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“Finding Community”

RECIFE, Brazil

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By Susan L. Sterner

CONNECTING

“We were at a party, a bunch of friends from the neighborhood were throwing a party. Elias (ay-LEE-as), my husband, brought his stereo,” began Neta (NEH-ta), a 39-year-old mother of three and community leader. “It was four years ago. There was a big room and everyone was dancing in a circle, moving around the room. The stereo was at one end and as Elias and I were passing it he stopped and lowered the volume. Everyone stared at us. Elias announced, ‘I can go into the street and have five hundred women, but this is my preferred. This one is my only woman!’ Everyone laughed. Elias embraced me and kissed me. He turned up the music and we kept dancing.

“I was a little mad. I didn’t think it was that funny so the next time we passed the music, I stopped and lowered the volume and said, ‘I don’t think I could ever have five hundred men but if I could have ten this one would be my preferred, my husband!’

“Oh Daughter, no one laughed! Well, some of the women laughed a little. No one would look at me. Elias fumed! He said I had no shame. He said I was acting like a prostitute because only prostitutes spoke like that. Oh, he was mad. We fought right there. He took his stereo and left. None of the men



Rio Doce Comunidade Mulher Vida (CMV) member Judete “shares positive energy” with fellow group members in a closing exercise after a weekly Friday-afternoon meeting. The Rio Doce group formed over six years ago with Neta at the helm. At its peak 41 women actively participated. Currently about 15 regularly attend.

would talk to me. Everyone was mad at me, even the women. The dancing ended and they went home. I left too and when I got home we fought more.

"I was embarrassed but even more angry. Nothing is equal for a woman here. Nothing! Elias said 'five hundred,' I said 'ten'. Elias has had lovers. I've had none. But that didn't matter. If a woman speaks like a man she is a whore."

Neta told this story during a routine Tuesday-afternoon meeting of community leaders at the *Coletivo Mulher Vida* (Women's Life Collective), a nonprofit organization located in Olinda, Pernambuco, dedicated to enabling women and adolescents to break cycles of violence in their lives. Neta has been a member of their discussion groups and later a community leader for more than eight years. Her story caught my attention. I had been trying to meet women community

leaders since arriving in the Recife-Olinda area in late February and Neta struck me as the type of dynamic, open person through whom I could learn. After the meeting I approached her about tagging along with her as she worked.

But I am getting ahead of myself; meeting Neta happened only after many false starts. Breaking into the everyday life of Recife and finding individuals willing to open their lives to me has taken time.

We came to the Northeast¹ because it seemed to be the place where the fate of the Brazilian people is being played out. Roughly 30 percent of Brazil's 157 million inhabitants live in this region. Of the 30 percent (about 46 million people), 7.2 million are undernourished, and 2.2 million of these *famintes* (famished) are living in the state of Pernambuco.² In 1996, infant-mortality rates in the Northeast were reported to be at 60 deaths per 1,000;



¹ The Northeast of Brazil consists of the nine states of Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe. The metropolitan area of Pernambuco includes the municipalities of Recife, Olinda, Paulista and Jaboatão dos Gurarapes.

² According to a Sunday, April 18, 1999 special edition of the *Diário do Pernambuco* newspaper, "Fome: O mal que mata em silêncio," over 32 million Brazilians go hungry or undernourished everyday in Brazil.

while the rest of the nation is at 34.7 per 1,000.³

In the greater metro area of Recife, violence is endemic. The Recife police reported nearly 500 homicides in the first two months of 1999.⁴ A local television station reported an average over 50 murders occur here every weekend.⁵

Yet with all of this, Recife, Brazil's fourth-largest city with a population of 3 million, has a reputation for being in the vanguard of social programs and has cultivated a fertile culture of nongovernmental organizations.⁶ It is estimated that nearly a thousand nongovernmental organizations have projects underway in the state of Pernambuco.⁷

Even the three local papers get involved in the debates over social problems and solutions and call on the carpet any entity, be it governmental, NGO, church, private or other that fails to live up to its promised course of action.⁸ Little usually comes of these public critiques, but they at least serve to keep issues and realities, which could easily become "invisible," on the breakfast tables and minds of Pernambuco's middle and upper classes.

My first look at Recife came through a bus window as my husband Tyrone and I rode across town to the historic district to join revelers on the next-to-last night of *Carnaval*. The afternoon sun was waning and a cool sea breeze blowing in from the beach. As we rumbled along Avenida Domingos Ferreira the notion of more than one Brazil became tangible to me. We had left behind the lush, temperate, industrial and prosperous South and arrived in the legendary Northeast: Land of devastating drought cycles, the cruel history of sugarcane, the fast-paced Cajun-like beat of *forró* music and the larger-than-life criminal heroes of Lampião (LAM-pee-ow) and Maria Bonita.

Even the romantic warm tone of the late afternoon

sun did not camouflage the pervasive, crumbling decay of Recife. A layer of orange-yellow dust covered everything, including the bus windows, rendering a sepia cast to the buildings and drought-stunted plants. Burnt-out and abandoned lots dotted the main avenues. People huddled in scraps of shade while they awaited buses as dogs roamed through garbage piles or napped in the holes in the sidewalks. The city looked exhausted and hungry.

We turned a wide corner and headed across one of the twin bridges spanning the *Bacia do Pino* (Pino Basin). Nestled between the bridges and braced from behind by the perimeter wall of the Lebanese Sport Club is a small community of fishing families and boat repairmen. I looked back at them as we zoomed over their roofs and saw a woman leaning against a beached boat working on a fish trap. Just beyond her the whole bay was filled with bobbing plastic bottles and plastic bags. Piles of rotting paper and other garbage had washed up onto the sandbars and edges of the river. Along the horizon men waded into the murky water with casting nets and fishing lines as the refuse floated by on its way to sea.

I pushed my face into the wind and inhaled the smell of low tide, bus exhaust and a hint of raw sewage. We landed on a peninsula for a short stretch and then crossed the Rio Capibaribe. As we descended from the second bridge into the city the salty ocean smell receded and was dominated by the throat-tightening pungency of a sewerage canal cut down the middle of the main avenue.⁹ The stench, combined with the heat of being packed into the bus hip to hip, made me feel faint.

Now, after nearly three months of living as a Recife I look beyond the grime and decay. I hardly notice the dust or feel the heat. But the smells of the city remain as startling and jarring to me as on that first day. They have not faded into the background, but have be-

³ "Pesquisa de indicadores sociais mostra desigualdades regionais," *Diario De Pernambuco*, March 11, 1999, Recife, Brazil. I have had to rely on newspaper reports about this study and have been unable to actually review a copy of it to understand how it defines infant mortality, e.g., is infant defined as under 12 months?, are stillbirths or deaths during birth included? The same study alleges that the life expectancy in the Northeast is 64.5 years while in the south it is 70.2 years. Figures from the Statistical Abstract of the United States 1998: The National Data Book., U.S. Department of Commerce, p. 99 lists the 1995 infant mortality rate in Mississippi at 10.5 per 1,000 and, in last place, the District of Columbia at 16.2 per 1,000. The U.S. figures exclude stillbirths and apply to children under the age of one.

⁴ "Polícia já registra 496 homicídios este ano" *Jornal do Commercio* March 5, 1999, Recife, Brazil, p. A1 and "Estado diz que morreram 496 em 2 meses" *Diario de Pernambuco*, March 5, 1999, Recife, Brazil, p. C3.

⁵ "Jornal do Record" evening news program, Thursday, May 13, 1999.

⁶ Recife is the largest city of several clustered together to form the Grande Recife metro area. Other cities included are Olinda, Paulista, and Jaboatao dos Guarapes. The 3 million reflects the combined metro population. Recife alone has 1.4 million officially counted residents.

⁷ "Governo repassou R\$10.5 milhões as ONGs em 98." *Jornal do Commercio*, May 30, 1999, Recife, Brazil.

⁸ The three dailies here are the *Jornal do Commercio*, *Diario de Pernambuco* and the *Folha de Pernambuco*. All are published here and circulated statewide.

⁹ The Derby-Tacaruna Canal, as I later learned it is called, was not intended to be a sewerage canal but rather a drainage canal opened to the rivers. The infrastructure of the city is so decrepit, however, that sewerage does indeed drain into it. The city is currently working to repair the canal as part of its "Recife 2000" program: an effort to improve city infrastructure with one focus area being a roughly four-mile stretch of Avenida Agamenon Magalhães, which is ironically becoming a corridor of hospitals, clinics and private-healthcare offices.



A young boy pauses with his burro on the edge of the Rio Doce dump. He and his friends were digging for recyclables like glass and aluminium, to earn money for their families.

come part of my landscape, my temporary home.

I ride the evening bus with my eyes closed and know when we're barreling along the Olinda inlet, or passing by the swamp-rimmed *favelas* where the residents burn their trash and fill the air with the acrid-sweet smell of burning plastic. A sharp blast of sewerage followed by cooler air carrying a fishy smell means we have traversed downtown and are once again heading across the bridges toward the community where Tyrone and I live.

Another aspect of life here that never fades is the presence of children and adolescents in the streets. I meet them washing windshields and hustling drivers, selling gum, sleeping on the sidewalk. While the vast majority of children in Recife do not live or spend their days on the street the number that does is large enough to make them characteristic of the city landscape and social fabric.¹⁰

These children beg and tug at my shirt for money, food and even water. They can turn on the charm in an instant. One moment they are goofing around with each other and laughing, the next they spot a *gringa* (foreign woman) like me and tuck down their chins, evoke puppy-

dog eyes and speak with tears in their voices as they hold out their hands for anything I can spare.

Actors or not, it's the way they eat. They are hungry for attention as well. My husband Tyrone and I have adopted a policy of not handing out money, but of buying food for hungry children. This is our small effort to reduce funds that fuel glue addiction. It also makes it a little harder for the older kids to shake down the smaller ones, though we've certainly seen food ripped out of little hands.

I have yet to be met with scorn when offering food. I often sit with the kids and buy them a sandwich or hotdog and talk with them. When I try to guess their age I'm always off by a few years because their bodies are so behind in development and underweight from malnutrition.

It's impossible not to wonder about their home lives and what drives them to the street. Many of them beg or work in the streets in order to make enough money to feed their families. About 70 percent of the kids I've met say they are the bread-winners of their families. They say

¹⁰ Recife officials estimate there are 700 living in the streets. The number is ambiguous because it is not clear how many children live on the street completely cutoff from any family. Many of the children have homes and families but have left them because of economic hardship, abuse or other violence.

their fathers are gone and their mothers are unable to find steady work or are hindered because there are other younger children who need constant care. Their lives are the complex results of personal misfortune driven by generations of unemployment, poor education and broken families.

I looked around those first days and tried to notice where the women were. I met them as they sold home-made seafood broth along the beach, rented out chairs, swept balconies, wrung out huge tubs of laundry and hawked fruit along the sidewalks. I would introduce myself to them and try to draw them out about their lives. Most of the time the conversation centered on the struggle to make enough money to feed themselves and their children. We did not speak of the future or dreams. Their minds remained in the present and their rough hands and tired eyes spoke of exhausting pasts.

The teenagers I met had already known years of responsibility and labor within their families and in the informal economy. By age 15 or 16 childhood is long over and some kids are themselves parents, repeating the same cycles. Solutions seem far away and difficult to enact on the large scale. That would mean a fundamental reorientation of Brazilian society and redirection of funding. Getting these children off the streets is directly linked to improving their home-lives, which in turn means changing the status of their mothers through better health care, access to education and child care, liberation from domestic violence (or at least the support to resist it), independence from abusive men and hope for their children. Much more easily said than done. But I am here to learn just how wide the gulf is.

COLETIVO MULHER VIDA (WOMEN'S LIFE COLLECTIVE)

Márcia Dangremon sat next to me inhaling cigarette after cigarette as she recounted her career, including eight years of living underground and on the run during the military dictatorship. The wicker chair she sat in creaked as she swept her arms in grand gestures and told me how she began her crusade became women's rights and countering domestic violence. When the political atmosphere opened up in the late 1980's Márcia emerged from the underground with a dream to open a resource center for women: a place where they could talk freely, find support and learn how to change their lives for the better. Together with friend Cecy (ce-SEE) Padrilla, Márcia started the Coletivo Mulher Vida in 1991 in Olinda.

Cecy, a poker-faced *nordestina* (northeasterner), whose reserve and distance falls away when she speaks about her work with young women, laughed and teased Márcia as she told her story. Her career began as an activist with rural unions in the western part of Pernambuco. She left the work after years of frustrated efforts to make women's equality a union priority. The final blow

to her idealism came when a union member raped his daughter and Cecy found herself obligated by union by-laws to defend him. Shortly afterwards she left to join Márcia in the effort to begin the Coletivo. She currently heads the division geared toward adolescent girls

Cecy recounted all of this as we stretched out in wicker chairs facing a window overlooking Márcia's courtyard filled with seven dogs and a chicken coop. As we talked the dogs barked, visitors dropped in for a few minutes and a coffee and Márcia jumped up and down to make telephone calls on my behalf to other organizations as they occurred to her.

As they tell it, Márcia, Cecy and other founding members of the Coletivo began by going into communities and talking with women about their rights, their domestic lives and the resources available to them via the Coletivo. They tried to form consciousness-raising groups but met with little enthusiasm in the communities. Very quickly they and the other social workers realized they were being treated formally and as outsiders. The women they were trying to reach doubted the Coletivo understood the reality of their lives.

Márcia changed her strategy and invited women from the communities to come to the Coletivo and participate in "encounter" groups in which they would share their experiences with violence, unemployment, reproductive health, rape, discrimination, child care, etc. The floor was open for them to talk about any topic. The goal was to give the women a safe place to share their lives without the threat of recrimination from their husbands, families or churches.

The participants who took to the process and seemed emboldened by it were then extended the opportunity to go through a course of training to learn how to be group leaders themselves. Following completion of the training course these women were assigned to communities to begin encounter groups. This strategy met with much more success.

Cecy offered to take me to the Coletivo later that afternoon to see the operation and meet the people that worked there. I was eager to do something besides sit and talk. I wanted to meet the women who needed the services of the Coletivo and find someone who would let me hang out with her.

The Coletivo is housed in an old, rambling 1970's-style beach house overlooking the main beach in Olinda. It's a quiet location right off the major avenue and bus lines. When Cecy and I arrived, the atmosphere was calm. We climbed the stairs and joined a small meeting of community leaders going over their weekly plans and bouncing ideas off one of the resident sociologists, Tertulina.

I took a seat on the balcony with them and tried to

follow their conversation. To my dismay, there was a man grinding rocks in the garden below and I could barely hear the conversation. That, combined with the fact that my chair faced out to the lulling pattern of the waves and bright light meant I was soon daydreaming and groggy. Then something came up which made Neta very animated and launched her into the story of humiliation at the dance referred to earlier. After the meeting Neta agreed to let me accompany her the following Thursday to a session in the Olinda suburb of Tururu.

TURURU

Thursday afternoon arrived and I got on the bus and rode the hour to the Coletivo. Neta arrived and we found Marcos, the driver, and jumped into the Coletivo's Volkswagen mini-bus. Marcos took the helm and Neta rode shotgun. I sat behind them and bounced along on the slippery vinyl seats as we headed out of town, leaving the pavement behind.

Tururu is located on the outer edge of the city of Paulista. At one time it was a large *fazenda* (ranch) filled with fruit trees and grazing animals. Locals say that the owner of the *fazenda* was actually a very decent man, a point proven, they say, by the fact that he ceded pieces of land to his most loyal workers and helped them build homes for their families. Eventually, he sold off chunks of the land that subsequently went fallow and were invaded and settled by the families who live there today.

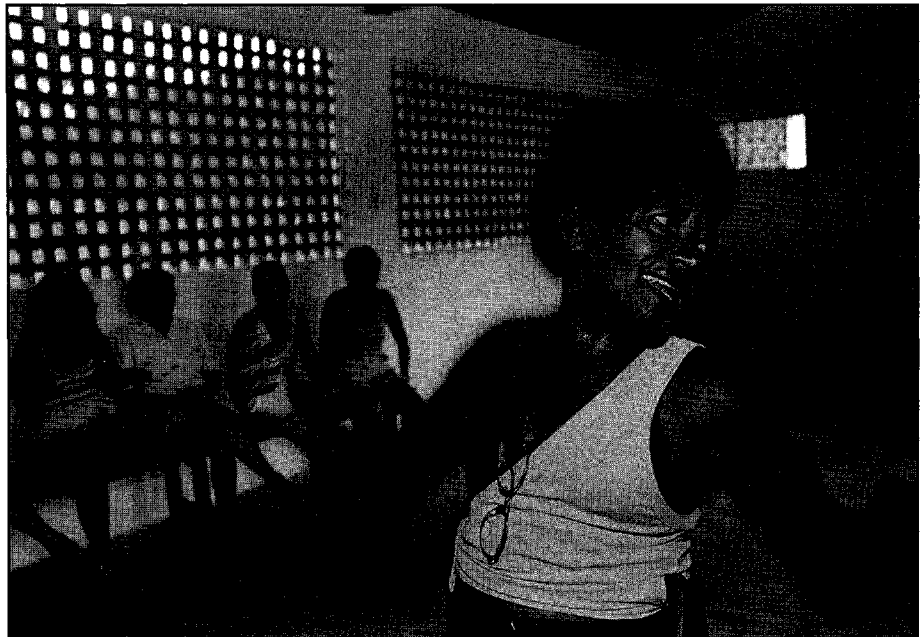
The main road through Olinda parallels the beach running north and south, crosses over the Rio Doce (Sweet River), the Rio Negro (Black River) and a marsh area called the *maré*, or tide, by the locals. At Milton's Bar, a small, cobblestoned street bears to the left and cuts through a well-maintained collection of middle-class houses and established local stores. After 500 yards the cobblestone ends abruptly and the road turns into a motley collection of deteriorating macadam, mud and stones until it gives way to dust.

As the road changes, so do the homes. Tile accents disappear and smaller, whitewashed brick houses become more common. Many have makeshift cake or candy stands perched in the windows. At a point where the road veers into a field of brush, the homes are simple concrete boxes with wooden shutters. Those that seem to house

the better-off have concrete or wooden fences around the front yard, good for privacy and containing children and chickens.

Marcos negotiated the van through a group of obstinate pigs grubbing in the dirt and stopped in front of a simple, cement resident's-association building surrounded by a tall, whitewashed-concrete wall. Neta and I hopped out and passed through the gates of the empty courtyard and then again through a padlocked metal grid that served as the door to the meeting hall. Inside the walls were bright white and a gentle breeze blew through windows made by bricks turned on their sides.

Neta and I organized chairs into a large circle and waited. The women trickled in, greeting Neta and nodding politely to me. I had expected to be taken as something of a novelty, but no one paid me much attention. (I later learned they had assumed I was a new psycholo-



Carminha (car-MEEN-ya) dances after a Thursday afternoon Tururu meeting while others enjoy the music and spectacle. The Tururu group loves to party as much as it loves to talk and frequently brings snacks and music for impromptu celebrations before heading home.

gist sent to work with Neta, a practice that the Coletivo had used until funding cuts forced them to downsize.)

When about 15 women had arrived, Neta asked everyone to stand in a circle. She removed one of the chairs and started a game akin to musical chairs, but without music or a diminishing number of chairs. The idea was for everyone to scramble for a seat and the odd one out would start the game again. Soon everyone was laughing and sweaty. The atmosphere was energized and the women joked and hollered across the circle to one another.

Neta calmed them down and introduced me. One



Tururu members Severina, left, Lena, 2nd left, Camila, 3rd left, and Denise, center, joke around as newcomer Sonia gives Neta, 2nd right, a hug as they joke around following a weekly community meeting. The Tururu group has been together for 15 months.

by one each woman greeted me and told me her name. They were young and old, a few mother-daughter couples, Catholics, Protestants (or *evangelicos*, as they say), employed, unemployed, singles, divorcees, widows and the abandoned. I scribbled frantically, trying to remember names and get their general stories down.

Carmelita, a hearty woman with sharp eyes and a loud, knee-slapping laugh, took up the issue of life for Brazilian women. "Life here is always the same. We get up. Make breakfast. Follow the routine of life: care for our children, care for our husbands. That's all."

"I am woman and father to my son," said Silverina, a tall smokey-skinned woman with incredibly sad, dark eyes and wearing a "*Deus está aqui*" (God is Here) t-shirt. Her husband left one day for work and never returned. She takes in laundry to support herself and her ten-year-old-son.

Carmelita added, "We have to work in our homes because we don't have the money to pay someone to clean for us. That's a thing of the middle class."

Neta asked if they could recall a moment of happiness, adding that she was herself very happy that as of that week she and her husband ("*meu santo marido*", my

sainted husband) had survived 21 years of marriage. She turned to Denise sitting at her left, but Denise shook her head. She couldn't remember a moment of happiness in her life because the sudden death of her 17-year-old son eclipsed everything. He awoke one morning last August with a tremendous headache and pain in his eyes and called out "Mamãe, Mamãe! My head hurts too much!" He died on the way to the hospital.

Nede (NAY-gee), a long-legged, freckly chain-smoker with black hair down to the middle of her back, smiled and said she was happy because her daughters had decided to become *crentes* (believers) in an evangelical church. "I'm catholic. But I'm so happy because this decision has made them both calmer. Before, they fought a lot. I don't care what they choose to be; I just want them to be good and honest. I saw [my daughter Manuela] pray for the first time and ask for real changes in her life." Nede began to cry. "I am very happy for this." The women murmured consolations and encouragement.

"Happiness never really exists, only moments when you feel happy," sighed Carmelita.

Lucy, a wiry, bespectacled woman in her early sixties who looked the part of a sun-hardened missionary, countered, "I'm very happy. I have four daughters," she

said, waving a gnarled and sinewy hand to draw attention to her quiet voice. "They're all very obedient and give me respect. I'm alive. I don't need a man. My husband left me with my fourth daughter in my arms thirty years ago. I never had a man again. I did not miss him in my life. He came around every once in a while and it was never any good. He died three years ago, finally, and I've been very happy."

Neta pushed the others to come up with one instance of happiness. Denise reluctantly recalled how proud she was when the son that passed away was selected to spend a month in France during the 1998 World Cup in an exchange program for young Brazilian soccer players. "It was marvelous for him. He saw a world outside this favela."

Ana, a round-bodied, quiet woman let out a big breath and added, "The day at the beach was beautiful. I got home and the house was destroyed. But I was lucky. My husband didn't yell at me for being gone all day and I just went to bed."¹¹

"I was very happy when my daughter [Maria José] found work. But then she had to leave the job as soon as she found it," said Amara, as she looked over at her daughter.

Maria José explained that she had finally succeeded in finding a job that would help her family. She found

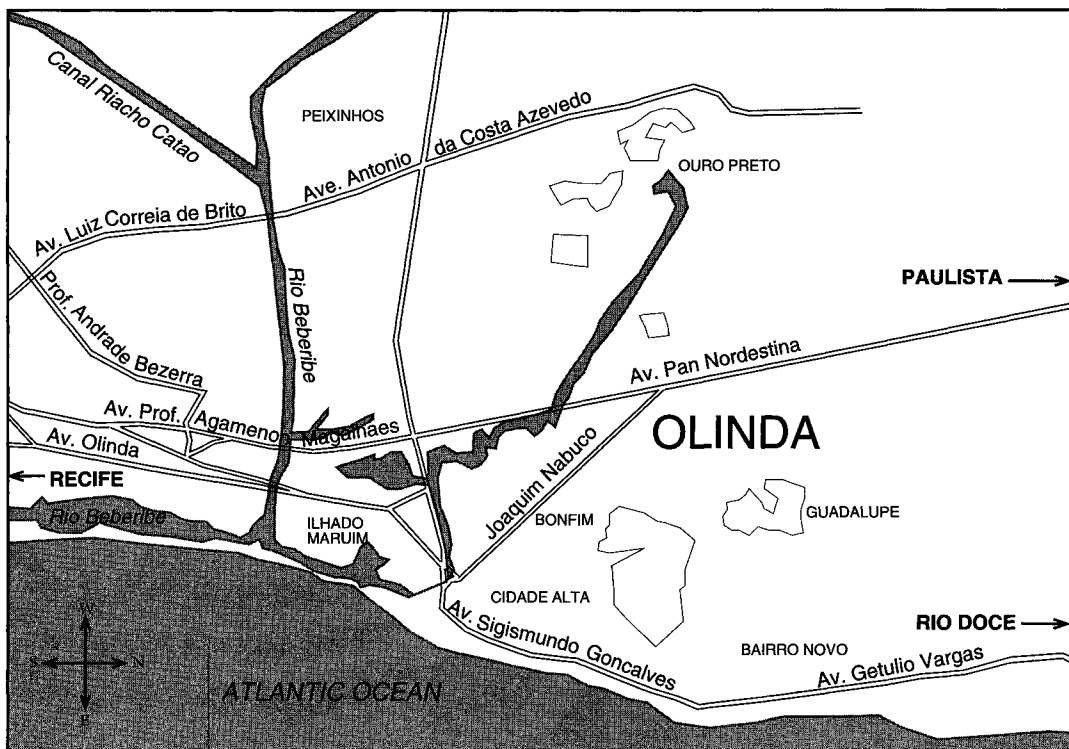
work as a maid in a nearby hotel but after one day her husband forced her to quit, saying she would be corrupted by seeing people having sex and then cleaning up after them. She would turn into a whore, he argued. So she had to quit. "The job does no good if it makes my husband angry," she shrugged.

Camila, a prim woman with Indian features and glasses ever at the tip of her nose, said happiness and sadness are two sides of the same thing. "When my husband doesn't drink he is one thing. When he drinks he's another."

Neta commented, "For me everything changed when my mother died on March 17, 1991. Since then every problem I've had has been bigger. Life has been harder. I still miss her."

Neta then asked them to name an important moment in their lives. For her it was when she learned she could never have children and adopted her sister-in-law's baby, Adriano, as her own. Two years later she became pregnant with her second son, Lucas, and then again with her third son, Jonathas (JON-a-tass).

Many women also listed the birth of their first child as the most important moment for them. Three named their most important moments as when they left their parents' homes to start their own families. But Camila, a *crente* and childless, said her most important moment



¹¹ Tururu and two other groups went on a field trip to a local beach the Sunday before I met them.



Dona Ana, left, jokes before a Tururu meeting with Dona Paulina, who at 83 is the elder of the group. Through the CMV meetings the women of Tururu have reaffirmed and redefined longstanding friendships within their community. They have also forged new bonds as well as new roles for themselves.

was in finding God. A few quieter women nodded in agreement.

At the end of the meeting Neta had everyone rise and hold hands. They said out loud what they hoped for each other, *i.e.*, respect, work, happiness, and then each kissed the cheek of the woman to the right. When the circle was completed in one direction the kisses returned in the other. With the last kiss landing on Neta's cheek, their voices exploded as they bade each other goodbye amidst laughs and calls out for to me to return. I promised to take them up on the invitation.

RIO DOCE

There's a bus that runs in front of our house called the *Rio Doce/Piedade* (Sweet River/Piety) line. *Piedade* is a beachside community to the south of us and the preferred locale of the big, luxury, convention-hotels and extravagant high-rise apartments. The community of Rio Doce straddles the municipalities of Olinda and Paulista to the north. Along the main avenue is a well-established working-class community surrounded by rambling

favelas rimming the edges of the river and the *maré*. The ride from one end of the economic spectrum to the other takes 90 minutes and runs the length of the cities of Recife and Olinda before jutting inland to Rio Doce.

I stood at the front of the bus and watched for the soccer fields that would be my signal to descend. The fields were filled with boys of all ages. Competition seemed keen but good-natured on and off the field.

Generic four-story cement apartment buildings on stilts stood the length of the fields on both sides and cast long shadows in the afternoon sun. At the sound of giggles I looked up to the laundry hanging from windows and saw girls waving and smiling at the athletes. I passed a solid little house converted into the Residents Association building. It was filled with people, mostly young men, talking, shooting pool and playing dominoes.

I arrived at a whitewashed clubhouse building with faces of *Maracatus* (roughly defined as Indian and African-rooted *Carnaval* dancing groups) painted on the sides. The building sat right up against a swampy, polluted in-

let of the *maré*. Next to the building were three dumpsters that looked as if they were routinely over-filled. An apron of garbage a foot deep with a radius of 15 yards spread behind them. A group of children and adults were digging through garbage — some for recyclable materials, others for scraps of food. I sat by the gate of the building and watched as I waited for Neta to arrive. A few minutes later, a young girl passed by who had attended the Tururu meeting the previous day as a guest. She recognized me and led me to Neta's house.

We walked down a wide, dusty alley lined by simple houses. Some were made of brick, some were only wooden shacks. A few were finished off in smooth cement and rimmed by neat courtyards. About 15 houses in, the path jogged to the right. We came to a low-cement wall painted gray with peach trim and the young girl, Sonia, called out, "*Neta! Neta! Já chegou a gringa!*" (Neta! Neta! The gringa arrived!).

Neta came to the door of her porch and opened the grill gate. "Are you ready for another day, Susana? Let's go!" Neta has lived in Rio Doce for over 14 years and has led the sessions for six. She is clearly in her element. As we made our way back towards the *Maracatu* house she stopped in front of the homes of the participants and called out their names: "*Zezé! 'bora! Dona França, 'bora!*" (zay-ZAY, let's go! Miss França, let's go!), collecting followers like the Pied Piper. By the time we reached the building we were a group of nine.

Neta unlocked the building and we filed in to grab old desk chairs, benches or crooked stools and drag them outside to form a circle in the dirt courtyard. As we were settling down Cleonice and her daughter arrived. They live on the other side of the *maré* and Cleonice pushes Ana over in a rickety wheelchair every Friday afternoon. The going is slow for them both because the path is deeply rutted and 58-year-old Cleonice struggles with elephantitis in her left leg.

From the first moment, I could feel the character of the group was much different from that at Tururu. The greetings were more intimate and familiar. There was nothing like a celebratory feel to the meeting: it felt subdued, reflective. The women seemed quieter and a little more melancholy than in Tururu. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps because a strong rapport within the group already existed, Neta did not open with a rowdy game, but rather with a quiet, meditative exercise. Then we sat down and Neta asked for anyone to comment, for my benefit, on what they thought it meant to be a woman in Brazil.

Judete (ju-DEE-tay) a 50-ish, self-described artist, immediately was the first to comment. "To live here is to live with discrimination. Men discriminate against women and women discriminate against women."

"We have no access to work and school. In school girls are

treated as if they are not as intelligent as the boys," commented Euridice, a 30-year-old mother of a teenaged girl.

"And that just means we live with more unemployment," concluded Judete.

Zezé, a beautiful, dark-skinned woman slumped in a school-desk chair, seconded Judete. "The hardest fight here is against unemployment."

Neta commented that many times it is women who discriminate against other women through gossip, criticizing them for ideas that seem new and perpetuating the same myths that have kept women under the thumb of men for generations. "And many times these ideas of how a woman should be are passed on mother to her daughter. There are many men who refuse to let their wives work even if there is no money coming into the house. Some men believe women should have children until they can't again. Men don't let women work and she never gets her own money or independence. She has to ask permission to do everything. She has to beg for bus fare."

Judete shook her head, "None of my husbands has ever dominated me. Since I was seven years old I have been independent. I learned never to listen to men. They have nothing to say. I've never let them stop me from doing something. Every time they tried to dominate me I left them or kicked them out of my house. As long as we're equals in everything, it's fine. But as soon as he tries to run me, I'm out the door!"

Neta responded, "There is never real equality in the house. The man never does anything in the house. He doesn't participate, but when things are not perfect he complains. Women have to run the house. It's part of our survival."

Angela added, "We have to react to men in order to show that we as women, I as a wife, have value outside the house. A friend of mine has work outside the house. Now her husband sees that she has value. He understands that she can bring money to the family, that she can be tired, too. We have to fight all the time to show our value."

Neta then redirected the conversation along the same lines she had in Tururu and asked them to think of their happiest and saddest moments. Angela, who actually lives in the Tururu area, just a few houses from the meeting room, said, "The day of my separation."

"For both happiness and sadness?" I asked.

"Yes for both. I was very happy to leave him behind, but with him I lost my house and furniture. We were together eight years and now he has another woman living with him, using my things."

"I have my health", said Judete. "I have my children

and I have finished building my house. I am very proud of that. I learned to do it with my own hands from a masonry course for women. Now it is finished and no one can take it away from me. Still my life is a hell right now because my daughter ran off with a married man eight days ago and I am left behind to receive the criticism. It is her life but I am suffering for it."

Cleonice looked over at her wheelchair-bound daughter Ana and smiled, "I have a healthy family, many grandchildren and many memories. My deepest sadness was the death of my fifth child [of eight]."

Zezé had put her head down on the desk surface of her school chair and was not answering. Neta prompted her to talk about something positive but Zé only shook her head. "My life is horrible! I have no happiness." But Neta insisted and finally Zé raised her head and said the beach was nice. [The Rio Doce group went on the same trip with Tururu.] Then she sighed and continued, "I was saddest when my mother and father died. But now I am really sad. My son was arrested yesterday for robbing someone and he's locked up in the jail. He'll never get out. I don't have the money to pay a lawyer." Judith and Dona França reached over and rubbed Zezé's back to comfort her.

Ana Maria, a younger-looking woman who arrived from work on bicycle about an hour after the meeting began said, "I have a son who is six years old. He is not the son of my current husband. His father ignores him, denies him. He married another woman and has a daughter. My son knows who he is. They live just over there," she motioned her head across the marsh. "He [my son] sees his father with the girl and is hurt. My boy is registered under his father's name but is denied. This is my greatest sadness."

Neta summed up the meeting with soothing words about the support that can be found within the group for all of their sorrows. She asked us to stand in a circle and join hands and try to think of positive events in our lives and repeat line by line, "I deserve to be happy. I deserve

to be respected. I deserve a life without violence. I deserve to dream." I watched as the women repeated these words with their eyes closed, clutching each other's hands. A few cried as they spoke. I looked beyond the circle to the humble houses and thought about the difficulties these women suffered and what they were trying to find with each other.

GROUP ENCOUNTERS

As I awaited my return bus I mulled over my initial impressions of the two groups. At first glance the needs seemed the same—they were looking for some kind of support, or solace, a camaraderie of suffering. They were looking for answers and a safe environment where the conversation could be different — maybe more honest. And where other women who lived in similar situations would listen. The process seemed an important one for them; an opening-up to the idea that it is possible to seek support without losing face and that they do not need to remain afraid and isolated from each other.

For the next month, I continued to attend the meetings and get to know the women. I noticed differences between the two groups that had to do with more than just personality combinations and illustrated the processes individuals go through in trying to change patterns in their lives. The Tururu group had been together for only a year and the behavior within the group pointed to this. There the women are learning to trust group interaction and

the idea that they can speak openly. Their primary concern seems to be a fear of gossip — of becoming grist for the rumor mill. However, even those who are reluctant to speak listen and react intensely when another brings up an issue with which they identify.

With Tururu, Neta uses physically active games to get the women to move around with each other and break down barriers and mix up comfortable seating patterns. At first there was community resistance to the founding of a Coletivo group there. Several of the more prominent



Neta takes a few minutes to walk and talk alone with Dona Franca after a Rio Doce meeting.

women of the community dismissed the idea that women either needed it or would benefit from a group. But enough women showed interest that the Coletivo went ahead with meetings. Now those same women either participate themselves, or refer women to the group who need the support.

In Tururu the more extroverted women compete for the spotlight by making jokes or wry comments and often break down the larger group conversations by pulling those near them into little asides. Still Neta can usually cajole them into paying attention to her or the woman trying to speak. They pay fairly close attention to her opening readings or comments and give her exercises sincere effort. It is apparent that speaking about domestic and personal issues is hard for the women. It's not as if they walk into a group removed from their daily social circle, unburden themselves under a cloak of anonymity and then return to daily life. These women are trying to learn how to share their experiences with their neighbors.

All of this means they have to learn to look at each other differently, that is with greater trust and less fear of the grapevine. This in itself is a huge challenge, given that Tururu, the community, does not end where Tururu, the group meeting, begins. Indeed the meetings often take on the flavor of a big social event.

Everyone is on their best, most animated and polite behavior. Behind the cordiality hover petty jealousies, hurt feelings, old offenses, family loyalties, community traditions and more. Frequently there is a little meltdown of unity following the meeting with a few women pulling Neta aside to point out some egregious behavior or voice an irritation about who brought more soda or baked a better cake; who danced too much or who hogged the conversation.

Yet the meetings are special events for all of them. They show up without fail. Most arrive a little late but freshly showered, made-up and in their best non-church clothing. They are proud to be part of the group and enjoy walking through the streets on the way to meeting — all dressed up with somewhere to go.

One of the most determining characteristics of the Tururu meetings is that they occur within the neutral confines of the Residents' Association building. The building has a small courtyard surrounding it, which means the conversations and games that occur are fairly private. On any pretense, the women love to bring lots of refreshments and snacks and end the meetings with a little dancing arm in arm. (Usually, a crowd of children gathers to watch the spectacle through the gate — and hope for leftovers.) The women have made the Thursday meetings their own space — a special time not to be missed. They have conveyed status upon themselves as group members without closing participation to others.

Although Tururu's level of discourse does not yet

go beyond social expectations outside the group, they are finding a role in the community and learning how to support each other and restructuring their support network. This means that sometimes the rule that what's discussed within the meeting stays within the meeting is not always observed — gossip is a hard habit to break when it's part of neighborhood communication. Also, women frequently sit through 2 to 3 hours of meeting only to wait for the opportunity talk with Neta privately about their lives. The trust is still not in the group process.

Rio Doce is a contrast. In Rio Doce the women have been together for over six years. Their enthusiasm is not quite as high-pitched as that at Tururu, according to Neta, because they have ridden out all of the changes and cutbacks of the Coletivo. To me it seems Neta's personal relationship with the community as her home also has a great deal to do with the timbre of the meetings. By the time Friday afternoon rolls around nearly every woman in the group has broached or hashed out issues over Neta's kitchen table. Most who participate in the group live within 100 yards of each other. They know each other well.

They have already battled the idea held by the greater community that the meetings are just formalized excuses to gossip and spread malicious news. There is a certain "group esteem" in that they have made themselves impervious to outside criticism and have complete confidence that what is said within the meetings will remain private. This is true even for newcomers or those who float through on occasion.

In Rio Doce, Neta lets the process progress in a more unstructured manner. The women arrive promptly and begin talking about what they need to say. In every session Neta spends the first half-hour quiet, letting the women air the topics they have on their minds. Inevitably the group cedes the floor to one woman who talks about her situation. From this Neta pulls together the direction of the meeting and builds a dialogue. Thus the meetings flow in the direction the women need for it to go.

Although the women trust each other, many days the physical environment of the meeting affects how open the women feel and how well they communicate with each other. Unlike Tururu's closed residents' hall, Rio Doce meets in the open courtyard of the Mararacatus' clubhouse. Every week the women drag out chairs and form a circle. Usually the clubhouse caretaker, Mario, sits inside the open window during the meetings. One side of the courtyard shares a low common wall with the laundry porches of a row of small houses. None of the women living in the houses are members of the Coletivo group. At the opening of the courtyard is a pool hall and the soccer fields.

Throughout the meetings children, cousins and husbands, appear at the gate and make the "psssttt!" sound to call someone over to the gate. Children come and go.

The flow of the meeting is constantly interrupted and Neta has to fight to maintain any continuity during the two hours. Even more important, the women watch who is on the other side of the fences listening or observing them and guard their words accordingly.

I asked Neta why, if they feel inhibited and shy about talking and doing exercises where the rest of the community can hear and see them, do they keep attending the meetings? Her open kitchen door could serve the same purpose. "Susana, I never asked that question. We've been together for a long time. We've shared a lot. It's true I do most of my work in my kitchen but I think it's important to them. They've learned a lot from the Coletivo, from being part of the group and I think they want other women to know we exist. It's a place to be together whether you feel happy or sad."

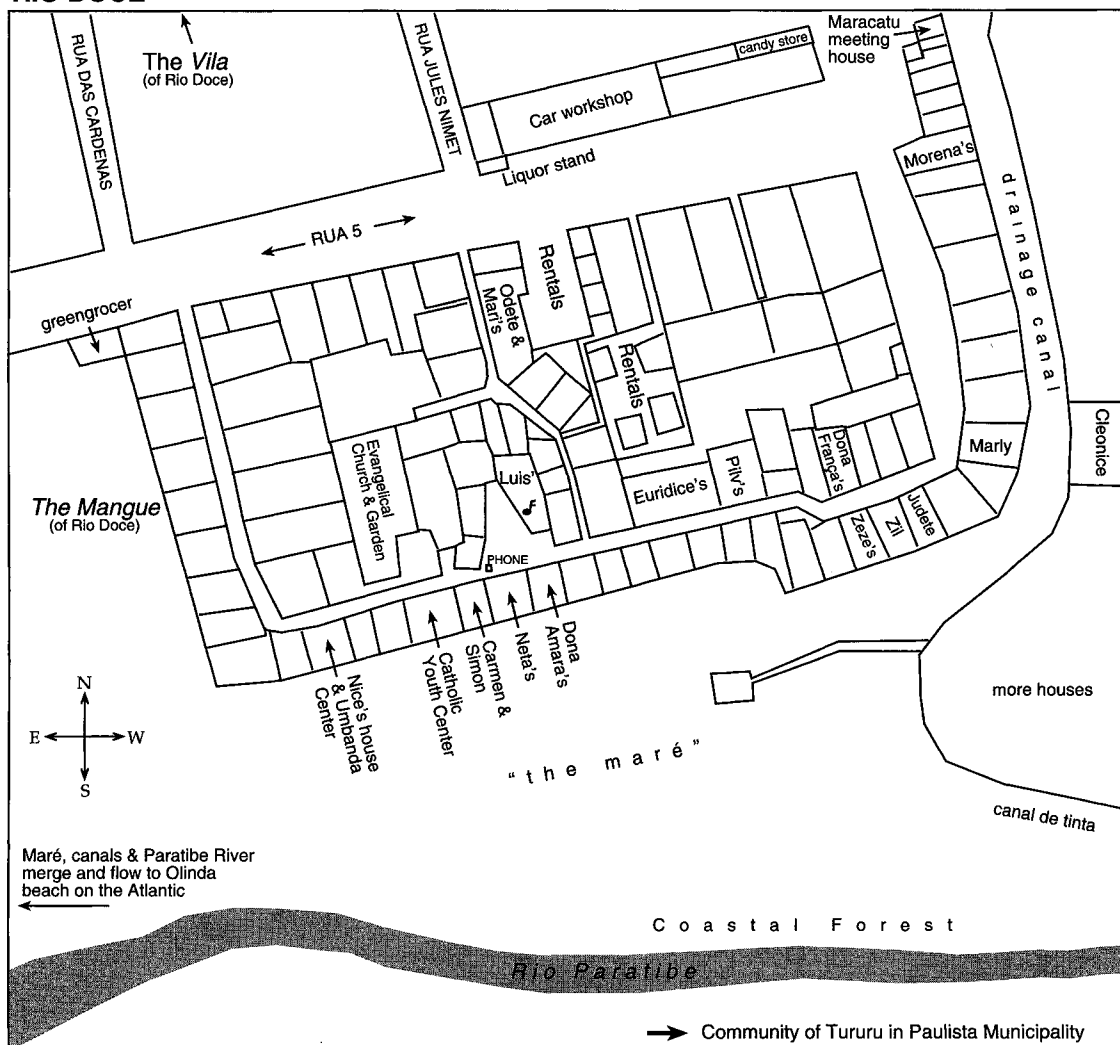
Over the next six weeks I learned the importance of the group as a symbol to other women in the community. The second Friday I was in Rio Doce, a young woman named Janaina (ja-NEYE-na) arrived. The other women were particularly happy to see her. They knew it

took a lot of bravery for her to leave the house and attend the meeting because her husband is controlling and violent. She arrived and began talking quietly to Neta at first and then more loudly to the whole group about what she felt in her body: constant headaches, nausea, anxiety. She described her fears of being alone, of her husband's violence and his threats to take their daughter away from her. She recounted three panic attacks in the previous week alone, and how her doctor assured her that her blood pressure would lower and her vision clear up if she were able to escape or change the violent atmosphere of her household.

"I know I'll feel better if I leave him. Before I married him I never had problems. I grew up alone: no parents, never anything of my own. I am very abused. I never suffered from anything [physical ailment]. A girlfriend of mine, since I was single, came to see us on the 4th of April. She stayed for many days. My husband became so jealous of her, everything about her. He didn't want me to talk to her. He got so angry he smashed the bed.

"He never gives me any money. I have to beg him

RIO DOCE



for it and I have to beg him for permission to go anywhere. He controls everything I do.

"He spent sixty *reais* just drinking the other night. One day! In one day I tried to take my daughter to a market. I spent four *reais* the whole day and he was very mad at me. I live suffocated. I left him for a while and he cried a lot. I'm going to separate from him. He's too egotistical.

"He beat me. I went to the *Delagacia* [police department for women]. I was there from one to five p.m. telling them about him. He never thought I would do that. I made a report about him and three days later they arrived with a paper telling him he can not beat me any more. He cried and cried and said I was destroying our lives.

"I said 'no, I'm tired of our lives'. He stopped beating me, but he still tried to kill me with his words. He has tried to kill me [before] with his hands, too. He's a pure coward.

"He wasn't like this when we met. He was cool, respected me, he was happy when we had our daughter.

"When I remember all the things I used to dream of I get very sad. I don't have dreams now. I just want to survive every day with my little Luana."

The group let Janaina vent and cry. As things calmed down Neta used Janaina's example to open talk about the effects of domestic violence, physical or emotional,

and pointed out that if left unchecked it could destroy all parts of a person's life. She also talked about the power of fear to keep a woman in a bad situation. A woman is often taught by her mother that she must bear anything except being left by her man. In Janaina's case this means physical abuse, and living with a man so controlling that he has her cook the food and then doles out to her only what he believes she should eat. Following this, the other women encouraged Janaina to do what is best for herself. They gave examples of fear and repression from their own lives.

On another occasion an unknown woman arrived at Neta's house for the meeting. (The Maracatu building keys had been temporarily lost.) She was a thin, almost frail wisp of a woman and entered timidly. She introduced herself as Ana Patricia. Neta welcomed her and had everyone say their name for her

When the circle had made its way back to Ana Patricia she sobbed into her hands. The room fell quiet as the women told her to cry hard "*para chegar em casa bem leve*" [to arrive home very light]. Ana Patricia cried and through her tears told how she was afraid of her husband, and that her children were hungry. She said she was crying because she felt relieved to know the group existed. She would think about them when she was sad. Then she dried her tears, stood up, and said she had to leave because if her husband were to arrive home and find the doors locked and the house empty, he would beat her. She thanked the group and left. She has never been back.



Sandra, Pamela and Saulo, three children from the neighborhood, giggle together while they wait for their lunch during the Sunday-afternoon party.

Neta's cousin Mari, right, tells stories and gets Zezé laughing during our Sunday barbecue at Neta's house. During the day dozens of neighbors, friends and relatives stopped by for food,



That same week a new participant arrived in Tururu: Nilsda, a woman so skinny and tiny her bones were visible through her worn clothing. She looked exhausted and scared. She huddled close to Neta and swallowed her words as she tried to introduce herself. The rowdiness of the group did not yield to her. She remained on the sidelines as many of the more timid ones still do in that group.

Three weeks have passed since Nilsda started to attend the group. She has yet to actually speak out loud in the meetings but everyone knows her story. Her husband routinely abused her and slept around with other women. He contracted AIDS and returned to their house for her to care for him, verbally abusing her until the very last days of his life. Nilsda has just learned that she has AIDS as well. Throughout the meetings her little body is racked with a powerful cough she tries to stifle. Everyone knows this story but it has never been shared with the group. However, Nilsda has started gain a little weight from the food donated to her. She even arrived in a new outfit the week of her birthday.

Through these groups lead by Neta and other Coletivo leaders, small communities of women are learning how to talk about the violence in their lives and about ways to break the cycles they live. But the path along the way seems as difficult as standing up to a domineering husband. They are reinventing their own culture. To be able to share and get anything useful out of the groups they must fly in the face of stereotypes that have sur-

rounded them all their lives. They learn that a group of women can do more than gossip; that there are others to trust; that sharing suffering can be positive; that women can have the freedom to broaden their world beyond the four walls of their houses; and that they do not have to live beneath men. They are teaching themselves to reject the role of victim.

For Neta the biggest lesson these women learn is one she says it took her forever to learn herself: that she is important and valid. The most valuable work she does is with improving women's self-esteem, teaching women to believe they are worth something even though their husbands have affairs, or have left them; teaching women they do not deserve to be beaten or belittled. This is Neta's goal.¹²

SUNDAY AT NETA'S

On the fourth Friday I attended the Rio Doce session Neta invited me to her house for barbecue and to meet her *santo marido* (saintly husband) Elias and their three sons that weekend. Early Sunday morning we bought pastries and flowers and jumped on the Rio Doce/Piedade bus. By the time we got to Neta's she had already headed off to the market with Elias to buy groceries for the day's party.

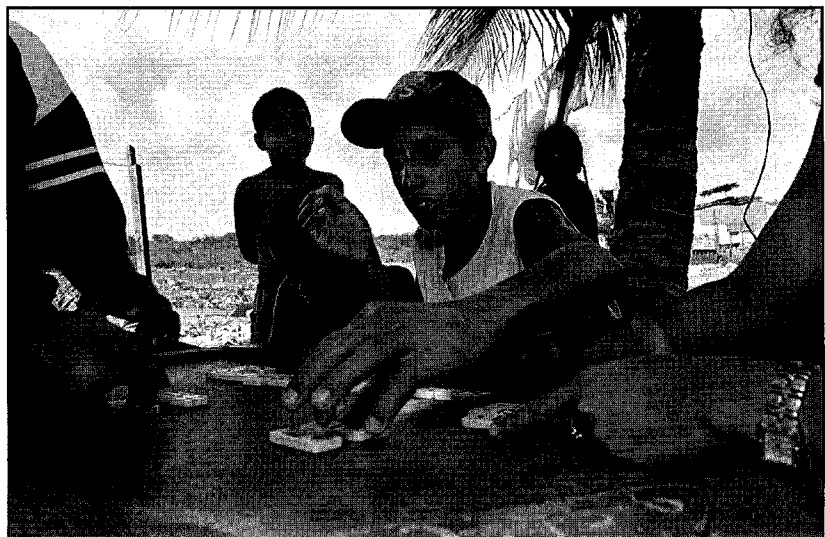
The 1,800 families of this particular *favela* in Rio Doce refer to their neighborhood as the *Mangue* because it butts up against inlets lined with *mangue* (mangrove trees).¹³

¹² Following my meeting with Márcia Dangremon and Cecy Padrilla of the Coletivo, Márcia made introductory calls and set up appointments on my behalf with a variety of organizations that work with women and adolescents. It turned into a maddeningly packed week of courtesy calls and interviews. However, one common theme linked all the groups, which ranged from shelters to traditional medicine, together: raising the self-esteem of the women who came to them had to happen before any other work went forward.

¹³ What is interesting about this is that the marshy area referred to as the *maré* has *mangue* (mangrove) trees in it so it is sometimes called the mangue as well. So both the marsh and the favela have the same name.



Neta jokes with her husband, Elias, as they dance to music he blasted through the neighborhood with the stereo system he dragged out from the house.



Sergio, Neta's nephew, makes his play during an ongoing Dominoes tournament during the barbecue.

The *Mangue* sits behind a more urbanized area of Rio Doce just off the main road. That area is referred to as the *Vila*. Lucas, their 14-year-old son, led us along different zig-zag paths, passing by relatives' homes and jumping over drains until finally reaching the paved road of the *Vila*. Clusters of men were already drinking beer and *cachaça* outside small liquor stands. They watched us with mild, hazy curiosity. We found Elias and Neta and joined them for a cold *caldo de cana* (sugar cane juice) before finishing up the marketing and wandering back through the *Vila* and then into the *Mangue*.

When we entered the house Elias showed us the mosaic-like tiling he had done to the floors with leftovers from his construction jobs. Lucas was eager to show us how to clean the crabs we had bought so we followed him through the kitchen to the backyard. From the front alley the houses looked solid and well-established. Standing in the backyard I could see that the residents of the *mangue* were just barely carving out their piece of the pie.

We arrived just as high tide was beginning to turn.

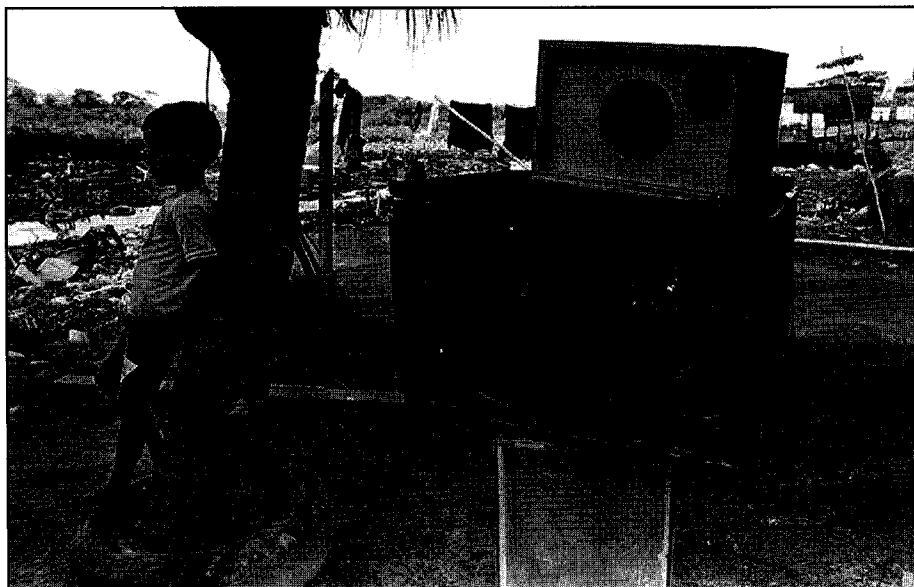
The *maré* rises and falls with the sea tide and carries with it the tons of garbage the residents throw into the water or toss on the banks. The smaller, lighter garbage was starting to float toward the ocean. Some larger pieces jutted out of the mud and the tidal current cut paths around them. I walked to the edge and looked up and down the horizon. To the left I could see no end to the wooden shanties of Rio Doce. To the right I just barely made out the main road. Straight ahead of me was a stretch of mangrove trees behind which stood a rare area of intact forest.

Off to the left, butting up against mangrove trees, perched a shack on an island of garbage and mud connected to the rest of the *mangue* by a 4x6 plank bridge. Up and down the bank sewerage pipes ran directly from houses that had plumbing into the *maré*. I turned back to the house and saw Tyrone had crouched down on the clay to play marbles with a group of little kids. I decided to go inside and help Neta prepare lunch.

As I chopped vegetables Neta sautéed crabs and made salads and *vinagretes* (similar to fresh *salsas*) to ac-

company the barbecue. We talked about food and family and she asked me about the United States. The whole time we cooked, a steady stream of curious friends and relatives appeared in the kitchen to meet me, or ask me to say something in English for them.

By the time the food was actually ready to eat, Elias had dragged his stereo outside and rigged up speakers. He cranked out mega-volume *samba, salsa* and *merengue* as he and his friends invited Tyrone to join them for whisky and coconut juice over ice. Soon the domino board came out and everyone got involved in a marathon run of games and good-natured bickering.



Revel, a nephew of a neighbor, hovers on the edge of the party as Elias' extravagant speakers blast music through the mangue.

Two hours before sunset a group of about 15 people — old, young, men, women — appeared out of the mangrove bushes and slogged in the low-tide mud past Neta's house. I glanced up from the game and looked back at them. I thought it might make a good picture and stood to get my camera but was motioned down by Lauro, a friend of Elias. I looked again and realized the last kid, the tall teenager at the end of the group, was carrying a revolver. I watched as they passed and made their way across the plank bridge to the shack on the mud hill. The teenagers stopped and helped themselves to the water in plastic jugs near the door: probably the only clean water the absent residents had for drinking. Then the kid with the gun fired a few shots into the mangroves and they left,

single file, one after another over the plank-bridge. I looked back at Neta's family. They seemed as mystified as I, but much less concerned.

I watched the group pick its way along the shore and disappear into the *mangue*. The clicking and slap! slap! of dominos resumed. What was it like to live here all the time and not just come and go for meetings? I wondered about the day-to-day context of the women I was getting to know. I wanted to get closer to their lives, particularly Neta's, who worked so hard to help others through the Coletivo. She carries herself with confidence and keeps her door open and hot food on the stove for anyone who needs to talk. I wondered about her marriage, what her sons thought about her work and the dynamics of the community outside the meetings. I resolved to ask Neta if I could live with her for a while, just to get a real feel for the neighborhood and her work.

VAGUE CAN BE GOOD

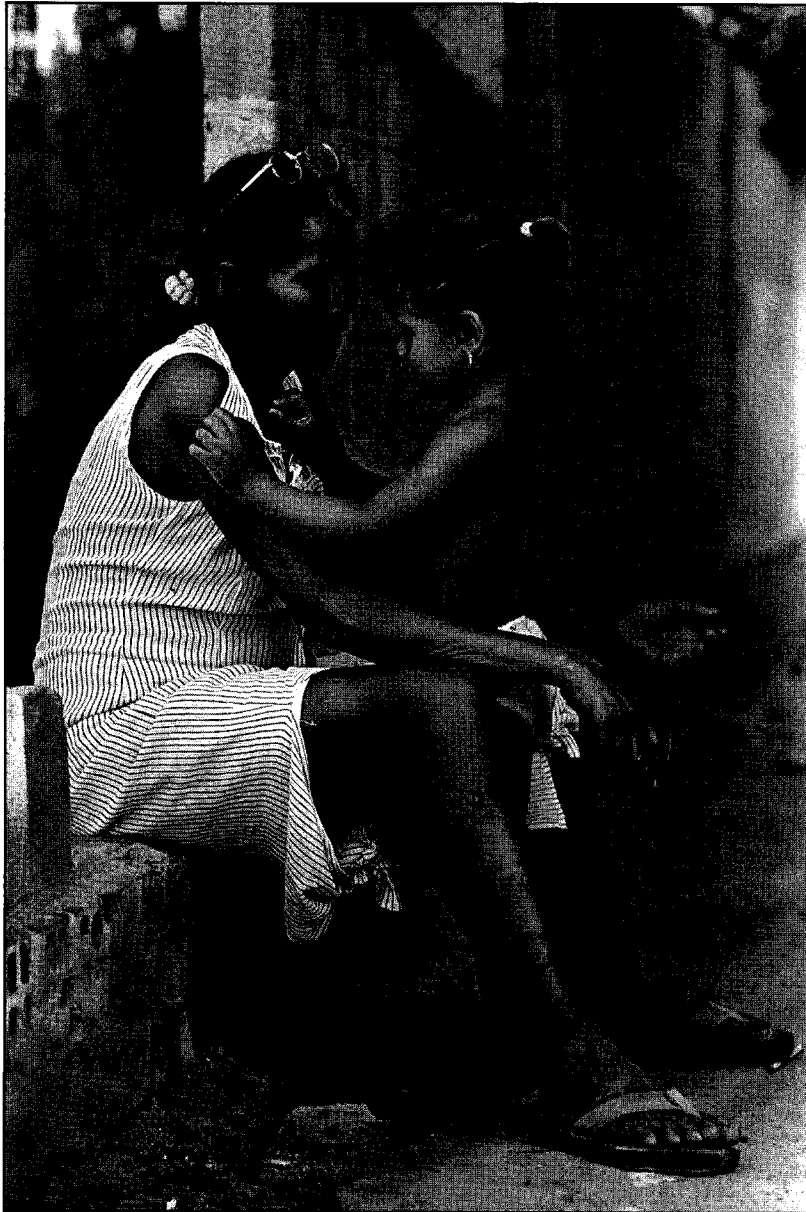
The following Thursday, as Neta and I waited for Marcos to get ready to take us to Tururu, I asked Neta, what she thought of the idea of having me as a roommate for a few days. I told her all I needed was a corner of the floor, some rice and water. I'd be set. Nothing special.

She looked stunned by the question. "*mais não temos nada para oferecer uma pessoa de sua altura* [But we don't have anything to offer to a person of your stature!]

"Stature? I don't have any stature. I'm just Susana. But if it will make you uncomfortable for me to live in your house, I understand com-



A little "toasted" from whisky cut with coconut juice, Neta's cousin, Erivan, and friend Lauro, right, share a dance under the palm trees behind Neta's home.



Away from the games and music, Zezé talks with her granddaughter Sandra

ted the whole time, but never about my visit. I figured I had permanently ruined our friendship and she was being decent enough to put up with me through the end of the day. We jumped off the first bus and stood together for the second one.

Just as my bus arrived she said, "So you want to go there when?"

"Where?"

"My house!"

"Well, Monday. But only if you're comfortable."

"My house is a mess, you understand. I have three boys."

And with that I had to grab the bus. She had been vague, but I thought that was a good sign. I took her answer for a "yes" and was excited about the upcoming week.

The next afternoon, after the Rio Doce meeting I lingered to find out what time I should arrive on Monday. We settled on 11 a.m. so I would be early enough to accompany her to another community. "But on Thursday Marcos can't take us to Tururu. I'll have to meet you at Milton's Bar and we'll walk into the *favela* together." She said this over her shoulder as she was running off to another appointment. I was baffled. If I were to be living with her the next week I would not have to meet her at Milton's Bar because I would already be with her. Maybe vague wasn't so good.

pletely and take no offense at your refusal."

With the next phrase Neta changed the subject completely. We talked about everything from sewing classes to soccer. I had no idea what this meant but decided to let Neta be the one to direct the conversation. Others arrived and joined the conversation for a moment or two. Each time someone left I expected her to return to the subject and tell me a visit was out of the question. Finally Marcos was ready and we rode off to Tururu.

After the meeting Neta and I walked the mile back to the main road to catch the first of two buses. We chat-

Confused, I went home and worried about it all weekend. On Monday morning I got up and packed a backpack for five days and headed off to Rio Doce not knowing if I would be back that night or the following weekend.

At the Rio Doce soccer fields I stepped off the bus into a sizzling noon sun. There was no one else about. As the bus pulled away I walked across the fields and listened to my feet hit the parched clay. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. "Who knows," I thought. "Maybe I'll come out of this day having offended a friend, or maybe I'll come out of this week with a better understanding of life in the *mangue* of Rio Doce. Who knows?" □



Adenildo, a next-door-neighbor, tosses pebbles into the trash- and sewerage-choked mare behind the houses in Rio Doce.

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