

FEMALE VULNERABILITY AND SEXUALITY: GENDER AND POVERTY IN THE MARGINS OF BRAZIL

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Summary

This dissertation in social anthropology at the University of Oslo, discusses female vulnerability and sexuality in relations to gender, poverty, and power in Fortaleza: a large city in North Eastern Brazil.

Throughout the dissertation, I have discussed sexuality, the female body, gender relations, and reproduction in specific historical, economical and social contexts. The main focus has been on the poor women of Jardim Verde, and the struggles they have to fight in order to sustain a dignified life. The vast poverty I encountered in Jardim Verde entrapped the most vulnerable women, such as Marisa, in webs of suffering, which she was unable to escape. This web, which connected history, poverty, gender, sexuality, bodies, reproduction, and power, contributed to the procreation of pain and misery within individual bodies.

I have chosen to write about a group and individuals that contradicted the general idea of a well-functioning citizen. On the one hand, these women represent one of the most marginalised groups within Brazil. On the other hand, however, they reflect, in essence, the vulnerability of women in general. When I approached specific social dysfunctions, I was able to reveal some of the fundamental structures governing Brazil and how these contribute to the reproduction of inequality and suffering. On a community level, the patterns that I identified were hidden in the relational dimension of relationships between men and women, as well as among family and friends. On an institutional level, however, the conflict was between people and the system.

In this respect, the challenges that I posed were to contextualise the living conditions of these women, in order to reveal not only what they experienced, but to also explore why they had these experiences. By this I mean to reveal how poverty afflicted their lives and the source of their vulnerability. I analysed the multiple layers of sexuality in order to reveal the female body and sexuality as a contested field where political economy and structures of power are negotiated and embodied.

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First of all I have to thank Marisa, for letting me into her life, and letting me know her story. Getting to know her and the other remarkable women I met in Fortaleza has enriched my life and I am forever grateful. By allowing me to use their histories I have been given the possibility to reveal to a larger public the difficulties they experience every day. For that I am very grateful and I hope I have proven myself worthy the task.

I am in deep debts to my academic supervisor, Rune Flikke. Without his excellent advice, and comments, this dissertation would not have been as it is today.

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SUMMARY	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	3
Fortaleza: the first contact	3
Beginning the fieldwork	5
At the beach: one month in Scandinavia	6
‘O bairro;’ Jardim Verde	8
Introducing the neighbours	9
Marisa	11
A theoretical background	13
How the empiric material changed the questions	15
New questions	15
Methodological approach	18
CHAPTER 2: EMBODIED STRUCTURES	22
Mother	23
Family structure	25
The female body	26
Body, beauty and fashion	27
Passive-aggressive	29
Sexuality	32
The absence of female masturbation	33
The connection between sex and love	36
The masculine ideal, as a contrast to the feminine	37
CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL PREDISPOSITIONS AND CHALLENGES	42
A brief history of Brazil	42
Property as an indicator of individual value	45
Living conditions	46
Relationships	49

Jealousy	49
Marriage	50
The end of a marriage and the ex-wife	53
The potential danger in reproduction	55
Claudinilson	55
Wellington	57
Donato	60
“If she did not want to get pregnant she would not have gotten pregnant, so why should it be my responsibility?”	62
CHAPTER 4: DOMINATED BODIES: THE NORMALISATION OF SUFFERING	64
A symbolic ambivalence of the female body	65
The public control of individual bodies	67
Locally exerted control	68
I would rather die than have this baby	71
Abortion	73
Sexual abuse: when incest happens	75
The stepfather	76
Risk and blame	78
The suffering social body	78
CHAPTER 5: FINAL REMARKS AND CONCLUSION	80
The field	81
The reproduction of low self-esteem	82
The women	83
Gendered relations	84
Sexuality	86
Suffering	87
Closing remarks	88
LITERATURE	89

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm.” (Farmer 2005:7).

Fortaleza: the first contact

I arrived in Brazil on 7 January 2005. This was the beginning of an anthropological fieldwork that lasted six months and became the foundation of this dissertation. I reached Fortaleza, my final destination, that same day. I was picked up at the airport and left at a high-class hotel by a friend who left the city the next morning. The following morning a hotel receptionist helped me locate the number of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) I had been in contact with before arriving. They told me to come in for a meeting the next week, so I decided to see the city and what it had to offer before starting work. In the tourist area where my hotel was located, the shoreline was the main attraction. Adjacent to beach was a brick promenade and the beachside was lined with small bars. There was also a large market along the beach promenade, which opened every night. At the market, souvenirs, hammocks, clothes, and other items aimed at a foreign market were sold after intense bargaining.

I spent the second day observing and writing field notes at one of the bars on the beach. As I was sitting there, an Italian man, probably in his late fifties, approached me. He asked if he might sit down. Glad to meet someone who spoke English, I let him take a seat and we started talking. I told him that I was there to study a HIV/AIDS prevention project whose main target group was women, and he seemed interested. He invited me to have a coffee with him and his friends the same evening and to experience the promenade at night. Later when I met up with him, he was sitting at the same bar at a table near the promenade, in the company of two middle aged Italian men. An old lady, probably 70 years of age approached our table selling ladies underwear. I told her I was not interested and she started persuading the Italian man to buy me some. She held up a red lace thong, then she put it over

her face demonstrating an opening underneath it, she then put her tongue into the hole and rotated it simulating female oral sex. The situation embarrassed me and the Italian told the lady that I was not a prostitute. Then she put the thong away and started demonstrating ordinary cotton panties.

When the table started filling up with the "girlfriends" of the other men, I decided to leave. At this point the Italian man told me he wanted to spend his last night with me. I laughed as if he was making a joke. I got up from the table and he grabbed my arm and raised his voice. He told me that I had to come with him, or else he would take another girl. He tried to persuade me, promising that he would buy me a mobile phone. In the end, he insisted and started to act threatening. I started to walk away and he held me back, so that I had to use force to break loose. None of his friends assisted me. I spent the following days in my hotel room. This was the city where I was to spend the next six months.

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On arrival, I knew Fortaleza was the fifth largest city in Brazil with approximately two million inhabitants. It was the capital of the "sunshine state," Ceará, located in the north-eastern region, or in Portuguese, *nordeste*. The region was known as the poorest and the least developed region of Brazil, which by Josuè de Castro (1969) described as "600,000 square miles of suffering" (in Scheper-Huges 1992:31).

"A land of contrasts, with cloying sugar cane fields, amid hunger and disease, periodic droughts and deadly floods, of authorial landowners and rebels, of penitential Christians, ecstatic messianic movements and liberation theology existing side by side with Afro-Brazilian spirit possession." (Scheper-Huges 1992:31)

Fortaleza was a relatively new city where since 1995, the tourist industry has exploded. From 1995 to 1999, tourism increased by 16, 5% annually.¹ Tourism caused great changes in Fortaleza's local infrastructure. The *bairros* (neighbourhoods) close to the beach were so rapidly changing, that it was possible to notice changes in the landscape from month to

¹ <http://www.fortaleza.ce.gov.br/fort/cid.asp>

month. Local settlements were forced out as Europeans moved in. The European presence in Fortaleza consisted of two groups. The first group included permanent or semi-permanent residents living in the city, whereas the second group consisted of tourists there for short visiting periods. The tourists that I spoke with often expressed intentions to return either as tourists or residents. Their common denominator was an extended participation in Fortaleza's rapidly growing sex-industry.

Sexual tourism affected the city so much that the newly-elected mayor had campaigned and won with promises to end prostitution. The artistic Praia de Iracema was the most scenic part of town, located near a cultural centre, the beach, and the Ponte Metalica, an antique pier. It used to be a part of the city where students and artists gathered at small bars and restaurants, but the bars had been bought up by Europeans and transformed into discos and restaurants for tourists and prostitutes. The promenade by the sea where people used to gather to play guitar or to *namorar*, spend time with a boyfriend or a girlfriend had become too dangerous. Now gangs of potentially violent street-boys with glue bottles and crack pipes occupied the area. This situation caused great concern among the locals. Ninno, an anthropology student, demonstrated the anger of the local residents by cursing the gringos who had come to his country and exploited its poor women. Another night, walking through the same area with a middle-class friend, she demonstrated her resentment by hiding her face with a jacket to make sure she would not be recognized and mistaken for a prostitute.

Beginning the fieldwork

When I met up with the NGO the first week, they informed me that the project I intended to study, which addressed women working in the sex industry, had been shut down. They offered me another project that focused on teenagers in poorer neighbourhoods in the interior of the city. As there were no organised activities due to the holidays, the NGO representatives encouraged me to study the sex tourism and then return one month later. They also told me there was nothing I might do at the NGO awaiting the beginning of the new term. The personnel seemed sceptical. Later, I learned that two years ago, a medical student had studied the same prostitution project and drew rather critical conclusions.

There were several NGOs in the state of Ceará and the ones dealing with the HIV/AIDS problematic were organised in a forum. The FORUM consisted of thirty-one NGOs working in the state and twenty-six of them were active in Fortaleza. The FORUM was a national institution and existed in most of the states. They met regularly and arranged larger operations, such as prevention campaigns at the carnival, commemorations of World AIDS Day, and other large-scale arrangements. The FORUM unified different interest groups, including organisations for transvestites, homosexuals, drug users, children with HIV and others. These organisations were local, national, and even international. They all followed their own agenda and as one of the leaders told me: “The quality of the work done by the different NGOs differs enormously. Some are serious and some, who knows what they really do?”

The NGO I worked with was a national organisation that had been active in the state of Ceará for 15 years. It had over the years worked with several projects and populations, and had attained a good reputation in the State. The project I worked with addressed teenagers from the age of fourteen to their early twenties, in matters related to sex, sexuality, gender relations, drugs, and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. The project had a liberal character, as the workers openly discussed and treated these sensitive subjects. The project’s main goal was to produce *multiplicadores*; local teenagers trained in HIV/AIDS prevention instruction, who would go into their communities and multiply the knowledge that they accumulated through the course. Through networking, the newly trained multiplicadores would increase the knowledge of the general population.

The personnel working in the NGO spanned from students to trained professionals, housewives, and single moms. There was a majority of women and all sexual orientations were represented. I did not study the organisation and its structure, so in the following text, when I write about the NGO, I am referring specifically to the HIV/AIDS project.

At the beach: one month in Scandinavia

While waiting for the beginning of the new term, I spent a month with Scandinavian tourists, trying to grasp some meaning of the whole scenario in Fortaleza—with prostitutes, bars, and Scandinavian men, who acknowledged the sex industry but to a large extent denied their own

participation in it. The average day was spent circulating between bars where the alcohol consumption was constantly and high. The initial goal for the research had not been the sex industry and especially not the buyer side of the industry. So before the month was over, I had tired from the whole scene, both mentally and physically. In addition to this, the NGO kept pushing me to continue this research and delaying my intended move from the beach to one of the bairros where the project was functioning. I finally convinced them to let me move when my academic advisor advised me to leave.

The month I spent with the Scandinavians had raised some new questions. The main topic of most conversations was “the Brazilians,” in general, and Brazilian women in particular. The extreme and opinionated perspective presented by most Scandinavians combined with an ignorance and lack of interest in any explanations other than their own, left me with a desire to prove them wrong. I will present some quotes to clarify the impression held by most of the foreigners. “Brazil would have been paradise on earth, if it was possible to remove all the Brazilians,” said Massimo, a thirty-six-year old Italian man, who, for the last four years had lived 6 months a year in Fortaleza. “You cannot trust a Brazilian; they are all criminals, even the ones you believe are your friends,” commented another foreigner. This was a general idea uttered by several men, both permanent and semi-permanent residents, as they warned new foreign arrivals against trusting the Brazilians. “The poorer the country is, the better it is to live in,” I was told by Ronny, a fifty-five-year old Norwegian man living in a luxurious villa on the outskirts of Fortaleza. When speaking of women, their statements were, if possible, more opinionated:

Because most Brazilian men are gay, there are not enough men for all of the women. It’s like four women for each man; therefore the Brazilian women are incredibly horny.

They [Brazilian women] cannot get enough sex; they are crazy about it.

That is the reason they have sex with us; it is not because they are prostitutes or poor.

For Brazilian women we are like movie stars. They cannot get enough of us.

Several foreigners repeated variations of these statements to themselves, to me, and to all the “newcomers.” When I questioned the foreigners about these “facts,” they cut me short with comments like “You are just jealous because we get so much attention” or “You really need to get laid.”

A direct result of my first experiences in Fortaleza the focus on sex and sexuality and the lack of nuance in the representations of women and female sexuality--initiated the process of defining the questions of this dissertation. Shortly after, I was able to convince Gina, one of the directors, to ‘let’ me move into one of the neighbourhoods. With the help of Anna, one of the teachers, we found a safe place. A few days later, I moved into the bairro that I was to live in the rest of the fieldwork. Avoiding the tourist scene and the Scandinavians for extended periods did not reduce the feelings that their ignorance had evoked in me. At the end of the research period, I realised that a great part my material focused on female sexuality and male-female relations.

‘O bairro;’ Jardim Verde

The bairro where I spent most of my fieldwork was located approximately one hour from the city centre. I have referred to it by it a pseudonym, Jardim Verde [Green Garden]. It had originally been cheap public housing for poor working-class people, but now the public has withdrawn and the free market has taken over. The neighborhood was large, divided into four zones separated by canals, but it had a somewhat idyllic atmosphere. There were no *favelas* (slums) or occupied areas *inside* the bairro, but slums surrounded the neighbourhood. Criminality was high but I never experienced it, except one time when someone stole my laundry. In the neighbourhood there were several households who owned their own homes, and some even owned cars.

It was like a small town inside the city. The neighbourhood had a community bank, schools, Main Street, shops, social centre, cultural centre, parks, and supermarket. Alongside the canals there were large trees, in between were larger grassy areas where skinny horses and goats grazed. Every morning teenage boys herded cows through the main street and stray dogs spent the days in the shadows. The standard characteristics of the housings differed, from the

common concrete floors, chalk painted walls, and unprotected roof tiles, to high standard apartments that were fully furnished with tiled floors. I was often told of people living in the neighbourhood who had means and were successful, but outsiders unquestionably considered this neighbourhood was a lower class area. Most residents also referred to themselves as poor.

I asked Anna, who taught the class at the NGO, if she ever worried about not reaching out to the kids who really needed the information. She answered: “Knowing that there is a crack-house on each street corner, the high prevalence of teen pregnancies and of crime I do not worry. They all know of someone who got pregnant or use drugs or commit crime. This makes them all vulnerable.”

Introducing the neighbours

In Jardim Verde I rented a small apartment in an old school, converted into three apartments. The apartments had a bedroom, bathroom, and a combined kitchen, living room, and hall. The fourth housing unit was just an old classroom with a small bathroom outside. The rent was 120R\$² a month, including water and electricity, except for the room which was only 60R\$.³

The old schoolyard was our front garden, a dirty sand hole, filled with garbage and random vegetation. A big wall separated the houses from the streets and provided a feeling of privacy and security, although the wall was falling apart and a person easily could enter through a rusted hole in the gate. The houses were owned by Sr. dos Santos, a corpulent, cross-eyed, bearded little man who had a repair shop next door. He cared only for money and women. He spent his days sitting on a bench, keeping an eye on his tenants, and looking at the women passing by. His presence was not welcomed by the residents and the women never spoke with him unless absolutely necessary.

In the first apartment lived Daiani, Rafael, and their one-year old son Everton. Daiani was twenty-seven and Rafael was forty-two. Rafael worked sixteen-hour shifts as the driver of a *topique*⁴ or minibus, and he had every other Sunday free. He earned well, around 600R\$⁵ each month, twice the minimal wage, but he had two families to sustain. The employment was

² 360NKR

³ 180NKR

⁴ A privately owned minibus, driving fixed routes through the city, considered faster and more dangerous than the public bus. The fares of the *topique* and the public bus were the same.

⁵ 1800NKR

unstable and his routes often changed. During my fieldwork he changed employers four times. Because of his long hours and sparse free time, I never really became acquainted with him; I just knew *of him*, through his common-law wife. He spent all spare time drinking, either inside the apartment or at one of the local pubs. Rafael had three children with his ex-wife, and she was the main preoccupation for Daiani, who was his second ‘wife.’ Her days were spent waiting for Rafael at the bus stop, cooking, and walking around to the neighbourhood bars looking for him at night. She always carried Everton in her arm. The boy often cried, and got hysterical if he lost sight of his mother. He was considered an unsupportable child by the neighbours.

In the second apartment lived Luara and Renato, another common-law married couple in their late forties. Luara had two children from an earlier marriage but they were living elsewhere. Renato did not allow her son to live with them or let him into the apartment. When Luara was away, he had to wait outside. The boy, who was sixteen, lived with his girlfriend in a shantytown nearby. He was already keeping ‘bad company’ and it was just a matter of time before he did something that would get him into serious trouble. Laura’s daughter, who was some years older, lived with a criminal boyfriend. She had a daughter from an earlier relationship but the child was in the care of its father. Laura’s daughter had little contact with the girl.

Renato worked as a handyman at the local railway station, and Luara worked as a housekeeper for a family in the neighbourhood. They both drank heavily, and when they came home from the bar, they would argue, cry, and wake up all the neighbours. One night, Luara was so drunk that she wet her pants on the way home. This incident amused the children for days. Luara had a lover that would come to the house while Renato was at work. To check up on his wife Renato ate his lunch at home. He believed he kept the only key to the apartment, but Luara had made a copy, and the affair went unnoticed.

The last residence was the former classroom, which had not yet been transformed into another apartment. In this room lived Marisa, a single mom, with her two children Maria (8) and Raoul (3). Marisa was in a relationship with Donato, a married man living in a nearby neighbourhood. She was pregnant with her third child, and he was the father of her unborn child. Marisa worked part-time as a manicurist from her home. The family’s income

consisted of a monthly payment of 80 R\$ from the state⁶, and sporadic child support of approximately 80R\$, from one of the fathers, and the money Marisa could earn manicuring nails. She charged 5R\$⁷ per client and used from one to one and a half hours for each. She would have a couple of clients during the week but not enough to earn a full minimum wage, which was 300R\$ in September 2005.⁸

Marisa

I met Marisa the first day I went to see the apartments. The landlord told me she was living alone with two children and we spoke briefly. Four days later I moved in. The second night she came looking for me. I was sitting alone in the flat, writing field notes, when Marisa invited me to a cup of wine. Four women sat in front of the house. The pavement was commonly used as a recreational area where family members and neighbours could meet up to talk and observe the activity on the street. This night we were sitting in front of Carla's house; she was the neighbour closest to the schoolhouse. This house was also owned by Sr. dos Santos. Carla lived here with her husband and son, as well as her brother and his girlfriend. When Marisa returned with me, Carla went inside to grab a bottle of sweet wine. The women wanted to know why I had not shown up voluntarily, if it was because I did not like them. I explained that I was timid. They served wine and started questioning me. The discussions largely focused on husbands and boyfriends. They talked about the different signals that men use to tell a woman they are interested in her. Then they taught me some rude ways to refuse a man and words to describe sexual relations and male genitalia, as they were giggling and drinking wine. The session was interrupted when Carla's husband showed up with the minibus he drove. They hid the wine glasses [tin cups], and the giggling stopped. He had come to check on her and stayed only a minute. As he drove away, Marisa asked her: "Do you think he will beat you for this tonight?" We sat for a while longer, and the conversation turned to children. Marisa told me she was pregnant, and she did not speak of her pregnancy again for weeks.

⁶ 240NKR

⁷ 15NKR

⁸ 900NKR

That first night, Marisa gave me a bracelet. It was made of natural fibres and seven glass beads that formed a flower. It was simple but I took the gift and the invitation as a sign that she wanted to initiate a friendship with me. The night ended when Carla's husband returned from work around one o'clock and we all went to our homes.

The next morning Marisa woke me up with coffee and a piece of bread. For several days, she continued bringing me food or coffee. Her initiative made me wary and for the first week, I felt uncomfortable. I did not know how to deal with the situation. Having heard stories from other anthropologists, I was sceptical about her intentions. She made a point out of who had given her the few things she owned and the food she ate, so I suspected that she wanted me to buy her something. When I asked Aline, a friend, what to do, she told me: "The next time you go to the shop, just buy her a bag of milk or some bread. It is normal; that's the way things work here." I followed her advice and established the foundation of a close friendship.

Two days later, Carla and her husband moved out; they had decided over night and moved the following morning. She came back to visit only once after she moved. After Carla moved out, I replaced her as Marisa's companion and friend. Friendships seemed to be of a flighty and unstable character, based on social contact, such as being neighbours, or common interests.

Certain perspectives on anthropological methodology advise anthropologist to take caution and be aware of persons who initiate contact in the primary phases of the fieldwork. Belmonte describes how his first meetings with young criminals in Naples caused him problems. It was not until he established contact with a family that his research became fruitful (Belmonte 1989). This warning also comes forth in an article by Wikan (1996), who describes her unwanted experiences with initial contact in the field. She is quite explicit in her warning against people who initiate contact in the preliminary stage of the fieldwork. It is said that the first people the anthropologist get in touch with, most of the time, are not the ones she wants to talk to. They are often outcasts of the society or they want something from the anthropologist (Wikan 1996). With these warnings in mind and with intentions of not being 'fooled' by the unrepresentative outcasts of society, I had started fieldwork.

When I met Marisa, she had all the characteristics of an outcast. She was a single mom living in hiding from her own family and former friends. She avoided contact with people and spent most of her time inside the walls of the front yard. As my intentions were to discover how young women perceived HIV/AIDS and how information affected them, I was mainly interested in getting in touch with someone who was involved in the project I followed. Marisa was not in my target-group but as she lived next door to me, we spent most of the day together and became friends. She was of great value when I was settling in to the neighbourhood, and she also took a personal interest in my security, teaching me the rules of the neighbourhood. When our petty-criminal, crack-smoking neighbours started showing particular interest in me, she told them I was married to a very strong *gringo* and they left me in peace.

As we became closer and our relationship grew, our conversations became more intimate, but I never considered the conversations we had to be relevant for my thesis. They were interesting and important in the building of our friendship, but after all, she was clearly not representative of society at large. Marisa was one of the people I had been advised to avoid--a local "clown." She was not only perceived by others to have failed, but she also felt great shame over the turn her life had taken and spent most of her time inside her home.

A theoretical background

When I conducted fieldwork, my initial intentions were to discover how education could reduce the spread of HIV; how young women thought about the disease; and if education changed the conceptualisation of the disease. I also wished to investigate how women related to the idea of risk and risk behaviour.

The theoretical paradigm I based the research on was Critical Medical Anthropology (CMA). Throughout the research and writing processes the questions have changed, but the theoretical foundation has remained CMA, which has two schools. The first is an epistemologically-oriented school inspired by postmodernist thinking concerned with different cultural models of health and body. This discipline works towards a deconstruction of the hegemony of Western biomedicine and the Western idea of the body. They argue that the Western model, like others, is a cultural model (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998).

The second CMA school has a background in neo-Marxist theories and sees health and sickness as part of larger structural processes of economy and power (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998). CMA is a theoretical and practical method for understanding health, sickness, and treatment on different levels. It takes into consideration: on the macro level, political economy; on the national level, politics and class structures; on the institutional level, the health system; on the community level, populist thoughts and actions; and on the micro level, personal experiences, behaviour and actions, as well as meaning, physiology and environmental factors (Singer 1998). I have used the second school as the framework for my analysis. I understand health to be more than individual experiences and believe it is necessary to take into consideration the dominating structural elements that facilitate certain patterns. As Paul Farmer has formulated so well:

“Structural violence is violence exerted systematically- that is, indirectly- by everyone who belongs to a certain social order: hence the discomfort these ideas provoke in a moral economy still geared to pinning praise or blame on individual actors. In short, the concept of structural violence is intended to inform the study of the social machinery of oppression.” (Farmer 2004:307)

Structural violence emphasises history, biology and political economy. Although the inequality of today is structured and legitimated over time, it also changes form in each era and maintains its essence. The anthropology of structural violence documents the complex workings of the machinery, founded in a political economy that reproduces inequality (Farmer 2004).

In this thesis I will give a brief account of the history and the current situation, but due to practical limitations on the length of the thesis, I will not give historical background a major role. At the same time, political issues were of small importance to the persons at the centre of this thesis. My intention is to give their story the space it requires without denying that the contexts exist because of hegemonic political, economical and social structures that create power and the powerless.

How the empiric material changed the questions

As I began the study, I immediately learned that it was no longer politically correct to use the term “risk-groups” in Brazil. Based on the stigmatization of risk-group, the concept was removed from the Brazilian HIV/AIDS discourse. The new concept was “vulnerability,” and “vulnerable groups.” By choosing the term vulnerability, HIV/AIDS workers have grasped an important aspect of the problem-- to relieve the carriers of the virus from guilt.

The project I worked with at the NGO focused on teenagers in poorer bairros. Throughout the fieldwork, I followed two parallel projects in two bairros, from beginning to end. The data that I obtained from this work were sufficient to write a thesis on the preventative work on HIV/AIDS. In addition to the work with the NGO, I was living in Jardim Verde and my every day life put me in touch with some remarkable women and their struggles to survive.

Throughout the fieldwork and the writing process the thesis changed form several times as some stories demanded its place and others faded into the ‘will be written in the future category’. One story that fought its way to the front line was the story of Marisa. I gradually realised that even if her story was to some extent extreme it was not unique, and her life in many ways concentrate the vulnerability of poor women. She is not the only one with these experiences, but she had experienced *so* many of them and was *the* person I knew the best. Therefore, will I use her life story as the core and build this thesis around it. The warning about the unrepresentative informant might have caused me to miss out on important sources of information. Luckily I *had* to get to know her, as she was my next-door neighbour. The most vulnerable in a community are the unsuccessful, the children and the poor. In this thesis, I am concerned with the vulnerability of women, their dependency on men, and the implications this had on their health.

New questions

One afternoon, I was sitting on the beach with Debora, a close friend of mine and the wife of Carlos, who owned the ice-cream shop where I spent most of my spare time. It was the last month of my fieldwork, and I still had not decided on the focus of my thesis. I was discussing the options with her. I had followed the project working with prevention of HIV/AIDS for

five months, but the stories of the women I had met; my neighbours and my friends intrigued me. I was confused. Debora asked:

Are you going to write about the project or are you going to write about how women are dominated by men? You see; we are! I cannot even go to the grocery-shop unless Carlos gives me permission.

It was not the first time that a woman had complained about the gender roles and gendered actions. I knew that although she was complaining, Debora also liked the fact that her husband took such interest in her whereabouts. Nevertheless I found it assuring to know that she wanted me to write about it.

After our conversation, the process of changing the entire thesis started. This is not a dissertation about how men dominate women; nevertheless it is about the relational aspects of gender. It is a thesis about how poverty and gender roles make women especially vulnerable in a society where the poorest have little or no power. This ethnography is about the multiple layers of sexuality; how sexuality becomes a contested field where political economy and structures of power are embodied; and how power is negotiated as women use their bodies to sustain the relations they need to survive.

The thesis is also a personal work. Throughout the fieldwork it became impossible for me to not get involved in the lives of these people. They are not just numbers in the statistics; they are persons who laughed, cried, and screamed sitting at my kitchen table, who shared their lives with me, and who cared for me when I was ill, depressed or just in need of a supportive shoulder. Their presence was essential for understanding the material that is the foundation of this thesis.

The analysis does not only aim to highlight and describe some of the more difficult aspects of poor women's lives. Through contextualising the difficult conditions they live under and how larger structures of power are embodied in individuals, this work gives the reader greater insight into not only what is going on, but also why it occurs.

In this work, I seek to address how poverty impacts the lives of the women of Jardim Verde. Some parts of the material were collected outside the bairro, but the main focus will be

on the women of the neighbourhood. Growing up under conditions giving little room for personal realisation and financial independence, many women become dependant on the men in their lives. Their situation--poverty and gender--makes these women especially vulnerable because they do not only risk their own security and well being but also the security and well being of their children. Because women give birth and raise children, they need the security of a home and a reliable supply of food and water. Men, on the other hand, can father as many children as they like and leave them for the women to care for and raise.

Based on the previously mentioned experiences regarding the sex industry and the men who bought sex, I had established an interest for revealing the 'truth' about the female sexuality. It turned out to be a difficult task, as the multiple aspects of female sexuality became clear. A large part of this thesis will be used to uncover different aspects of sexuality, with the main focus on the female sexuality, although I cannot guarantee that I have comprehended its totality.

When one walks along the beach one might get the impression female sexuality in Fortaleza is all about sex. Women wear miniature bikinis, flirt aggressively, and enjoy the attention it evokes. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church emphasises the virtue of virginity, and this is solidly rooted in the public consciousness. I discovered that despite their visible sexual confidence, women seemed to have difficulties relating to their bodies. I hope to uncover some of the dynamics of sexuality and how women related to their bodies. This area of knowledge is interesting because it tells us more than the history of a few women; it reveals how the political economy is embodied in individuals. Furthermore, the study of sexuality shows how patterns of power, internalised through generations, affect the lives of these women. Lastly, an investigation of sexuality reveals the vulnerability of women to be a socially constructed phenomenon.

In the construction of "habitus" through the repetition of social praxes, history is turned into nature. The process represents the reproduction of past structures into present praxes and a potential for present praxes to be reproduced as future structures. Habitus is described as a historical structure that, over time, reproduces and orders the maintenance of a society socially stratified by class (Bourdieu 1977:77-83). Likewise, power relations are

internalised, transmitted, and replicated over time, as the structures of power become embodied as habitus.

This study has a clear focus on the micro-level and the individual experiences of women. Structural power was imposed on them at the micro level through gender relations and at the macro level by the state. The notion of governmentality describes the power that the state holds over a population through public benefits, regulations, and laws. For the state, the control over populations has replaced state control over territory in important respects. The population is often unaware of the structural power imbedded in the benefits that the state introduces (Foucault 1991). Throughout the dissertation, I hope to make clear for the reader how the empirical material can be connected to a larger discourse on structural power. As Scheper-Huges and Lock have suggested with their notion of the *mindful body*, which directly connects the individual body to the body politic (1998).

Methodological approach

My methodological approach will be rather obvious for the reader of the dissertation, as I clearly position myself in the text and in the field. But this section on method is necessary to make explicit the different techniques I used in the data-collection period.

My Portuguese skills were limited on arrival but I spoke fluent Spanish, and during the month spent with the tourists I got plenty of time to improve the Portuguese before moving into Jardim Verde. Throughout the fieldwork I never confronted any severe language problems. When I encountered problems or did not understand, I asked and someone explained it to me. As the language improved, the nature of my data changed from being dominated by observations to more dialogue.

As I have already mentioned, my initial goal was to study the NGO project. So with the NGO I took, and was given, the role as ‘anthropologist.’ With my notebook and pen always present, I observed and participated equally, as my role assigned by the teachers and the students were that of an assisting teacher. I replied to and asked questions, and I participated in games and discussions.

I spent the rest of my time making friends, passing time, and exploring Jardim Verde. When I was home or with my friends, I did not think of my thesis and a large part of my

experiences were never written down. At the university, I had two friends, middle class girls, with whom I went to concerts, dancing, and to visit their families. We also went to the beach and gossiped in their bedrooms. I never regarded these actions to be field related and I seldom wrote about it in my field notes. The fact that I did not have the thesis consciously in my mind all the time may have given me access to a different level of information than I could have attained if I had *looked* for it. Underestimating the anthropological value of my ‘private’ activities has led to limitations in the material. Nevertheless the back stage information I was able to access due to this, has been invaluable. Today I might regret not writing more about the rest of my experiences. In spite of the limitations, the material is sufficient to confirm my thesis.

To describe my positioning in the field, I will mention some of the different roles I occupied in the field. At the NGO, I was considered a ‘professional’ and acted as a teacher. This was also the role I entered when socially interacting with the students in the class. This role limited the level of access and complicated interaction outside the formal settings of the project. With my friends, I was given the role as friend and equal; my foreign status was soon forgotten and rarely the subject of comments. When commented on it was to state how different I was from the other foreigners in Fortaleza.

Confronted with the arrogance and ignorance of many visiting Europeans, being European had become a stigma and my friends communicated my resemblance to them rather than our differences. As a result I kept hearing I was the most ‘Brazilian’ European they had ever met. I was “just like them”, which of course I was not. Whenever I acted un-Brazilian, however, I was firmly corrected about how a Brazilian woman was supposed to act. This again gave me inside information on expectations about how women were supposed to act. This information is important for the dissertation. I am aware that the training of an adult foreign woman was different than the socialisation of a daughter, but I will argue that the information is valid, because adult men and women explained to me their expectations of how a woman was supposed to be.

In Jardim Verde I tried to make myself as invisible as possible. Due to high crime rates and the fact that I was living alone, I hoped to keep a low profile. I was known as the ‘foreign teacher’ by the ones who did not know me, and I dressed down, lived simple, and

never spent more money than the rest. I often brought Maria, Marisa's daughter to the grocery shop, and it was commonly assumed that she was my daughter. The days in Jardim Verde, I spent like my neighbours, cleaning house, planning dinner, watching daytime soaps on TV, resting in the hammocks and gossiping with my neighbours. I was never alone, and when I tried to get some time to write my field notes I was called by one of the neighbours, mostly Marisa, to join her. If I explained I had to study, they would send a child to accompany me. All the time we spent together we talked; talked about family, children, TV soaps, fabric softener, men, landlords, neighbours, rats, crime, and school. Even Maria, when she was supposed to study with me, talked about her mother and her father her brother, her cousins, her friends, and school. Most of these conversations never ended up in my field notes but some did. It is with background in the hundreds of conversations that I had with my friends, neighbours, and their friends that this thesis finds its body.

I intended to use interviews as a research technique but after some time, when the different relationships became established, it felt uncomfortable to take my notebook and pen and interview my friends. I sometimes asked, "Is it ok if I use what you tell me for my thesis" and most of the time it was. There are parts of my material that I have not received permission to use, but through pseudonyms and by altering irrelevant information, I have maintained the ethical standards.

If I had known that I would end up writing about my neighbours and not about the project, I probably would not have become so personally involved or intervened in their lives to the extent that I did. But if I had not, I may never have received access to intimate information, such as Marisa's intended illegal abortion. If I had not taken her to the doctor, she would not have discovered that she was seven months pregnant instead of just five as she believed, or wanted to believe. She may have died on the kitchen table. The whole ordeal of the abortion included me in some of the more delicate and private matters of genders relations. It revealed the fear and the suffering with which many women have to live.

Thus to conclude this introduction, the following quote from *Death Without Weeping* captures the complexity of my fieldwork and this dissertation. Scheper-Huges writes:

“Like all modern ethnographies, this one might be read at various, sometimes “mutually interfering” levels ... as a book of voyage and discovery as a moral reflection of a human society forced to the margins, as a political text (or as a Christian passion play) that indicts a political economic order that reproduces sickness and death at its very base.” (Scheper-Huges 1992:30)

As I share these sentiments and motivations, my ethnography will be presented as “close to the bone” as it was experienced.

Chapter 2: Embodied structures

We are situated in the world through a body. How this body is perceived by different persons or in different cultures varies, but the common factor is that we all have one. The body is the epistemological foundation, the landscape, where the traces of culture are written. It is through these traces, these structures of meaning that we confront and experience the world (Solheim 1998:60-61). The body is not a cultural product alone, but it is a product of both nature and culture. Nevertheless, it is hard to see where nature ends and culture begins (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998:19). More than being a cultural and natural product, the body is also a representation through which identity is produced and reproduced. This multidimensionality makes explicit the complexity of studying and discussing the body, particularly if we accept that all bodies keep both a symbolic and an imaginary dimension.

The symbolic body becomes important not only to the self but also in relation to others seeing that the body as a symbol that communicates identity (Solheim 1998). Nevertheless, as Moore discusses, this perspective is not another way to say bodies are socially constructed, rather it shows how the experience of embodiment involves a confrontation of the imagined and the symbolic (Moore 2003:160-163). The following chapter will discuss personalized experiences of gender, sexuality, and the body. I will position myself within an established comparative tradition of gender and sexuality in Latin-America. I reveal several problematic aspects of the female body and how they become embodied in individuals. The female role in reproduction and sexual relations are, as Solheim (1998) notes, the reason why the female is perceived as “opened,” in contrast to the ideal impenetrable body. This chapter will focus on the sexual body and how women relate to their sexuality. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of masculinity, as it is impossible to discuss female sexuality without addressing its male counterpart.

“Señora, you have an ounce of gold if you have your mama.”

(Behar 1993:110)

Mother

In the remarkable monograph *The Translated Woman*, Ruth Behar, the Cuban-American anthropologists, portrayed the life history of Esperanza, a poor Mexican woman. The core of the ethnography was Esperanza's relationships with her mother, sister, children and mother-in-law. Being a mother was the cornerstone of female identity. An important theme in Esperanza's narrative was the loss of six of her children in infancy, which represented a woman's greatest suffering. The great sorrow that resulted from losing so many children was linked to the important status of motherhood. That motherhood was Esperanza's only source of happiness reveals how important it was for her. But being a mother was also connected with suffering as Esperanza's sons grew up and caused her much pain (Behar 1993). The mother as a symbol for female identity in Latin America has been thoroughly described in a broad body of anthropological literature.

The strong position of the mother in the Brazilian imagination is shown in the commemoration of Mother's Day, one of the most celebrated *feriados* (holidays). Mother's Day was the celebration of all mothers. Those people who were financially capable presented gifts to their employees, neighbours, friends and family who were mothers. Adult mother-child relationships were intimate and affectionate, and loyalty to mothers seemed to be based on a collective idea that mothers were special. Although this dissertation will not elaborate on the symbolic dimensions of motherhood, this section will elaborate on the absence of a mother and its consequences. Furthermore, this relation between motherhood and female identity reveals an important ambiguity about female sexuality in a culture that attaches great value to mothers. In the following comment, Marisa talks about her mother and illustrates the tensions between motherhood and female identity.

Not long ago, I saw my mother walking naked and confused [drunk] in the streets. People made fun of her and I turned away, so she would not recognize me. She was so skinny and ugly; it is a punishment for her sins.

Marisa rarely spoke of her mother, and the few times that she did, the conversation was influenced by sadness. “I never knew who my father was,” she said on one occasion. “My mother knew, but she never told us. I think he was a married man with means.” As a child Marisa had lived with her grandmother because her mother, Aliana, was unfit and uninterested in taking care of her children. Aliana had a drinking problem, which she still suffers from today. Aliana had left Marisa and her siblings, four girls and one boy, with their grandmother. Thus Aliana had only sporadically taken part in their lives.

During my fieldwork, Marisa had no contact with her mother. Aliana lived in the care of Marisa’s older brother, Elton, who acted as her guardian and managed her public benefit payments. Marisa complained about how bad he treated their mother and accused him of taking advantage of the situation by spending her money on himself and his daughter. Up until recently, Marisa and her children had also lived with Elton and she felt that he had treated them badly.

When my mother was young she saw a man being burned by an electrical wire in front of the house, the man turned all black, after that my mother started drinking heavier and I think that was when she became crazy.

Aliana’s presence in the life of Marisa had been sporadic. Marisa’s stories indicated that when they had contact, there was a history of abuse and violence. One time when Aliana was angry, she had beaten Elton with a stick and broke his arm. Another time, when Aliana was arguing with her own mother, she had thrown a metal-milk-jar, which hit Janaina, Marisa’s sister, in the head. The scar was still a dominant feature of Janaina’s forehead. Marisa told about one time that Aliana brought some toys home. “We played the entire day with those toys,” Marisa said. The next morning Aliana sold the toys to buy alcohol. Marisa believed that her mother had done so to be mean and because she was evil.

Marisa did not visit her family, even though most of the family, Marisa’s sisters and a brother, lived on the same street, which was close to a large cheap supermarket. She did not shop at the supermarket, to avoid encountering the family, and especially her mother. The last

time they had met, Aliana had called Marisa ‘garbage’ and ‘whore’ she had also verbally abused Maria’s daughter.

Marisa had grown up with a foster mother. The fostering of children is described in Scheper-Huges (1998) as a common practise among family members and among neighbours. The initiative to foster a child may come from the foster parent, who intervenes in what she perceives as unfavourable living conditions. In some cases, the biological mother might cause the situation by leaving the child with a relative or neighbour or abandoning the child on a doorstep or plaza.

At the beach in Fortaleza, I met a twelve year-old girl who had been left alone to take care of herself when her mother had gone to Italy with a ‘boyfriend.’ The girl lived with relatives and spent her nights selling gadgets to the tourists. While I was visiting the family of Luciana, a girl from the NGO project, I learned of another child who was abandoned by her mother. The girl, aged eight was the daughter of a former neighbour. The girl, who had been left alone some months ago when her mother left for the interior, had no identification-papers and was not allowed to attend school. Luciana’s mother took care of the child, who was waiting for her mother to return. She was not the only child that Luciana’s mother had in foster care, a grandchild, who was the son of one of Luciana’s brothers, lived there as well. The severing of mother-child bonds was, however, not always permanent.

It is also possible to re-establish mother-child relationships after an abandonment. This happened in the case of Zezinho, a boy Scheper-Huges saved from starvation. Later, he returned to the care of his mother who had shown him no attention and left him to die when he was a sick baby. Several years later, Scheper-Huges spoke with Zezinho and asked him who his best friend in life was, the one he could always rely on. He answered, “My mother of course” (Scheper-Huges 1992:343-347).

Family structure

During Brazil’s colonial era, the Nordeste was dominated by sugar plantations. The traditional family structure from the colonial era is traceable in modern gender and relations. The centred of the plantation was the *casa grande* or “big house” which housed the masters and their extended family, including his children and his concubines who were often house slaves

(Scheper-Huges 1987:38). Today Brazil is a patriarchal society in which male dominance is present in both family and work life. Male hegemony does not automatically lead to female submission, as men and women have different fields of authority. Whereas a man was valued for his role as a provider for the family, a woman was judged by her qualities as a mother. The father's responsibility was to meet financial obligations, but the mother's obligation was to develop the moral standards and values of her children. She would be held responsible for her children's behaviour, and she was blamed if a child ended up on the wrong track or engaged in shameful behaviour. Unwanted behaviour was criminality for sons and prostitution for daughters, and both traits were departures from traditional family life (Sarti 1995:124-128). The nuclear family was considered the ideal family constellation and both motherhood and family life are central aspects of female identity. The next section of this chapter is devoted to another important aspect of female sexuality and identity--the female body.

The female body

The most popular TV-show for children was "The Xuxa hour." Xuxa, the program leader, started her career in the eighties, and today she is still one of the most popular TV personalities in Brazil. She is very beautiful, with long blond hair and heavy make up. While watching the show, Marisa said: "I dislike that woman, she is pure plastic. Her face, her breasts, her hair, her ass, her legs, there is not a part of her body that has not been put under the knife. She is probably more silicone than flesh. But at least she looks good."

Xuxa was extremely popular and an important role model for girls because of her fame and beauty. I refer to her here to demonstrate the importance of being beautiful. Beauty is essential for women, and they spend hours at beauty parlours to have their nails manicured, eyebrows and their facial hair waxed, body hair bleached, and hair styled and blow-dried. The ones who can pay for it have complete body treatments, such as chocolate body baths and more. Once a month, a woman married to a Norwegian man spent six hours at the parlour.

The pressure on women to be beautiful was evident, and it was clearly important to them. Daiani often looked down on her un-manicured fingernails and sighed, "This is not the hands of a married woman; this is the hands of a girl." When Brazilian anthropologist João Biehl first met with the family of Catarina, an institutionalised woman who was the subject of

a life history that he solicited, the family's first recollections of Catarina referred to her beauty as a bride, her limp, and her beautiful handwriting. Their memories were not of her personality but of her appearance (Biehl 2005:230).

Women manipulated their bodies to reflect the feminine ideal of beauty. To understand the female body, it is necessary to look at several specific characteristics. Solheim notes that basic body functions must be seen in a social and cultural context and argues against understanding the body as bounded and "separated" (cf. Spiro 1993). Although the body is bounded and separate, it is also "open." It has openings that allow what is on the inside to exit and what is on the outside to enter. In this sense, the body may also represent the infinite, the borderless. The borderless body is to the bounded body as chaos is to order. The penetrable or open body can be viewed as a threat (Solheim 1998:74). The female anatomy and the female role in reproduction, through pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, combined with the female "openness" in the sexual act, leads to the understanding of the female body as more open than the male body (Solheim 1998:74). The mortal woman, with her penetrable body, stands in contrast to the pure and separated Virgin, who is free from the shame of the open body. The Virgin Mary represents purity and is the only image of women, in our symbolic universe, who approaches the ideal of the "separate body" (Solheim 1998:76). The ideal of the separated and impenetrable body becomes a metaphor, a collective agreement, and affects how we perceive the body (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). According to Henrietta Moore, the body alone is not enough to construct a social or a personal identity, and it alone cannot be a stable platform for the creation of identity (Moore 2003:160).

Body, beauty and fashion

Carlos, the owner of the ice cream shop once complained as we were talking of women: "I wish all Brazilian women would wear the Arab veil." His statement cannot be taken literally, because he spent a large amount of time looking at the women passing by his shop. These women dressed in little more than bikinis. What his statement shows is the dualism and the contradictions that women have to confront. It is important to acknowledge the dialectic dimension of establishing a gendered identity. The ongoing dialogue about the tension

between the sexually pure 'virgin' and the active 'sexual object' affects how Brazilian women define themselves and are defined by others as women.

Carlos once tried to explain the difference between daughters and sons:

I wish I never had daughters; they are too much work. At first you have to take care of them when they are children. Then they become teenagers and you have to make sure that some looser doesn't get them pregnant. And then you have to make sure they find a good husband, and when they finally get married you have to make sure the husband doesn't beat them.

Then he added, "It's a whole lot better with a son; they can manage themselves from the age of sixteen. If they get in a fight, they fight back, period." I asked him what he would do if his son impregnates a girl pregnant. He replied, "I take care of my daughters. If my son gets a girl pregnant it's her father's problem. Women need men to look after them; they are not capable of taking care of themselves." When I mentioned that some women are actually capable of looking after themselves, men just laughed at me.

Carlos's statements reveal an attitude and understanding that women need someone to take care of them and protect their sexuality. At the weekly lessons with the project, the ambiance was liberal and open for even the most sensitive subjects. Anna, the *profesora*, would initiate discussions about teen pregnancy, incest, intimate shaving, sex, drugs, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Contrary to this general openness, Anna would often end the discussion by saying, "But remember girls, our virginity is our mark of quality." This statement was spoken ironically, but it was partly a critique as well as a statement of fact.

The notion of purity and being virtuous were a big part of young people's everyday life, but the pressure on young women was especially obvious and visible. The ideal of virtuousness existed parallel with the notion of and pride that Brazilian women were the "sexiest women in the world." Women demonstrated their sexual awareness by the way that they dressed, and female fashion was revealing and very provocative.

My next illustration illustrates this point. I was invited to the NGO board meeting to present my study, it was a rather formal situation. My understanding of dress codes was that in formal situations and meetings women would wear pants and shirts covering the shoulders. This was in contrast to informal settings where the dress code was more casual. During the meeting I particularly noticed the attire of two women. One woman, in her early thirties, wore a black see-through shirt with a black bra underneath and tight embroidered jeans. The other woman, around fifty, wore a blouse with neckline that revealed deep cleavage and left about two thirds of her breast visible.

Fashion was not a homogenous field, but expected these two women from different generations to dress equally provocatively. Although some women dressed conservatively and “old fashioned,” many women dressed the same as their teenage daughters. Economic situations also affected the conceptualisation of fashion and beauty, but I will not elaborate here on the matter. The standard fashion was miniskirts and hipster pants. Some pants were cut so low that it was necessary to shave the pubic area in order to wear them. Blouses were tight, low-cut, and often revealed deep cleavage. The fabrics were colourful, synthetic, and minimal. The outfit was made complete with high-heel sandals or platforms. Time and again, seeing ladies approaching their sixties wearing eight centimetre-high heels and platform sandals amused me.

Scandinavian men perceived Brazilian women as being extremely sexual, a perception which was understandable, taking into consideration their Scandinavian habitual knowledge. The female dress code and behaviour indicated, based on our Norwegian understanding of sexuality and the sexual language, that Brazilian women were indeed initiating sexual relations. It became clear after some time that women would dress and act sexually provocative, but their intention was not sexual.

Passive-aggressive

Sitting outside a local club my friend Yasmin and I noticed some men looking in our direction. We looked back and I told her I found one of them attractive. Yasmin told me to go to them to say “hi!” Appalled by her suggestion, I refused. She explained how things worked in Brazil. “No Brazilian woman can afford to sit on her ass and wait for a man to show up.

She has to go out and get it. You just have to make the most of every opportunity, because if you don't, someone else will." She told me how she met her former boyfriend. While waiting to take the bus home from work, she noticed a handsome man. When her bus had arrived, he got on the same bus. Inside, she had written down her phone number and passed it back to him in the bus. He received her note and called her some days later. That day at the club, I did not talk with the men. On the way to her home Yasmin was very irritated with me. Although Yasmin was very assertive, she was twenty-eight and still virgin.

The presence of sex was everywhere, in music, in commercials, in movies and literature. Prevention of STDs and HIV/AIDS was highly profiled, and information was spread by several NGOs, schools, and the state. One of the first times I went with Anna to Jardim Verde, she, using only her mouth demonstrated for the group how to put a condom on a wooden penis. This openness and relaxed attitude toward sex might give the impression that sex and sexuality was unproblematic, but this was not the case. As mentioned before, parallel to the strong sexual overtones in public, the catholic ideal and value of virginity has a strong position and creates an ambivalent field of contradictions.

After ending a six year relationship, Alyane, who was twenty-five at the time, was asked by her mother whether she had been intimate with her ex-boyfriend. When Alyane told her mother the relationship had been sexual, her mother suffered a "breakdown." Alyane and her boyfriend did not reconcile, and in the eyes of her mother Alyane was now a "used" woman. This situation worsened after Alyane met her new boyfriend. Her mother used a lot of energy trying to prevent Alyane from being alone with him in situations where they might have sex.

The significance of virginity becomes even more obvious in the following example from Donna Goldstein's work in a shantytown in Rio. One night, two men went to a house in search of a third person. Moreover, the man they were looking for was not a member of that household. They were allowed to enter the house to clear up the misunderstanding and once inside, they decided to rob the place and rape two of the daughters, ages fourteen and fifteen. The following quote is a reconstruction of that night.

“Anita had already lost her virginity, so it hardly hurt at all. But Claudia was still a virgin (laughter), so it hurt a lot. She was a virgin [...] She [Anita] screamed as loud as Claudia [...]. Claudia went crazy that night [...]. Anita did not pay any attention because she was not a virgin anymore. [The one] who took away the most damage was Claudia, right? Anita was only faking [damage] saying the pregnancy was from the rapist, but it wasn't [...]. Claudia was crying all the time. Claudia is the one who suffered the most damage, right?” (Goldstein 2003b: 265).

The experienced rape was supposedly only traumatic for the girl who was still a virgin. The other girl, Anita was accused of faking her damage to avoid the publicity of her previous sexual experience (Goldstein 2003b). The assumption that a sexually active woman, or in this case a girl, does not experience trauma when raped, I find both problematic and symptomatic. Despite a greater acceptance of girls being sexually active, attitudes like this reveal a deeper-rooted notion that women who have lost their virginity have lost their purity and cannot complain if they experienced sexual violence. The rape had never been reported to the police. Anita explained that although her mother was obsessed about her not having sex, she still assumed that she had been sexually active. According to Anita, this had provoked her into having sex with her boyfriend (Goldstein 2003b). I also observed that family involvement in their children's lives was extensive in Brazil. When Yasmin started dating her new boyfriend her family reacted immediately. When the relationship became formalised, Yasmin received a phone call from her sister in Rio. She begged Yasmin to respect their mother enough to not let the relationship with the new boyfriend become sexual.

I am not trying to comment on the amount of sex that young people had. I got the impression that most couples had sex, at least after some time. Whether they engaged in sex or not, they experienced pressure from their families and the community to be or to appear pure. To be pure was emphasised more for women than men, however religion and family interests could put the same pressure on young men. A seventeen year-old boy told me he was still virgin. He had not acted on opportunities to have sex, a decision based on his religious

beliefs and respect for his parents. Waiting until marriage was an option he seriously considered. The emphasis put on virginity, in a public sphere that at the same time emphasises and idealises sex, creates an ambivalent situation that becomes especially difficult for women. They have to be sexy and aggressive in their approach to the opposite sex, and at the same time they have to maintain their purity and preferably be perceived as virgins.

This dilemma might be understood as an extension of the discussion of the open body. The female body is not only understood as physically ambiguous, it is also socially ambiguous. The pure, separate, and whole body becomes a standard or ideal for how bodies are supposed to be. When personal experiences of the body differ from the general ones, when the body is experienced to be open and not closed, problems may occur. This may be seen when studying the social experiences of the body as well. A modern perspective on sexuality that focuses on the female body blurs the boundaries between social and natural bodies, and reframes the notion of the “open” female body (Solheim 1998).

Sexuality

When reading Laqueur’s *Making Sex* (1990) and *Orgasm, Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology* (1987) it becomes clear that the construction of sex and sexuality is social. The historical reconstruction of sex and orgasm reveals how closely this is connected to larger social structures. Foucault analyses how sex is spoken about, who does the speaking, and the positions and viewpoints from which they speak. Furthermore, by scrutinizing and uncovering the institutions that speak, store, and distribute sexual discourse, Foucault locates the forms of power and the channels they use to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour (Foucault 1990:11).

Anna often talked about how ideas of sexuality were undergoing drastic changes. The conservative attitude that virginity and abstinence was the norm was changing towards a more liberal contemporary perspective. In some teen groups, sex was emphasised to the extent that a fifteen year-old girl might feel abnormal if she was not sexually active. Coelho uses two similar cases, one from the 1960s and one from the 1980s to discuss continuity and change in the sex roles (Coelho 1995:91). She uses *Concepts of Ethos and the World View* (Geertz 1973) to explain sexual morality as a concept. The ethos involves the evaluative elements of a

given culture. Sexual morality refers to the evaluative aspect of sexuality, what are right, wrong, proper, and improper forms of behaviour, and includes a gender perspective. Her hypothesis is “that whereas sexual morality has changed dramatically in the direction of greater liberality [...] the concept of sexuality remains unchanged in terms of its underlying basic constructs” (Coelho 1995:95). Parents and the community are more accepting towards teenage relationships but not towards sexual experimentation. With respect to the approval of sexual experimentation, only male experimentation was acceptable.⁹ Parents seemed reluctant to discuss sex with their children, and the information that teens received was from schools and several NGOs working on the issue. Without discussing sex and the consequences of sex with their daughters, many girls were not sufficiently equipped with information before initiating sexual contact. A friend of Jade, a girl at the project, claimed that she would never have unprotected sex, however a month after her first sexual intercourse, she was having unprotected sex with her boyfriend.

Sex and sexuality are concepts with relational dimensions, but this does not necessarily apply to a second part. The relational dimension can also refer to women’s relation to their own bodies, which I address below.

The absence of female masturbation

I found a contradiction to the ‘collective Brazilian sexuality’ when I discovered that women felt alienated relating to their own vagina. Ardener describes the feminist struggle to challenge the male (sexual) hegemony and to make women more aware of their bodies and sexuality. Ardener finds it problematic that the female genitalia have been rather invisible in the expression of culture and for many women as well. Simone de Beauvoir states, “The feminine sex organ is mysterious even to the woman herself [...]. Woman does not recognise herself in it and this explains in large part why she does not recognise its desires as hers” (in Ardener 1987:124).

⁹ Parents did not generally accept that their teenagers were sexually active, especially not their daughters. The ones who “accepted” the sexual activity, did so by pretending it did not happen. Confronted with the situation they would, if the child was a girl, voice opposition.

I visited Yasmin and as it got late, we decided I would spend the night. Since we had not planned for the occasion, I was without a toothbrush and clean underwear. We went shopping at the local supermarket, and as I was considering which underwear to buy, Yasmin told me, “I always buy the cheapest ones, because they never last.” Later it became clear why they never lasted. Another afternoon at her house, I observed her do the laundry. She put everything into the washing machine except her underwear and told me she did not trust the machine to do it. She washed her underwear by hand, and it surprised me to see her pour concentrated “sanitary disinfectants,” the same solution used to disinfect the toilet, on the part of her underwear that had contact with the genitals. This was the first indication that the female genital was unclean. Following up the matter, I made more inquiries about female genitalia and masturbation.

When it was time to discuss sexuality at the NGO, the atmosphere was anxious. The room was more crowded than normal, as more kids had shown up. The first thirty minutes the youth seemed embarrassed about discussing the subject. Then after a while, the questions started to flow, and the rest of the class was spent discussing topics around sexuality. Juliana, who was seventeen, spoke:

I have a seventeen year-old friend, who has been with her boyfriend for a year. They have been having sex, but my friend has never had an orgasm. Is it normal?

Anna answered, “Well, it is possible that she is frigid!” At this point, confronted with what I consider not only wrong, but also harmful information, I interrupted the conversation. I told her it was completely normal for a woman to have problems reaching sexual climax, especially if she expected the man to do the job. I told them most women needed clitoral stimulation and not vaginal penetration in order to achieve an orgasm. Then I said that the best way to succeed was first to get to know your own body through masturbation. My comment was followed by silence, and for a moment everyone looked to the floor.

My interruption was soon followed-up, by a seventeen-year-old boy who asked

Is it normal to masturbate several times a day?

The teacher answered,

How much is several times a day?

“Three,” said the boy. Again, the teacher replied:

Well there is always the danger of sex-addiction.

Again, I interrupted and told him it was completely normal to masturbate more than that, as long as he didn't bother anyone with it. The use of terms, such as *frigid*, *sex-addict*, and *nymphomaniac* can be extremely stigmatising.

The rest of the class proceeded without any more discussion about masturbation. On the buss back home, I discussed the theme with Anna. She told me that female masturbation especially was taboo, a topic no one ever talked about. As a matter of fact, she did not think women even masturbated. My neighbour Daiani confirmed this statement in a different setting. We were sitting outside my house, when Daiani began to tell me about how much she loved sex, and that she never got enough sex from her husband. She confided in me that she got so angry with him, if he ever touched himself (masturbated) because it left her unsatisfied. At this point she explained to me that even if she knew that some women did it, she had never touched herself “down there,” not even if she suspected something to be wrong. To her, it was incredibly dirty. Her two-year old son came toward us. , “After I had him,” she said pointing towards the boy, "and my breasts got filled with milk, my husband stopped touching them.” I asked her, “And now, when you have no milk, does he touch you now?” She replied, “No, he never does; he finds them disgusting”.

I understood that both men and women found the female body to problematic and unclean. And especially the visible symbols of female sexuality, such as the vagina and, in the case of Daiani, the breasts. Based on my observations, I see two spheres or fields of the female sexuality, a public and a private sphere. In the public sphere women dress in mini skirts and see-through blouses, aggressively hunting down men. In the private sphere,

however, they regard their bodies as unclean, and have ambivalent feelings about their sexuality.

In 1966, feminist artist Hanna Wilkes had, an exhibition of small terracotta boxes in the shape of tiny genitalia, but no one seemed to notice them. According to Ardener, this seems to confirm the fact that the vagina, until recently was, “effectively ‘invisible’ in public” (Ardener 1987:126). Another demonstration used by Ardener was the demonstration of *The Big Chakra*, a film consisting of thirty-eight women’s vaginas, at the Anne Arbour Film Festival of 1972. The film caused several hundred viewers to walk out during the show, while one of the women who supported the film chased them out bashing them with her bag (Ardener 1987:125-126). Through the analysis, Ardener tries to “...manipulate the dominant discourse and conventions, which require women, especially, should see their ‘underparts’ as shameful and unspeakable” (Ardener 1987:135). In a similar way, Emily Martin discusses female alienation. Although Martin does not specifically address the vagina, she explores attitudes towards natural body functions, such as menstruation, reproduction and menopause (Martin 1989).

The connection between sex and love

I found it hard to understand how Katrina could be crazy about sex, and at the same time have a husband who did not touch her. I knew that every night, after working sixteen-hour shifts driving the *topique*, her husband spent the rest of the night drinking, and then he had to leave home at five o’clock to start work the next day. For me, these facts made it even harder to grasp the significance of her self-expressed sex-addiction.

When spoken of in casual conversation, sex was considered a masculine activity; men had sex with their women, not the other way around. People also spoke of male pleasure, but hardly ever referred to female pleasure (cf. Melhuus 1998). With the exception of the NGO project, female orgasm was rarely discussed. A rather common subject was female frigidity. It seemed also easy to conclude that a woman was frigid, rather than to question male performance, as I illustrated above.

Marisa once told me, when you feel no desire for a man, in bed, you know it is over. But what did she really feel? Biehl states it clearly when describing the life history of

Catarina. “Catarina was left with sex as if it was love” (Biehl 2005:100). This was my understanding of the matter as well. For many women whom I encountered, the emotional confirmation that sexual relations provided was important, whereas the physical sexual experience came secondary. When Rafael had sex with Daiani, he proved his love for her, and also that he would not leave her for another woman or return to his ex-wife. In Biehl, Catarina also expressed that having good sex did not necessary mean that she felt pleasure. “We made love. It was good. Sometimes I felt pleasure” (Biehl 2005:114).

Now that I have discussed the social aspects and ideal of female sexuality, I will turn attention to ideals of masculinity and their implications for Brazilian women.

The masculine ideal, as a contrast to the feminine

“My grandfather told my father that in order to be considered a ‘man’ he needed to have several mistresses. A wife was only needed for reproduction.” Vitor was twenty-one, openly gay, and clearly not living according to his father and grandfather’s ideal of masculinity. Sandro, a travelling vendor of hand-made jewellery, souvenirs, and marijuana, told me about his childhood and adolescence in a shantytown in São Paulo. When he was eight, his father had taken him to a *cabaret* or brothel and given him the freedom to choose among the girls. At that time, he said he did not know how to use his penis and had not achieved an erection, but three years at the age of eleven, he lost his virginity. This was also around the same time that he became addicted to cocaine. Sandro became a father at the age of fourteen and tried to live as a family but it had not worked out. When he was seventeen, something happened that made him leave São Paulo, but he never revealed the reason.

When discussing masculinity, the group at the NGO project concluded that characteristics of maleness were: seeking risk, not demonstrating feelings, and being hard and tuff. Kaliana, a member of the NGO board, described the ideal for the *cearaense* man to be; driving a big car, drinking heavily, having several girlfriends, and attending *forròs* or dancehalls.¹⁰ Domestic chores were considered women’s work, and a man would not pick up a crying baby even if he were the only person in the room. Sarti (1995) described the male obligation in a household financial, rather than the role of a caretaker. Being financially

¹⁰ Forrò is the nordestino dance and music style, and the forròs are large dancehalls in the outskirts where forrò is played and danced.

independent and able to sustain a family was an important trait but not the only characteristic associated with masculinity. If a group consists of men who are all successful and financially independent, the position of provider gives little extra-credit. On the other side, for a group consisting of men who have little potential to fulfil the financial obligations, male pride derives from establishing alternative economic sources. [In Fortaleza,] the inadequacy caused many young men to avoid marriage and to abandon family responsibilities (Anderson 1990).

The opposite of the responsible man was the *safado* or never-do-well, a lazy and irresponsible person. One day, Mario, seventeen tried to explain how he related to the local dating practises. “I am a good boy, and I respect girls. But when the girls deserve it, I can be a real *safado*.” His attitude is typical; although he told me he was a good boy, he also added with unhidden pride that he could be a *safado*. Another time I was speaking to Juan a twenty-four year-old navy officer. He told me with unhidden pride, that he was a *safado*, but when I asked him what he meant by *safado*, he refused to explain and instead told me to ask an old man selling drinks from a trolley. The old man told me that a *safado* was a man that was “good for nothing.” *Safado* cannot be translated easily. The meaning stretches beyond shameless. It encompasses unrespectable, yet it holds some of the essence of masculinity and male pride. Even though Juan expressed pride in being a *safado*, other men emphasised that they were respectable when a girl deserved their respect.

At the final phase of the project, Anna initiated an activity to focus on self-reflection and self-esteem. She passed out a piece of paper and told teens that the paper represented them, and was to serve as a thermometer of their self-esteem. She told them to rip the paper as she said some phrases. The rip should represent how they would have felt in the situation that she described. Anna described the following: you fight with your boy/girlfriend; a teacher did not like your work; a close friend did not invite you to a party; your parents argued with you without cause; a friend revealed one of your secrets; somebody said something that damaged your reputation; your boy/girlfriend left you for somebody else; you received a low score on a test; somebody you liked turned down an invitation for a date; and your team lost a game. As Anna spoke, one of the boys in particular, Aristoel, ridiculed and commented on the insignificance of the events, until Anna read the final statement—your team lost a game. He had hardly torn his paper until then, but when his team lost, he ripped the paper in two.

For the second part of the activity Anna gave out tape and told them they have the potential to mend their papers. This time when she spoke, they were to use the significance of the following phrases to repair the tears in the paper. She started out with: a friend asked your for your advise; somebody you like asked you on a date; your mother told you she loved you; you received good grades at school; you received a postcard from an old friend; your team won; you won a scholarship; you got a love letter from your boy/girlfriend and; your friends complimented your outfit.

The final dimension of the activity was to showe their self-esteem and comment on what had caused them to damage the paper and then to glue the paper back together again. Aristoel and the other boys commented and laughed spitefully when the girls said they were the most “hurt” by their boyfriends and their families. Some of the girls have almost ripped the paper in half for every quote Anna mentioned. Aristoel commented or laughed every time someone spoke of what “hurt.” When it was time for Aristoel to show his paper, which represented self-esteem, he seemed proud of the fact that only the loss of his soccer team could damage his self esteem. Aristoel was proud to be a man who was unaffected by emotional matters, and the behaviour during the activity indicated that it was important for him and the other boys to distance themselves from feelings and weaknesses. This activity also revealed the relational aspect of male identity. Masculinity was clearly separated from femininity and communicated within a masculine community.

It was important for a man to be perceived as a ‘man’ by his wife, his peers and the community. A similar point was revealed by Arnold’s study of Peruvian Brothels (1977). Her study, as my own, shows how male infidelity in large was accepted and moreover blamed on the women involved rather than the husband. To be able to fulfil himself as a man he needed his extramarital experiences. Arnold demonstrated different types of activity at the brothel, but what the activities have in common is a communicative dimension. The first category of clients arrives between six and ten in the evening. During this period, the girls stand in the hallway in front of the rooms and men arrive mostly on the bus and pay for five minutes with the girls. These men are financially not able to pay for the later saloon hours and visit alone and for a short time. They use the brothel to live up to the macho ideal and to fulfil

themselves, but are in reality not able to acquire the wider social requirements of machismo (Arnold 1977:180-183).

The second group arrived at the brothel after eleven in the evening. In the salon, the men stand in the bar and drink heavily. While standing in groups, they demonstrate their masculinity by delivering verbal comments to the girls, consuming large amounts of alcohol, and the duration of their sexual performance. All of these traits conflict with the interests of the prostitutes, and this is part of the expression of machismo. The man demonstrates that he does not care for about what she wants; he is going to have it his way anyway (Arnold 1977:183-188). This also describes the male as independent and distanced from the female. Thus, male identity is formed in relations to other men, and in ridiculing and devaluing female values. This is evident in the example from the NGO project and in the above examples.

Male identity was also connected to action and public and private displays of masculine qualities. Kulick's work on transgendered prostitutes in Salvador relates maleness to penetration and penetrable bodies. During anal sex, the man who gets penetrated is perceived as a homosexual, while the man who penetrates is perceived as a "man" or masculine. Heterosexual men could perform anal sex with a *travesti* (transvestite) to increase his manliness, as long as he was penetrating and not being penetrated. Moreover, the *travesti* does not perceive herself as a male; she sees herself (and women) to as 'non-male' rather than homosexual. Homosexual men cannot be men, as long as they enjoy being anally penetrated. The *travesti* has boyfriends and expects them to be "manly." If a boyfriend started to show interest in the transvestite's penis or wants to be penetrated by the transvestite, the relationship ended. This means that the boyfriend is no longer a man but a homosexual, which makes him undesirable as a boyfriend (Kulick1997). This dynamic encompasses the connotation between maleness and action. The male is active while the non-male is passive and penetrable.

The man who achieved the most respect from other men was Antonio; he was the best surfer on the beach and drove a motorcycle. His body was covered in scars, most of them surfing-related, but some were from motor-cross accidents and car accidents. His face; the left cheek and the forehead were scarred as well. Antonio was successful; he had managed to make a career not only as a well-known surf-photographer, but also as a journalist in the

biggest newspaper in town. Unless he was working, he dressed casual, in loose clothes showing off the tattoos on his shoulders and chest. He never wore shoes, only flip-flops. When he went to the beach, all the younger boys watched him in admiration; when he went to a bar, people surrounded and wanted to talk with him. He was the manifestation of a “man.”

On a personal level, Antonio had left his wife and moved back into his mother’s house. He considered his duties looking after his family and earning money, and he saw no use for skills, such as cooking and washing. He was not going to move out of his mother’s house unless it was to live with a new wife. He admitted that he was very jealous but saw it as a sign of his qualities as a good caretaker or provider. “*Cuidar*” to take care of someone, was considered an essential boyfriend/husband quality, and it also was a measure of how much a man loved his woman. Arnold confirms this, describing how male jealousy and the need to control his wife were perceived as compliments, annoyances, and something that needed to be tolerated (Arnold 1977:180).

In this chapter, I have discussed how social structures were embodied in individual bodies. Furthermore, I explored how institutions, such as family, sexuality, and gendered identities were internalised and made personal. In the following chapter, I will expand this focus the structures and predispositions of the social body and describe how these reproduce the vulnerability of women.

Chapter 3: social predispositions and challenges

The contemporary hierarchies of class, race, gender, violence, and sexual identities are products of history. Without an understanding of Brazil's capitalist expansion, one cannot understand the enormity of inequality in Brazil (Goldstein 2003a:46).

This chapter will initially give an introduction of the history of Brazil. Then the focus will return to Marisa. Through her particular story, I will illustrate the vulnerability of poor women. After an introduction to the political and economic circumstances, it will be easier to understand how the life history of one single woman is connected to larger social structures.

Marisa's story does not only show the trajectory from a position as a respectable married woman to her present position as a single mother with uncertain living conditions. Her story also describes how serious the consequences could become for a woman who failed to live up to the socially accepted standards. For many women the perimeter separating "failure" from "success" was marginal. Moreover it was in this marginal space of female action and its interaction with society that concentrated the essence of vulnerability.

The story of Marisa is not a unique story, yet the response received from her family and friends would indicate that her story is both rare and shameful. Using the financial history of Marisa and some of her neighbours, I will show how financial dependency leads to physical and emotional dependency. This particular section of the dissertation focuses on presenting the empirical, social, and historical context in which my informants found themselves and the determinative influence it has on their individual histories.

A brief history of Brazil

The colonial history of Brazil began when Pedro Alvares Cabral sailed from Portugal to Brazil in 1500. The Portuguese presence in Brazil was impermanent for the first thirty years but with the increased competition from the French and the Spanish in the New World the establishment of a permanent Portuguese colony began. From the start Brazil established itself as a sugar cultivator, and by the early 1800's Brazil was the worlds leading sugar exporter. The enormous sugar plantations used African slaves, and from the landing of the first slave ship in 1538 more than three and one half million slaves were brought to Brazil before slavery was finally abolished in 1888. The social structures developed around the sugar plantations

have been described as *tropical feudalism* by the Brazilian social historian Gilberto Freyre in his works *The Masters and the Slaves* (1986[1933]) and in *The Mansions and the Shanties* (1986 [1936]) (In Goldstein 2003). The present day social structures in Brazil have evolved from the tropical feudalism and the hierarchical relationship between slave owners and slaves. Scheper-Huges accuses Freyre of idealising slavery and defending the myth of Brazils racial democracy, a myth that had until recently been unchallenged (1992:36-43).

Brazil gained independence from Portugal when Dom Pedro, the son of the prince regent Dom João IV, declared Brazil independent in 1822. The new state followed an economic ideology called Manchester liberalism, which encouraged each country to produce what they were best at and import goods that were easier and cheaper to buy rather than to produce. With its economic foundation in slavery and plantations, Brazil did not develop a diversified economy and remained export oriented with a firmly intact feudal landowning system. Brazil produced primary goods for trade rather than producing finished products. Thus, the doctrine of Manchester liberalism kept Brazil from industrialising. The colonial and agricultural structure maintained the social inequality and led Brazil into a dependency economy (Goldstein 2003:50-51).

In 1931 Dom Pedro returned to Portugal and left his four-year-old son to rule in his place. In 1889 Dom Pedro II was dethroned and the Brazilian Republic was established. In the first election, only two percent of the population voted, and this laid the foundation for the consolidation of the elite. The formation of the republic happened without significant bloodshed or a major land reform (Goldstein 2003:50-51).

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazil experienced immigration from Europe and made attempts at industrialisation. The larger cities developed segregating practises forcing the Afro-Brazilians, the newly freed slaves, to slums outside the city centres. At this time, the Brazilian Communist Party was founded and encouraged to ignite a popular revolution. By 1930 the military had installed G. Vargas as a president. He led various types of governments throughout his life and ruled through a combination of populism, nationalism, and social reform. Furthermore, his tactics included banning political parties, imprisoning opponents, and censoring the press (Goldstein 2003:51-53).

After the death of Vargas in 1954, Kubitschek was elected president; he initiated the building of a new capital city, Brasilia. In 1961 when the elected president resigned, the vice president, João Goulart, a reputed leftist liberal, became president. Following his presidency was a polarisation of the political fractions into left and right. In 1964 the military backed the conservative National Democratic Union, and staged a coup. During the next twenty-one years, several military dictators ruled Brazil. In this period, political repression and torture and murder of political opponents caused dozens of guerrilla groups to emerge (Goldstein 2003:53-55).

Strangely enough, Brazil experienced an economic miracle during the 1970s. With financial aid from the United States and a diversification of agriculture, economic indicators showed growth. Parallel with the rise in the economy was the rise in inequality. The overall income had grown but the distribution of income had become more unequal. The economic miracle was followed by uncontrollable inflation and increased economic uncertainty. The extreme inflation may have moved the military into finally giving up power (Goldstein 2003:55).

During the elections of 1989, Brazil was again divided into two distinct factions. Fernando Collor de Melo, the candidate from the right, won the election, but later, he resigned after a widespread corruption scandal. The vice president Itamar Franco resumed the office and chose the leftist sociologist Cardoso as his minister of economics. Cardoso initiated the *plano real*, a financial program to stabilise inflation. Cardoso was later elected president. He formed an alliance with the rightist free trade party promoting neo-liberalism, globalisation and free trade (Goldstein 2003:55-57).

As I described in the introduction, the region of Nordeste is the least developed region of Brazil. This regional inequality is also a result of historical events. The main products of the Nordeste were cotton and sugar, two industries founded on slave labour. As Mintz (1985) so eloquently revealed, the history of sugar is intimately attached to slavery and the brutality, impoverishment, and suffering of the workers, which generated the fortune of distant elites in Europe and the colonial states. Scheper-Huges (1992) also allocates the responsibility for the extreme inequalities in the Nordeste to the sugar industry. In 1822 cotton and sugar comprised forty-nine percent of Brazils export income; by 1913 it contributed barely three percent. The

per capita product (GDP) fell in the state of Ceará with 275% between 1872 and 1900, while the per capita product (GDP) of São Paulo, during the same period, experienced an increase of 506%. This shows the unequal regional development in this period (Davis 2001:381). The region also had and underdeveloped infrastructure. Moreover, based on their Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian “racial” mixture, the nordestinos was an undesirable labour force in the south of Brazil. In addition to this structural difference, the region was troubled by seasonal draughts, such as the draught-famine of 1825, which killed 30,000 in Ceará alone (Davis 2001:383-387).

In this section, I have outlined the history of Brazil and tried to give a historical explanation of why today Brazil faces such economic stratification. Over time, the elite have been able to reproduce its power without losing its privileges. Cristovam Buarque, the former director at the University of Brasilia and governor of the Federal District, suggests that Brazil is currently living a form of social apartheid and that the nation needs to reinvent itself in order to surpass its history of inequality and injustice (Goldstein 2003:57).

Property as an indicator of individual value

In this section I will try to demonstrate how this historical development can be traced in the histories and lives of individual persons. “You are worth what you got.” The phrase, which was often repeated, reflects an understanding that a person with financial conditions is worth more than a person without.

Rezende described this in a study of birthing practises in Salvador, Bahia. Rezende comparatively describes the treatment of birthing women in private and public hospitals and shows that women giving birth at public hospitals are treated as nuisances by the hospital staff. There was hardly any interaction between the birthing mother and the hospital staff. Mothers were supposed to give birth in silence without being “in the way.” When the baby was delivered, there was no information passed on about nursing the baby or physical healing of the mother. In contrast, women giving birth at private hospitals were given information and were physically and emotionally prepared for the birth and the post birth experiences (Rezende 2002). The difference in treatment and support offered to these women shows the linkage between economy and personal value.

Another indicator of economic status was material possessions. Understanding the meaning objects have, that having objects is a privilege, is highly relevant for understanding how people themselves and others. My neighbours were all poor but their degree of poverty differed. By poverty I mean a constant financial situation where the household needs outnumber the household income. To sustain the household it depends on an informal sector of reciprocal relations with family and neighbours. Food was shared, as were most objects such as clothes, shoes, pottery and furniture. Purchases were made with credit cards and down payments with high interests. The use of credit-cards was surprisingly high, and most warehouses and larger shops provided financial aid and customised credit cards. Therefore it was also possible for one person to own various cards. As the interests on these cards were high, eventually many became unable to fulfil the required payments.

When unable to pay, people became blacklisted, and a consequence of this was a widespread shearing of credit. Names (a person's credit history) and credit cards were borrowed for buying clothes and shoes, for electricity and water or in the case of Roberto, larger purchases like a car. Roberto had signed for a car loan for a friend who had been blacklisted. After a while the bank came and threatened Roberto with jail because for several months the friend had avoided the payments. The use of others names and credit did not only happen between entrusted friends. It was also possible to buy and sell credit. Marisa had sold her name for 10 R\$¹¹ to a neighbour, signing for a water company contract. Aware of the risks involved, Marisa had done it out of a desperate need for the money.

Living conditions

Continuing with an introduction to the homes and the living conditions of my neighbours, I hope to give the reader an understanding of the degree of and variations in poverty that existed within the neighbourhood.

Marisa lived in a single room with her children. The room was sparsely furnished; she had two hammocks (given to by a sister) and an old mattress (given to her by a neighbour). A wooden box, some cardboard boxes, and a laundry basket served as storage for the family's clothes, the children's toys, and important papers, including birth certificates, pictures and

¹¹ 30nkr

identity cards. A glass table was the platform for a water tank (given to her by a sister), but as she had only bought water once, the tank was empty. Beside the water tank was a plastic devise for drying and guarding dishes. Marisa had two glass plates and three plastic ones, and a small collection of plastic and metal cups. She cooked on a small, kerosene stove, a rectangular metal box with two fire plates but no oven. The landlord's wife had given her the kerosene and fireplace. It was not an oven, just the cooking plates. On a metal shelf she had three blue plastic boxes for food storage. She had bought the boxes with her own money. Of electrical appliances, she had a borrowed electric fan and a seven-inch black and white combined TV and radio from a brother in-law. The last furniture was a large coca-cola refrigerator, which had been placed there by the landlord. Because the refrigerator used too much electricity, she was not allowed to use it for cooling. So, it was utilized for storing dirty dishes, clean dishes and the schoolbooks of her daughter. Marisa's home was the most impoverished of the neighbours.

Daiani and Rafael were better off than Marisa. In addition to the basic necessities mentioned above, they had a king-size bed; they were not sleeping in a hammock. They also had a wardrobe for clothes, plastic chairs, a new electric fan, a kerosene stove with four cooking plates and an oven. Moreover, she had a blender, a stereo and a 14`` colour TV. Most items were bought on credit, and because Daiani was unable to fulfil the payments her name had been blacklisted.

The third neighbours Luara and Renato were older, in the late forties, and their home was the most furnished of the neighbours. In addition to the other furnishings, she had a refrigerator, wooden and metal furniture, instead of plastic furniture, and carpet for the floor. They also experienced difficulties in fulfilling their financial obligations and payments. Several months, they were unable to pay the rent on time. When they moved into a new apartment, they left behind several unpaid bills. One day, a man from a furniture shop came to pick up his furniture because she had failed to meet the agreed payments. The other neighbours told the man she had moved, but did not reveal their whereabouts.

Jardim Verde was a poor neighbourhood but all the inhabitants possessed a minimum of necessities and household equipment. The household equipments were also shared when needed; my refrigerator was used to cool water and Daianis blender was used for making

juice. The loyalty and reciprocity are traits that Scheper-Huges writes about in her renowned monograph *Death Without Weeping*. Scheper-Huges illustrate a local praxis of sharing food, where women always had some food to spare for a neighbour who had nothing to eat, even if hunger is constant and ordinary. Women who have been widowed or abandoned by men received extra help from their neighbours. The help was based on her status as “abandoned” or “widowed.” In this practice concerns some moral limitations, as the aid was only given to women who were perceived by others as respectable. A woman was expected to live honourably with the father of her children. Sexual promiscuity and prostitution were socially condemned. A woman perceived by her peers as promiscuous could never be able to claim her status as abandoned or widowed and she would not receive help from her neighbours. Whereas a respectable woman received aid without asking, an unrespectable woman had to beg her peers for help. Furthermore, she could eventually be forced into the *rua* as a common beggar (Scheper-Huges 1992:99-102).

The examples mentioned above describe the harsh living conditions that the majority of Brazilians endure. They experience a constant state of financial need and are treated as insignificants and non-humans by the upper and upper middle classes. Coelho applies Da Matta’s concept of ‘the invisibility of the poor’ to similar situations, such as when comparing two cases of rape-murders over a 30 years span (Coelho 1995).

The difficulties poor people confront will be followed up when I return the focus to Marisa’s actions and the circumstances surrounding her destitution. As an introduction to her story, I will give a presentation of the nature of family relations and gender relations. The empirical description of a large part of Marisa's adult life does not only illustrate the history of Marisa. I suggest that her story also manage to conceptualise the vulnerability of women in general. Her story describes the troubled landscape of gender relations and the danger involved in reproduction. Relationships between men and women and between family members were simultaneously both very strong and extremely fragile. This dialectic aspect of gender will be the focal point of the rest of this chapter.

Relationships

One of my first observations after arriving to Brazil was the amount of public displays of affection. I saw people holding hands and kissing in public and this was not a phenomena necessarily associated with young people. It also seemed that most people were in a relationship, and the few singles that I met seemed eager to get involved in a new relationship. I started to investigate relationships between men and women. Of the twenty persons I had contact with on a regular and continuous basis, only one remained single for the entire period of my fieldwork. Two others were single when I got to know them; Yasmin met her boyfriend shortly after we met, and one of the boys dated a girl for a short period of time.

As I mentioned before, the most essential quality in a boyfriend was his capabilities, *to cuidar* or take care of his girlfriend. When I went shopping with Sarah, a student at the university, her boyfriend would call every thirty minutes to check up on her, and to ask whom she was with, even though he already knew that she would be with me. One afternoon, we went out to have lunch with a male friend of hers. She had deliberately avoided telling the boyfriend to avoid scandals. When her boyfriend discovered she had met with a man without him, he ended the relationship explaining that she had seen another man behind his back. The fact that I had been present the whole time did not influence his decision.

Care was most often displayed through physical contact, kissing and holding hands, and jealousy. Calling to check up on the whereabouts of a partner and keeping control over with whom one's partner spent time, were minimal requirements for both sexes. It was not looked well upon if someone who was in a relationship went out without the partner.

Jealousy

Love seemed to be founded in security. Yasmin told me to be tactical in finding a boyfriend. You cannot chose just a good looking guy, you have to chose one whose interests comply with yours, one who is well educated and who will become a good father and a stable partner. When Alyane considered ending the relationship with Douglas because of his intense jealousy and need to control her, Yasmin reminded her of his good qualities: he was polite, a gentleman, and took good care of her. For Sarah the jealousy of her boyfriend was challenging, although she was equally jealous. He had danced with a classmate at a dance and

Sarah had been convinced that he had looked at her in a special way and caused a scene before she left.

I came to see jealousy as an integrated part of the relationship between men and women. I saw countless displays of jealousy and an apparent need to control the partner. As I mentioned earlier in the text, Arnold notes that male jealousy was not only accepted, it was also rendered a compliment (Arnold 1977: 180). My experience was that this jealousy was not necessarily gender determined. Whereas male jealousy became more visible as it was more violent in its approach, female jealousy was more often associated with crying, and giving the “silent treatment.” Female rage mostly targeted the other woman rather than placing the blame on the man, as illustrated by Melhuus (1998).

The violent potential of male jealousy comes forth when I was crossing the street with Debora, Carlos’s young wife. According to other men, Carlos had a *genero forte*, a heavy or dominant gender. As we crossed, the street a man stopped and said he wanted to get to know us better. He was in the company of two boys and a girl and smelled of alcohol. The approach was done in a rather harmless and humoristic manner. We continued towards the car without taking notice of the man, but Carlos, who had seen the incident, came running out of his shop screaming, “Don’t you know that she is married?” He ran towards the unsuspecting man and hit him in the face before returning to the shop. Debora paid no attention to the incident and sat in the car.

Being in a relationship was a way for women to obtain security and to be perceived as respectable. It was not common for an unmarried single woman to live alone and maintain herself. In Arnold’s study, women living alone were associated with prostitutes (Arnold 1977). Melhuus also mentions the rarity of single women living alone; she only encountered one case of this and mentions the controversy surrounding the person (Melhuus 1998:364). Marriage was the expected institution for adults. I will continue elaborating on the practise.

Marriage

Most of my informants defined themselves as married, but none had formalized their alliance. When describing these relationships, I will use the term common-law marriage. The alliance was spoken of as a marriage, and a ring was used to symbolize it to the rest of the world.

Socially, it was also accepted as a marriage, and no one questioned its legitimacy. Marriage has been discussed and categorised according to whether or not it involves a contract between groups, flow of rights, and rights or privileges to sexual access and reproduction. Like Keesing and Strathern, I would like to emphasise the relational dimension in an analysis of marriage (1998:219).

The practise of common-law marriage was most common amongst the lower social classes, as the middle classes married in the church before starting a life together. Getting married was an expensive affair and most people could not afford it. The common-law arrangement placed the woman, in particular, in a vulnerable situation. Although the community considered her a married woman, the legal system did not. So if the relationship ended, she was left with few possibilities.

Carlos, who owned the ice-cream shop, was separated from his first wife and she had refused to sign the divorce papers. Many women did not want to sign divorce papers because of the very negative connotations related to divorced women. As long as she was an abandoned woman, she received respect and help from the community (Melhuus 1998:364). For the last four years, Carlos had lived with Debora, a twenty-three-year old, tourism graduate, from a small town outside Fortaleza. They lived in a common-law marriage and spoke of each other as husband and wife. Their relationship was both romantic and financial. For the last three years, she had run the ice-cream shop for him, while he was worked as an engineer at a national company. During the period she had worked for him, Debora had never received any payment and she was not registered as an employee, despite the social benefits this would have given her. She was totally financially dependant on him and had to ask him for money and permission every time she wanted to do something.

The problem was that Carlos, the same man with a *genero forte*, had a temper and they used to fight a lot. One afternoon I was looking after the shop so they could go of for lunch. They returned after a short time without speaking to each other. Inside the shop Debora started crying and Carlos went off to a neighbour bar. He did not return before it was time to close. They had been arguing on the way to the lunch-shop and he had told her to move out. She told me he always told her to leave whenever they argued, and she was scared he would make her move. At this time she revealed that she had been working for him without papers

and payment. "I have no place to go, and I cannot do anything, how would I survive alone? I would have to move back to my mother." I tried to remind her of her university degree and the experience she had acquired running a shop for three years. She replied that it had all been without the proper registrations, so it had no value. The fight was forgotten the following day and the subject never reoccurred, but they continued to fight regularly throughout my fieldwork.

The problem women faced through these informal alliances was obvious, especially in a system with traditional gendered roles in which the man is the provider and the woman is the homemaker. These roles became particularly dominant in the period with young children in the household. The financial imbalances in the relationship make the women vulnerable and dependant. She therefore stretches herself to the maximum in order to prevent him from leaving her and their children. If he leaves, she is totally dependent on his goodwill or the assistance of her family. She may stay with the furniture and the rented house, as private ownership was uncommon, but most often she will be unable to pay the rent. Men were legally obliged to pay child support but this often did not happen, as Melhuus has documented (1995:361).

In the matter of child support, Carlos stood out. He gave half of his engineering salary to his ex-wife. He gave her approximately 500 R\$ a month, even though two of the three children were over the legal age of 18. At the time, the minimum wage was 300R\$.

During the fieldwork there was talk of a new law. The law would make living together for five years equivalent with institutionalized marriage. The only problem was that this was only possible for people who could afford an attorney, had proper knowledge about the legal system, and knew about the law. It was also a new law, which I was told, meant that it was hard to make a judge rule in favour of the woman. Furthermore, she had to present witnesses to prove their cohabitation. The law was a step in the right direction, but unfortunately it was not an option for women living under unsatisfactory financial conditions. They are also the ones most in need of the law.

The end of a marriage and the ex-wife

Most of my material is about relationships between men and women. Even though I never spoke with the ex-wives, I received information about them from male informants and also some of the second wives. I am aware that this information serves to tell more about the climate in the relationships than to give characteristics about the ex-wives in question.

Antonio was a 30 years old journalist and photographer who had been married for some years but the relationship had ended and he now lived with his mother. He had a son with his ex, and Antonio went to see the boy and to pay child-support once a week. He told me that his ex wife tried to get him into her bed every time he visited.

Debora told me she hated it when Carlos went to pay child support to his ex because Debora knew that the ex would try to get him in bed. Sometimes Carlos accepted the invitation, so Debora had refused him to ever see his ex. Carlos explained that in order to protect Debora it was for the best that he had no contact with his ex.

Antonio Also admitted to occasionally sleeping with his ex, especially when he was in between relationships. The ex wanted him to move back and their three-year-old son used to beg Antonio to love his mother again and to return to them. He believed the mother planted these words in the child.

Daiani and Rafael experienced the same difficulties in relation to his ex. Daiani used to walk in front of her rivals house every day just to show herself and her son. She knew that Rafael had been sleeping with the ex (Daiani called her “garbage”) and had forbidden Rafael to talk with her again. One night when he had gone to his ex-wife’s home to drink, play cards and snooker, Daiani had been standing with the baby on the arm in the front yard for three hours, waiting for him. Meanwhile the other woman had been showing off inside the house by walking in front of the window and the door. The female rivalry was strong, and as I stated above, women targeted each other rather than placing blame on the unfaithful husband.

I wondered why an ex-wife would go so far to get back a husband who left her and her children. Anna told me it had to do with the concept of virginity. When a woman had been married and especially if she had children, she was no longer attractive on the market. Her possibilities to find a new man were slimmer than getting back the man who left. It struck me as peculiar that men seemed to be the initiators of the break ups, as this differs from Norway.

The only woman I knew to break out of a marriage or stable relationship was Marisa, but even her situation was more a result of necessity than free will.

I understand the reluctance to accept a break-up and the intense female rivalry as indicators for dependency. When Carlos pointed out that women need men to take care of them, he was portraying a general understanding. Women were financially and socially in need of a man in order to be perceived as respectable. The effort to get a former lover back into their beds and into their lives demonstrates this. The grandmother of Marisa's second child had been left by her husband to take care of five children alone. He had been gone for ten years, drinking and living with other women. When he finally returned to Marisa's grandmother, he entered the house as if he had not been gone at all and expected her to fulfil her marital obligations. She let him move back into the house. It is unclear whether he was allowed to return to the household because it was expected that he could do so, or because she wanted him to.

The Brazilian anthropologist João Biehl has also documented the same patterns I registered: where women over and over again not only accept but continue to live with the men who abuse them. Maria-Helena had a history of abuse; she had been abused by her father when she lived at home. Some time after she got married, her husband began to drink and beat her. One night he had set on fire the house where Maria-Helena and her five children were sleeping. They had lost everything. Maria-Helena sold foods and managed to save money and bought another shack and then returned to her husband. When questioned, she said he was truly "a great guy" (Biehl 2005:181).

The story of Frida is a similar case demonstrating another extreme situation where a woman chose to stay in a relationship. Frida, now diagnosed with psychosis, attended medical care at the Novo Hamburgo service. She came to the clinic in secret to get her medication. Her husband, a pastor of a religious community, had sexually abused all of their six children. Frida did not want more children but her husband prohibited the use of contraceptives, and denied her surgery to have her tubes tied. In Brazil a married woman needs a written authorization from her husband to get sterilized. And the stories of Frida and Maria-Helena are not unique. "We have at least five hundred women like Frida in the house right now" said Psychologist Simone Laux, at the Novo Hamburgo service (Biehl 2005:179).

I have no intentions to give a psychological analysis of why women chose to remain in abusive relationships, but I believe that the abuse of women to some extent has been institutionalised. As a direct result of this, many women, especially the ones without a financial back-up, find themselves in a situation where remaining in an abusive relationship becomes the only option. Melhuus spoke of how rarely women left their husbands despite continued maltreatment. She explained this was because of the children and that the women knew they would not receive support for the children if they left (Melhuus 1998:366). As I have mentioned, this demonstrates how the female vulnerability is linked to economics and reproduction. The link between vulnerability, reproduction, and economics is the essence of Marisa's life history. The story focuses on the choices she has made. Although it is implicit, it becomes clear for the reader the lack of options that she confronted.

The potential danger in reproduction

In Brazilian Portuguese, the term for single mothers are separated into two categories, *mae separada* and *mae solteira*. The first term refers to separated women and means separated mothers, but the second term refers to single mothers who have not been in a marriage or stable relationship. This language differentiation is also found in Mexico, where they differentiate between *abandonada* (abandoned) *fracasada* (failed, read: getting pregnant outside a marriage like relationship) and *divorciada* (divorced) (Melhuus 1998:364).

Claudinilson

The first serious relationship Marisa was involved in had been with Claudinilson. She was seventeen when they met on the beach where they both worked selling fruits. She described the first years as happy and after some time she had moved in with him as his wife. He was the father of her eldest daughter, Maria. She explained that after some years, she stopped loving him, and eventually left him with their daughter Maria. On a later occasion, Marisa revealed the incidents that led to the break-up. Marisa and Claudinilson had been disagreeing on some matter, and the disagreement had evolved into a fight. The fight had climaxed as Claudinilson had hit her in the face outside their home in front of all the neighbours. Following the humiliating situation Marisa had threatened to kill him. She had even hid a knife, "the biggest knife in the house," she said, and was awaiting his return home.

At first I found it hard to believe she had intended to act on her threat, but a similar case was described by Goldstein in her study *Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality* in Rio de Janeiro. There a woman had tried to kill her husband with rat poison. Ironically the survival of the husband seemed more shocking to the neighbours than the intentional murder (Goldstein 2003b). Whether Marisa would have tried to kill her husband remains unknown, but her husband had taken the threat seriously by.

When Claudinilson returned he discovered the knife missing and left the house. He then moved to his mother and did not return to the house until Marisa had moved out. Because Claudinilson was the only financial contributor to the household, he left Marisa without any means to cover the basic needs for her and Maria. “We were starving in our own home,” she said. Marisa was indirectly forced to move, and he returned to the house that was owned by his family. Marisa moved to her sister, Janaina.

After the relationship ended, Claudinilson has maintained the relationship with Maria, and he pays child support almost regularly. The relationship with Marisa remained cool. They do not speak and all communication goes between Maria or female relatives of him. Marisa does not even go near the house when she follows Maria to her father. Claudinilson was financially better off than Marisa, and at his place Maria had a bicycle, and he had a TV, DVD player, and stereo. Maria is not allowed to bring her bicycle to her mother, and when Claudinilson celebrated Maria’s birthday, he did not allow Marisa and her other child to attend. This happens whether the birthday was celebrated at his place but also when the birthday was celebrated at the home of Janaina, who was the godmother of Maria.

At this point Marisa stands out as a proud woman who would not take physical abuse; she was unable to support her self and her daughter and was forced to live with a sister. As a manicurist, Marisa had a small income but she was dependant on others in order to survive, she had lived with her grandmother before living with Claudinilson and when she left him, she had to in the absence of her parents, move in with her sisters. Living alone had not been an option mostly due to financial reasons but also because there seemed to be no practise for a woman in her position to live alone.

Wellington

Some time after Marisa left Claudinilson, she got involved with a new man, Wellington. Marisa told me he was “black,” and considered to be “bad company.” He lived in the nearby shantytown, Jurema. Jurema was one of the most notorious shantytowns in Fortaleza, and it was reputed as the most dangerous place in the city. Wellington was involved in crime and smoked crack. Marisa described this period as a bad time in her life. This was also when her position as a respectable woman started to crumble. She left Maria with her sister while she daily walked between their home and the shantytown. Wellington was both criminal and dark skinned and this resulted in the condemnation of the relationship by Marisa’s family. Wellington was not of Afro-Brazilian decent, but they emphasised his “blackness” whenever they spoke of him. This may be explained by the Brazilian practise of associating skin colour with economic and social positioning (cf. in Scheper-Huges 1992 and Rezende 2002).

During their relationship, Wellington initiated a parallel relationship with another woman. Knowing that Wellington was seeing another woman and that he made no attempts to hide it made Marisa angry. She responded by seeking comfort from another man. He was handsome, had fair skin, and was a reputed gangster. Their relationship did not get serious; it was only a few random meetings and was kept secret. Shortly after they became intimate, the new lover was sentenced to a long-time imprisonment for a serious crime. At this moment, Marisa realised she was pregnant again. Knowing that the biological father of the child was in prison, Marisa named Wellington the father. Wellington’s family supported her claim, even though he was living with the other woman at the time.

The pregnancy was hard on Marisa, who experienced serious depressions. Marisa’s felt, and was viewed as “stupid” because she had become pregnant. Thus, the relationship between Marisa and her sister worsened and she was unable to continue living with her. When she had to leave her sister, Marisa moved to her brother Elton and his family.

Marisa knew that the child most likely was the result of her brief relationship with the imprisoned lover. Wellington was dark and her lover had been fair, and she was terrified of the day the child would be born and the lie would be revealed. This situation was extremely stressful for Marisa. She responded to the situation by hurting herself and beating the growing belly. She never attended pre-natal care and when the baby was born she had made no

preparations. Marisa went to the hospital without the necessary diapers and clothes mothers have to bring with them. She told me, “I did not even have a single diaper before he was born, I had nothing.” She had no intentions to keep the child and had planned to give the baby away for adoption as soon as he was born. Marisa was preparing to sign the adoption papers when Wellington’s mother, the boy’s grandmother, interfered, forbidding her to go through with the adoption. The paternity was never questioned and they emphasised the baby’s beauty and resemblance to Maria as a child. Marisa decided to keep him and named him Raoul.

After Raoul was born the situation changed for Marisa. She had been a *mae separada*, but now she had become a *mae solteira*. The source of her respectability had changed dramatically. Her life situation changed and she had had to leave her sister to live with her older brother Elton. The change in life situation had a dramatic effect on her relationship with Raoul. According to Marisa, “The first years of his life I was unable to love him.” When Raoul was a baby Marisa had seriously neglected his needs. She had not given him food when he was hungry or picked him up when he was crying. She gave him sleeping pills so he would sleep through the day and let her work and have some peace. Similar behaviour is documented by Scheper-Huges who calls this “selective neglect” (1998). A concerned neighbour sent Marisa to a public psychologist at the community centre. The psychologist told Marisa she was unable to love the Raoul due to the suffering she herself had experienced and because of the absence of love in her own life. Marisa did not accept this theory, since she was fully able to love her daughter. She therefore quit therapy.

Marisa often said she was unable to love and care for Raoul when he was younger. She explained the neglect as motivated by hate and anger. She had blamed him for her own suffering and the difficult social situation that resulted from having a second child. At the time of the fieldwork, he was three and was receiving lots of attention. The amount of attention and affection that he received then was “because no one had loved him when he was younger.” Here it becomes difficult for me to fully describe what Marisa meant when she told me she was unable to love Raoul and neglected him because she hated him and felt anger. I am only presenting her words and explanation of her actions and feelings. All of things that had happened prior to my fieldwork, so I can only retell the stories that she told me during our daily conversations. Moreover, it is hard to fully understand the extent of the abuse and

whether it was abuse in the sense that one understands it, for example in Norway. In “Culture, Scarcity and Maternal Thinking,” Scheper-Huges writes:

“It is also essential to note that selective neglect is not analogous to what we mean in the United States by ‘child abuse’; it is not motivated by anger, hate, or aggression towards the child. Such sentiments-part of the ‘classical’ child abuse syndrome [...] appear altogether lacking among the woman in Alto.” (Scheper-Huges 1998:377)

According to Scheper-Huges the neglect she documented so well in *Death without Weeping* had nothing to do with the classical child abuse syndrome. Without being present at the time the abuse occurred it becomes impossible for me to determine if the abuse was motivated by anger or not, so I choose to avoid an analysis of the neglect and maltreatment of the child. I simply present it as insights about the consequences that followed Marisa’s relationship and pregnancy.

Before I abandon the subject, I want to emphasise one aspect of mother-child relations that was not clear in Scheper-Huges monograph. She explains mother-child detachment to be a result of poverty, disease, and death rates. I believe, however, that the liability that these children could become for their mothers is a factor that has not been emphasised enough. Without elder children or family members who could take care of a baby, a new child placed the woman in an extremely vulnerable position, which made her totally dependant on others for survival. Confronted with these choices, which none should have to make, the problem could be reduced to a question of priorities.

After the pregnancy and the birth of Raoul, Marisa experienced drastic changes in living conditions. Elton was reluctant to having her and the children there. Marisa had to sneak around to get a plate of rice for her self and the children. She also told of hours sitting outside his house waiting for him to get up or get back home. The period she lived with Elton was connected with humiliation and shame, and Marisa was unwilling to talk about it. She blamed the baby, and believed this was the reason for her being unable to *feel* love for him.

For a brief period of time, Wellington paid child support but the payments stopped

because he was constantly in between jobs. Afraid that he might question the paternity and discover the truth, Marisa had not pressured him into paying. His mother had offered to help provide for Raoul but the help had been minimal. Their relationship had also cooled after Marisa had heard that one of Wellington's sisters mentioned, that "if Marisa needed help from them, it would be appropriate if she would come to their home and let the grandmother see her grandson." When a neighbour had told her of this, Marisa had responded with anger and said she felt that the family was backstabbing her. I also believe she used this explanation to justify not going to see them, in order to hide her new pregnancy and growing belly.

When I first met Marisa, she had lived in the converted school building for approximately two months. At this point she believed she was four or five months pregnant while she in fact, as the ultrasound later showed, was almost seven months into the pregnancy. It remains unclear whether Marisa believed she was only four or five months pregnant or whether she claimed to be so to easier justify the illegal abortion she indented to have.¹²

Whether she knew of the exact duration of the pregnancy or not, she had known of it at the time she moved from her brother Elton. At the time I moved into the converted school she was living without any contact with the family. The pregnancy was the direct cause of this.

Donato

Marisa went through her third pregnancy during my fieldwork. The father of the child was Donato, a married man living in a nearby bairro. Their relationship was known and accepted by Donato's mother and sister. During the relationship, Donato left his wife but as his daughter had gotten ill, he had moved back with her. Marisa never complained about the situation and she often said, "I knew he was married when I met him and I have to accept it." Only one time did she allow herself to express her own vulnerability. This happened one of the few nights they were not fighting. Both were in a good mood and we decided to spend the night at one of the neighbouring bars. After a few glasses of beer Marisa said, "Can you imagine having a man who goes to bed with another woman every night?"

¹² The abortion will be discussed in chapter 4

Throughout the fieldwork, arguments and fights dominated the relationship between Marisa and Donato. They would fight and she would throw him out, telling him to get lost or to take responsibility. At first the fights were surrounding financial matters, as she demanded Donato to provide the money, 400 R\$,¹³ for an illegal abortion. She eventually realised that he would not be able or willing to give her the money required. At this point she changed her approach. Emphasising his resignation regarding the desired abortion, Marisa started to put pressure on Donato to assume responsibility for the expected child. The relationship continued to be dominated by arguments even though the character of the disagreements had changed. Marisa was urging Donato to bringing the necessary baby equipment for the child, which was soon to be born. For Marisa, this would not only make her present financial situation less complicated, it would also indicate Donato's intention to accept his financial responsibility after the child was born. Donato never brought anything with him. As a result, they continued fighting. Marisa complained that he only came to have sex. She was afraid and worried that Donato would abandon them when the baby was born.

In order to have a child registered the mother and the father have to show up at the registrar's office to give the baby their names. It was expected that a child was given the name of both the mother and the father. Furthermore, a woman could not register a baby without a father because if she did, the child would forever be perceived as the child of a prostitute. This causes shame not only for the mother, but also for the child whose illegitimacy will be documented in the absence of a second last name.

The American psychologist Biller states that a crucial strategy to prevent paternal deprivation and maltreatment is positive encouragement during the pregnancy and the establishment of a relationship with the newborn (Biller 1995: 72). The constant arguing and shoving Donato away when he came to visit may eventually have caused Donato to take less interest in the child. It is neither my place to speculate whether or not Donato's intentions were genuine, nor is it in my place to speculate whether or not the fear of abandonment that Marisa experienced was founded in an authentic threat. Marisa ended their relationship several times, and during long periods Donato did not come to her home.

¹³ 1200nkr

“If she did not want to get pregnant she would not have gotten pregnant, so why should it be my responsibility?”

Paternal neglect was rather common, and for several reasons men took little part in the upbringing of their children. In the article “Configuring Gender,” Marit Melhuus describes similar practises in Mexico. Masculinity is manifested in the ability to procreate. For a man, having several illegitimate children would only manifest his masculinity. It was not uncommon for a man to abandon his wife and start a new household with another woman and when this happened he would as often as not fulfil his economic obligations to the first family (Melhuus 1998:360-61).

The same male irresponsibility Marisa had experienced and now feared was put explicitly expressed to me during two different conversations in the middle of the fieldwork. Once, I went to a beauty parlour with Yasmin as she was getting her eyebrows waxed and her fingernails manicured. While I was sitting there I decided to get my eyebrows done so the lady working on Yasmin calls out a man from the back of the parlour. He was a charming man in his early thirties and he instantly began to flirt with us. As we were talking he told us of his life and the five children he had fathered. Yasmin wondered if he had provided anything else to his children beside his seed. He answered that he had done his part. If the woman was stupid enough to get pregnant she had to take the consequences. He claimed that the woman must have wanted the pregnancy; why else would she have slept with him? If she did not wish to get pregnant, she should have protected herself or avoided sex. On the way back to Yasmin’s home we discussed what we believed to be ignorance from the man at the beauty parlour. At the apartment building where Yasmin lived, we discussed our frustration with the janitor as we were waiting for the same elevator. We asked him what he thought of men abandoning their children, not acknowledging paternity, refusing to pay child support, as well as being uninvolved, and disinterested and negligent. The response from the janitor was almost identical to the attitude of the man at the parlour. He said, “If the woman gets pregnant she has herself to blame.”

The idea of female ‘guilt’ and male ‘innocence’ regarding reproduction was rather common. Whenever I mentioned Marisa and her situation, all men made comments of the same character. They did not feel sympathy for her and blamed her for getting herself into

such a difficult situation. The female response was more sympathetic and in discussions about paternal neglect, the women would argue against the men.

Nevertheless, I am not saying that in general men neglect their children. I have mentioned that the father of Maria cared well for her and paid his child-support almost regularly. Maria also spent time with her father and his family, and Marisa often talked about that Claudinilson was a good father for Maria. Sandro, another man, was also deeply involved in the life of his child. He had a daughter with a woman with whom he was not married. To make sure that the girl did not miss anything, Sandro worked two jobs and double shifts. The mother was rather uninterested in the girl and was now living with a new man. So, it was Sandro's responsibility to provide everything the girl needed, clothes, food, schoolbooks, tuition, and ice cream. Sandro was not sure he was the biological father of the child, but he cared deeply for her. The involvement of men, in large part, depended on their individual interest and the involvement of his family. The legal system obliged men to pay child support and they could risk imprisonment as a final consequence, but in my experience this never happened.

The female body and sexuality were both assets and liabilities for the women I have described. Sexuality was a form of capital that women could use in negotiations with men. When the capital was correctly cultivated, it could be used by the women to find a man, keep a man or win back a man who had left. On the other hand, sexuality could lead to unwanted pregnancies with the fatal consequences of total abandonment and social isolation, especially from their families. This isolation and the ambiguity that many poor feel towards their family relations will be discussed in the next chapter.

This chapter has focused on the historical and social circumstances influencing gender relations. Furthermore, I tried to uncover how these contribute to institutionalising an imbalance of power between men and women. The economic pathology, where the material was collected, is relevant and it becomes clear that most of these people find themselves in the lower social classes. With an increased financial position, the differences become less visible as the risks of total destitution become less threatening.

Chapter 4: Dominated bodies: the normalisation of suffering

Solheim notes that our understanding of gender is derived from an underlying, symbolic agreement with a metaphoric language. This language is mainly implicit and unspoken, rather than explicit and outspoken. This metaphoric language centres on the female body and femininity as a prime “symbolic object,” In contrast, the male stands out as a “pure subject” separated from the symbolic objectification that recognizes the female. Solheim tries to uncover some of the fundamental female metaphors, to make visible a *metaphoric connection* and to *reveal the symbol as a symbol*. This becomes problematic because gender as a mythological system and as a self referring carrier of meaning, is so tightly woven that it becomes *invisible* to us, and we lose the ability to see the construction of its meaning (Solheim 1998:17-19).

As I stated previously, the body is a product of both nature and culture, making it hard to grasp where the natural ends and the cultural begins. Solheim constantly confronts with the same phenomenon of epistemological foundation. According to Solheim the epistemological foundation leads back to are the institutionalised “boundaries of the body.” Solheim she: To what degree are the boundaries real, and to what degree are they a part of an imaginary symbolic universe we have learned to be the ‘self’? The body is both a material body and a sign with symbolic meaning. Experiencing through the body gives us a “natural” limit of imagination. In the words of Csordas, the body is thereby “not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture ... as the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1990:5).

We experience the body’s boundaries as real and as natural even if they are tested, challenged, invaded, or redefined. The boundaries have are part of an embodied condition that appears to be fundamental, and they are projected into our conceptualisation of the world (Solheim 1998:19-20). In this sense, what happens when the boundaries dissolve and the borders between the self and the world dissipate, when reality dissolves? According to Solheim all symbolism is centred on the embodied materialistic problem. Our embodied experiences become the model we use to conceptualise the surrounding world. Nevertheless, these experiences are modelled through our anticipations and expectations of the world. This is what makes the whole symbolic field so hard to grasp; the body and the surrounding world

are at the same time, sign and reference, symbolic and real. It is in this context that Solheim locates the female body, in particular, as predisposed to be borderless. This is what Solheim calls “the open body.” For Solheim, the open body is a key symbol in the social construction of meaning. The understanding of the feminine body as lacking boundaries could be the result of symbolically produced structures. If the female body appears to be borderless, however, it is so due to both male and female embodied experiences. The absence of borders appears real (Solheim 1998:19-20).

When discussing masculinity and non-masculinity in an analysis of gender among Brazilian transvestites, Kulick confirms Solheim's theory of femininity as open and penetrable in a contrast to masculinity. In Brazil masculinity was associated with the penetrating act while the non-masculinity was associated with being penetrated. The one who penetrates remains whole and sealed off while the one who is penetrated becomes open (Kulick 1997). In Brazilian Portuguese, the words used to describe sexual relations are connected to the open-closed metaphor and an understanding of the relation between penetrating and being penetrated. *Comer* (to eat) and *dar* (to give) are the Portuguese words used to describe the roles played in the sexual act. The male is the one who eats while the female is the one who is eaten.

A symbolic ambivalence of the female body

Much of the literature on sexuality in Brazil and Latin America focuses on “machismo” and on variations on homosexual and bisexual practices. This dissertation has focused on female sexuality and on relations between men and women from women’s point of view. When I speak of sex and sexual practice, I will be speaking of sexual relations between men and women, from the viewpoint of women.

As I have described above in the section on the absence of female masturbation, women experienced great problems relating to their own genitalia. This was demonstrated through attitudes towards physically touching the vulva and more specifically through attitudes towards female masturbation. The ambivalence that I observed regarding the female genitalia is not typically Brazilian but has a long international history. The artist Judy Chicago experimented with body symbols in the 1960s. When she showed them to her thesis committee, they threatened to withdraw their support unless she stopped making this kind of

work. Her reply was that she was being punished for having a “cunt.” She deliberately used this word because she meant the word demonstrated the society’s contempt for women.

“[...] because I have a cunt, I was despised by society. By making an image of the sensation of orgasm, I was trying to affirm my own femaleness and my own power and thus implicitly challenge male superiority.” (Ardener 1987:128)

It has been said that the female vagina and the human sexual act contributes to the perception of the female body as symbolically open, in a striking contrast to the male body. The female opens her self, and let the man in and he enters her body. The man acts and is the one who penetrates, while she is the penetrated. Moreover, if Solheim is correct and the emphasis on the closed and bounded body is fundamental for a healthy conceptualisation of the self, women are more vulnerable than men because of natural body functions.

In *The Woman in the Body* (1989), Emily Martin documented the alienation that many women experience confronted with by their own bodies. Menstruation is seen as something that happens *to* women and not as something that is a part *of* women. The feeling of not being in control over the body was a traumatic experience for some women. Other women mentioned that they did not feel apart of their own pregnancies and childbirths. Again this was explained as something that happened to them. The women’s bodies were experienced as a container, and with the assistance of modern biomedicine, doctors and nurses controlled the pregnancy. Machines monitoring heart rhythms became more important than the woman and her feelings about the experience. Sadly it seemed that women experienced their bodies and its functions to be both *unnatural* and *strange* (Martin 1989).

Rezende (2002) made similar observations in a study of expecting mothers in Brazil. Confronted by the medical system, the women experienced an undermining of their own autonomy and a loss of control over their own bodies. The two groups in Rezende’s study shared this feeling equally. Moreover when looking at how the differences in hospital care apply to the poor and rich, it is obvious that poor women are generally more susceptible to this experience.

The public control of individual bodies

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defined health as an idyllic blend of mental, physical and social well-being. This classification of health is problematic. Veena Das characterises the body as a site of conflict between these definitions. When talking about the body, it does not only relate to the individual body; the individuals inhabiting a society also form a “body population” (Das1990:40-45). Three interconnected dimensions of the body are the individual body, the social body, and the body politic (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998). The body is the meeting point where the individual experiences and the collective ideologies blend, whereas the body politic is the embodied manifestation of a society’s control over the population. Individual bodies are connected to the social body (population) and to the body politic.

The body politic is a shield used to protect the population, it may be compared to the human body in that what is on the *inside* is good, but and what’s on the *outside* is evil. When a society experiences danger, either represented by a foreign threat or by internal problems, the body politic tightens its grip on the population and expands the social rules used to control the group’s boundaries (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998:217). The body politic may refer to the manner in which the national-state uses laws to control the population, but it may also describe how neighbourhood women use gossip or exclusion to assert their values and norms of behaviour on fellow residents.

The body politic relates to the concept of governmentality, the model that Foucault introduced to describe the power and control that the governing institutions inflict over the population. This assertion of power is achieved either through large scale campaigns like public health care and schooling or indirectly through techniques that do not arouse the full awareness of the population. The public is the subject, with needs and aspirations and it is simultaneously the object in the hands of the government (Foucault 1991:100). Thus, the power a society has over its members becomes an important aspect of the body politic.

In any society the population is expected to live by an established set of rules. This involves controlling the individual body according to accepted ideas about proper bodily behaviour. Implicit in this is the understanding of the power relations between individual bodies and the body politic. The body politic is, according to Scheper-Huges and Lock, directly connected to individual bodies. Furthermore, changes and threats to the body politic

can be traced in individual bodies. Having a 'correct' body is necessary in order to live "correctly." Depending on the society the idea of the correct body varies. In our own health-oriented and body-conscious culture, both the male and female ideal body is fit, strong, lean and androgynous, whereas among the Yanomamo, male shave off the hair in order to better show off their scarred heads (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998:217).

Changes in the involvement and expansion of public health-care have caused a change in the regimes of the body. These changes were also enforced on the lower strata of the population as traditional medicine was replaced by biomedicine. The poorest and the most vulnerable become objects, and in the end it seems like the poor themselves obstacles to better health (Das 1990:40-45). Being in good health and having a healthy body have become markers of an ascribed status and something that one has work hard to achieve and maintain through exercise and healthy eating

Locally exerted control

In Jardim Verde, the ideal woman was a married mother living in a home with furniture and electric kitchen appliances. The ideal woman was a beautiful "at-home-mom" with a loyal husband who was able to provide for the family. The contrast to the respectable woman was the prostitute or the loose woman. I agree with Melhuus's assertion that the prostitute and the loose woman were not only required by men in the construction of male identity; the loose and disrespected woman is also vital in for the construction of the respectable woman (Melhuus 1998:362).

As mentioned above, single mothers were categorised as *mae solteira* (fracasada) and *mae separada* (abandonada), depending on the immediate circumstances surrounding their pregnancies. Melhuus includes an additional category, the *mae divorciada*, which a classification that I never encountered. I did not encounter any cases of divorce either. On an average basis, abandoned women received more respect than the single women. Respect, however, was not only determined by the immediate condition surrounding the pregnancy. It also depended on the women's communicative skills and their ability to relate to others (Melhuus 1998:365). Finally, I would like to underscore the importance that economics possess in the construction of respect and the maintenance of relations.

When an individual's behaviour contradicts with the socially accepted norms, she will suffer sanctions. While studying the consequences encountered by women who become pregnant outside of a marriage, it became obvious that economy was important. This was confirmed when a middle-class friend told me that when an unmarried girl gets pregnant there will be gossip, but this stops as soon as the child is born. "She might have a handicap when she wants to find a new man because she does not fit with the ideal of the virgin bride, but she does not suffer other sanctions. Most of the time, the woman continues to live with her parents." I asked what happens if she gets pregnant again. She answered, "Well, in the middle class it does not happen again." She did not know what happened if the girl was poor. In the lower classes, the occurrence of pregnancies outside of marriage is higher, and matrifocal households are common as illustrated by Scheper-Huges (1992), Goldstein (2003) and Rezende (2002). Although matrifocal households are common, it does not prevent the severe sanctions some women experienced as a result of a pregnancy. My material suggests that the women who were socially punished for their "mistake" soon found themselves in a financially vulnerable situation. I observed that sanctions predominantly came from close family and friends, which confirms this deduction.

Sarti has described the economical-rooted ambiguity that poor people feel towards their own family. As they strive to enhance their own position family members could become both an assessment and a burden in the quest for personal improvement. A family member in a difficult financial situation would expect aid and therefore become a financial burden for the family that attempt to advance. Likewise, a family member who is financially better off would be expected to aid and help the family enhance its position (Sarti 1995).

Marisa had become a financial burden for her siblings and they responded by excluding her. During my fieldwork, her condition; she was pregnant with a married man, and this had worsened her position and lead to her disassociation from her family and former friends. When I met Marisa she had no contact with her family. Old friends avoided her home and she shunned them. At this time Marisa had hardly anything to eat and her children were suffering starvation and physical abuse because she took out her anger and despair on them. One afternoon we were sitting on the pavement in front of the house, when her sister passed. When her sister saw us, she crossed the street and turned her head as if she had not seen us. In

addition to the social and physical exclusion, the family gossiped about Marisa. They even told her daughter, Maria, negative things about Marisa, knowing that Maria would return home and tell her mother.

At some point during the fieldwork, I started helping out Marisa financially. I provided the chicken and vegetables we had for lunch and helped her pay a 5R\$¹⁴ increase in the water bill. Furthermore I paid for her pre-natal consultations at a private clinic in the bairro.¹⁵ When Marisa's financial crisis went away, her sister started to talk to her again. One night Janaina came with her husband to meet me. She explained that she had not cut off her sister because she did not care for her but because people were narrow-minded. When Marisa's financially position had improved the narrow-mindedness of others became easier for Janaina to handle.

There were no rigid categories in Jardim Verde, many women had children with men who were not their present husbands, just as many older women were living alone with their adult children. In each case there were differences, and while some women experienced no problems, others suffered greatly. Economics and the age of one's children played a dominant role.

Women with babies and pre-school-aged children could not work unless they had someone who could take care of the baby. The inability to earn money placed these women into financial jeopardy and makes them dependent on others. Marisa's difficult situation was worsened by the fact that she did not have parents, or a mother that she could turn to for help.

The occurrence of pregnancies outside of marriage or partnerships was higher amongst the lower social classes. Given their knowledge of the potential cost and the easy access to information about prevention, it struck me as peculiar that so many women, Marisa included, would not take precautions against unwanted pregnancy. Anderson offers an explanation regarding the case of African-American girls in an inner-city neighbourhood in Chicago. Here the inner-city girls are less educated about reproduction than their middle class peers; some did not even know how babies are created until they became pregnant. This is unlikely to be the case in Brazil because that despite the fact that parents rarely discussed sex with their

¹⁴ 15nkr

¹⁵ 10R\$ or 30nkr pr visit, Totally 3 visits

children, the information that the schools, NGOs, public offices, and TV presented was of a very high quality. Rather, I think it has to do with the second dimension of Anderson's analysis, that lower class teenagers often see their future in a different perspective than the middle-class teenagers. Whereas middle-class teenage girls view the future positively, preparing for higher education and good jobs, the inner-city teens are less optimistic, and have difficulties seeing themselves in a different place in the future (Anderson 1990). Confronted with a future holding few possibilities for improvement, these women might take an indifferent approach to their future prospects.

Moreover, children provided a degree of autonomy for the young women, by making it possible for them to be perceived as adults, and thereby escape the control of their mothers. The mothers also hoped that a child would consolidate their relationship with the father, make him assume responsibility, and that they could establish a new household together (Anderson 1990). For some women, children create relations to men and thereby a possible degree of economical stability.

I would rather die than have this baby

After the first night at the converted school, Marisa never mentioned her pregnancy. She did not speak of it again until the neighbour, Rafael, said that he suspected that Marisa starved herself in order to kill the baby. Daiani told Marisa, and the same night she revealed her plans for an abortion. She had withheld the information from me due to fear that I might condemn her. At this time, I believed that she was five months pregnant. Marisa had already experienced the consequences an unplanned child could have, and she did not want another child. She was aware that an abortion in her prolonged stage in the pregnancy might kill her. Nevertheless, Marisa said she would rather die than have the baby. She considered prostituting herself in order to raise the 400R\$¹⁶ to pay for the abortion.

At this point, I considered lending her the money for the abortion and contacted my supervisor at the university to learn about the legal and ethical implications of my involvement. I was not able to get in touch with him, so I discussed the problem with my mother who is a nurse. She told me not to get involved with the abortion. Instead, my parents

¹⁶ 1200NKR

offered to “adopt” the baby and help Marisa cover the rent so she would not risk losing her home after the child was born. When I told Marisa that my parents offered to “adopt” the baby and make sure they would be taken care of she refused and told me she would go through with the abortion when she got the money.

I was able to persuade Marisa into seeing a doctor and to get an ultrasound. The ultrasound revealed that she was seven months into the pregnancy. Nevertheless, this knowledge did not stop her from wanting to go through with the abortion. Her mind was made up, and she would do whatever she could to abort the child. Throughout the time I knew Marisa, she had hardly eaten. Marisa explained this self-inflicted starvation; she wanted the baby to become weak in order to make the abortion easy. She did not see that her weakness would only increase the danger of the whole procedure.

During an average day, Marisa would eat white bread with butter and drink coffee for breakfast. Then she would skip lunch and supper; she only ate the leftovers that Raoul would not eat. Unless I forced her to eat and gave her a plate and a spoon, she did not eat anything other than bread. She fainted on several occasions and everyone was worried about the situation. At the time of the ultrasound, her belly was just beginning to show. During this period I was practically living with her and the children.

There are several possible explanations for Marisa’s behavior. Rafael and the other neighbors believed that Marisa wanted to starve the baby until it eventually died naturally in the womb. A second reason could be that the starvation bought her some time because it delayed her weight increase and prevented the visible detection of the pregnancy. A final motivation for not eating could be explained as an attempt by Marisa to reclaim control over a body that she experienced as out of control. Several texts show that often people who self-starve feel that they have lost control over their bodies and themselves. By forcing the body into a rigid eating plan, they regain control. In this way, the starvation becomes a way to take back the control that has been lost (Solheim 1998).

I am aware that my involvement in this particular situation contradicts some ideas that the anthropologist should remain neutral and avoids interfering in the field. Bourgeois has noted, however, that it is through getting personally and intimately involved in other people’s

lives that the anthropologist get information (Bourgeois 2003), and that by doing so, it some times becomes impossible not to intervene.

Abortion

Abortion was illegal in Brazil but it was available for those who could pay. I was told about private clinics that performed medical surgeries for the privileged. The NGO workers informed me of the most common abortion techniques used at the *clinics* available to the underprivileged. One method involved inserting a vacuum device, a *sonde*, into the vagina to suck the foetus out or provoke a “natural” abortion. The second method involved inserting knitting needles in the opening of the uterus, such that they perforated the foetus and caused pre-natal death. Both methods involved a high risk of damage to the woman. Gina at the NGO said that the needles did not only perforate the foetus, they also often perforated the uterus as well and could cause severe bleeding and infertility. It might even cause death.

A third method was to use a medicament called *Cytotek*©, which was used as abortion pills. *Cytotek*© was an inflammatory medication with uterus contractions and abortion was listed as a side effect. Marisa had tried *Cytotek*© unsuccessfully. She had taken one pill by mouth and inserted a second in her vagina. She had been told to lie still until the pill in her vagina had dissolved and the abortion was in progress. She had lain down for four hours but eventually she needed to go to the toilet. When she was on the toilet, the pill had fallen out without signs of dissolving. Marisa took the pill out of the toilet and inserted it again and returned to her hammock. For another five hours she had lain and waited before giving up and she removing the pill in her vagina. Over the next days, she experienced some bleeding. Marisa feared that the attempted abortion might have caused serious damage to the foetus. To make sure everything was normal we made arrangements to see a doctor.

The morning of the doctor appointment, we went to queue up at half past six in the morning, since the line in to the doctor were determined by who arrived first. While we were waiting for our turn, an acquaintance of Marisa showed up. They started chatting and I did not pay them much attention before Marisa mentioned that I was the reason she was at the clinic. She stated plainly that she originally wanted an abortion. The waiting room was filled with

twelve pregnant women, who did not deter Marisa and her acquaintance from not continuing their conversation in the room.

Marisa: I really wanted an abortion

Woman: I did one in between the boy and the girl

Marisa: I have never had one, even though if everybody I know has had one

Woman: Mine was awful, I went to see [...] and she did the thing. When I got back from the clinic my temperature became really high and after a day with high fever my husband took me to the hospital. There the doctor saw me and told me that the foetus was still alive but on its way out, he sent me home and told me to go back to the place I came from to let them finish the job. My husband took me back and they repeated the procedure. Again I got really ill, and my husband brought me to the hospital. There they left me alone in a corner. As I was lying, there I felt something happening, and I walked towards the bathroom. Then the thing fell out of. I saw it lying with its back up, I could see the spine despite I did not have the courage to turn it over to see if it was male or female. A nurse came and threw it away. They cleaned me up and sent me home.

The rest of their conversation was about how bad she was treated at the hospital after the abortion. This was confirmed by Anna and Gina who also told me that women who suffered natural abortions were treated badly at the hospital, because the doctors were so “fed up” with the illegal ones. Rezende also describes the unsatisfactory treatment that women, and in particular poor women, receive at public hospitals (Rezende 2002).

At some point in the conversation the woman’s youngest daughter came in and climbed up on her mothers lap while the woman was continuing her story. They did not seem

bothered by the girl or other women in the room, and the other women did not seem uncomfortable with the conversation either. I seemed to be the only one who was bothered by the normalisation of such an incident.

Sexual abuse: when incest happens

Illegal abortions were not the only unpleasant dimension of everyday life for many women. While discussing her relationship with Donato, Marisa's married lover and the father of her unborn child, I suggested that she could tell him to leave his wife and that the two of them could live together and form a separate family. This Marisa refused and she informed me she would never live with a man again in her life. I pushed her and told her that I didn't think just because she had two bad experiences with men that she should judge all men, and deny herself the possibility of finally getting a stable life. She refused again and started telling me a story that took time to complete. At first she said: "I will never live with a man again, not after what happened to my family." I asked her what had happened she told me over the next few weeks when we were alone in her home, doing household chores or resting in the hammocks.

Prior to this, Marisa had told me she had a brother in prison. He had committed an assault and she was ashamed of it. I did not ask much and she never spoke of him. She spoke of him as a brother, but later I realised he was a cousin who had grown up with them in her grandmothers' home. This day she revealed the real reason for her brother's imprisonment. He had not been sent to prison as a result of an assault but because he had molested his niece. Marisa was not really aware of the circumstances surrounding the incident but she knew that the brother's home had been filled with men who had been smoking crack and drinking. Her second brother Elton had taken his daughter with him. She was five at the time. No one had noticed anything until the girl had walked into the living room with blood in her panties. She was taken to the doctor and the abuse was confirmed.

At first the child had refused to speak of the incident and did not identify the culprit, but after a while she had named her uncle. Marisa was not sure about who could have done it, and she viewed the whole situation as suspicious. There had been an ongoing conflict between the man in question and the mother of the girl. It was the mother who had first named him as

the molester. Marisa also recalled how the accused brother had cared for her and her sisters and put to bed when they were alone as children. He had never touched any of them. The police had taken blood samples, but they were inconclusive. Then they had taken a DNA test, but the test results had never returned.

This was three years ago. The brother had been sent to prison, and the family of the girl had moved into his house. When I asked Marisa what she thought she replied, “I have no idea. It could have been anyone present. It could even have been the father of the girl. I have absolutely no idea, but I am not convinced that the right man was sent away.”

The fear of incest was real and Marisa never let her daughter walk alone to school because she feared what strangers might do if they had an opportunity. It was not only strangers who Marisa feared might harm her daughter, she was also afraid for what might happen at home or if she left her daughter with people she knew.

The stepfather

One day I was sitting in the Scandinavian bar in the beach zone, and one of the men told another story about the Brazilian society. This time it was about incest. He said that that sixty percent of all Brazilian girls lost their virginity to their fathers. I thought that this was just another case of the ludicrous information the Scandinavians spread around. Nevertheless, I had to check it out. I asked some people from the NGO and they were appalled by the fact that someone might spread such false rumours about their people. It was not true, Nevertheless, I remember Anna, saying that it might be so if we are talking of stepfathers instead of biological fathers. I still found it hard to believe it, so I continued to ask people about it. It seemed as though everybody knew that stepfathers “took advantage” of children. So, I eventually accepted that it was a real problem.

Lying in the hammocks at Marisa’s and talking about her brother in prison she asked me: “Have you noticed that I never let Donato spend the night when I have the children here? It is because I want to be on the safe side.” She lived in a single room, so and the possibility that something could happen to the children when the boyfriend was sleeping over seemed minimal. She repeated that she would never live with a man again because she was afraid for her children. Melhuus writes that women rarely get married again because a new husband is

not likely to presume responsibility for other men's offspring. A woman who remarries will be perceived to be egoistic (Melhuus 1998). I could draw the same conclusion from my material. In addition to this, the fear of incest seemed proportionally greater than the financial benefits of remarrying. "I have one girl and two boys (referring to the unborn baby as well). Even if the boys do not have a hole in front they do have it in the back, and I am not going to risk it." Marisa really believed the man she was in love with could be capable of sexually abusing her children.

Various people expressed a fear of incest was on several occasions by. Marisa and Daiani had a serious argument after Daiani told Maria not to be around when her husband Rafael was at home. She had explained to Maria it was because Sr. Rafael was tired. Marisa, Maria's mother, had taken this as an insult and an insinuation that her children were noisy and "without upbringing." Daiani told me later, however, that she would not risk something happening to the girl. Maria was only eight and walked around the house wearing just her panties. This was a topic that was widely discussed by the neighbours, who said that Marisa should know better. Men might have considered the girl walking around undressed as an invitation. Marisa, on the other hand, did not see the problem and explained that the girl was not particularly mature.

On a different occasion, Carlos told me that he would bring his daughters to live with him if his ex-wife ever got remarried. This was strictly because: "A man who marries a woman with daughters will expect sexual benefits from not only the mother but from the daughters as well." Sarah my sixteen-year-old neighbour was lived with her father and her sister. Her mother had remarried and when she did, Sarah's father had come for them. Ever since then, they had lived with him. She told me that their father did not like it when they went to see their mother.

The prevalence of sexual abuse has been illustrated in the behaviour that I have described above. Daiani and Marisa did not exclude the possibility that their men could be potential child molesters. Daiani once told me that men "eat" anything, young, old, fat, or ugly. It does not matter; if a man can, he will take the opportunity.

The obvious fear of incest and the common understanding of stepfathers' "privileges" regarding their stepdaughters make evident an existing problem that targets young women.

The habit of not reporting rape and sexual abuse (Goldstein 2003) and the absence of a public discourse that takes these problems seriously and legitimises poor women's right to a life free from sexual abuse (Coelho 1995), abandons lower class women with their problems. Furthermore, it denies them the legal justification to suffer, and this implicitly repudiates their suffering.

Risk and blame

In this chapter, I choose to interpret the normalization of abortion and sexual abuse as symptoms of a suffering social body. With the present commoditization of health, good health has become located more within the control of the individual. It becomes the individual's duty to maintain health (Nettleton 1997:208). When good health turns into an individual responsibility, the absence of health might be blamed on the sufferer. The privatization of risk-management also has consequences on how one relates to oneself and to others. It becomes a personal obligation to prove the capability to care for oneself and others (Petersen 1997:199).

The ability to control and maintain the individual body then becomes an indicator of the ability to take care of her self and others. The increased focus on a person's individual role in managing health and well-being, opens up for placing guilt and blame on the victim. Individual risk behaviour has in many ways replaced coincidence as explanatory factor in health matters. As a result of this trend, "risk-groups" have been replaced with "vulnerable groups" in the Brazilian HIV/AIDS discourse.

The suffering social body

As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, the World Health Organisation defines health as a state of physical, social and mental well-being, but what does it really mean? When discussing individual bodies, only individuals can describe its experiences. Because the individual bodies are part of a population of bodies and collective ideas manifest themselves in individuals an analysis is possible. The individual, social and politic body are in connection with each other. Thus, suffering inflicted on the population can be directly traced through individual bodies (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1998). Instead of placing the individual as the

isolated location of health and sickness, I agree with Das that it would be beneficial to see health and sickness as networks of relations (Das 1990:35-37).

My material shows how suffering was reproduced inside the community and how it affected its most vulnerable members. Where people of the middle classes were publicly perceived as “persons” members of the lower classes were perceived as anonymous individuals without public interest (Coelho 1995:92). I would argue that the invisibility of the poor makes them vulnerable for abuse from individuals and the public. This invisibility includes the suffering of the poor. Violence, abuse, and infectious diseases are an element of poor people’s every day life. Because they mostly affect the poor, they receive little or no attention from the global community. Paul Farmer’s work brings forth the importance that poverty plays in the spread of infectious diseases. Moreover, he focuses on how the world economy influences the amount public attention that given to health problems. It seems that as long as the problem only concerns the poor, it is not worthy of public interest (Farmer 1998). Though Marisa and the poor women who I encountered were not suffering from infectious diseases, I argue that they were carrying and suffering social ills. Their suffering received little attention and was not accounted for although the social problem clearly was. Instead, the community held them accountable for their mistakes.

Chapter 5: Final remarks and conclusion

“They endure and they get by, the women and men ... “making do” as best they can, relying on their wits, playing the odds, and engaging in the occasional malandragem of deceit and white lies, gossip and rumor, feigned loyalty, theft, and trickery. But can we speak of resistance, defiance, opposition - themes that are so privileged in critical circles today? My friends on the Alto do Cruzeiro do not deceive themselves anymore than do the few, discouraged members of the surviving radical left in Bom Jesus, who now speak only with irony and bitterness of when, “come the revolution,” things will be different”
(Scheper-Huges 1992:505).

In her latest email, Marisa said that she was tired, tired of her children and her situation. Zè, the youngest was getting his teeth and kept her awake all night, Raoul was still a little mischief-maker, running around making a mess out of everything, and Maria always wanting things Marisa could not afford to buy. She had finally realised that Donato would never become the boyfriend she wanted. He would never leave his wife, and she had realised that for him she was only an adventure. “As a boyfriend, he only wants sex. I hoped for something more serious but he does not. Sometimes I feel like getting a *real* boyfriend who can help me with things around the house” (As vezes tenho vontade de arrumar um namorado de verdade para mim ajudar nas despesas de casa). I hope she finds a *real* boyfriend who helps her and that her life will finally be detached from the chain of suffering that has followed her for so long.

The theme of this dissertation has been how inequality and vulnerability are reproduced over time and embodied in the female body in Fortaleza, Brazil. Because of their bodies, women become marginalised within the community, alienated to themselves, and dependant of others in order to survive. The underlying themes have been health issues, the existing class differences, and the positioning of women in the Brazilian society.

Throughout the dissertation, I have discussed sexuality, the female body, gender relations, and reproduction in specific historical, economical and social contexts. The main focus has been on the poor women of Jardim Verde, and the struggles they have to fight in order to sustain a dignified life. The vast poverty I encountered in Jardim Verde entrapped the most vulnerable women, such as Marisa, in webs of suffering, which she was unable to

escape. This web, which connected history, poverty, gender, sexuality, bodies, reproduction, and power, contributed to the procreation of pain and misery within individual bodies.

I have chosen to write about a group and individuals that contradicted the general idea of a well-functioning citizen. On the one hand, these women represent one of the most marginalised groups within Brazil. On the other hand, however, they reflect, in essence, the vulnerability of women in general (cf. Solheim 1998). When I approached specific social dysfunctions, I was able to reveal some of the fundamental structures governing Brazil and how these contribute to the reproduction of inequality and suffering. On a community level, the patterns that I identified were hidden in the relational dimension of relationships between men and women, as well as among family and friends. On an institutional level, however, the conflict was between people and the system.

In this respect, the challenges that I posed were to contextualise the living conditions of these women, in order to reveal not only what they experienced, but to also explore why they had these experiences. By this I mean to reveal how poverty afflicted their lives and the source of their vulnerability. I analysed the multiple layers of sexuality in order to reveal the female body and sexuality as a contested field where political economy and structures of power are negotiated and embodied.

The field

Fortaleza exposed itself as a city of differences. White sandy beaches, large modern hotels, luxurious residential areas, restaurants and bars existed side by side with favelas, prostitution, crime, violence, and suffering. Parallel with extreme wealth distributed to a small minority of the population, Brazil sustains a large lower class where suffering and abuse are part of people's every day lives. These inequalities are reproduced over time, and by all members of the society.

The data I collected during six months of fieldwork is rather complex material and mirrors a broader spectrum the society than I have described in the thesis. I have chosen to narrow the topic to sexuality and gender relations because I believe that these issues capture some essence of the main problems the Brazilian society confronts. I do not claim that they are "problems of women;" they are problems of society

The history of Brazil is a history of the reproduction of inequality and suffering. From the colonial era until today, Brazil has been known for political repression, military dictatorship, corruption, and an increased disproportion in wealth. The Nordeste region has been described as 600,000 square miles of suffering, and is the poorest and least developed region in Brazil. Sugar and cotton plantations have left behind a social landscape of brutality, impoverishment, and suffering for the population of 40 million people.

More than forty-seven percent of the population remain illiterate. Whereas ten out of every twenty child deaths in Latin America are Brazilian, five are *nordestinos*; the Nordeste contributes to a quarter of Latin American child mortality. Diseases, such typhoid, dengue, malaria, Chagas' disease, polio, tuberculosis leprosy and bubonic plague, which we formerly believed to be under control in Brazil returned in the eighties and are now, claiming new victims. Social relations that produce rural to urban migration, malnutrition, favelas, unemployment, and illiteracy are the primary culprits behind the spread of these epidemics (Scheper-Huges 1992:31). These social relations also contribute to the agony of women, as I have described in the dissertation. As I have argued above, Marisa and the other poor women I encountered were carrying the suffering of social ills in their bodies. I have tried to reveal how these structures were embodied in the female body, and the consequences it had on individual lives.

The reproduction of low self-esteem

Through a process of embodiment, a society turned history into nature in the female body (Bourdieu 1977:78). , Everyone that belonged to the society systematically and indirectly exerted structural violence (Farmer 2004). Violence was not only exerted by the state, it was also reproduced and legitimised within the community and internalised in bodies. Take for example in the reproduction of low self-esteem. The NGO considered fighting low self-esteem the most important task in order to improve problems of poverty and health.

Marisa's daughter Maria had a serious problem at school; she could not read. She was eight and attended second grade at a local public school. Her handwriting was beautiful and her math skills were excellent, but she had yet to break the reading code. She did her homework at night and because she could not read Maria would start to cry and give up, then

she would try to get her mother to do the homework for her. During this session Marisa would constantly critique her and sometimes punish her physically. She also called Maria stupid and useless and told of her own fluent reading at the same age. Marisa would describe how her grandmother had demanded full discipline and hard work because she wanted the children to be literate. The session would end with Maria crying and Marisa complaining about her daughters' uselessness. Afterwards Marisa would do the homework, or tell her which letters to write.

Growing up in surroundings both socially and at home constantly reminded of your own insufficiency would have a serious effect on a person's self-interpretation of her. This will eventually have consequences for how this person sees her self in relationships with others as well as the authorities. "As Cruikshank points out, [they] seem not to recognise the extent to which personal life is a product of power relations (1993:341 in Petersen 1997:200).

The women

The women who make up the empirical foundation of this dissertation, each in their own way, experience themselves, their bodies and their children as problematic. The problematic dimension did not emerge from the nature of things but became visible in their relations to others. Because of this relational dimension, I interpret the vulnerability of women to be another symptom of a "political economy that reproduces sickness and death at its very base" (Scheper-Huges 1992:30).

Luara's husband did not allow her sixteen-year-old son to live with them. Whenever Luara was away from home, her husband would not let the boy inside the house. Alyane and her mother were not able to restore their relationship, which had been damaged when she told her mother that she was no longer virgin.

Even in her marriage, Daiani lived in the shadow of Rafael's ex wife, and feared that one day he would abandon her. She waited for him at the bus stop and wandered the streets at night with her baby on the arm to figure out where he was. Debora lived and worked with Carlos without proper employment registrations or a salary. He threatened her with separation when they fought and demanded full control over her whereabouts.

In their relationship to their own bodies Yasmin, Anna and Daiani all expressed commonly accepted understandings of the female body to be unclean and “dangerous.” Yasmin disinfected her underwear and Daiani would never touch her self “down there.” Anna explained that women did not masturbate. The absence of focus on female sexuality and female pleasure at the NGO project also reveals that in the public discourse on sexuality, female pleasure in sexual relationships was taken for granted or not emphasised. There was no need for elaboration and was not perceived as problematic. Nevertheless, my material reveals that women indeed experienced the lack of focus on their sexuality as problematic.

I summarise the stories of these women to reveal explicitly how individual suffering was linked to a social structure and how social structure was linked to historical, political, and economic structures. Marisa’s history captures this point best. While recounting her life Marisa revealed how connected her personal suffering was to these social structures. Her story also reveals the power behind these structures and their influence on individual lives.

Gendered relations

Men and women relate to each other according to traditional gendered statuses. The masculine ideal was macho and the feminine ideal was a fusion of the virgin and the mother. Both men and women needed the indecent woman in order to maintain their positions as macho and respectable woman. The man needed the indecent woman to prove his manhood, through virility and having multiple sex partners. Respectable women become more respectable in contrast to the ones who lacked respect, just as female honour needed a counterpoint in order to be recognized (Melhuus 1998). My material is not about prostitutes or other sexually promiscuous women. It is about “ordinary” women who have experienced bad luck. From a risk-management approach, perhaps one might argue that Marisa should have acted differently. Nevertheless, she acted no different than most other women with her level of education, social position, and class background would have acted. The outcome and the consequences could have been totally different, as there are so many variables involved. The additional variables involved in Marisa’s case were parents, economy, relationships, and pregnancy. Marisa did not have any parents to turn to in the event of a crisis. Her siblings were not in a financial situation assume responsibility for her, whereas the outcome of her

relationships with men would be impossible to determine from the beginning. With regards to pregnancy, there are many factors involved in why and when one becomes pregnant. The combination of these variables and chance accounted for Marisa's unfortunate position during my fieldwork.

The questions I wanted to answer in this dissertation were: Why these things happen and why women, in particular, are the victims of this structural violence. In order to give some kind of explanation to the situation of women, it has also been necessary to study the relationships between women and men. It is difficult to give a valid analysis of gender without taking into consideration its relational aspects.

Male-female relations and marriage were under a constant threat from infidelity. Women feared, with reason, abandonment and destitution. Stereotypical male and female gendered identities were not comparable and the realisation of the male ideal led to the vulnerability of women. Sex, love, and security were closely linked as women used their sexuality to sustain their relationships, and to get them confirmed.

The manners in which men and women relate to each other are determined by reproduced cognitive models of socialised, expected and desired behaviours (Strauss and Quinn 1994). These cognitive models are a combination of larger structures and individual characteristics. I identified how structural models reproducing inequality were embodied and internalised until they became part of the individual. The construction and preservation of inequality between rich and poor was obvious, as was the construction of inequality between men and women.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the imbalance of power between men and women in combination with extreme poverty have placed these women in a particularly vulnerable position. Marisa's story has captured this vulnerability. She is financially, socially, and medically vulnerable. Marisa is lacking all the aspects of the World Health Organisation's definition of health as a state of physical, social and mental well-being. I argue that the two leading factors to Marisa and other women's vulnerability are poverty and the fact that they are women.

Sexuality

The stereotypical image of Brazil with its sandy white beaches, samba, and sexy women deceives many visitors to take for granted the seemingly unproblematic attitude towards sex and sexuality in Brazil. This image was also portrayed by researchers, such as Parker, who writes about the normality of various sexual practises, like anal sex, oral sex, and that all Brazilians emphasise broadening their sexual repertoire (Parker 1993:74-75). I have no material that contradicts or confirms these statements on sexual practise, but I do have data that point towards a much more complicated analysis of sexuality. A presentation of the normality of anal sex within the four walls of a home only contributes to the myth of the hypersexual Brazilian woman and Brazilians as sexually liberated and open-minded.

My material reveals some of the ambivalence that many women experienced in regards to their own bodies and sexuality. Sexuality was a part of the Brazilian construction of identity, but it was not a subject that parents spoke with their daughters about. Furthermore, I regard the absence of female masturbation as an indicator that challenges the idea of the sexually-liberated Brazilian woman. Moreover, the classification of women as nymphomaniac or frigid depending, on their sexual appetite, was stigmatising women and contributed to the alienation that many women felt towards their own body and desires. Recall the example of the seventeen-year old girl who had not experienced an orgasm and was categorised as potentially frigid by a health worker speaking with a group of teenagers. The use of stigmatising labels and categories, such as frigid and nymphomaniac tells women who experience problems in their sex life or who experience great pleasure in sex, that there might be something wrong with them. The apparent antagonistic attitude toward the female sex organ added to the complexity of female sexuality and the female experience of the body. I was given sensitive information on so many levels, yet no one was willing to talk to me about female masturbation. Women would reject the fact that any respectable woman masturbated, and the subject was clearly a great taboo. Daiani's statement that she would never touch her own genitalia, not even for medical purposes and the revealing demonstration when Yasmin washed her panties in concentrated disinfectant were illustrations of women's dislike of the vagina. I find it hard to accept the liberated and uncomplicated presentation of Brazilian sexuality and have reason to believe that an analysis with conclusions like Parker's was based

on information from men. My data suggest that female sexuality is a very complicated field filled with ambiguities.

One could argue that the socially accepted ideal of women as either virgins or married or as a sexual mother –might have influenced the information I had access to during the fieldwork. Nevertheless, I would argue against such a potential misunderstanding. I have collected both verbal and non-verbal observational data that confirm my analysis. Furthermore, information has been gathered in various settings and with women of different backgrounds. When comparing my data with the material on the history of European and North American feminists struggle to ‘recapture’ the vagina (Ardner 1987) and the impressive analysis of the alienation that many women feel towards their body functions and sex organs (Martin 1992), I find my conclusions to be reasonable and probable.

Suffering

Motherly love is a celebrated part of Brazilian and Nordestino culture. This is displayed in music, folklore, and folk art, as well as in the devoted worship of The Virgin Mother, and São Antônio, the patron saint of mothers and children. The image of the mature Mary, the widow with the dead Jesus in her arms and her own heart pierced with a sword was the popular image of long suffering motherhood and of a tormented but sanctified motherly love in the community (Scheper-Huges 1992:357). When describing motherhood, suffering, and maternal detachment, Scheper-Huges emphasises disease and child mortality as explanatory factors for “selective neglect.” My material brings in one dimension that Scheper-Huges does not address.

I did not encounter any deaths during the fieldwork, so I am not able to comment on that aspect of her material. I did notice, however, that despite the high regard for motherhood and motherly love, children presented a risk for their mothers. Living on the margins of starvation, without the support of others, a child could become a ticket to total abandonment. The praxis in Brazil of excluding physically and psychologically ill persons to the condition of “social death” has described a collective justification for this act of abandonment by the ones involved. This was the case of Catarina, who was totally abandoned by her family and friends (Biehl 2005). I argue that Marisa’s situation when I met her was a similar. Everyone

who should have been able to help Marisa abandoned her. Tainted by her body, and weighed down with her children, Marisa was left for dead in the eyes of her family.

The risk of abandonment was not the only threat women had to live with. Sexualised violence was a large problem that was not accounted for in the public debate. Intruders raped two girls, ages fourteen and fifteen, in their home. The family and friends of eldest girl, who was not a virgin, accused her of faking the screams and the post-rape suffering in order to conceal from her mother that she was sexually active prior to the incident. As a result, the rape was never reported (Goldstein 2005). Rape was not reported, according to Melhuus, but was kept private because women who were raped were perceived as loose, indecent or in the wrong place at the wrong time (Melhuus 1998:366). The prevalence of sexual abuse, rape, incest, and illegal abortions performed without the proper medical attendance reveal that the difficulties that women confront go beyond, have deeper roots, and are more than fear of abandonment and financial destitution. I argue that this systematisation and normalisation of violence inflicted on women and children contribute to maintaining the enormous social differences in Brazil and the vulnerability of women.

Closing remarks

When writing against cultures of suffering and structuralised violence, one risks the possibility attributing great explanatory power oppression. By doing so, one also risks reducing the subjectivity and agency of the people to a discourse on victimisation. The other possibility is to locate agency and the tactics and practises used by the oppressed as ‘weapons’ against their oppressors. Nevertheless, by doing so, one risks romanticizing human suffering and trivialising its effect on the human spirit, consciousness, and will (Scheper-Huges 1992:533). I have tried, like Scheper-Huges, to locate myself in the middle, where hopefully, I have been able to reveal the destructive “signature of poverty and oppression in individual bodies and social bodies.” My goal, however, was to do this without removing the actions and tactics that the women of Jardim Verde use to survive and prosper within their given social contexts.

I have tried to uncover a core of female vulnerability, and I have found it to be infiltrated with sexuality, reproduction, and gender relations. I hope this may shed light on the

established structures of power, positioning of women, and existing class differences within the Brazilian society.

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