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Love and Suffering in Bom Jesus: Marileia as Favela Woman and Mother

By [Dr. Marcia Mikulak](#), University of North Dakota, USA

Abstract:

This article explores the life history of Marileia, a *favela* woman and mother of five children, several of whom work the streets in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil, and is drawn from research carried out between 1997-2000 in Brazil. Ethnography exposes the multiple realities coexisting within and between individuals engaged in the constructionist process of fieldwork. From the anthropologists perspective, narrative is a translated and transcribed event that can magnify inequalities and barriers between researcher and subject. This article explores ethnographic representation by extending the cantankerous and complex experiences of researcher, subject, *and* reader into a form similar to a musical improvisation whose impetus is the interaction between all performers.

Keywords: Gender, Latin America, Social Inequality, Childhood, Marcia Mikulak

Introduction

My anthropological fieldwork has focused on economically poor working children and their families in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil (population 63,467) between 1997-2000 (IBGE 1996). While my research demonstrates the importance of children's income to household economy (Mikulak 2003), my data also explores the harsh conditions grinding poverty foists upon the poor, particularly women and children living in Brazilian *favelas* (shantytowns).

This article is a case study, in narrative form, of a *favela* woman named Marileia, a mother of five children, several of whom work the streets in Curvelo, Minas Gerais, Brazil. The significance of Marileia's story is that it is not unusual; it is typical of *favela* women in my sample, whose lives are lived at the margins of Brazilian society (*1). Her story reveals not only her personal history as a poor *favela* woman, it also discloses Brazil's colonial past. Common themes of extreme poverty, racism, sexual violence, child abuse, and contemporary slavery are exposed in Marileia's story. Each of these themes are disturbing, yet a majority of *favela* women recounted stories with similar experiences.

Chaos, Contextualization, and Narrative

There is an artistic process involved in "doing ethnography." I argue that four intersections must occur if narrative and ethnography are to find purchase in anthropological literature. The first involves the anthropologist as both participant and observer; the second links the anthropologist to the subject, whose life is both actually lived and symbolically re-created for the

anthropologist; the third is a presence generated by the interaction between the anthropologist and the subject, as complex translations of experience and meaning take form; and the fourth extends into the fertile and imagined world of the reader. Multiple worlds of experience, perception, meaning, and context are created in every lived event, and the job of ethnography, seems to capture this cacophony. Both individuals and groups, families, and communities generate a babble of extensive experience whose meanings spill into the chaos of the quotidian of living.

As in Chaos Theory, small differences in the input of any event may result in large and unpredictable differences in the actual result of an event. Translated into ethnography, and in this case, life history narrative, the actual meanings of described and translated events produce variables of meaning that confound their source, the imagination. One could argue for taming and/or corralling the plethora of meanings found in a life history narrative, and anthropologists usually do by contextualizing their research data through theoretical paradigms and historical particularisms, and in their doing so they focus the richness of ethnographic data into a manageable discourse that can allow for possible insights. For example, in the case of Marileia, the colonial history of the city of Curvelo in Minas Gerais, provides us with an understanding of how poverty, inequality, and social injustice developed in this particular location. Yet, history and its retelling is a contestation, a further dialogue in part crafted by the historian and the imagination of various social actors who have left traces of actual experiences in court records, birth registries, marriage documents, family genealogies, and human imaginations. History is also a product of imagination, just as life history narratives are imaginary ghosts of lived lives. Is it possible to lose the important essence of a life history's narrative by over theorizing and contextualizing the framed re-telling of a life's experiences? In what textual manner must we know the place, the gender, the age, and setting of a life before we read the lived experiences of another and assist the narrator in weaving her story on the warp of our common humanity? Do not art and science overlap and intertwine? Like Chaos Theory, complex events are perhaps best understood by beginning with the highest degree of order, which paradoxically, appears as chaos. In narratives, events unfold with disparate pieces, incongruent logics, and divergent cultural perceptions, weaving stories that are not necessarily logical, and I argue that such processes form an artifact of symbolic understanding that is far richer and more complex than any contextualized, theorized, or academically packaged text.

As does neorealism in Italian film, we should seek to place Marileia's life story within the context of her everyday events and portray her extraordinary courage, living in poverty under the harshest of circumstances. Her narrative speaks to the tenacity of the human spirit embedded in all cultural locations. Marileia's narrative has not been contextualized in either anthropological theory or in avante-guard textual treatment, but rather her narrative (translated verbatim) provides the surreal terrain of her life revealed in its own script, full of edgy twists, betrayals, and daily dramas. For her, there are no happy endings, no theoretical positions, no historical overviews that assist in contextualizing her situation. Such contextualization would remove the rawness of poverty and the stunning numbness of inequality. Marileia's story needs to speak for

itself, and each reader must interpret it in terms of their own sensibilities. Readers, both academic and popular, often seek understanding through context, usually through the imaginations of historians and the theoretical paradigms of ethnographers and anthropologists. A reader can only hope to be able to place Marileia within their imagination and to vicariously know her. However, Marileia's everyday reality is far from understandable from the perspective of most American readers, and even from the perspective of most middle to upper-class Brazilians. Her narrative places the reader, for a few moments, in the center of her life without preparation or warning. We read her words with no tricks, no justifications. Presenting the text as raw narrative, we sit not on the edge of our seats, nor are our heart strings stretched beyond endurance. All we have as readers is our own reaction to the life of a woman we will never personally know. Marileia's words call forth from us a basic humanitarian response, and for a brief time we are able to individually embrace and respond to her; that is sufficient in-and-ofitself.

No solution is offered, merely a present moment in her life as Marileia frames it. I have chosen to keep the lyrical elements of Marileia's dialogue, with its sparse and matter-of-fact presentation, and have provided a counterpoint in italics that mark the interrogator's words, reactions, and perceptions. It is raw, simple, profound, and baffling, and as such finds no comfortable home except that of narrative, as living performance.

The Dialogue

"What would I change? What would I change?" *Marileia Repeats the question. Did I really ask her this -- surely I must be joking?* "Ah Marcia, everything" (Field Interview).

It was a hot evening. Dust drifted down on us in an unceasing cloud as the wind, cars, foot traffic, dogs, and running adolescents passed us by. We must have looked suspicious -- or rather I must have, with my Sony professional recorder on my lap and my high-tech microphone in hand. I sat on a tree stump, Marileia the mother of twins, sat on an overturned bucket, and Geraldo her lean neighbor squatted on his heels. Perched on a hill above the *favela* Bom Jesus we came together to talk, about life, hardship, abuse, ignorance, and love. Marileia and I had planned this meeting; Geraldo just happened along.

"In my country, the US, we have a lot of corruption, too. We have inequality, racism, but the laws that we have don't just stay on paper. There's more equality there, at least on the surface, when compared to Brazil," I say.

"There's inequality there?" Marileia asks. And I reply, "I'm certain of it."

"Well, it's very difficult for us to talk about a country that we don't know," Geraldo interjects.

"Yeah, it's difficult, I know," I say.

"Because we sometimes see things on the TV, that something happened in this or that country. Sometimes it's something good, or sometimes something bad happens and that's put on too. Therefore, the way it's presented, as good or bad, affects us, tells us how to think about a country. We don't know if *favelas* (shanty towns, slums) exist in other countries," Geraldo says.

"Oh yes, they exist," I say, "it's a problem throughout the entire world."

Geraldo continues in rapid speech, "We have a community here that is very poor, all the money we give in taxes will be taken away to some other place and thrown away, while our community stays in need. The hospital has many needs -- they are shutting down! There are so many necessities that aren't being attended to because we don't have any money. What are we going to do? How can we study this problem?" There's a kind of pleading anger in Geraldo's voice, and his astute awareness is common among favela residents I know.

"But Brazil needs to pay attention to its people. I know that it's been only a little over ten years since the military regime, and that you don't have a strong history of fighting against racism and oppression and winning, but if these things are to change, you have to fight against them, every day. Laws in Brazil exist, but they stay on the paper!" I say.

"It's not law, it's money! A Law!" *Geraldo says, and continues.* "For example, to put it simply -- if you are arrested and you go to jail, you're free if you pay money to some policeman, you're set free and nothing has been corrected. So, the 'law' wasn't worth anything, there's no law. The law is just easy to replace with money. Many things that we see in our country are divided like this. We actually have an unwritten law that sanctions killing. Do you understand the problem? For example, because a person is poor and has no way to survive and steals, he can easily die -- he will be an example for the rest of the poor. You understand the problem? The funny question is this: Who would want to exchange death for life without having a way to live? So, I decide I'm going to do what I want, either way it's the same." *Geraldo is like the dust, he drifts away and leaves us sitting on the stump and bucket, blinking the grit deeper into our eyes. Marileia coughs, I sneeze.*

I turn to Marileia to begin our planned interview. "I'll begin by asking you things that are easy, like, how old are you?"

"I'm 34. I was born in *Costa Sena*, it's close to *Curvelo*. It's a lot hotter there." Marileia. says. "There were, if we all lived, there were ten of us altogether. God took two -- no it was three. There are five women and two men now. One was born with a problem and the others died after they were older from different kinds of diseases that made them bloat and swell. We lived on a *roça* (a plot of land without resources, where the rural poor eke out a living, often by caring for rich people's land and animals for one minimum salary or less a month). We didn't have any medicine, we didn't have any resources. Understand? There wasn't anything, where I was living there wasn't anything. My brother was very young when he died, one or two years old when he

died. I saw my brothers and sister die -- I came home and saw it, but I was very young. I didn't understand those things. I didn't understand that my mother had just lost a child."

"Yes," I nod. "You can't cry a lot, because you have to survive," I say.

"No, you can't, huh Marcia?" says Marileia. "But we didn't have the same things, the same problems with people being killed or the things that happen in the *favela*. We were very poor, but we didn't have the same things happen to us as in the big city" *she continues. I blink, my eyes hurt, and I see little difference between the death on the 'roca' and death in the 'favela,' but I say nothing, nodding.*

"My mother died when I was very young. First my father died. He was about 30, I think, and soon after my mother died. I'm not sure, but I think my father may have died of alcoholism and my mother from childbirth. My parents didn't hit us, I don't remember that, but my father hit my mother. I don't know where they were from, where they were born. The people that mistreated me were the people that raised me."

"When my parents died, I was left with all my brothers and sisters, who were also very young. One day, a man from *Villa Nova* came. He was newly married and he took me with him from the house of another woman who lived on the *roça* too. My other brothers and sisters -- well, one stayed on the *roça* (*2) alone. The rest, well -- we lost contact. I don't know if some are still living or not. I only have contact with one who lives in *Gouveia*," Marileia tells me this, fluidly.

Where's *Gouveia*?" I ask, while Marileia and I wipe our eyes with dirty fingers, digging the grit from our tear ducts.

"It's past *Inimutaba*," Marileia says. "In *Minas*, right?" I ask. "That's right," she says.

"I grew up in Curvelo -- the family that raised me lives in Curvelo. I mean they lived in *Cosa Siena* and then we moved to Curvelo. I was very little. The wife of this man that took me was a teacher -- she was a woman like a policeman! She taught me how to cook by putting a small bench in front of the oven, and I learned how to cook that way."

One of the twins interrupts us. "But, he is really not feeling good."

"No, we aren't going now. Sit here and keep quiet" says Marileia. "What's happening?" I ask.

"Oh, a person on the road isn't feeling good and he wants me to go." Marileia says, *and without missing a breath, continues with her story. Life is like that here, it doesn't miss a beat, and if it does, it simply changes rhythms from common time to syncopated multi-rhythms -- always moving on. It's just the way it is.*

"When I arrived there, the woman who raised me treated me very badly. She put me in school at night so I could work during the day, but I had to clean the house every day."

"Was she white or black, rich or what?" I ask.

"Ah, she was white and rich. She was upper class. I don't remember too well how old I was. It was the time when my mother died, I was very little. I was taken in by others, and then by this woman. I think I was about four maybe, but I don't remember when I started working, I was very young. She had children of her own and they are all grown up now and are so tall and strong, so strong that they couldn't pass through my doorway. I raised them all. She was a professor and she never arranged her time so that she could say "let me help you with your homework." I was the youngest, and she put me in school. She did it in a way that was acid. She always arranged things in such a way that I couldn't study at night. I was the last to arrive at school and the first to leave.

She always came and got me early. And then she made up stories that I was cutting school, watching *novelas* (similar to an American TV soap opera), and when I became an adolescent, she said that I cut classes so I could meet boyfriends. So, I was never able to get through the first year of school. I never cut classes, not for anything Marcia! Not for anything! But, her children, they cut classes. She use to hit me a lot, understand? I have a revolt inside me against her. She hit me a lot and drew blood, using her hand, a broom, a chair."

"A chair?" I ask, *did I hear her say a chair?*

"Yes, a chair, a small metal chair. She took it and hit me with it. It had a red pillow, like this." Marileia makes a round, puffy shape with her hands. "I don't know if you remember these, they had little tiny feet made of iron. One time, she commanded me to get that chair and bring it over to her -- a simple thing. I was ironing clothes for her sister because she needed them to go to a party. It was very late, after 11:00 p.m. I was falling asleep and almost burned myself. I often ironed late into the night. Well, her boy came up to me and was hanging on my arm and I was so tired I couldn't stand and I began to fall over. He fell away when I swayed on my feet. She saw that and started to hit me, saying that I tried to hurt her son. She came at me like a panther, and she picked up that chair and hit me in the mouth, and cut my mouth. It was swollen and full of blood. I was splattered with blood all over my clothes. My arms were bruised, like this Marcia. I looked like I had a sickness of the skin and body -- all because of her rage. I was red and bruised. She had long nails and she grabbed my ear and her nail was so long it cut my ear inside and it began to bleed and drip over my clothes, like this. She was a professor and she gave classes. My life, it has never had anything good," *Marileia states, matter-of-factly. Another car passes, throws sheets of dust over us. We're silent as we let the dust settle.*

"She turned everything into confusion. She did this with everything. She'd say, "get the scissors" and I'd do it and then she'd grab me where my hair was tied up and hit me in the head with the scissors. Many times I'd be working on the weekend in the house, making *pão de queijo* (cheese bread) and cleaning the house, washing the cans that coffee comes in. She'd arrive at the house

in the afternoon and just take a bath, or eat all the cookies, or drink coffee, or take a small lunch before going to church. She would watch me all the time and she'd hit me horribly, a lot, all the time. I never liked to stay in the house, but I couldn't go out. She threw hot coffee in my face, hot coffee. This is the woman who raised me."

"How did you meet her?" I ask again. "I told you, my mother died and left us, the girls. Well -- people knew that they could use us to work in their homes. This woman's husband came and took me. He told me that they would care for me, that I'd be like a daughter to them, but it was just the opposite. They just came and took me. That's it. I didn't have anything to give her. I didn't have any clothes or anything at that time. He told me his wife was a professor and she wanted a girl to raise. But really, she raised me for only one year -- then I became her maid.

"After a while, I had a boyfriend with a good face, and I felt that life was a little better. She told me that I couldn't have a boyfriend. Her sister had a boyfriend, but he was white and rich, but I was black and ugly. Then, one day, she told me that I would never get married and leave her house because I was a maid and I was black and ugly, just like a dog. She said these things to me. She was a religious person. How can it be? So -- I stayed like this, wanting to run away. I couldn't receive a message or anything from anyone. I couldn't do anything, you know? I thought about running away, but I didn't know how. When she would go out she would lock all the doors and keep the key. I stayed locked in like a prisoner, while she would visit a friend, or whatever. I didn't start school until I was eleven. I couldn't learn anything. I had to wash, iron, make cookies for them, do everything. I woke up at 4:30 every day. I never slept any later than that. Sometimes I had to wake up earlier. Until today, I wake up, ready -- at this hour. I worked every day, Sundays too. She eventually chose my husband for me. He was poor and an alcoholic."

"Was she a professor in public or private school?" I ask.

"I think it was a public school, but I don't remember. I don't know if it's like this everywhere. The rich have the ability to get things, all of us don't have this ability. Now, I don't know if I'm being swindled or not. I can't tell. I only went to one year of school. I can't read or write. Really, it was less than one month that I was in school. She called me out of school almost every time I arrived there.

"After I married, I became pregnant with the twins, with a very big stomach. I worked for a woman who lived in front of the project. I've just kept these things in my head. I wasn't born with these horrible things in my head, it was her that put them there. My head isn't very good. It's not a good head." Marileia tells me, shaking her head.

"But you don't have a problem with your mind." I say.

"I don't?" She asks. "But I can't remember things." One time, I was thrown off a horse, me and my brother. There were three of us on the horse. Two of us hit our head. I was dizzy for a long

time. I had a lot of headaches. How do you talk about a life that isn't a life? I don't have a way to explain my life." Marileia is crying.

"Yes, but you have your children, even though it's hard with so few resources" I say.

"I have a bad mind, I couldn't learn anything because I haven't had any opportunities. I don't know how to write, just my name. If you write out numbers, I can copy them by watching you. I can't read, not a single word." *It's with such finality that Marileia states her case; a huge period at the end of a tiny sentence--I am nothing.*

"I worked in a house in Curvelo as a maid, for five years and eight months. I never received a holiday, and I never received money when I worked more than eight hours a day. I never received anything extra. In the end, the *dona (patron)* just made my final payment. In the end, cleaning up my accounts there were many pages like these (*pointing to my notebook*), but the pages were colored. There were red, yellow, blue--there were many pages for me to sign. (*This is a workbook given to domestic servants and other lay laborers who are registered and will eventually receive the equivalent of social security. By law, ironically (illiteracy is high among domestic servants), it is the maid's responsibility to make sure that everything is signed.*) There was one page that was white, and the woman at the *prefeitura (Mayor's office)* told me that I

needed to sign it so I could get my benefits. I gave my book to the boys (*the twins*) to help me find where I needed to sign. I signed it, but not correctly. I signed my name alone, not with my last name. So, they told me that I had to come back. They said that I had to sign it correctly. They wanted to take all my benefits away." Marileia recounts.

"There are times that I get money back after I buy something and I will try to analyze it. I'll go over it. How much did I give and how much did I get back. I'll try to understand if they gave me the wrong change. I'll go back to the store and look and see how much something costs, but I don't know anything about numbers or math."

"Are you married now?" I ask.

"Yes, I'm married. I was 21 when I got married. We were married in a civil and religious ceremony. My stepmother (*madrasta*) knew that he wouldn't be a good husband because he drank and worked in menial jobs. She knew that he was bad. She wanted me to be with someone who would beat me. She wanted to slap me in my face. She was a witch."

"Now I have five children, my first were the twins, Alison and Welington. I went to the hospital to give birth. I didn't have any help while I was pregnant." *I interrupt her and ask if her husband helped her out during this time.* "Ha! Marcia, he helped with nothing. It was like this. We are poor and don't have anything, don't have any rights. The INPS (*Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social*) (*a governmental, low-quality health care system, similar to medi-care in the US, but very slow with very unequal quality of health services and care*), they took care of us. With the twins I

had problems. I was very swollen and my blood pressure was very high. I stayed in the hospital for one week for observation. I had a caesarian. After, the boys and I stayed one week so they could control my blood pressure. Now, this one here, she almost died," *Marileia says, pointing to her daughter.* "I wanted to give birth normally. I didn't have a good passage (*her pelvis wasn't wide enough*), I never did. I stayed one week going and coming from the hospital. I'd go to the hospital and they'd tell me that I wasn't in labor, even though I'd be rolling in pain. They told me to go home. Day after day it was like this. Then they kept me for observation at the hospital and they gave me some serum. All the pain stopped when I was in the hospital, but nothing was happening. Then I was released and went home. On a Saturday or Sunday, I started having pain again, and I was tired of going and having exams and being told that it wasn't time yet. When Saturday came, my water broke and my stomach became small and the baby stayed like this at the top. I kept losing water all night, and I was having sharp pains. She didn't drop down or come out. The water bag was hanging outside me, and the baby stayed on top. She hurt her face and that's when she almost died. Me too, I almost died. After I left the hospital and went home, I got an infection. In all, I gave birth five times. The rest were OK.

"I didn't take any pills (*birth control*) because I was afraid they would go hungry if I didn't breast feed them. Their father wouldn't buy any milk for them and I didn't have an invoice (*given by the state*) to buy milk, and I couldn't buy any. The pill is difficult to get and people said if I take it, your milk will dry up and they will need a bottle, they told me that I wouldn't get pregnant if I was breast feeding.

"I was pregnant with Tatiana and I didn't know it. I wanted my tubes tied, but it's difficult to arrange this. I don't know if it was a political issue at the time, but you have to have money to have something like that done. So I didn't have it done. I got my papers in order to try to get my tubes tied, and went in to get them tied, but when they cut me open they saw that I was pregnant. After my fifth child, they finally tied my tubes.

"Alison (*one of the twins*) had problems with his lungs. He had pneumonia. At times he feels pain, usually on the left side of his chest. The doctor says it isn't anything. It's worms. So, they are taking medicines. When he had pneumonia, he was in the hospital. Wellington had the same exam (*to check for worms*) and he had three kinds of worms, and Emerson he had many furious worms. Tatiana was feeling very bad and my husband took her to see the doctor, and he said she had malnutrition. He told us we needed to give her better food to control her growth, to fatten her up. Yes, fruit, vegetables, meat, milk. But how do I get these things? Those that have, they don't give them. I would go out and buy these things but I don't have any money. We don't have a refrigerator, running water, toilet. I work outside the home, Monday through Friday, and get home late on Friday afternoon. I'm working now, planting trees. It's a long way out of the city, and I can't afford to come home after work, so I stay at work during the week. The twins (*who are now twelve*) take care of everything. They are responsible for their younger brothers and sister. They have a lot of responsibility. At work, there is a kind of lodge, a kind of barracks where there are ten beds. They have a cook and a dining room. The conditions on the farm are

good. There's a bed and we bring our own bedclothes and there's good food. They don't mistreat anyone. I work from seven in the morning to five in the evening (*ten hours a day*), and I make one minimum salary (*\$R130 per month in 1997*) but they take out money each month for my living expenses (*\$R20.00*). I have about *\$R110* each month."

"You raise your children on *\$R110* a month?" (*3) I ask.

"Yes, this month -- this week for example, if the director of the group here lays me off for a day or takes a day off, I will not have any money to leave with the boys to buy food. I don't have any money and I can't buy things on credit or trust. This is how it is. For example, another house where I worked, I quit after a short time. For two months I did a lot of work there, and she hasn't paid me yet. I was really nervous today because I saw the woman, the owner of a shop where I owe money. I didn't know if she'd ask me for the money I owe her or not. I gave my boss two months work, and she hasn't paid me yet. The owner of the store stopped me in the street. She didn't need to do this. I owe her *\$R30.00*."

"Wait," I say, "during the week, your children stay in the house alone?"

"Yes, that's right." Marileia answers.

"So, during the week your children are living here alone?" I ask.

"Alone," she says. "There's a neighbor, not a relative that lives on the other side of our house. They go to her if there is a problem." *The firecrackers (used to mark a goal point in soccer) are really blasting away.* "They wake up early and they make coffee (*the twins*) for everyone. They go to school, and they also work (*the twins*). This woman wants me to pay her what I owe her, and she says that I won't pay because I'm just a vagabond. I have been very nervous because she says many things about me. I'm waiting to get some money so I can pay her, the money from the other woman I worked for. Logically, the store won't let me have any more credit because I'm so late in my payment. I don't know -- it's difficult." *Marileia lets her voice trail off. More firecrackers explode, and a dust devil twists by us throwing more grit in our faces. We've given up trying to get it out of our eyes, and we just let them fill with tears that run down our faces.*

"What do your children usually eat every day?" I ask.

"Rice, beans, they don't like macaroni very much (*no one likes it. It's a stigma -- a mark of poverty and it's bland and slimy*). They eat vegetables only at the project they go to. *The irony of the name of the project, translated to mean "To Be a Child" adds to the irritation and pain in my eyes. Marileia tells me the extent of her children's hunger and I tell her how I tried to get unused vegetables from the project for her children.*

"I talked with Sr. Levi (*The gardener at the project*) first, without talking to Edinalda (*the main coordinator*). I went directly to him and I said, "Look, I talked with two boys. They are twins

here. They have a lot of responsibility and they are hungry a lot of the time. I think it would be a good idea if they could take home some vegetables from the project's garden." I had been told about the project's policy of giving vegetables to the children to take home if they needed it. When I talked with Edinalda she laughed, "Ah, Marcia, they're eating well. They get everything here at the project. They don't need anything. You don't need to worry about them."

"Olha só!" (This means, roughly 'How about that!'). "It's really difficult, isn't it? So, what are we going to do? They (the project) know about our situation. They could take what they throw away, and they could give it to the kids who need it. How can we live?" Marileia looks at her hands, studying them and shaking her head. "This is their way. So, I buy what I can, rice, beans, macaroni, oil, soap for head lice, some coffee. We often don't have sugar, but the thing that we need and don't have is meat and vegetables."

I ask, "Do you have milk?"

"No, we don't have any," she says.

I want to ask if they sometimes buy cheese, and then remember that cheese is more expensive than milk. "Your children, they work in the streets selling ice cream to help you. They told me that they had to work so they could help, that they wanted to help you, and they told me that they usually get about \$R3.00 a day."

"Sometimes. They have never brought home \$R3.00. It's usually \$R2.00 or less than that. Sometimes it's very little. It's always like this. They never earn more than this. When I'm here, I send them out to sell and they give me what they earn. Now, they go to the project and go to school in the mornings. They come home for lunch or eat at the project. Sometimes they sell on the streets and other times they don't." *At this rate, the twins are earning approximately 35 percent of the household income (Marileia=\$R100 Twin's=\$R40-45, @\$R2 per day, five days a week. According to the twins they are working every day now, while their mother works at the tree planting company).*

Marileia looks tired and drawn and I ask her if she's tired. "Really tired, but no I don't want to stop." She says. "My boys go to the project every day, Monday through Friday. I heard from other people that it was a good place, where they could play. There are boys from the neighborhood that also go there and they say that they like it. But this one here (pointing to one of the twins) sometimes he doesn't like the project, and he doesn't go."

"They told me that there are times that the older boys hit them," I say.

"Yes, that's right. This one doesn't go back now." Marileia tells me, touching one of her sons standing close to us. I ask her to tell me what things the project is doing that she thinks are good. "The music is good for them, teaching them how to do simple work is good. Homework, they don't bring their homework to the project. They bring it home and when they have a problem,

they take it to the project. The food, at times they say it's good, other times they say it's bad. I think working in the vegetable garden is good, learning how to grow a garden. If God wills, someday we can have a garden here. Everything that they can learn about work, how to do things is good. It's also good to play, but it's also more important to learn a profession, and it's good for them to work."

"About the things that are problematic for them, what can you say about that in relation to the project?" I ask.

"Sometimes the boys come home saying that the others hit them, and that they told the coordinators and that they didn't do anything. These problems seem to be constant, but just this. Sometimes the work is not good, like cleaning the old bathrooms that have snakes and poisonous insects. There are times that they don't tell me what's happening -- and other times they tell me how bad it is with the older boys, because they let everyone run around free. I'm certain that the project could do more. They have the conditions to do more (*money*), they could buy computers. It wouldn't cost them much. The boys just play football -- they could be learning how to use computers. If they did this, it would be a really good thing, it would be the best thing they could do for our children. Because they could be learning how to use the computer. Instead, they will have to find a way to take a course in computers after they leave the project, and this won't happen." *Marileia shakes her head and continues to study her hands.*

"So," I ask "do you think the project is preparing the boys to enter the work world?"

"Ah, Marcia -- I don't think so," she says, shaking her head.

"Do you think that the project -- would you like the idea, if the project would work with your children and other youth to help your *favela*? For example -- to get better conditions, like sewage, do you think this would be a good idea?" I ask, interrupting her.

"I think it's a great idea. For me, it's a great idea. Here in our *favela*, there doesn't exist a community. No one looks out for us here or helps us." Says Marileia.

"You don't have a community group?" I ask. *I've been told how each favela has a community group that represents them and petitions the mayor's office for services.* "We don't have anything," She says emphatically. "Nothing is done here. We have a city government, we have the *vereadores* (*like a city councilwoman or councilman*) that comes here during political campaigns, going to all the houses, and after the elections are over, it's over. We could fall down in front of them and go hungry. I walked into town and asked them to help me fix my house. With one minimum salary, look at my house and my back yard. My back yard is completely open. (*They don't have windows, they're open to the street. No running water or indoor toilet, no refrigerator*) When it rains, it all comes into the house from the roof gutter. Here, on this wall, it infiltrates inside the wall. It's falling down -- (*the wall*), and here too, in the bedroom of the children."

"Your neighbors won't help you?" I ask. "No! With nothing -- they've never helped me with anything" Marileia mumbled. *I remember the social network described by Janice Perlman, in the favelas in Rio de Janeiro. Perlman shows that in the urban setting of favela life in Rio de Janeiro, favelados are well organized "...making wide use of the urban milieu and its institutions"* (Perlman 1976:242-243). *By contrast, I found the favelas of Curvelo to be unorganized, and de-politicized. Yet, like Perlman, I found that poor and racially dark-skinned favelados have similar aspirations for themselves and their children as the middle and upper classes have. In the favelas of Curvelo, the poor rely on the hierarchical exchange that occurs in clientelism, the actions and events that create relations of dependence between the rich and poor, and between the poor and the poor. With its origins in the countryside, clientelism was born of relations between lords and vassals, imported by the Portuguese as they colonized Brazil. Its vestiges are evident everywhere in Curvelo, as is populism, how votes are won by politicians. Promises are made by the political elite to 'marginal' groups, who almost never receive the goods promised them* (Gay 1994; Perlman 1976).

"There's no solidarity here. The majority, if they see me with this blouse, they want to take it. They'd take it from me. That's the way it is here." *Marileia's voice sounds flat and emotionless.*

Firecrackers explode somewhere near us; we feel them through our feet and bodies, but are no longer startled by them.

"Why aren't you working as a maid in someone's house in Curvelo?" I ask, wondering why she would choose to be so far away from her children during the week.

"For this reason, because -- generally to do the work of a maid, you have to work in the kitchen - the stove, everything. Most of the time, the boss doesn't have the patience to teach me how to use these things (*Marileia can't read or write*). If you show me one time, so that I can see it, I will soon learn. But, most of these *patroas* don't have patience, they want me to make cakes, cookies, fish, everything. I need to know how to read, understand? If I knew how to read, I could do all these things. They could leave me with a recipe and I'd do it. Another thing, the majority of the houses where I've worked, where I've been given lots and lots of work to do, they don't pay you. The house that I told you about, that I left, this woman owes me \$R126.40. While I'm waiting for this money, the owner of the shop where I have credit, she's wanting me to pay her. I can't pay her because of this woman."

I ask Marileia if she can get a legal process going to get her money.

"There is, there's the *ministério* (*ministry of employment*). Says Marileia. I'd have to go there with her and then she's supposed to pay me -- it's difficult because a majority of the people say you don't want to do this, because they will (*the patroa*) will 'dirty' your name, so you won't get another job. I have to do something, but I don't know what, and I think about it day and night, every day."

I ask Marileia about her husband. "Could you talk about this, your marriage? How many years ago did he leave?" I ask.

"About five years ago, about that. When he left I had all five of my children. He drank a lot! Most of the time he was here at home, and I had to go to work. I worked in a *cozinha* (kitchen). Sometimes I would come home and find dinner ready, and hot water for a bath. Other times I would find him dizzy drunk, fighting, fighting a lot. He hit me, he yanked out a lot of my hair. I went to the *Delegacia de Mulheres* (Delegate for Women). I had a physical exam -- he hurt me a lot. When I was pregnant with Emerson, he hit me. I don't think it was in the stomach, but I

know that he hit me, things like this. It was normal. He did many, many bad things! He said *palavrões* (very degrading things to her like whore, bitch, etc.) -- all the *palavrões* that exist, he said to me. Everything. There was a time that he worked at a little grocery store up the street. I was in the house and we didn't have anything, didn't have any gas to cook with. My neighbors didn't have any to loan me. When I was looking for something to make, the boys came inside this house, it's really a shack, to hunt for some pieces of wood to light to make a fire. I owe this woman money (the one mentioned, whom she has credit with), and only God can take care of this debt and pay it. Dexa (*her name*), I don't know if you heard me talking about her, she is the owner of these stores that you see around here. I owe her money, and have said that only God will pay it for me. I went for my husband and told him that we didn't have anything to eat and that the children were hungry and that we didn't have any gas. I took the boys -- the woman at the store told me that I can't ask anything without my husband's authorization. He was working in this place (*this other store*). She said that we couldn't get anything to eat without his authorization. I went and told him this. He told me that he told her not to give me any food, that I wasn't to bring anything home and that everyone should die of hunger. So, I began to insult him. 'OK, you stay here with your children. You're working in a place that has food and I don't have any, and I don't have anything to take and give to the children to eat. So, stay with the children, and I'll go and hunt for work some how.'

"I came to this bridge (*metaphorically*) with my children lined up like a stair-case behind me, one behind the other. So, I talked with Dexa and she bought food for us and gas so we could kill the hunger of my children. I am taking this generosity of Dexa and other people too, like the Godmother of Tatiana (*her daughter*). She is great to me, but she doesn't have the means to help me.

"My husband, he didn't leave me with any longing for him. Today he's in a wheel chair. He can't talk, he doesn't know anyone, and he used to say things and then forget what he said. He eats with his hands, he doesn't eat right (*with utensils*). He had difficulty eating with his mouth. He doesn't get up and he doesn't walk any more. He just stays a little bit on his feet. He used to feed the birds. Now he can't do even this any more. He had a type of stroke. The doctor didn't say it was a stroke, but it probably was because one side of his body doesn't work. His left side, his left hand is swollen. You can't touch his left hand or take it because he will scream.

*We're both quiet for a while. Another car passes and the dust, now orange in the setting sun, drifts slowly. I feel like the woman in the film "Woman of the Dunes." (*4) There is so much of drifting dirt; it's so constant that it's useless to fight it.*

I ask Marileia about her children -- did they see the fights, did they try to intervene, were they afraid? "Yes, all the time, all of them tried to help me. They were afraid, they screamed a lot, and at times they came at him. They weren't hurt because at times when we were fighting and hitting, other people would come in and break up the fight -- separate us. I didn't let him touch them, and at times he would hit me more because I wouldn't let him hurt them."

Marileia tells me that she is religious, but that "...the religions that I am practicing now, I want to say this. They don't worship any saints -- they are different because they don't adore a dead Jesus -- they adore a living Jesus. Understand? So, for them a church doesn't exist. They have a book of music. Understand? They have been doing many good things for me. I had three unpaid bills, the company was going to cut off my water. I had two water bills and I think one light bill. They went and paid them for me. Our rice ran out. They bought more for me. Sometimes I don't have eggs -- I buy them -- but they go soon because the boys are hungry. I and my children talked with them and they bought more for my boys. It's like this kind of trust. When I'm not here during the week, they come by to see if the boys need anything. They offered, in the moment to take Vanderson to the doctor. They asked to bring his prescription to him and to buy the medicine for him. I told them that I wasn't feeling good, and they took me to the clinic to get a prescription and they paid for the medicine. This is the way they are. They are helping me, and Wellington and the others said that they were preparing a surprise for me. Now what it is, I don't know. I just know that there is a surprise. I would like for you to meet them. They are very loving people.

It's almost dark and I need to go. I'm on foot and it's a long way down the hill to my small lodgings. I ask her about 'rights'. Does she know what 'human rights' are? "Marcia -- I don't know. I would think that everyone must have the right, like this -- to have a good house, and that those who are the most powerful should help those who are weaker. For example, if I have a very old refrigerator, that still works, and I'm going to get a new one, I should give it to the poorest because in all these ways, I should be helping. So, like this. Many other things need to happen." Marileia says.

"Do you want to go inside? The dust is really bad here," Marileia asks, starting to stand up. "It's OK." I say. She sits down again and continues: "And health. Because there are times Marcia, that health is a thing very difficult for the poor, because it's like this. Many times, for example -- the other day. I met a friend of mine, last Sunday who was passing by. I was going to church and she was going home. She was a few months pregnant, and she was losing blood, not a lot, but some. At the clinic they wouldn't see her. She returned home feeling pain and losing blood. She was very afraid she was going to lose the baby. They didn't want to see her. So, she went to the clinic and a friend of hers called the doctor and they told her they needed to see her, and that she needed to take medicines. Yet, they didn't do anything. So, sometimes we go to INPS to get an

appointment. They say something like this, "To get an appointment you must wait until the next week." So, it's very difficult. I don't know if she lost the baby because I haven't seen her again."

We're nearing the end of our discussion; it's almost too dark to see. Walking down from the favela Bom Jesus after dark is dangerous, but not for the reasons one would think. Pedestrians are an endangered group of people in Brazil, and in Curvelo, where a good number of streets are still paved with the broken stone laid by slaves in the 1800s, the hazards increase. They are uneven, filled with deep ruts, and the drivers of cars love velocity. I ask her one last question.

"What about children's rights -- should they have the same rights as adults?" I ask.

"If adults and children should have the same rights?" Marileia repeats my question. "Yes, they must have the same rights. They must. Yes, I think they must, because if they are working and don't get the same pay, they are being exploited. The thing we have the most of in Brazil is the exploitation of minors. My step-mother, looking at the other side -- she didn't care about me. She took boys like the ones on the street, to peel garlic, and then she'd give them a plate of food for their work. This is what happens with the maid too -- she will hit the boys if they don't do enough or do it fast enough. Yes, they are abusing them. The same rights because everyone is a human being. Children should have the right to work and go to school. I think it's very important, because that's what I didn't have as a young girl. I want my children to have that. No one can take their schooling and what they know and learn away from them."

I ask Marileia what she hopes for her children, for their future. The movements around us become calmer, fewer cars and running adolescents, but the fireworks continue. "My hopes for my children?" She asks. "For them to study, for them to get through the year, that they become young men and a young woman who are good people, working honestly and to have a good profession. The only hope that someday I'll have something is to see my children raised and working. I can hope for this, but more than that, no."

The light is almost gone now, and the dust has begun to settle, until another car passes or running feet kick it up again. I have so many questions I want to ask Marileia. We promise to talk more soon, but I must ask her one more thing. What would she change to make her life better?

"What would I change? What would I change?" Marileia repeats the question. *Did I really ask her this -- surely I must be joking? Marileia surprises me, telling me what she would not change.*

"Ah Marcia, everything. I just wouldn't change my dignity -- there's nothing that matches it. That I have and it's worth a lot. My children wouldn't want me to change that, but if I could change things it would be for the better, for the better. To have a better little house, with more comfort for me and my children. My little house doesn't offer them any comfort -- not for them, not for me, or for anyone. Just these kinds of things." I ask, "Do you think you will have these things

someday?" "Ah yes, certainly. with God's help. This is how I'll live until then. When my children are grown working, I think it will happen."

Our interview comes to an end; I pack up my tape recorder and cough.

"Marcia, let's go and ask my neighbor for some cold water and she will give us a package of juice, grape juice. Do you like grape juice Marcia?" Marileia asks.

"Grape Juice? I like it." I say. *We get water from her neighbor and pour in the grape juice powder. We drink it, grateful for a means to wash the dust from our throats. In the dark, I feel my way down the Alto Bom Jesus.*

Conclusions and Discussion

As Esperanza in Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman* (1993), Marileia's interview is a translated and transcribed event. It is my fingers that play the keyboard of a computer, not Marileia's. My education, opportunities, white skin, and Americanization create barriers between her and I, making even the act of writing of another's life both a privilege and a burden. It is vitally important that stories such as Marileia's find entrance into academic literature and university classrooms. Were Marileia able to write her own story and find avenues to print it,

anthropology will have partially succeeded in its missions to understand human complexity and bring disparate human worlds closer together.

Including the interviewer's thoughts throughout this dialogue reflects the concerns of Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth* (Rosaldo 1989), who argues that good ethnography requires the anthropologist to be aware of their own reactions to everyday events, often in very unfamiliar territories, which can shock, dismay, or create prolonged despair in the anthropologist. Are not those who read ethnographies also called upon to be reflexive observers of their own internal dialogues and commentaries? If so, this process can extend the cantankerous and complex experiences of researcher, subject, and reader into a form that is similar to a musical improvisation whose impetus *is* the interaction between all performers.

Notes:

(* 1) Twenty women and children were interviewed in my sample.

(* 2) Roça refers to a small plot of land in rural areas cleared for planting.

(*3) In 1997 the Brazilian Real (name of currency) was equal to \$1.00 US dollar.

(*4) "Woman of the Dunes", a film by Hiroshi Teshigahara, released in 1965.

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