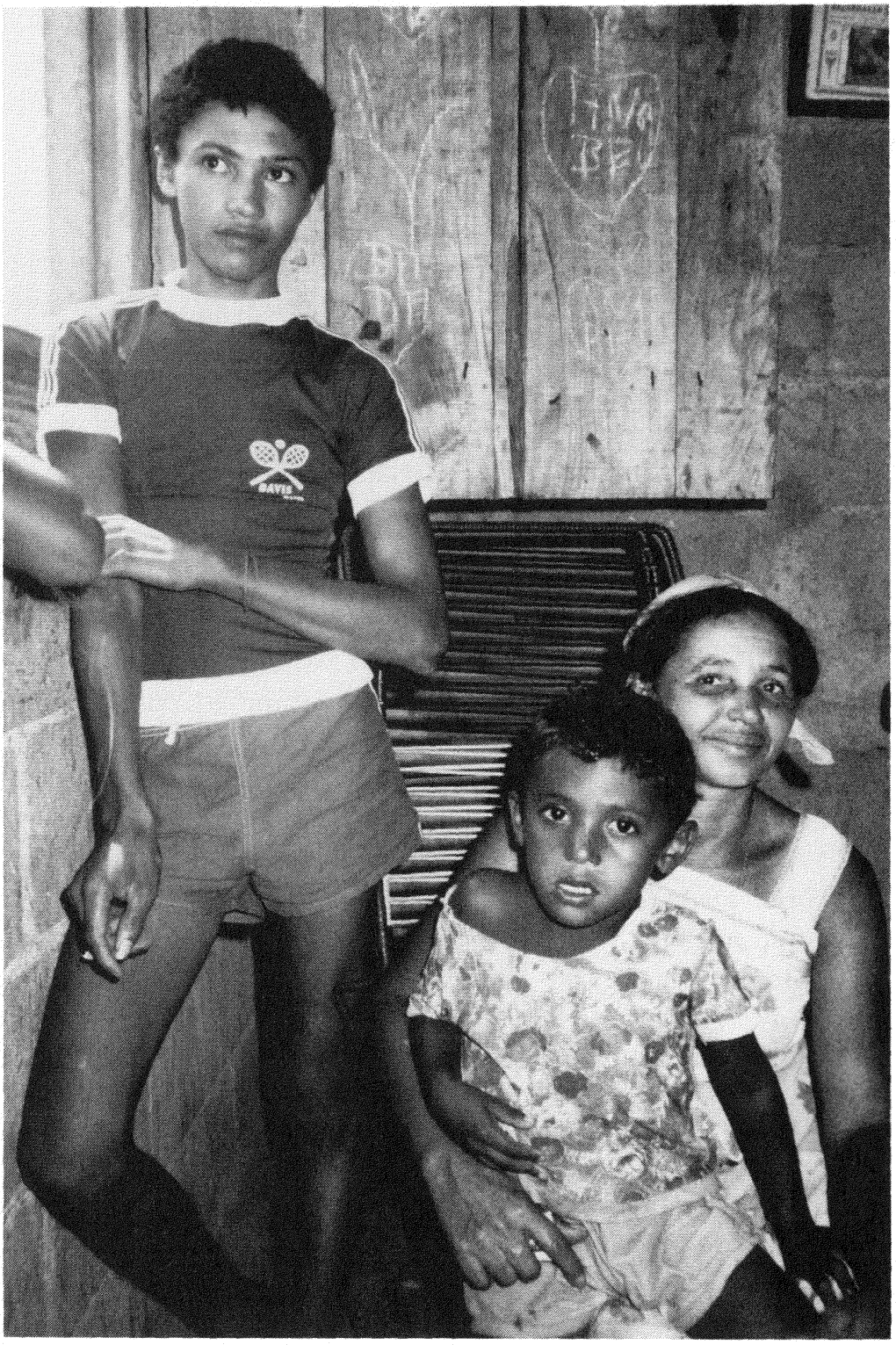
Their philosophy was alien to me, and I continued to do battle with the boy, who finally succumbed: he began to eat, although he never did more than pick at his food with lack of interest. Indeed, it did seem that Zé had no *gosto*, no "taste" for life. As he gained a few kilos, Zé's huge head finally had something to balance on. His wispy, light hair began to grow in, and his funny, wizened, old man face grew younger once his first two teeth (long imprisoned in shrunken gums) erupted. Gradually, too, Zezinho developed an odd and ambivalent attachment to his surrogate mother, who, when frustrated, was known to angrily force-feed him. Then the power struggle was on in earnest; once when Zé spit his *mingau* in my face, I turned him over and swatted him soundly on his skinny, leathery backside. He wouldn't even give the satisfaction of crying. Throughout all, Zé's legs remained weak and bowed, and long before he could stand upright, he would drag them behind him in a funny sort of hand crawl. Once he became accustomed to it, Zé liked being held, and he would wrap his spindly arms tightly around my neck and his legs around my waist. He reminded one of a frightened Brazilian spider monkey. His anger at being loosed from that uncomfortable, stranglehold position was formidable. Zé even learned to smile, although it more resembled a pained grimace. Withal, I was proud of my "success" and of proving the creche mothers wrong. Zé *would* live after all!

There were many other little ones in the creche like Zezinho, but none had arrived quite so wasted as he, and none ever engaged me in quite the same way. But as the time approached to return Zé to his mother, my first doubts began to surface. Could it be true, as the creche mothers hinted, that Zé would never be "quite right," that he would always live in the shadows "looking" for death, a death I had tricked once but would be unable to forestall forever? Such "fatalistic" sentiments were not limited to the creche mothers by any means. A visiting pediatrician from the American Midwest took a dim view of the creche. At first I could not understand his negative reactions. What could be wrong? Each of the thirty-some creche babies wore hand-laundered cotton diapers with the monogram UPAC stitched onto each. There were handmade canvas cot-cribs and even a playpen donated by the German sisters of the local convent. In the midst of the tour of the facilities, the doctor turned away and wearily rested his head on his elbow against the wall. "What do you think you are doing?" he asked.

I had to shake myself out of my own accommodation to see what the American pediatrician was noting: that the diapers, so white from having been beaten against stones and bleached by the sun to sterilize them, were covering fleshless little bottoms. The high point of the day was the weighing-in ritual, and we would cheer when a ten-month-old would weigh in at a fraction over his "normal" six or seven kilos: "*Gordinho* [fatty]!" or "*Guloso* [greedy]," we would say in mocking jest but also in encouragement. The "toddlers" in their playpens sat on their mats passively, without crying but also without playing. They moved themselves away from the brightly colored plastic toys, unfamiliar objects altogether. The creche had something of the grotesque about it, for it was a child care center, a place where healthy, active babies should have been howling and laughing and fighting among themselves. From the visiting doctor's clinical perspective, virtually all the creche babies were seriously physically and "developmentally delayed" and likely to remain so, carrying their early damage into what could only become highly compromised adult lives.

What *was* I doing, indeed? Could Zé ever be "right" again? Could he develop normally after the traumas he had been through? Worse, perhaps, were the traumas yet to come, as I would soon be returning him to Lordes in her miserable lean-to on the trash-littered Vultures' Path. Would he have been better off dead after all that I had put him through? And what of Lordes? Was this fair to her? She barely had enough to sustain herself and her newborn. But Lordes did agree to take Zezinho back, and she seemed more interested in him now that he looked a bit more human than spider monkey. Meanwhile, my own interest in the child began to wane. I was beginning to "let go." By this time I was becoming better socialized to Alto life. Never again would I put so much effort where the odds were so poor.

When I returned to Bom Jesus and the Alto in 1982 among the women who formed my original research sample was Lordes, no longer living in her lean-to but still in desperate straits and still fighting to put together some semblance of a life for her five living children, the oldest of whom was Zé, now a young man of seventeen. Zé struck me as a slight, quiet, reserved young man with an ironic, inward-turning smile and a droll sense of humor. He had long, thin, yet obviously strong, arms; I could see that they had always served him well, compensating for legs still somewhat bowed. Much was made of my reunion with Lordes and Zé, and the story was told again and again of how I had whisked Zé away from Lordes when he was all but given up for dead and had force-fed him like a fiesta turkey. Zé laughed the hardest of all at these "survivor tales" and at his own near-miss with death at the hands of an "indifferent" mother who often forgot to feed and bathe him. Zé and his mother obviously enjoyed a close and affectionate relation-



Lordes and Zezinho (with cigarette): "This boy is my arms and legs."

ship, and while we spoke, Zé draped his arm protectively around his little mother's shoulders. There was no bitterness or resentment, and when I asked Zé alone and in private who had been his best friend in life, the one person he could always count on for support, he took a long drag on his cigarette and replied without a trace of irony, "Mãezinha [my little mother],

of course!" For her part, Lordes gave "homage" to her son as her *filho eleito*, her "elect," or favorite, son, her "arms and legs," she called him, more important to her than the shadowy, older man with whom she was then living and more beloved than any other of her living children.

To understand Lordes (and Zezinho) better, I asked my old friend if she would be willing to tell me her life story. Lordes readily agreed, although she blushed modestly as she asked, "Do you think people 'there' would find anything of interest in my life?" I assured her that "they" would. When I arrived the following Saturday to the dirt road along the banks of the Capibaribe River in the Campo de Sete where Lordes was living with elderly widower Seu Jaime, her door was bolted shut and her five-year-old cried pitifully from within, begging me to spring him from his dark cage. Some neighbors sitting in a circle at the end of the street assured me that Lordes was expecting me and that she would be home from the river soon.

We managed to liberate the child, who, happily seated on the lap of a neighbor, was the first to spy his beloved mama coming up the river trail, her head bouncing under the weight of a heavy basin of wet laundry. Although Lordes had been out in the sun all morning and was fairly splattered with brown freckles, she was still very much the *galega*, "fair one," of her childhood nickname. Lordes bore little resemblance to her oldest half-sister, Antonieta, with Antonieta's coppery skin and her high, Amerindian cheekbones, and even less did she resemble her half-sister, Biu, the darkest of the three with her warm brown skin, dark brown hair, and black, black eyes. It was as if the three "races" of the Northeast had united under the banner of their mother's notorious "promiscuity." "*Mãe era fogo* [Mom was dynamite]," the half-sisters liked to say in referring to their mother's casual indifference to monogamy and in explaining why each of them had a different father.

After awkwardly embracing, Lordes and I quickly entered her cramped but neat little cinder block house. Time has been kind to Lordes, who was sliding toward rock-bottom *pobridão* (grinding poverty) when I first encountered her in her lean-to of cardboard, sticks, and discarded Food for Peace bean sacks. Her present surroundings, though simple in the extreme, were pleasant, the few furnishings and wall hangings arranged with evident care. All the more must she have suffered the indignity of her Alto campsite.

"So you want my life story? Well, my history is really something, almost like a television soap opera. I was born in 1948 on the Engenho Bela Vista, but my mother soon gave me away to her sister, my aunt, Tia, because Mãe had to be gone from the house working. My father was good to Mãe until she got pregnant. That's when he started to abuse her, and after I was born he wouldn't have anything more to do with either of us. When the second

baby was born, Pai walked out on us for good. We have not heard from him since; I don't even know his name. The baby boy wasn't any good anyway. He only lived a few weeks. But Mãe made her way in spite of these problems. She wasn't one to sit and cry about spilled milk.

"Mãe washed clothes seven days a week, and one of my first jobs was to find her at the river and bring her lunch. She never washed clothes in the same place, so I had to learn how to walk the *mata* from an early age. I had other jobs, too. It fell to me to gather the *capim* [grasses] for the animals and to search for kindling wood, all the outdoor jobs. I wasn't much good at housework. Antonieta was better at that.

"I never learned to read or write, although Mama and Auntie tried to make me go to school. It was no use. I learned to sign my name, but not very well, because it is a complicated name and it has a lot of parts to it. When I was about five years old Mãe took me away from Tia and gave me to another woman, a woman who lived next to us on the plantation. It was during this time that my aunt found a job as a maid in Recife, and she could take only one child with her. So we got divided up. Mama took Biu, Tia took Antonieta, and I stayed at Bela Vista with my godmother, Dona Graças.

"My *madrinha* was a real mother to me. Dona Graças raised me with care and great sacrifice. In those days food was scarce, and some days all we had to eat was the coarsest manioc flour, *farinha de roça.* I found it hard to swallow because of a sickness that injured my throat when I was a small baby. It made my godmother sad to see me getting skinny, so she begged a few spoonfuls of the finest whitest *farinha* every day from her *patroa* so that she could make me a smooth custard. When there was no other food, Madrinha would take an ear of hard Indian corn, and she would roast it and coax me into eating the dried kernels one by one. I was close to dying more than once, but my godmother fought with me to stay alive. And she won!

"When I was fifteen I married for the first time. I became the legitimate wife of Severino José da Silva. But it was a marriage that wasn't worth much, and it soon fell apart. We lived in a tiny room built onto the side of Tia's house on the Alto do Cruzeiro, so small you could only lie down in it. Severino was miserable the whole time we were together. He never wanted to marry me; it was Mama and Auntie who forced him into it. In those days when a boy ruined a virgin, he was made to marry the girl, and if he refused, the judge could put him behind bars. So when it happened like that to me, Mãe and Tia went to the judge and made a formal complaint against Severino. When he heard what my family was up to, he ran away. But a boy of fifteen doesn't have too many places to hide, and within a week he was back on the Alto staying with friends. José Leiteiro, the old *pai dos santos* (Xangô master), spotted Severino, and he ran down the path, grabbed him, and tied

him up good. Then José called Mãe and Tia, and the three of them carried Severino to the judge. Severino refused to have me, and so the judge locked him up. Severino stayed in jail for two weeks until he gave in. When they let him out, I was standing right there in my best dress, and they married us on the spot with two police for witnesses. It was a real *casamento matuto*, a shotgun wedding!

"Even though we didn't have a good start to our marriage, I was determined to make it turn out all right. I worked myself sick. I did everything I could to put food on the table, but all Severino did was lie around and mope. He was lovesick, but not for his bride! You see, all along Severino had promised himself to another woman, and during the time that he was living with me, he was always thinking about *her*. That's why he had put up such a fight not to marry me. Finally, he left me to live with his other woman. By then I was almost glad to be rid of him.

"Well, once Severino was gone, I had to figure out what to do. First I lived with Mãe, then Auntie, and then with our neighbor Beatrice. Bea found me a live-in job as an assistant to a shoemaker and his wife in town. I lived with them for two years, and then I outgrew it. So I left to work outside of town in a ceramic factory, and that's where I met my second husband, Nelson. Nelson's job was firing roof tiles, and he was very skilled at this. I can't really say that Nelson was my 'husband,' though, because I was still legally married to Severino. And I can't even say that we 'lived together' because Nelson was very attached to his old grandmother, and he never stopped living with her the whole time we were together.

"At first Nelson was good to me. Every Saturday he would climb the Alto to visit, and he always brought a basket of groceries for the week. He never once came empty-handed. And so everyone really thought of him as my husband. But after I got pregnant, everything changed. Nelson began to abuse me. It looked like I was going to follow in my mother's footsteps. I was actually glad that my firstborn died right away. Things got better for a little bit, and then I was pregnant again. After Zezinho was born, things went from bad to worse. I was living in a hovel without even a roof over my head. It was worse than living in an outhouse. Virgin Mary, goats on the Alto lived better than me! But I clung to Nelson thinking that he would change. I had it in my head that he mistreated me only because he was so young and still very attached to his grandmother. But finally I began to see that Nelson was abusing me for the fun of it. It was a kind of sport. He wanted to keep making me pregnant just so he could threaten to leave me again and again. I was young and emotional and so I cried a lot, but once I saw what he was up to, I got stronger, and I put him out for good.

"That was all well and good, but there I was still living in my stick house

with my stick baby, Zezinho. What a mess, and I was only eighteen years old! I was my mother's daughter for sure. That's when I decided to go to Ferreiras to find work picking vegetables. I spent three months working in the tomato fields, and that's where I met Milton, my third husband, the one you liked so well and whose tongue was so tied up in his mouth that no one could understand him. They put us working together on the same *quadro*, and he looked over at me, and I looked over at him, and before long nature had its way. I was too afraid to say anything when I got pregnant again because Mama and Tia were losing patience with me. So I tried to hide it, and I never told anyone at all about Milton.

"I was low and dispirited during this time. It was the only time in my life that I didn't have energy for anything. I didn't have any interest in Zezinho, and I never did anything to prepare for the birth of Wagner. That's how it happened that I had to call on you at the last minute to cut the cord. I didn't care about anything. I *wanted* that baby to die and Zezinho, too. But it turned out to be a pretty baby. Still, they were the cause of my misery! I was so unhappy that I didn't pay any attention when you took Zé away to raise him in the creche. You could have taken him and never brought him back, for all it mattered to me then. *Oxente*, and today that boy is my arms and legs, more than a husband, better than any husband could ever be!

"After Wagner was born there was no reason to hide what was going on. So finally Milton came to visit, carrying a big sack of fresh corn on his head to give as a present to Mãe. He told both Mãe and Tia that he was responsible for the baby. And that's how he became my third husband. Well, with Milton I finally had some luck. It worked out, and I wound up living with him for fourteen years. I was pregnant ten more times with him. I had three miscarriages and seven live births, and of those I managed to raise four. So we didn't do badly. The three of his that died all died quickly. The first one died in his hammock while I was away working. One of the older children killed him. He got too close and yelled in his ear. He just frightened that baby to death. He died of *susto* in less than a day, and I didn't suffer very much. The other two were weak and sickly from birth. They had no 'knack' for life. The other four came into the world ready to confront [*enfrentar*] hardship and suffering, and so naturally they lived.

"Although things were going along well enough with Milton, I took a fancy to leave him and take up with Seu Jaime, the old widower I live with now. What can I say? First you love one, and then another one comes along, and your heart goes out to him. Isn't it Jesus that made us this way? Didn't he put these feelings into our hearts? If it is wrong, then we will be punished. That I know. Milton accepted it without much of a fuss. He went back to live in the *mata*, and people say that he has found himself another

wife on the Engenho Votas and that he has a new family already. I'll say one thing about Milton: he has never forgotten his own children, and he always sends us produce from his *roçado.*

"I have been living with my old man for almost four years now, and it hasn't been easy. Because of our sin, violence entered our lives. The first real trouble came from Jaime's side. A group of his first wife's relatives stoned him one night as he was coming home from work. They left him bleeding and unconscious on the sidewalk. 'My poor old man,' I said, 'what have they done to you all because of me?' How was it their business anyway? Jaime's first wife was dead, and he was free to do what he wanted with the rest of his life, even throw it away on a woman such as me! Jaime's old in-laws were Protestants, and they didn't want to see their family tainted by association with the likes of me. By bringing Seu Jaime down, I was bringing shame on them as well.

"Seu Jaime was so injured that he couldn't go back to work for a long time. I thought that we might have to move back to a shanty on the Alto. But then as luck would have it, my first husband, Severino, died suddenly, and as I was still his legal wife and not the other woman he'd lived with all these years, I was entitled to the widow's pension. So in the end it paid off, and Severino's pension brought a little bit of comfort into our lives. Now I hope that we are entering a period of calm and tranquility and that God has finally forgiven us."

Our Lady of Sorrows

Mother, behold your Son; Son, behold your Mother.

John 19:25

Lordes and Jaime's period of tranquility was short-lived, however. Perhaps God had not forgiven them after all. Or perhaps it was that death once again came stalking Zezinho as if to square an old and bad debt. On my next return to Bom Jesus in 1987 I was told the news immediately: "Go find Lordes—she has suffered a terrible tragedy. She is mad with grief." I found Lordes at home disconsolate, plunged into a profound mourning. With tears coursing freely down her suddenly, prematurely aged cheeks, Lordes explained that her favorite son, "her arms and legs," had been brutally murdered on the night of the feast of São Pedro by his lover's ex-husband. Zé had been fooled; he never knew that his girlfriend had a husband. Lordes struck her breast in grief.

"If only my Zé were alive today, my life would not be one of suffering and misery. Not one of my other children turned out like him. On the day he died he left my house filled with enough groceries for a month. It was as if he

knew he would be leaving me. I couldn't eat for weeks after the murder, and it pained me to look at all the food he had left me: yams, manioc, pimientos, beans. . . . These other wretched children of mine, they only know how to drive me crazy by asking for things. As soon as Zé was old enough to work, he said to me, 'Little Mama, now you are free. You will never have to worry again. You won't have to depend on some worthless bum to feed and protect you. I will see that you always have enough to eat and a bed to sleep on. I will be your protector. And he was! He was like a mother to me! He never forgot me, even after he found a woman of his own. How many mothers can say that about their son?"

With Seu Jaime sitting next to her, passively holding his distraught wife's hand, Lordes told what happened on the night that her son's life was taken: "I had a premonition that something bad was about to happen. All during the days of the *festas juninas* I warned Zé to be careful. I told him that it was during fiesta time that people take advantage of the chaos to do evil things, to get into fights, to take drugs, to steal, even to kill. Zé became impatient with my fears. On the eve of São João, Zé came home very late, and I was up waiting for him, biting on my knuckles. Zezinho was so angry that he spoke to me like he never had before, for he was always very respectful. But this time he said, 'Old woman, get off my case. Can't you understand that I am a man now and that I need to be about my own business? When I am out late, you know where you can find me: I am at the home of Rosita, my sweetheart.'

"It was on the next market day, the eve of São Pedro, that Zé brought me home those groceries. He called it my 'holiday basket,' trying to make up for the mean words he had thrown at me. But I still wasn't consoled. He left to work the afternoon shift at the factory, and when he came home it was already late. He put the radio on very loud, playing *forró* music. I begged him, 'Zezinho, for the love of God, it's late. Put that music down low. My head is pounding.' He refused. So I yelled at him again. Finally, he slammed the radio off, and he rushed out in a bad mood. It was the vesper of Saint Peter's, the night of the festivities, and before he left I grabbed him by the shoulders, begging him to be careful. I told him that a mother cannot stop herself from worrying and that I had a 'bad feeling' that night. Zé laughed and kissed me good-bye. To make amends he asked me for my blessing. *Ai, meu filho*, it is my one comfort!

"I tried to lie down next to Jaime, but I couldn't get my mind off Zezinho. Finally, I drifted off to a restless sleep, half awake, my ears cocked to hear the latch and to know finally that he was home safe. But I was awakened instead by the sound of grunting, 'Ugr! Ugr!' the ugly noise that a huge pig makes when it is angry or frightened. I thought it must really be a hog that had gotten into the food that I had stored away in the back of the house, but

when I went out to look with my flashlight, everything was black and silent and tranquil. You see, that was the moment of his death. Zé was letting me know of his final *agonia,* his death throes. Just as I turned around to go back to bed, a bat swooped down on me. It swirled around my head and around my shoulders, then around my belly. It wouldn't leave me! I swung my arms around to defend myself saying, 'Holy Virgin Mary, protect me from this mad creature! Leave me; leave me at once!' And just as suddenly as it came, it swooped back up into the black sky and out of sight. That was his soul telling me good-bye.

"I went back to bed and slept fitfully until finally there was a clamoring at the door. I sat straight up in bed. Oh, I knew, I knew! A sharp pain pierced me in my chest, and then I had no doubt. Jaime jumped up out of bed, and I followed him to the front door. When we opened it, there was a crowd of people outside. As soon as they saw me, someone cried out, 'Protect the mother! Don't tell her! Bring her inside for the love of God!'

" 'No,' I screamed, 'for the love of God, tell me! Tell me what has happened to my son? What have they done to my child? Is he in jail?'

" 'No, Little Mother Lordes, he is dead,' a young boy was brave enough to say. 'His body is in the hospital. You can go and get it now.'

"That was the end. I fell down into a heap on the ground, completely demolished. Jaime rushed out into the crowd and to the hospital. He left me there on the ground. I don't remember what happened to me after that. On his way to the hospital Jaime met a man with a long woolen cape who said, 'I know who murdered your son, and I know where he is hiding.' But Jaime was too distraught to grab the man and take him with him. Instead, he ran on all the way to the end of town to get the body, to bring Zezinho home to me, what was left of my son."

Lordes could go on no more, and after she went inside to lie down, Jaime put his finger to his lips to silence me while he reached up for a box hidden away among his things. In it was a photograph of Zezinho, taken as he was found, bleeding and already dead, sprawled awkwardly across the steps leading down the backside of the Alto do Cruzeiro. His eyes were open, and the blood was seeping through his shirt. I turned away quickly, stifling a scream. My head began to spin.

"The mother must *never* see this," said Seu Jaime. "She must never know that I have the photo hidden away. It would *kill* her altogether." I wished that Jaime had remembered that one time, long ago, the dead man had been my "son" as well.

Mother Love and Child Death

Love is always ambivalent and dangerous. Why should we think that it is any less so between a mother and her children? And yet it has been the

fate of mothers throughout history to appear in strange and distorted forms. Mothers are sometimes portrayed as larger than life, as all-powerful, and sometimes as all-destructive. Or mothers are represented as powerless, helplessly dependent, and angelic. Historians, anthropologists, philosophers, and the "public" at large are influenced by old cultural myths and stereotypes about childhood innocence and maternal affection as well as their opposites. The "terrible" power attributed to mothers is based on the perception that the infant cannot survive for very long without considerable nurturing love and care, and normally that has been the responsibility of mothers. The infant's life is a vulnerable thing and depends to a great extent on the mother's good will. Sara Ruddick (1989:34–38) has captured the contradictions well in noting that mothers, while so totally in control of the lives and well-being of their infants and small babies, are themselves under the dominion and control of others, usually of men. Simultaneously powerful and powerless, it is no wonder that artists, scholars, and psychoanalysts can never seem to agree whether "mother" was the primary *agent* or the primary *victim* of various domestic tragedies. And so myths of a savagely protective "maternal instinct" compete at various times and places with the myth of the equally powerful, devouring, "infanticidal" mother.

Whenever we try to pierce the meanings of lives very different from our own, we face two interpretive risks. On the one hand, we may be tempted to attribute our own ways of thinking and feeling to "other" mothers. Any suggestion of radically different existential premises (such as those, for example, that guide selective neglect in Northeast Brazil) is rejected out of hand as impossible, unthinkable. To describe some poor women as aiding and abetting the deaths of certain of their infants can only be seen as "victim blaming." But the alternative is to cast women as passive "victims" of their fate, as powerless, without will, agency, or subjectivity. Part of the difficulty lies in the confusion between *causality* and *blame*. There must be a way to look dispassionately at the problem of child survival and conclude that a child died from mortal neglect, even at her or his mother's own hands, without also blaming the mother—that is, without holding her personally and morally accountable.

Related to this is the persistent idea that mothers, *all* mothers, *must* feel grief, a "depth of sorrow," in reaction to infant death. Women who do not show an "appropriate" grief are judged by psychoanalytic fiat to be "repressing" their "natural" maternal sentiments, to be covering them over with a culturally prescribed but *superficial* stoicism, or they may be seen as emotionally ravaged, "numbed" by grief, and traumatized by shock. But it was indifference, not numbing or shock, that I often observed. The traumatized individual does not shrug her shoulders and say cheerily, "It's better

the baby should die than either you or me" and quickly become pregnant because little babies are interchangeable and easily replaced.

One may experience discomfort in the face of profound human differences, some of which challenge our cultural notions of the "normal" and the "ethical." But to attribute "sameness" across vast social, economic, and cultural divides is a serious error for the anthropologist, who must begin, although cautiously, from a respectful assumption of difference. Here we want to direct our gaze to the ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling that represent these women's experience of being-in-the-world and, as faithful Catholics, their being-beyond-this-world. This means avoiding the temptation of all "essentializing" and "universalizing" discourses, whether they originate in the biomedical and psychological sciences or in philosophical or cultural feminism.

On the other hand, there is the danger of overdistancing ourselves from those we are trying to understand so as to suggest that there is no common ground at all. This is found in some deconstructionist and postmodernist theories of gender politics where the categories of "woman" and "mother" are rigorously problematized and deconstructed out of existence.[4] Less radically, one can see the "overproduction of difference" in the writings of those modern social historians who have suggested that mother love is an invention of the "modern" world and that until very recently in human history women scarcely knew how to love their children (see Aries 1962; Badinter 1981; de Mause 1974; Shorter 1975). The language of these historians can be extreme and off-putting.

"The history of childhood," wrote de Mause, "is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes . . . the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused" (1974:1). Edward Shorter concurred. With respect to early modern England he wrote that "mothers viewed the development and happiness of infants younger than two with indifference," which was why their "children vanished in the ghastly slaughter of the innocents that was traditional child-rearing" (1975:168, 204). Writers in this genre have often pointed to such "child-hostile" and covertly "infanticidal" cultural institutions as "wet-nursing," "foundling homes" (Trexler 1973), the early introduction of baby "pap" and other unnutritious weaning foods (Phillips 1978; Fildes 1986), and the common use of laudanum syrup and other narcotic "pacifiers" (Engels [1845] 1958:161) throughout the early modern period of Europe, which contributed to high rates of infant and child mortality.

William Langer (1974:360–361), for example, referred to the wet nurses of early modern Europe as those "angel makers" and "baby killers" who kept

the infant coffin makers busily employed in Italy and France from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Wet nurses, recruited from the poorest social classes and paid but a pittance for the servitude of their bodies in nurturing the infants of more affluent classes, were poorly motivated and rarely punished for the frequent deaths of the infants charged to their indifferent care. Maria Piers (1978) referred to the institution of wet-nursing as little more than a public license to kill unwanted and excess babies in societies in which active infanticide was sanctimoniously condemned by church and state. Thomas McKeown (1976) argued that such culturally established but harmful infant- and child-tending practices as these served to check population growth in Europe for many centuries.

Nevertheless, social historians continue to debate whether the observed indifference of mothers to the fate of their infants in the early modern period was merely a reaction or an actual contributor to the death of young children. Most historians have tended to reject the mortal neglect hypothesis for an interpretation of maternal indifference as less the cause than the effect of high infant and childhood mortality. In this view the distanced emotions are but an "unconscious source of emotional armour against the risk of seeing the object of their affection die" (Badinter 1980:58). But where early human life is precarious in inhospitable urban slums and shantytowns, maternal indifference (whether intentionally or not) exaggerates the risks and exposes vulnerable infants to premature death. Nonetheless, in identifying the role of neglect in the etiology of infant mortality, one must be careful not to isolate it from its origins in pernicious social and economic relations. The attention to mothering and mother love can obscure the fact that the greatest threats to child survival from the early modern period to this day (and through all stages of industrialization) have been extreme poverty and exploitative female wage labor.

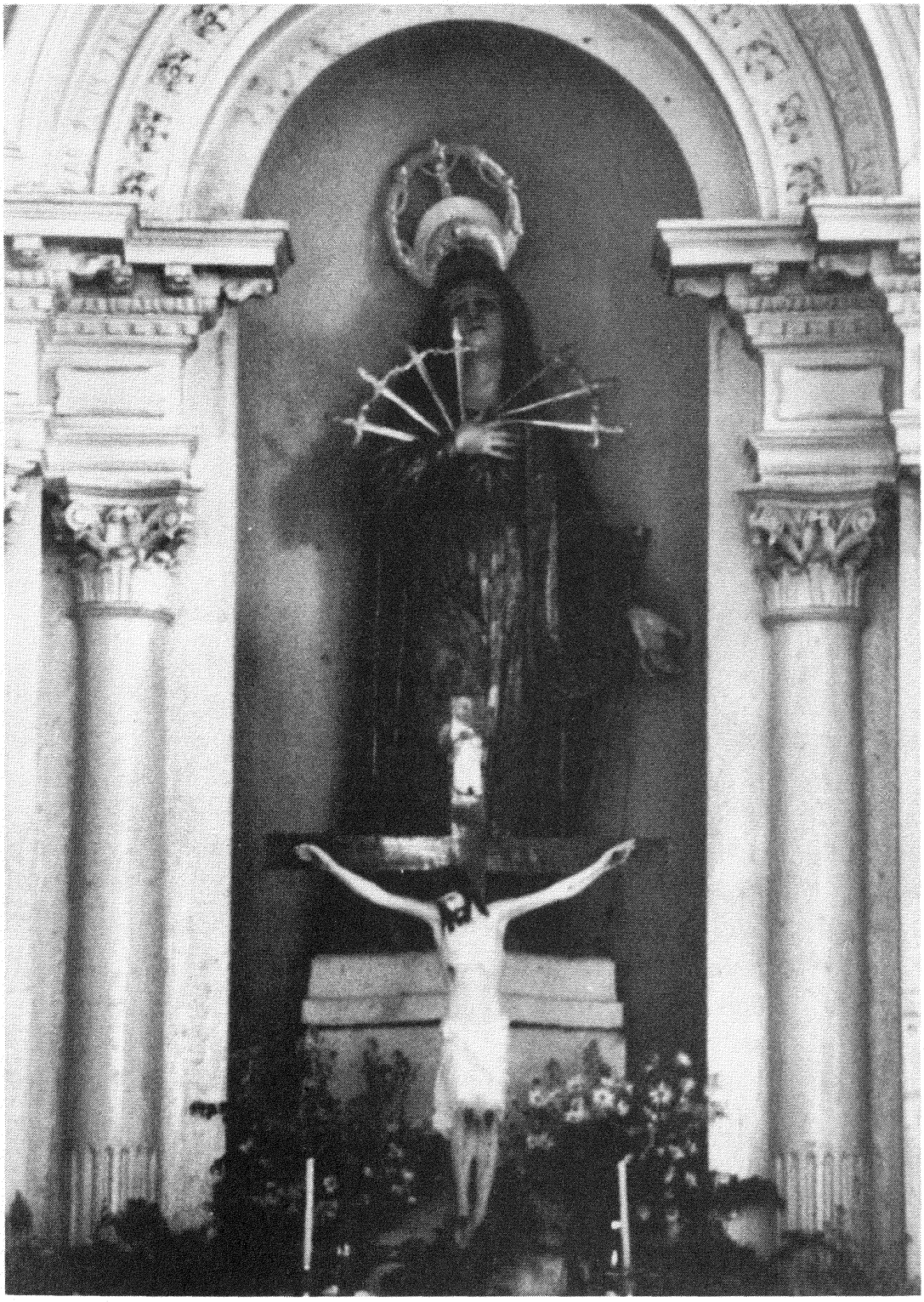
So perhaps there is a middle ground between the two rather extreme approaches to mother love—the sentimentalized maternal "poetics" and the mindlessly automatic "maternal bonding" theorists, on the one hand, and the "absence of love" theorists, on the other. Between these is the reality of maternal thinking and practice grounded in specific historical and cultural realities and bounded by different economic and demographic constraints. Maternal practices always begin as a response to "the historical reality of a biological child in a particular social world" (Ruddick 1980:348).

Seen in the context of a particular social world and historical reality, the story of Lordes and Zé conveys the ambiguities of mothering on the Alto do Cruzeiro where mortal selective neglect *and* intense maternal attachment coexist. Alto mothers, like Lordes, do sometimes turn away from certain ill-

fated babies and abandon them to an early death in which their own neglect sometimes plays a final and definitive part. But maternal indifference does not always lead to death, and should an infant or a toddler show, like Zé, that he has a hidden "talent" for life, his mother may greet the "doomed" child's surprising turnabout with grateful joy and deep and lasting affection. And these same "neglectful" mothers can exclaim, like Lordes, that they live only for their grown children, some of whom only survived in spite of them. In so doing, these women are neither hypocritical nor self-delusional.

One of the benefits of returning to the Alto do Cruzeiro after a sixteen-year hiatus was the chance to observe the happy outcomes of several memorable cases of severe, selective neglect, children who survived and were later able to win their way inside the domestic circle of protective custody and parental love. Whatever else it is, the customary practice of selective neglect on the Alto do Cruzeiro is not what we in the United States mean by child abuse. It is not motivated by anger, hate, or aggression toward the small baby, for that would be seen as grotesque and unnatural by the people of the Alto. The impoverished, neglected, and often abandoned women of the Alto are more likely to express "pity" than anger toward a frighteningly sick, needy, and overly demanding baby. Moreover, Alto mothers are entirely disinclined to strike what is seen as an innocent and irrational little creature, and (unless they are mad or psychotic) they never project images of evil or badness onto an infant.

Mother love is a richly elaborated theme on the Alto do Cruzeiro, as in Brazilian *Nordestino* culture and society at large (see Aragão 1983), and it is celebrated in folklore and folk art, in popular music, and in an intense devotion to the Virgin Mother and to São Antônio, the patron saint of mothers and children. But it is especially the mature Mary, the widow standing tearfully at the foot of the cross or sitting in its shadow while cradling the dead adult Jesus in her arms, her own heart (like Lordes's) pierced with a sword, that is the popular image of long-suffering motherhood and of tormented but sanctified mother love in this community. Our Lady of Sorrows, Nossa Senhora das Dores, reigns over Bom Jesus as the *município*'s patron saint. Her statue is taken down from its grotto over the main altar of the church, and bedecked with many floral wreaths she is paraded through town on various holy days during the year (see Figure 8.1). But images of the young mother Mary at the creche, holding her fat infant in her arms or suckling Him at her white breast, that are so common to Catholic imagery and iconography in northern Europe and North America (see Fernandez 1979:70–71; Kristeva 1980:237–270) are curiously absent in Bom Jesus da Mata even during the Christmas season. On the Alto do



Our Lady of Sorrows.

Cruzeiro the birth of a child is hardly a time of rejoicing, and mother love follows a tortured path, often beginning with a rocky start and fraught with many risks, dangers, separations, and deaths.

On the inhospitable, rocky outcrop of the Alto do Cruzeiro mother love grows slowly, tentatively, and fearfully. The cheerful and resilient "maternal optimism," of which Ruddick (1989:74) wrote, that allows the mother to greet each new life born to her hopefully gives way in the shantytown to dark clouds of maternal pessimism, doubt, and despair rooted in the unhappy experience of repeated infant death. "Can it be," asked Margarita, "that Jesus wants me to leave this world without having raised a single, living child?" And so the doubt allows a mother to reject an infant born weak and sickly as a child not worth keeping, a child without a knack for life. Or maternal optimism can degenerate into its opposite, a "cheery denial" (Ruddick 1989:75), so that a plump Maria das Prazeres can breezily dismiss her skeletal son's anorexia, born of the child's frustrated hunger, by saying of him, "Gil doesn't 'like' to eat so we don't 'waste' any food on him."

Holding on and Letting Go— The Pragmatics of Mothering

What mother among us living in a secure and protected household has not once in her life had to suppress the wild impulse to throttle a child—even a helpless infant—within an inch of her or his crying, complaining, demanding life?[5] And what middle-class mother has not on more than one occasion "forgotten" about a child, left a terrified toddler to wander through racks of women's dresses on the crowded floor of a midtown department store while herself absorbed in a shopping frenzy? What mother has not put a fussy, "hyperactive" child down to nap once too often in the day or in winter sent older children out to play in the "fresh air," even as their red fingers were near frozen, so as to enjoy uninterruptedly a cup of coffee and a long and much anticipated visit with a dear friend? Yes, we have all done these or similar things with (at least we like to think) little harm done.

Most mothers, despite such "lapses," fall into that broad and forgiving category that D. W. Winnicott called "ordinary, devoted mothers" or, alternatively, "good enough" mothers (1987:16). For Winnicott, "holding" is the root or generative metaphor of nurturing, the "prototype of all infant care" (37). Indulging the infant in her or his basic need for enfolding, protective "holding" allows the newborn to feel both "*secure* enough" and "*real* enough" to begin developing an autonomous ego. In Eriksonian terms, "good enough holding" anchors the infant's "basic trust" in the world (Erikson 1950:247–251). Ordinary, devoted mothering has, for Winnicott, an overdetermined and existential quality about it. It is where humans start