

ICWA LETTERS

SLS-1
THE AMERICAS

Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.

Introduction to the Samba

SÃO JOSÉ DOS CAMPOS, Brazil

January 12, 1999

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Brazil seems to hold a particular place of charm and evil in the minds of those who look at it from a distance. It conjures images of scantily costumed women dancing to dizzying drum rhythms and a vast, burning Amazon sending our clean air and future pharmaceuticals up in smoke. To some it is the cornerstone of Latin American markets, and by extension the world economy. For others it is a place of violence: home to the incredibly rich, and the incredibly poor.

I am intrigued by the truths behind these partially informed images and why the United States, as a culture, is so reluctant to look south. Conversely, why is Brazil, the leading Latin American economy, a great producer of music, literature and folklore, so unknown outside of its own borders? What are the realities of life in a country with such a huge number of working poor and destitute? Why, with all of the hardship, inequality and poverty, does Brazil's image persist as a country of incomparable beauties, swaying hips and soccer heroes? How do Brazilians want to be seen in the world?

For the next two years my husband, Tyrone, and I will be in Brazil as ICWA fellows. My interests lie in exploring the lives of women of all classes and their expectations of life; and in discovering the nuances of Brazilian popular culture — what makes Brazil, Brazilian? My goal is to begin everyday with my senses alert, and to absorb and to learn from as many walks of life as possible.

BRAZIL FROM AFAR

As my husband and I prepared to depart for Brazil, we decided to pack our belongings into storage in Los Angeles and drive the southern route across the United States to bid farewell to family and friends. Along the way we shared with them our excitement about being ICWA fellows and living in Brazil. Explaining ICWA turned out to be the first challenge of our fellowship. Few believed such a wonderful opportunity existed.

The topic of Brazil always raised eyebrows. Inevitably, the conversation would turn to two topics: the Amazon and the economy. Our exchanges evoked a sense of adventure and discovery, and I think a few family and friends were ready to pack their bags and travel with us. There was great



Photo: Tyrone Turner
Susan Sterner

"I know that somewhere in Brazil are the beginnings of answers to questions about the experience of womanhood in this time, the fragility of childhood, the role of images in national identity, and the strength of the human spirit over physical conditions." Susan Sterner wrote these words in her application for a two-year fellowship in Brazil.

A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received a B.A. from Emory University in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology and a Master's from Vanderbilt in Latin American Studies. As a staff photographer for Arundel Communications in Reston, Virginia, she hired a promising young photographer named Tyrone Turner — and later married him. They both worked as photographers in New Orleans and Los Angeles.

Despite their marriage, Susan and Tyrone were evaluated by ICWA's Trustees as individual and separate candidates; if only one of them was approved, the other would presumably travel along as a Fellow's assistant. Both won fellowships, however. A comparison of this, her first newsletter, with Tyrone's, will indicate that their fellowships — and their writing — promise great differences.

enthusiasm and support all around. Yet underlying these well-wishes lay a sense of trepidation and caution. Our safety as travelers from the United States, a country that evokes such anger and envy, concerned some. Others worried we would fall victim to robbery because of our camera equipment. Would bribe-demanding police consume our reserves of cash, leaving us stranded? Apart from safety concerns were general questions: Would we miss U.S. culture? Would we be healthy? And of course, Why Brazil?

I often felt like a junior ambassador from Brazil: extolling its beauty, sophistication and important contributions to the world economy and society. Little did I know that some of the same fears expressed by their questions were on my mind as well. Indeed, I had many unarticulated apprehensions floating in my head. They came together only once we arrived in Brazil.

TOUCHING DOWN ON BRAZILIAN SOIL

We flew all night from Washington and arrived at Garulhos Airport outside São Paulo around mid-morning. The approach to Garulhos felt oddly familiar. As we passed over the edge of the sprawling metropolis of São Paulo, surrounded by lush green hills, I was reminded of Los Angeles, our last home. Only there the hills that rimmed the city were the burnt gold of the California dessert.

After claiming our bags we queued to clear customs-anxiously hoping our laptops and professional cameras would slip by them. Our worrying came to naught, and we breezed through — a great surprise to my brother, Rob, who awaited our arrival on the other side of the gates.¹

We left the airport and drove through a light drizzle

¹ When we applied for visas from the Brazilian consulate in Los Angeles we learned that we would need sponsorship from a Brazilian entity. Through the help of a classmate of Tyrone's from Georgetown University, Kristin Lund, and her family we received sponsorship from Grupo Lund and the American Chamber of Commerce for Brazil – São Paulo (AmCham). We are deeply indebted to Kristin and her husband Chip Vosmik, her parents Chris and Susie, and John Mein, President of AmCham. Mr. Lund's assistant, Margareth Mark, has been an invaluable source of information and assistance as well. Without the help of these new friends, I fear we would still be in Los Angeles, sorting through the labyrinthian Brazilian bureaucracy. In return for their support we are going to photograph the social programs supported by AmCham both in the metro São Paulo area and in the Northeast of the country where AmCham is involved in hunger-relief programs. It is our hope that our work with AmCham will be the subject of future newsletters.

Coincidentally, my brother, Robert Sterner, has been living for the past ten months in São José do Campos, Brazil, a little over an hour from São Paulo, while working on an assignment with Cearal Partners Worldwide. He has been gracious enough to offer to us a spare room in his apartment as a staging point for our work in Brazil. Although our sights have been set on heading to the Northeast, Sao Jose dos Campos has proven to be interesting in its own right.

to São José dos Campos, an industrial city of about a half million, situated 100 kilometers northeast of São Paulo in a valley of rivers and rolling hills known as the Vale do Paraíba. I let my head fall back against the seat and exhaustion sweep over me. The anxiety and anticipation of beginning my life with ICWA, in combination with the worry over clearing customs with so much electronic equipment, had taken its toll. I listened to my brother and husband talk about life in Brazil. My mind floated along their words as we merged onto the Ayrton Senna freeway, leaving behind cement structures and hints of big-city life. We slipped into a rolling countryside of lush grass dotted by termite mounds and giant anthills. Not a soul was in sight. Even livestock were scarce. This was not the vista I had expected to fill my first moments in Brazil. The amount of open space so close to São Paulo astounded me. Brazil seemed indeed a country of urban compression.

I was expecting crowded suburban developments, shopping centers and *favelas* (urban slums) to span the freeways from São Paulo to Rio de Janeiro. But we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn in the largest country in South America without a soul in sight. I wondered where everyone was and why such huge tracts of land so close to the city seem unused and unoccupied — I imagined that the answers lurked in historical patterns of land ownership and rural-to-urban migration. Issues of land-reform and democratic access to resources jumped to the front of my mind. I thought of the *semterristas*, land reform activists who work to have the underused land of the wealthy redistributed to the landless. From my very uneducated vantage point, the battle for reform looked long and hard.

As we exited the Senna superhighway and merged with traffic on the Presidente Dutra, the Brazil I had envisioned began to emerge. Scattered along the side of the decrepit, busy highway were small industries, a few restaurants and questionable hotels. The occasional shack and cinderblock home crowded against the properties of the businesses. I glimpsed small towns in the distance with shiny red clay roofs and bright white walls. Thin muddy trails led from seemingly random points along the road's edge into the grass and trees, hinting at more homes out of view.

As we crossed into the municipality of São José, clus-

ters of buildings became more frequent. Bus stops appeared along the side of the road. Long gashes of bright red clay tore into the landscape where improvements and expansions were underway. It reminded me of my years in Mississippi, where the red clay was forever being torn up and pushed around in the name of improvement. I wondered about the politics of public-works projects here and made a mental note to learn the parallel expressions for "boondoggle" and "pork barrel."²

Mega-factories like Kodak, Fuji, Johnson and Johnson, Volkswagon, Ericsson and GM occupied huge properties along the road. I understood the gray scratchiness of the air quality and wondered about the levels of toxins in the water table. I felt like the region was under siege by corporate giants. Closer to the town center, malls and superstores lined the freeway. As we crested the hill my heart fell to see the golden arches of McDonalds wedged between store signs. (Later that week I was even more disturbed to come across a Walmart Superstore). I glanced at everything with mixed emotions: Bully for U.S. enterprise I thought, but are we headed to a homogenized world culture? Is there no escaping the big stick of U.S. corporate interests? A few turns off the freeway and we had arrived. São José dos Campos: the city that would be our home for the holidays.

DRIVING WITH THE GHOST OF AYRTON SENNA and KNOWING WHEN TO FEAR

As I got to know the city, I was constantly cautioned to have my "documents" with me and to walk with care. São José is not a typical, dense, centralized knot that has grown outward, but rather a wide-spreading crescent of small hubs. Close to the original center, the terrain drops to a deep river valley, or *banhado*, filled with fertile farm land. As you drive along Avenida São João, which traces the perimeter of the *banhado*, only the green fields and distant mountains are visible. A walk to the edge reveals a cluster of about 500 cinderblock and wooden homes clinging to the hillside and perimeter of the fields. Thin wisps of smoke rise from a few houses. "Stay away from there," I was cautioned, "that's a *favela*. The drug dealers live there. You go there and you get killed." I understood the caution behind the words, but questioned how well they represented the reality of the residents' lives. Each

²Houaiss, Antontio, ed., and Ismael Cardim, *Dicionário Inglês-Português*, Editora Record, Rio de Janeiro 1997, and Taylor, James L., ed., *Portuguese-English Dictionary*, Editora Record, Rio de Janeiro 1977, supply the following definitions:

boondoggle – *cavação* (profitable job or business, esp. one obtained by pull), *vantagens obtidas por proteção* (advantages gained by patronage/protection), *emprego que exige pouca dedicação* (work demanding little effort) / v.i. *Dedicarse a trabalho sem utilidade prática* (v.i. to apply oneself to useless endeavors)

pork barrel – *fundidos destinados a melhoramentos com fins políticos* (Funds earmarked for improvements of political gain)

Friends have offered these Brazilian expressions:

"*Empresa fantasma*" – phantom work, money changes hands for projects without the intention of ever doing the work; a political pay-off

"*Projeito faronico*" – Pharaoh's project. A public-works project done only to line the pockets of interested parties.

"*Cabide de emprego*" – the nepotism and cronyism that occurs when someone is elected to office and then appoints only family and friends to well-paying positions. It's similar to the idea of "coattails" in English. A *cabide* is the coatrack or clothesline of the elected person to which the friends and relative attach themselves for gain.

So, Brazilians have many parallel terms!

time we passed by, I wondered about the people living there and how it felt to be labeled in such harsh terms.

Later, in another conversation, my husband and I were warned: "Never drive down a dirt road. If the pavement runs out, turn around as fast as you can and get the hell out of there. That's a *favela*. They'd just as soon kill you first and ask questions later." I resisted these warnings not because I wanted to drive carelessly into a neighborhood I didn't know, or parade singing like Julie Andrews into a *favela* to cure the world's ills. I resisted because I had heard the same words before in New Orleans when talking about "the projects." I'd heard them spoken about the isolated rural areas of Mississippi, and again when I moved to Los Angeles — the land of riots and celebrity murders. I've learned that stereotypes travel two ways and are powerful dividers. Living behind them are diverse human beings and experiences. The trick is knowing how to filter the information.

Almost everything associated with *favelas* is given a negative spin. At night Tyrone and I would hear firecrackers popping around the city. We mentioned this to our Portuguese teacher who remarked that firecrackers were the sign that a fresh drug shipment had arrived in the *favela*. I thought perhaps it could be kids playing with firecrackers.

I was unaware of the fear I had absorbed and the tension I felt until a few days after our arrival. My brother had an evening flight from the same airport through which we had arrived, an hour away. This meant we would have to drive home on the freeways at night. I worried about this all day without realizing it. Brazilian drivers seemed wacky to me, but that wasn't my worst fear. I feared the combination of empty freeways and possibly crooked cops. As we drove to the airport, my brother tossed out a list of driving tips and repeated the stories of people who had met unfortunate ends driving alone at night on isolated roads. He recounted various incidents of thieves rolling large rocks onto the highway to slow lone drivers and ambush them.

We reviewed our return route. The most important point was to stay off the Ayrton Senna, usually deserted at night, and avoid all roads leading into São Paulo. The best option would be to stick to the slow-moving, crowded Via Presidente Dutra. "Just get on the Dutra and head in the direction of Rio. You'll be fine as long as you stick to the Dutra," said Rob.

We dropped off my brother, exited the airport and realized that an on-ramp for the Dutra heading to Rio didn't exist. Rather than risk getting lost in São Paulo we opted for the Ayrton Senna. Palms a little sweaty, and

cursing my brother's name, I got on the freeway and left town. We drove in tense silence waiting for boulders to roll down the hills or police lights to flash in the mirror. At the point where the Ayrton Senna merges with the Via Dutra to pass through the Vale do Paraíba, we turned onto the artery labeled "Rio."

Immediately, we knew we were on the wrong road. The Dutra is littered with little businesses and clusters of homes. On this road our headlights cut into blackness. Only the hills surrounded us. There were no little villages or bars dotting the way. An occasional car passed in the other direction. We continued, passing up darkened exits because they lacked re-entries.

I tried to relax and just headed north, hoping for a sign to a familiar town or maybe a 24-hour gas station. Insidious fear had infected me. The road narrowed as it climbed a gentle slope; a little fog collected around us. If nothing else, we could drive to Rio and turn around, I thought. Suddenly bright lights flared up in front of me. Brake lights! To the left I realized there was a police freeway checkpoint cabin. I switched to the right side of the road just as my headlights illuminated the legs of a policeman. I swerved back to the left lane and squeaked out a few curse words. I had just missed him. Sure that the cops would be on my tail for erratic driving, I slowed to below the speed limit and tried to stay hemmed between two trucks. But lights never flashed in the rear-view mirror and a dozen kilometers later my stomach left my throat when a sign appeared for São José. No bribes, no boulders, no bandits — my first drive in Brazil came to an end.

As I lay in bed that night I marveled at my sense of relief. I had been completely convinced that I was driving right into harm's way. Either ne'er-do-wells were going to rise up from the tall grass and surround the car, or I was going to be pulled over by a *Policia Federal* (or *Policia Militar*, *Policia Civil*, or *Policia Rodovária* — there are many types of *policia* here. I'm not sure what they all do), bribed, hassled, arrested and disappeared. None of that happened. I was struck by the power of suggestion and the culture of fear to which I had fallen victim. I was living with a head full of stereotypes about Brazil — the same stereotypes I thought I was beyond.

But there are signs in everyday life that feed these stereotypes and fears. For years the military and state police have been accused of involvement in vigilante activity against the poor and have been viewed as poorly trained, corrupt bandits-for-hire commanding the highways like pirates on the seas.³ Bribes are illegal in Brazil, yet it's common to be advised that if stopped by a cop, a driver should slip 50 *reales* (U.S.\$40) into the back of a

³ There have been many cases of police involvement in violence. One infamous case was at a 1996 protest by *semterristas* in the state of Pará. There a group of military Police surrounded the protesters, including children, and fired into the crowd, killing 19 and injuring 57. A few years earlier police killed street children as they slept in front of a Rio de Janeiro church.

document folio before handing it over to the officer. The cop will then take documents back to his patrol car to “verify” them and return with or without a citation. This allows the briber and the bribee each to save face. The cop never demands money, and the motorist does not offer an illegal bribe. Everyone’s innocent: a nice system all around.

Even in relatively quiet São José, groups of security guards hover at the entrances of banks and other businesses. Each apartment building has a door guard and secured parking. Some buildings even have “control towers,” about the height of the second floor, that monitor comings and goings along the sidewalk. Single-family homes are surrounded by barricades such as iron fencing, or brick walls topped with glass shards. Some feature the sporty, electrified-wire option that emits a low, crackling hum. Nothing is blatant, but it all works its way into the subconscious and speaks to fears Brazilians harbor.

As for the freeways, even the Brazilians in this region seem to avoid all but the busiest highways at night. And when they head for the beach, most opt to rise at dawn on Saturday and jump in the car rather than cut through the mountains on Friday. The culture of fear is not in my head alone. As I reflected that night, my surprise was in how deeply and quickly I had absorbed it.

By the next morning, I felt recovered enough to take the wheel again and head to the beach about 90 kilometers away. It’s one of the things Brazilians love to do. Tyrone and I wanted to feel the mystique of the Brazilian coastline. Still groggy from the previous night, we threw together towels, dictionaries, beach guides and our ever-needed documents and tossed them in the car. Determined to not give in to stereotypes, and made brave by the sunlight, I relaxed and took in the sights along this new road. A few kilometers outside of town we decided to stop at the next gas station to grab a little coffee and *pão de queijo* (cheese roll).

There’s nothing like a hot cup of coffee and a *pão de queijo* in the morning. It’s ironic that in Brazil, where coffee has been an important part of the economy for centuries, that the coffee is usually pretty lousy and needs a lot of milk and sugar to go down easily. However, it is served piping hot, which goes a long way. In the mornings, coffee can be found in a variety of forms: *espresso*, a bitter equivalent of Italian espresso; *pingado*, espresso or regular coffee cut with steamed milk and served in a small glass (locals have mastered the art of grabbing it with a slippery, waxy napkin and holding the boiling hot glass as they sip) and the infamous *cafezinho*,⁴ a complimentary shot of coffee offered by restaurants and bars. *Cafezinho* is usually served from a thermos on a small

table near the exit. Those with the taste for a little java grab one of the tiny plastic cups — similar to the those used by hospitals to dispense pills — pump in an inch of coffee and toss it back like a shot of vodka. If only it went down so smoothly.

The espresso and *pingados* (if you can figure out how to avoid burned fingers) are wonderful in the morning once the taste buds reorient themselves to the Brazilian palate. And nothing goes down so deliciously as a *pão de queijo*. In this region, the ubiquitous *pão de queijo* shows up in nearly every establishment that serves food: corner coffee shops, bus stations, McDonalds, little carts on the street. It’s a favorite mid-morning snack or lunch, but I like it best for breakfast with a super-strong espresso. Ideally, *pão de queijo* is made with a light flour, seasoning and fresh soft cheese from Minas Gerais (the state north of São Paulo — Brazil’s Wisconsin, if you will). The cheese is pasteurized but un-aged and has the texture of an airy sweet feta. It is shredded into the batter and then spooned onto a baking sheet in uniform goopy mounds, then baked until the outside browns to a crunchy crust and the inside becomes thick and spongy.

So what better way to start a sunrise run to the coast than with a little *pingado* and a *pao de queijo*? We pulled into a combination gas station and roadside-snackbar-cum-novelty-shop. The size of the crowd inside belied the few cars stopped in the lot. Plates clattered and the short-order cooks called out numbers and took requests. Samba music blared from scratchy speakers. About four dozen mute bodies hovered around elevated tables. Shifting their weight from foot to foot, they crowded over their steaming cups and gnawed away at gooey breads. Bathing-suit strings peeked out from under t-shirts. The occasional flip-flop-clad toes wiggled to the music but their owners’ eyes were filled with exhaustion, and perhaps a little too much beer from the night before. They stared past each other, blank-faced, chewing their breakfasts in a trance: anything for a day at the beach.

If I thought I was going to mosey along the roads, enjoying the vistas, I had another think coming. Freshly gassed-up and caffeinated brigades of cars, piled full with bodies and beach accoutrements, roared out of the parking lot to take on the mountain and anything else that stood between them and the water. A curious thing happens when a Brazilian gets behind the wheel of a vehicle. I think the entire population is first cousins to Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde. Overall, most Brazilians are the most friendly and etiquette-minded people I’ve met — but try to cross a street and you’re liable to get clipped. It’s as if they invoke the spirit of Ayrton Senna, the Formula One champion race-car driver and adored native son who died

⁴ *Cafezinho*, as I understand it, can also be taken as a general term for a coffee break or a cup of coffee served in any of the other forms I mentioned. The “zinho” and “ninho” suffixes are used in Portuguese as diminutives suggesting, in this case, either a small serving or a pleasurable diversion from the rigors of daily routine.

in a crash four years ago.⁵ Signs hang above the streets: "*Motorista você também é pedestre!*" (Drivers! You too are a pedestrian!) Although the laws are being tightened, it's still a general high-speed free-for-all on the road.

As our little one-liter engine chugged up the hills, cars, buses and unidentifiable contraptions zoomed by us — passing on the left, passing on the right, up a hill, down a hill, with or without visibility. The goal of the game was to get there as fast as possible and never to linger behind the same tail lights for more than a few minutes. The "one-Mississippi; two Mississippi" rule of thumb for maintaining a safe distance between cars does not exist here. (My husband maintains I'm the only one in the world who practices it.) If a car is traveling too slowly and blocking the way of others, leaving no room to execute a daring pass, the nearest driver need only crowd the very bumper of the lead car and look the driver in the eye through the rear-view mirror. They'll get the message. I did.

Higher into the *serra* we passed through valleys shrouded in light fog and little hillside towns with modest, white-washed colonial churches. We climbed and climbed, passing farmers beginning their days; families walking with bibles; and the occasional vendor setting up stands to hawk fresh eucalyptus honey, string cheese and iced coconut juice. With the windows down we drove through the mist and let the cool, cloudy air, flow through the car, blowing away the dry dust of the city.

While the ascent into the mountains was filled with twists, turns, narrow lanes and crazy drivers, in retrospect it seemed relatively calm. As the descent began, the road narrowed to a barely two-lane ridge rimming the mountainside. Snaking back and forth, a hundred Ayrton Sennas jockeyed for position, each one outdoing the other in insane feats. I glided slowly down the road, pulling over when a chain of impatient cars had bottlenecked behind me. As we rounded a bend the horizon dropped suddenly and we found ourselves overlooking an incredible mountain descent to Churning Bay (*Enseada do Mar Virado*) and the town of Caraguatatuba. Thin wisps of clouds drifted across our view as we stopped to look down into the semi-circular bay dotted by rounded islands.

Clearing what we hoped was the last police checkpoint, Tyrone and I looked at each other and grinned. We had arrived in a different Brazil. The mountain road ended at a roundabout in Caraguatatuba that spun traffic off to the north or south. We turned north to Ubatuba Bay and our first dip in the South Atlantic. It was slow going. Traffic wove through the dusty, unmarked streets

of the town, sharing the lanes with pedestrians criss-crossing through the cars and vendors on rickety bicycles balancing children on the handlebars and carrying loads of fruit to the beach. Each road was an obstacle course of potholes and *lombadas* (speed bumps), which gave the whole experience the sensation of cruising in a low-rider with bad hydraulics.

We pulled into a dusty beachside lot and negotiated with one of the many small boys to watch our car (they offer and it's hard to refuse). We changed into bathing suits and walked into the sand. The beach was filled with families, gaggles of teens and vendors hawking food and beachwear. We walked along for a while to unwind and feel the sun on our shoulders. I turned back to look for the mountain road we had descended. There was no hint of the frenetic path cut into side of the hills; only deep greens dotted by Impressionistic sprays of the purple, orange and yellow of flowering trees. My feet sank into the coarse yellow sand as I walked into the water and stood for the first time in the South Atlantic. It is that moment that I hold in my mind as my arrival in Brazil.

BIKINI DEMOCRACY?

Slowly the people around me came into focus. I realized that I was the only woman wearing a one-piece bathing suit. Compared with everyone else, I looked like Esther Williams. Women of all ages and every possible size and shape strolled the beach in bikinis. This reminded me of a topic that interests me greatly: the cultural differences in the way women view their bodies and sexuality. Unlike the States, where only the most close-to-perfection dare to bare themselves in scantily cut bikinis, here women walk with an awareness of themselves as beings entitled to be sensuous and comfortable with their image — no matter what they look like. I reflected that I'd actually seen very few women wearing makeup and those that did used very little. Perhaps that was because I was in a small city in the interior.⁶ I filed away these thoughts and noted that what I saw contradicted what I had anticipated before arriving in Brazil. I had thought everyone in a bikini would be the golden-skinned *Girl from Ipanema*, and those that weren't would be influenced by the ideal of beauty immortalized in the lyrics. But this idea that Brazilian women are free of aesthetic pressures is a false one. Brazil's reputation for high rates of elective plastic surgery, as well as booming diet and cosmetic markets, indicates that Nature isn't always regarded as the ultimate artisan. Indeed, television, magazines and the radio are peppered with instant solutions to overeating and pesky cellulite. The prevalence of plastic surgery centers in our São Jose neighborhood hints at this com-

⁵ Friends tell me the whole country wept when Senna died. He's practically regarded as a martyr, particularly since it was discovered after his death that he had set up charitable foundations to aid children but never sought publicity for his work. It was recently announced that Hollywood has taken up the torch, with Antonio Banderas slated to play the famous racer.

⁶ Although São José is only 100km from the coast it's considered a city from the interior and therefore much more simple and unsophisticated. Of course this opinion is advanced primarily by the residents of coastal cities.



of her eyes and along the bottom edge of her eyebrows — just an everyday working woman, maybe on the “Beauty Plan”

TAG-TEAM SANTAS

After a mosquito-harassed sleepless night on the floor of a vacant Ubatuba Bay house lent to us, we awoke the next morning and headed back to Caraguatuba. There in the early morning light we watched sound technicians test amplifiers and saw hundreds of volunteers don fuzzy Santa-Claus hats in 85-degree heat Fahrenheit. We decided to stick around to see what would happen. We found a few chairs and placed them in the sand to watch the event unfold and keep an eye peeled toward the ocean.

By 10 a.m. it was well above 90 degrees and the crowd continued to grow. Families milled around on the bright, white cement waiting for things to get underway. Small children ran loose, playing with the free soccer balls and paddleballs that the Santa volunteers handed out. A young woman dressed in fluffy white boots, pantyhose and a Santa’s helper’s outfit took

plex contradiction. Equally evident is the fact that plastic surgery as a means to fix nagging insecurities is not restricted to the well-off.

On more than one occasion as I walked through town I was handed a promotional flier for *Saude Unicolor*, a health-insurance plan that claims to be the only one that includes elective cosmetic surgery in its coverage — and for only R\$24.95 (U.S.19.96) per month. The front of the flier shows a beautiful model and the monthly price. On the flip side is the “Beauty Plan” for plastic surgery offering a broad selection: breast reduction or augmentation, aesthetic correction of the nose or stomach, facelifts, a variety of liposuction options and more. That the “Beauty Plan” has been made a selling point for an insurance company (and a “health-insurance” company, at that) indicates both a high-demand for such procedures and broad acceptance of plastic surgery as part of a beauty regimen.

One recent morning I jumped on the elevator in our building to find myself face to face with a nurse I recognized from the 7th floor. About 5’7” and very slim, she wears her shoulder-length hair the color of beach-blond straw and looks to be an attractive 45. Dressed in her nurse’s uniform and clutching a fluffy, long-haired terrier under her arm she smiled quickly at me and looked away. I glanced at the dog, groomed and decorated with white satin bows above the ears. I looked back at the woman and noticed small white bandages at the corners

the stage with a cadre of coordinated background singers. They sang and danced to pre-recorded music heralding the arrival of Santa Claus. The speakers were so warped that the words were indecipherable to my gringo ears, but the families in the crowds sang along and danced with children on their hips.

We watched, absorbing the spectacle and wondering just how much more sun we could take. From over the horizon appeared a small helicopter. We joked that Santa was probably passing through. Sure enough, the helicopter slowed as it approached the concert area and began to descend. I grabbed a camera and went running in my bathing suit into the crowd. Santa had arrived and was making his way through the children. The crowd was so thick I couldn’t get closer to him than 20-people deep.

It was the first time I had photographed in a big crowd wearing only a bathing suit and carrying an extra roll of film in my teeth. (I was still wearing 50 percent more than most of the crowd — with the exception of Santa and his helpers.) Eventually Santa took the stage to toss candy into the crowd. My toes already bruised from random feet, I retreated to watch and see what would happen next. I wandered behind the stage. Rather than depart through the crowd, Santa exited to the back of the stage. Seeing him, children and their mothers ran up to the roped-off area and called out his name.

Santa approached the rope and smiled. The children



Getting Santa's blessing

turned suddenly timorous and stared wide-eyed at the red-velvet giant. With pieces of his beard matted against his cheeks and rivers of sweat pouring down his brow, Santa reached into the cluster of children and gently caressed the forehead of a little girl. "So beautiful," he said. The other children shuffled a little closer. Not one asked for a Power Ranger, Nintendo game, puppy, doll, or even a simple kite. They waited to be blessed. Santa's hands moved tenderly from forehead to forehead, illuminating their faces with his touch.

For the brave, he offered a hug and a kiss. Mothers snapped photos in the cramped confines. Some children returned Santa's gesture by smoothing his beard or laying their heads briefly upon his shoulder. They were visiting with a saint in a land where saints have clout and can make a difference.

But saints need to take breaks, too. And when they're dressed in Santa suits and it's 95 degrees, Santas can suffer from heat stroke. Santa signaled to one of the backstage handlers that he needed to go and was whisked into a tent. There he stripped down to belly padding and his own hair as another Santa suited up and prepared to head into the sun. It was a tag-team Christmas. Mean-

while, a group of curious children had worked open a corner seam of the tent and stood eating popsicles as they watched the respective dismantling and assembling of the Santas.

With a full sack of candy, Santa II stepped into the crowd, waving like a politician. The same Santa's helpers repeated his serenade as he took the stage and tossed candy to the children. Much older than the first, Santa II looked more the part as he spryly jumped from into the crowd to hug children and flash the national thumbs-up sign — "legãl!" (Great!) Children rushed him begging for a hug, a caress, a blessing.

Meanwhile: Back in the tent, Santa III was gluing on his beard.

FREEDING OUR CHICKENS

Originally, Tyrone and I had planned to depart for Brazil in mid-November. We thought this would give us the time to get involved with social programs that interested us and lay the groundwork for 1999 before the country shut down for the Christmas holidays. The process of getting our visa foiled all of that, however, and we delayed our trip until early December. By the time we arrived, summer vacation was in full swing and the upcoming holidays were on everyone's mind. A local joke is that Brazilians love to stretch out Carnival by beginning months earlier with the Christmas holidays — dubbed "Nataval" (Natal + Carnival). Many of our contacts had indeed begun their month-long *feiras* (vacations).

Resigned to a slower holiday pace than we had anticipated, Tyrone and I decided to take advantage of the open time and find a Portuguese teacher to help us gain finesse in the language, and get involved in everyday life. We found Yelva (pronounced ee-EL-va), an incredibly energetic woman who teaches English to Brazilian workers looking to advance themselves in management; and Portuguese to newly arrived foreigners at the multinational enterprises in São José.

Along with grammar drills and slang decoding, Yelva answered our questions about the city and its resources. We mentioned a party we had attended when we first arrived and the frustration we felt at not being able to keep up with the Brazilians on the dance floor. Her face lit up and she suggested that we stop in at the *Centro Vincente Aranha*, an old tuberculosis sanatorium that had been converted into a rest home for the elderly in one half, and a center for culture and arts in the other. There we might be able to take classes from a great dance teacher, Marcelo Brasil.

That afternoon we dropped by to check out the offerings. Everything had stopped until the 7th of January, when vacations ended. By then our schedules would be

too full for dance classes. Disheartened, we turned to go — just as Marcelo Brasil himself walked through the door. I don't think he understood our sense of urgency about learning samba, but he liked our enthusiasm and agreed to some holiday classes. We walked into the dance studio, a long room with high ceilings and old mahogany floors. Marcelo plugged in a boom box and dropped in a compact disc. He asked us to show him what we knew: samba, foxtrot, bolero? We laughed. We knew nothing — just the Cajun Two Step and maybe the Bump. We agreed to meet the next afternoon following lunch.

For a week we spent three hours a day studying Portuguese and three hours practicing samba. We needed more time in both. Marcelo would dance with each of us to a *pagode* rhythm and then have us work it out together. We would stiffly step off the basic box of couples samba. At the end of the first day Marcelo told me I had "German hips" and that we both needed to "*soltar de frango*" ("free our chickens" — cut loose and have fun). We tried, even practicing at home.

Most afternoons the power would go out about a half an hour into the lesson and we would dance in sweaty, boomless silence. On the third day I suggested that we dance outside under one of the beautiful gazebos instead of suffocating in the studio. Marcelo remarked that it was a good idea, but Brazilians would never do that until they danced perfectly. We were shameless and too sticky to care what anyone thought. As the hot breeze blew through the gardens, Tyrone and I would dance to our own voices counting, "*Um, dois, pausa*" (One, two, pause.) When we got it right, Marcelo yelled, "Beautiful!" the only word English word he knew.

Marcelo eventually cajoled us into accompanying him to dance classes he taught for City Hall employees. He offered it as a means for us to get more practice and attend the end-of-the-year dance. We agreed, and set off to walk across town to the union hall where the class met. There his pupils were gathering informally, kissing greetings and tipping back cold beers.

Beer bottles empty, and a second round on the way, we headed upstairs to a windowless, tiled room that doubled as a meeting hall and garage. Two cars were parked near big aluminum doors. Marcelo lined up the women and men across from each other and announced "*pagode!*" Couples paired off with the partners he had assigned and the music began. Tyrone and I panicked. Music! How can we actually dance to music? We were only used to *um-dois-pausa*. Suddenly our feet were cement. We stumbled through the first song as other couples whirled around the room. Then Marcelo called out, "*bolero!*" and the music changed. "Maybe we should skip the party Friday night," I suggested.



Children looking through a tent corner, watch "tag-team" Santas change gear behind the stage of the Caraguatatuba beach party.

But Friday came, and we felt brave. The union hall had been transformed. The lights were low. Streamers and candles decorated the walls. Where the cars had been parked a band was set up. The dance floor was packed. In the center of it all was Marcelo spinning one of his students around to a fast paced samba. "Uh-oh," I thought. "*Um, dois, pausa*" wasn't going to cut it.

We worked our way through the tables and met Marcelo as he left the dance floor. We exchanged hugs and kisses and he encouraged us to strut our stuff. We demurred and instead ordered *caipirinhas*⁷ to sip as we watched the dancing. This was not a group of beginners. After an hour the band slowed the tempo to *pagode*. Tyrone and I, emboldened by the familiarity of the rhythm, wove through the couples and found the darkest, most out of the way part of the dance floor and be-

⁷ A *caipirinha* is a cocktail made of smashed lime pulp, sugar, ice and *cachaça*, the Brazilian liquor made from sugar cane.



The three boys from the favela swim in knee-deep water from a heavy rain storm that filled an old fountain.

gan: "um, dois, pausa; um, dois, pausa." Couples whirled by, but we stuck to our corner. After a few songs we were able to "free our chickens." My "German hips" began to move on their own. "Beautiful!" yelled Marcelo.

We were speaking Brazilian.

LEARNING FROM EVERYONE

As the weeks have passed here I have had to pinch

myself a few times to make sure it's real. I have the gift of time to explore a culture and learn as much as possible about it. In my time here I have forged friendships with several women from various walks of life. Their lives will be the topic of my next newsletter.

Um abraço brasileiro,

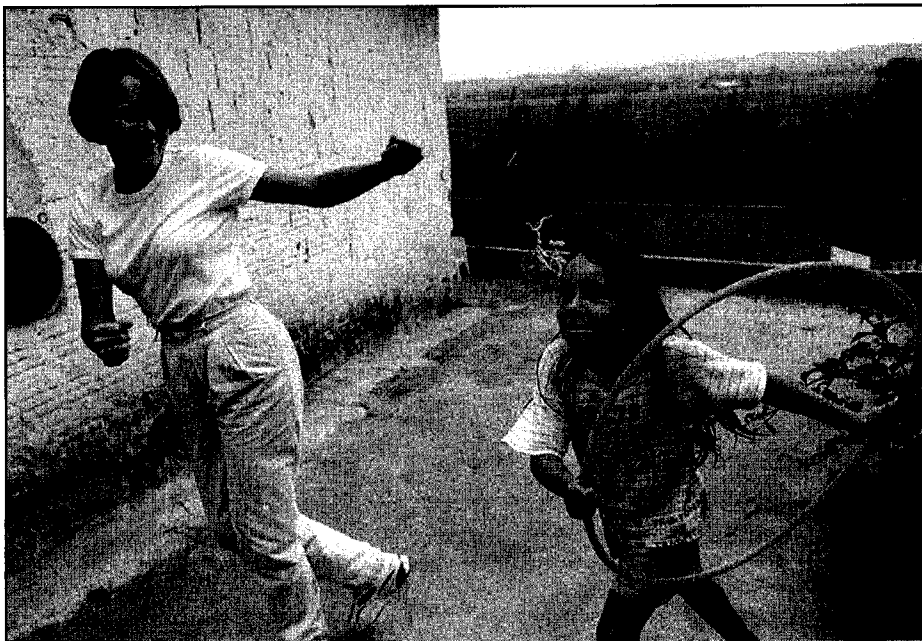


Photo: Tyrone Turner

The author gets a dance lesson from Amanda Cabral, 9, during a visit with the Cabral family in the Banhado area of São José.