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TLT-9  
THE AMERICAS

*Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.*

## ***Muribeca: The Making of a CD Cover and Other Stories***

February 1, 2000  
JUAZEIRO DO NORTE, Ceará, Brazil

Peter Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Four West Wheelock Street  
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Dear Peter,

The BR-101 highway heading south from Recife passes the suburban cluster/town of Prazeres, after which there is an exit for Muribeca (The BR designates a Brazilian federal highway, but it should stand for "Big Ravines" because of the impassability of stretches of the road). The turnoff is crammed with mechanics' shops overflowing with auto bodies and spare parts, small groceries, and roadside beer stands.

The commercial congestion drops off quickly to reveal the old brick smokestack of *Engenho Muribeca* (the Muribeca sugar mill) and the lands that



Thirteen-year-old Rodrigo scans the trash of the Muribeca municipal garbage dump for aluminum cans as vultures dry their wings in the background. He said that he made 30-40 reais weekly (about U.S.\$18-23), as much or more than a minimum salary (136 reais per month, or about U.S.\$78). With this money he helped with household expenses as well as bought things for himself. However, because of working, he hadn't been to school in two years and could not read or write.

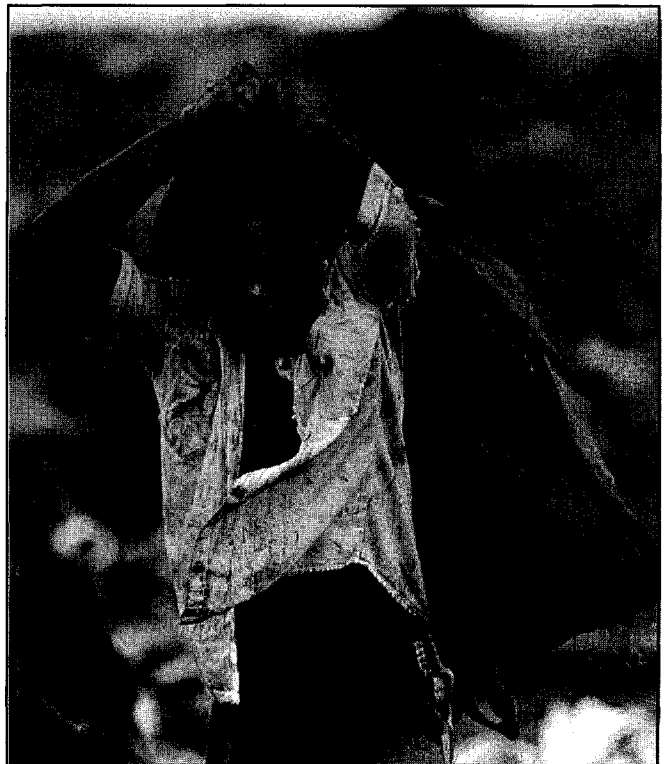


once belonged to it. Once, waves of sugarcane dominated the horizon. Now, wide, square patches dirt mark sites for future apartments and gas stations. The surrounding hills are being eaten, the red dirt being scraped away and loaded into trucks to be sold for construction and landfill. It amounts to the leveling of Recife's periphery, a slow redistribution of the dirt as hills come down and buildings go up.

The name "Muribeca" is hardly a positive draw in the real estate world, though. That's because a half mile beyond the ruins of the *engenho*, beyond the intervening *favela*, is an ever-growing mountain of trash. When "Muribeca" is mentioned, this municipal garbage dump is what they are talking about.

When I visited Nicaragua in 1995, well after the Sandinistas had stepped down, and international attention had fallen away from the struggling country, I went to Managua's trash deposit. A friend took me to see how the people lived and worked there: the vicious competition for basic elements — glass, wire, paper, plastic — that the rest of society had discarded. I felt sorry for them, a population of poor souls — men, women and children literally scraping the bottom of the human barrel to survive. They saw themselves as honest workers, choosing to toil in the fields of trash to feed their families rather than beg or steal.

Coming to Brazil, I knew that similar scenes were repeated across its landscape. According to UNICEF,



*(Top) A young boy steps through piles of trash on his way to look for more aluminum cans. (Above) An eight-year-old boy helps his mother by carrying sacks of cans from where she is picking them out of the trash to their holding place.*

88 percent of Brazil's cities had open trash dumps. In some of these dumps, half of workforce were children.<sup>1</sup>

When I arrived here in Recife last year, the name Muribeca popped up when I talked to different people about child labor. I wanted to visit the dump, as I had in Managua, and document what was happening. My freelance sociologist friend, Andre Vasconcellos, offered to help me visit the site.

It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon on a beautiful Sunday when Andre rolled up in his silver Fiat with a "Devotos do Odio" ("Hate Devotees," a band from the Alto José do Pinho neighborhood in Recife) sticker in the back window. Our friend Massacre, from the rap band "Faces do Suburbio" ("Faces of the Suburb," also from Alto José do Pinho), sat in the front passenger seat decked head to toe in chic surfer/grunge wear provided free by one of the sponsors of his band. My wife Susan and I jumped into the back with our camera bags and we were on our way.

I didn't give Massacre's presence much thought, ex-

cept that he seemed to know how to get to Muribeca better than Andre. We rolled along, and it wasn't until we stopped for a soda at a roadside stand near the ruins of the old Muribeca *engenho* that Massacre sprang his question.

"Hey, if you guys get some good pictures, can I take a look at them for a possible cover for our next CD?"

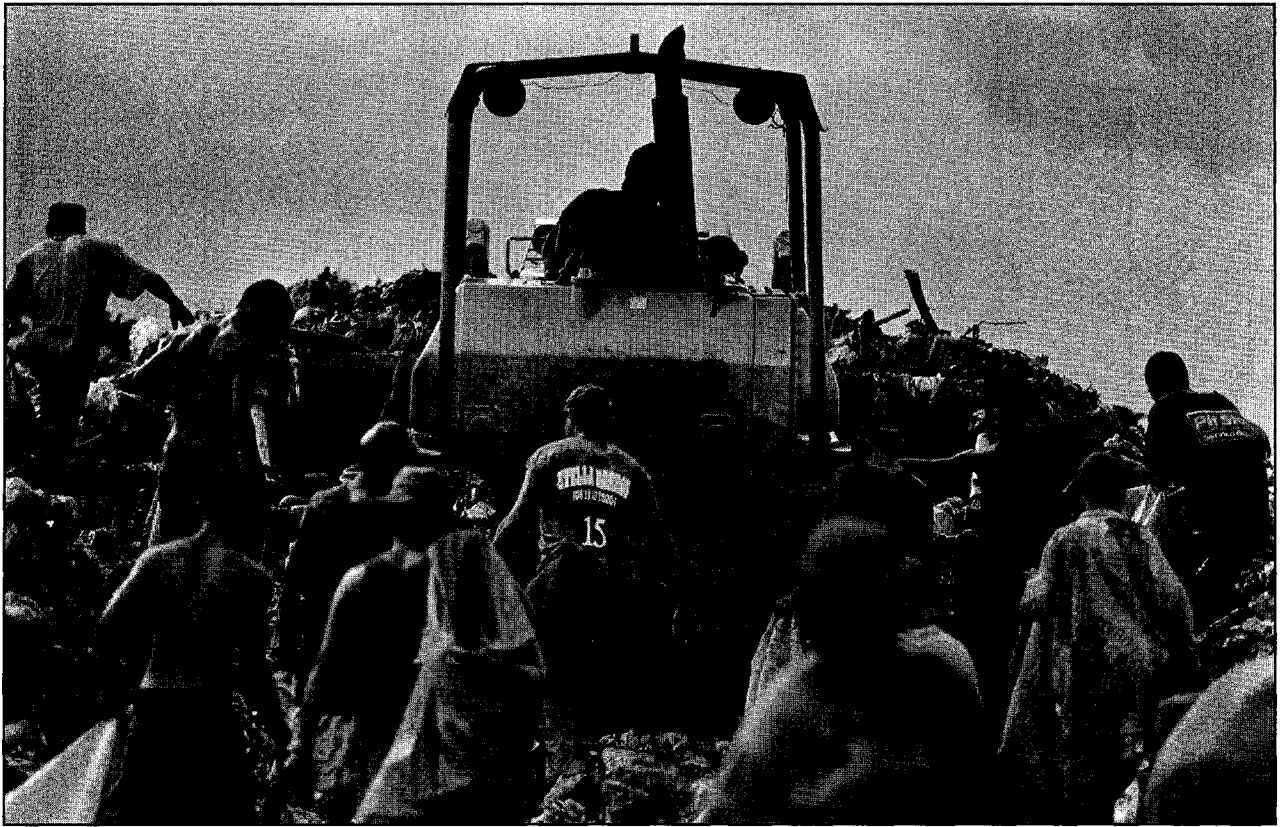
We nodded positively, but then I started telling him about the difference between journalistic and commercial uses for a picture. In journalism, when photographing in a public place in the United States, I usually didn't need approval from the people in the picture if it was to be published in a magazine or newspaper. However, the subject usually knew I was there, and it was rare that I didn't ask the permission of the subject. And if they said "no," I usually put down the camera.

Using a photograph for commercial ends was very different. To sell a product with the photo, whether the image is used on the label or in advertising, the person



*With a pacifier in her mouth, nine-year-old Adriana covers her head with a sack as a rainstorm moves over Muribeca. Adriana and five young brothers and sisters, ages seven to thirteen, helped their mother, Maria, in her work at the dump. Since the family lived over an hour away, in Cabo, Pernambuco, they would sleep in a tent at the dump from Monday to Saturday. Since the start of the "bolsa escola" (school stipend), Maria stopped bringing her children to the dump, instead putting them into school.*

<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian non-governmental organization "Missão Criança" (Child Mission) estimates that 50,000 children work in garbage dumps across Brazil.



*A crowd of men and teenagers follow a bulldozer that is spreading out the piles of trash, picking up valuable materials that are uncovered.*

in the photo had to sign a "release" authorizing its usage. In the case of a minor, the guardians of the minor had to authorize usage.

Soon we could see the immense mound of Muribeca rising above the tree line in the distance. Thick, black smoke billowed from one side. Vultures circled in the air. The sun glinted off piles of refuse.

We followed the signs to the entrance and turned off of the main road. Andre marveled at the nine-foot barbed-wire fence circling the dump, the blue-uniformed guards posted near the main road and the large main-gate entrance that we were rolling up to. The last time he had been to the Muribeca dump, almost six years before, no system of control existed — no fences, no guards, no gate house.

A guard approached the Fiat. Obviously, we weren't there to do any unloading.

Andre slipped into his most winning Brazilian "jeitinho" (way or manner), where one can get pretty far with a smile and some small talk. Establishing a personal relationship with the person in authority is key to bending any rules.

"Como vai, tudo bem?" (How's it going, everything cool?). Andre laughingly said leaning out of the window. He mentioned something about the heat of the day, be-

fore the guard asked why we were going into the dump.

"We are doing some research and we just wanted to go in and talk to some of the people working here," replied André.

Like a cop looking for drugs or weapons, his eyes swept through the car, spotting the André's camera bag between Susan and me in the back seat. "Do you have any cameras with you?" The young man went on to say that a couple of months ago, a German TV crew had done a report about children working in Muribeca, and now all filming had to be authorized by the municipal authorities.

I was flabbergasted. It struck me that the way they were dealing with the problem of child labor in Muribeca was *not* by getting the kids out of there. It was by keeping out those who could show the problems. That was what the barbed wire and the gates were for, not to prevent kids from sneaking in and working there.

Furthermore, he didn't care if we wanted to write about what was in Muribeca, only if we were going to shoot pictures of it. It affirmed the power of images, that what needed to be controlled was not what people read or heard, but what they saw.

Andre maneuvered deftly by saying "yes," he had



brought his camera along. He handed it over. He smiled and asked that they take good care of it. With our feet, Susan and I scooted our own camera bags farther under the car seats. The guard nodded, stepped back and let us pass.

From the gate, the dirt road forked in two directions that led around the same dumping area. We took the left fork instead of following directly behind the dust-churning trucks on their way to the drop-off area. Proximity to the garbage produced a horrible stench that brought the taste of bile to my throat. It was a veritable mountain of garbage baking under a brutal sun, the refuse of 3 mil-

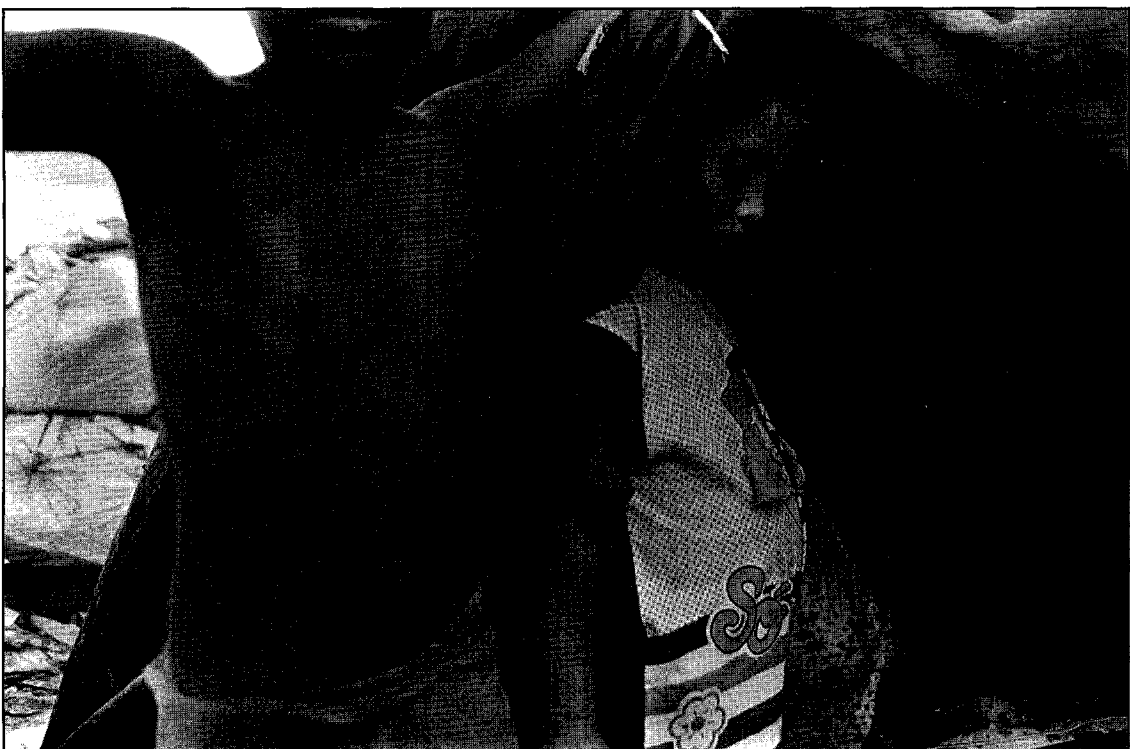
lion people for whom basic sanitation was a luxury.

Cresting the ridge, we could see more clearly the extent of the dump. The highest area, roughly the size of four football fields, was already capped off, covered by the Mississippi-red mud common to the area. Pipes poked from the ground where fires burned off excess methane gas produced by the decomposition of trash. As Andre explained, if these weren't there, the gases would accumulate and the mountain of garbage would eventually explode.

That covered-over field was surrounded on three



*(Left) A group of young girls relax in a makeshift tent near the garbage drop-off point in the Muribeca dump. This is where their families sleep when passing the night at the dump. (Below) Young boys hang out at one of the overnight tents.*





*(Above) Isabel, 11, picks through garbage as her brother, Izake, 12, (center) helps.*

*(Right) A young boy plays with an aluminum can that his mother had picked out of the trash. Many of the mothers bring their children into the dump for lack of childcare. Muribeca has a daycare center, but many do not like leaving their children there because of rumors of poor care.*

sides by equally large lower areas that had uncovered trash. Only one area, however, was active at a time. Twenty-four hours a day, trucks arrived to leave their contents. The people not only worked in this area, but set up wooden shacks with black plastic for roofs — shelter from the brutal sun, or for sleep at night.

For work there seemed to be three options. Young men wrestled for the pick of fresh deposits as they spilled from the back of trucks. Others hugged the back of Caterpillar bulldozers that spread the trash over the surface.

They would grab anything unearthed by the machines. The rest fanned out, sacks in hand, stooping and scanning the leftovers for anything else.

André stopped the car close to the largest concentration of workers. Wary of guards keeping watch over the area, we left our camera bags behind and wandered to where people were stuffing aluminum cans into bags.

As we walked among the trash collectors, I wondered why Andre and Massacre were so silent. My instinctive

response was to acknowledge the eyes staring at me, and say hello. Even with my accented Portuguese, it seemed the only way to bridge the gap of unknowing and threatening silence between strangers. But Andre and Massacre didn't speak. I especially found Massacre's hesitation baffling, given his upbringing in a poorer working-class neighborhood and his music, whose lyrics speak to the reality of life for so many poor, mostly black youth from the violent neighborhoods ringing the city. Perhaps being Recifenses, they felt too close to how their fellow citizens were living.

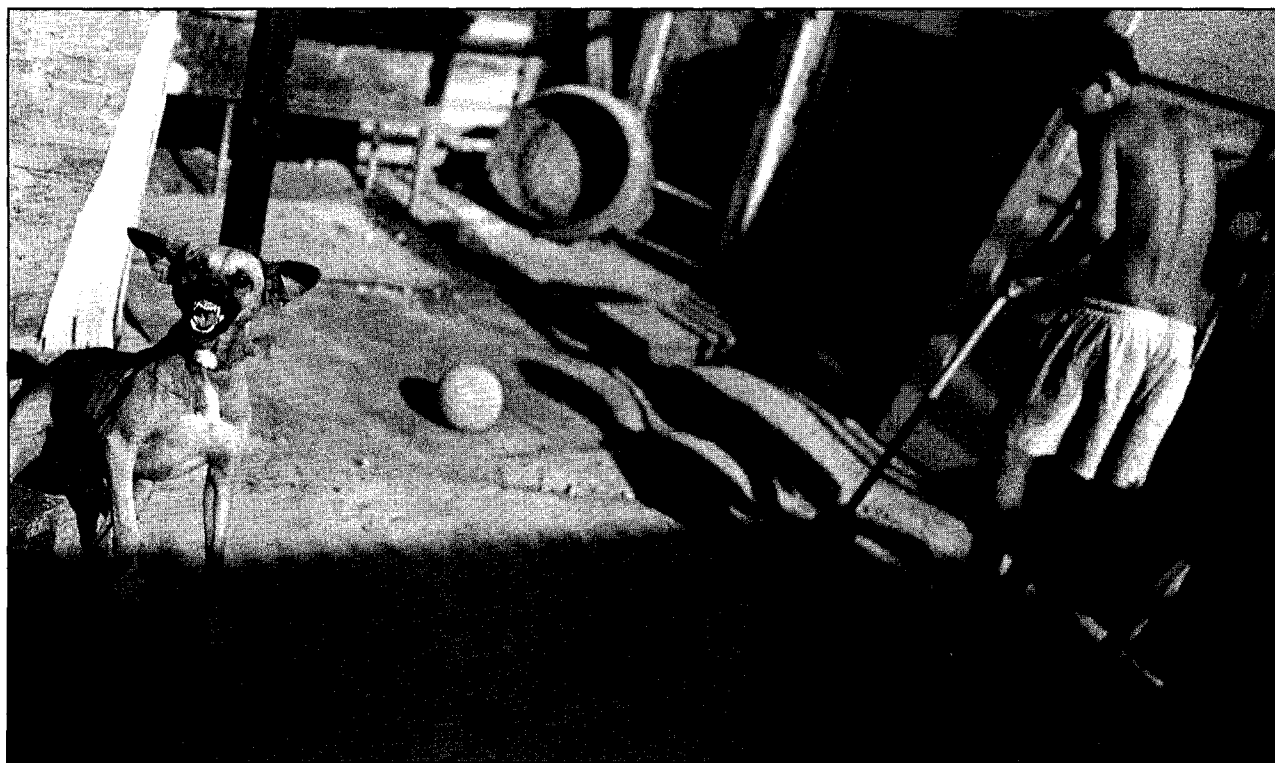
I quickly decided not to take photographs, to use this as an afternoon to meet people and return for pictures another day.

However, Massacre asked that we shoot something for him. He saw a torn red couch and got the idea of asking three kids standing nearby to pose on the couch. I agreed to shoot the picture, and didn't ask for permission first. In the months that followed, I would regret that slip.

I framed Ronaldo, 14, Rodrigo, 13, and Jaqueline, 15, in the golden light of the afternoon sun. They sat on the couch, looking into the lens,

with the dump and tents in the background. I didn't like the composition terribly much, and changed positions until I found something acceptable. In the back of my mind, I was planning to return to "really" photograph these and the other children. Susan, Andre and Massacre kept a look-out for guards in case they saw what we were doing.

Finishing, I prompted Massacre to find their parents.



*(Top) Patricia da Conceição, 13, holds her four-month-old brother, Jefferson, near their home in the Muribeca "Invasion" favela. Patricia used to help her mother work in the dump, but left because of the violence. She stays home to care for her two young brothers while her mother works the dump. Because of her role as a caregiver, she has not attended school for over a year. (Above) While his aunt Nilda works in the dump, Rodrigo, 13, sweeps out the yard of her house, where he presently lives. The family dog, in his zeal to protect the family, wanted to take a piece out of the visiting photographer. Now that Rodrigo receives the "bolsa escola" (schol stipend) money, he doesn't have to work in the dump anymore, and will be returning to school.*

Pointing to a tent a short distance away, our little crowd walked over, and we introduced ourselves to Severina, Ronaldo's mother. Massacre explained the purpose of the photo, that it might be used as a CD cover for their band. Though some of the younger people around had heard of the band, no one really knew their music. Severina nodded affirmatively, and I took down her address.

We walked around a bit, but I shot only a few more pictures. Walking back to the car, both Andre and Massacre were excited about the possibilities of the picture of the three kids on the couch.

Getting out of Muribeca proved to be harder than we thought. We took a spin around the top, covered part of the dump to see a *favela* nestled in the hillside nearby. Continuing outward, we tried to see if the dirt roads led to another exit, for future reference, one maybe less guarded. On one of the small cut-throughs, Andre brought the car to a halt in front of what seemed a wet muddy stretch. Susan seemed sure that we could pass, and Andre accelerated — with enough force to bog us down securely.

With Andre at the wheel, Susan and I stepped shin-deep into the muck to push from the front of the car. Massacre, in his new designer tennis shoes, opted to pull from the back — a much cleaner propo-

sition. We rocked the car free, then compared the personal-clothing damage. Susan and I lost.

With the Fiat looking for all the world like a well-muddied cross-country racer, we descended to the gates, got Andre's camera, and went home.

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The picture of the kids was a hit with Andre, Massacre and the producer of the *Faces* CD, Universal Music. They wanted to use the picture for the cover, and subsequently hired me to shoot pictures of the band in their Recife neighborhood, *Alto Jose do Pinho*.<sup>2</sup> I enjoyed getting involved in the project and learning more about the musical movement at the *Alto*. However, the lack of written releases from the parents of the kids at Muribeca still left us open to lawsuits if the photo were used.

Five months passed during which I became involved in documenting the lives of glue-addicted street kids in Recife. In September, Massacre started calling me about getting releases, of returning to find the kids and their parents. We both knew that the long delay meant that there was a chance of not finding anyone.

On the Monday afternoon that we finally started our search, getting through the front gate was easier. Strangely,



*In the Muribeca "Invasion" favela, children play on the half-built brick walls of a house under construction.*

<sup>2</sup> See TLT-5 for more info about *Alto José do Pinho*.





*The photo that started it all. From left to right, Rodrigo, 13, Jaqueline, 15, and Ronaldo, 14, pose on an old couch in the middle of Muribeca. This is the picture that Universal chose as the CD cover.*

no guards approached — they just waved us through. Climbing the hill, I realized that the landscape had changed. The active area was much higher and built-up, the shacks had been moved to different locations. We got out of the car and walked around like police investigators, photo in hand, asking if anyone knew the whereabouts of Ronaldo, Rodrigo and Jaqueline. People treated us like we were cops — they said nothing.

teenage boys lounging in a small lean-to. They grasped at the photo and asked who we were. Massacre said that he was from “*Faces do Suburbio*,” and that they might use the pic for a CD. The kids sat up, their faces brightened. Suddenly they had a real celebrity in front of them. The dam broke — now everyone knew where the kids in the photo lived.

Getting nowhere, we started talking to one group of

“That is Rodrigo. His aunt is Nilda. They live down in the Invasion,” said one boy munching on a package of

*Mercia holds her 13-year-old son as they take a break from working in Muribeca. A resident of the “Invasion” favela, Mercia told me that last year she was raped at gunpoint by two men as she worked late one night in the dump. She did not tell the authorities for fear of reprisal.*





*Rodrigo, 13, stands before a mound of trash in the garbage dump. Though he doesn't like it, he says, "you have to work there in order to help the family."*

cookies he had found nearby. Crumbs fell from his grimy fingers as he pointed back towards Recife.

The "Invasion," as everyone called the *favela* Muribeca Jardim, was only six years old, and felt new. It stretched for about a mile along the road heading to the dump, and was about a half mile deep. Belying the chaotic feeling of the name Invasion, the small wood-and-brick houses, in various stages of completion, were laid out in orderly blocks along unpaved streets — at least until the very back, where the grid pattern broke down. Electrical wires lined the streets, and public phones dotted a few corners.

Our search routine repeated itself in the Invasion. We parked the car on the edge, and started walking. As we showed the picture around, we still were met with empty looks. We started to ask for Nilda also, and that got some positive response. However, they all were dead-ends. As we penetrated deeper in the neighborhood, I had a feeling that we would not be successful on this first day. The shadows were getting longer, the light more golden, and pretty soon we would have to quit.

As we talked to one person, she said she knew where some of the garbage dump families lived in the Invasion. She pointed even to the far reaches of the area, and gave

us her best directions, but finished by telling us to just ask around.

"*Quem tem boca vai a Roma*" (Literally, "Who has a mouth gets to Rome," which means, "If you ask questions, you'll get to your destination"), laughed Massacre with a flash of a silver-capped tooth. This was good to remember as we trooped along unnamed streets and past unnumbered dwellings, with residents poking their heads out to see the passers-by.

Unexpectedly, we came upon a makeshift soccer field built at the back edge, before the land dropped off into a swampy lowland, and finally into a small polluted river. Massacre suddenly screamed toward a group of kids at one of the goal posts, remarkably recognizing Rodrigo with his back partially turned toward us. We had found Rome.

Even with the photo, I had a little difficulty recognizing Rodrigo. He remembered us immediately, and shook our hands with an electric smile. We asked about Ronaldo and Jaqueline, and Rodrigo said that they all lived in the same area, that talking to them would be easy.

We didn't have to gather the other kids and their families. They simply appeared as news spread of our

arrival. Severina, Ronaldo's mother, invited everyone to crowd into the fenced-in front porch of their home, sitting on the one old couch and a few chairs. This covered space was actually where Severina and her husband had run a soup program for 152 children of the Invasion. They had received money for the raw materials from the municipal government, cooked on their own stove, and served a daily lunch. Unfortunately, that assistance had been cut off months earlier, without any promise of renewal.

Massacre began to explain what we wanted to do with the photo, and what was required. Authorization was not a problem. With the kids so excited about having their picture on the cover of a CD, the parents agreed immediately.

The problem was completing the written authorizations. A simple "John Hancock" wouldn't do. The parents needed to have identity papers. And their signature had to be filed with the local *cartorio*.<sup>3</sup> That way, the signature would be legally on file, in case anyone disputed the authorizations. Luckily, Ronaldo and his parents had their identity papers in order. In a show of trust, they allowed Massacre and me to take their documents so that we could register the signatures the following day.

Rodrigo and Jaqueline's authorizations, on the other hand, took about two weeks to clear up. Rodrigo's mother had kicked him out of her house a few years before, and his aunts Nilda and Fatima had taken him in. Though nothing official had ever been registered, they acted as his guardian. Rodrigo did not have identity papers.

Fatima was also Jaqueline's mother, and agreed to sign for both of them. Jaqueline's document had been stolen from her in the dump, and Fatima's identity papers were tied up in the process of getting new papers for Jaqueline. We brought Fatima to the *cartorio*, figuring they could register the signature if the person was in front of them. Unfortunately, as the blank-faced young clerk told us, that was not possible without her identity papers.

To get Fatima's papers back, we had to go to see the director of the garbage dump's daycare center, a woman known as *Dona* Fatima. Being vague about the purpose of needing *our* Fatima's ID papers back from the judge (because we weren't supposed to have been in the dump shooting pictures to begin with), we got *Dona* Fatima to promise that she would get the papers back in two days. Two days later, *Dona* Fatima still didn't have Fatima's document, and we had to return once again to finally pick them up.

In the meantime we learned that Fatima was illiterate. Though we had her papers, which had a photo on it, we still had to bring her physically to the *cartorio* to prove that the document belonged to the correct person. In the

end, we pressed her thumb into an ink pad and onto the paper as a clerk witnessed. Finally, the ordeal was over.

After straightening out the releases, I began returning to document child labor in the Muribeca garbage dump. For transportation and as help, I hired my taxi-driver friend "Loinha," a rail-thin, 60-year-old, bright-eyed man who could strike up a conversation with a wall. If anyone enough *jeitinho* to distract the guards with some tall tales, it would be Loinha.

The first time I returned was at six o'clock on a Saturday morning, just as the light peeked through the clouds building for a morning rain. Loinha waved to the guards at the gate of Muribeca and shouted out something that made them laugh, which in their early morning daze did just the trick. We proceeded through and climbed the now familiar hill and he pulled his fire-engine-red Fiat station wagon near the unloading area. This was no discreet entrance.

I got out and starting photographing, moving among the shadowy figures as dark clouds swept away the remaining light. The misty drops turned into a torrent of rain just as I spotted an eight-year-old girl picking atop a trash pile, a white pacifier stuck in her mouth. She pulled a sheet of cardboard over her head — and the pacifier — as protection. I was soaked to the bone.

Looking for cover, three young men offered room under their own cardboard shelter. During a lull in the downpour, I asked if I could shoot a picture of them. One smiled and said cryptically, "Yeah, as long as you have the permission of the *"chefe urubu"* (the head vulture)."

I thought he might mean a guy in charge that I had foolishly overlooked. He knew I didn't understand, and pointed to a row of black vultures perched on a ridge. In explanation, he said that there is a saying that before a new person, no matter what age, could work in the dump, they had to get the permission of the *"chefe urubu."* They laughed and I logged in my first experience with dump humor.

From the comedian I also learned that they welcomed rain, as uncomfortable as it might be. Waterlogged paper tilts the scales quite a bit more, and they got paid by weight.

After half an hour of rain, the clouds broke, and a brutal sun heated the fallen water into a clingy vapor. Photographically crippled by the rain and steam, I let the scene around me sink in. Within sight were about a hundred kids and young teenagers, some with parents, others free to roam the ghastly mounds. One plump eight-year-old carried sacks of aluminum cans from where his mother slaved to their collection area. He sat down at one point, ripping open the packaging of some crackers that he had found in the trash, crumbs spilling over his

<sup>3</sup> *Cartorios* are notary offices which also serve the purpose of civil registries of documents.

sooty black t-shirt. An 11-year-old girl sat against a broken bicycle, wearied by the morning toil, head in her hands. Several other small boys played hide-and-seek on discarded furniture as their mother separated sellable paper from worthless pulp.

Hardly a place for any human being, much less a child, the inhospitable surroundings was home to many of the kids. They ate, slept, worked and played there. Though the garbage dump had a daycare center, few of the mothers entrusted the center with their children. Some said that adult men entered the center, used the bathrooms, and sometimes walked around naked or partially dressed. Other mothers responded from the opposite point of view, wanting their children to stay with them and work because at the daycare center, "they do nothing but play"

I wandered to the bulldozers and heard someone screaming a version of my name. Fatima, mother of Jaqueline and aunt of Rodrigo, approached, a half-filled sack of aluminum cans over her shoulder. I don't know if I would have recognized her; the darkness of grime made her look like a shadow against the full sun. She and Rodrigo had spent the night there, and were going to work through Sunday morning.

The dump operated 24 hours a day, and so did the families I knew. With fewer people working at night, there was more trash per person, so more money could be made. Since the area was not illuminated, the workers carried flashlights to cut the darkness. In fact, as Fatima explained, once she started to work it was foolish to stop and sleep. Her collected trash had to be guarded. She and Rodrigo had to stay vigilant through the night or thieves would take the garbage. These robbers were not all silent-footed types that made off undetected with valuable metals and cardboard. As she explained, sometimes men with guns brazenly walked up in the middle of the night.

Violence was common conversation among my friends who worked in Muribeca. "There are all types of people here: murderers, drug dealers, escaped convicts," Fatima said. Armed assaults regularly took place, usually at night, but sometimes in broad daylight.

"You have to have courage because there is so much danger in there," Rodrigo admitted. Most talked about this "courage" and "going in" as if they were describing a battle.

Everyone had stories of things that had happened to them personally, not second-hand rumors. As Mercia, a young mother from the Invasion, wrapped her arms around her 13-year-old son, she confided the events of one night just five months before. Two men walked up to her with a gun and raped her. She was alone could do nothing. She did not tell the authorities.

After Loinha and I had left Muribeca after a Satur-

day-morning session of photography, two men were murdered. Fatima warned me about returning since many knew I had cameras, and were "*ficando de olho*" (they were casing me). She even recounted to me an experience I had where a man became angry because I wouldn't give him money. I hadn't understood the last thing the man muttered before he walked away.

Fatima had heard. According to her, the man said he would "put a bullet in [my] side." She said that the families that I knew from the Invasion feared for my safety. Worst of all, Fatima said that if something happened they knew they couldn't do anything to defend me. Retribution would be worse for them if they did. Whether they liked it or not, they had to keep returning and working in Muribeca in order to survive.

"Rodrigo was born in the dump," Ronaldo and Jaqueline swore to me one day when I was in the Invasion. All of the kids in the neighborhood knew this to be true. He was a child of Muribeca. Rodrigo's mother, Neida, dispelled this rumor. However, it was true that when he was eight months old, she began bringing him to the dump, not having any other daycare options. When he was 11 he left school and started working in the dump full-time. With only a brief period of schooling, he has been in the dump ever since. At 13, he was a veteran.

His mother has also kicked him out of her home. Rodrigo shrugged his shoulders and accepted much of the blame. Yet his message was mixed — he said he was "brought up badly," and that he "didn't want to listen to anything she [Neida] said. "When I did bad things, she wanted to hit me," he said, and he would run away from her. Rodrigo's aunts also mentioned something about Neida selling a bicycle that Rodrigo had bought with money he had earned. His mother finally put him out of the house, and his aunts assumed guardianship. When I talked to him, he lived with his aunt Nilda, who had three children of her own, ages six through ten.

With a sparkle in his eyes, and a sunburn over the bridge of his nose that on another boy might have meant a day on the beach or on the soccer field, a shirtless Rodrigo continued his work "*catando*" (collecting) aluminum cans. His gloved hand rested on the frame of the monstrous bulldozer that churned up new treasures as it spread piles of trash. His feet, in mud-splashed white tennis shoes, tread a dangerous mixture: fetid food, broken glass, cans and plastic, industrial and even hospital wastes. The possibilities of being hurt or getting sick increase exponentially just by walking through Muribeca's gates.

Rodrigo's eagle eyes are good at spotting cans. His earnings show it. He claims to make from 30-40 *reais* or about U.S.\$18 to \$23 weekly, as much or more than a minimum salary (136 *reais* per month, or about U.S.\$78). With that money he could help his aunt with the expenses of the household. Or he could buy himself a pair of jeans or



a shirt. Though he didn't enjoy the dump, he liked the economic power that it gave him.

What he suffered, though, was the lack of an education that would allow him a choice for the future besides the dump. Since he was ten, he had had only one year of school. Even then, he admitted, he was more interested in soccer. As a result, this boy who would turn 14 in April, was illiterate. At most he recognized some of the letters of the alphabet.

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The last time I visited the Invasion, things had changed dramatically. The families were finally receiving a "*bolsa escola*" (school stipend) that the authorities at the dump had been promising for months. The 25 *reais* per month (U.S.\$14.30) for each child between the ages of seven and 14, was to compensate families for pulling children out of the dangerous work in the garbage dump and keeping them in school.<sup>4</sup>

It seemed to be working. Sitting outside his aunt Nilda's home, Rodrigo told me that because of the *bolsa* he had already stopped working in the dump and would soon return to school. In all, Nilda had three children besides her nephew that no longer accompanied her to work in Muribeca because of the financial aid. She pointed to a pile of bricks in front of her wooden shack and declared, I got that with the first month of the kid's [*bolsa escola*] money."

To Rodrigo, the push to get kids out of the garbage dump was complicated. It was good because children should go to school. It wasn't that children wanted to work in Muribeca. "You had to work there to help the family." According to him, it would be "better if in the mornings you studied and in the afternoons you worked." As Rodrigo mused about going back to school and his future, he said, "I want to be a worker, whatever

kind. Anything but a drug dealer, glue sniffer, or robber."

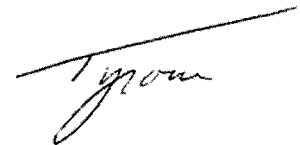
The other two youths that I had originally photographed, Ronaldo and Jaqueline, were both too old to receive the *bolsa escola*, but had quit working in the dump anyway. Jaqueline, 15, left because of persistent respiratory and eye problems; doctors have told her that she needs an operation for cataracts. In spite of her health problems, she planned to continue her schoolwork.

Ronaldo, 14, was excited that he had recently passed to the next grade level. Recently he also landed a part-time job that would not interfere with school. He helped a man who bought aluminum cans from the dump, sorted and re-sold them. It wasn't easy, he said, but he could make money (20 *reais* a week, about U.S.\$11.50) without staying in the dump full-time.

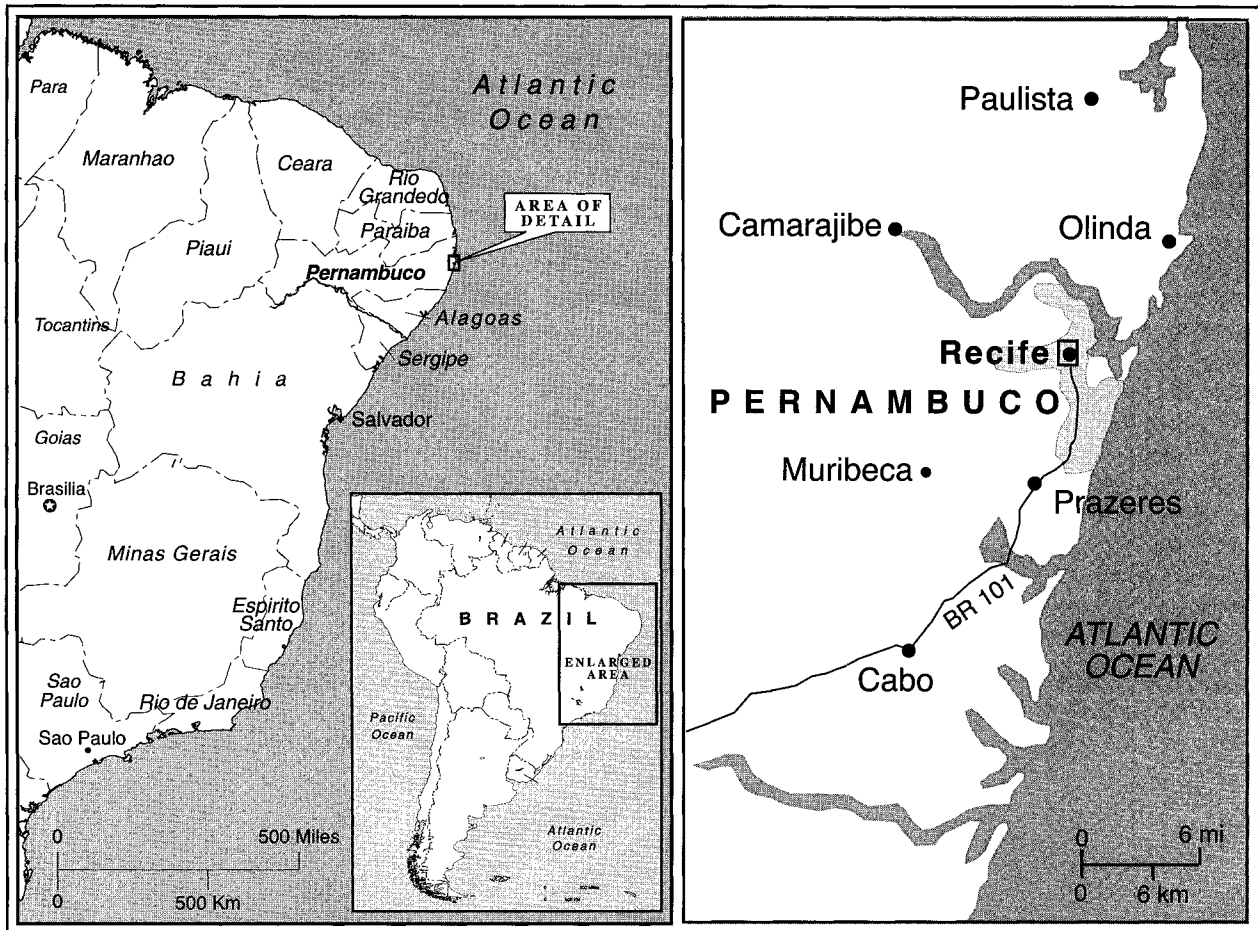
In January, I went into the Muribeca dump for a last look. Many of the kids I had gotten to know on my other visits were not there. The mother of the eight-year-old with the pacifier said that her daughter, one of six children, liked coming to the dump to work and got upset at having to stay home. However, the mother was trying to abide by the rules, and said that she knew it was better that way.

Though the children I had met weren't there, other families with other children have taken their place. Fatima claimed that the mothers heard about the *bolsa escola* and were flocking to get their own money. I believe the motive is less sinister but just as sad: that there is no lack of families for whom picking trash is a step up in life.

Until next month,



<sup>4</sup> The term "*bolsa escola*" (school stipend) generally refers to the governmental Program for the Eradication of Child Labor (PETI). Started in 1993, it pays families in significant areas of child labor, like sugarcane cutting and charcoal production, R\$50,00 (U.S.\$28.60) per month, per child (for up to three children), from seven to 14 years old. About 145,000 *bolsas* are distributed nationally right now — a small amount, given that an estimated 4 million children do not attend school because they need to work. However, according to Fabio Moraes of the Recife office of UNICEF, the R\$25.00 (U.S.\$14.30) monthly *bolsas* that the families of Muribeca are receiving are not part of PETI. Rather, these are *bolsas* "*Cidadão Bancário*" (Citizen Bank) organized by the NGO "*Missão Criança*" (Child Mission), which, along with UNICEF, raises private money to offer these *bolsas* to help end child labor in Brazil. In June of last year, UNICEF and the National Forum of Trash and Citizenship launched a nationwide "Children in the Garbage Never Again" campaign, which has been putting pressure on national, state and municipal governments to implement change and eradicate this national problem before the year 2002.



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