

When Hunger is Silenced: Endemic Hunger and the Socio-Cultural  
Construction of the *Almoço* for the Urban Poor in Trairi, Brazil

Catherine Bélair

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthropology) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 2006

© Catherine Bélair, 2006



Library and  
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-20705-5*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-20705-5*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## ABSTRACT

### When Hunger Is Silenced: The Socio-Cultural Construction of the *Almoço* for the Urban Poor in Trairi, Brazil

Catherine Bélair

This thesis is an ethnographic study of endemic hunger in the city of Trairi, in the Northeastern state of Ceará, Brazil. It explores the lunch time meal (*almoço*) as a socio-cultural construct and proposes it as a useful tool for the investigation and comprehension of the daily experiences that take place when one is hungry. The extensive descriptions and the narratives of women and men of Trairi complement one another as we come to discover two slightly different discourses of hunger that emphasize the occurrence of a paradox that plays either on the presence or on the absence of a socio-cultural problem of hunger.

Several conclusions emerge from the arguments at the basis of this thesis: endemic hunger is understood as meaning malnutrition and undernutrition; the Trairiense know poverty which governs their socio-cultural eating patterns; the *almoço* is the principal meal of the day and is an excellent milieu from which to scrutinize the ideologies rooted within everyday eating practices; and lastly, people have developed different ways of acting and of speaking about food in such a manner that they are able to endure their condition. These findings come together and work simultaneously to silence the state of endemic hunger in Trairi: it is not a silence that relies on intimidation or on enforcement; it is a silence that is culturally shared and ingrained in social codes that, I suggest, are being reproduced in the daily performance of the *almoço*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey into the field of anthropology would have been quite brief, limited and not so exciting without the precious support of particular agencies and individuals. Funding for this Master's thesis was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Graduate Scholarship and a Concordia University J. W. McConnell Memorial Graduate Fellowship. This financial assistance allowed me to engage in an extensive fieldwork endeavor in Trairi, Brazil for a period of six months, a project which would not have been achievable without such funding. I wish to thank both agencies for granting young researchers, like myself, with extraordinary opportunities.

I would like to express profound gratitude to the members of my thesis committee for their careful reading of my work, their critical comments and suggestions and their support throughout my entire course of study at Concordia University. I especially thank Professors Sally Cole, Sima Aprahamian and Homa Hoodfar who, at one time or another, deeply influenced my way of thinking and assisted, directly and indirectly, in my difficult choice to pursue an academic orientation rather than one of amateur sports. I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Christine Jourdan, for her invaluable support, her attentive ear, her constant encouragement, her trust throughout the various stages of my studies, her unique faith in my over-zealous fieldwork project and her relaxed yet demanding approach which always motivated me to produce my best work. Special gratitude to Katia Wolfson for her precise reading and accurate recommendations, for her positivism and sincere encouragements during the final dash! And a sincere thank you goes to Walter Amaral, my Portuguese language professor in

Montreal, for his patience in teaching me the language and for his brilliant insight when he put me in contact with Padre Neto in Trairi.

I wish to extend my thanks to my family and friends: to my parents Francine and Richard, who have always respected my life choices and helped make my dreams become reality; who have supported me in good and in bad times and motivated me to follow my passions despite the numerous challenges; and who still inspire me everyday. To my sister Marie-Élise, for her incessant encouragement and for always being there when I needed her. To my dear friend Isa, for our numerous conversations, for her constant reminders to take a break and join her for a night out and for the many inspirational messages left in my inbox. To Gabou, for always being available for a quick poutine at *Milan*, reassuring me whenever needed, of my academic abilities. You have all helped re-boost my confidence many a times.

And finally, my deepest recognizance goes to my friends, *minhas irmãs de corações* and acquaintances in Trairi: to Padre Neto and Plácida for hosting me and for their camaraderie; to Dorra who taught me so many rudimentary and necessary life skills and for her soothing friendship; to the women and men depicted in these pages and to those I could not include, for accepting to participate in my project, for being exceptionally patient and always so generous; to my dearest Aurilene and Andréia, whose support and character helped to make my experience in the field a successful one; and finally to Miguel, for having always believed in my work and for his continued support. I could not have done it without any of you!

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>CHAPTER 1: Exploring Hunger through Eating</u></b>	1
1.1. Setting the Stage	3
1.2. The Objective	5
1.3. Organizing the Thesis	6
<b><u>CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Framework</u></b>	9
2.1. The Anthropology of Food	11
2.1.1. Food as Communication	12
2.1.2. The Structuralist and Materialist Perspectives of the Meal	15
2.1.3. An Interactionist Example	18
2.2. The Anthropological Literature of Hunger	20
2.2.1. Different Approaches to Hunger: A Source of Inspiration	21
2.3. Development: An Approach to Analyzing Hunger?	27
2.3.1. Entitlement	32
2.3.2. Food Security	36
2.4. Poverty and Hunger	40
2.4.1. Structural Violence	44
2.4.2. Experiences and Examples of Structural Violence	46
2.4.3. The Relevance of Structural Violence	49
2.5. My Definition of Hunger	50
<b><u>CHAPTER 3: Contextualizing the Field</u></b>	55
3.1. The <i>Nordeste</i>	55
3.2. The State of Ceará: Progressive Changes	60
3.3 <i>Projeto Fome Zero</i> : General Intentions	64
3.4 Trairi: Introducing and Pin-Pointing Local Realities	66
3.5 The <i>Bairros</i>	70
3.6. Day-to-Day Life in Trairi: The Census	74
<b><u>CHAPTER 4: Reflections on Fieldwork</u></b>	82
4.1. Ethnographic Concerns	83
4.2. Fieldwork Methodology	87
4.3. Negotiating my Place in Trairi	92

<b><u>CHAPTER 5: People and their Everyday Experiences</u></b>	96
5.1. Opportunity and Coincidence: Meeting an Informant	96
5.2. Victoria: When Six Months Are Not Enough To Tell It All	99
5.3. Antonia: “Bearing Witness”	109
5.4. Trairiense Talk: Different Voices	122
5.4.1. Julia’s Story	123
5.4.2. Maria: Dealing with Changing Status	125
5.4.3. Rafael: About Poverty and Dreams	127
5.4.4. João: Being in a Household with Four Women	128
5.4.5. Isabella: The Light at the End of the Tunnel	131
<b><u>CHAPTER 6: O Almoço Está Pronto?: The Almoço Meal</u></b>	133
6.1. When Food Diaries Tell it All	134
6.2. Trairi: My Informants’ Diet and the Brazilian Food Pyramid	142
6.3. Trairiense Foodways: A Play in Two Acts, Several Scenes and One Actor	146
6.3.1 Food Preparation	147
6.3.2 Food Distribution	150
6.4. The Decision Making Process: No Trivia	155
6.5. When Lunch is Finished	160
<b><u>CHAPTER 7: “There is no hunger in Trairi”: The Contradictory Discourses of Hunger</u></b>	162
7.1. Hearing and Knowing: Statements versus Conventions	164
7.1.1. On Hearing	164
7.1.2. On Knowing	168
7.2. Clarifying <i>Fome</i> : The Questionnaire	173
7.3. <i>Fome</i> and Hunger: Two Sisters, One Paradox	176
<b><u>CHAPTER 8: Reviewing the Scene</u></b>	181
8.1. Shortcomings	181
8.2. General Conclusions	182
8.3. Reproducing the Silencing of Hunger	187
<b><u>Bibliography</u></b>	190
<b><u>Annexes</u></b>	
Annex 1: Glossary	203
Annex 2: <i>Recenseamento</i>	207
Annex 3: <i>Questionario : Fome, (Des)nutrição e Altruismo</i>	210

## LIST OF FIGURES

### **Maps**

Map 1: The Five Regions of Brazil	56
Map 2: Brazil, the <i>Nordeste</i> and the State of Ceará	61

### **Representations**

Representation 1: Trairi's Location within Ceará	67
Representation 2: The <i>Bairros</i> of my Fieldwork	71

### **Tables**

Table 1: Household Make-Up	79
Table 2: Monthly Revenue	79
Table 3: Ownership of House and Goods	80
Table 4: Reproduction of Food Diary Data	135

### **Photographs**

Photograph 1: Antonia's House	113
Photograph 2: Antonia's Outdoor Sink and Personal Hygiene Space	114
Photograph 3: Josefina's Traditional Stove	115
Photograph 4: Antonia's Daughter and her Renda Bundle	117
Photograph 5: Production of <i>Farinha de Mandioca</i>	119
Photograph 6: <i>Baião de Doce</i>	137
Photograph 7: Typical <i>Almoço</i>	139

### **Diagram**

Diagram 1: The Brazilian Food Pyramid	144
---------------------------------------	-----



## Chapter 1: Exploring Hunger through Eating

*Eating alone is a disappointment. But not eating matters more,  
is hollow and green, has thorns like a chain of fish hooks,  
trailing from the heart, clawing at your insides.  
Hunger feels like pincers, like the bite of crabs;  
it burns, burns, and has no fur.*

*Let us spread great tablecloths, put salt in lakes of the world,  
set up planetary bakeries, tables with strawberries in snow,  
and a plate like the moon itself from which we can all eat.  
For now I ask no more than the justice of eating.  
(Pablo Neruda cited in Eisner 2004: 137)*

It is that time, yet again! My insides begin to growl and a slight pain in the pit of my stomach announces the need for nourishment. My inner fight to silence the physiological demands of daily sustenance settles within the depths of my belly despite the constant muscular contractions that revive the urge to eat. I am slightly restless. I cannot ignore the overwhelming sensation of hunger that hits me so harshly. Well aware that my experience is temporary, I am devastated as I realize what a daily reality is for the urban poor in the community of Trairi, Brazil.

“*O almoço está pronto... Venham comer!* – Lunch is ready, come eat!” Without any hesitation, all those present in the presbytery (*casa paroquial*) rush to the kitchen counter where the meal is about to be served. The display of food is a relief and, to a certain extent, a sight for sore eyes. Respecting a pre-set and implicit serving order, we fill our plates, sometimes generously, as we know all too well that this meal is, unfortunately, the only one of the day. This freedom to serve oneself is not a norm in Trairi, explains a young Trairiense teenager during my first weeks in the community. In fact, she hints that this is only typical to the presbytery as the people in attendance for the

*almoço*, the lunch time meal that serves as the basis of analysis in this thesis, often change: “you will see many different faces in this house”, she adds. Her insight did hit the mark as I indeed shared, at the presbytery, the *almoço* with many different community members of Trairi.

As I put the food onto my plate, I consider the menu of the day and I am confronted with the obvious: the menu has not changed. My food choices today are exactly the same as yesterday and most likely will be precisely the same tomorrow: a minute quantity of some type of meat, rice (*arroz*), beans (*feijão*) and *farofa* (manioc flour cooked with olive oil). These food items are, as it will be demonstrated, the main components of the *almoço*. There are no vegetables, no fruits, no milk products and no bread: the variety of food that I have come to expect is nonexistent. Yet, despite the recurring similarity of menus and meals, the available food items rapidly become common to me and soothe my hunger at least for a brief moment when my stomach is full. No longer am I hungry... for now!

My temporary sensation of hunger experienced while in Trairi is by no means the topic that will surface in the pages of this thesis. Neither will this preoccupation with hunger concern itself only with the mundane necessity to consume foods as a physiological reflex. For the people in Trairi who worked with me, the necessity to *mata fome* – to kill or rather subdue hunger, is all too real and all too present. Why is this so and what meanings does this notion of *mata fome*, conceal? Such queries led me to explore the food habits of the urban poor of Trairi. The following are some of the questions which arose during my fieldwork: what role does food hold?; how is the *almoço* constructed?; what are the meanings created by the everyday performance of

*almoço*?; does this meal hold significance for an understanding of hunger? The answers emerged from the Trairiense milieu which is one that yields endemic hunger, consequently bringing at the forefront the embedded notions of malnutrition and undernutrition.

### **1.1. Setting the Stage**

Before proceeding, I find it necessary to outline, however briefly, my interpretation of the word hunger. I am not making reference here to a hunger that is associated with images of emaciated, starving bodies bearing the dramatic and physical consequences of famine. Instead, my understanding, as well as my use of this word relate directly to the hidden and chronic characteristics associated with and corroborating terms such as malnutrition and undernutrition. Hence, the hunger I will be examining is the endemic hunger that finds its roots in questions extending farther than the correlation which exists between the physical need to consume food and the ability to nourish oneself. The hunger of the urban poor of Trairi is representative of a lack of opportunity, structure and market and it expresses a variety of meanings that can be found in everyday life.

It is these meanings that I find interesting as they speak for a reality that is silenced by an economic system – “a model that emphasizes free markets and [keeps] governments focused on assisting capital and keeping the working class in line; (...) a model that has burdened Brazil with some of the most disgraceful inequality and human suffering in modern history” (Shellenberger and Danaher 1995: 1). Furthermore, this model is responsible for increasing the divide between the very rich and the very poor populations of Brazil. Cast aside by more ‘pressing matters’ such as economic prosperity

or political improbity, the question of endemic hunger, a result of this system, must be scrutinized and brought out of the shadows as I believe that the right to food, which includes the accessibility of sufficient amounts of food as well as a satisfactory variety of food ensuring good health, is a basic human right. Such hunger is, as Scheper-Hughes suggests, “a potent critique of the nation-state in which it exists” (1992: 174).

In Northeastern Brazil, people continue to be denied the right to food. According to Marcus Melo, “poverty and inequality remain Brazil’s most important challenges” (2002: 365). In addition, Silva et al. contend that endemic hunger is “the recognizable sign and the undeniable testimony of political and economic inequality” (2001).

Poverty, inequality and endemic hunger are thus all interconnected in some shape or form and despite this assertion or because of it, an investigation into the individual and the local understanding of endemic hunger in Trairi is necessary. Food and *almoço* in particular, present an avenue from which to consider the endemic hunger that persists in a context of urban poverty, as well they are viewed as essential components in the lives of the Trairiense involved in this thesis, serving as markers of the obvious inevitability of the human need to consume food in order to survive. Hence, to study endemic hunger, I have chosen to scrutinize the lunch time meal, *almoço*.

When framed within the anthropological study of food, the focus on hunger shifts away from a cause and effect format commonly found in economic and developmental studies and situates itself rather in the meanings associated with the construction of the *almoço*. This approach emphasises the individual experience, which is situated within the context of households. Furthermore, my impression rests on the assertion that a collective of individual experiences, although only a partial representation, will reveal a

local understanding of hunger that goes beyond the “why” surrounding the persistence of endemic hunger. The objective is to get a sense of the socio-cultural mechanisms and habits that are constantly being negotiated within the construction of the *almoço* in Trairi, as well as to establish what food and eating reveal about the daily struggles encountered when one is poor and hungry. The discourses of hunger that are manifested within this context will also be explored. More importantly though, the question that lies at the heart of my query is whether the concept of hunger bears a similar understanding for the urban poor of Trairi as it does for Western ideologues. Is endemic hunger simply an assertion of yet another construction of a discourse that seeks to label the “*Other*” as unfortunate while perpetuating First World superiority?

## **1.2. The Objective**

This thesis attempts to contribute to the documentation of the daily predicament associated with living in a state of endemic hunger. It focuses mainly on the everyday struggles of women in the town of Trairi, in the state of Ceará in Brazil’s Northeast (*Nordeste*). In particular, it looks at how the Trairiense women present in this thesis and their household members experience a specific type of hunger, which can be categorized as malnutrition and/or undernutrition. The rich history of this region, its involvement in progressive economic changes and its overall complexity provide an interesting site for this investigation and render it timely and legitimate. Moreover, the current governmental initiative by the name of *Projeto Fome Zero* generates an exciting context for hunger research as genuine efforts to improve the situation seem to be taking place.

My research question rests within the interconnectedness of food and eating in the comprehension of endemic hunger as I seek to understand *how the socio-cultural*

*construction of almoço reflects local discourses of hunger for the urban poor of Trairi.*

My inquiry problematizes a conception of hunger that is crystallized in the habitual and routine daily performance of the lunch time meal and stresses the different meanings found in this structured event. The aspiration for this thesis is to expose one possible interpretation of the local understanding of endemic hunger in Trairi. Yet the long term goal generated by this experience implies the pursuit of further research into the realm of exchange processes between local, national and international assistance schemes. In fact, this thesis is but the first step of a greater project that will consider altruistic ideals as a bridging construct between the micro realities of hunger in urban poor areas of Brazil's Northeast and the macro attempts to advance the resolve of this humanitarian predicament.

### **1.3. Organizing the Thesis**

This thesis comprises of six chapters that are grouped together into two sections. The first part (chapters two to four) grounds the thesis in a theoretical perspective and contextualizes the research. It begins with a literature review that presents and discusses the writings in the anthropology of food. It also considers hunger as a site of inquiry, visits the concept of structural violence and suggests a practical definition of the word hunger. The following chapter introduces the geography and demography of the Northeast of Brazil and the town of Trairi. The last chapter of this section shares a reflection of my fieldwork experience that includes my situatedness, my ethical concerns and the presentation of the methodology used for this thesis.

The second section forms the ethnographic body of the thesis. Chapter five introduces the protagonists of the research through their everyday experiences and allows

for the discovery of both their *jeito* (way of being, nature) and their challenging reality. The socio-cultural construction of *almoço* is introduced in chapter six. Several aspects of the *almoço* are discussed, these include: a reporting of its construction or composition, the meanings within the structured social performance of the event, a presentation of the Brazilian Food Pyramid and its recommendations in comparison to what is found on the Trairiense's tables, and an inquiry of the role of women in the enterprise of having to make food decisions day-in and day-out. Chapter seven, the last chapter of this section, focuses on the contradictory discourses of hunger in Trairi. It highlights both the discourses at play in Trairi – the local concept of *fome* and the established Western understanding of hunger. It is followed by an attempt to demystify the existing contradictions and it concludes with a discussion of the “paradox of hunger” in Trairi.

The thesis comes together in the final chapter (chapter eight) which highlights the different conclusions that emerge from the ethnography. These deductions seek to join the theoretical constructs with the practical data and as a result, reveal the web of knowledge gathered during my fieldwork experience. As theory and practice come together, the thesis comes to an end.

Hunger, as a site of inquiry, is too often misconstrued. This thesis will reveal that hunger means different things for different people in different contexts. It seeks to be a contribution to a growing repertoire of literature on hunger, such repertoire being in need of enrichment and creativity as the establishment of new frontiers is necessary for the overall struggle against hunger. Moreover, as specific consideration is given to the socio-cultural understanding of the meal, this thesis also pursues to expand on the growing and

rich field of the anthropology of food, a field that I would submit, endorses, thrives and encourages varied enterprises and ingenuity.



## Chapter 2: Conceptual Frameworks

*Perhaps hunger as hunger - a frightening human affliction - is simply "not good to think" for anthropologists who, if they think of hunger and famine at all, prefer to think of them as symbols and metaphors or as positive contributions to long-term adaptation.*  
(Scheper-Hughes 1992: 132)

*Theory both shapes and is informed by application.*  
(Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 184)

Hunger has not received much attention in anthropological literature. Perhaps, as Scheper-Hughes suggests, "the 'anxious taboo' against the study of hunger" (1992: 132) simply persists. My impression, however, is that the 'taboo' etiquette works as an excuse for the limited hunger research endeavors. The very complex nature of the hunger phenomenon, and its ramifications within the political, economic, health, social and cultural spheres, renders the task, plausibly, too enormous for researchers. Maybe hunger is an uninvited topic because, in scrutinizing it, we uncover traits of human beings that we prefer to either keep hidden or ignore all together. The reticence may also find its roots in the fact that hunger, especially endemic hunger, is a predicament that is a creation of human beings (De Castro 1966). In any case, I agree with Scheper-Hughes in thinking that hunger is a very daunting hardship to study. Many a times, when confronting the issue, I have felt completely overwhelmed and helpless. Yet, it is these very emotions that strengthened my convictions to venture onto this research path.

Moreno-Black (2002) confirms that anthropologists who do research about hunger, malnutrition or food-insecurity have currently placed much emphasis on questions that are mainly pertinent to its definition, questions such as "How do we define hunger?"; "Who should define hunger?"; "Is there a biological or cultural definition of hunger?"; and "How

are responses to hunger framed in terms of assistance?” (see e.g. Dufour et al 1997; Guerrón-Montero and Moreno-Balck 2001; Moreno-Balck and Somnasang 2000; Van Esterik 1999). My concern with the endemic hunger predicament goes beyond the need to establish its definition. Using a structural approach, I choose to explore the local construction of the *almoço* and examine the resulting discourses that fuel the understanding of hunger of the urban poor in Trairi. Though a practical definition of the word hunger must be established to facilitate the understanding of the terminology used in this thesis, the focus of my writing is on the everyday experiences of a small group of poor Trairiense. Indeed, the concept of the everyday, as an analytical tool, has been a popular practice in recent ethnographies of the everyday Brazilian life (see e.g. Goldstein 2003; Rebhun 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992). De Certeau (1984) views “everyday life as the unmarked background condition against which specific events are framed and therefore as something that cannot be known in itself” (cited in Lowell Lewis 2000: 539). I find this conception of everyday life interesting and relevant for my thesis because it offers a foundation, a basis from which a comprehension of hunger may emerge; I propose that hunger is both situated and emphasized in everyday life experiences.

To tackle the vast human conundrum of endemic hunger, I find that I must resort to a multifaceted approach that links many different pools of literature from within sub-areas of anthropology. It is at the interface of such various theoretical positions that I situate my socio-cultural argumentation of the meal and my presentation of the local understanding of hunger in Trairi. Accordingly, this chapter will review a variety of literature.

Starting with the standard literature of food that presents different theoretical considerations – the symbolic, the structuralist, the materialist and the interactionist, I

identify the viewpoint I privileged. I then consider the derivative literature pertaining to hunger as well as three anthropological case studies to demonstrate the possibility and the usefulness of situating my thesis amidst the anthropology of food literature. Venturing thereafter with the developmentalist perspective and its relative notions of dependency and modernization, I discuss the paradigm as one that explains or situates a ‘cause and effect’ attitude towards hunger and contend that it is incomplete and that it must be complemented with the prior position. I subsequently address the notion of structural violence, an all encompassing and underlining theme that emerges from the various experiences and arguments found in the thesis. I conclude the chapter with the establishment of my definition of the word hunger.

### **2.1. The Anthropology of Food**

The vast amount of literature on the anthropology of food (see e.g. Atkins and Bowler 2001; Caplan 1997; Mintz and Du Bois 2002) highlights the fact that food is important. The act of eating is an action that must be approached here as one that goes beyond the basic need of providing sustenance for bodily growth and maintenance. It is an act that bears meanings, such meanings being often the product of people’s reasoning about what to eat, when to eat and even whether to eat at all (Goody 2002: 34). Current studies and discussions scrutinize food in terms of food choices, food discourses, food habits, food preferences, food rules and food attitudes, beliefs and values (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997; Weismantel 1988; Wilk 1999). These constructs reflect issues of availability, cost, culture, health, social status and taste. Hence food and its relative meanings, as a site of investigation, introduce an interesting framework from which to consider hunger because food is intrinsically associated to the choices, habits, rules, beliefs and attitudes that are

perpetuated in social environments. Accordingly, a background of deprivation, as found amongst the urban poor in Trairi may, in fact, heighten the meanings attributed to food and food actions as food becomes a pivotal and a continual concern. Considering then as a basic premise for the meaning of food its association with certain everyday life contexts and events in their relation to cultural and social norms, I consider the four most common approaches to food which will reveal, thereafter, my selected paradigmatic preference for this thesis.

### **2.1.1. Food as Communication**

Food is substance, which can also be a symbol or a sign. In the literature on semiotics, foods appear repeatedly as examples of the kind of objects in social life that form systems of signs. In *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes (1965 [1967]) turns to the system of food to explore the signifying systems composed of collections of objects. He argues that “the food system [is] especially amenable to semiotic analysis, as it has some of the most important properties of language: a unity in the material out of which the signifiers are constructed (47), the double axes of syntagm and paradigm (63) and a distinctly separable langue and parole (27-28)” (Barthes 1965 [1967] cited in Weismantel 1988: 10). To put it simply, Barthes uses a linguistic analogy to discover a code or a ‘grammar’ that will enable the explanation of the meanings found among the different signs that are linked to food. “Where there is meaning there must be a system” says Barthes (cited in Counihan and Van Esterik 1997: 21). Thus food, as a component of a structure formed by substances, techniques of preparation and habits, becomes part of a system that carries signification; consequently, we may consider communication by way of food. Accordingly, the particular characteristics of food (as mentioned above) give it

semantic wealth (Barthes 1997; Counihan 1999; Douglas 1969; Levi-Strauss 1979).

And, in some cases, the symbolic power of food enables prohibitions and taboos which signify social boundaries – religious integrity (Douglas 1969), status (Counihan and Kaplan 1998) and of course, gender differences (Counihan 1999; Weismantel 1988). So, for example, feeding can be a symbol for fosterage, adoption and family while greediness can epitomize the untamed animality struggling against social control that authority figures – generally parents, enforce by teaching table manners (Freud 1946 cited in Counihan 1999: 48). And in some instances, the refusal of food may connote a certain rejection of social mores (Harris 1985; Douglas 1969).

The cooking process, as a sequence of operations, can be viewed, as suggested by Mary Weismantel, as a constant movement between conceptual framework and productive process because such movement portrays, in similar ways, the relation between text and context (in language) and the relation between production and consumption (in cooking): “Production is consumption; consumption is production; (...) [they] appear as mutually connected (...) yet remaining outside of each other. As with the concepts of signifier and signified in linguistics, neither process precedes the other, yet each presupposes the other at any particular moment: People grow foods they want to eat (or want to buy), but also eat the foods they can grow or buy” (Weismantel, 1988: 24). Hence, the cooking process has a structure, which is normally homologous to other cultural processes, that comes to express the practices and discourses that are meaningful for the social environment and, it is from this meaning that a typical understanding of hunger for the urban poor of Trairi emerges. As a result, food as a tool of communication

seems fitting in this thesis as it is this language – the language of food, which will come to speak for the daily *almoço* experiences that I witnessed in Trairi.

Mary Douglas views food as a symbolic system of communication but not as a sole one. She acknowledges the extent to which everyday life is highly ordered and adds that this order permeates all social activities, including food and eating. Accordingly, she notes that “food is (...) the medium through which a system of relationships within the family is expressed. Food is both a social matter and part of the provision for care of the body (...) instead of isolating the food system, it is instructive to consider it frankly as one of a number of family body systems” (Douglas 1982 [1973]: 86). In other words, food is an expressive, communicative system which reflects relationships within social groups such as families or households, but it is also a means for people to express attitudes towards their bodies in terms of what is or is not regarded as acceptable versus unacceptable and dangerous versus not dangerous (see e.g. Douglas 1969).

When food is considered a tool of communication, it includes the idea of the construction of a meal as a system of meaning. One does obtain a better sense of the significance of food in a particular context, such as that of Trairi, through the observing and recording of daily food activities. Food can then be expressed as a communicative system that reflects the relationships within social groups such as households. And this particular characteristic of food will definitely be of assistance for both the understanding of the meal construction in Trairi and the customary hunger discourses which sustain the endemic nature of the predicament.

### **2.1.2. The Structuralist and Materialist Perspectives of the Meal**

As a useful everyday event which serves the purpose of nourishment, the meal is worthy of particular inquiry. Wood's (1995) synthesis of the principal literature of the meal suggests that the meal is a legitimate site of study. The meal, as a central theme of this thesis, opens the door for a proposition that considers *almoço* as a useful tool for the investigation and comprehension of endemic hunger. In essence two of the more prominent modern perspectives are of great value for the comprehension of the meal: the structural one with key writers such as Levi-Strauss (1997) and Douglas (1997) and the materialist one having Harris (1985) and Goody (1982) as its main supporters.

In the most general sense, the main tenet of structuralism wants for societies, social institutions and social actions to be “analyzed in a manner analogous to language as structures of often observable meaning that can nevertheless be detected in the relationships that exist between elements in the language” (Wood, 1995: 4). Structuralists would see the cultural significance of natural and social occurrences as deriving from the relationships amongst them, relationships which are normally established by convention as a result of social and cultural action. Accordingly, these occurrences carry meaning for social actors. As an example, this construct supports the idea argued by Barthes (1973) in his *Mythologies* whereby the different meanings derived from the consumption of wine convey two different connotations: wine signifies refreshment for the French and dehydration and drowsiness for the English (cited in Wood 1995: 5). Therefore, different foods and their distinctive meanings are not intrinsic but are defined by networks of relations which describe the system of norms that make them possible.

Levi-Strauss, a principal figure in the conceptualization of food and eating, is best known for his culinary triangle concept (see e.g. Levi-Strauss 1997) which he uses to explain the dualism between nature and culture. Basing his argumentation on the principle that most societies cook, he views the transformation of food from raw objects (nature) into consumable food stuff (culture) as the foundation of what he considers the main universal of the human species (Levi-Strauss 1997; Weismantel 1988; Wood 1995). Although this theory is an interesting one and has sparked reactions by writers such as Mennell (1985) for instance, it is not its contribution to the study of food as a classificatory device that retains my attention but rather his idea that “food is good to think with” (cited in Counihan 1999: 20). In formulating his tri-polar model, Levi-Strauss was successful in representing a type of ‘grammar’ or structure for food which echoes the earlier idea that food is a communicative agent of meaning. With that in mind, I now direct my attention to the work of Mary Douglas.

Given her contribution to the study of food and eating, the work of Mary Douglas, one of the main thinkers of the late twentieth century, has been the subject of extensive review (see e.g. Passariello 1990). Her work on food is, at the theoretical level, motivated by a refutation of the universalist prescription of the structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss (Douglas 1997). Instead, she argues for a micro-sociological study of food-culture relationship as a basis for building a more profound understanding of the meanings related to food: “The meanings of food”, Douglas writes, “need to be studied in small-scale exemplars; attempts to generalize by using linguistic theoretical assumptions tend to produce explanations of tastes and preferences that seem too trivial or too bizarre” (Douglas 1984: 22).



Douglas highlights a variety of ways from which to consider the meal as a site of investigation. In her article *Deciphering a Meal*, she (Douglas 1997) argues that there are two contrasting food categories, meals and drinks. Meals are structured and named events, for example lunch, dinner and so on, while drinks are not. Meals take place against a background of rituals and assumptions that include everything from the use of utensils, a table, a seating order and even cultural restrictions on behavior and movement (ibid.). A meal also incorporates a series of contrasts: hot and cold, bland and spicy, liquid and semi-liquid (ibid.).

Moreover, Douglas also suggests that meals and drinks reflect a quality within social relationships. Drinks are usually or generally available to strangers and acquaintances. They are more democratic and have wider social applications. Meals, in contrast, are reserved for family, close friends and honoured guests (ibid.). Douglas maintains that there is a key relationship between meals, social distance and intimacy: “Those we know at meals,” she writes, “we also know at drinks” (Douglas 1997: 41). Meals then express close friendships and family solidarity while drinks are much less intimate. In any event, Douglas’ conclusions stipulate that if such a boundary matters and exists for individuals, then the distinctions between meals and drinks have meaning. Therefore, meals and the foods that make them up carry meaning; they are encoded and, as such, reveal social boundaries which render them relevant for a project focusing on food, eating and hunger.

In contrast, the materialist approach is concerned with the historical evolution of food practices and preferences. The emphasis shifts from structured patterns to one that attempts to show “how [the] understanding of contemporary food habits is improved

through the examination of historical trends and data” (Wood 1995: 6). The key theorist of this approach is Marvin Harris. Harris’ stance on food and eating is rooted in two assumptions, according to which, biological, psychological, environmental, technological, political and economic factors all influence the foods that are eaten in a given context; and all humans must satisfy basic nutritional needs while certain limits, related to taste and toxic tolerance, must be observed (Harris 1987: 58). For his part, Goody, a processualist, supports the idea that the role of history in understanding how food behavior evolves and develops is imperative; this approach to food emphasizes the link between the transformation of patterns of food production, consumption and social transformation. But I choose not to delve into these contributions any further as the historical component necessary to the materialist approach was not considered during my data collection in the field and therefore cannot be considered in this thesis.

The materialist perspective just discussed offers an alternative for the often criticized structuralist stance which has been viewed as largely incomplete and idealist because it does not address the biological imperatives, the underlying food habits of individuals and the array of factors that influence food supply (see e.g. Wood 1995: 6). Nevertheless, I find that I align myself in this research with the structuralist approach as it is a useful one to point out how relations within the household are reproduced and challenged through the ideology and organization of meals. This approach, as a result, generates the needed framework from which to assess the current discourse of hunger in Trairi.

### **2.1.3. An Interactionist Example**

I turn to the work of Mary Weismantel (1988) to present one ethnographic example that places emphasis on social relationships. This approach is particularly

interesting as it offers a theoretical milieu that allows for a consideration of the interactions of individuals taking place within foodways. In *Food, Gender, and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*, the author uses food and cooking - realms of ordinary life, to explore the underlying structures of Zumbagua culture, its semi-proletarianized economy, societal racism (as identified by Weismantel) and an indigenous Andeans' culture. Weismantel considers the organization of production and consumption of foods with particular emphasis on gender roles. The interaction of women in the organization of kitchen work, the relations between husband and wife as enacted in the acquisition, production and consumption of foods and the power relations within the households as demonstrated in the formal organization of the meal, are the focus of this case study.

The separation between the symbolic and the material, the domestic and the political, the traditional and the modern are transcended in this work which allows the description to reveal much depth in the cultural life of the protagonists. Weismantel contends that "cooking ensures the material production and reproduction of the social group, (...) this material process [being] culturally structured: to cook is to speak and to mean as well as to make and to do" (1988: 7). Accordingly, decisions about what to eat often reveal ideological conflicts about the politico-economic structure and the place of the characters within it. Found in the vocabulary and as part of their experience are questions such as "what foods are traditional?" and "what cooking a meal signifies for individual and family relations?" (Weismantel 1988). Foodways then speak volumes for one's social structure model as well as the place one claims within it. As a result, food symbolism is considered throughout the work as structure, discourse and practice. Weismantel renders obvious the link between the structure and the acts of food

symbolism, making it possible to contend that the act of cooking “represents the relations between the social collective and the individual” (Weismantel 1988: 23). Thus, the “constant movement between the conceptual framework and productive process” (ibid.: 24) allows for a vigorous depiction of culture.

Of particular relevance in this example is the way Weismantel merges the earlier symbolic and structuralist stances to explain the interaction between household members. Accordingly, “production creates the material as outward object of consumption [and] consumption creates the want as the inward object, the purpose of production” (Marx 1859, cited in Weismantel 1988: 24). Despite its brevity, her exploration of how meanings and structures dictate interpersonal relations contributes to my understanding of food and eating.

Food, as a system of communication - a language, is a significant concept in this thesis as it provides a tool to scrutinize the silencing of hunger taking place in Trairi. The meanings which emanate from the structured system of the meal also provide a broad and convincing context from which to understand the social and cultural dimensions of foodways. In any event, despite being often castigated for its concern with the “here and now” (Wood 1995: 6), structuralism does suggest a favorable framework from which to ground this thesis as it is specifically the ‘here and now’ of my fieldwork experience that takes center stage.

## **2.2. The Anthropological Literature of Hunger**

Hunger continues to be approached with reticence in anthropological literature (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Can we even speak of a theory of hunger in the same way that we address Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’, or Weber’s conception of the state or even D’Andrade’s

moral models? Unfortunately, De Castro's statement still holds true: "Hunger [is] a well-kept secret about modern human existence so that of all the calamities that have repeatedly devastated the world (...) it is hunger which is the least studied and discussed, [the] least understood in its causes and effects (1952: 5 cited in Scheper-Hughes 1992: 130).

Hunger must not only be considered from the perspective of its causes and effects, as De Castro recommends; because hunger is a chronic condition and a process that persists day-in and day-out, it must be explored and understood from its everyday incidence. The experience of hunger is one of those issues that permeate the background of life of too many individuals and as I found in Trairi, their collective experiences necessitate further attention.

### **2.2.1. Different Approaches to Hunger: A Source of Inspiration**

My review commences with three anthropological works that deserve a brief mention. They are a source of inspiration and they constitute indicators of the much needed examination of hunger. I will consider Turnbull's exposure of the Ik of Uganda as well as Scheper-Hughes' touching account of "*Delirio de fome*" (1992). I begin with a work by Mariam Kahn (1986) entitled: "*Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society*", which explains why the Wamirans, a people of the Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea, always refer to their land as being plagued by famine and perpetual hunger, despite their fertile soils and generous crops. Paralleling and contrasting human fertility with reference to the female gender and the growing of taro that is attributed to the magical powers of men, Kahn presents famine as a metaphor for the Wamirans' strict regulation of food consumption and of their

control over desires. In other words, she opposes the environmental context of “imposed” famine to “restrain conflict of desires” (Kahn 1986: 151). This is interesting because what Kahn is suggesting here is an interpretation of hunger that is not necessarily grounded in a physiological process but in a bio-social one. Indeed, Kahn explains the different ways Wamirans have molded their food related behavior to display hunger. For example, she speaks of the various mechanisms that structure food sharing habits: “to say that one has ‘no food’ may mean that one has some but does not have enough, or does not want to give any to others. (...) When we say there is no food we mean there is just a little for ourselves but not enough to share with others” (Kahn 1986: 35). Hence the Wamirans are hungry and at times greedy, despite the title of Kahn’s work. It seems that the psychological adaptation of abstinence and control (Kahn 1986: 58) explains a state of famine that is deeply rooted in an obsession with food. This obsession in turn takes hold of the Wamirans and becomes continually reproduced in the social structure and cultural custom of this group.

Food and related behaviors of the Wamirans are “richly resonant systems of symbolic communication about biological needs and social relationships” (Kahn 1986: 8). As we shall see next, this view of “food and hunger as cultural constructs” (Kahn 1986: 1) contrasts that of Turnbull and Scheper-Hughes’ contributions. Yet, in many ways, I find Kahn’s work relevant to my research endeavor in Trairi as the epistemological understanding of hunger in either setting, her’s or my own, is contextual and interpreted in such a way that hunger speaks to other realities for the people who endure it. In addition, her attempt at exposing an interpretation of the everyday lived experience of hunger is interesting in that her cultural stance does appear to label famine

or hunger as an account that may not be considered as such by specialists who would judge a daily consumption of 3,435 calories for men and 2,692 calories for women far from one pertaining to famine (Kahn 1986: 173, Appendix F). What this implies is that a conception of hunger does not rest only on the quantity and/or quality of the foods people consume. And this is highly pertinent for this thesis because foods are also being consumed on a daily basis in Trairi but never in sufficient or well-balanced amounts.

The quest of interpreting the lived experience of hunger continues with a text by Colin Turnbull: *The Mountain People* (1972). What emerges from this work is the exposition of the impact of hunger and its consequential starvation of the Ik people – a small population of hunters and foragers. The author's main objective is to show how this social phenomenon has affected the social structures of the Ik. Turnbull's writings show in details how the notion of survival materializes into a very personal affair. As food becomes scarce and hunger sets in, the family structure completely breaks down. The Ik, lacking any moral or ethical code whatsoever, find their everyday experiences evolving toward a state of extreme competition where 'every Ik against every other Ik' becomes the status quo. All kin, parents and children, brothers and sisters are competitors and the love that once solidified familial bonds vanishes. Social constructs such as cooperation, sharing and reciprocity also disappear. When hunger and famine were at their worse, Turnbull witnessed the breakdown of the aforementioned social structures and the inhumanity in the day-to-day life of the Ik: hunger broke down any principles that had shaped their culture.

I find this recounting slightly exaggerated as well as perhaps somewhat inaccurate as it is difficult to believe that in times of great hardship, the Ik would turn against one

another to such an extent; our human history testifies to several examples revealing the resilience of human beings in times of great suffering – the Jewish strife for survival in the Nazi concentration camps and the rebuilding of Japan after the dropping of nuclear bombs during World War II, just to name a few. My impression of the book is not farfetched as important controversy did in fact emerge from Turnbull's work. Reviewing *The Mountain People*, Beidelman contends the following:

“This book cannot be discussed in any proper sociological terms, for we are provided with only snatches of data. Rather than being a study of the Ik, this is an autobiographical portrait of the author utilizing the Ik as counters for expressing his personal feelings and experiences in the field” (1973: 171).

Heine also echoes Beidelman's opinion in writing that “the Ik are portrayed as a people lacking social integration, but if there is anyone who shows no interest in social integration it is Turnbull himself” (Heine 1985: 15). Whatever the ethical and ethnographical mishaps of the work, I find Turnbull's case study useful in two ways. Firstly, it is a reminder of the ethical dilemmas that one can encounter when researching hunger: any state of scarcity does oblige a conduct and a sensitivity that must reach beyond the normal expectations of field research. Secondly, it is the factor of variability that accompanies different examples of famine or hunger which heightens the fact that Turnbull's example is but one interpretation of famine and hunger. Scheper-Hughes (1992: 134-135) suggests contrasting cases that strengthen this argument – the behavior of the rural Irish during the “great hunger” is but one example. Although Turnbull's work is, in many ways, a warning to conduct vigilant fieldwork, I also view it as a reminder to never over-dramatize a situation that could easily be misinterpreted.



In *Death Without Weeping* (1992), Scheper-Hughes reveals that in Brazil, the most sensitive problem associated with hunger is its medicalization, a process that turns hunger into a medical problem and allows for the masking of any of its evidence. Accordingly, people have come to interpret hunger as a condition that requires medical treatment rather than food. If hunger is normally classified as a social problem, she suggests that in Brazil, it has been redefined as a medical problem: “a hungry body represents a potent critique of the nation-state in which it exists but a sick body implicates no one and conveys no blame, guilt or responsibility” (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 174). As a result, the medicalization of hunger has given rise to its complete denial as a social problem.

This interpretation of hunger seems fitting in the sense that it justifies the existence of hunger. But in labeling hunger as a medical problem, a mechanism is set in place to push it aside completely. Though the medicalization of hunger is presented as a conclusion in Scheper-Hughes’ work, it must be problematized further as the label does not stand in for an end point but rather introduces new possibilities for hunger research. The newly formulated medical problem labeled as hunger does suggest that the focal point of analysis leaves the sphere of the kitchen to situate itself rather in the medical realm which necessarily includes broader social structures and presents, perhaps, a more aggressive approach to understanding the hunger predicament. Therefore, the medicalization of hunger obliges a social critique of the location where such phenomena is taking place. In Trairi, although it is impossible to speak of the medicalization of hunger as presented in *Alto do Cruzeiro*<sup>1</sup>, the denial of hunger as a social problem does

---

<sup>1</sup> *Alto do Cruzeiro* is the name of the community where Scheper-Hughes carried out her fieldwork for her ethnography *Death Without Weeping* (1992).

however stand firm. As a result, the community holds a distinct local discourse of *fome* – perhaps as an alternate form of social critique, a discourse which will be illustrated more closely in chapter seven.

The reviewed case studies are important for this thesis as they guide the way for future research but also because they bring to the fore a very important point which I cannot ignore. Hunger, or the experience of hunger, is highly contextual and thus presents different expositions and/or interpretations from one case to another. Indeed, and as this thesis will posit it, hunger takes place in various forms, at various times and in various places. Accordingly, it carries or produces very different meanings tied to such experiences. As a result, each case must be understood on its own terms before any attempts to alleviate hunger, regardless of the origin of the initiative, take place.

The aforementioned works point to an unfortunate reality in which the causes of hunger are often unknown to its victims and seem, at times, somewhat irrelevant for them. Yet their cognitive reality is defined clearly by the inertness and entrapment that engulf them. As a result, I believe that the stigma of endemic hunger imprints the poor and persists from one generation to the next. Josué De Castro has broken the silence surrounding hunger and denounces it as a curse devised by “men against men” (1966). Such a critique has opened up a space, albeit a limited one, for hunger research in anthropology, as seen in the examples above, but the earlier endeavors also serve as reminders of the initiative that must be set in motion and of the work that still remains to be done.

### **2.3. Development: An Approach to Analyzing Hunger?**

Hunger is rarely ever a phenomenon that occurs in isolation, it often goes hand in hand with poverty and inequality. The national and international policies that create these social dynamics also perpetuate them. This statement stands firm for hunger as it is recurrent and finds its conception and persistence in theories of development.

When speaking of theories of development, we are unavoidably also speaking of theories of underdevelopment. The prior invokes the latter. Since the deconstruction period of the 1990s and the works of Ferguson (1990), Sachs (1992) and Escobar (1995), the concept of development has been silenced within some intellectual circles (Gardner and Lewis 1996). The argument of development proposes “the world as in a state of linear progression and change in which the North is ‘advanced’ and the South locked into static traditionalism which only modern technology and capitalist relations of production can transform” (Gardner and Lewis, 1996: 1). The claim surely bears some truths as the benefits of modernization are largely an illusion for most. Economic growth, technical change and scientific-rationality have failed to materialize in most countries, with the exception of the remarkable rise of Asian economies including Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, which testify to the contrary. In general, the sharp distinction between the rich and the poor countries is ever growing (see e.g. Escobar 1995; Gélinas 1998). In addition, the recent categorization of “maldeveloped countries” (Gélinas 1998: 28) such as Brazil, South Africa and Malaysia to name but a few, does introduce new complexities and inequities that render development considerations even more complex. In any case, the resulting increased injustice produced and the moral dilemmas created by development ideology can sometimes be sufficient to silence, at least temporarily, certain

issues such as social and economic inequality, illness, poverty and hunger. Awkwardly enough in this context of development, the occurrence of hunger becomes more than a social plight; it is a visible marker of the greater structures that withhold access to better living conditions for a large majority of impoverished individuals in countries like Brazil and its Northeastern region.

In *“The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power”*, Sachs demonstrates the ethnocentric and even violent nature of development. He views it as a “construct rather than an objective state, a dream perhaps, but one in which many people emphasizes a starkly political project of continued Northern dominance over the South” (Sachs 1992: 5). Therefore, the framework of development helps to reproduce neo-colonial and/or neo-liberal power relations. The comforting thought for those involved now is established in a belief that development implies a process of empowerment or the redistribution of the world’s riches (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 3). Accordingly, one can assume that the concept of development incorporates enormous and powerful ideas which have guided thought and action across the world since the end of World War II. Along the lines of the instigators, however, the problematic nature of development finds its roots in the deliberate intentions to inflict change which, therefore, affects the lives of people, most of the time negatively, and comes to describe a set of activities, relationships, exchanges and, of course ideas that go against local socio-cultural customs.

Notions of development are closely linked to those of colonialism and capitalism. In the last fifty years, development ideologies have experienced a shift in thinking. Arturo Escobar explains that “[development] has become a discourse [-] a particular mode of thinking and a source of practice designed to instill in ‘underdeveloped’

countries the desire to strive towards industrial and economic growth” (cited in Gardner and Lewis 1996: 6). In other words, the underdeveloped countries should strive to be more like their Western or Northern counterparts who are judged to be “better”, only because they benefit from the arrangement perhaps? Succinctly, it is from the unequal distribution of power found in the conceptions of development that models of underdevelopment take shape (see e.g. Escobar 1995; Sachs 1992). In accordance then, development and underdevelopment are essentially characteristics of the same process, and the former has been able to occur only by increasing the latter. As such, and in this context, underdevelopment and mass poverty have become synonymous in manifesting a state where endemic hunger is a widespread result.

Two oppositional underdevelopment paradigms – modernization and dependency, further my review of the development approach, although it must be acknowledged that neither has stood up well to the onslaught of 1990s post-modernism. In any case, these models surely justify the need for the earlier consideration of a complementary framework originating from literature on the anthropology of food for the purpose of this thesis.

The theory of modernization is an inherently optimistic concept for it assumes that countries will eventually experience economic growth. In other words, this theory believes “that the solution to mass poverty [and thus to hunger] lies in an essential capitalist strategy of rapid economic growth and the modernization of traditional institutions” (Hardiman and Midgley 1989: 52). Modernization is essentially then an evolutionary and linear pattern that leads countries toward industrialization. The transition from subsistence agriculture to cash-cropping and urbanization are all

significant examples of this process. This theory clearly echoes that of Durkheim's model of an industrialized "organic" society (Hardiman and Midgley 1989: 53). Yet modernization, as both a theory and a fix of strategy, can be criticized on several fronts. Its assumption that change inevitably follows the Western model is quite ethnocentric and wrong. Economic development comes in several shapes and generalizations about transitions from one type of society to another should not be made (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Change is not something that can be enforced on a culture as the fallouts can be detrimental (see e.g. Scott 1998). The theory of modernization also overlooks the political implications of growth on the micro level. Premised on the notion of "trickle-down", it presupposes that eventual economic growth will lead to rewards for all, as the benefits will be shared downwards (Escobar 1995; Sachs 1992). Yet life is not so simple, if it were, billions of people, including the Trairiense population, would not be living with endemic hunger.

Lastly, the most fundamental criticism of this theory is that it fails to provide an understanding for underdevelopment and poverty. The linear nature of the model neglects the historical and political factors that have made the playing field anything but leveled. As such, the theory of modernization is narrow-minded and weak. It does not provide for a realistic explanation of the occurrence of hunger, since if we were to follow this type of thinking, hunger would be dissipating; unfortunately our reality proves otherwise (Gardner and Lewis, 1996: 12-16).

An understanding of endemic hunger can also be emulated from a second prominent theory of development/underdevelopment. The theory of dependency argues that development is an essentially unequalizing process: while rich nations get richer, the

rest inevitably gets poorer (Gardner and Lewis 1996: 16; Irogbe, 2005). An analytical comparison can be made in regards to hunger which also demonstrates the unequal nature of the current state of affairs. Throughout the world, billions are suffering of hunger while a small Western elite – the core of this system, is getting fatter and obesity has even become a growing lifestyle illness (Russell 2005). This approach, therefore, is primarily historical and rests upon the political structures that have come to shape the world. In accordance, underdevelopment is a condition fundamentally different from undevelopment. The latter term refers to a condition in which resources are not being used, whereas underdevelopment refers to a situation in which resources are being actively used but in a way which benefits dominant states and not the poorer ones in which the resources are found (Irogbe 2005).

Moreover, the distinction between underdevelopment and undevelopment places the poorer countries in a profoundly different colonial historical context. These countries are not “behind” or “catching-up” to the richer countries of the world. They are not poor because they lagged behind in the course of scientific transformation. They are poor because they were coercively integrated into an economic system only as producers of raw materials and have been denied the opportunity to market their resources in a way that fosters competition with dominant states (Irogbe 2005).

The development literature, though only briefly acknowledged here, presents distinct limitations for my thesis. I view these theoretical orientations as sustaining an approach that seeks to contextualize and explain why poverty and hunger continue to be. Perhaps this stance is adequate when one attempts to uncover possible solutions to the poverty and hunger questions that prevail. But this is not my objective in this thesis. My

aim is to explore the socio-cultural construction of the *almoço* with the expectation of understanding the discourses of hunger that emerge from it and contribute to maintain the endemic condition that has plagued the impoverished *bairros* of Trairi.

But, as this development literature furthers a general trend of thought that seems to blame the poor for being victims of their historical heritage, cultural customs and economical positioning, I find such an approach quite problematic as it seems to restrict the inquiry towards one that seeks out solely the causes, the ‘why’ of the occurrence. Those who know endemic hunger, the urban poor of Trairi, cannot have their voices heard because development ideology does not answer directly to individuals; it is a discourse that is useful for technocrats, scholars and policy makers who continually place their agendas above those of the impoverished “other”. Consequently, a different perspective, one that is grounded in the initiatives of the anthropology of food as previously highlighted, must be considered to complement the predominant and significant literature of development. However, stemming from such development paradigms are two economic theoretical components that are imperative for my work and must be acknowledged; these are entitlement and food security.

### **2.3.1. Entitlement**

The fundamental cause of endemic hunger is the poverty of specific groups of people, not a general shortage of food as one might presume (Drèze and Sen 1991; Drogat 1962). What apparently distinguishes the poor from others is that they do not have sufficient purchasing power or effective demand to enable them to acquire enough to eat. This is what has been supported by Amartya Sen who contends that the heart of the problem is the relationship of particular groups of people to food, not food itself.



Such a relationship is governed by what he calls the “entitlement system” (Sen 1981) which displaces the view that the total supply of foodstuffs is the central determinant of hunger (ibid.).

Sen’s notion of entitlement is of particular importance in this thesis as it explains hunger by taking into consideration the social dimension of the market and the reality that the need for commodities and goods continues to pervade even when people are hungry. The entitlement approach is useful in understanding the inconsistency of a world in which surplus food production appears to burden farmers, taxpayers and consumers in the richer countries while hunger persists among those who are poor (Drèze and Sen 1990; Russell 2005). It also draws attention to the fact that, within the same country and even within the same community, those who are hungry may live alongside those who have all the food they might possibly need. This is highly visible in Trairi where the poor residing in the *bairros* are neighbors to a small wealthy elite that control the *Centro* as well as the overall municipality. The concept of entitlement, despite weaknesses that will be highlighted below, provides reliable insight into the relationships of people to food and to other goods and services needed to obtain adequate nourishment.

In using the term “entitlement” (Sen 1981; Drèze and Sen 1989; 1990; 1991), Sen stresses that the concept should be seen as an analytical device, a framework for analysis that enables one to address a range of issues broader than the behavior of per capita food production or availability (Sen 1982). Indeed, the term connotes an idea of “rights” and Sen has made this quite clear:

*“It is usual to characterize rights as relationships that hold between distinct agents e.g. between one person and another, or between one person and the state. In contrast, a person’s entitlements are the totality of things he can have by virtue of his rights (...) In the social context, a*

*person's entitlements would depend, among other things, on all the rights he has vis-à-vis others and others have vis-à-vis him. If a right is best thought of as a relationship of one agent to another, entitlements represent a relationship between an agent and things – based on the set of all things relevant to him” (1982: 347-48 cited in Gore 1993: 430).*

The “things” that can be part of a person’s entitlement are, Sen adds, generally comprised of anything that the person could conceivably wish to have (Sen 1982: 348). But in all of his analytical work on entitlements, Sen (1981; 1982) has focused on a particular type of thing: commodities. The right to commodities, or in this case the right to food, is a central tenet to the endemic hunger predicament for it is the breach of this right that brings hunger to the fore. In entitlement analysis, a person’s command over commodities is said to depend firstly on the person’s position in society<sup>2</sup> and secondly, on the rules which render claims over commodities as legitimate (Drèze and Sen 1990; Gore 1993: 431). However, the concept of entitlement carries its own set of rules<sup>3</sup>, which specify what persons can rightfully command given their position in society (ibid.). These rules vary between societies and present differences across various markets and economies (ibid.).

Although the manner with which Sen uses entitlement analysis to explain hunger is well known and well documented, it is worth recapitulating briefly. Endemic hunger is said to arise from food entitlement failures<sup>4</sup> but also from the inability of some people to convert their entitlement bundle into an adequate nutritional functioning (Drèze and Sen

---

<sup>2</sup> The position in society is understood for example as the occupation or class and it considers what one produces as well as where one lives or even how much land is owned as well as the skills possessed to work this land.

<sup>3</sup> The rules of entitlement have three distinct readings yet they all pertain to the notion of legal rights which define the law as the “black-letter rules” formulated in cases and statutes, backed by state power and enforced by courts. Moreover, rules and rights can often be supplemented by “informal rules” in society which can constrain or enable a person’s command over commodity.

<sup>4</sup> The lack of entitlement of other commodities ranges from lack of health and medical attention, elementary education, clean water, living space and basic sanitation, all considered necessary for adequate nutritional functioning (Sen, 1990).

1991; Gore 1993: 439). As a result, it is difficult for poor and chronically hungry people to establish entitlement to adequate food intake as they are caught in a vicious circle where empty stomachs limit their ability to work and attain commodities, thus limiting the very basic right to food. As this thesis will demonstrate, food entitlement failures can also result when people are able to work but experience a situation where there is no work available.

The work of Amartya Sen has attracted much acclaim but it has also sparked strong criticism. In retrospect, he appears to be underplaying especially the political, cultural and ecological backgrounds that are often difficult to conceptualize in analyses that deal with hunger. Indeed, in a paper titled *Entitlement Relations and Unruly Social Practices*, Charles Gore (1993) offers a broader emphasis of Sen's entitlement approach as he considers both a moral and a philosophical perspective to enrich the entitlement analysis of hunger. From his standpoint, power relations and discursive practices are in fact incorporated into the examination of the moral economy of provisioning, thus allowing for an active process of negotiation and a shift in the emphasis of entitlement to social practices that rest at the center of such understanding (Gore 1993). Another drawback of Sen's theory is his inability to conceive the process of adjustment and recovery which follows a crisis of hunger such as famine (Atkins and Bowler 2001: 136; Gore 1993). To counter balance this critique, Sen has extended his notion of entitlements to a notion of human "capabilities" which emphasizes the ability to obtain access to resources through an assemblage of rights, including for example empowerment and enfranchisement through political agitation (Atkins and Bowler 2001: 136; Watts and Bohle 1993).

Despite the shortcomings, Sen addresses entitlements as considered in market economies and favors: voluntary trade; production, in terms of entitlement to own what they, as individuals or communities, produce with their own resources; and fair exchange of trade goods and services among individuals who are gainfully employed (Drèze and Sen 1990). Consequently, Sen links his notion of entitlement to another theoretical economic component, relating entitlement to food security and contending that considerations of food security must focus upon adequate access to food at household and individual levels rather than relying on estimates of national aggregate demand.

### **2.3.2. Food Security**

Food security is a concept which bears significant analytical purpose for this thesis. Before I review some of the tactics of food security, I find it useful to explain its meaning. In principle, a state of food security is one where the individuals or the communities under consideration enjoy consistent access to foods in quantity, quality and varied composition, providing a hygienic and nutritionally adequate diet (Hulse 1995). The Select Committee on Hunger<sup>5</sup> (1990) has defined food security as: “All people obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet, through non-emergent food sources at all times”. Reutlinger (1987) understands it as the “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”. However conceived, I find the issue of food security to be complex. While certain principles are valid for each community and indeed for each individual household, the specific needs and the resources to satisfy those needs may differ. Therefore, definitions of food security tend more to generalizations than to specific prescriptions.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Select Committee on Hunger, known for its efforts to find real solutions to national and international hunger and poverty, was founded in 1983 by Congressmen Benjamin Gilman, Mickey Leland and Tony Hall all members of the Congressional Hunger Center in the United States (see [www.hungercenter.org](http://www.hungercenter.org)).

Anthropologist Johan Pottier (1999) has focused extensively on the problem of food insecurity within the discipline. In his writings, Pottier highlights what local contextual analysis can contribute to food-policy design, implementation and evaluation with an objective to connect household and community to national and global levels of analysis in order to produce a more integrated understandings of food security. To do so, he considers topics such as intra-household allocation of resources, gender inequality and risk management. He makes complex the simplifying contentions of policy-makers to confirm the truism that no policy is entirely good or bad, but it is the social contexts into which programs are inserted that shape outcomes (Pottier 1999). Hence, Pottier explores the many levels and ways food constitutes an ideal unit through which one can understand local to global linkages. However, his analysis offers very few solutions to the challenges of reconciling multiple agendas<sup>6</sup> dealing with local and global concerns, to the necessity of empowering diverse local voices especially those of remote poor populations or to the introduction of evocative arguments that would grab the attention of policy-makers. Yet ultimately, as a call for action, Pottier (1999) suggests that one can do more than simple research work by being engaged in policy making and lobbying to make local voices heard (with more depth) and to ensure fairer outcomes (cited in Messer 2001: 215). Thus, his work is particularly noteworthy as it reinforces the principle of contextuality for general topics such as hunger, which in addition holds significant local explanations and variations in the larger understanding of the hunger question.

Agro-economists Busch and Lacy (1984), in an extensive critical review of agriculture and food production, conceive food security as having three important

---

<sup>6</sup> Multiple agendas are often at the forefront of development ideologies and plans especially for countries that are considered or labeled maldeveloped (Jacques Gélinas' term 1998), such as Brazil.

dimensions: availability, accessibility and adequacy (Atkins and Bowler 2001: 154-156).

Availability requires that there be a stable sustainable system of production and distribution to provide enough food to satisfy the needs of all dependent people (Busch and Lacy 1984; Bigman 1993). In other words, food must be produced in sufficient quantity and, if equitably distributed, is successful in satisfying all nutritional needs.

The notion of accessibility implies that populations of all incomes and social categories, rural and urban, must have access to a nutritionally adequate supply of food; moreover, in a free market economy, all must have sufficient disposable income to afford the purchase of food necessary for their individual physical requirements (Busch and Lacy 1984; Drèze and Sen 1989). Indeed, food should be within the reach of all who have needs and especially to those that are hungry. Unfortunately, in an economic system wherein all food must be paid for at market prices, the very poor may not have access to food even where and when food is available (Drèze and Sen 1991).

In broad terms, adequacy can be described as a food supply that satisfies different nutritional needs among various conditions<sup>7</sup>, where adequacy tends to, or leads to equality (Bigman 1993). However, Busch and Lacy talk more of nutritional equality, whether the food that is available and accessible is nutritionally equal to collective and individual want. In any event, the concepts mentioned above are practical and useful in the context of this thesis, for they highlight the different dimensions that must be taken into account when hunger is scrutinized. Although certain generalizations can be inferred by such notions, the specificities of each dictate their proper usage.

---

<sup>7</sup> Various conditions mean amid men, women and infants, young and old, rich or poor, who make up national and communal populations.

While the aforementioned concepts all have their importance, Berck and Bigman (1993) consider economical, political and technical issues that bear on food security with a particular accent on availability and accessibility. In addition, Bigman (1993) relates insecurity to chronic undernutrition and temporary food deficiencies, the first reflecting the number of people affected, the second being indicative of the food available as well as the variability in prices. Bigman concludes that food security is least uncertain when supply and prices are relatively stable and when markets fluctuate only minimally (Bigman 1993). He further comments on indicators of insecurity, which reify what constitutes an adequate diet and reveals the misleading acceptance of average per capita caloric intake as an index of national nutritional well-being. Bigman's analysis is quite interesting and valuable as it clearly shows that average intake estimates obscure individual differences as well as gaps that take place between actual consumption and minimum nutrient requirements<sup>8</sup>.

All in all, the ideas behind the concept of food security contextualize the explanation of hunger in a local setting. Hence, a better understanding of terms such as availability, accessibility and adequacy limits the account of the thesis to a micro level analysis without directly omitting the macro dimension that ultimately guides regional outcomes.

---

<sup>8</sup> Though caloric intake is deemed necessary when investigating situations of hunger, the caloric consumption in Trairi falls beyond the scope of the socio-cultural argument of this thesis as knowledge of in-depth medical and nutritional aspects would be required.

## 2.4. Poverty and Hunger

*“The poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. His or her existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a bi-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. They are the oppressed, exploited proletariat, robbed of the fruit of their labor and despoiled of their humanity. Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go build a different social order”.* (Gutiérrez 1983 cited in Farmer 2003: 139)

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.* (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights cited in Farmer 2003: 136)

The different sections of this chapter shed light on the various concepts and theoretical tools that enable an exploration of the endemic hunger of the urban poor in Trairi. However, the conceptual frameworks aforementioned fall short of contextualizing the everyday implications of being poor. Even though the central tenet of this thesis deals with hunger, its background is poverty; and poverty underlines everything. For that reason, poverty must be acknowledged to fully comprehend the context and the scope of everyday experiences.

My view of poverty echoes that of Gutiérrez (1983) and Farmer (2003) which suggests that no one ever chooses to be poor. The poor are not the casual victims of human history; rather, poverty results from the actions of human beings toward other human beings. Those who endure poverty do so because of the larger systems and structures which work to ensure the persistent divide between the rich and the poor (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Boff has stated that “the poor are those who suffer from injustice, their poverty [being] produced by mechanisms of impoverishment and



exploitation” (cited in Farmer 2003: 139). The modern state emerges as the main villain as it falsely believes that it exists above the society that lay out beneath it, being able to perceive and make legible the contours of nature, thereby promoting that a grand reorganization is possible and attainable through standardized formulas (see. e.g. Gélinas 2000 and Scott 1998). As the asymmetry of power generates a kind of quiet brutality, the poor are the resulting marker, the visible symbol of man-made structural violations. The words: “In our countries, numbers live better than people” (Eduardo Galeano cited in Farmer, 2003: 29) are a reminder that there is a direct correlation between poverty and structural violence.

Two Brazilian ethnographies explore the poverty existing in Brazil. In either presentation, we find general trends of poverty that are echoed throughout this thesis. The first study, Donna Goldstein’s *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*, takes place in a *favela* of Rio de Janeiro where poverty and everyday violence organize the life of a single protagonist. Goldstein’s storytelling recounts the brutality of family life, which often includes domestic rape, the struggle for decent wages, the existence of racial and sexual exploitation and the necessity to keep children safe and out of illegal activities. The author demonstrates how people in *Felicidade Eterna* use humour as a coping mechanism and contends that “[l]aughter reveals the fault lines [that prevail] in social relations” (Goldstein 2003: 35). Studach, in her review, agrees with this idea and even suggests that humour as profiled in Goldstein’s work is the medium that masquerades as “a form of resistance to, and critique of, the class-oriented, gendered and racialized hierarchies of the everyday Brazilian reality” (Studach 2005: 259). Emerging from the text is the connection between cultural

conventions and historical, political and economic forces that shapes relationships. Accordingly, Goldstein's investigation of class, race, gender, violence and sexuality substantiates the structures of racism still intact in Brazil and also provides a vivid interpretation of everyday life of a poor family living in a *favela*.

Of particular interest for this thesis is the parallel that exists between the challenging economic reality of everyday life in Goldstein's study and in the *bairros* of Trairi where I worked. In *Laughter out of Place*, the discussion surrounding sexuality and race, not as separate issues but as two facets of the same context, illustrates women's ability to be socially mobile while securing economic advantages. In a similar fashion, the economic dependence of women on their male partners in Trairi guarantees women's access to food for their children and themselves and creates very complex and interacting hierarchies that prevail within both household and community. This parallel features a significant characteristic of women that is very "à propos" in this thesis: "Throughout their everyday lives, [they are] almost wholly devoted to surviving [poverty]" (Goldstein 2003: 15).

The second case, *The Heart is an Unknown Country: Love in the Changing Economy of the Northeast Brazil* by Linda-Anne Rebhun, investigates the attempt to experience love amidst an emotional landscape that is both complex and structurally violent. The emphasis of this study is "the impact of rapid social and economic change on courtship, marriage, cohabitation and infidelity, and their accompanying emotions" (Rebhun 1999: 1). Amongst a background of poor working class Pernambucans, the author presents both men's and women's conceptions and experiences of love and contends that love is "a sentiment of affiliation that allows societies to co-exist" (Rebhun

1999: 50). Building upon this discourse of love, the analysis problematizes the implications of political relations in the *Nordeste* and enables a discussion that examines love and historical processes from which the principal forces behind courtship, marriage and cohabitation shape, by extension, family, sexuality and gender roles. Through the varied threads of Rebhun's book, we discover an interpretation of everyday life in the Northeast that is contingent, once again, of poverty.

What informs my thesis is the duality presented by the author between the Western categorization of love (as the study is situated within the context of love in European history) and the local comprehension and application of the expression *amor* (a related cluster of sentiments). Within this discussion of love, we come to discover Northeastern Brazilian male and female relationships, local gender roles and *jeito* - a mainstay of social practices that is translated by Rebhun as "arrangement, manipulation [and] swindle" (1999: 69). Such sites of investigation come to express an understanding of poverty and everyday experiences that are echoed in the pages of this thesis. Also relevant, moreover, is that my argumentation surrounding the discourses of hunger (see chapter 7) follows a similar rational trend and serves as another interpretation of poverty in the *Nordeste*.

However, this ethnography, because of its context, of its themes of shame and jealousy and of the Brazilian street and house opposition, comes to speak against a situation where extreme poverty makes sentiments "a seemingly unaffordable luxury (...)" where a ruthlessly casual indifference toward human dignity causes so much suffering" (Rebhun 1999: 87). Yet, the author's focus on love detracts from the violence that structures life and politics in Brazil. Consequently, Rebhun's conception is somewhat

enclosed within a vacuum and omits the notion of structural violence that often contextualizes any situation of poverty. Although my interpretation of hunger acknowledges structural violence and may appear to distance itself from the work of Rebhun, the strength of the author's line of reasoning remains in her presentation of poverty and offers certain similitude with my investigation of hunger for the urban poor in Trairi.

Both ethnographies deal with poverty in different terms and offer extremely rich details of the lives of the poor in Brazil. They also enable a greater understanding to several elements of political culture in the country and set the stage for further analysis of poverty and violence, or rather, poverty as violence.

#### **2.4.1. Structural Violence**

The words power, structure and violence have been overused in the literature on social inequality (Farmer 2003; Farmer, Connors and Simmons 1996). Direct and/or visible violence, which involves injury to the human body and is usually inflicted through torture, war and abuse often captivates people's attention, suggest DuNann Winter and Leighton (1999). Direct violence usually involves a specific event with an identifiable victim and an identifiable perpetrator. In contrast, structural violence is almost always invisible, as it is embedded in omnipresent social structures and normalized by established institutions and customary experience (DuNann Winter and Leighton 1999).

The term structural violence was originally coined by Johan Galtung to explain the violence attributed by means of constraints of human potential via economic and political structures (1969). He maintained the idea that structural violence takes many different forms ranging from unequal access to resources, political power, education,

health care or legal standing (Galtung 1969). Endemic hunger falls inside the scope of structural violence according to this view. Its victims see their habitual eating patterns as ordinary despite their obvious disadvantage because of political agendas, economic inequities and even, cultural traditions. In fact, “the victims of endemic hunger do seldom ‘see’ or comprehend the systematic ways in which their plight is choreographed by unequal and unfair distribution of society’s resources” (DuNann Winter and Leighton 1999).

According to Farmer, the term structural violence is more a “broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality and [...] human right abuses” (Farmer 2003: 8). He further sustains that such structured inequities produce suffering. The damage caused to individuals who experience such offenses of structural violence is much slower and carries less impact in the “here and now” for the ramifications of this violence are more subtle, more common and more difficult to repair (Farmer 2003; Farmer 1999). The destructive forces that are generated by structural violence are what Amartya Sen has termed in Farmer’s introduction as “unfreedoms”, listing them as poverty and tyranny, poor economic opportunities and systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities and intolerance of repressive states (Sen, 1999: 3-4). The impoverished of Trairi encounter such daily “unfreedoms” continually, to borrow Sen’s term. It is a reality that I observed and experienced (see chapter 5) during the six months of my fieldwork, hence the framework of structural violence informs my thesis.

#### 2.4.2. Experiences and Examples of Structural Violence

The notion of structural violence encompasses all of the aforementioned concepts which bring together a theoretical orientation to the everyday experiences of endemic hunger in Trairi. In fact, the ethnographic highlights of my research reveal a distinct form of everyday violence and suffering that has come to structure people's realities and social relations. The extent to which this takes place in Trairi is perhaps not as complex nor is it considered with appropriate depth as other examples in anthropological literature, but it informs the background of the Trairiense's lived experiences.

Structural violence, Sen suggests in the preface to Farmer's *Pathologies of Power* (2003), is often better understood through examples rather than through theory. One of such examples is Linda Green's (1999) *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala* that explores the struggles encountered by Mayan widows in rural Guatemala when rebuilding their lives after insurgency warfare. Green examines the intricate ways with which violence intertwines the widows' attempts to remold historical memory and restructure social relationships and cultural practices (Gill 2000). Her analysis, embedded in social institutions and daily interactions, reveals a structural violence that originates within a historical and political process resulting from a coercive military apparatus that perpetuates relationships of inequality. Green also demonstrates, argues Gill, how years of structural violence reproduced in the concentration of land ownership<sup>9</sup> and in the processes of commodification<sup>10</sup> have weakened the social fabric of Mayan

---

<sup>9</sup> The privatization of land has eroded the subsistence practices of many rural households as residents find it impossible to sustain a range of cultural practices without a material base.

<sup>10</sup> The commodification of the rural economy has generated increased differentiation between Mayan households as opportunities have opened up for some and closed down for others; it has also further increased the divide between men and women in households as men are integrated into the cash economy and women grow more dependent on the earnings of men.

communities while undermining the ability of men and women to manage the divisions, animosities and grievances that characterize village life (Gill 2000: 944). As ongoing violence of impunity<sup>11</sup> stands firm in the background of everyday life, women are forced to remain silent and reconstruct their lives while dealing with their suffering in highly circumspect ways that are, in the author's view, far from satisfactory (ibid.).

Green situates the widows' predicament historically and within an ethnographic context. She first notes the loss of social relationships between women as the pressure leading up to war occurred. She also emphasizes the facets of the women's lives after the war - the embodiment of violence, their weaving of Mayan cloth and the experiments with Protestant fundamentalism, to illustrate the continued political oppression that shapes the lives of these women. All in all, Green's work is pertinent as her insightful analysis does highlight the challenges encountered when violence is endured daily, for the life of the Mayan widows continues to be shaped by class, gender, racial oppression and the most recent round of political violence led by the military.

In his *Pathologies of Power*, Paul Farmer (2003) motivated by his extensive experiences in the field both as a physician and an anthropologist, seeks to elucidate how the poor of the world today, excluded from the mainstreams of economic prosperity, political participation and health care, are being castigated by their own vulnerability (Kleinman and Benson 2004: 44). He contends, much like Green, that the conditions in which the poor live are the direct results of broad historical, political and economic forces (2003). Through four case studies extending from rural Haiti to Cuba, Chiapas and Russia, Farmer demonstrates how certain groups are placed at disproportionate risk for

---

<sup>11</sup> The fear of the women is well-founded in the absence of justice and accountability as the army perpetrators are often allowed to remain in the community after their devastating actions.

suffering and death because of gender, racial inequalities and impoverishment. These case studies become a tool for dialogue with the notion of human rights abuses as well as a critique of the political structures that deepen injustice and inequality worldwide. Finally, he links human rights abuses to structural violence and his main thesis corroborates the following argument: “Human rights abuses are 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 it” (Farmer 2003: 7; Kleinman and Benson 2004: 44).

The human rights abuses presented in Farmer’s work, which are all medical in nature, surely appear somewhat removed from the context of endemic hunger of this thesis. However, what is useful is the message that Farmer formulates. Since the inception of the Charter of Human Rights, we have an obligation, whether moral, ethical or political, to investigate situations where rights are being denied. Farmer pushes the limits of health policies and neoliberal agendas by making medication for drug-resistant tuberculosis (TB) available for Russian prisoners or by ensuring accessibility to antiviral therapies (HIV) to his patients in rural Haiti. Instead of focusing on the “how” and the “why” of the ills from a macro context, Farmer successfully re-orientates the pressing questions of human rights as he stresses the local “how” and initiates different ways to tackle the predicaments of the unfortunate. Farmer creates new avenues and opens new doors despite the constraints of political and economic systems. In other words, Farmer breaks all taboos and advises urgent action, healing, justice and faith in the poor (Maskovsky 2005: 284). The relevance of Farmer’s message is that similar action must come about for endemic hunger.



### 2.4.3. The Relevance of Structural Violence

*“A wall between the rich and the poor is being built, so that poverty does not annoy the powerful and the poor are obliged to die in the silence of history”* (Richard, cited in Nelson-Pallmeyer 1992: 14; Farmer 2003: 50)

The concept of structural violence emphasizes the interconnectivity that exists between power, structure, poverty and, as an extension, endemic hunger. Poverty, as part and as package of the global free-market is one of the most pressing matters demanding serious attention and rectification. This is indeed what is implied in Gutiérrez’s statement which suggests that poverty *demands that we go build a different social order* (Gutiérrez 1983 cited in Farmer 2003: 139).

Does the question reside in the origin, the orientation or the intention of such change? Or does it rest with the “who”: who will prescribe change for the poor and who will initiate and create a different social order? Since the end of World War II, the “who” seems to have held a position of authority in all matters pertaining to human rights, poverty, hunger and humanitarian aid. Such issues are renowned for boosting the lives and careers of those who deal with these matters, and of those who make the decisions while the potential beneficiaries await, helplessly, castigated by their position in life. It is still too often believed that Western technocrats, intellectuals and activists know best the solutions for development and underdevelopment, modernization, dependency and even poverty and disease. Instead of implementing positive or beneficial changes, these policy makers and their assistance schemes only continue to serve the needs of the instigators.

The context of this thesis, built upon poverty and endemic hunger, serves as yet another example of the outcomes of Farmer’s *“Pathologies of Power”* (2003). As the contextualization of the following chapter will demonstrate, the urban poor of Trairi find

themselves at the mercy of a system that neglects, even silences their plight. However, I claim not to confront these issues head on in my writing but maintain, rather, that what emerges between and betwixt the lines of this thesis bears direct ideological inferences to structural violence.

## **2.5. My Definition of Hunger**

The word hunger inferred from the aforementioned case studies and discussions is a confusing term. Hunger is a psycho-physiological state of the mind and body and it can refer to various meanings. It is a feeling, a sort of negative sensation that is experienced daily, in varying degrees, by all. The sensation triggers a need to feed oneself; it reminds one of the human need to consume food in order to survive. But the endemic hunger described in this thesis does not testify only to this simple and customary reality of physiological nourishment: it testifies to something much greater that is the result of imposed man-made structures that have removed the possibility for the Trairiense to feed themselves appropriately and well. In the urban poor communities of Trairi presented in this thesis, the endemic hunger goes beyond the routine physiological sensation of hunger and is situated in a reality where there is no money to purchase enough food for consumption and where there is a distinct and severe lack of food variety to be purchased. Hence, although individuals in Trairi eat, the act of eating does not seem to satisfy their physiological needs and/or does not prevent food deficiencies. Given the ambiguity that surrounds the meaning of the word hunger, I will conclude this chapter by defining the term hunger and by clearly establishing the difference existing within its semantic field, by outlining the terms famine, starvation, malnutrition and undernutrition.

The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1981) defines hunger as "a craving or urgent need for food or a specific nutrient, an uneasy sensation occasioned by the lack of food or a weakened condition brought about by prolonged lack of food" (553). Hulse (1995: 8) refers to hunger as the painful and uncomfortable sensation caused by want of food. And this want of food can be experienced at three different levels: acute, hidden and chronic. I will discuss these different levels further below.

Famine, on the other hand, describes an extreme scarcity of food among large populations, while starvation, which is often used synonymously with famine, alludes to a slow lingering death from cold, disease or a lack of food and water (Hulse 1995: 8). Most often, the main difference between the two expressions is the context within which they take place. Both terms describe a situation where there is an absolute shortage of food within a defined area caused by crop failure, destruction or war. Starvation can also be used in order to exterminate a given population as seen in the Nazi concentration camps or in the Minnesota Project (see e.g. Russell 2005: 113-135). Because all of the above terms are generally viewed as very dramatic events, with characteristics that label them as acute, news media and the public equate them with the word hunger. The cases of the Ethiopian famine of 1984-1985 and of the recent famine in Darfour have set a standard for network coverage because of their intensity and the immediate and large death tolls associated to such phenomena. Because the word hunger, in most instances and in its most common connotation, evokes an array of imagery and of emaciated starving bodies, it is too often employed to portray either famine or starvation. Yet, such drastic events constitute only a very small fraction of the occurrence of hunger in the world today (Russell, 2005).

Malnutrition denotes an inadequacy or an imbalance in the intake of essential nutrients while undernutrition - a variation of malnutrition, specifies that required food proteins and caloric energy are chronically or seasonally absent from normal eating patterns (Hulse 1995: 8). There is a semantic difference between the two terms, however. Malnutrition is a vitamin, mineral or protein deficiency that results from the foods people consume. In the poor *bairros* of Trairi, for example, this condition is believed rampant as the limited choice of menu (that will be discussed in chapter 6) highly suggests a deficiency in vitamins due to the absence of fruits, vegetables and milk products in the daily diet. Undernutrition, on the other hand, represents a situation where foods are consumed on a regular basis but never in sufficient amounts to attain a state of satiety. Hence, individuals in Trairi may eat *tapioca* and drink coffee but they are never satisfied or full. Even when eating, the sensation of hunger lingers.

Although the particular characteristics of both conditions (malnutrition and undernutrition) are extremely difficult to decipher, the fact is that they are heavily endured by the poor populations across the globe including the urban poor residing in the *bairros* of Trairi. Malnutrition and undernutrition are vital hunger problems and their prevalence is not contested (Kates 1996). Their occurrence is quite challenging to evaluate however as the methods and the criteria employed in making such estimates are constantly changing (Kates 1996). Accordingly, *hidden* and *chronic* are often associated with both expressions as a means to imply an inadequate food intake for health, growth and minimum energy needs persisting over long periods of time in either routine or episodic instances (Wright 1995: 197; Read 1977: 104). Furthermore they illustrate why malnutrition and undernutrition sufferers are forgotten, their plight being overcast by

more pressing problems such as economic prosperity. In short, this thesis focuses on the hidden and the chronic characteristics of hunger and of their corollaries, namely, malnutrition and undernutrition.

Throughout this document, the word hunger will refer to and encompass the parameters described above for the understanding of malnutrition and undernutrition as well as to their related conceptual degrees of hidden and chronic. Accurate in its terminology, the substantive hunger does suggest a greater level of intensity and severity than the sole use of the words malnutrition and undernutrition which is the desired effect here. But malnutrition and undernutrition deserve the semantic transfer of such intensity as, in most instances, they are the direct outcome of the structures that sustain them, rooted in questions of opportunity, rather the lack thereof, structure and market, which speak to a state of structural violence that castigates the poor who must endure such condition. De Castro's words are fitting: "The hungry cannot eat because they cannot produce, and they cannot produce because they cannot eat" (1966: 11). Moreover, even when acknowledged, this hunger remains below the radar as it shames the governmental agencies and their technocrats. In my view, this silencing escalates the crisis of endemic hunger to a state of urgency.

In using the word hunger as an indicator and a synonym for chronic malnutrition and endemic undernutrition, my objective is to create a newly defined cognitive association that now correlates hunger to malnutrition and undernutrition. In the context of my thesis, this definition seeks to acknowledge a shift in the semantics of the word. Furthermore, it enforces the recognition of the severity and of the widespread prevalence of endemic hunger

that forms of a never ending plight that is critical and grave, the condition being the most familiar form of hunger witnessed in Trairi and in many parts of the world.

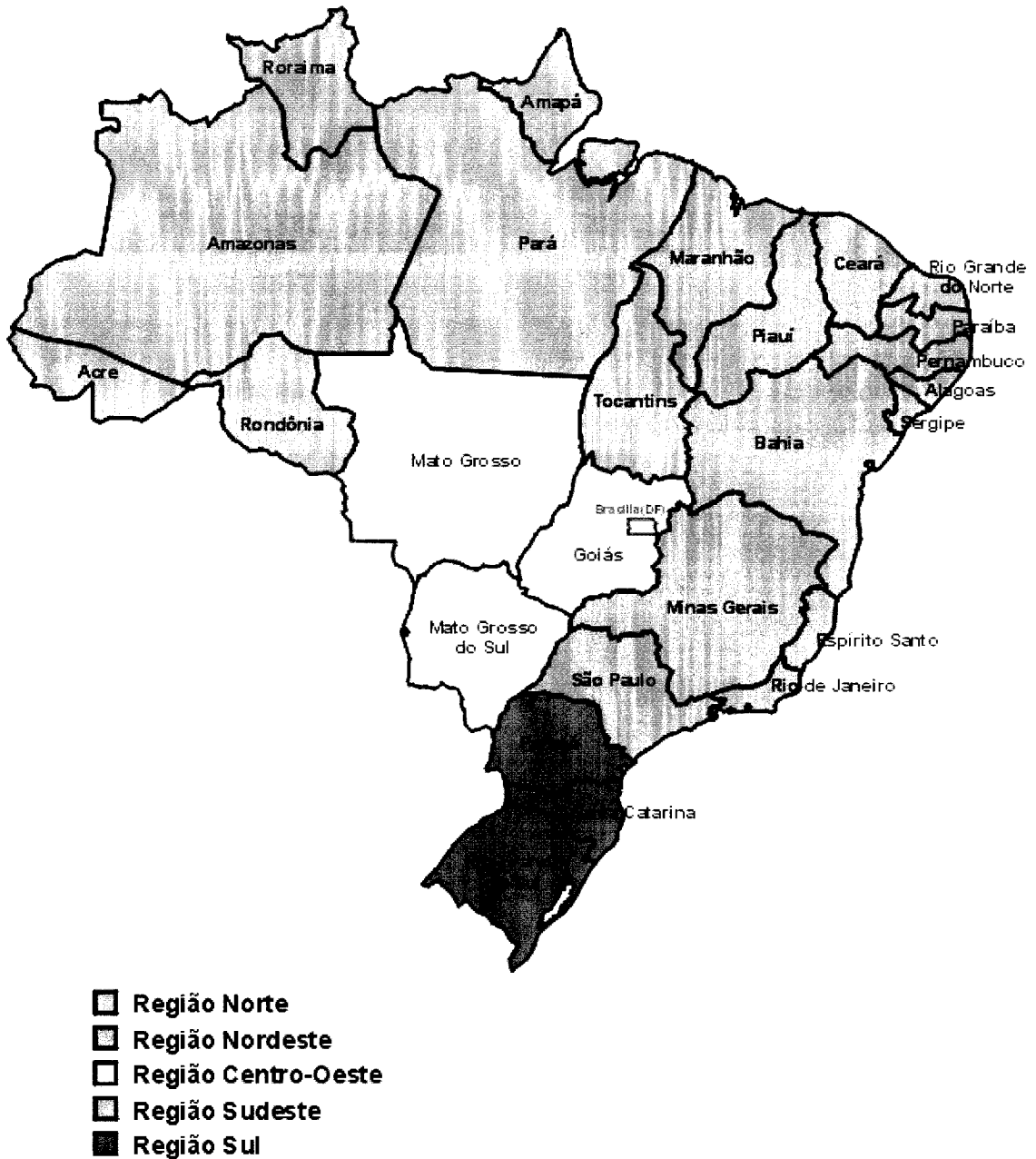
## **Chapter 3: Contextualizing the Field**

Social phenomena - such as hunger and poverty, do not take place in isolation. They are rooted in and strongly interconnected with an array of platforms - historical, political, economical, social and cultural, that must be disclosed in order to better comprehend the setting of the location but also to contextualize the backdrop of the ethnographic endeavor. In this chapter, I will introduce a portrait of Trairi that will enable the reader to situate, discover and identify with the protagonists of this thesis. In short, the essential qualities of this town situated within the Northeast of Brazil reveal different information that, when merged together, form a lens from which to view my experience in Trairi and allow for a description and an interpretation of a specific reality as observed during my fieldwork.

### **3.1. The *Nordeste***

The *República Federativa do Brasil* is the largest and most populous country in Latin America, and the fifth largest in the world (Almanaque Abril 2003: 295). Spanning a vast area between central South America and the Atlantic Ocean, it is the easternmost country of the Americas. It is home to both extensive agricultural lands and rain forests. Its vast natural resources and its large labor pool constitute a large part of South America's leading economic power and make Brazil a regional leader; "a major world producer of coffee, soybeans, cocoa, sugar, orange juice, animal products and wood, (...)" Brazil is abundantly endowed with natural and human wealth, with a gross national product (GDP) several times greater than other wealthy countries [categorized] as the Third World" (Shellenberger and Danaher 1995: 2). It is also considered one of the

world's major powers (L'État du Monde 2005: 435-437). The official language of the country is Portuguese, inherited from Portugal, its former colonizer. The country is divided into five distinct regions (see map 1): the agricultural South, the industrial Centre-South, the Centre West, the Amazonian North and the arid Northeast (represented by the dark orange section).



Map 1: The Five Regions of Brazil (IBGE, 2006)



The Northeast, known in Brazil as the *Nordeste*, is a land of contrasts: the very rich and the very poor, the lush jungle and the barren desert, the traditional and the avant-garde all constitute part of its landscape (see. e.g. Almanque Abril 2003; De Castro 1966). In its nine states - Maranhão, Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe and Bahia, live more than 50 million Brazilians (Levine and Crocitti 1999), which is slightly less than one third of Brazil's total population. Resting along 3,500 kilometers of coastline on the Atlantic Ocean, they all share identical climate, similar geographical characteristics and bear common socio-economic problems (Levine and Crocitti 1999). But, despite a wealth of traditions and a unique cultural sufficiency, the region suffers from a bad reputation, "the principal legacy of the Northeast [being its] wretchedness that has been handed down from generation to generation" (De Castro 1966: 24).

The geomorphology of the Northeast is characterized by four divisions. The *Zona da mata*, the forest zone, covers the coastal area and extends up to 200 kilometers inland. The forest, known as the *Mata Atlântica*, now exists only in tiny pockets; the rest was destroyed to make way for sugar-cane cultivation during the colonial period. With the exception of *Teresina* in the state of Piauí, all the major cities of the Northeast have been established in this zone (Piletti and Piletti 2002). Further West, the *agreste* forms a transitional strip of semi-fertile lands, which merges into *Sertão*, the backlands, to the South and the West of the states of the coast and North of the state of *Goias*, which is a region characterized by a dry and temperate climate. Droughts, sometimes lasting for many years, have been the problem of this area for many centuries. The vegetation is scarce and dominated by vast tracts of *caatinga* - a scrubby shrub, cactus, and *juazeiros* -

small green bushes, the only touch of color in a land too “beige” and much too burnt. The largest towns of the region are dotted along the *Rio São Francisco*, the river that provides most of the irrigation for the agricultural sector (Piletti and Piletti 2002). Bleak and brutal, the life of the *Sertanejo* - inhabitant of *Sertão*, has received extensive literary attention, especially in the Brazilian epic classic *Os Sertões* – “Rebellion in the Backlands” (Da Cunha 1944) and in the novel *Vidas Secas* (Ramos 1972). Finally, the fourth division encompasses the state of Maranhão and the Western margin of Piauí state to form the *Mejo Norte*, a transitional zone between the arid *Sertão* and the humid Amazon region (Piletti and Piletti 2002).

Historically and economically, as the cultivation of the sugar cane allowed for the “mise en place” of a form of social and economic organization, Brazil was born in the Northeast (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Yet the transformation of the plantation economy had disastrous effects on the traditional peasant: as the South embarked onto the exploitation of the sugar cane, the market dropped considerably and most of the *Nordestinos* went bankrupt, making room for the concentration of ownership of properties among the most powerful and wealthiest families (Scheper-Hughes 1992). The African black slaves continued to work the sugar cane cycle but were replaced progressively by the *Caboclos* – a mixture of white, Indians and runaway slaves, who became accustomed to the hardship of the *Sertão* (Curto and Lovejoy 2004). Ruined by droughts, most of the time having lost their land, the *Flagelados*, the dispossessed peasants of the Northeast, have no other solution today than to join the *favelas*, the shantytowns or slums of the large cities or to move to the South or to the Central West, in search of a living wage or new land for cultivation (Goldstein 2003; Levine and Crocitti 1999). If they find land and occupy it

without legal papers, after a full year and one day, they are said to gain the right to stay on it, a sort of symbolic right of ownership by usage, through which they become the *posseiro* (Piletti and Piletti 2002).

When President Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) took office in January 2003, the stronger than ever solidarity movement forced the President to promise a quick resolve to the predicament of the 12 million *posseiros* by committing to provide land to 60,000 families within the first year of his mandate knowing that the “Mouvements des Sans-Terre” (MST) demanded in fact access to ownership for 120,000 families (L’État du Monde 2005: 440). Unfortunately, by the end of November 2003, only 22% of the promised credits were voted in by the government (ibid.). Consequently, in the spring of 2004, the peasants multiplied acts of vandalism and destruction on large properties and caused dissension to rise within the ranks of President Lula’s own political party (ibid.).

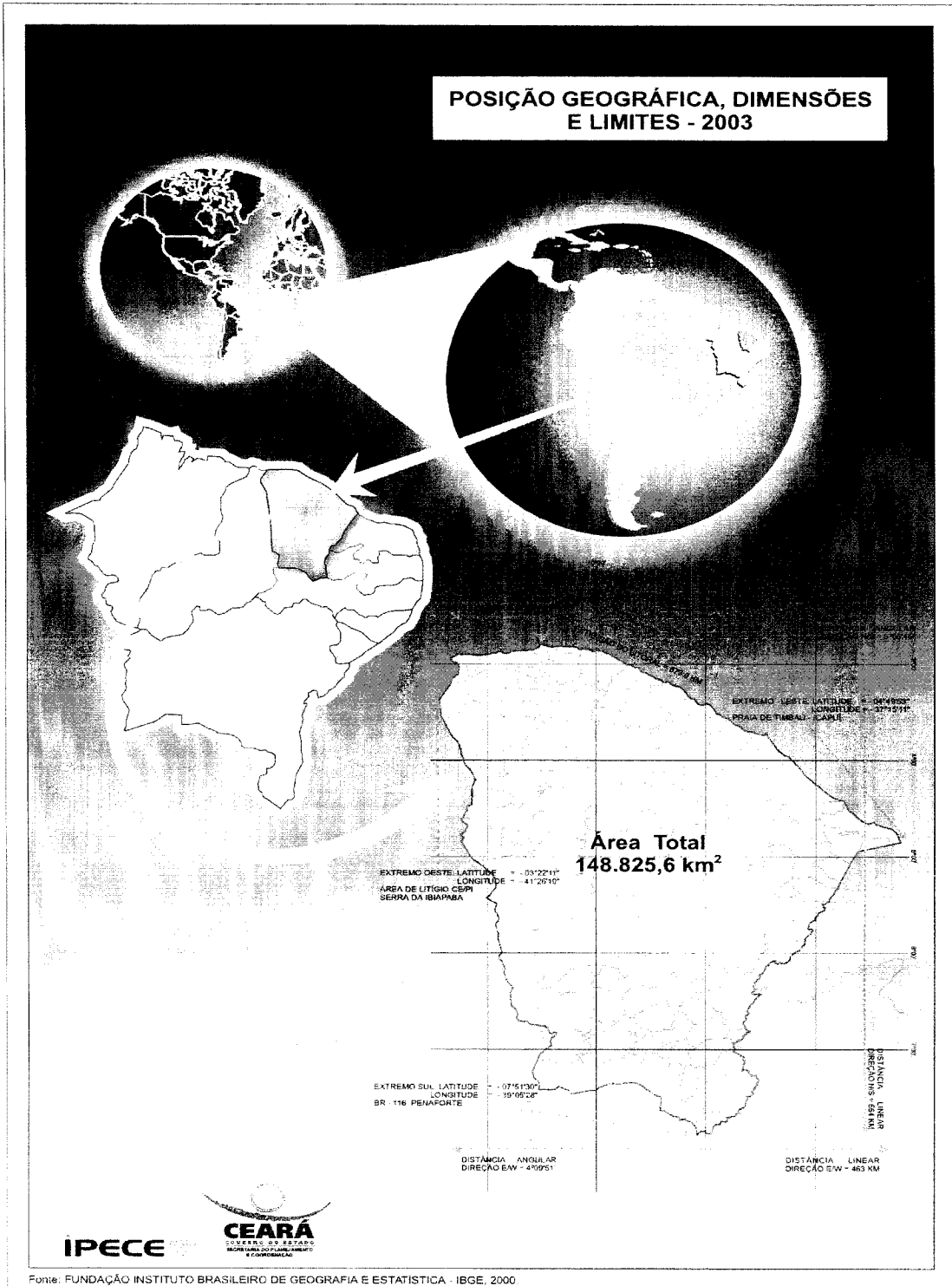
The social problems of the Northeast include poverty, underemployment, housing shortages, a decaying educational system and an absence of basic sanitation (Levine and Crocitti 1999; Piletti and Piletti 2002). For example, in Salvador, the capital of the state of *Bahia*, 40% of the households of its 2 million inhabitants have no running water, 80% have no sewer system, 100,000 persons live in huts built on piles (IBGE 2006). In the state of Ceará, the population of the capital Fortaleza has doubled in the last ten years due to the rural depopulation linked to the droughts of the 1980’s, as well as the general indebtedness of the small peasants and their subsequent expulsion by banks (Almanaque Abril 2003). In what is called the drought economy, 700,000 *Fortalenses* live in shantytowns and more than 500,000 in neighborhoods of the *favelas* (ibid.).

### **3.2. The State of Ceará: Progressive Changes**

The state of Ceará presents many of the characteristics of the *Nordeste*. Located within the drought ridden area of the Northeast, it shares borders with the states of Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba to the East, Pernambuco to the South, Piauí to the West and the Atlantic Ocean to its North. The climate is predominantly tropical as 90% of the area is found in the semi-arid region, and is characterized by temperatures that vary between 26° to 34°C and by irregular rainfall mainly concentrated throughout the first five months of the year (Almanaque Abril 2003: 365; IPECE 2005). With its 573 littoral kilometers, the state is rapidly becoming a major center for tourism given its wonderful beaches and succulent culinary dishes; it is considered the new trendy destination for Europeans and world travelers (Almanaque Abril 2003: 365). Yet the realities of those who inhabit the state are very different and rooted strongly in its history, economy and geography.

Historically, much of the state's potential was based on the available natural resources. The geo-ambient conditions have contributed dramatically to the organization and structure of local systems of production, principally the agricultural sector which was determined, in most cases, by locality and the type of economic development activities in place (Girão 1986).

Despite obvious challenges in the agricultural sector, the state has not lost its drive for economic development. The emphasis has now been placed on industries with 39.3% of the GDP and commercial services with 55% of the GDP (Almanaque Abril



Map 2: Brazil, the *Nordeste* and the State of Ceará (IBGE, 2000)

2003: 365). Through government incentives in 2003, more than 600 jobs<sup>12</sup> were created in the state, an increase which progressively continued (ibid.) to provide low-paying jobs opportunities. In 1999, with the ideals of global competitiveness in mind, the Secretary of Irrigated Agriculture stimulated the production of *floricultura*, flower culture, within the interior of the state. With a modest 19 hectares in the beginning, the industry has rapidly grown to 80 hectares by 2002. By 2004, the state was the second largest exporter of flowers in Brazil, reaching the 1 million US\$ mark and generating 12 direct and 6 indirect jobs for every cultivated hectare (IPECE 2005: 7). These new export commodities have caused the state to progressively improve its position within the *Nordeste* and Brazil at large, recording GDP increases of 4.4% in 2004, which is the best improvement since 1994 (IPEA 2006). In 2004, the inflation also decreased significantly to 5.66% from 10.07% in 2003, at the same time representing a lower figure than that for the whole country - 6.13% (IPEA 2006). Therefore the state of Ceará is definitely showing signs of amelioration.

The state remains, however, one of the poorest in Brazil, a fact that is well known and has been recently confirmed by IPEA (2005). In Ceará, one child out of eight dies before the age of five, which constitutes 12.5%. For a family of six, the average monthly income stands at about 55 BRL (Brazilian Real), equivalent to 28,50CAD\$<sup>13</sup> (Melo 2002: 365).

Yet, some social indicators also demonstrate a positive shift for the state of Ceará. In 1992, health statistics reported an infant mortality rate of 64.1 per 1,000 births,

---

<sup>12</sup> The new created jobs are mostly in the sectors of textiles, mechanical-metals, ironworks, shoe wear production –*calçadista*. and electronics

<sup>13</sup> As all other currency, the BRL fluctuates. April 01, 2006, the value of 1BRL equaled 0.52 CAD\$; 1CAD\$ equaled 1.92BRL.

which after a decade of constant medical reform, has fallen to 35.1 in 2002, representing an improvement of 45.3% over a 10 year period (IBGE and IPECE 2006). It is interesting to try to reconcile the relative high levels of poverty observed in Ceará with the relative low levels of infant mortality rate. One possible explanation that comes to mind could be the efficiency of governmental health programs of reaching the poor areas, while it is still very difficult for the people living in these areas to engage in market activities of any form.

The state has also demonstrated advances in education. Using literacy as a precursor and marker for economic openings as well as individual and social well-being, the changes in illiteracy rates become quite revealing. In 1992, the illiteracy rate for Ceará was 34.4%; it has since decreased to 22.8% in 2002 (IPEA 2005). The continuation of this trend has been confirmed by IPECE - *Instituto de Pesquisa e Estratégia Econômica do Ceará* in 2005, although the organization admits to its impossibility to support the outcomes of such a statement as new research endeavors led conjointly with IPEA – *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* are underway and results are still unavailable.

IPECE contends that another hindering obstacle in Ceará is the lack of equal income distribution. Accordingly, several development organizations within the state have joined forces to create new employment and to spread out income across the population. The results are impressive. The state now has commercial relations with 100 countries worldwide; it is the first honey exporter of the *Nordeste*; it has the largest industrial development base with the implementation of 216 industries between January 2003 and December 2004 alone; and, in the last decade, it has installed more than 31,240

new work posts (IPEA 2005: 7; IPECE 2006). These actions have consequently reduced the *Gini*<sup>14</sup> coefficient by quite a margin, a testimony to the state's effort. Essentially, there is a definite link between income inequality, health and illiteracy. Consequently, and as suggested by Messias (2003), a decreased illiteracy rate is directly a result of lower infant mortality and reduced income inequality.

The state of Ceará is apparently trying to remedy a situation that has been rooted in the difficulties of a country that is unjust, corrupt and divided between the very rich and the very poor. As seen above, the dynamism of the shifts that are taking place in the state offers an interesting site for research and a complexity that permits and demands profound, extensive and innovative investigations. In fact, the context and the local intricacies of the state of Ceará provided me with an ideal site for a project that deals with endemic hunger especially when the presence of endemic malnutrition and undernutrition has been persistent across generations (De Castro 1966; Scheper-Hughes 1992), thereby making it possible to link the socio-cultural construction of the meal to an understanding of hunger. Moreover, by implementing his widely acclaimed *Projeto Fome Zero* within the first few months of his presidency, President Lula himself (see section below), confirms that his people are hungry and that the matter necessitates immediate attention.

### **3.3. *Projeto Fome Zero*: General Intentions**

By recognizing that his people are hungry and that hunger, malnutrition, undernutrition and poverty are interconnected, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva strives to completely eradicate the problem. Right from the start of his first mandate, he has launched *Projeto Fome Zero* (PFZ) – Hunger Zero Project, which establishes as *jure et facto* the necessity for everyone to have daily access to a sufficient

---

<sup>14</sup> The Gini coefficient measures the level of income inequality.



quantity and quality of food in order to maintain basic nutritional needs and good health (Poletto 2005). The concepts and decisions embodied in PFZ are more than a simple moral imperative as they have been devised to also generate important social and economic benefits. Accordingly, PFZ is set up to be inclusive and nationwide in its approach, although specific attention is given to the Northeast (Brazil Projeto Fome Zero 2002; Poletto 2005: 34).

*Projeto Fome Zero* combines actions to instigate production and pay increases with measures to broaden access to food and better nutrition (Silva et al. 2001). With the full engagement of civil society, such proposed planning and implementation aim to stimulate the expansion of small farmer outputs without distorting price formation processes. As the goal of eradicating hunger implies an enormous national commitment, PFZ does not limit its interventions and programs to the support of the incremental consumption and production of foodstuffs. It also recognizes and addresses “the need for far-reaching structural changes in the broader policy milieu to create conditions which are favorable to hunger and poverty reduction in the medium to long term” (Silva et al. 2001: 4).

The program aims at providing three meals per day to 9.3 million families in need by sending them, after considering their actual income and the number of the children in the family, a maximum of 100BRL per month – 52CAN\$ (MESA 2003; L’État du Monde 2005: 440). In return, the parents must send their children to school full time and accept to follow diligently the basic vaccination schedule (ibid.). Unfortunately, at the end of December 2003, *Projeto Fome Zero* had reached only two thirds of the targeted

areas (ibid.). Furthermore, where established, the program has encountered major problems in implementation.

Although Brazilian society under the guidance of President Lula appears united in its determination to banish hunger, it is clear that several obstacles present real challenges. The requirement to strengthen the institutional capacity to implement what is necessarily a complex multifaceted program with the full collaboration of an engaged civil society; the need to mobilize resources in ways which are consistent with economic and fiscal stability; the necessity to reconcile the high expectations of the Brazilian people for rapid results on a very large scale with the need to ensure quality; the necessity to avoid contributing to a culture of dependency; and finally, the absolute minimizing of unintended side effects, are some of the challenges (Silva et al. 2001; Brazil Projeto Fome Zero 2002).

Keeping all of the above in mind, PFZ hopes to reduce by half the number of undernourished people by 2015. “We have what it takes to put an end to hunger in Brazil” says José Graziano da Silva, the Special Minister of Food Security and Hunger Combat (MESA 2003).

#### **3.4. Trairi: Introducing and Pin-Pointing Local Realities**

*Trairi é terra de mar, de praia, de sol*  
*Trairi is the land of the sea, of beach, of sun*  
*Trairi é sorriso que se instala no rosto*  
*Trairi is an ear to ear smile that is enduring*  
*De gente faceira, brejeira, hospitaleira*  
*Where an elegant, playful and hospitable people*  
*Que recebe com afago os que vêm e que vão.*  
*Will receive with care those who come and those who leave*  
*Que vão, mas para sempre retornam.*  
*Who leave, but always return.*  
(Rola, 2002: 129)

The city of Trairi, as a research location, was selected mainly by coincidence. Prior to my departure for the field, my Portuguese language teacher in Montreal told me that he had an acquaintance living in Trairi – Padre Francisco Neto de Sousa, who might be happy to welcome me into his presbytery.



**Representation 1: Trairi's Location within Ceará**

Although the priest's positive and enthusiastic response to my project sold me on the idea that Trairi was to be my field site, it should be noted that the characteristics mentioned above for the state of Ceará could also apply to Trairi, rendering such a choice justifiable.

Located 12 kilometers from the coast, Trairi is 123.5 kilometers from the state capital Fortaleza and stands at 18 meters above sea level (IPECE 2005). With a mainly tropical climate, the average yearly temperature oscillates between 26° and 34° Celsius and the total annual rain fall represents less than 16 centimeters - the rainy season lasting only from January until April (ibid.). In fact, for most of the year, Trairi sees no rain at all. Indeed, between July 12<sup>th</sup> 2005 and the last day of my fieldwork, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2005, not a single drop of rain fell on Trairi.

The region of Trairi, with an area of 925 square kilometers (IPECE 2005), appears quite large. However, the center of Trairi where most of the town's commercial and economic happenings take place is quite small. In fact, the large area can be explained by an amalgamation of smaller districts and rural communities that fall under the jurisdiction of Trairi. Although these localities are part of the municipality of Trairi, they are more commonly referred to by their *bairro* or neighborhood names.

Accordingly, throughout this thesis, the following *bairro* names will be privileged:

*Corrégo dos Furtados, Boa Esperança, Corrégo São Gonçalo* as well as *Rua da Palha, Sítio Ilha* and *Centro*. Most of my fieldwork has been conducted in the first three localities. However, as Trairi presents some diversity within its territory, I could not assume that the three locations selected were representative of the whole territory; thus, four households from the latter three sites were also selected to offer a comparative perspective from the different neighborhoods.

In June 2005, the total population of Trairi was estimated at 47,997 inhabitants with a demographic density of 47 inhabitants per square kilometer (IPECE 2005). More men than women live in Trairi, but only by a slight difference of 2.88 %, and 54.66 % of the total population are between the ages of 15 and 64 (ibid.). The child mortality ratio for the whole state of Ceará is 22.30 deaths for each 1,000 births; Trairi fares rather well with a ratio of only 11.52 (IPECE 2005). However, out of all the yearly births in 2003, 2% were recorded to weigh less than 2.5kg while estimates show that approximately 20% of all babies under the age of twenty-four months were severely malnourished with little possibility of surviving to school age (IPECE 2005). No new figures have since been tabulated by IPECE. Clearly, these statistics support the existence of a state of malnutrition and undernutrition that often begins at birth and continues, or is prolonged, into adulthood.

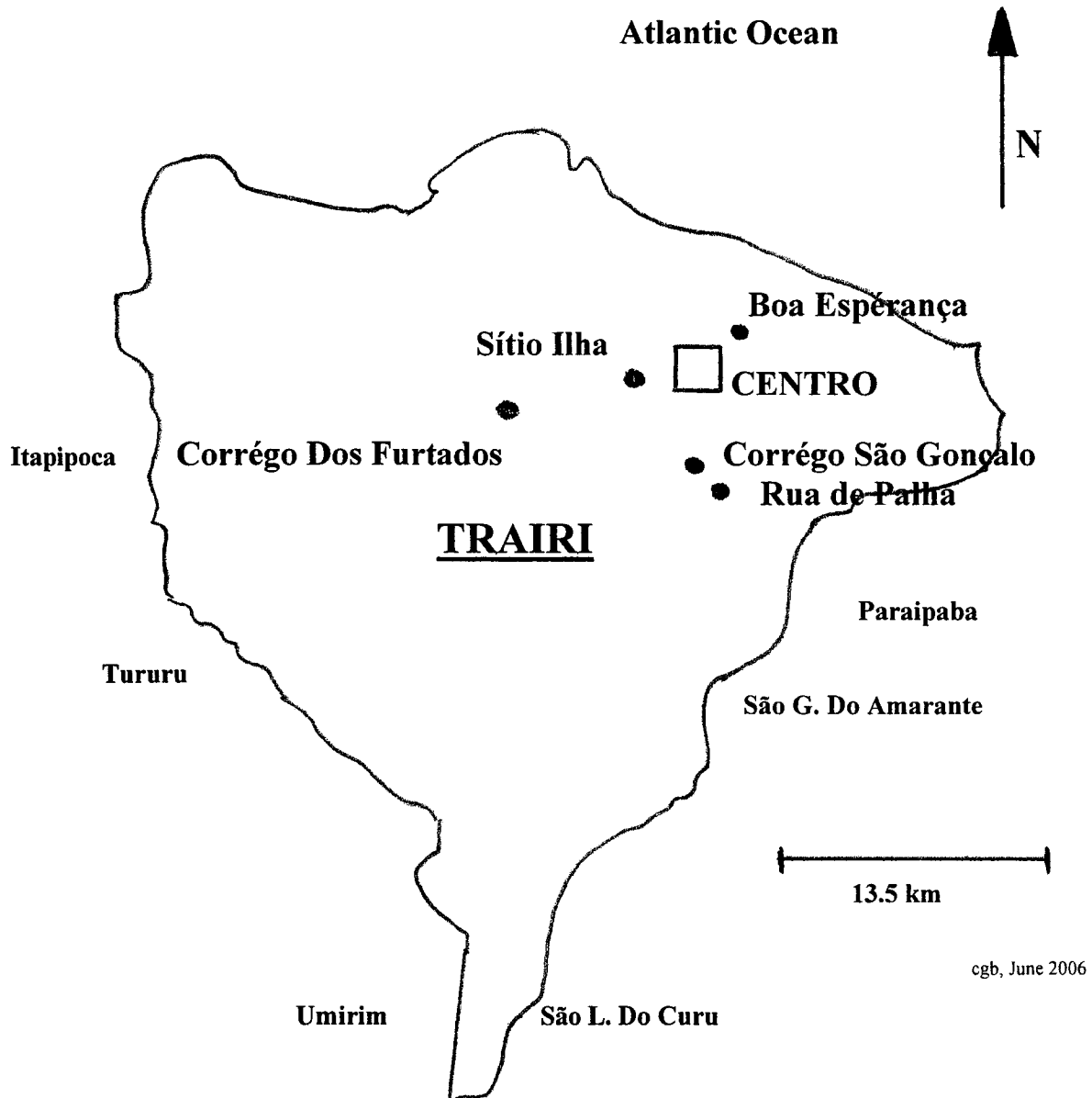
Houses in Trairi are either made of bricks (71.01%), covered or uncovered dried mud (27.61%), wood (0.10%) or other materials (1.22%) (IPECE 2005). At the time of my arrival in Trairi in June 2005, 67.63% of the population lived in rural areas (IBGE and IPECE 2006). The center of the city was slowly developing as people are progressively being drawn closer to the city center. In fact, the *Centro* was continually in motion with new houses, new commercial buildings and fresh paint on municipal edifices displaying the new town colors – three shades of blue decreasing in intensity from a dark sky blue to a very pale baby blue. For those attuned to such changes, the daily improvements were stunning, yet, they seemed to go unnoticed for most. Throughout the six months of this study, Trairi provided a panorama that continually experienced alterations.

The municipality's basic hygienic and utility services present quite a challenge to the *Trairiense* – the citizens of Trairi. Only 6.19% of the entire population has access to public water networks while 80.08% must get their water via wells and 13.73% have to resort to other means of water collection which include water from rivers, which is often extremely unsafe to drink or relying on friends and family that have access to better and cleaner water (IPECE 2005). The survey I conducted during my fieldwork (see section 6 of this chapter and chapter 4, section 2) reveals a slightly better situation: 15.8% of the respondents have access to a public water network while 72.6% of them collect their water by means of a well. In the case of waste water collection and treatment, only 2.53% of the community has access to the public sewer system (IPECE 2005). For personal hygiene and elimination of body fluids and feces, 68.51% of Trairiense use *fossa* - pits, while the remaining 28.96% must opt for open spaces (IPECE 2005). Despite the challenging setting, cleanliness is a very strong value to the Trairiense and they bathe up to three or four times a day.

### **3.5. The *Bairros***

Of all the smaller districts and rural communities that fall under the jurisdiction of Trairi, it proved difficult to select the *bairros* (see representation 2) where I would conduct my research. After a short investigation and several recommendations from acquaintances met through the Roman Catholic parish in Trairi, three neighborhoods stood out as suitable for my project mostly because of the complicity encountered during the first introductions with *bairro* residents facilitating the selection process and, except for one *bairro*, they were sufficiently removed from the *Centro* yet remained accessible by foot.

*Corrégo dos Furtados* is a *bairro* located 9 kilometers from the center of Trairi; its residents' main activity is the production of manioc flour that is often sold locally and holds an important role in the region's subsistence economy. At the heart of the *bairro* stands a small white chapel, attended by most when the priest comes to celebrate mass twice a month.



**Representation 2: The *Bairros* of my Fieldwork**

There is one small school that teaches the fundamentals – reading, writing and basic arithmetic, to young students from the age of 6 to 15. For secondary type of schooling – the equivalent of high school, teenagers much venture to the center of Trairi.

Only two small retail businesses operate from a room designed for such a purpose in two homes near the chapel; they provide basic foods and goods. The goods are sold to most households on a basis of trust - *afiado*, and a log book records what has been bought by each household. Except for some jobs at the school, there is no work available in *Corrégo dos Furtados*. Everyone I spoke to in this *bairro* finds themselves reliant on government assistance and struggles to make ends meet. Once a month, when people receive money from either governmental initiatives of *bolsa familia*<sup>15</sup> or *bolsa escola*<sup>16</sup>, they repay part of their bill. Bills are hardly ever paid in full, which does not impede the shop's functioning as the practice allows for a large mark-up on goods.

There are no paved roads in *Corrégo dos Furtados*: only sand streets that are shared by pedestrians, motorcycles, bicycles, chickens, cats, dogs, horses, donkeys and sometimes even oxen. One must often be careful in using these roads as it is not uncommon to be hit by a passing cow! The households are spread apart and one must walk fair distances to go from house to house. However, the scenery is absolutely

---

<sup>15</sup> Under the *Fome Zero* program, the *bolsa familia* provides financial assistance to families that varies between 50 and 80BRL per month, based on a variety of flexible criteria that seem to fluctuate dependent on the administrator that reviews the *Cadastramento Unico para Programas Sociais do Governo Federal* – the complete application documentation provided by the family in need.

<sup>16</sup> Under the *Fome Zero* program, the *bolsa escola* – the education assistance – provides 15BRL per school age child from age 6 to 16. This amount is however insufficient when one considers the price of notebooks – anywhere from 8 to 15BRL, the price of pens, clothing and of shoes. In fact, this amount can only secure sufficient funds for a notebook and a pen. In addition, much of the financial assistance is received with a guarantee that school age children will attend school. Accordingly, state documentation reveals a 100% rate of school attendance for fundamental education and 15.82% rate of attendance for preparatory studies (IPECE, 2005). The results of my census suggest, (all levels of education combined), a 66.85% rate of school attendance for males and a 65.8% participation rate for females.



brehtaking with much green from random vegetation and trees, golden sand and an always extremely blue sky.

Along the stretch of modest highway that leads to Trairi and 1.5 kilometers from the *Centro* is *Corrego São Gonçalo*. The people here felt disturbed by my presence and were quite resistant to my work, especially my survey, which did not make me feel welcome. In this community, the hub is not a religious building but a water pump installed by the government which supplies selected residents of the *bairro* and most of *Rua da Palha*, the neighboring *bairro* and poorest area of Trairi. I never discovered why only selected households of the *bairro* could use this pump. Homes are much closer to one another and the streets are made of deep sand that proved difficult to walk in. School aged children must walk to the *Centro* of Trairi to attend classes as the neighborhood school does not teach all levels of fundamental education. Overall, the general appearance of *Corrego São Gonçalo* is much less bucolic than *Corrêgo dos Furtados*, even though the characteristics and conditions of the *bairro* are extremely rural in nature.

About one third of my informants lived in *Boa Esperança*, less than one kilometer away from the *Centro* of Trairi. The houses are built close to each other and stand somewhat in a compact unit. The main street leading into the *bairro* is paved but once in *Boa Esperança*, sand replaces the pavement. There is no school as children live close enough to attend classes in the *Centro*. A medical clinic provides many basic health services such as vaccines for young children and prenatal care, but its infrastructure is inadequate for emergency first response. There is no real center point in this place, though people, mostly men, often congregate around a small bar to drink *cachaça*-sugar cane based alcohol, and catch-up on local gossip. As the many younger children

cherished my presence, I did not encounter the same weariness from the people here as I did in *Corrego São Gonçalo*. Much to the contrary, the demands to speak with me became so great that it sometimes impeded my work. In any event, working in all the *bairros* and visiting numerous households allowed me to get a sense of the daily challenges found in Trairi.

### **3.6. Day-to-Day Life in Trairi: The Survey**

As briefly alluded to earlier, I conducted two surveys (see survey in annex 2) among a total of 186 households in three different *bairros* (see chapter 4, section 2 for additional information). I conducted these surveys in order to demystify or perhaps clarify different components related to household make-up, to provide a possible and partial illustration of the realities experienced in the different *bairros* involved in my research and to demonstrate the material conditions of the Trairiense. I choose to introduce the results of the survey here, rather than in the methodology section of the thesis, as these data stress certain particularities that strongly shape the Trairiense daily experience.

The household<sup>17</sup> make-up encountered in Trairi varies greatly. The first survey indicates that the average household is composed of 6 persons, although the range is quite wide with as few as 2 and as many as 19 members per household. Gender representation testifies to a rather equal number of men and women; 24.2% of the households surveyed show a “three men for three women” ratio. However, in more numerous households, this ratio often shifted with the presence of more women to men. More than 25% of the families have two children (individuals under the age of 18), one male and one female.

---

<sup>17</sup> I use the term household to refer to all persons inhabiting the same house and/or living under the same roof. This category goes beyond affine and consanguine lineages.

However, several of the households present different make-ups, the most recurrent figures showing zero (14.7%), one (21.1%), three (17.9%) and four (12.6%) children. In one exceptional case, there were seventeen children living under the same roof. The gender division of children echoes that of the general household composition. As far as age is concerned, the sample reveals that 37.5% of the males and 35% of the females are between the age of 18 and 29 while 22% of the males and 32.5% of the females sampled are between the ages of 30 and 39. In other words, 59.5% of the males and 67.5% of the females are between 18 and 39 years old. These figures did not show any variation with the second census.

Because poverty and endemic hunger are tightly intertwined, it proved necessary to consider household and municipal economic indicators of Trairi to better assess the notions of entitlement (Sen 1981) and structural violence (Galtung 1969; Farmer 2003) previously discussed in chapter 2. When speaking of household economics with my informants, a large majority of them considered a monthly income of 300BRL to be a marker of minimum income and an indicator of poverty. The reality is that few households and fewer individuals receive this amount of money per month. In fact, when combining the data of the three *bairros*, the average monthly income of a household of six individuals is 225BRL, equivalent to 120CAD\$. This figure is somewhat close to the minimum indicator of 300BRL, which might not qualify the situation in Trairi as critical. However, several factors have tainted this number. More than 12.2% of the recorded incomes in my survey come from outliers, twelve cases disclosing a monthly salary of 600BRL<sup>18</sup>. At the other end of the spectrum, the survey data established that 42% of the

---

<sup>18</sup> This amount represents the monthly pension of two retired persons or the governmental assistance provided to anyone above the age of 65.

respondents earn less than 150BRL - half the value of the minimum marker. Even more destabilizing is the fact that 50% of the aforementioned manages to survive on less than 75BRL a month, equivalent to 39CAD\$.

There is little work in Trairi. The main employers are the *prefeitura* - city council, the hospital and the schools, some commerce and shops in the center of town and some individual participation in retail sales such as Avon and *renda* - artisanal clothing. As a consequence, the unemployment rate reported in the survey is quite high: 69.5% of men and 81.1% of women stay at home and do not have employment. One must then question the origin and the nature of the salaries disclosed when such a high percentage of the respondents do not work. Part of the answer resides in the fact that households consider as revenue any cash income, and any form of governmental assistance. In my survey, 75.25% of the households reported that they receive such assistance under the *Projeto Fome Zero* initiatives of *bolsa familia* or *bolsa escola*. Without a doubt, if households would have been instructed not to enter as income any governmental assistance, the real figure would have been much lower than the calculated average of 225BRL and much further away from the locally identified poverty index of 300BRL.

The question of ownership of property and/or goods, is yet another reliable indicator of poverty. My survey reveals that in these three *bairros* of Trairi, 90% of the sample constitutes of home owners. In most cases, the houses are “single detached house”, as termed in Canada; in 50% of the cases, these houses have two enclosed bedrooms, although several houses did not have any. Interestingly, several of the respondents who consider themselves home owners have not purchased their house through legitimate means. In several instances, individuals have occupied a vacant or

abandoned home and, after one year and one day<sup>19</sup>, took for granted that they owned their house. Oftentimes, the question of house ownership remained vague and unexplored as respondents become withdrawn from this seemingly intrusive question.

The topic of ownership of other goods<sup>20</sup> was, on the contrary, a welcomed one. In fact, most respondents were quite talkative about their possessions: 22.7% of the sample reported owning other land situated in either the *bairro* of their residence or in another *bairro* of Trairi; 75.25% reported owning animals<sup>21</sup>; and only 13.65% reported owning a garden. Of the 86.35% who did not own a garden, only 8% confirmed that they had access to someone else's garden. This latter statistic of garden ownership or of access to garden products reveals that the individuals surveyed must turn to the market for the purchase of food and other goods, especially fruits and vegetables.

In terms of household utilities, key items were selected in order to better identify what represents the day-to-day challenges in Trairi. Contrary to what I believed and witnessed, 92.25% of the survey sample has access to electricity; which is slightly above the 83.69% reported by IPECE in 2006. Moreover, 62.8% of all households surveyed have a refrigerator in their home while 91.05% also have a gas oven. It was my belief when formulating the survey questions that there was an obvious link between owning such items and poverty; however, what the survey suggests is that one can still be considered poor despite the presence of such items in the household. Moreover, as both these items facilitate food preparation and food conservation, it was possible to foresee a

---

<sup>19</sup> Trairiense have transferred to house ownership the principle of land ownership – *posseiro*, previously discussed in section 2 of this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> I refer to other goods as a wide category which includes, among other things, land, animals and gardens.

<sup>21</sup> Animal ownership varied between chickens (66.3% own anywhere between 1 and 100), cows (36.3% own anywhere between 1 and 15), pigs (27.3% own between 1 and 9) and other animals – cats, dogs, *capote* (wild edible bird), donkeys or horses (38.4% own between 1 and 15).

discrepancy in the level of malnutrition and undernutrition between households who own these goods and those who do not. It falls beyond the scope of this thesis however, to consider different levels of malnutrition and undernutrition as I do not possess such expertise. In any case, such statistics could be useful for later longitudinal researches.

Televisions and cellular phones<sup>22</sup> are very popular items with reported ownership of 72.1% of the former and 30% of the latter. As far as vehicles are concerned, only 6.35% of the households own a car as the most popular mode of transportation is the motorcycle<sup>23</sup>. There is a saying in Trairi, expressed mainly by the men of the *Centro*, which stipulates that the number of motorcycles in all of the greater area of Trairi represents a one to two ratio of the population of the *Centro*. In fact, motorcycles are quite present in Trairi and allow for part-time or full-time employment for a large portion of the men between the ages of 17 and 39 under the official title of *motoristas* - taxi driver. Other domestic items such as personal computers, first aid kits and washing machines are not used in Trairi. Electricity, refrigerators and gas ovens are the most sought after items and once these are acquired, a television and a cellular phone are soon to follow. However, in some cases, empirical evidence reveals that oftentimes, the television set and the cellular phone are purchased before the refrigerator as prices of the former items are much lower than those of a refrigerator, which must also be purchased in an urban area such as Itapipoca<sup>24</sup> or Fortaleza.

To my surprise, there were hardly any significant variations between the first and the second survey, which were conducted with an elapsed time span of three months. My pre-fieldwork hypothesis was that throughout the duration of my fieldwork, the nature of

---

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, only 1.6% of all respondents have landline phones.

<sup>23</sup> No data has been recorded for motorcycle use as it was unknown when the census was prepared.

<sup>24</sup> Itapipoca is the nearest urban center to Trairi.

household composition and household economics might present significant changes to justify a second survey. This was not the case. Moreover, as the survey was conducted in only three *bairros*, the data does not suggest that the statistics highlighted above apply to all of the *bairros*<sup>25</sup> of Trairi. In addition, the survey fails in its inability to represent the large disparities visible between the more financially sound *Centro* and the surrounding *bairros* as the small elite of wealthy individuals in the *Centro* were not asked to participate in the survey<sup>26</sup>. The following tables summarize the data mentioned above:

<b>Table 1: Household Make-Up</b>					<b>N = 186</b>	
Size of household	Average Size		Smallest size		Largest size	
# of people in household	6		2		19	
Gender repartition in average household of 6 people			Male		Female	
			3		3	
# of children per household in % (under the age of 18; male/female gender ratio: 1/1)	0	1	2	3	4	
	14.7%	21.1%	25%	17.9%	12.6%	
Age repartition in household in %			Male		Female	
18 – 29 years old			37.5%		35%	
30 – 39 years old			22%		32.5%	
18 – 39 years old			59.5%		67.5%	

<b>Table 2: Monthly Revenue</b>			<b>N = 186</b>		
▼ % of sample	► Monthly revenue	BRL (Brazilian Real)		CAD (Canadian Dollar)	
Minimum marker/ indicator of poverty		300 BRL		156 CAD \$	
Average household of 6 people		225 BRL		117 CAD \$	
Outliers – 12,2% of sample		600 BRL		312 CAD \$	
42% of sample		150 BRL		78 CAD \$	
26 % of sample (the 50% of the 42% above)		75 BRL		39 CAD \$	
<b>Unemployment/ Source of Revenue</b>			<b>N = 186</b>		
Source of revenue	All type of work combined		Stay at home/ unemployed		<i>Fome Zero (Bolsa Familia &amp; Bolsa Escola)</i>
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male + Female
	30.5%	18.9%	69.5%	81.1%	75.25%

<sup>25</sup> As I did not visit all the *bairros* of Trairi and as I worked in only six of them, I cannot contend that my sample is representative of all of the Trairi. For example, the *bairros* of the interior which border the Sertão, and the *Centro* – the economic hub of the city, are at opposite end of the spectrum of possibilities in regard to domestic realities and overall opportunity; this is not addressed in this thesis, however.

<sup>26</sup> This oversight is significant as the contrast between the wealth in *Centro* and the poverty of the *bairros* reflects the microcosm that takes place at the national level.

<b>Table 3: Ownership of House and Goods</b>			<b>N = 186</b>
Property/ goods owned	% of sample	Additional information	% of sample
House	90%	House with 2 bedrooms	45% (50% of the 90%)
Other land	22.7%		
Animals	75.25%		
Garden	13.65%	Access to a garden (for the 86.35% who do not own a garden)	8%
Access to electrical energy	92.25%	Access to electrical energy as reported by IPECE (2006)	83.69%
Refrigerator	62.8%		
Gas oven	91.05%		
Television set	72.1%		
Cellular phone	30%		
Car	6.35%		

The very low human development index of 0.632<sup>27</sup> recorded in Trairi combined with the social and economic indicators introduced in this section via official state documentation and my survey confirm that the site chosen for my fieldwork bears characteristics for the occurrence, the development and the persistence of endemic hunger.

Day-to-day life in Trairi is very difficult. Nevertheless, the household survey reveals a wonderful quality of the town's people. When asked if they consider their household to be a happy one, 99% of the respondents answered YES. Surely not the response expected when dealing with such harsh living circumstances. This *felicidade* – the happiness of the people, is very characteristic of the Trairiense and gives way to an optimism which in turn provides an interesting milieu for the subject of this thesis. To wrap-up the contextualization of my field site, I offer an excerpt from a poem by Maria Pia de Sales which captures the essence of Trairi:

---

<sup>27</sup> Trairi's human development index of 0.632 is relatively lower than Brazil's which amounted to 0.777 in 2005. Even more, the current index falls even lower than the Brazilian figure of 0.643 reported in 1975 (IPECE, 2005).



***“Vamos meu povo (...) Lutando fortes, sempre a progredir;***

Let`s go my people, (...) Fighting hard, to always progress;

***Corpo robusto, mente sã e pura; Mostrando a patria, quem é o Trairi”***

Robust body, sane and pure spirit: showing the nation who is Trairi.

(De Sales 1998: 190)

## **Chapter 4: Reflections on Fieldwork**

*“The anthropologist is an instrument of cultural translation that is necessarily flawed and biased. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears, and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered” (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 28)*

*“The challenge for anthropologists (...) is to use the power of our privilege to speak out about what is at stake for us and for our subjects as human beings and to do so without causing more harm” (Green 1999: 22)*

Through fieldwork experience, anthropologists have an obligation to develop original and efficient methods of research which will assist in the exploration of their selected topic. Green suggests that anthropologists “go into the field in an attempt to render intelligible the contradictions and complexities of people’s lives (...) [being] both witnesses to and participants in those very lives” (1999: 22). Rooted in the intrinsic nature of human exchange, the undertaking of fieldwork comes with immense responsibilities. The relationship between the fieldworker and the people being studied has been considered at length in the anthropological literature and is not regarded as an egalitarian one (Green 1999; Katz 1992; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Going to Trairi to research the predicaments of endemic hunger involved a constant negotiation of power relations as my ‘stranger status’ and socio-economic background implied that I was a privileged individual. Moreover, the people being studied constantly reminded me of my apparent powerlessness in the field, my vulnerability being situated within my inability to ever fully grasp their embodied cultural knowledge, their ‘habitus’ to use Bourdieu’s term (1977), regardless of the time spent in their community. Consciously, I

acknowledged the power imbalance between the one who studies and those being studied to ensure a careful examination of my overall methodological approach in the field.

To legitimize my role of a “cultural translator” (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 28) in the investigation of the socio-cultural construction of the *almoço* that reflects local discourses of hunger in Trairi, I needed clear methodological tools. This chapter will discuss the logistics and the various instruments of data collection privileged in my fieldwork. First, I highlight different ethnographic and ethical concerns that dictated my process. Second, I present and justify the various methodologies used. And third, I elaborate on my continually shifting positioning throughout the field experience.

#### **4.1. Ethnographic Concerns**

As mentioned earlier, Trairi was a location selected mostly by coincidence (see chapter 3). Upon my arrival and tour of the town in June 2005 however, I realized that it was a perfect setting for my fieldwork. I would not need to consider or re-consider a different site, an apprehension that existed long before my departure from Montreal. Though the *Centro* presented a sense of organization in a milieu of small businesses, I rapidly discovered that the periphery, located a short walking distance away, sheltered a population which encountered a different reality and different levels of poverty. Although I did not encounter starving individuals and emaciated bodies, I had the feeling that if the eating customs at an economically sound household such as the presbytery displayed certain nutritional shortcomings, surely the scenario would be worse for the people living in more precarious conditions. Moreover, the Trairiense displayed little energy, constant fatigue and an overall lethargic state in their daily activities; but, it was too early to deduce whether overall lack of activity was due to heat, hunger or simply

different cultural habits. In any case, I rapidly developed a need to explore this community's eating rituals and to decipher the phenomenon of hunger of the *Nordeste*.

While in the field, my research intentions were ambitious. I wanted to study how the urban poor Trairiense live and most importantly, how and what they eat. I wanted to establish whether endemic hunger was a concern for the Trairiense and if so, how they interpreted their everyday experiences of hunger socially and culturally. I wanted to assess their household economic realities. I desired to learn more about the food-related gender roles at play in the households of Trairi. And, of course, I had hoped to evaluate the real impact of Lula's *Projeto Fome Zero*, which proved impossible to do in the six months of my fieldwork experience. As I soon found out, these research guidelines were in fact very demanding and they could have sustained several research projects. Formulated as objectives, however, they enabled a more holistic approach in exploring the research question as their link to the inquiry grounded the investigation in the daily experience of endemic hunger.

Despite the wide range of data inspired by the different sub-questions aforementioned, there are still significant limitations within this thesis that are important to bring forward. The focus of this work is restricted to the socio-cultural construction of *almoço* and to the discourses of hunger in Trairi. Although a limited nutritional comparison will be discussed later (see chapter 6, section 2) in order to comprehend the implications of the condition of endemic hunger, this examination will not provide an in depth assessment of the meal composition breakdown in nutritional terms. As a means of comparison and analysis, it will only take into account the simpler nutritional aspects of a

balanced nutrition as stipulated by the Brazilian Food Guide, despite its cultural construction and political agenda.

Furthermore, although an understanding of household economics is fundamental, the weight of my argumentation will not rest in this material approach. Instead, household economics will only serve the purpose of contextualizing the challenges of food consumption. Moreover, despite the role of the political issues in the community of Trairi in defining and delimiting some of the problems related to the silencing of hunger, they will be acknowledged only when deemed necessary as this data is unfortunately incomplete. Accordingly, the emphasis will be placed solely on the social and cultural aspects of the meal as a daily social performance in households and as a space for subsequent reflections on the discourses of hunger.

A thematic exploration of malnutrition and undernutrition introduces ethical concerns that must be acknowledged. The main ethical dilemma rested in the necessity to eat while working with the different households. As observation and working patterns usually meant spending full days with the respective households, my need to eat<sup>28</sup> added additional stress to households who accepted to work with me. Since the Trairiense with whom I worked had access to little quantities of food, it proved quite problematic at times to eat with them as I represented an extra mouth to feed. Moreover, in the first month of fieldwork, my status of *pesquisadora* - researcher, which was synonymous with that of a special guest, rendered the negotiation of eating with different households and different household members quite difficult; individuals within these different households were given even smaller portions of food to consume to ensure that my nourishment be

---

<sup>28</sup> Most of the families that I worked with lived far away from the presbytery and I could not consider coming back home to eat. I could not either take a snack or a lunch bag with me – much too awkward to have food when your informants do not.

satisfactory and sufficient. Explaining that it was unnecessary and that I did not need to eat more than anyone else or even that I would be fine without food all together fell on deaf ears. As time passed, however, normalcy returned and I no longer received preferential treatment, being given the same amount of food as anyone else in the household and at times even a little less.

My occasional purchase of beverages or of small treats, such as a birthday cake, as a contribution to the *almoço* gave rise to another type of concern. Although I attempted not to interfere with food purchases or food contributions in order to reduce the possibility of upsetting the food dynamics of different households, I still found myself guilty of such actions. When these occurred, I did, however, thoroughly consider the ramifications and made sure to document my thought processes in my journal. Thus, although I infringed in these rare occasions the self-imposed boundaries between household members and myself, I did remain conscious of the direct and indirect consequences.

The idea of keeping a distinct emotional distance from my collaborators – the notion of self-imposed boundaries (see e.g. Dubisch 1995; Giovanni 1986; Rabinow 1977) was essential given the nature of the research topic. Nevertheless, constant negotiation of this boundary was needed as my relationships with the Trairiense became intimate, intimate in the sense that a significant level of trust was attained that allowed for the sharing of very personal information of their life challenges. In re-assessing the positionality of this boundary, I consciously and repeatedly evaluated the need for a balance between my role as a researcher and the sensitivity characteristic of the human listener (D'Andrade 1995). As a result, I believe that I was successful in situating myself

throughout my fieldwork while also displaying the necessary traits of understanding and compassion.

#### **4.2. Fieldwork Methodology**

My fieldwork was carried out in the city of Trairi, in the state of Ceará, during a six month period from early June to the end of November 2005.

Judging that my research interests were of relevance to his community, *Padre Francisco Neto de Sousa – Padre Neto*, in charge of the parish *Nossa Senhora Do Livramento* in Trairi, had agreed, prior to my arrival, to provide housing, food and other available support necessary for my work (see chapter 3, section 2). These arrangements were quite advantageous: they secured a minimum level of comfort and relieved the concerns of my own sense of food insecurity. *Padre Neto's* displays of respect for my presence, my work and our cultural differences enabled a smooth transition into my field site. Moreover, the full time presence of Paulina, the live-in administrator and care-taker of the presbytery did provide the necessary gender balance, preventing any discomfort for the priest or myself.

When in Montreal, my initial contact with *Padre Neto* was straightforward, slightly distant or maybe even impersonal. Upon my arrival in Trairi, our first meeting and my field entry were quite successful due to positive first impressions and a mutual acquiescence between the *Padre*, Paulina and I. Despite language challenges which were greater than anticipated, I was able to narrow down my actual field site location mostly because of the help, interest and encouragement offered by the women working in the presbytery. Much to my delight, *Padre Neto* contacted a local man, by the name of Paulo, who spoke a little English and a little French, who could assist me in my first

weeks of fieldwork. I felt reassured as I realized that I was receiving suitable guidance for the selection of precise field locations and important tips for the understanding of the Trairiense daily life. Moreover, these early relationships proved to be quite reliable as they flourished into a dependable research support.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, my methodology consisted mainly of participant-observation within households. Documenting information about food and its implications for individuals in the respective households were emphasized. In an attempt to better comprehend the lunch time meal, I decided to uncover the different factors and mechanisms involved in it. In particular, I was collecting data pertaining to the daily 'foodway habits', including the preparation, distribution, consumption and clearing of meals (Counihan 1999), to the relation between what foods are available and how the *almoço* menu is elaborated, and to the interaction between household members. More importantly, the first month of participant-observation provided valuable data that enabled a thorough direction for the interview questions that were to be formulated later on in the first half of my fieldwork. The selection of households to undergo participant-observation was simple: the first three families that I worked with were direct or indirect acquaintances of the women working at the parish. My visit to the *Fundação Antunes* (see chapter 5, section 1) put me in contact with four more households and, as one of my main informants sparked the interest of her entire *bairro* in my work, several additional households joined in.

The compilation of life-narratives and detailed case-histories of both women and men represents the second method of data collection. The different accounts offer insightful perspectives of daily life in Trairi. While the focus of the thesis is



predominantly on women, the male perspective is not omitted; rather, it provides an interesting instrument for comparison. In order to preserve the accuracy and authenticity of the stories, each session was recorded and each speaker authorized, in writing, the utilization of a tape recorder. The narratives were neither limited to the theme of hunger nor harshness of life and were selected with much freedom. I did not provide any pre-recording recommendations and I tried not to guide the direction of the subjects discussed. To the contrary, as much leeway as possible was given to the speakers, letting them decide on the nature of the issues discussed and the depth with which they wanted to expand on their topics: also, I made it clear that they could share as little or as much as they liked. This loose format transformed the formality of the sessions into a comfortable moment of reflexive re-counting while allowing for the development of trust between the speaker and the researcher. As a result, the experience as a whole was very positive.

Formal and structured interviews of sixty-five questions were my third method of data collection. All questions could be modified to suit the individuality of the interviewee. Some interviews had to be broken down into several sessions as it often proved impossible to do them all in one sitting. Also, I kept a written log of all interviews. In most cases, the interview served as a confirmation of what I had already witnessed in the first months of fieldwork. However, with main informants, the interviews offered additional depth and introduced new paths of reflection. As my overall level of comprehension quickly expanded, it allowed for the formulation of more sophisticated lines of questioning associated with food, eating, malnutrition and undernutrition.

An individual food diary is a prime instrument in recording daily food intake. Food diaries written in Portuguese represented my fourth method of data collection. I distributed twenty-eight diaries among six different households located in the three main *bairros* where I carried out my work. For a minimum of fifteen days, each household individual, up to five per household, completed the food log by recording all the food products eaten each day, indicating (1) the type of meal – breakfast (*café de manhã*), lunch (*almoço*) and dinner (*janta*); (2) the time of each meal (or snack); (3) where the foods were consumed; (4) what was eaten; (5) how many people ate with them; and (6) their individual mood at the time of the meal.

Although most households were able to fill out their food logs by themselves, the completion of the food diaries presented a huge challenge for several participants who like many others in Trairi are illiterate (see chapter 3, section 2). Consequently, the task had to be expanded over the entire fieldwork period as some households needed my daily assistance in completing their journals. All in all, the food diary enterprise was highly successful and provided an abundant amount of information and data (see different examples of the food diaries in chapter 6, section 1).

My preliminary fieldwork investigation had exposed contrasting views of the conceptions of *fome* (hunger), *desnutrição* (malnutrition) and *subalimentação* (undernutrition). Furthermore, the qualitative and empirical data revealed several nutritional inadequacies in the current eating patterns of my informants and their narratives suggested something different, however, a complete denial of the presence of hunger. The contradiction demanded additional exploration. In the last month of fieldwork, I presented a questionnaire to forty-six different acquaintances and established

contacts in Trairi – my fifth method of data collection. Presenting no wrong responses, the multiple-choice questions, formulated collaboratively by Paulina, Victoria and myself, stressed hunger terminology, hunger experiences and hypothetical scenarios.

My sixth method of data collection was a survey of thirty element-questions (see annex 2) administered twice during my fieldwork, first in early August and then in early November of 2005. It generated pertinent demographic information, namely the number of people living in the various households, their age, their occupation and their household economic situation which included the question of material ownership (goods). The sample was randomly selected in the three *bairros*. Accompanied by an associate in each *bairro*, I circulated from house to house to complete the survey. In most cases, the people were very guarded and bothered by my visit but eventually agreed to participate in the survey after casual conversation and, in some cases, after more convincing. In all, 186 survey forms were completed – 95 in August and 91 in November<sup>29</sup>. The survey identified several of the gaps in the existing social indicators in Trairi. To my surprise, there were hardly any significant variations between the first and the second survey.

My seventh method of data collection entailed the study and analysis of local literature, state logs, census and archives in order to further complement, at the micro level, the contextualization of the thesis. Documenting the setting, as experienced in 2005, was important as my long term objective is to return to Trairi at a later time for follow-ups on the evolution of *Projeto Fome Zero* and for longitudinal data comparison.

---

<sup>29</sup> During the November census, four household groups were missing. It did prove quite challenging to locate them as no one could tell if they had abandoned their house or if they had just left for a couple of weeks. In any event, the difference of total input between the first and second census did not impact the results drastically.

Throughout this thesis, several Portuguese words and expressions<sup>30</sup> are used to highlight a distinct meaning, a *nuance* that loses its particular cachet when translated into English. I will attempt to limit this practice to Portuguese words that do not have an equivalent English translation; at times, however, Portuguese idioms may be favoured if they accentuate a distinct mood. In addition, I must specify that all verbatim citations of interviewees' narratives are the result of my personal translation. At all times, I have tried to remain truthful to the essence and the sense of the discourse<sup>31</sup>.

Without a doubt and although the procedural structure seemed complex, the methodology privileged in my research allows for an extensive analysis of the thesis question and a favourable comprehension of the interconnectedness between the meal and hunger. Denzin's triangulation of methods (1989) provided me with a reliable set of tools and the assurance of solid interpretation of data while reducing to a minimum the biases that always prevail in ethnographic research (see e.g. Hammersley 1995; Tierney 2000).

#### **4.3. Negotiating my Place in Trairi**

*It is Friday morning, the sun is a clear soothing blue and the contrast with the lush green leaves of trees captures my attention as I leave the capital in route for my field site. The peaceful tropical scenery presents a complete contradiction with the nervousness forming in the pit of my stomach and although a panic state seems to be creeping up from within the inner most layers of my being, I continue to acknowledge a necessity for the work and the experience that I am about to embark upon. I sit anxiously in the Oceanview tourist bus headed for Mundaú, one of the new paradisaal destinations of the state of Ceará. Trairi, although not a regular stop on the itinerary, is on the bus route and the company has agreed to drop me off on the way. It is really happening: the year's*

---

<sup>30</sup> Each time a Portuguese word will be used for the first time in the text, an English translation will be provided.

<sup>31</sup> « Le processus [...] de la traduction est une recherche de la coïncidence la plus parfaite possible entre une idée et sa formulation, entre le sens et son expression. » (Delisle 2003: 193).

*preparation has come to an end and fieldwork is about to begin. Am I ready for such an experience? I believe so! Anyhow, I will soon find out!*

*Trairi – 20! Only twenty kilometres to go and, for a brief moment, petrified with fear, I consider turning back and not getting off the bus. From the top of a highway stretch, I see large sand dunes, I see the ocean in the distance and there it is, Trairi. Within a few minutes, I will be knocking at fieldwork's door. Down a small hill, over a short bridge and the bus comes to a stop. I am told to get my bags and to get off as this is Trairi. There I stand, on the side of the road at a gas station with my apple green luggage that seems too heavy to carry on my own. For what felt like an eternity, I just stood there: a stranger in a strange place attracting the inquisitive gaze of passers-by.*

The sentiment of being out of place was a constant undertone for the first weeks of fieldwork. As I walked along the streets of the *Centro*, I became extremely self-conscious of the apparent physical differences between the Trairiense and myself. I stood at least fifteen to twenty centimetres above the average person's height; I weighed significantly more than most women and even some men; my hair and eyes were quite fair in comparison to most other women; and my language skills were definitely not what they should have been. My confidence level was dropping by the second. The pebble streets offered at times quite a challenge and it was not unusual for me to trip every now and again. This only attracted more attention and, often, laughter. Such events and many more made me extremely aware of my situatedness: I was an "exotic character"<sup>32</sup> and the on-going tensions generated by my gender and my appearance would follow me around in the field. I soon realized that fieldwork did not only imply constant negotiations between collaborators and researcher but considerable adaptation with surroundings and, in my case, with the Trairiense in general.

---

<sup>32</sup> In many circumstances, I was often considered an "exotic character" as, for the Trairiense, I presented a very different idea of a young foreign woman: I was not a European tourist in passing; I was a North-American woman from a "cold" country that came to observe and question their way of being. This was a foreign notion to most.

My presence disturbed, to a certain extent, the everyday happenings of the town. As I was a constant figure of inquiry and, at times, perhaps even a slight annoyance due to my poking and prodding at a variety of different issues which heightened the overall concern for the general well-being in town. Conversations were often stopped when I would go into a store (*mercado*), and people questioned and discussed my presence, assuming that I did not understand what they were saying about me. Progressively, as people started to know me better and understand why I was there, they gently started to refer to me as *a canadense* - the Canadian, instead of *a estranha* - the stranger. It was nice to feel accepted and to realize that the Trairiense were on their way in making sense of my role and presence in Trairi.

As the Trairiense resolved the conundrum of my presence by the use of etiquette, I kept to my research objectives and the boundaries that I had set-up for myself as a fieldworker to define my own positioning. It proved difficult to remove the emotionality from my work and from my relationships while being continuously observed and being under the Trairiense microscope. As I became more involved and more accepted in town, I learned to balance the subjectivity that emerged as relationships developed with the necessary imposed psychological and emotional distance required for effective fieldwork, through a constant reflexive re-negotiation of my positioning in the field and of my behaviour toward my work and toward individuals in Trairi.

Somewhere in between the role I had to play to meet my research objectives and the interpersonal relationships that were created with informants and acquaintances, I managed to consider adaptability, flexibility, sensibility and growth in such a way that I remained aware of my shifting positionality. As a result, both the Trairiense and I

positively negotiated a manner in which to cope with some of the dissention that my presence was creating.

I end this section and the chapter with a vignette which expresses just how successfully this accommodation evolved over my six month period in Trairi:

*Anna – an extremely patient and understanding teenager, joined me to go run some errands on my first Monday afternoon in town. She helped me, with language and location, to find craft like stores where one might find materials to create a make-shift shower curtain<sup>33</sup>. As we walked to different craft stores, everyone we passed greeted Anna and ignored me or avoided my gaze. It was wonderful to see that Anna knew everyone in town, but so humbling that no one paid attention to me.*

*In the last week before I left the field, I found myself walking in the Centro of Trairi with Anna, as we had done so many times in the last six months. Yet, the roles were completely reversed. I was no longer the stranger. I was “a canadense” living in Trairi accompanied by one of the many adolescents (or children) that were routinely seen with me. People greeted me, discussed random customary topics with me, thanked me for the work that I had done in their town, asked if I was considering returning in the future and wished me well – vai com Deus (go with God)! As we returned to the presbytery, Anna commented: “you have become a Trairiense; now it is I who is unknown and unnoticed and you who is known by all. How things have changed since we first took this walk!”*

---

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly enough, in the presbytery, there is no separation between the shower, the sink and the toilet and no inclination in the floor to direct the water flow toward the drain; when one showers, water splashes everywhere and it becomes quite time consuming to keep objects dry and clean. The shower curtain - an estranged object to Anna (and to most Trairiense), was a must for my overall comfort and adaptability.

## **Chapter 5: People and their Everyday Experiences**

Endemic hunger and its representations are at the center of this thesis. Yet, I cannot explore such a sensitive topic without taking into account the lives of the individuals that experience it daily. This chapter is about the life stories of Trairiense women and men who agreed to work with me, whose smiles and *felicidade* – happiness, hide painstakingly the suffering of endemic hunger. The first section describes an event which holds importance for my fieldwork experience as it created the opportunity to meet the woman that became one of my more important collaborators. The second segment presents this woman, Victoria, and the narrative of her everyday experiences. In the third fragment, I bear witness to the life of another woman, not for what she shared with me but for how she let me observe and discover various aspects of her daily encounters. And I end with a section that brings to the fore the voices of other informants. As a result, this chapter attempts to illustrate, from my observations, perceptions and my informants' testimonies, an understanding of their everyday experiences that stresses the implications of being poor in the *bairros* of Trairi.

### **5.1. Opportunity and Coincidence: Meeting a Collaborator**

It was a beautiful sunny day like every other day in Trairi. I had been in Trairi for less than a week and this was my first official day in the field. I had already settled into what I would consider as my new home for the next six months, had written my first field journal and report, attempted to wash a load of laundry and organized all my work for the next couple of weeks. Paulo, a man in his late fifties and an acquaintance of *Padre Neto* was giving me a tour of *Centro*.



Prior to my departure for Brazil, I attempted to formulate scenarios which would allow me to meet different individuals, although I realized that, with flexibility, patience and a bit of luck, things would most likely just fall into place. After my first few hours with Paulo, who assumed that he would be of great service to me in the meeting of possible informants, I realized that I might be more successful on my own as my look of confusion and the sentiment of feeling slightly lost could work to my benefit in creating opportunities that would otherwise never take place. In addition, I assumed that acquaintances of Paulo might be biased or prove problematic as Paulo would always figure within the relationships that I was attempting to establish. As a result, I parted Paulo's company.

Shortly after, Gabriela, a young woman who I had previously met at the tourist information center and my first contact person in Trairi other than the women at the presbytery, invited me to *Fundação Antunes*, a foundation run by her boyfriend<sup>34</sup>. It was *São João Batista* day and celebrations were held all day long across the various communities, including the foundation. This provided a great opportunity for me to visit the foundation and as it turned out, a chance to meet Victoria. I remember this day as if it had just occurred.

During the short ten minute drive over to the foundation, seating in the box of an old greyish and rusty pick-up truck, I am stricken by the absolutely breathtaking scenery. On one side of the small sandy road is a beautiful river - the *Rio do Trairi*; on the other side, a mixture of luscious trees and, a little further, massive sand dunes. One can almost

---

<sup>34</sup> The foundation is located in *Crianco* in the *bairro* of *Boa Esperança* and appears much like the schools in Trairi. However, the place was independently founded and organized by one of the wealthier men in Flexeiras. His son - Gabriela's boyfriend, although not enjoying an honest reputation makes sure that the foundation remains functional as a legacy to his father.

imagine the sandy beaches and the smell of the ocean in the backdrop. With magnificent foliage all around us, the overall beauty of the area is captivating. In the moment, poverty and misery are easily forgotten as well as the importance of the task at hand.

After a left turn and then an abrupt change of direction between a few bent over branches, the building of the foundation appears to come out of nowhere, at the end of this stretch of a make-shift road. I am feeling completely overwhelmed and more often than not, I do not have a clue of what is being said to me. Mastering only rudimentary Portuguese in this early stage of my fieldwork, I resort to body language and to the odd word that I can easily understand to figure out what is being communicated to me, though the contexts and voice intonations reveal much more than I acknowledge. As a fieldworker, I do not yet feel very confident.

Many women and children are already there and await the director's entrance, it seems. Quite nervously, I get off the truck and both Gabriela and Roberto are by my side. The gazes I receive are completely different from the ones I received in the *Centro*. The children are amazed by my height and stature that differ so much from their mother's. Most children are curious and they pull their mothers by the arm to come closer to me. There I stand, looking down at these faces, feeling completely intimidated and out of place. But the children and the women's instant outpouring of warmth and sincere welcome fill me up with immediate joy. I start to relax and to feel comfortable amongst this group.

Very rapidly, I am at ease and I begin to converse with the women and the older children. They are so curious. They ask so many questions and when I am unable to answer, they patiently help me with my Portuguese, resorting to a variety of simple words

that allow me to understand. Surprisingly and with much conviviality, we speak for more than two full hours: the contact is established. But, more importantly, I meet Victoria.

### **5.2. Victoria: When Six Months Are Not Enough To Tell It All**

Of all the women in the crowd, one stood out. Her interest in what I had to say went beyond that of the other women. She asked a lot of questions; she was never satisfied with my answers: she always wanted to know more. Victoria is her name. As the initial interest of people wore off, she remained and we spent most of the afternoon together. Her three children – Carolina, Ricardo and Eliza, as well as her sister Dora and her niece Maya, all liked me instantaneously. There was something special about this moment as if it was meant for our lives to cross each other's that day!

I viewed this first meeting as an opportune moment to introduce and share my ideas and my research objectives with Victoria and she immediately expressed her willingness to work with me. I felt that this woman had a story to tell, she had a lifetime of stories to share with me. Before my departure from the foundation, she explained how to get to her home but my limited abilities in spoken Portuguese did not allow me to remember the finer details of the description of her house as there are no street name and house number<sup>35</sup> that identified her home. Thus, when I left the foundation, the only thing that I knew was that Victoria lived in *Boa Esperança*, in a yellow house at the top of a hill.

Finding Victoria was a huge challenge but I needed to find her because I knew that I had to see her again. One can imagine my surprise when I discovered that there are three *Boa Esperanças* in Trairi – lower, middle and high. Following this I had absolutely

---

<sup>35</sup> It is very difficult to locate people and houses in Trairi as there is no structured administrative street system established in any of the *bairros* to the exception of *Centro*.

no idea where to begin my search but I had no other alternative than to walk through each one of them. With much patience I walked every unpaved road, looking for any and every yellow house. And each time I saw a friendly face, I asked about Victoria. What I did not know is that Victoria was not originally from Trairi and nobody knew of her.

For three days, I walked every morning for five hours, from dawn until lunch time, without success. The openness and generosity I felt when I first met Victoria were guiding my search and, despite growing frustrations, I was ready to walk every morning until I would see her again. Finally, on the fourth day, I heard a child shouting with incredible joy: “*Catarina, Catarina...nos somos aqui...mãe, mãe...vem praca...Catarina está aqui!*”<sup>36</sup>. At last, I had found the place; my long and rigorous search had paid off. Yet, for some mysterious reason, I knew that it was not I who had found Victoria and her family, it was the children who had found me. Within a matter of moments, Carolina, Ricardo, Eliza, Dora and Maya, respectively 11, 7, 5, 12 and 4 years of age, were all around me, hugging me and dragging me to their home. Victoria ran from the house and rushed into the street. We exchanged a hug. She was extremely happy that I had found her and asked if I had any difficulties in locating her. I shared the experience of my last few days and we could not stop laughing. From that moment on, I became the new honorary member of the family. And, for the duration of my fieldwork, each time I went to *Boa Esperança* to work, I was greeted in much the same fashion, the children always running towards me as I arrived and I walking the last five hundred meters or so with one, sometimes two children in my arms.

Victoria lives in a modest yellow house near the beginning of middle *Boa Esperança* with her current partner Ronaldo and her three children. She has never been

---

<sup>36</sup> “Catarina, Catarina, we are here... mother, mother... come here, Catarina is here!”

married but has lived, at different times, with the different fathers of her children. She was close to thirty in age and maintained strong familial ties with four siblings which all lived close by in the same neighbourhood. Family values occupy a significant place in her life; during the time I spent with her, she had often turned to her sisters for guidance when making important decisions. Moreover, she always weighed the consequences of her decisions in light of how it might affect her extended family. She did not own many material goods: she had a small malfunctioning black and white television with poor reception, a few dishes and various items of clothing. Although Victoria made sure that her children had a shelter, were clothed and had food to eat, she wished that she could do more for them.

Her daily life was not so different from the other women I encountered in Trairi. In fact, most life stories seemed to present many similarities which suggest a correlation with other cases that refer to poverty (Kahn 1986; Lewis 1966; Narayan and Petesch 2002; Safa 1974). She was not employed and would probably not have time to be as her household duties were time consuming and strenuous. She did not have the luxury of items which would simplify her daily chores: no refrigerator to store and keep food fresh; no regular size gas oven<sup>37</sup> - her old mini-size gas oven worked at an extremely slow pace; no running water - water must be retrieved daily from a well located approximately one hundred meters from the house. The house was difficult to keep clean as dust, sand, mud and bugs always found their way inside despite the dusting and cleaning which was done twice a day. Her young children were walked to and from school each day. Under such conditions, being a mother was a hardship, especially when the children were sick or

---

<sup>37</sup> Although a regular-size gas oven would be great, the reality is that Victoria would not have the money to afford the purchase of the propane gas to run it.

when there was no food to feed them, which unfortunately occurred quite often. In fact, during my six months of fieldwork, there was only a period of three weeks in all where not one of her children was sick! Her words best describe how she viewed her daily activities:

*All moments of the day, the entire day is agitated ... when I must go to the street, I have to hurry because I have to leave the kids alone in the house. I'm scared to do this, but Eliza does not like to go to her grandmother's because of Marco<sup>38</sup>. So I tell them to sit still and watch TV and not to open the door to anyone (...) I lock them inside the house and I hurry. I must go really quickly. Only sometimes I leave them with my mother. When I get back, I make the meal, I finish to wash the dishes, I give the kids their bath, I take a bath, I serve them the meal. And it is hard with Eliza. I will sometimes have to feed Eliza, help Eliza because many times she will not eat. She does not like to eat; meals are always so difficult with Eliza. Then I will get her and Ricardo ready for school, I must walk with them to school and leave them. The day is always busy ... finish one thing and there's another thing to do. Water takes up most of the time; getting water is so time consuming. Almost every hour I must get water from the well, and water is needed for everything so I can't go to get water. Then I have to go back and get Eliza, her school is far, near the stadium just next to the gas station, you know, and everyday we go on foot (...) Ricardo comes back on his own. I worry. So we get back tired ... I'm so tired. When Ronaldo gets back from work, I'm always so tired and I don't have the courage and energy to deal with him. It's so difficult!*

Victoria was often stressed by the daily tasks she had to complete on a day-to-day basis. Almost every morning, when money was available, she went to the street to buy a tiny serving of meat at the meat market. Once back home, the time was spent preparing and cleaning the meat with vinegar and lemon juice in order to remove the bugs and other polluting agents. Then the meat was boiled, which took time. In the late morning hours, the rice and beans were also cooked. As there was no refrigerator and no pantry to store food, the cooking would be done in a particular order so that everything stayed clean.

---

<sup>38</sup> Marco is Eliza's seven year old cousin that lives permanently with Eliza's grandmother.

Otherwise, as soon as raw food was left unattended to on the wooden table, ants, flies and several other insects manifested an interest for it and devoured it.

Victoria was aware that food preparation and cooking were not done in the best sanitary conditions and she was often worried about illnesses and health issues, especially in regard to Eliza and Ricardo. Her five year old daughter did not like to eat. Having only limited access to food since the day she was born, Eliza had not been able to develop regular eating habits or a liking for certain foods. Victoria often found that her daughter was also a picky eater, a fact that complicated the situation further. As an example, “she does not like meat because she has never had a chance to really try it and develop a taste for it” said Victoria, but as I observed it, when there was meat to be consumed, there was never enough on the table for the entire family. Moreover, her small stomach filled easily. This was challenging and stressful for Victoria as she had to, at times, force feed Eliza with the little food that was available.

For Victoria, fetching water was another time consuming task and one that was also physically demanding. Although the well was within short walking distance of the house, she had to fill two huge barrels, twice a day, with a small bucket, for bathroom use and one other thigh-high container for household and kitchen tasks. As the water was being use constantly throughout the day, this task was continuous. Furthermore, well water was a source of problems other than that of simple logistics.

*A lot of times, the water isn't treated and we've already had a lot of problems with the water (...) the children are sick all the time (...) and they are tired and weak because they don't get enough food to get strong and the water makes them weaker.*

*For a long time, our drinking water came from the same well as the water to do everything else, but my kids kept getting sick (...) Eliza and Ricardo were so sick all the time. Now, we try to get drinking water from the well*

*near Marcia's house -my mother's house (...) they say the department of health treats this water (...) but sometimes this is not possible. The water situation is really difficult and to make it better, we need money, but we don't have any. What can I do?*

To make the water safer to drink, Victoria boiled it on her little gas stove.

However, 30 BRL, the price of gas, is often difficult to come by. Thus, Victoria had grown to depend on the generosity of her mother's household to provide clean drinking water from their treated well. This option was not ideal but Victoria felt that there was nothing else she could do: her children's health came first.

While I was working in Trairi, the region encountered a period of unprecedented violence. Although the community experiences violence on a regular basis, the change in the level of violence allowed Victoria to express her ideas about some of the constraints and lacuna of life in Trairi:

*Violência results from the lack of work, from culture, lack of education, lack of support, lack of conversation, lack of so many things (...) sometimes lack of friendships, so many things, it is hard to explain. There's no work, so there is a loss of dignity and what are people to do. (...) I want to work but there is none, so I don't have enough money and I ask for money, but my friends (and family) don't have any either, we are in need of so many things (...) and everyday the stomach is hungry, the soul is hungry (...) so many things are missing. Sometimes I think, oh! I will make a snack, the kids are hungry, but I have no fridge, how can I consider this idea when I can't store food to even make a snack? Everything is so complicated and I am stressed all the time, I worry even more when I know my kids want something, but I can't offer them anything. I feel depressed sometimes, and it hurts my heart, my head. My sisters' lives are so much easier. Maybe it's o jeito delas - their way that makes their situations easier. (...) I want better things for my family but it is hard because one can only hope. There is not much I can do but conform to this way of life (...) it's hard! What is happiness? You must know happiness as your dreams come true, but mine remain unfulfilled. My children are my only source of happiness. (...)*

*Ah meu Deus (Oh my god)! Life here is so complicated (...) everything would be better with work, oh, everyday seems worst, everyday has its challenges and I don't always have the energy or the courage to face each day. Are you not scared (...) so many things to worry about!*



Victoria was always worried. She did not believe that she was able to provide everything her children needed and desired. And in her conversations with me, she often painted a negative picture of her life and of herself. Yet, when I observed and talked with Victoria, my impression was very different. She was a strong woman who was devoted and conscientious of everyone's needs in her household. Her organizational skills and the way she ran the house – planning chores and executing them, managing food and preparing meals while caring for children, partner and family, were exceptional. In her resourcefulness and in the way she managed her days, Victoria was quite resilient. Scheper-Hughes's (1992) ethnography makes allusions to the resilience of Brazilian women. Hence, in dealing with her several daily responsibilities and commitments, Victoria always found the energy to get everything done and kept her mood positive for her children. She was an inspiration to me throughout my entire fieldwork.

For Victoria, other tribulations heighten a general sense of anxiety. In the next passage, she speaks of her relationship with Ronaldo, her current partner and Eliza's father. I asked if she thought they shared equal responsibilities in the home:

*Sometimes yes, but most of the time no ... men have much more freedom than women...and they get out more (...) especially if they work outside the home (...) when they return, or on the weekend, he will go out (...) go to the bar, buy, drink beer (...) he will have fun and have a good time. Women cannot do that, they must always stay in the house (...) she must stay at home and take care of the kids, prepare the meal, and as you have already seen, this is really difficult, it takes so much time to get the meal ready. I'm always making the meal! (...) he does not like it when I go out, even to the small market, so it is he on the weekend that leaves the house to get the few things we can afford.*

*We argue a lot as well (...) he finds his work stressful so when he is at home, he does not want to be bothered by the children (...) he wants to relax and rest, but he does not seem to think that my staying at home, taking care of the children, walking Eliza to school and then I must walk*

*Ricardo to school, preparing the meal, washing the dishes all the time, washing the clothes, constantly getting water (...) all this is work, it is hard work. I'm stressed too, but that doesn't matter. After all, I'm just the woman of this house. He gets home from work, expects a little something to eat even when there is nothing, takes a bath and goes to bed. I'm always left with all the work. (...) I know there is no money, yet I still have to find a way to feed my children. He just brings home money, and it isn't enough. I'm worried all the time, I'm tired all the time but that's not important. I don't get a break (...) ever! He gets to rest when he wants (...) because he says he's stressed from his day-to-day work, so he will do nothing in the house. This situation is hard, it is really hard.*

And when I asked if men consider themselves better than women, Victoria added:

*Yes, extremely and this is really bad (...) they think they are better because they work and can pay part of the bills (...) they think they can do anything while I can do nothing. But what can I do, I have no money of my own and I have to feed my kids!*

Responsibilities for men and women are very different in Trairi and so is the scope of the word freedom. In her relationship with Ronaldo Victoria had few liberties. She was very much constrained to his will and whims and felt that she could not displease him as she was completely dependent on his small income. Being dependent meant that she could not go *na rua*<sup>39</sup> for personal reasons. Her trips had to be in relation to household necessities or religious purposes. She could not attend, alone or in small groups, *fórró* – local dancing parties; she could only participate when Ronaldo wanted to go. Even amongst a group of women composed mainly of sisters and friends, she was denied permission to attend such *festas*. Similar female/wife constraints rather, have been documented by Lancaster (1992). For instance, on an occasion when Victoria's entire family and

---

<sup>39</sup> In Trairi and in Brazil or even in Portugal (Cole 1991) for example, there are two social environments complementary to each other, that of *na casa* – in the house and that of *na rua* – in the street. Socio-cultural customs and rules vary from one sphere to the other (DaMatta 1995; Hess and DaMatta 1995). So a behavior that may be appropriate of women in their home may be absolutely frowned upon in the street. Women may be a little outspoken in their households in Trairi (at least in the households where I worked), but they must be absolutely submissive in the public arena.

I had organized a surprised birthday party for her mother Marcia. A simple dinner of rice mixed with a beef bouillon followed by some dancing in the town square had been organized. Victoria had mentioned all the details to Ronaldo who had agreed to participate in this event. Few hours before the beginning of the evening festivities, he changed his mind and Victoria was not allowed to attend. In fact, Ronaldo categorically denied Victoria permission to join in the later revelry. Despite a tension felt by all guests, nothing could be done to persuade Ronaldo to let her come with us. In many of the daily events in Victoria's life, she found herself in a position that left her with few options. This gender status inequality was not exceptional to Trairi. It finds its root in gender norms and relations in Northeast Brazil and in historical traditions that continue to be a cultural driving force there (see e.g. De Castro 1966; Goldstein 2003; Rebhun 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

Victoria's position and obligations as wife and mother appeared somewhat overwhelming at times yet she did not let these challenges discourage her. She did adopt a specific *jeito* – a manner of thinking and coping that is common for many of the women with whom I worked. In her ethnographic study of migrant women working in factories in the Northeast of Brazil, Carrier-Moisán (2005) has explored such a phenomenon with much depth and stresses the various mechanisms employed by women to overcome their hardships. She refers to this as the *luta das mulheres* – the struggle of women, and argues that women in Cascavel find ingenious ways to negotiate their *jeito* as migration has placed them in a paradoxical situation whereby the improvement gained by their newly found economic independence has increased their daily struggle for class and

gender equality (Carrier-Moisan 2005). In Trairi however, the sentiment or the occurrence is different. Oftentimes, it was preferable not to ponder why life is as it is. It was better to avoid certain topics which question why daily obligations are so demanding. This way of being, this particular characteristic often inherited through socialization, is well presented by Victoria:

*One needs to adapt to whatever one has... we have to learn to accept our reality. The children often want things that I cannot give them, so they must learn to want only what we have. If they always ask for what they cannot have, they will be sad and miserable. Conforma -conforming is important! It's a way of understanding and accepting how things are because we can't change the situation but at the same time, it's bad, because we comply with everything and don't expect to change things, we don't try to improve our fate, so it's bad too. This is what my mother taught me. (...)There is nothing simple here in Trairi.*

The notion of conformity- *conformidade*, introduced above is important in order to understand how endemic hunger works and how it is being silenced. For people, this idea of compliance diminishes any compelling need to question the inequalities that are at work in the *bairros* of Trairi<sup>40</sup>. However, it also removes the sense of agency so necessary to encourage the initiative and the drive to bring about change. And it is the resilience stemming from the notion of conformity that supports the discourse of mothers when they explain to their children the lack of food quantity and quality, the need to accept that what one has is what is available and the universality of injustices that plague all neighborhoods.

Victoria's story and her narratives serve to illustrate the difficulties of every day life experienced by some people in Trairi. Her testimony also sheds some light on the community's structural violence (Farmer 2003) as it situates realities found in urban poverty and by extension, endemic hunger.

---

<sup>40</sup> The inequalities that exist in Trairi echo on a micro level the whole situation of the *Nordeste*.

### 5.3. Antonia: “Bearing Witness”<sup>41</sup>

Meeting Antonia was no coincidence. We met the very first day I arrived in Trairi when she stopped by the presbytery to visit her sister Paulina<sup>42</sup>. Although the introduction was brief, two days later, I saw her for the second time in *Corrégo dos Furtados*, the *bairro* of Padre Neto’s childhood. After being given a tour of different areas of Trairi by Paulina and Padre Neto, we all enjoyed the afternoon swimming in the *lagoa* - a small lake, facing Neto’s house. On the way back, we visited Paulina’s mother’s house which Antonia was also visiting, coincidentally. She was reserved, shy perhaps and the language barrier made the communication difficult at first. I smiled, she smiled back: this is where the relationship stood! In the weeks that followed, I saw and spoke briefly with Antonia when she came to the *Centro* to purchase goods and visit with her sister at the presbytery.

I was often puzzled about Antonia because I could read neither her mannerisms nor her reactions with much accuracy. I did not know what she thought of my presence in Trairi as a researcher, nor could I fathom if she had any intention or desire to work with me despite the fact that, on several occasions, I had voiced my interest of working with her. Through our spontaneous meetings we developed mutual curiosity about each

---

<sup>41</sup> Paul Farmer (2003) uses this term when writing on the plight of the oppressed. Much like his experiential stories and his testimony, I introduce Antonia mainly from my observations as her narrative was captured in an informal manner. I conducted two interviews with her but too often her answers were either a “yes” or a “no” or a complete silence: Antonia was not able to express her own understanding of things in depth. Thus my writing of her life story reflects necessarily a partial testimony of her life, such testimony being an interpretation of what I observed and witnessed.

<sup>42</sup> Paulina is the permanent live-in resident in the presbytery; she is in charge of the general administration and of the kitchen; she has been working for *Padre Neto* for the last fifteen years.

other. Fortunately for me, one month into my fieldwork, an unexpected event<sup>43</sup> helped facilitate the connection and allowed for the sealing of a working partnership.

Eventually, I no longer needed to meet with Antonia at the presbytery or at her mother's house; I was now invited into her house.

At a height of approximately 150 centimeters, Antonia is neither extremely thin nor heavy. Her body appears to be strong because she displays phenomenal stamina; nevertheless, Antonia shows obvious signs of malnutrition. Her arm and leg muscles are weak and her skin is marked with either infectious scabs or with scars that have deformed the skin texture in several places.

The second of seventeen children, she has lived her entire life in *Corrégo dos Furtados*. Having attended school for less than two years when she was a child, Antonia still does not know how to read and struggles when writing her name. She has been married for twenty seven years to Francisco, a manioc farmer and spiritual healer. She has fond memories of their courtship years when they were *namorados*, girlfriend and boyfriend: "Those were happier times", she contends. They have six children: four daughters - Rosa (26), Isabella (19), França (16) and Francia (13) and two sons - Josué (23) and Claudio (21). Antonia was pregnant seven times out of which one of her children was stillborn. She expresses little sadness at the loss of her child and explains that such an outcome is normal for women like her. Scheper-Hughes (1992) documents

---

<sup>43</sup> On July 10<sup>th</sup> 2005, a thief, looking for a large amount of money, broke into the presbytery during mass and, as there was no money to be found, stole my audio-tape recorder. Paulina, having discovered the break-in and seen the thief, experienced a severe shock which necessitated an emergency hospitalization. I later confronted the thief, retrieved the recorder and convinced the young man to meet with Padre Neto. As the thief, a repeat offender and I walked back to the presbytery, he was beaten up by a local man and Padre Neto mostly observed but also assisted in the attack. Shortly after, the criminal was dropped off at the police station and arrested. For having found the thief and having him arrested, the community thanked me for several days. As an immediate result, the bond of trust between Paulina, her family and myself grew much stronger: I was no longer a stranger, I had become a cherished family friend because I had placed Paulina's needs above my own.

brilliantly how women living in extreme poverty are accustomed to unsuccessful pregnancies and high child and infant mortality. In fact, Antonia is happy to say that she has had six successful births and that, although her children may not have always eaten everyday and at times have had serious health problems, they all lived to adulthood. Without a doubt, Antonia is both mentally and emotionally strong woman.

For my first visit of her household, it was easier to meet up with Antonia at her mother's house. From there, we headed down a small ravine at the back of the house in a direction unknown to me. Of course, to Antonia, this trek was familiar and as she was not walking very quickly, I kept sinking into the sand and stumbling after each and every step just trying to keep up. Keeping up was such a challenge that I failed to notice the magnificence of the area. We arrived at a small water crossing where a four meter rotting log was strategically positioned to reach the other side. As Antonia leaped over with grace, I wondered if the log could hold my weight and whether I would be able to get to the other side without losing my balance and falling into the water. I successfully made it to the other side but my apparent and numerous balance checks did create much amusement. Quite interestingly, a home-made ramp was built and installed by the time of my second visit.

That day, Antonia brought me to a deep man-made waterhole that is somewhat protected by a cover made of tree leaves; its source is the small river we had just crossed. Clothes are washed in this waterhole and the water needed for personal hygiene and household chores is also collected from it. Drinking water is usually provided by her mother's well but it is not uncommon to drink water from the waterhole.

For a few more minutes, we walked up a steep incline through bushes and flora. As we arrived near her home, we were greeted by two large bony dogs, one white with black spotting and the other completely black, which barked ferociously and would not let me take one more step. Two of Antonia's daughters rushed to the scene to give me assistance. I must have been ghostly white from this encounter as I am not too fond of dogs. With the dogs secured, we approached the house.

Her house (see photograph 1) is of wood and dried mud. Three small rooms sit over a compacted dirt floor. Two cut out windows on one of the larger walls provide daylight and make way for aeration. There is no electricity. The kitchen, stained with dark black spots from the smoke of the traditional wood stove, is at one end of the habitation. A small rack holds few cooking tools: two pots for coffee, a stockpot, four plates and some utensils. No food items can be seen and there is no storage space. Hidden in a corner, a small tin of cooking oil and a plastic container with the word sugar written on it constitute the household food reserves. Beans are setting to boil which causes the room to be extremely hot due to poor air circulation. In what appears to be the sleeping quarters, hammocks are rolled up and rest on the hooks on the wall while a small cupboard provides shelter for the clothing that dresses the entire family. The last room, which gives way to the front door, is mostly bare: there is a tiny wood table and one chair flanked by four covered *renda* bundles<sup>44</sup> on the floor. There is no bathroom and no water tap. The odd food items and dishes are washed in an old sink in the yard. And a little off to the side, a hut made of wood and leaves provides a space for personal hygiene with a pit and a small water container to clean oneself (see photograph 2). Six people live in

---

<sup>44</sup> *Renda* is a type of handcraft lace usually made by women. It is a local way of making clothes (dress, camisole and skirt) that are sold for extra income. In the case of Antonia, the lace making represents the only income of her household.



this house at all times. However, when all of Antonia's children and grand-children visit, it can host up to twelve individuals.



**Photograph 1: Antonia's House**

Antonia's daily routine does not offer much variety. Every morning, she awakes at the first sign of sunlight. She makes her way, without disturbing the sleepers in the house, to the waterhole to refill the water barrel for personal hygiene. During this water trip, she also gathers sufficient fire wood to boil a pot of water to prepare the morning coffee and manages to take care of her own cleanliness by bathing and changing into her second set of clothing. Once the coffee is ready, she drinks a small cup; the serving size is perhaps no more than what might be considered the size of a short espresso, and heads immediately to her mother's home.

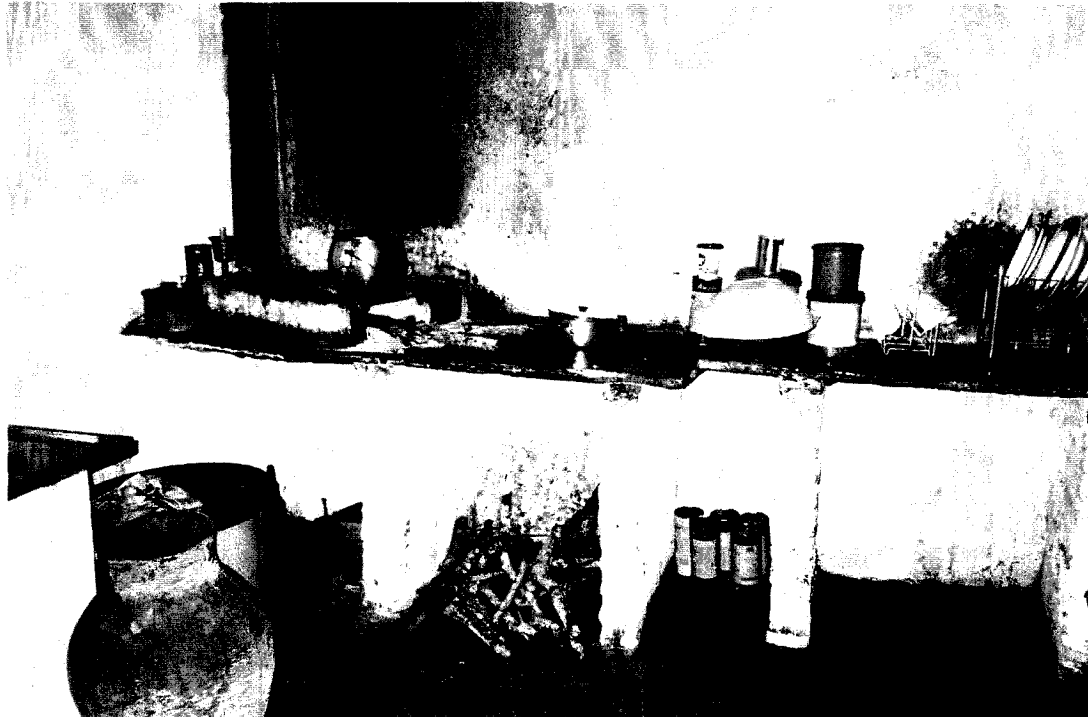


**Photograph 2: Antonia's Outdoor Sink and Personal Hygiene Space**

Although she has many duties of her own, Antonia, at 44 years of age, contributes daily to the morning chores in her mother's household as her mother has grown too old and too frail to take care of mundane household tasks. Her youngest brother lives with their mother but, at twenty-one years old, he cannot do everything on his own. In fact, Olivia, Antonia's sister also participates in the familial responsibilities. In return, Josefine – the aging mother, gives her daughters a small percentage of her monthly governmental old age allocation and often provides extra food, mostly meat, to feed her grand-children. Every morning, the water barrels must be filled up and the main common areas must be cleaned. Both Antonia and Olivia often assist in the lunch preparation for

Josefine's household, though most decisions are taken by their younger brother as he is in charge of orchestrating the meal. From large barrels in a storage area where main staple food items such as rice, beans and manioc flour are kept, they gather a sufficient quantity of rice and beans to feed two to three households - Olivia's, Josefine's and sometimes Antonia's when she does not have anything to feed her own family. On Sundays, when most of Josefine's family spends the day together, up to thirty people share the main meal of rice and beans.

Both the rice and the beans are carefully examined for bugs and impurities and separated into two piles – one that is comestible, the other to be thrown away or given to animals – mainly hens and dogs. Meal preparation and cooking, given the traditional wood stove (see photograph 3) is very time consuming and it can take hours to boil both



**Photograph 3: Josefine's Traditional Stove**

the rice and the beans.

Once her chores are completed at her mother's house, Antonia returns to her home and begins the meal preparation of her own household around nine o'clock in the morning. The same ritual of rice and bean triage and cooking is carried out when food is not given to her by Josefine. When cooking is not required, Antonia uses the time to clean the house, collect firewood, fetch additional water and tend to the manioc field next door. It is unclear if she owns this small field but, oftentimes, the manioc from this field is her only reliable source of food.

The *almoço* in her household is rarely consumed with all household members in attendance at the same time. But, even though the menu is not always appealing or does not provide for large servings, all of her children will eat whatever foods she prepares. Antonia does not like to ask her family or anyone else for food, despite her mother's generosity. "Much shame is felt – *fica com vergonha*, when I must resort to this option" she says. When the rice and beans are cooked, Antonia serves her family when they are ready to eat. Her husband and her son Claudio often work in the manioc fields and take their meal together. Her three teenager daughters eat before the beginning of Francia's afternoon classes. Antonia eats only when everyone else has eaten. Too often, what is left of the food allows only for a very small serving: "This is how things need to be", adds Antonia, "a mother and wife must place her husband and children's needs above her own. I will manage".

As the afternoon heat is burdensome, it is best to stay inside the house to reduce the required amount of physical work to its minimum. This is the time when I usually met with Antonia. I arrived after the meal as I did not want to impose an additional

mouth to feed on a family that struggles and has even less to eat than most households participating in my research. Contrary to the local habits, Antonia and her daughters do not take early afternoon naps – *descansa*. They sit in the bare room at the front of the house and work on their *renda* (see photograph 4). For the entire afternoon, all four women work hard at their craft, focusing and concentrating on their respective clothing patterns. Gossip and stories are exchanged during this time but it is not uncommon to see the women work in total silence.



**Photograph 4: Antonia's Daughter and her *Renda* Bundle**

In the evening, the older children attend night classes. There are three different time blocs when school is attended - morning, afternoon and evening. Students, especially parents, select the preferred time slot for school attendance, but sometimes they have no options. In the case of Antonia, her older children attend school at night as they must travel to the *Centro* and transportation is available only in the evenings. On most days, there is no evening meal for Isabella and França; only a cup of coffee and a little manioc flour are available for consumption they tell me. Despite the household's poverty, overall personal appearance remains important especially for the girls: they bathe, pick-out their best outfits, comb and fix their hair and oftentimes apply a little make-up<sup>45</sup>. The girls travel to school with other cousins and friends on a truck driven by a male volunteer from the *bairro*. As Claudio, who no longer attends school, and Francia, Antonia's youngest, make their way to their grand-mother's house as they must keep her company and spend the night there, the others leave for school. Sleeping at their grandmother's house gives Josefina's grandchildren the opportunity to watch television and evening *novelas* which is a welcomed change of pace. This time alone at home is cherished by Antonia and her husband. They get to spend quality time with each other and often share both the experiences and frustrations of the day. This moment alone also provides a moment of rest. As the house does not have electricity, the couple usually goes to bed soon after sunset. In this manner, the lack of an evening meal is quickly forgotten and it is easier to sleep away the pain of hunger while waiting the morning hour for a much craved cup of coffee.

Many of the challenges faced by Antonia, whether related to household chores

---

<sup>45</sup> As there is almost no work in Trairi, many women sell Avon cosmetic products. The market is quite competitive as many women resort to this option, but it does secure a few extra dollars as well as interesting material benefits such as skin care products, soaps, shampoos and make-up.

and work, gender inequalities or nutrition, are linked to her difficult economic situation. Similar hardships are documented by Goldstein (2003), whereby the uncertainties of everyday life for Gloria, the central protagonist of the ethnography, are brought to the fore in a Rio de Janeiro *favela*. Despite her low income as a house worker, Gloria is able to feed her charge of fourteen children amongst a setting where “poverty, inequality, racism and violence are everywhere [and are] so pervasive that they are sometimes hard to see” (Goldstein 2003: 27). Antonia, in contrast to Gloria, does not have a job outside the home, yet she too must find ways to access income to feed her children. As many siblings within her extended family have a *casa de farinha*, a flour making house (see photograph 5), Antonia often turns to this option to earn a little money.



**Photograph 5: Production of *Farinha de Mandioca***

Accordingly, every fifteen days, she will work there, peeling manioc and assisting in the packaging of the final product for approximately ten hours a day for two to three days at a time.

Women can participate mainly in two of the five tasks performed in the making of manioc flour. This work is not available all the time and pays very little. A female worker earns 5BRL a day and *almoço*. When the owner of the *casa de farinha* does not have sufficient money to pay the workers, he (or sometimes she) gives the workers a 30kg bag of flour per household, which sells for approximately 30BRL in the town market, an equivalent of one full day of work for a household of six individuals. The flour pay-off is of the same value as the salary but, for Antonia, money is of much greater value than flour. Flour, when eaten, provides a feeling of fullness to the stomach; money however, allows for the purchase of food that is high in nutritional value, so needed for a balanced nutrition.

The sale of *renda* is another source of revenue. Once a month, a woman from Fortaleza comes to *Corrêgo dos Furtados* and purchases all of the items of clothing produced in the various households: a camisole or a skirt sells at 10BRL, a full length dress, 20BRL<sup>46</sup>. Antonia counts on making 20BRL a month with her craft. However, as several women practice this trade for extra income, sometimes there are too many articles of clothing for sale. As the woman from Fortaleza does not have enough money to buy everything that has been made, Antonia often has to wait until the subsequent month to sell her production.

---

<sup>46</sup> Of course, business being business, the tourists buy these items at a price that is at least twice the initial purchasing price.



Her husband Francisco works the land with other male relatives. They tend to the manioc fields for the various *casas de farinha* in the *bairro*. In return for their labour, they sometimes bring part of the daily production back home for personal consumption. Francisco cannot get work in Trairi: he does not have the required qualifications to teach at a small school or work at the *prefeitura*<sup>47</sup> and he is too old to be employed on a construction site. In any event, Francisco does not bring money home.

Antonia's only other means of income is received from *Projeto Fome Zero*, via the government initiatives of *bolsa familia* or *bolsa escola*. Antonia gets 50BRL a month, which is the maximum amount provided under the *bolsa familia* program, but is not granted any money under the *bolsa escola* program even though two of her children are under the age of sixteen and go to school full time. Unfortunately, subsidies are arbitrarily assigned by the local administrators (see chapter 3, section 6) and there is neither an appeal procedure that Antonia is aware of nor did I discover one. Furthermore, due to government shortages in the face of the large number of local demands, this money is not always distributed regularly.

In the best case scenario, Antonia has 80BRL per month to run her household of six, which includes two adults and four teenagers. Therefore, the purchase of food is very taxing. Clearly so, considering that the price of certain goods, such as rice for example, sells for 1.20BRL per kilo and an average of 25kgs are required monthly. In short, to provide rice and beans for one month, Antonia must spend 72BRL. In a month when finances are good, she is left with approximately 8BRL to buy such items as cooking oil, sugar, salt, coffee, bread, pasta and meat – whether it is chicken, beef, pork or fish. So, how does she manage? How does she provide at least one meal a day for her

---

<sup>47</sup> The schools and the *prefeitura* are the two main employers in Trairi. See chapter 3, section 6.

children? How does she keep going, day in and day out, without getting discouraged and/or feeling sorry for herself? She has no money, no work and only little quantities of food. Moreover, her situation is not unique; I witnessed similar hardships in five other households in the three different *bairros* during my six month stay in Trairi. I was never able to answer these aforementioned questions but if these questions are very complex, so are their answers. I do not contend that my thesis attempts to offer even a satisfactory or a complete response to such inquiries. However, in exposing some of Antonia's dilemmas, the intention is to describe one example where harsh economic constraints and important food deprivation plague the daily experience of her household. Of course, this case does not apply to all citizens of Trairi, yet, it is definitely not the worst that I witnessed either. But if what is illustrated here is not the worst case scenario, it is still a very precarious situation when buying the most basic food supplies to feed one's household is a huge, if not impossible, undertaking.

#### **5.4. Trairiense Talk: Different Voices**

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have introduced, with much detail, the experiences of two Trairiense women. In their narratives, they express a feeling of anxiety, stress and continual concern for daily challenges and specifically for the provision of the *almoço*. One clearly perceives their daily struggles as the information shared is not specific to their own experiences; it reflects the general situation in Trairi. The following narratives complement my observations and come to speak to a context of poverty, which my informants are a part of. Indeed, my greater sample for this thesis is composed of eleven households (with six of them being my main household participants that took part in the food diary exercise [chapter 4, section 2 and chapter 6, section 1]),

where thirteen women and six men constitute the actual basis for the interview component of my fieldwork. Of course, other members from the eleven households as well as other acquaintances of Trairi have shared their ideas and thoughts with me about their daily life experiences, for this thesis however, I privileged the testimony of informants with whom a relationship of trust had developed.

Moreover, I find it important to highlight the main theme that emerges from the narratives: throughout this chapter, it is the miserable aspects of my interviewees' lives that prevail as such were the nature of my exchanges with them. I cannot offer an explanation for this preference. As I considered any discussion pertaining to endemic hunger and poverty to be sensitive, I strived to create a milieu where informants would feel comfortable to share any experience with me. This approach, however, may have slightly jaded my results as the more positive aspects of my informants' daily experiences were not expressed

The stories that follow serve to bring into sharper focus the different perceptions and understandings that the people I worked with have in regards to their everyday experiences. In the next section, I introduce other Trairiense and let their narratives express much of what I witnessed. Their life experiences shed more light on the difficulties encountered by the urban poor of Trairi.

#### **5.4.1. Julia's Story**

Julia is a twenty-three year old young widow who lives with her mother in *Boa Esperança*. Her husband was brutally killed in a gas station robbery, less than six months before my arrival in the field. Julia's situation however, is rather atypical due to the fact that she receives a widow's pension from the government. Accordingly, she is

economically independent. As she has neither children nor other major financial commitments, she finds herself obligated to contribute part of her money to help her mother's household budget because she lives with them. Hence, her economic contribution has elevated her status within the household placing her on an almost equal footing with her mother. The new balance of power tends to create, at times, some tensions between mother and daughter. Julia, describing a normal day:

*On a normal day, people will awake around 8, have a little something for breakfast – usually only coffee, take care of household chores, like wash dishes, sweep and clean the house, sometimes we go to the street to buy a few things, to buy the things that we need or a little meat, make the meal; we will eat around 12; in the afternoon we rest, a little sometimes, (...) I really like to rest after lunch but sometimes sleeping during the day gives me a headache, so I prefer to read a little, read the bible mostly (...) we also like to watch a little television in the afternoon, there is nothing better to do. Then, we have to take care of the house again, fetch the water again and sweep the house again. If there are leftovers from lunch, I try to come up with a little something to eat for dinner but there is not much to eat at night. Everyday is the same. Things don't change for me.*

Julia has an established routine. Her day-to-day obligations do not change and she is content to think that this is how it should be. Yet, she explores other challenges:

*Many times, most of the time, I feel quite tired. (...) The pressures of everyday are huge, things are difficult. There are so many things to take care of everyday; one day is never long enough. I must go to the street, to make various payments for my mother, arrange her things – you know, she doesn't always make things easy for me, or to buy a little meat to feed everyone. I feel pressure because Mãe depends on me. She relies on me too much, this is difficult. And there are all the problems with water, it goes unnoticed sometimes because we are accustomed to the work that is needed everyday, but water is a problem, it is a big problem. People who have access to water are not like us, they are better, things are easy for them. When you have water, everything is simpler. (...) My responsibilities are big. Sometimes, I'm really tired because the house is big (...) I walk a lot, from the kitchen to the storage where we keep the gas stove, to prepare and make all the meals. There is so much coming and going within the house; running around (...) and the heat. And the water problems make everything hard. Pai is tired more than anyone else because he is in charge of fetching the water – water to drink, water for*

*hygiene, water to cook food, water for everything. He suffers the most from the water challenges. But we all do. I can perceive that he is really tired. He and I work the most in the house, so it is normal for us to be the most tired. But it is mostly the stress that makes me weak (...) the stress and constant anxiety, I worry all the time. And I work too much!*

Much like in Victoria's and Antonia's cases, water is a primordial concern for Marcia's and Julia's household. Poverty is another factor that increases anxiety as a sense of security is never felt. In the following passage, Julia talks about what it means to be poor:

*There are many things that have changed for poor people today. Now, you can be poor and have a television. Many people that are considered really poor even have refrigerators, not everyone, but many people. We are poor but we have one. (...) The world has evolved and so the poor have evolved a little as well, but one thing hasn't change at all: the people have no rights, we have no rights. We have not received any rights! And there is nothing I can do but accept and conform. The hearts of people haven't changed, the way people think, people's mentality has not changed. When other people have the opportunity to study, we are jealous, we know envy (inveja) and this is negative, everything is negative in how we perceive things.*

The argument that Julia makes is an important one. But what is most insightful here is how she stresses that this false semblance of advancement in the condition of poverty, the possession of a refrigerator or a television, has not given people more rights and has not changed their way of thinking.

#### **5.4.2. Marcia: Dealing with Changing Status**

Marcia is Julia's fifty-five year old mother. Including Julia, she has brought up eleven children and has become accustomed to the daily material difficulties. Her life's challenges are of a different kind; her main cause of stress originates from her interpersonal relationships with other household members. She says:

*I am a person that feels a lot and I have learned that we have to respect the way people are – their way (jeito). My girls have very strong*

*characters and they are difficult. They have their own way of doing things now. So, we have problems, not everyday, but often. Julia and I argue a lot, we have the same jeito, we are the same way, so this is normal, but it is difficult and tiresome. She creates much stress for me, but I have to let her act in her way. It is difficult for her since last year, when her husband was murdered. When I have problems with her or with them [the girls], there is not much that I can do. I have to conform, just like everyone else. So, I feel, many times, that I am alone, I am lonely but this is part of life when you have an ignorant husband and difficult girls. I suffer a lot but I still have faith, and love and there is always light. I find peace where I can.*

Marcia's relationships with her daughters and her husband are difficult. In our conversations, she repeatedly said that she felt lonely, ignored and completely left out of exchanges that take place in her household. The continuous dissension within her family is a growing concern for her as she struggles to understand why things are changing. Why is her authority being questioned all the time and why is she losing the respect of everyone in her household? Marcia is a very strong woman who wears her beliefs and emotions on her sleeve. However, her way of seeing the world does not always concord with her daughters' views, especially with those of Julia who helps with the finances of the household. Furthermore, with the exception of Julia and two teenage daughters, all of Marcia's daughters are also mothers. As a result, the mother-daughter dynamics that once predominated have been replaced by a mother-to-mother or a woman-to-woman contention. Such contention is especially visible with her daughters who live in her home or nearby in the same neighbourhood. There is always much argumentation among the women in Marcia's family. And Marcia is not adjusting well to this shift in household positioning: her new status has strengthened her feelings of isolation and increased her stress and anxiety levels.

### 5.4.3. Rafael: About Poverty and Dreams

So far, I have provided only female voices, but what about men's? How do they experience their day-to-day life challenges in Trairi? Although much of house work and meal issues affect and target women's experiences, unemployment, lack of money and lack of food must afflict men as well.

Rafael, a twenty-one year old man and the last of seventeen children, finds himself in a unique situation. He lives with his adoptive mother Josefine<sup>48</sup>, a seventy-five year old woman with very fragile health. As his mother's caretaker, he bears most of the responsibilities generally attributed to women. Consequently, he does not get to experience the same freedom as other young men usually do. He can neither go to occasional parties on Friday nights, nor to the street to hang out with friends. Rafael tells his story:

*Life here is (...) work, my day-to-day experience is work. In this moment, I work mostly in the house. I clean the house; wash the dishes and the clothes: this is bad. Sometimes I think that this is not men's work, but I must take care of my mother. I also must get water from the well, this takes much time but it is near so it's ok. I do other work (...) well (...) sometimes I work in na roça, capina [work in the fields]. Sometimes I work in na casa de farinha, but only sometimes because this work takes much time, it does not pay much and it keeps me away from the house for too long. I have to be home to take care of Josefine. Everyday it is the same – always the same!*

Clearly, much of what Rafael does on a daily basis resembles experiences expressed in the women's narratives I presented earlier. Although he does not explain in much detail how he handled each task, my observations confirm that Rafael carries out his tasks exactly like Victoria and Antonia do. The more I hear about how each individual and each household goes about their respective chores, the more I realize that

---

<sup>48</sup> Rafael is the only adopted child. His sixteen brothers and sisters are all the natural children of his adoptive mother.

the reality of one Trairiense is the reality of all, at least in all the households I worked in.

Rafael goes on:

*I want to study and I want to finish my preparatory studies. I want to finish all my studies, learn as much as I can. I hope to go to university, I really want to but I do not know if I will have this opportunity. We don't have opportunities here in Trairi, even less in Corrêgo dos Furtados. There is no money. Maybe Paulina<sup>49</sup> can help, but she already has done so much for me. I want to study (...) but at this moment, I don't know, maybe chemistry but I don't know. My dream is (...) to realize the things that I want to accomplish for me, do what I'd like to do, have opportunities, fulfill my objectives, go to university and study chemistry or medicine. I have many dreams. I'd like to take a course in music, play music (...) so many dreams, so many other dreams...!*

Rafael has many ambitions and though he speaks with much enthusiasm, he knows that most, if not all of his dreams, will never come true as there are simply no opportunities in Trairi. Based on my observations of the urban poor in Trairi, Rafael's case is not the exception, it is the rule. Many of Trairi's young men and women share dreams similar to Rafael's but their approach regarding their situation is fatalistic. They all have learned that nothing can be done to make their dreams become reality. Much like most women, Rafael is tied up to the household and must accept to depend on his family as much as his family depends on him for the care of their aging mother. And, while Rafael waits for his devotion to his mother to be recognized in the form of financial assistance from a wealthier sister which could allow him to go to university, he must also conform.

#### **5.4.4. João: Being in a Household with Four Women**

João, a twenty-six year old man, is not married to Lyna, the thirty-three year old mother of his eighteen month old daughter, Sabrina, but he shares a home with her. He also takes care of Anna (15) and Angelina (10), Lyna's two older daughters from a

---

<sup>49</sup> Paulina is Rafael's sister. She works full time at the presbytery. See chapter 4, section 2.



previous marriage. His full time employment as a *motorista* - motorcycle-taxi driver, provides the only source of income for this family of five. His narrative offers some insight into gender relations:

*I think that when a man loves a woman, that when he really loves a woman, he will accept her children, all of her children even if he has not fathered them all. A man should consider himself lucky if a woman wants to be with him. So the best thing to do is to hope for the best and see what is going to happen. But not all men think this way. I accepted Lyna's girls but my brother Jeana does not accept his wife Dórra's kids, none of them. As she needs a way to survive<sup>50</sup>, she has abandoned her children with relatives, and she accepts this, or is forced to accept this because she does not have other options. This is his way and my way is different. I love Lyna; therefore I must accept her girls, this is my way.*

*I think that couples, well the majority of couples follow a tradition of how relationships should be between a man and a woman. The tradition gives more status and authority to men. And if you look around, here in Trairi, this holds true. Women are not considered important, even when they do all the work in the house, exactly because of the work they do in the house. Some women have it really bad and it is really tough for them. Relationships between men and women are difficult. You see one thing in na rua and a different thing in na casa. In the house, women have one way of being, in the street it is another way. I don't know. A woman will say one thing in the house and say another in the street. Men are really machista [machos], without a doubt. They think they are better than women all the time. But for me, I don't consider myself better than Lyna. We are equal partners in this relationship, but then I know that I am different, I think what you have encountered in the other homes where you work, that it is different. I know my way is different from the majority of Trairiense. Women are difficult, and this issue is difficult. I don't really know what else to say.*

When considering intra-familial relations, João adds:

*Everyday I argue with Lyna's girls, everyday, because when I get home from work, I'm tired and stressed. And I think that they do not like me so when I get home, the very moment that I get home they start arguing with one another. Everyday it's the same thing. They wait for me to get home, and they start fighting! They don't argue when it's only their mother that is here, they have a funny way these two. They have no respect for authority, they don't respect me, but this is maybe because I'm not their*

---

<sup>50</sup> Before Dórra met Jeana, she was living on the street with no place to sleep. Being with Jeana provides her with a home, some money and food.

*father, and I'm younger than their mother. They don't accept my authority. This makes me feel, (...) I don't know, but I cannot do anything about it. I will not consider beating them, men who beat women and children often go to jail, I don't want to go to jail, so I don't beat them, I do nothing. And I really love their mother, I have a child with her and they live with me because of their mother, not because of me. They don't like doing their chores; they rather watch television or play. They study too. Children who have a good life here in Brazil are those who are treated well. Anna and Angelina have good lives; they are treated well despite the lack of material things. But this does not mean that they should not work. They need to do what their mother asks. It is difficult for me, the relations between the girls and their mother, the girls and me. Girls are such a cause of stress.*

Despite the tensions between himself and the girls, João gladly shares the following:

*My family, my daughter, my wife and, by connection, her daughters too, come first. I would do anything for them, especially when I know that they are hungry [Sabrina cries in the background]. But it is difficult too, because there are not many options.*

João's words do not express the typical male attitude in Trairi, but his words do acknowledge how he considers himself to be different. In fact, the men in another household where I worked tended to display a stronger sense of identity that is considered more typical of documented gender dynamic found in the households of the urban poor in Brazil (see e.g. Goldstein 2003; Rebhun 1999). For example, Rebhun (1999) speaks of machismo to explain masculine signifiers, such as honor, "virile forcefulness expressed in both sexual aggression and personal will-power" (Rebhun 1999: 110), and devotion to and submission of subordinates. Thus, when João and Lyna's relationship is compared to the one of Ronaldo and Victoria, it is clear that Lyna has much more freedom because of João's attitude. What is not expressed in his narrative however is the recognition of just how much work women are responsible for in his house. At only twenty-six years of age and working full time, João has not had the opportunity to experience first hand the

physically hard and stressful challenges of daily household maintenance. Nevertheless, his testimony presents a unique and textured understanding of his own reality.

#### **5.4.5. Isabella: The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

The last voice in this chapter is the one of Antonia's daughter, Isabella. When I first met Isabella (19) in *Corrégo dos Furtados*, she was working with her mother in her mother's house. Each time I visited with Antonia, I would have a chance to also observe Isabella in her various daily challenges and obligations. Two months before the end of my fieldwork, Isabella was offered a job in the *Centro* as a live-in maid and household helper for a school teacher. Isabella jumped at the opportunity to have a paid job and to learn about other ways of living and moved out of her mother's house. Here are Isabella's thoughts after her first seven weeks in her new position:

*Life is better now (...), because everything is easier. I live closer to the school, euh (...) also, I eat better here. There is running water. There is a refrigerator. There is electricity. Here I can eat more vegetables...well, kind of more potatoes, carrots, onions and sometimes even lettuce. We don't eat vegetables everyday, but now at least, I eat a little bit of vegetables, which is much better, a big improvement from none at all. I also have the opportunity to eat more meat, beef, chicken and fish. Now I eat a little meat or a type of meat once a day. I never had this chance at home. And everyday, I also eat rice and beans and even a little pasta. Things are much better for me here. (...) The type of work that I do here is (...) I take care of the house, clean, prepare the meals, wash the clothes, everyone's clothes and take care of their son. I do almost everything for them. It is the same type of work that I did at home but here I have better living conditions and I am not as hungry as I was before - my situation is much better, thanks to God! Now with my work here in this house, I can help my family in Corrégo (Corrégo dos Furtados). I can't give much but every dollar helps. I am thankful for this work. (...) It is a friend of mine who told me that this woman needed someone to work in her house. She knew things were quite bad for me at home so she mentioned me to the woman who was looking for someone. So I told her I was interested and the woman came to the school to talk to me and agreed to have me live in her home. For me now, all is better.*

This narrative clearly highlights the presence of different economic classes in Trairi. Despite her acknowledgement of disparities, however, Isabella's words clearly express hope and optimism. There is little self-esteem in Trairi, at least in the way of thinking and being. But when access to work is provided, when individuals can find work, everything changes and self-esteem is restored. The opportunity to move from one situation to another provided Isabella with better nourishment, clean water to drink, and running water to ease the daily requirements of water use and electricity: these introduced important changes and altered dramatically Isabella's day-to-day experience. Such changes, however, would be beneficial to any individual living in an urban poor setting, thus Isabella's narrative, as well as all others in this chapter echo that of poverty (Goldstein 2003; Lewis 1966; Narayan and Petesch 2002; Safa 1974; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

In this chapter, every single individual who offered his or her story is someone that encounters, in my opinion, one form or another of endemic hunger, day in and day out. Their testimonies are those of poverty and of socio-economic and cultural hardships that provide similar yet different recollections which highlight the challenges and trials of the different households of Trairi. As their everyday reality is exposed with its load of stressful negative aspects, we nevertheless come to discover how these individuals live their lives. Hence, it thus becomes possible to tackle their conception and construction of their *almoço* – the lunch time meal, for it is an extension of such daily experiences. The emphasis will now shift first to the socio-cultural construction of the *almoço* (chapter 6) as a site of hunger management and secondly to the mediation of the broader discourses of hunger in Trairi (chapter 7).

## **Chapter 6:** ***O Almoço Está Pronto? Is Lunch Ready?***

The people in Trairi<sup>54</sup> do not generally eat three meals a day. In most cases they eat only one meal, which is *almoço* (lunch). Through this meal, as a site of investigation, I will seek to illustrate the complexities of food consumption for the urban poor of Trairi within a broader context of endemic hunger. This approach is interesting as it accentuates the eating patterns that prevail despite the silencing of hunger. For the impoverished Trairiense, such a meal is understood as a moment that unites members of a household to partake in the sharing of the consumption of food items such as rice (*arroz*) and beans (*feijão*). Yet *almoço* is more than the simple meeting of household members for the purpose of food consumption. Presented below is the data on food consumption patterns and habits and a presentation of women's decision making when dealing with food precariousness. They reveal a wealth of information enabling the discovery of local hunger discourses in Trairi. However, the data in this section is neither pertinent nor accurate and nor applicable to all Trairiense as it only represents the results of the twenty-eight household sample from the three *bairros* - *Corrêgo dos Furtados*, *Boa Esperança* and *Corrêgo São Gonçalo*. Furthermore, it can be presumed that my observations speak, in most cases, certain partial truths of what and how poor people eat in Trairi.

This chapter of my thesis is built upon the prevailing patterns of consumption as reported in the food journals (see chapter 4) as it is about the everyday social and cultural performance of eating *almoço* among the urban poor of Trairi. It begins by reporting the

---

<sup>54</sup> I make reference here to the twenty-eight individuals from the six different households in the three main *bairros* discussed throughout this thesis.

results of the food journal exercise that establish, when combined with the input of my daily participant-observation sessions, a model of the *almoço*. Its content is later compared with the Brazilian Food Guide to allow for a better comprehension of the different discourses included in this thesis, namely, the discourse of hunger and the discourse of *fome* (see chapter 7), and to also emphasize the imbalances of eating patterns that substantiate the possible presence of malnutrition and undernutrition in Trairi. The chapter concludes with a presentation of foodways and a discussion of women's decision making processes with regards to the various food practices of their households.

### **6.1. When Food Diaries Tell It All**

Eating and the need to nourish oneself in order to sustain the basic demands of one's body are neither taken lightly nor for granted in the poor *bairros* of Trairi where I conducted my fieldwork. I had originally assumed that my informants' sensation of hunger would have been obvious, more at the forefront of their daily experiences. As presented in chapter five however, the idea of *comformidade* did seem to render the characteristics of hunger as normative and routine in such a way that the expected signs such as: stunted growth, brittle health and lethargic stance, appeared to fade into the backdrop of daily life. The manner in which people consumed and shared their food seemed to speak to this normalization of hunger. The data reported in the food journals (see chapter 4, section 2), not only showed the food items that come together on the plate, it also provided a semiology for the conception of the *almoço* that elucidates an explanation.

In order to discuss and analyze the *almoço* as reported in the food diaries, I present in the following table, a reproduction of randomly selected journal entries of

given participants from each of the six different households that partook in the exercise.

In order to maintain the anonymity of my informants, I have voluntarily left out the component of the diary which identifies the household members in attendance during food consumption.

<b><i>Corrégo Dos Furtados: Household 1, Day 5</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
06h10	Kitchen	Coffee & tapioca	Happy	Breakfast
12h00	Kitchen	Rice & beans	Cheerful	<i>Almoço</i>
17h40	Kitchen	<i>Baião de doce</i>	Hungry but happy	<i>Merenda</i> (snack)
<b><i>Corrégo Dos Furtados: Household 2, Day 7</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
07h00	<i>Sala</i> (room)	Coffee & <i>bulacha</i>	Happy	Breakfast
12h10	<i>Sala</i>	Rice, beans and 1 egg	Hungry	<i>Almoço</i>
18h15	<i>Sala</i>	<i>Baião de doce</i>	Suffering	Dinner
<b><i>Corrégo Dos Furtados: Household 3, Day 3</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
06h10	Kitchen	Coffee & <i>bulacha</i>	Happy	Breakfast
11h40	<i>Sala</i>	Rice, beans and beef jerky	Hungry	<i>Almoço</i>
17h30	<i>Sala</i>	1 egg & manioc flour	Hungry	<i>Merenda</i>
<b><i>Boa Esperança: Household 4, Day 14</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
07h30	Kitchen	Coffee with milk & small piece of bread	Anxious	Breakfast
13h30	Kitchen	Rice and beans, leftover fish (1-2 bites)	Worried, hungry	<i>Almoço</i>
20h10	Kitchen	Beans	Tired and hungry	<i>Merenda</i>
<b><i>Boa Esperança: Household 5, Day 8</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
08h00	Kitchen	Coffee with <i>macaxeira</i> (boiled manioc root)	Delicious/happy	Breakfast
13h00	Kitchen	Rice, beans, <i>farofa</i> and beef	Very happy	<i>Almoço</i>
20h30	Kitchen	Rice and <i>farofa</i>	Hungry but happy	<i>Merenda</i>
<b><i>Corrégo São Gonçalo: Household 6, Day 5</i></b>				
<b>Time</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Food consumed</b>	<b>Feelings</b>	<b>Activities</b>
07h30	Kitchen	Coffee with milk & <i>tapioca</i>	Anxious/tired	Breakfast
13h10	Kitchen	Rice, beans and fish	Hungry	<i>Almoço</i>
19h50	<i>Sala</i>	Rice, beans and fish	Very hungry	Dinner

**Table 4: Reproduction of Food Diary Data**

The food journals clearly report that foods are being consumed at different times throughout the day. Indeed, the full extent of the nourishment of the urban poor Trairiense participants does not rest solely on *almoço*, however, it is this meal that provides the most important consumption of food throughout the day since the items eaten in the morning and in the evening are viewed principally as snacks (*merenda*); basically enabling one to last from one *almoço* to the other. Moreover, it is important to note that the feeling of hunger reported in the journals speaks to a sensation that never goes away. However, as an important element is missing from the diaries, namely quantity, it proves difficult to corroborate this statement. When I explained the food diary exercise to the participants, I unintentionally omitted to inform them to indicate the quantity (serving size) of the foods they consumed. As a result, it is impossible to say with much accuracy whether the participants encountered malnutrition/undernutrition or not and at what level. But it is obvious from the table above that there is very little variety in the food products being consumed and that fruits and vegetables are rarely listed as elements of lunch. On few occasions, I did witness the consumption of some fruits and vegetables but it occurred at other times of the day and such occurrences were rarely planned.

In this thesis, I have chosen to only report the data and the results of *almoço*<sup>55</sup> as my informants insisted that it is the most significant moment of the day - a moment when household members gather to partake in the consumption of a meal, a moment when hungry individuals *mata fome* – subdue hunger, albeit only temporarily.

---

<sup>55</sup> The in-depth reporting and analysis of this methodological tool could be a thesis in itself and therefore, my usage of this data will be limited to that which serves the purpose of my overall socio-cultural argument.



The analysis of the food journals reveals the typical composition of *almoço* in the households I visited. Though twenty different food items were listed as being consumed during the meal, only a distinct few appeared systematically on the menu and they include: rice, beans, manioc flour, pasta and a serving of meat. It is my assumption that these food items represent the core of lunch. In some cases, the presence of only two core food items – rice and beans, is deemed sufficient. Over any given fifteen day period covered by the food dairies, 76.5% of all *almoços* comprised of rice and 67.9% included beans. Rice and beans, served alone or mixed together to make *baião de doce* (see photograph 6) represent the essential foodstuff of *almoço*. These are consumed generously, in large quantities, as they are affordable and filling.



**Photograph 6: *Baião de Doce***

A small serving, approximately the size of a golf ball, of either *carne de gado* - bovine meat, *carne de porco* - pork meat, *frango* - chicken, *peixe* - fish, *carne de sol* - sundried beef or beef jerky (the main meat items available in Trairi) or *ovos* – eggs, is added to rice and beans 69.3% of the time. But the meat intake proportion falls to 35.1% when all the meals and snacks recorded in the diaries are combined together.

Oftentimes, two other meal components are part of the menu: *macarrão* –spaghetti noodles prepared with a hint of cooking oil and shallots (*cheirro-verde*), and *farofa* –a mixture of manioc flour with either used and heated cooking oil or court-bouillon. *Macarrão* is often consumed in the weeks when finances are less restricted and when the need for change is being experienced and expressed. It is sometimes a substitute for rice but most times it is consumed along with rice and beans and appears on 23.2% of the menus. In a category by itself, *farofa* shows on the plate 18.8% of the time. These last two food items are generally complementary to the rice and beans and provide a sensation of being full. Whatever food combination is privileged or chosen, the food journals indicate that the ideal meal consists of at least two of the items mentioned above. Photograph 7 shows a typical *almoço* with all five food products aforementioned.

The serving plate in this image is not much bigger than a small salad bowl measuring approximately fifteen centimeters in diameter. The spoon size is also revealing of the amount of food on the plate, as it appears to be quite large in comparison to the plate and the food items. To the left, on the plate is a generous serving of rice, a similar serving size of beans lies hidden underneath the *macarrão* (at the top right) and *farofa* (at the bottom right). Both *macarrão* and *farofa* appear to be equal in quantities.



**Photograph 7: Typical *Almoço***

The very small piece of meat, which mostly constituted of bone, stands alone on top of everything. Although the photographed plate appears to be quite full, it is important to keep in mind that this meal is the only one of the day. Quite noticeable is the absence of any greens. With a reported occurrence of only 0.5%, the food journals testify to a vegetable deficiency in the eating patterns of my informants. In addition, fruits are not and would not be seen on the *almoço* plate; but when consumed, it is at a very low incidence of 1.6%. On the rare occasion when fruits are consumed, especially by children, the fruits are picked directly from fruit trees that are in fairly large quantity in Trairi. In any event, I must state that the data pertaining to fruit consumption is incomplete and inaccurate. In all and without specific data on the consumption of fruits,

while the photograph shows a fully loaded plate, it would be foolish to assume that such a meal is sufficient or nutritionally balanced. Therefore it cannot be labelled as adequate consumption especially when this meal shoulders the responsibility of absolute sustenance as it is consumed only once a day.

Mary Douglas, in discussing the structure of the British meal, submits that the prevalent structural nature of the meal is critical for a meal to be categorized as such (Douglas 1997). In describing meals, she refers to food categories and proposes a minimum meal composition through her equation  $A+2B$ , where A is the stressed main course and B is an unstressed course (Douglas 1997: 43). Douglas's equation is pertinent to an ordered structure of courses that make up the meal. In Trairi, it is impossible to speak of different courses. Using my own method of meal classification, I am presenting here a reworking of the meal structure of a typical urban poor meal of Trairi with a similar yet different structuralist method; however reductionist it may be at times, this method has the distinct advantage of showing overarching patterns. By compartmentalizing the different food items served into different categories, I am able to grasp, although partially, an understanding of a Trairiense's particular eating pattern.

My application of Douglas' meal equation to the Trairiense's situation begins with a re-definition of the variables. Maintaining the stressed (A) and unstressed (B) categories of meal courses, I propose that my variables pertain to the food components on the plate with these same stressed and unstressed categories. Thus "A" is represented by rice, beans or a combination of both as found in the mixture of *baião de doce*. Accordingly, the first part of my equation  $2A$  implies that two large servings of rice and beans represent the essential canvas of the meal. I identify the unstressed items as "B",

but the food components of the category are quite different than those of Douglas’.

*Macarrão* and any food substance that includes manioc and/or manioc bi-products are automatically categorized as “B”. Although the meal illustrated in photograph 7 displays two “B” category food items, my observation suggests that, in most cases, only one such item is included to form *almoço*. Thus, the second component of the equation is “B”.

Since there may be more than one serving of “B”, however, I introduce ‘x’ as a quantifiable variable for such cases.

Despite being present only in small quantity, the meat product does hold an important role in the construction of *almoço* as it solidifies the notion that the meal is a complete one. Yet, meat in Trairi falls in between Douglas’ two categories. Meat is neither stressed nor unstressed but rather holds a position of privilege all of its own. For this reason, I identify meat as variable “C” – a third and new variable that specifically attests to the presence of meat, no matter how small the serving size is. Accordingly and with these redefined variables, my equation for the structure of the meal in Trairi begets three possible formats: (1)  $2A$ , which represents the more basic and common meal; (2)  $2A + xB$ , which reveals a slightly more complex composition and includes the addition of the unstressed manioc by-product or *macarrão* component; (3)  $2A + xB + C$ , which stands for the notion of a “complete” meal.

My observations and impressions of food consumption in Trairi amongst the urban poor corroborate the information reported in the food diaries. My participation in the sharing and the consumption of the *almoço* conveys the perception that the sole presence of rice and beans on a plate is satisfactory and sufficient for one to consider the *almoço* as a meal. Sometimes, when the economic situation permits it, some meat or fish

will find its way onto the plate, accompanied at times with some *farofa* and *macarrão*. The diversity of the meal seems most often limited to this composition. No vegetables, no bread, no drinks (except on special occasions like weddings and important family gatherings), and basically no variation of any kind to the menus were observed. I am told that this is because of inter-generational habits: “*e simplesmente por causa da cultura – it’s simply because of our culture*” (Rafael); “*as tradições são assim – our traditions are like this*” (Marcia); “*eu não sei como fazer outras coisas, si minha mãe preparou baião, então eu vou também – I do not know how to make anything else: if my mother prepared baião, then I will too*” (Isabella).

Although several types of foods are available at the markets of the *Centro*, including a variety of fruits and vegetables, canned goods and sweets, there appears to be a distinct resistance, linked most probably and logically to economic constraints, which limits both accessibility to and selection of different food products. Perhaps such an inability to purchase other kinds of foods has enhanced the traditional and customary pattern of food consumption that can be interpreted as static in the different households where I shared in the consumption of *almoço*.

## **6.2. Trairi: My Informants’ Diet and the Brazilian Food Pyramid**

The biological components of the human body require adequate nourishment to guarantee sound health. Not surprisingly, the absence or presence of particular food groups delineates the parameters of what renders an individual healthy or not (see e.g. Goodman et al. 2000; James 2004; Norge et al. 1980). To better evaluate what is being eaten in Trairi in light of a prevalent local theory of health, it is necessary to situate the conception of what constitutes a meal locally as well as the quality of the meal

components within the Brazilian model of healthy eating. In juxtaposing the food diaries and the Brazilian Food Pyramid<sup>56</sup>, it is my objective to highlight, using a comparative approach, the nutritional characteristics that prevail in Trairi.

As other types of representation of ideal food intake, the Brazilian Food Pyramid (see diagram 1) is divided into levels (four in our case) with eight subdivisions of food categories. Each of these levels and subdivisions represent different food groups which are organized from bottom to top according to suggested respective importance in the diet. The base of the pyramid presents the food items that are deemed most important while, as the food products echelon up the pyramid into the higher smaller levels, their respective importance in the diet also diminishes. The bottom level is the most significant one and it comprises of the grains and cereal group, which includes: rice, pasta, breads, potatoes, and *biscoitos integrais* – whole wheat crackers. Five to nine servings a day represent the prescribed norm. The lower-middle level, divided between the vegetable and the fruit groups, suggests four to five servings of vegetables and three to five servings of fruits daily; these are the next most important categories for healthy eating. The upper-middle level is shared by three food categories that include milk products: milk, yogurt and cheese (three servings); meat products: meat, poultry, fish and eggs (one to two servings) and *leguminosas* such as: dry beans, pulses and roots (one serving). Finally, the top of the pyramid is sub-divided between *oleos e gorduras* – fats

---

<sup>56</sup> The Brazilian Food Guide is necessarily part of a greater structure, a structure that is at the very root of the hunger (malnutrition and undernutrition) found especially in areas such as the Northeast of Brazil and Trairi. It bears a political agenda and supports governmental policies that generate much ambiguity and obvious ethical dilemmas. In addition, such policies are often a transposition of Western ideals that do not apply to the context of *maldeveloped* areas such as Brazil's *Nordeste*. From a different perspective, it is imperative to also note that such a food guide is jaded by 'food politics' which refers to "the agrobusiness, that highly influences both the ideals of nutrition and health" (Nestlé 2002). Despite all of the above, the use of the Brazilian Food Pyramid as a comparative tool is justified here as it identifies the disparities and the nutritional imbalances witnessed in Trairi without necessitating a nutritionally medical analysis, as such an analysis falls outside the scope of this thesis.

and oil group and *açúcares e doces* – sugar and sweets group, where one to two servings of each per day are the norm. This is what Brazil believes to be a healthy eating pattern:



**Diagram 1: The Brazilian Food Pyramid<sup>57</sup>**

The situation in Trairi, as reported in the food journals and as witnessed in the observation of food intake I made in the households I worked with, is far from fulfilling the recommendations stipulated above in terms of diversity and quantity<sup>58</sup>. In considering the *almoço* food make-up from the food diaries, I can construe that one meat product, two *leguminosas* and four grains and cereal products are generally eaten during that meal.

As per the food diaries presented earlier, 16 out of the 28 person sample eat more than once a day, two to three days per week. Accordingly, it is important to also consider

<sup>57</sup> This illustration of the Brazilian Food Pyramid was provided by Andréa Albuquerque, a nutritionist who comes to Trairi from Fortaleza once a month to weigh children under the age of 2 and council mothers on food education. Such diagram is also found on the internet at <http://www.diabetes.org.br>

<sup>58</sup> It should be noted, however, that if a person were to follow exactly the prescriptions of the food guide, this person would eventually and probably become overweight.



the food intake outside of the *almoço* to establish a better comparison with the recommendations of the Brazilian Food Pyramid. In the morning at breakfast (*café de manhã*), the menu comprises of either *tapioca* (incidence of 40.2%) or *bulacha*<sup>60</sup> (13.1%) with a cup of coffee (coffee is consumed by 95.3% of the people including children as young as two years old). This typical breakfast menu only adds one grains and cereal product to the daily food intake. The evening meal (*janta*), does not introduce more food variety as most food items consumed at this time of the day are usually the leftovers from *almoço* but in much smaller quantities; in this way, they fall under the categories of grains and cereal, meat and *leguminosas*. With occurrences of 41.2% for *baião de doce*, 30.1% for rice, 23% for meat – either beef, chicken or fish, 13.6% for manioc flour or *farofa* and only 9.6% for *sopa*<sup>61</sup>, the evening meal represents generally one serving of *leguminosas*, one serving of a meat product and two servings of grains and cereal produces, assuming that all aforementioned food groups are still available in the household at dusk.

The total food intake for the keepers of the food diary represents seven servings of grains and cereal, two servings of meat and up to three servings of *leguminosas* when added up together; the consumption level of both meat and bread categories concords with the Brazilian Food Pyramid while the quantity of *leguminosas* is well above the suggested national recommendation. Five of the eight food categories are almost

---

<sup>60</sup> *Bulacha* is a type of whole-wheat biscuit.

<sup>61</sup> *Sopa* is a soup-like dish made of all leftovers mixed with water into which a red tasty food coloring is added.

completely absent<sup>62</sup> from the Trairiense's diet and they include: milk, fruits and vegetables.

As the consumption of a variety of different food is necessary to ensure the absorption of various nutrients needed by the body, it becomes clear that the participants of the food diary exercise are not regularly consuming a sufficiently diverse array of foods that would support the label of a well-balanced diet. Hence, such results infer a perception that the urban poor individuals of this study encounter a nutritional imbalance that can lead to malnutrition. In fact, the sole deprivation of vitamins and minerals due to the absence of fruits and vegetables does sustain, to varying degrees albeit, a condition of malnutrition<sup>63</sup>. As the narratives of my informants allude to, both in the earlier and in the subsequent chapters, the challenges of their everyday experiences are heavily fraught with imbalanced and insufficient food consumption in such a way that these individuals know hunger. However, the difficulty of identifying their hunger experience lies in the habitual food rituals of everyday life that often render unnoticeable or even hide the consequential extent of this hunger that is considered normal due to the idea of *conformidade* that prevails in the households I worked with.

### **6.3. Trairiense Foodways: A Play in Two Acts, Several Scenes and One Actor**

The conception of the meal is not limited to the different food items that show up on a plate. The meal, rather, is an every day performance of social and cultural rituals that is repeated regularly amongst a constant group of actors. The production of *almoço* occurs within the household setting and is most often composed of many acts. In this

---

<sup>62</sup> The food diaries show a daily consumption of 1.2% for the fruits, 0.49% for the vegetables and 6.7% for the milk.

<sup>63</sup> And if the actual serving size of food intake would have been reported, it could have been possible to conclude with certitude that the participants of the study also experience undernutrition.

section, I will explore the foodways of my informants and the socio-cultural performance of *almoço*. I suggest that the social play enmeshed in assorted scenes of the *almoço* works together to render mundane and normative the endemic hunger of Trairi (see discussion in chapter 2).

### 6.3.1 Food Preparation

The curtain rises just as the day begins. The need for water is of immediate concern and before the little ones awake, several trips to the well have already taken place. With the water securely in the barrels, a *mulher da casa* – the woman of the house, quickly acknowledges the next most pressing affair, food: “*Como eu vou fazer para mata fome?*” – “What will I do to kill hunger?” (Victoria). This inquiry leads her to the pantry, a small wooden cupboard, where she assesses what quantities of rice and beans purchased every fifteen days by her partner<sup>64</sup> are left. In general there is enough for the *almoço* but a meat product necessary to qualify the meal as complete, is seldom available; meat remains a constant concern. Once the morning chores are completed, the women head to the street, the preferred option, or to a friend’s house or to the house of a family member to negotiate the exchange or the purchase of a piece of meat. In addition, other food items may be bought at this time to replace those missing but, oftentimes, there is no additional money to do this. However and as previously discussed in chapter 3, certain goods are accessible as per a principle of mutual trust. Such social exchanges take place amongst informal networks of women that have been established from one generation to the next and that are rooted in large familial ties and close neighbouring acquaintances. Haddad et al. (1997) and Weismantel (1988) also discuss

---

<sup>64</sup> Although women in Trairi are in charge of the food within their household, it is men who most often go to the street to do the purchasing of the basic food elements for the household.

the usefulness of such networks. My female informants in Trairi, however, do not enjoy asking for help or hand-outs and are reluctant of being dependent on these same networks even though they alleviate much anxiety when there is simply nothing to eat. Such actions bring up a sense of *vergonha* – shame, a feeling that is much frowned upon in Trairi. Resourcefulness is favourable. Consequently, the networks are regarded mostly as a last resort solution. Nevertheless, these interpersonal linkages ease the burden, apprehension and stress suffered in dealing with food responsibilities.

Preparing the meal is the second act of the play. There are usually only one or two actors in this scene: *a mulher da casa* and the eldest daughter of the family or, if there is no elder daughter, a female sibling close in age. Mid-morning, when the woman of the house returns with a little meat, the first task consists of washing it be it beef or chicken, using vinegar or lemon juice and then rinsing it thoroughly with water. Fish is cleaned in a different manner as it is rinsed of its impurities with water and then salted heavily before the cooking process starts. Though meat, chicken or fish are much appreciated when *frita* – fried, with a little cooking oil in a pan, it is more practical for women to boil such foods.

The boiling of meat - *carne cozida*, takes more time but requires less supervision and allows the women to carry out other food related tasks. In a pot, shallots (*cheiro-verde*), pepper, garlic, a hint of cooking oil and a local food colorant (for flavour) are added to a small quantity of water. The meat is then put in once the water has begun to boil. A pressure cooker, which was present in three of the households I worked in, will allow the meat to be ready in thirty minutes while in a regular pot it can take twice as much time, if not more.

While the meat cooks, the women prepare both the rice and the beans. Purchased in large quantities and stored in simple plastic bags or large covered plastic containers, these dry and raw food items are easily infested by small insects. It thus becomes necessary to separate good and bad grains before rinsing the good ones with water. The rice must be rinsed up to three times in order to remove the natural dust (*puera natural*) of the rice. After it has been smoothed, it is cooked in water with salt, oil and garlic. Once rinsed, the beans are placed in a large quantity of water with a little oil and salt. Both rice and beans take approximately thirty minutes to be ready for consumption if cooked on a gas stove but require much more time if the household only has a traditional wood oven at its disposal (see photograph 3 in chapter 5). As a result, these food items are usually prepared at the same time as their required cooking times are of equal duration. Doing so facilitates the coordination of meal preparation.

The order of the above preparation undergoes changes on a regular basis. Sometimes meat is taken care of first, sometimes it's the grains. Many times, the type of meat available dictates which will be tended to first. In any case, although the cooking times seem quite straightforward, the entire meal preparation can take up to two hours. The logistics of cooking largely illustrate the singularity of women's food work and exposes the simple yet lengthy process of meal preparation. In summary, for most women, the *almoço* is a major task at the center of their daily preoccupations.

The main character of the play is usually a *mulher da casa*. Much authority befalls her in this role as both the administrator and the gatekeeper (McIntosh and Zey 1989; 1999) of the food she serves to her household. Only twice in the various households observed was this structure altered. In Marcia's household in *Boa Esperança*,

her twenty-three year old daughter, Julia (see chapter 5) takes care of the meal preparation: her responsibilities match her status as widow and financial provider, a privilege reluctantly agreed upon by Marcia. Josefina's household is the second case, her situation being somewhat a breach of the gender work pattern within households. Old and frail, Josefina has passed on to her youngest son the responsibility of *almoço*; it is acceptable for Rafael to tend to his mother's will and needs as he is the youngest, the only unmarried child (except for Paulina who works for Padre Neto as a live-in administrator for the presbytery) and the last of Josefina's children to still attend school.

### **6.3.2 Food Distribution**

Once the meal is ready to be eaten, the distribution process of food follows two models, the choice between the two being dependent on the consumption habits of each household. This section will scrutinize examples of food distribution and consumption. It will highlight the cultural nature of meal rituals as well as the social hierarchy linking people within the household.

When all household members share the meal, their respective role and social position within the family is quite evident. Marcia's household serves as the first example. In Marcia's home, *almoço* is an imperative social event. Mealtimes are the only moments in the day when all household members gather at the same time and in the same room - the kitchen. Anywhere from twelve to fifteen individuals will assemble for this

meal. Oftentimes, Victoria's three children - Marcia's grand-children, will also take part in the meal when there is no food in Victoria's pantry to feed them<sup>66</sup>.

In this household, role and social positioning are played out in a specific manner: Julia, the widowed daughter, is the cook of *almoço* and also the one responsible for its distribution. In so doing, she occupies the same position as *a mulher da casa* despite the presence of her mother Marcia and, therefore, holds a privileged status within the household, such status placing her on an equal footing with her mother.

Two kitchen tables, one small and one large, sit all of the household members. Marcia and her husband, the heads of the household, sit at the smaller table with their permanent guests, Marcia's sister and her son. Julia attends to this table first. The meal is served to her parents and then to the guests, in a metallic basin (*bacia*); they sometimes use a spoon to eat though I often observed them eating with their hands. Large quantities of rice and beans are dished out to these individuals but the better quality items, such as better pieces of meat, are reserved for the younger children whose growing bodies demand such consideration. This order of distribution suggests a definite endorsement of a hierarchy that vehicles Julia's profound respect for her parents and their position within the household.

Once the small table has been taken care of, attention is paid to the larger one where the youngest children are seated. Those under the age of seven receive portions that suit their appetite: Julia ensures that the youngsters eat better quality foods. Even though the lack of food is evident, much consideration is given to what is put on their

---

<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that, when Victoria's children consume *almoço* at their grandmother's home, Victoria will not eat. She may or may not accompany her children to Marcia's home, but when she does, she refuses to consume any of Marcia's *almoço*. Except for one occasion, Victoria never ate *almoço* at her mother's home.

plates as their nutritional needs are greater: the better pieces of meat are saved up for them. The meal is served in a small plate, very much like the one in photograph 7 in section 6.1., and eaten with a tablespoon often too big for their little mouths.

All remaining members of the household are then given whatever food items are leftover, in equal amounts. An effort is made not to create any dissention between the individuals who fall in between the earlier categories but these teenagers or young adults do understand the constraints that dictate the quantity and quality of food served on their plate. Julia, the last one to eat, generally eats less than everyone else and eats alone. This distribution pattern is interesting as it highlights an important fact: although the same food items are being consumed by all, in reality, each person eats a different serving or a different make-up of this meal as quantities vary according to age and gender (see e.g. Counihan 1999; Ekström 1990; Jansson 1995; Miller 1997; Weismantel 1988).

In Marcia's household, every one eats all the food that has been put on their plate. This is true also of the youngest children. They are all aware that this is the only complete meal of the day<sup>67</sup>. Despite the hunger felt in the belly, food is savoured and eaten slowly. The importance attributed to the way people consume their food is a particularity of their hunger experience: appreciation and gratefulness transpire the meal habits that I witnessed in Marcia's household. From one generation to the next, however, the repeated habits and beliefs taught from the time of infancy manage to silence hunger. This silencing takes place from within the self and from within the household as eating

---

<sup>67</sup> The children are being socialized to think that they are not hungry when dinner time comes, when one usually knows that one should eat again. They are taught to think that at dusk, the stomach is not hungry and that nourishment is not necessary. I often heard Victoria telling her children: *A noite, as gentes não têm fome, e normal (...) vocês vão comer amanhã para almoço (...) perseverance!* ("At night, people are not hungry, this is normal [...] you will eat tomorrow at lunch [...] patience!") This make-believe scenario is developed as a coping mechanism because too often, there is no food available for dinner. It is considered necessary, for Victoria, to teach this to her children as this practice tends to reduce tension within the household when people are hungry.



rituals are reproduced daily and have become heavily ingrained in the consciousness of the people.

The second example shows one family's youngest son as the person responsible for the preparation of the meal, which in turn contrasts with Marcia's household scenario. Rafael's meal production is not performed within the purposeful guidelines of a social gathering but is rather a moment where the emphasis is placed on rest and nourishment. Everyday, Rafael alone or sometimes with the assistance of older female siblings residing nearby, prepares the *almoço* for two, sometimes three households - his own, his sister Olivia's, who resides across the sandy road and sometimes, Antonia's. Though sufficient quantities of food are prepared for approximately six adults, it is not uncommon for cousins to stop-by near the noon hour to grab a bite to eat. Josefina's extended family<sup>68</sup>, especially her daughters who live nearby, always assume that there is food to eat at their mother's house. Many have come to rely on Josefina's generosity to provide the smallest serving of food to consume when there is nothing to eat in their own households. This favour is usually reserved for the smaller and younger grandchildren but this custom greatly stresses the organization and rationing of food. As a result, it proves quite difficult from day-to-day to plan the amount of food that needs to be prepared as well as to know the allotted serving size of those that will participate in the *almoço* as the partakers change daily.

In Rafael's household then, the distribution of the meal becomes quite a challenge. As the people who partake in the *almoço* change regularly and the schedule of each individual fluctuates daily, it is impossible to organize the serving of a meal as a one

---

<sup>68</sup> Josefina's family is large; of her seventeen children, eight live within a walking distance from her house; so many grandchildren means a large number of mouths to feed and of bellies to fill.

time sit-down event. Accordingly, when Rafael serves his mother's meal<sup>69</sup>, the standard *almoço* must be ready for consumption and is kept warm on the traditional wood oven. For approximately a two hour period, individuals come and go, rinse one of the three available small deep plates and serve themselves with much restraint given the unknown number of mouths to feed. The food items are shovelled into the mouth with a large serving spoon and are consumed rapidly. Most of the time people eat alone and do not even take the time to sit on a window sill or on a plastic chair. This eating pattern was broken in only two instances: during the Sunday *almoço* when Josefine's entire family meets to share a meal<sup>70</sup> and when Rafael and I partook in a meal while sharing informal conversations.

The model of food distribution in Rafael's household emphasizes the need for nourishment and the need to *mata fome* – to subdue hunger, if only temporarily. Rafael's mother knows that, within her extended family, not all of her children and grandchildren have daily access to food. Accordingly, her open door policy for the lunch time meal, supported by two governmental pensions – her own and her deceased husband's, allows everyone from different households to consume a small quantity of food at least once a day. But not having food and not being able to provide nourishment for oneself and for one's immediate household members, having to resort to Josefine's generosity, has triggered a debilitating feeling of *vergonha* – shame, for several members of Josefine's family. Hence, to reduce this shameful sensation, it is viewed positively to eat in

---

<sup>69</sup> Rafael's aging mother does not eat the same food as other household members. Accordingly, Rafael must also prepare for her a special menu for his mother – an extremely small quantity of meat served in a light bouillon with a hint of rice. Everyday, Rafael's mother consumes her meal alone, seated by a low window.

<sup>70</sup> These Sunday *almoço* meal habits, much like those in Marcia's household, were performed with specific attention to household hierarchy based on age but not gender.

isolation and quickly so that other people will judge neither the serving size nor one's need to rest, despite the visibility of general weakness - *fraquesa*.

The exposition of the meal preparation and distribution above does not present much evidence for a context of endemic hunger. But the foodway practices of my informants provide a sense of what takes place during *almoço*. The rituals of the *almoço* preparation suggest constant economic challenges that oblige resourcefulness and flexibility but they also expose a constant concern for the lack of food availability. The distribution customs reveal household hierarchy along age and gender divides. The consumption practice proposes, in one case, the need to relish eating while the other case attempts to diminish the shame attached to the necessity to *mata fome* – subdue hunger. Whichever the case, the foodways of my informants are directed to what constitutes the *almoço*, hence it is quite difficult to discover if the habits are as such because of endemic hunger or whether because such habits endorse the very occurrence of the situation.

#### **6.4. The Decision Making Process: No Trivia**

Women make numerous and important decisions each day especially in regard to planning, preparing and distributing the *almoço*. This is what some of my informants have to say:

*The majority of the time I make all decisions, because I'm the one who is most often in the house (...) all food decisions in the house, I make them. It is my responsabilidade-responsibility, sou a muhler da casa – I'm the woman of the house. (Victoria)*

\*\*

*I take, well, I take most of the decisions in the house but, before I make the final decisions, I always ask my mother, she still has something to say in how I do things in the house, I'll ask her first and she usually agrees with me, but it's better to make sure that she agrees (...) but it is I who prepares all the food, so the majority of the time, I decide. When I wake-up in the morning, I'll drink a little coffee and I decide what I want to make but there is not much to decide because here in Brazil, when you are*

*poor, you already know what you are going to decide, what types of choices you have, what you will cook, you already know that there is no variety, there is no real choice to make, only the type of meat might change, but arroz and feijão never change (...) so, I make the decisions, but these are not hard to make, I have no option to choose from. (Julia)*

*\*\**

*I take all the decisions in this house, not her. The only time she can decide something is when she makes the meal. She decides what she wants to make and I have to eat what she makes. But, well, not really, since I go to buy the meat, I still really get to decide what we are going to eat in the end! If I want to eat fish, I'll buy fish. If I feel like chicken, I'll buy chicken. I'm in the Centro most of the time, so I get to buy what I want and she will make whatever I bring home. (João)*

*\*\**

*This is how it is. In the morning, before João leaves, he will ask me: Lyna, what are you going to make for lunch today? And, I tell him, whether it's fish, or chicken or meat. And sometimes, only sometimes, I will tell him, I do not know, so I will tell him, today, whatever you want to buy, just buy it. He goes to buy the food so in some way, he decides. Even when I tell him to buy one thing, at times he buys another. He doesn't listen all the time. (Lyna<sup>71</sup>)*

Despite the very limited variety and availability of food, the people I worked with, and the women in particular, have several daily assessments to make. Although each single decision has its own particularities, it is not the nature of the decision that draws interest but rather the meaning and interpretation attached to the decision making process. The routinely normalized patterns of decisions, too often unnoticed, are essential and relevant for the social and cultural comprehension of how the meal is constructed and conceived of. They shed light on the various power dynamics in action between household members and also illustrate the status and character of women.

As illustrated earlier in this chapter, there are different steps involved in the production of *almoço*. Each step of the meal orchestration allows for an exploration of the role of women as they exercise their judgments. When organizing the meal, the women I worked with were extremely aware and conscious of rationing as there is not

---

<sup>71</sup> Lyna is João's wife. See chapter 5.4.4.

enough money to buy what is needed to feed everyone. Consequently, the necessity to control the quantities of food consumed by household members is what structures much of the *modus operandi*.

Because food consumption occurs in the home, food work and food related activities have been assumed to be the province of women within the literature on gender (Counihan 1998; 1999). Women are, most often, credited with a certain control over the purchasing, storing, cooking and serving of food. In so doing, they are perceived to greatly influence the food habits of family members: this has been alluded to in the two previous sections. Accordingly, the concept of “gatekeeper” (Lewin 1943; McIntosh and Zey 1998; 1989; Weismantel 1988) seals the perception that women control the flow of goods, specifically of food, into the household. When Lewin (1943) first introduced the concept of gatekeepers, he argued that one could discover why and how people eat what they eat if one learns how food comes to the table: “Food gets to the table through what he calls ‘channels’ such as grocery store, the garden and the refrigerator. (...) The selection of channels and the foods that travel through them is under the control of the gatekeeper” (cited in McIntosh and Zey 1998: 128). In Lewin’s study, these channels are mostly, if not all, believed to be controlled by women (McIntosh and Zey 1998; 1999). However, because women control the flow of food, their association with domestic roles and the centrality of meals represent elements that nevertheless continue to label them as intellectually inferior (McIntosh and Zey 1998: 129).

For my female informants - the gatekeepers in Trairi, the dilemma begins in the morning, when they tell their partner what foods to buy at the small market or when they go to the street to acquire the foods themselves. For most, there has been no money, no

refrigerator and little storage for food for as long as they have lived. Therefore, the knowledge of the quantity of each product to buy is moulded in their sub-conscious rendering the decision making process more like a reflex than a conscious action. In the same fashion, the repetitive menu and the amount of food to prepare is the result of an automatic response. In any event, in the act of selecting the food items (even only if this selection takes place between two food products such as beef or chicken) and the food quantities, women are agents in the development of cultural habits for the meal (see e.g. Goody 2002; Jansson 1995; Weismantel 1988). And the socializing process passed on from mother to daughter (as seen in section 6.3.) ensures that such eating customs prevail over time. This may explain, to a certain extent, the lack of food variety observed from table-to-table and from plate-to-plate across the different *bairros* of Trairi.

The meal composition and the order of service, as seen in section 6.3., expose status and hierarchy within the household. Indeed, the different meal arrangements index the respective rank and status of the people sharing the meal where men eat larger quantities, children consume better quality, teenagers split what is left and a *mulher da casa* consumes whatever remains or is not wanted once everyone else has been served. This distribution, controlled in most instances by women (except for the case of Rafael), does illustrate habitual practices that reproduce hierarchy and gender division. In choosing to perpetuate this distribution, either because they are dependent on a man's economic resources and therefore have no choice or because this is what they know, my female informants are influencing their children and other household members to adopt a similar classification of individuals. For these women, food does vehicle messages about how to view one's position within the household.

Much weight actually befalls the order and quantity of food distribution within households and it is these incessantly changing decisions that provide a sense of empowerment (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005; James 1999) for women as they ultimately dictate and re-enforce the *what* and the *how* of the *almoço*. Victoria's excerpt at the start of this section suggests however that most of the decisions made within the household, including or especially those related to food, are her responsibility. And this sense of responsibility issued from the decision making process, although experienced in varying degrees in the different households that I worked in, introduces an incongruity where women, via their food work, do not, in fact, maintain that much power over household members and especially over their partner. João's and Lyna's narratives reify this perception. Hence the terms "responsibility" and "control" should not be confused. McIntosh and Zey (1998) use the following analogy to highlight an inconsistency found within the notion of the gatekeeper: "Secretaries monitor, direct, classify and store information, making them indispensable components of bureaucracy but others make and enforce the policies that affect their everyday activities" (McIntosh and Zey 1998: 126). Accordingly, even though the decision making concerning food work within households of Trairi reveals that women make decisions about food purchases and do the actual storing, preparing and distribution of food, it is falsely inferred that women retain control over such food activities: their food work is rather recognized as a responsibility.

Although the role of women as gatekeepers in their responsibility with food work is an important one, women continue to take a back seat regarding men's control over economic resources as demonstrated in the earlier testimonies above and in chapter 5. Therefore women remain obligated to harmoniously produce or reproduce a setting that

answers to their partner's whims. Obviously, the concept of women as gatekeepers, just like women's food related decision making, is very misleading and carries a false notion of power. As it has been demonstrated, women maintain little or no power over their own consumption-production activities.

### **6.5. When lunch is finished.**

In this chapter, I have explored how the Trairiense I worked with conceive of the meal. I first presented the results of the food diaries to reveal the main meal pattern in Trairi. This pattern suggests a rather straightforward meal composed of any two to five major food elements such as: rice, beans, meat, *macarrão* and *farofa*, and sustains the local understanding of what a meal is. As meat is considered a luxury item, its presence, even in very small quantities, raises the conception of the meal to one that is referred to as complete. As I observed it, this blueprint of the meal is the same across the different *bairros* where I worked regardless of slight variation in economic status.

In an attempt to expose the lack of food variety in the eating patterns of the food diary participants, I juxtaposed the reporting of the food diaries with the Brazilian Food Pyramid. This is perhaps not the best measuring tool, but it did serve the purpose of stressing the obvious imbalance in food intake of the participants as the comparison exposed the regular absence of five of the eight food groups included in the food chart, namely, fruits and vegetables, milk products, fats and oils and sugar and sweets. Clearly the absence of the aforementioned categories can support the idea of a possible vitamin deficiency. However, it must be reiterated that the notion of a balanced diet is culturally determined inferring a challenge in accurately establishing what constitutes of malnutrition and undernutrition from this comparative approach.



I then considered the different foodways enacted during *almoço* – mainly the preparation and distribution components. These provided a sense of the daily performative nature of the *almoço* and reified the notion that this meal is socially and culturally constructed: in fact, the foodways of my informants are specific to their socio-cultural experiences. Finally I considered the decision making process of the women I worked with to emphasize the contention that women retain very little control over their food work activities as these activities are subjected to the desires of the financial provider, in most cases, the woman's partner or husband.

This chapter has considered different aspects of the *almoço*. Although the meal make-up pattern and the comparison with the Brazilian Food Pyramid do advocate the possible presence of malnutrition and undernutrition, the foodways customs and the decision making process of women present a situation that is considered normal for the Trairiense who allowed me to share the experience of their food consumption. Whether the normalized situation is caused by hunger or recreates it, is beside the point for what we have come to discover is a way of proceeding with food work and food intake that is, as Kahn (1986), Lewis (1966), Monteiro (1995) and Safa (1974) present it, typical of poverty.

## **Chapter 7:** **“There is no hunger in Trairi”:** **The Contradictory Discourses of Hunger**

*“Life does not have clear edges”*  
(Hockney 2001)

*“We have to give the lie to the official perception that until something has been measured, counted or recorded, it does not exist”* (Blakemore 1990)

*“There is a constant dilemma that you want to let the ideas that are forming in your mind take their own form but at the same time you have to impose some discipline and structure or you do not make much progress. So, you have to strike a delicate balance in imposing structure upon your ideas and remember that the ideas are always more important than the structure”* (McCormack 1976)

My first week in Brazil was spent in Fortaleza where I met various people who questioned my intentions of a six month stay in their country and especially in the *Nordeste*. The employees of the different hotels where I stayed were most interested by my plans as it was not very common for Canadians to travel to this area. When I explained the reasons for my presence in Ceará and the objectives of my research, I was shocked by the responses I received and by the bewildered expressions on the faces of my inquisitors: *“Não tem fome aqui! – There is no hunger here!”* None of their words made sense as my preparatory research work suggested the exact opposite (Brasil Projeto Fome Zero 2002; De Castro 1966; Girão 1986; Guimarães 1991; Kates 1996; Messias 2003; Monteiro 1995; Russell 2005). I concealed my confusion behind an uncomfortable smile. Was I to encounter a dead end before ever beginning my fieldwork?

Interestingly enough, the statements I heard in my first week in Brazil were also echoed in Trairi. For the entire six month period of my stay in Trairi, all I heard from

informants and random acquaintances was that “there is no hunger here!” The recurrent denial of hunger was quite problematic because my observations of the day-to-day experiences of the Trairiense I visited with seemed to suggest something completely different. Obviously the very fundamental understanding of hunger was being played out on different stages simultaneously. Furthermore, there appeared to be different ways of understanding the notion of well-being and livelihood, a direct consequence of a state of poverty where hunger prevails I assumed. I encountered slight shifts in the definitional differences of the term hunger – as many opinions as there are people with whom I worked within the *bairros*. From household to household and from individual to individual, the acknowledgement of the presence of hunger varied so much that I basically experienced an overall clash in the conception of hunger – theirs and my own.

The daily experience of the Trairiense presented in this thesis – through their narratives and in light of the food management I observed in the different practices of *almoço*, represents a sharp contrast to my overall understanding of what endemic hunger is. As a result, by means of my inquiry and my presence, two different conceptual ideas about hunger emerged. On the one hand, there is my own understanding of hunger, clearly coloured by my ethnocentricity. It contends that when people are not eating two to three well-balanced and calorically sufficient meals per day, which is a minimum to sustain good health, something must be wrong. On the other hand, there is a local comprehension of *fome* that includes an all-encompassing understanding of the term that stretches beyond the basic definition of the physiological need to consume food as *fome* incorporates personal feelings - emotions, lack of material wealth, and lack of opportunities. Such sentiments come to speak for a situation that is larger than what may

be thought of as hunger: the semantic field of *fome*, as it will be demonstrated, is much more complex and rooted within poverty.

Hence, I was confronted with a clash of ideas which I will call the paradox of hunger. Questioning the legitimacy of this paradox brings forth, however, the realization that in any paradox lays a form of truth, even if this truth is only partial. Therefore, this clashing of ideas between hunger and *fome* ought not to be dismissed especially when they are imperative or essential to the understanding of a particular truth. Whatever the opposition of thought that is intrinsic to the paradox, the paradox itself does reflect a life-related issue that cannot and should not be ignored (Slaatte 1968).

### **7.1. Hearing and Knowing: Statements versus Conventions**

While I carried out my research in Trairi, it became evident that my background and understanding of hunger, which emerged from Western education, Western ideals and extensive literature, differed immensely from what I was hearing. My observations, however, seemed to contradict the statements of the Trairiense and rather followed the direction of the official reports produced by *Projeto Fome Zero* and IPECE. Both organizations indicated a prominent presence of malnutrition and undernutrition in this region of the *Nordeste* (Projeto Fome Zero 2002; IPECE 2005). What was going on?

#### **7.1.1. On Hearing**

The paradox of hunger fuelled my need to grasp how the citizenry of Trairi with whom I worked understood the concept of hunger. Once a relationship of trust had been established, I asked them: “How do you define *fome*, what is *fome*?”

*It's when people don't have anything to eat. Fome is so many things, it is so many different things. It's a sore stomach, when the stomach hurts because it is hungry. This feeling is bad, it is so bad, and it happens too often. (...) But here (...) no, no, there is no fome. My girls eat once a day;*

*they have almoço and sometimes a little tapioca in the morning. Things are good for us; there is no fome here, but in Trairi, maybe. Sei la – who knows? (Lyna)*

\*\*

*What is fome? Fome is when the stomach begs for food, nutrition, and you do not have anything, you can't get anything, you can't buy anything, and when you find yourself in a position where you need to seek, or ask for help; I feel ashamed when this happens. There are definitely problems of this nature in Trairi, but it is difficult to define fome, fome is so many things. (João)*

\*\*

*For me, I think that sometimes people say that they know hunger that they experience fome, but I think these words are very heavy. The word fome is a really strong word, real hunger is when someone has nothing to eat, nothing at all for a week, maybe longer. I do not know fome because I eat once a day. I'm fine with this. There might be fome in Trairi, but I don't see it. People can always find a way to get a little flour, a little rice or some beans. (Julia)*

In these passages, one theme is recurrent; *fome* is understood as an occurrence whereby individuals do not have access to any food for consumption whatsoever. Moreover, such absence of food must be present for a certain amount of time to deem *fome* legitimate. As soon as one has a little something to eat, once a little bit of something has been consumed, even when it is solely a little manioc flour, then the Trairiense quoted above say they do not experience *fome*, that the word *fome* does not apply to their situation.

However, the idea of *fome* expressed in the statements above is limited to the act of eating. Others offer a different take on *fome*:

*Fome is the worst thing that exists, my mother used to say that those who know fome endured the world's largest burden, it is hardship. And this is true, because the people who experience fome, know such sadness, fome is sadness, it is so sad. I'm often very sad because of this. (Marcia)*

\*\*

*Fome, I don't know. (...) Fome is (...) there are so many kinds of fome. There is fome of the word of God, there is fome of meat, there is fome of opportunity, there is fome because people do not have enough food to eat (...) I know fome, but I eat too sometimes, so I don't know. (Antonia)*

\*\*

*Fome is a sensation of hurt, hurt of the soul, hurt of the body, especially the stomach, it is a feeling that tells you that you need to eat. This feeling exists here. Fome is when a person wants to eat and cannot (...) that happens here, but the experience is different for everyone I think. (Rafael)*

This is a different *fome*. These excerpts suggest that hunger goes beyond a conception related only to food moving it away from the physical sentiment tied to the inability to consume food. The expression is transformed to incorporate a whole realm of personal feelings revealed by these Trairiense's regular contact with *fome*. Hence, the statements express *fome* in negative terms such as: burden, hardship, sadness, a sense of lacking and hurt. Accordingly, the term *fome* also includes the emotional reactions issued and originating from life's daily struggles as experienced in Trairi (see chapter 5).

*Fome* is a lack of food consumption. *Fome* is also a realm of personal feelings and emotions. But, and as the next extract demonstrates it, *fome* is, in addition, the lack of material things and the lack of overall livelihood:

*Fome for me is as follows: if you eat even just once a day, you do not experience fome. Fome is when a person goes two days, three days, one week without food. If there is water with sugar, coffee or even a little flour, a person does not know fome. Fome is only when someone has nothing to eat at all. But there exists other types of fome. Fome is also when you are sick, when there is no medicine, when one lacks affection, love, tenderness, when one does not know love at all. Fome is also when you do not have clothes to wear, when you cannot clean yourself, when there is no soap to clean yourself. Fome is everything and anything that is missing from life. (...) But as long as people eat, even if it is only flour, there is no fome. There is no fome here; we have enough flour to eat for days. (Josefa<sup>69</sup>)*

Josefa sums up *fome* as anything that is lacking from one's life in a way that is akin to poverty. This meaning substantially broadens the concept but it especially

---

<sup>69</sup> Josefa is Marcia's older sister and not the one that is Rafael's mother. Josefa lives in Marcia's household with her youngest son.

highlights that *fome* encompasses simultaneously the nutritional, material and emotional spheres.

Furthermore, the notion of *fome* is dependent on the way it is interpreted, on how it is being applied. The next two quotations offer a meaningful contrast. The first passage speaks of the absence of vitamins in the Trairiense diet, a deficiency that, however formulated, is not considered *fome*. The second extract recognizes the necessity to alleviate the physical sentiment of hunger but acknowledges the impossibility to ever do so.

*Fome, what do I think. I do not really know. Thanks to God I do not know fome. Today I did not have breakfast, I did not have lunch and there is nothing for dinner. Yet, there is a little food for the children. Fome is a horrible experience, it's really bad. It is the cruelest thing that I know. But I do not know fome, we eat, not always, but we eat. There aren't many options for me; there aren't many choices for me. I make what I can buy and so I do with what I have. But our nutrition is bad, I know, so many things are missing from what we eat I think, we need food that gives more vitamins for the body, foods that make us stronger. (...) I am always so tired, maybe this is because everyday is a struggle, and sometimes perhaps things are missing for my nutrition (...) what do rice and beans give you, everyday it's only rice and beans but so much is missing, this can even make you sick. (...) My children too are always so weak; they do not have dinner, ever. They are often tired and it is easier to let them sleep when they are this way. I don't know what else to do. But I don't think that this is fome. (Victoria)*

\*\*

*I think fome is a thing, something we can't control. I drink a small coffee, my kids drink a little coffee, but there is nothing to eat with the coffee, no mixing of any kind that allows me to mata fome of my kids. We drink coffee, but the coffee does not mata fome. The fome remains. When lunch comes around, there is nothing to fill the stomach, even flour, we eat flour a lot, but this does not mata fome, it improves it, but it does not mata fome. So, it is possible to eat a little at times, even rice and beans, sometimes even meat, but it is never in ways that can mata fome.*

*Everyday, it is the same. This fome happens all the time here, it also happens for thirst. It is so difficult.* (Laura<sup>70</sup>)

Victoria seems to refuse to admit to an occurrence of *fome* despite her knowledge that vitamins are necessary for good and strong health and that their absence is responsible for *fraquesa* – the feeling of weakness. As seen earlier, the notion of *fome* appears to be linked ideally to the act of eating, whether such eating is considered balanced or not. Laura, on the other hand, connects the notion of *fome* with the idea of *mata fome* – the killing of hunger (Scheper-Hughes 1992). She claims that even the presence of small quantities of flour or any other basic meal items do not suffice to subdue *fome*. For Laura, *fome* is like everything else in Trairi: it is a hardship that never dissipates.

Upon the reading of the above passages one fact becomes clear: *fome* is understood differently from one person to the next resonating a concept that is as unique as each household and each individual experience is. Of course, these opinions are not sufficient on their own to pin-point what is inferred to by the term *fome*: to elucidate the paradox further, these opinions must be paralleled with, or compared to other Trairiense's attitudes as well as with my own observations and understanding of hunger. Only then will it be possible to explore the epistemological milieu that feeds the paradox of hunger.

### **7.1.2. On Knowing**

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, my general understanding of hunger is deeply rooted in my Western conception and includes the various definitions of

---

<sup>70</sup> Laura is a 36 year old mother of six and a grandmother of two. She resides in *Rua da Palha*, the poorest bairro of Trairi. She works as a household care-taker for a woman of the Centro. When she works, six of the seven days of the week, she leaves her children and grandchildren alone in her home. Her second older daughter takes care of household responsibilities and attempts, as best as she can, to feed her siblings with an extremely small serving of rice and, only sometimes, beans. However, it is not uncommon for Laura's children to go full days without any food altogether.



the terms malnutrition and undernutrition as highlighted in chapter 2. Accordingly, as my understanding of hunger was originally grounded from my readings of the different literature on the subject, I created fundamental biases in the way that I approached the topic. Unintentionally, I attempted to decipher or observe signs that would fall within an academic theorization of hunger. As a result, I somewhat overlooked the possibility that hunger may be or may mean something different for my informants. In fact, it proved problematic for me to consider that hunger and *fome* may not be the same phenomenon. Hence, it was absolutely clear that, in the *bairros* of Trairi where I conducted my work, food was not consumed regularly nor in appropriate quantities and the little food that was consumed did not have the necessary dietary balance for good health. In this statement resides a subtlety that grounds the paradox of hunger which demands to be clarified. Before I venture into a plausible explanation, I must display the knowledge gained from my observations of the *almoço* and my participation in it.

Food is indeed being consumed in the six *bairros* of Trairi where I conducted my investigation and, in most cases, on a daily basis. To recapitulate briefly: in the morning, my informants and their respective household members drink a cup of coffee, though this cup is normally not larger than the equivalent of a single espresso in Montreal. At times, a small roll of bread or a small serving of *tapioca* or *bulacha* accompany the morning coffee. Lunch, the most important meal of the day, is served as per the extensive description in chapter 6. Dinner is a precarious meal as it is rarely available. Many times, manioc flour and a cup of coffee are the only items on the menu in the evening. On the rarer occasions, there might be some leftovers from lunch; in which case, preference is given to the children, especially the youngest ones. Such a daily meal

regiment is a clear contrast to a recommended Western nutritional model that supports the idea of two or three well-balanced meals a day.

As lunch is sometimes considered a complete meal, it also offers a platform from which to scrutinize hunger. As explained in chapter 6 (section 2), five of the eight food groups from the Brazilian Food Pyramid are not served during this meal. Of course, not all food categories need to be included in the lunch menu but the socio-cultural construction of this meal confirms nutritional imbalances that are fundamental for this analysis. The absence of vegetable and fruit servings is a case in point; only a few times I actually witnessed vegetables or fruits being served. But more importantly is the different serving sizes of any category of food ingested. The following quote points out a conception of hunger that is somewhat complimentary to my own:

*The problem with fome in Trairi is not what you may consider as fome because people do eat, they have in general, one good meal everyday. But the problem is what they are eating and how much. Many people think that eating well is eating a lot. So, all the time, people eat rice, beans, flour and meat; rice, beans, flour and fish; rice, beans, flour and chicken. Rice, beans and flour in large quantities, meat, fish and chicken, hardly any; the more they eat, the better they think they are doing and the less they consider themselves to be victims of fome. The way I see fome then, is the problem in the way people eat, it is the lack of alimentação equilibrada – a balanced nutrition. Because it is a lie to think that because one eats a lot, that there is no problem. There are so many people that think this way here. You cannot be eating healthy with only rice, beans and flour. I know this because I read a lot, I'm educated, but here, people don't know anything. (Paulo)*

Paulo stresses the obvious belief that there is no *fome* if one eats one large serving of rice, of beans and of flour a day. But when he emphasizes that hunger is not only a problem relative to how much food is being consumed or how often such consumption takes place, he acknowledges that hunger has to do with what is being eaten, distancing his position from the perspectives presented earlier. He further contends that hunger is

indeed present in Trairi, intermingled within the local formulation of thought processes of the Trairiense. The way they eat combined with their conception of what a proper meal is seems to disable the possibility of forming new ways of thinking about eating and the *almoço*. Succinctly, the habits that are at the very foundation of their eating patterns promote the current state of affairs. In fact, the cultural eating patterns of the Trairiense who shared their experiences with me are highly contingent to their context of poverty. And the resulting understanding of hunger is connected to the question of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) which structures the world view of the Trairiense and in turn, is structured by it (see descriptions of daily experiences in chapter 5 and of cultural eating patterns in chapter 6). In addition, by problematizing this issue, the two different conceptions of the hunger paradox compete against one another and render the situation of hunger in Trairi inconsequential. The following testimonies convey the same idea:

*Here in Trairi, there is definitely fome. Fome here is best understood as malnutrition, because there are many factors that are related to this type of problem: lack of good nutrition and the basis for a well balanced conception of the meal. This originates with lack of money, lack of love, lack of better life conditions, so when you combine all the factors together, a lot of the time, the problems of fome are problems of an inadequate way of doing things. It comes from people's habits, which are slow to change. Desnutrição exists because of the daily way of life here in Trairi, it would be wrong to say that there is no desnutrição, that there is no fome.*  
(Andréia<sup>71</sup>)

\*\*

*There is hunger here; you have seen it just like I see it. But what is difficult here in Trairi is that the people do not see with their eyes. They have become blind and as a result, it appears as though nothing can be done. The Trairiense think that their day-to-day experience is normal, that this is how life should be. But what I think is that people who know fome, who experience it on any level, they are the victims. They are victims, 100%. Fome is culturally ingrained and it is habitual. It is an accepted reality. I would say that to explain fome, you need to question the culture, and after, question the public structures, because they are*

---

<sup>71</sup> Andréia is a qualified nutritionist working at a children's center. She comes to Trairi once a month from the capital to weigh and assess the health of various infants in Trairi.

*directly involved in the development of life in the community, so people suffer from this misery and are victims of the lack of opportunity. Those who are most poor, most simple, suffer the most and since they do not know of any other way to get access to different opportunities, since their personal values don't change and they are unable to perceive what is happening, they must accept life as it is. It is more complicated than this, but the political culture here ensures that the Trairiense remain dependent, therefore, sustaining the fome that you see and experience here. (Claudio Rôla<sup>72</sup>)*

Andréia highlights many points that were mentioned by Lyna and Victoria. As a qualified nutritionist, she considers the Trairiense's daily struggles to be the result of hunger and adds that the predicament is directly linked to the local conception of *fome*. This position underlines the necessity for the whole situation to be scrutinized and not simply accepted as is.

Claudio Rôla confirms my observations and supports, much in the same manner, the idea that *fome* is contingent of the habits that structures much of the Trairiense's daily experiences. Claudio Rôla's words emphasize the inability in Trairi to question everyday experiences, such inability being at the root of the normalization of the state of hunger, rendering the situation invisible. I would add that this invisibility enables the silencing that surrounds the hunger predicament in Trairi.

To problematize hunger from my 'outsider' perspective is arguable as I draw attention to a socio-cultural problem in a way that it not necessarily relevant locally because what I consider problematic is categorically denied by my Trairiense participants. The majority of my Trairiense informants agree with the views presented in sub-section one – there is no *fome*. Only a small educated minority – the nutritionist, the

---

<sup>72</sup> Claudio Rôla is a city official in Trairi and a writer. Yet, despite his esteemed position within the city's organization, he was always extremely critical as well as judgmental of the political system and the individuals who appear to govern it in favor of their own interests and not those of the citizens.

community official and I, the researcher, testify to the presence of hunger. Clearly, there is a rupture in the comprehension of hunger.

## **7.2. Clarifying *Fome*: The Questionnaire**

In Trairi, two different conceptions of hunger exist side by side. Neither one supersedes the other as both perspectives decidedly hold prominence in their respective social environments – the locally accepted Trairiense view and the more analytical stance of a dominant, not to say, official discourse. To help me understand and clarify what I saw as a contradiction, I decided to use a multiple choice questionnaire which I distributed to 46 acquaintances and established contacts from eleven different households in Trairi (see chapter 4, section 2). The goal was to try to elucidate, to a limited extent perhaps, the variations in the understanding of hunger among the Trairiense I worked with. I limit the reporting of data obtained from the questionnaire to questions 1 through 9 and question 13, which are relevant for this section, as I view the formulation of the other questions ethically problematic in that they guide or enforce limited spheres of possible answers for respondents. One can view the entire questionnaire in annex 3.

The questionnaire was formulated around different types of questions. The first set of questions proposed different terminology for the notion of hunger. For the following terms – *fome* (hunger), *desnutrição* (malnutrition) and *subalimentação* (undernutrition), a choice of definitions was provided. *Fome* is described by 21 people as the necessity to eat; 15 others claimed that *fome* is synonymous with misery. Malnutrition was reported by 30 people as a deficiency in nutrition, as a lack of or as an insufficiency of food. Only 8 individuals suggested a direct association between malnutrition and their harsh financial conditions. As for undernutrition, all respondents

related it to a lack of some elements in the daily diet: 18 people defined the concept as the lack of vitamins and proteins while 23 others viewed it as inadequate quantities of food.

Another group of questions inquired about the existence of the different notions of hunger as experienced in each individual's day-to-day life as well as in the community. The reported answers demonstrate a distinct confusion as to how the different terms are actualized and/or acknowledged in one's everyday experiences. On an individual basis, 25 of the 46 Trairiense surveyed reported that they personally experienced *fome*, 17 others confirmed that they encountered malnutrition and 28 of them testified to knowing undernutrition. When asked how many days per month they experienced *fome* without relevance to the form, 26 persons answered that they encountered hunger more than one week per month. Of those 26, 7 said they encountered it an average of fifteen days per month and the other 15 confirmed knowing hunger for more than fifteen days per month. These 26 individuals who testify to a hunger experience of fifteen or more days a month all reside in the *bairros* that are farthest away from the *Centro* – those are: *Corrégo dos Furtados* and *Rua da Palha*. In fact, half of the household participants in the questionnaire exercise live in these two *bairros*.

Questions 7 to 9 asked to acknowledge the presence of *fome*, *desnutrição* or *subalimentação* in Trairi. Generally speaking, most of the respondents testified to such a presence. More specifically, of the 46 people surveyed, 42 identified the presence of *fome* in Trairi. Forty individuals indicated that malnutrition also existed in their community. Moreover, 40 people also recognized the presence of undernutrition. What is astonishing in these answers is that almost all respondents did identify the presence of some interpretation of hunger in the community around them and in the greater Trairi

region. What is perhaps more interesting is that the individuals who offered their testimonies in the earlier section of this chapter are among the 46 participants of this questionnaire exercise. Without a doubt, there seems to be a distinction between personal experience, personal interpretation and the generally acknowledged occurrence of hunger across the *bairro* communities of Trairi. In fact, hunger is reported to be experienced by acquaintances, by neighbours, by family and by friends. But only a few have admitted suffering from it individually and have testified that hunger is part of their everyday experiences. Another confusing conundrum arises: although 26 participants have confirmed that for at least fifteen days out of each month they are hungry – they report that they do not know *fome*.

The ambiguity in identifying the terminology and the hesitation in reporting the lived experience of hunger surely echoes the narratives of the Trairiense in sub-section 7.1.1 above as each individual understands *fome* from his own unique experience – unique in the sense that habits structure the different points of view of *fome* and food practices. However, when the questions about hunger leave the private sphere and target the community of Trairi, Trairiense’s attitude toward the subject makes a 180° shift: most of them agree that hunger exists in the community. This conclusion, this certainty that hunger is a widespread phenomenon in Trairi originates from the 46 Trairiense that answered the questionnaire and echoes the dissention that exists between the household and the communal experience. Similar to Da Matta’s (1995) opposition of *na casa* and *na rua*, hunger is identified and understood differently from one socio-cultural environment to the next: within the household, it is acknowledged in one way – “we do not know hunger”; whereas in the larger community of Trairi, “people are hungry”. As a

result, the differentiation between these two socio-cultural spheres introduces a possible analytical framework from which to explore the different discourses of hunger in Trairi, allowing for a certain clarification of the ensuing paradox.

### **7.3. *Fome* and Hunger: Two Sisters, One Paradox**

A paradox is a tenacious problem of thought. Fundamentally, it entails an embracing of clashing ideas (Slaatte 1968: 1). As an irreplaceable trope, the paradox implicates the opposition of propositions connoting a contradiction and, experientially, it often expresses partial truths of human existence. The paradox, thus, “plays a heuristic role in both contemporary thought and anthropological thinking” (ibid.).

Slaatte adds that the paradox is “an idea involving two opposing thoughts or propositions which, however contradictory, are equally necessary to convey a more imposing, illuminating, life-related or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster in its own right” (Slaatte 1968: 4). In what I label the paradox of hunger, which is applicable at this time only to the investigation of the Trairiense experience, the conceptions of *fome* and of hunger lay the foundation for a consequential clashing of ideas: that of viewing *fome* as a component of a normalized context and that of considering hunger as problem that necessarily must be fixed.

*Fome* is the Brazilian Portuguese term for hunger but, in this examination of the concept, I do not consider *fome* and hunger synonymous. In Trairi, *fome* is complementary to a more general understanding of hunger. The Trairiense testimonials explain *fome* as a physical discomfort that results directly from ill nutrition, a discomfort that does not allow the sensation of hunger to disappear. However, *fome* includes much more as it engulfs many things. It extends as far as to comprise that which is considered



lacking: the vital necessity of safe water access, the everyday necessity of material items such as clothing, the need for the creation of opportunity, the absence of faith and the lack of love are but a few examples that emerged in the earlier quotations of this chapter. But *fome* is also understood from an emotional stance: it is the pain of the soul expressed by sadness. Overall, *fome* is best described by terms such as hardship, burden, suffering and misery.

The meaning of hunger is not as broad in its comprehensive scope. It is limited to its direct association with food. Hunger is a physical sensation as well as a physical reaction to the contractions of the hungry stomach. Hunger is unbalanced eating, bearing especially the characteristics of malnutrition and undernutrition (see chapter 2, section 5). When experienced endemically, it can become synonymous with medical illness (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Thus, this form of hunger results from the necessity to eat but it is even more so linked conceptually to occurrences of poor nutrition, of insufficient quantities of food for consumption and of deficiencies in indispensable nutritional elements such as vitamins, minerals and proteins.

Although the understanding of hunger is echoed in the Trairiense conception of *fome*, the semantic field of *fome* is wider than that of hunger and comprises all the social, emotional, psychological and physical limitations and ills that are often associated with poverty (Kahn 1986; Lewis 1966). Accordingly, there is not much contradiction in the definitional scope of *fome* and hunger. However, there is a sharp disagreement in the comprehension of the different discourses that emerge when one attempts to clarify the correlation between *fome* and hunger.

In this thesis, the presentation of a discourse of hunger is presented much like that of a development discourse. I arrived in Trairi with the distinct understanding that endemic hunger – malnutrition and undernutrition, as reported by IPECE (2005) and *Projeto Fome Zero* (2002) was and is still a problem in this area of the *Nordeste*. The establishment of this fact made the Northeast of Brazil an excellent location for my research site. The desire to explore such endemic hunger problems seemed not only appropriate but also necessary. By articulating the comprehension of the everyday experience of individuals living in a state of endemic hunger as an objective, I was directly targeting hunger as a problem. Moreover, such a formulation of a research inquiry did recreate neo-liberal power relations sustaining what we Western educated scholars and researchers know best, which is deliberately inflicting change because of our knowledge, without really considering the consequences of our actions (Escobar 1995; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Sachs 1992). Such a realization became clearer with every month of fieldwork, my knowledge of hunger standing firmly at one end of the hunger paradox spectrum, being somewhat imprecise and inaccurate to categorize and understand the endemic hunger situation of Trairi. In fact, my lacunae rested and still rests in the contestation that hunger is not *fome*, whereby hunger continues to be considered as a problem and *fome* is not.

*Fome* comes to speak for poverty and its discourse normalizes its very occurrence. The necessity to conform (*conformidade*) expressed in the earlier chapters by the narratives of my informants supports such a statement. Indeed, in trying to clarify how *fome* is conceived of from the quotations and the questionnaires, we come to realize that the word and the problem of hunger are not at all a conception within the Trairiense

understanding of daily life. *Fome* rather is a specific discourse that expresses their everyday reality. Viewed in this fashion, *fome* could be castigated as an outcome of the structural violence that moulds the experiences of the urban poor in Trairi. If so, a double-sided question remains to be answered: where does structural violence begin and end and where does *fome* begin and end?

What must be emphasized is that within the notion of structural violence, a historical colonial experience shapes the lives of those who experience normalized hardships such as endemic hunger. In the same manner, the conception of *fome* embraces a common heritage. As the contextualization of Trairi presents it (chapter 3) and the everyday experiences of the Trairiense confirm it (chapter 5), poverty and hunger have been and continue to be a socio-economic truth for my informants. In addition, their cultural eating patterns (chapter 6) also suggest that *almoço* has been a key player in perpetuating traditional or common customs of eating. However, neither arguments of context, experience nor foodway practices suggest that *fome* is a problem. As a result, *fome* works in much the same way as the notion of conformity, as it renders normal a situation that, I would argue, repudiates the core social rights of all impoverished people in Trairi.

The main dissention within the paradox of hunger is that my conception of hunger reaffirms the reality of a socio-cultural problem while the Trairiense understanding of *fome* does not. Moreover, the paradox currently takes shape solely because I introduced a different way of thinking while I was present in Trairi. Much like development initiatives, I unintentionally instigated changes because I searched for a local understanding of endemic hunger experiences that locally did not even exist. While this

paradox of hunger testifies to the presence (discourse of hunger) and the absence of (discourse of *fome*) a problem, it also predicates an ethical warning: when researching topics that are sustainable such as endemic hunger, poverty or even development, we must articulate questions and consider our positionality in such a way that we do not impose Western conceptions of any sorts that are not locally applicable.

## Chapter 8: Reviewing the Scene

*“A tradition is inherited; it is the product of centuries, it cannot be fabricated a posteriori. And yet, in order to live, dignity is necessary” (Levi 1989: 128)*

The objective of this thesis was to understand the relationship that may exist between the meal as a socio-cultural construct and the discourses of hunger that prevail locally, in the different *bairros* of Trairi where I conducted my fieldwork. To do so, I used a variety of different methodology – from participant-observation to structured interviews, from contextual surveys to a questionnaire and the all-important food journal exercise. My research attempted to emphasize the exploration of three points: the everyday experiences of my informants; their foodway practices generated from their daily performance of the *almoço*; and the resulting paradox of hunger which contends the presence (discourse of hunger) and absence (discourse of *fome*) of an actual hunger problem within and amongst the community of Trairi.

### **8.1. Shortcomings**

Narrowing down the scope of the thesis to the meal as a socio-cultural construct does expose certain limitations and tribulations. The acknowledgement of these serves the purpose of heightening the complexity of the issue of endemic hunger and because of its shortcomings, creates an opening for further research, which is not to be considered as only optional.

As a main theme, the meal limits the analysis to one that centers on eating as a social occurrence within the context of the household. Consequently, there are different aspects that might play an important role in the phenomenon that have not, and could not

be considered as they fall outside the breadth of the thesis even though these additional inquiries could have provided for alternative understandings and supported different findings. For example, the thesis does not attempt to answer how the political organizations of Trairi influence the overall livelihood of its citizens; it does not address the detailed economic compositions of households and does not consider how they compare or fit into the larger community of Trairi or in the state of Ceará; the religious component has also been completely left out despite its entrenched ideologies which could offer spiritually oriented explanations to the “why” behind the constant hardships of the Trairiense’s daily experiences.

## **8.2. General Conclusions**

Several conclusions emerge from the arguments at the basis of this thesis. Firstly: regardless of the resulting discourses of hunger and of *fome* (as mentioned in chapter 7), endemic hunger is understood, in Trairi, as malnutrition and undernutrition. Secondly: the Trairiense who shared their experiences and their understanding of life with me, know poverty which dictates their access to food and governs the normalization of their resulting cultural eating patterns. Thirdly: the *almoço* is the principal meal of the day and accordingly it generates an excellent milieu from which to scrutinize the ideologies that are rooted within the eating habits observed in the different households of Trairi. Lastly: my informants in Trairi have developed different ways of acting and of speaking about food in such a manner that they are able to endure their condition. The failure to acknowledge that one encounters hunger offers one such example, while the notion of conformity, which hinders the need to question one’s everyday reality, is another. These findings come together in this thesis and work simultaneously to silence the entrenched

endemic state of malnutrition and undernutrition – endemic hunger, enmeshed within the daily experiences of my Trairiense informants.

The endemic hunger of which I speak in this thesis is clearly not the absence of food altogether but the consequence of recurrent limitations in food choices and availability of an inequitable single meal-a-day food intake pattern that has come to shape the regular eating habits. The food items that come together on the Trairiense's plate and validate the conception of a meal offer little variety in terms of nutritional make-up and in terms of menu options. Across the three *bairros* I worked in, from one observed household to the next, the composition of the meal showed only slight variation between four plate presentations: (1) rice and beans; (2) rice, beans and a small serving of meat; (3) rice, beans, a small serving of meat and *farofa*; and (4) rice, *beans*, a small serving of meat, *farofa* and *macarrão*. The repeated presence of the same food items, in insufficient quantity and/or in poor quality adequately suggests that this food consumption pattern may lead to, or may sustain malnutrition and undernutrition. Indeed, such a meal composition highlights the absence of distinct food groups such as vegetables, fruits and milk products for example, which are considered imperative for a sense of balance in one's eating pattern. Furthermore, it supports the possibility of vitamin and mineral deficiencies (malnutrition) emerging from such eating practices while the existence of only one meal a day may lead to inefficient and insufficient food consumption (undernutrition).

The depiction of my informants' lives, especially as discussed in chapter five, clearly brings poverty to the forefront. In addition, poverty plays an important role in the governance of food and meal related practices. It is, however, impossible to decipher if

the cultural eating habits presented throughout this thesis are unique and subtle characteristics of the experiences observed in Trairi or if my reporting is simply contingent of poverty. Whichever the scenario may be, I do not view this Trairiense case as representative of any one exceptional trait and I would contend that this example offers rather a contribution to the existing literature of poverty (Goldstein 2003; Kahn 1986; Lewis 1966; Rebhun 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992). In addition, although different food options are available in the small stores across the *Centro*, the urban poor of Trairi do not have access to these food products: their cash liquidity and overall income are predominantly constricted by the *Projeto Fome Zero* initiatives of *bolsa familia* and *bolsa escola*, limiting considerably their purchasing power. Consequently, such schemes as *Projeto Fome Zero* do appear to have increased the individual local dependency on the federal government which subsequently implements further structural violence. Hence, as the boundaries between the structural violence induced by poverty, the need to eat food to survive and the manners by which the lunch is consumed often seem blurred, the overall ambiguity that takes place on a larger scale, at the macro dynamic level – the regional realities of the *Nordeste*, appears to transcend to the micro level – the Trairiense experience, and generates a constant sensation of food insecurity.

In exploring the ideologies resulting from the *almoço* as a social construct, we come to realize the normalizing practices that silence hunger. Although most of the different foodways of the meal have been considered in this thesis (mainly food purchasing, production, distribution and consumption), it is the preparation and distribution of food that warrants most attention. The patterns of actions instrumental to the preparation of the meal communicate and reproduce meanings that are passed down



from one generation to the next through the food work of women<sup>73</sup>. Indeed, children, mostly young girls, learn by observing and assisting their mother or other older female relatives and are quick to grasp an understanding of which foods to select amongst a limited selection, how much food to prepare for a specific number of people keeping in mind the necessary and all-too-important rationing of food and, of course, how to cook it. From one household to the next, the ways of doing things rarely change and all decisions linked to the food and the meal rapidly become automatisms that orchestrate each of the minute details of food preparation. The repetitive and constant actions involved in the preparation of the meal make it very resistant to change despite the process of time and altering contexts. By means of this learned process, it is safe to contend that culinary traditions are being incessantly formulated, taught, reproduced and maintained in a way that does not revisit the question of the welfare, the personal interests and the struggle of the Trairiense.

The actions involved in the distribution process of the meal privileged by *a mulher da casa* who is the executive producer of the *almoço* reveal an amalgam of different information that maintains the distinctions and divisions amongst individuals at the household level. The most prominent message arises from the order with which people receive their food at mealtime, a procedure that generates an echelon of a privileged few among household members. According to this ranking men receive their meal before women, the youngest children, despite gender, eat next, those in between, consume whatever is leftover, and at the end, the woman of the house often is left with very little or no food all together. Such order not only testifies to an entrenched gender

---

<sup>73</sup> Although this is a slight generalization, what is important to keep in mind here is that some men also participate in the preparation of meals, for example Rafael (Chapter 5.4.3). But, generally speaking, food work does remain the domain of women's work in Trairi.

inequality that exists in Trairi, it also perpetuates it. Moreover, in maintaining this distribution order, women are reproducing the social and cultural conventions that are typical to this area of Brazil – the *Nordeste* (Goldstein 2003; Rebhun 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

The proposed paradox of hunger which suggests that hunger is a problem whereas *fome* is not uncovers various ways of acting and of speaking that reveal how the Trairiense who participated in this research project cope with hunger – they conform. And this important notion of conformity - accepting life as it is presented, makes an allusion to Bourdieu's habitus (1977). Indeed, as the discourse of *fome* comes to encompass an extensive field of meanings - comprising all the social, emotional, psychological and physical limitations and ills that are often associated with poverty, the idea of conformity allows for an easy acceptance by my informants of their day-in and day-out harsh realities. Furthermore, as the conception of *fome* includes such a large and various definitional scope (see chapter 7, section 1), the Trairiense I worked with did not feel the need to acknowledge whether or not they actually experienced hunger because a problem ignored is the recognizance of its non-existence, allowing one to be free to carry on as best as one can with what is actually available, even though access to food is limited and is comprised of mainly rice and beans.

### 8.3. Reproducing the Silencing of Hunger

*“The silent side of history is seen a little in the silent suffering of men and nations. But more suffering is lived through than is seen from the outside. It seems that mankind prefers to suffer in silence, prefers to live in the world of silence, even if it be by suffering, than to take its suffering into the loud places of history.”*  
(Picard [1948] 1952: 84 cited in Sheriff 2000: 114)

Sheriff, much like Picard, recognizes “a ‘silent side of history’, one in which various forms of suffering, despite their muffled nature, play critical, if not unrecognized (or unremarked) roles in shaping not only private experience but also the politically charged social relationships that make up public life” (2000: 114). The silence surrounding the endemic hunger of Trairi is not one that relies on intimidation or enforcement; it is a silence that is culturally shared and ingrained in social codes that, I suggest, are being reproduced in the daily performance of the *almoço*. To be sustainable, such silence requires collaboration and implies an allusive common understanding (Sheriff 2000: 115); the discourse of *fome* does fit this requirement. In many ways, the silencing of hunger points to or testifies to the consequential features of an unequal distribution of power where the dominant players, absent from this thesis, necessarily gain from the silence.

A variety of cultural mechanisms and social actors contribute to this silencing. It is the structural violence serving as the background to daily life in Trairi which is the prime actor and activator at the root of this “cultural censorship”<sup>74</sup> (Sheriff 2000).

Rooted in the interpretive mundane meanings embraced by the *almoço* and supported by

---

<sup>74</sup> Sheriff uses the concept of “cultural censorship” to represent a communal form of silence that does not rely on coercion, a silence that shapes social and political landscapes. By means of this terminology, she analyses a Brazilian case based on ethnographic research in Rio de Janeiro, where customary silence surrounds the subject of racism in Brazil, to argue that silence should not and must not be interpreted with non-hegemonic consciousness.

the local discourse of *fome*, such a “cultural censorship” of hunger represents a conventionally and socially meaningful code of choice that perpetuates the state of endemic hunger. I am not arguing for a ‘cultural culprit’ as an explanation for this case study but instead, I am simply suggesting that in addition to the structural violence that maintains the poverty found in Trairi, the idea of “cultural censorship” reinforces what is happening at the level of everyday experiences. The notion of conformity is a case in point.

The silencing of endemic hunger in Trairi resembles the notion of structural violence in that it is being maintained behind “[the] gigantic wall [that] (...) hides the reality of the poor majorities; a wall between the rich and the poor (...) so that poverty does not annoy the powerful and the poor are obliged to die in the silence of history” (Richard cited in Farmer 2003: 50). Thus, as endemic hunger and poverty remain so tightly intertwined, poverty and structural violence are practically two sides of a similar coin. It is logical to deduct, in this thesis, that endemic hunger and structural violence are fundamentally connected. Hence, my interpretation of endemic hunger does act or bear witness to another example of structural violence.

I passionately believe that no one should be denied one of their most basic human right - the right to eat, the right to eat sufficient food and adequately balanced meals, solely because the context of social and economic inequality deprives them of the opportunity that would grant them the means to be the bearers of their own destiny. Thus, in attempting to understand the everyday experience of endemic hunger in Trairi and, by extension the endemic hunger of the *Nordeste*, this thesis is only the beginning of my research on hunger as I choose to explore the topic further. For as Sorious Samura

once said: “When you look into the eyes of the people... to quit is not an option, you can't...you can't just quit!” (Samura 2004).

## Bibliography

Almanaque Abril.

2003 *Brasil 2003: A Encyclopedia da Atualidade*. Edição 29. São Paulo: Abril.

Atkins, Peter and Ian Bowler.

2001 *Food in Society: Economy, Culture, Geography*. London: Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group; New York: Oxford University Press.

Barthes, Roland.

1997 *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*. in Food and Culture: A Reader. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (Eds.). New York: Routledge.

1973 [1957] *Mythologies*. London: Paladin.

1965 [1967] *Eléments de sémiologie*. Paris: Gonthier. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith as *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Beidelman, T.O.

1973 *Review of Colin M. Turnbull; The Mountain People*. Africa, 43 (2): 170-171.

Berck, P. and D. Bigman.

1993 *Food Security and Food Inventories in Developing Countries*. Oxon, U.K.: CAB International.

Bigman, D.

1993 *The Measurement of Food Insecurity*. in Food Security and Food Inventories in Developing Countries. P. Berck and D. Bigman (Eds.). Oxon, U.K.: CAB International.

Blakemore, Colin.

1990 *The Mind Machine*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

Bourdieu, Pierre.

1977 *Outline of a theory of practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Brasil Projeto Fome Zero.

2002 *Final Report*. Report of the Joint FAO/IDB/WB Transition Team Working Group. Internet source: <http://www.fomezero.gov.br/download/FinalReport.doc> (May 2005).

Bryman Alan (Ed.)

2001 *Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications.

- Busch, L. and Lacy, W.B.  
1984 *Food Security in the United States*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Caplan, Pat.  
1997 *Approaches to the Study of Food, Health and Identity*. in Food, Health and Identity. Pat Caplan (Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Carrier-Moisan, Marie-Eve.  
2005 *Narratives of Luta : The Manoeuvres of Migrant Women Workers in the Brazilian Northeast*. Concordia University.
- Cole, Sally.  
1991 *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Counihan, Carole M.  
1999 *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Counihan, Carole M. and Steven L. Kaplan (Eds.).  
1998 *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Counihan, Carole and Penny Van Esterik (Eds.).  
1997 *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Curto José C. and Lovejoy, Paul E.  
2004 *Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil during the Era of Slavery*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books.
- Da Cunha, Euclides.  
1944 *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Translated by Samuel Putnam. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- D'Andrade, Roy  
1995 *Objectivity and Militancy: A Debate, Moral Models in Anthropology*. Current Anthropology, 36(3): 399-408.
- DaMatta, Roberto.  
1995 *For an Anthropology of the Brazilian Tradition or "A Virtude está no Meio"*. in The Brazilian Puzzle. D. Hess and R. DaMatta, (Eds.). Columbia University Press.
- De Castro, Josué.  
1966 *Death in the Northeast*. New York: Random House.

- De Certeau, Michel.  
1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Delisle, Jean.  
2003 *La Traduction Raisonnée: Manuel d'Initiation à la Traduction Professionnelle Anglais→Français*. 2<sup>e</sup> édition. Ottawa: Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa.
- Denzin N.  
1989 *The Research Act*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- De Sales, Maria Pia.  
1998 *História de Minha Terra: Como Nasceu Trairi*. Fortaleza, Ceará: Gráfica e Editora LCR.
- Deshmukh-Ranadive, Joy.  
2005 *Gender, Power, and Empowerment: An Analysis of Household and Family Dynamics*. in Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspective. Deepa Narayan (Ed.). Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.
- Douglas, Mary.  
1997 *Deciphering a Meal*. in Food and Culture: A Reader. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, (Eds.). New York and London: Routledge.
- 1984 *Standard Social Uses of Food* in Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities. Mary Douglas, (Ed.). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 1982 [1973] *Food as a System of Communication*. in The Active Voice, Mary Douglas (Ed.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 1969 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen (Eds.).  
1991 *The Political Economy of Hunger: Endemic Hunger*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1990 *The Political Economy of Hunger: Entitlement and Well-Being*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1989 *Hunger and Public Action*. Oxford: Clarendon.



- Drogat, Noël, S.J.  
 1962 *The Challenge of Hunger*. Translated by J.R. Kirwan. Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press.
- Dubisch, J.  
 1995 *Lovers in the Field: Sex, Dominance, and the Female Anthropologist*. in Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork, D. Kulick and M. Wilson (Eds.). London: Routledge.
- Dufour, D., J. Staten, J.C. Reina, and G.B. Spurr.  
 1997 *Living on the Edge: Dietary Strategies of Economically Impoverished Women in Cali, Colombia*. American Journal of Physical Anthropology, 102: 5-15.
- DuNann Winter, Deborah and Dana Leighton.  
 1999 *Structural Violence: Introduction*. Internet source: <http://www.psych.ubc.ca/~dleighton/svintro.html> (April 2006)
- Eisner, Mark. (Ed.)  
 2004 *The Essential Neruda*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- Ekström, M.  
 1990 *Food, Class and Gender*. Umeå.
- Escobar, Arturo.  
 1995 *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton NJ.: Princeton University Press.
- Farmer, Paul.  
 2003 *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor*. California: University of California Press.  
 1999 *Pathologies of Power: Rethinking Health and Human Rights*. American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 89, No. 10: 1486-1496.
- Farmer, P., Connors, M., and Simmons, J.  
 1996 *Women, Poverty, and Aids: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.
- Ferguson, J.  
 1990 *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Galtung, Johan.  
 1969 *Violence, Peace and Peace Research*. Journal of Peace Research. 6 (3) 167-191.

- Gardner, Katy and David Lewis.  
 1996 *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge*. Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press.
- Gélinas, Jacques B.  
 2000 *Juggernaut Politics: Understanding Predatory Globalization*. London and New York: Zed Books; Nova Scotia: Fernwood.
- 1998 *Freedom from Debt: The Reappropriation of Development through Financial Self-Reliance*. Translated by Arnold Bennett and Raymond Robitaille. London and New York: Zed Books Ltd; Ottawa: Inter Pares; Dhaka: University Press, Ltd.
- Gill Lesley.  
 2000 *Review: Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. American Anthropologist, Vol. 102, No. 4: 944-946.
- Giovanni, M.  
 1986 *Female Anthropologist and Male Informant: Gender Conflict in a Sicilian Town*. in Self, Sex and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork. Tony L. Whitehead and Mary E. Conaway (Eds.). Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois.
- Girão, Raimundo.  
 1986 *Evolução Histórica Cearense*. Fortaleza: Banco do Nordeste do Brasil S.A.
- Goldstein, Donna M.  
 2003 *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goodman, Alan H., Darna L. Dufour and Gretel H. Pelto.  
 2000 *Nutritional Anthropology: Biocultural Perspectives on Food and Nutrition*. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co.
- Goody, Cynthia M.  
 2002 *Rural Guatemalan Women's Description of the Meaning of Food: Eating to Live and Living to Eat*. Nutritional Anthropology, Volume 25, Number 2: 33-42.
- Goody, Jack.  
 1982 *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gore, Charles.  
 1993 *Entitlement Relations and 'Unruly' Social Practices: A Comment on the Work of Amartya Sen*. The Journal of Development Studies. London: Frank Cass. April, Vol. 29, No. 3: 429-460.

- Green, Linda.  
 1999 *Fear as a Way of Life: Mayan Widows in Rural Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 1998 *Lived Lives and Social Suffering: Problems and Concerns in Medical Anthropology*. Medical Anthropology Quarterly, 12 (1): 3-7.
- Guerrón-Montero, C. and G. Moreno-Black.  
 2001 *Household Structure and Dietary Patterns in the Afro-Ecuadorian Highlands*. Food and Nutrition Bulletin, 22: 23-30.
- Guimarães, Roberto Pereira.  
 1991 *The Ecopolitics of Development in the Third World: Politics and Environment in Brazil*. Boulder, Colorado: L. Rienner Publishers.
- Gutiérrez, G.  
 1983 *The Power of the Poor in History*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.
- Haddad, Lawrence, John Hoddinott and Harold Alderman (Eds.).  
 1997 *Intrahousehold Resource Allocation in Developing Countries*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Hammersley, Martyn.  
 1995 *The Politics of Social Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hardiman, Margaret and James Midgley.  
 1989 *The Social Dimensions of Development: Social Policy and Planning in the Third World*. Brookfield: Gower Publishing Company Limited.
- Harris, Marvin.  
 1987 *Foodways: Historical Overview and Theoretical Prolegomenon*. in Food and Evolution: Toward a Theory of Human Food Habits. M. Harris and E.B. Rose (Eds.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 1985 *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Heine, Bernd.  
 1985 *The Mountain People: Some Notes on the Ik of North-Eastern Uganda*. Africa, 55 (1): 1-15.
- Hess, D. and DaMatta, R.  
 1995 *Introduction in The Brazilian Puzzle*. Columbia University Press.
- Hockney, David.  
 2001 *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. New York: Viking Press.

Hulse, Joseph H.

1995 *Science, Agriculture and Food Security*. Ottawa: NRC Research Press.

IBGE

2006 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. Internet source: [www.ibge.gov.br](http://www.ibge.gov.br) (July 2006).

IBGE and IPECE

2006 *Retratos do Brasil e do Ceará: Indicadores Sociais e Econômicos*. Fortaleza: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) and Instituto de Pesquisa e Estratégia Econômica do Ceará (IPECE). Internet source: [www.iplance.ce.gov.br](http://www.iplance.ce.gov.br) (February 2006).

IPEA

2006 Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada : Institute for Applied Economic Research. Internet source: <http://www.ipea.gov.br>. (February 2006).

2005 *Radar Social – 2005: Diretoria de Estudo Sociais*. Internet source: <http://www.ipea.gov.br>. (February 2006).

IPECE

2005 *Boletim de Conjuntura Econômica: Desempenho da Economia Cearense 2005*. Internet source: <http://www.ipece.ce.gov.br>. (February 2006).

Irogbe, Kema.

2005 *Globalization and the Development of Underdevelopment of the Third World*. Journal of Third World Studies. Vol. XXII, No. 1: 41-68.

James, Delores C.S.

2004 *Nutrition and Well-Being A to Z*. Detroit, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA.

James, Wendy.

1999 *Empowering Ambiguities*. in The Anthropology of Power: Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures. Angela Cheater (Ed.). New York: Routledge.

Jansson, Sören.

1995 *Food Practices and Division of Domestic Labor. A Comparison Between British and Swedish households*. The Editorial Board of the Sociological Review. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Kahn, Miriam.

1986 *Always Hungry, Never Greedy: Food and the Expression of Gender in a Melanesian Society*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Kates, Robert W.  
 1996 *Ending Hunger: Current Status and Future Prospects*. Consequences, Vol. 2, Number 2: 1-10.
- Katz, Cindi.  
 1992 *All the World is Staged: Intellectuals and the Projects of Ethnography*. Society and Space, 10: 495-510.
- Kleinman, Arthur and Peter Benson.  
 2004 *Power and Human Rights: The Political, Moral and Global Context of Health and Social Reform*. Hasting Center Report, March/April, Vol. 34, Issue 2: 44-45.
- Lancaster, Roger N.  
 1992 *Life is Hard : Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lassiter, Luke E.  
 2005 *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- L'État du Monde 2005.  
 2005 *L'État du Monde 2005: L'Annuaire Économique Géopolitique Mondial*. Montréal: Éditions La Découverte, Éditions du Boréal.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude.  
 1997 *Culinary Triangle*. in Food and Culture: A Reader. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, (Eds.). New York and London: Routledge.
- 1979 *The Raw and The Cooked*. Translated from the French by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Octagon Books.
- Levi, Primo.  
 1989 *The Drowned and The Saved*. New York: Vintage International, A Division of Random House, Inc.
- Levine, Robert M. and Crocitti, John J.  
 1999 "Introduction". in The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics. Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti (Eds.). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lewin, Kurt.  
 1943 *Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change*. in The Problem of Changing Food Habits, Bulletin no. 108: 35-65. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Science, National Research Council.

- Lewis, Oscar.  
1966 *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty - San Juan and New York*. New York: Random House.
- Lowell Lewis, J.  
2000 *Sex and Violence in Brazil: Carnaval, Capoeira and the Problem of the Everyday life*. American Ethnologist, 26(3): 539-557.
- Marcus, George and Michael Fischer.  
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Maskovsky, Jeff.  
2005 *Review: Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor*. American Anthropologist, Vol. 107, No. 2: 283-284.
- McCormack, J.S.  
1976 *The Personal Doctor 1975*. Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Oct. 26 (171): 750-3.
- McIntosh and Mary Zey.  
1998 *Women as Gatekeepers*. in Food and Gender: Identity and Power. Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan (Eds.). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers.  
1989 *Women as Gatekeepers of Food Consumption: A Sociological Critique*. Food and Foodways. 3:140-53.
- Melo, Marcus.  
2002 *Gains and Losses in the Favelas*. in Voices of the Poor From Many Lands. Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesch (Eds.). Washington D.C.: World Bank; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mennell, S.  
1985 *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- MESA – Ministério Extraordinário de Segurança Alimentar e Combate à Fome.  
2003 *Brazil's Food Security Policy: Fome Zero: O Brasil que Come Ajudando o Brasil que tem Fome*. Internet source: [www.fomezero.gov.br](http://www.fomezero.gov.br). (May 2005).
- Messer, Ellen.  
2001 *Anthropology of Food, Review*. European Journal of Development Research. June, Vol. 13 Issue 1: 214-216.

- Messias, Erick.  
2003 *Income Inequality, Illiteracy Rate and Life Expectancy in Brazil.* American Journal of Public Health. Vol. 93, No. 8, 1294-1296.
- Miller, B.D.  
1997 *Social Class, Gender, and Intrahousehold Food Allocations to Children in South Asia.* Soc. Sci. Med. 44(11): 1685-95.
- Mintz, Sidney W. and Christine M. Du Bois.  
2002 *The Anthropology of Food and Eating.* Annual Review of Anthropology, 31: 99-119.
- Monteiro, Carlos Augusto.  
1995 *A Dimensão da Pobreza, da Fome e da Desnutrição no Brasil.* Estudos Avançados, V. 9 No. 24. São Paulo.
- Moreno-Black, Geraldine.  
2002 *Gender, Food, and Getting By: Researching and Teaching about Poverty and Hunger.* Voices: 41-44.
- Moreno-Black, G. and P. Somnasang.  
2000 *In Times of Plenty and Times of Scarcity: Nondomesticated Food in Northeastern Thailand.* Ecology of Food and Nutrition, 38: 563-586.
- Narayan, Deepa and Patti Petesch (Ed.).  
2002 *Voices of the Poor from Many Lands.* Washington D.C.: A Co-publication of Oxford University Press and the World Bank.
- Neruda, Pablo.  
2004 *The Great Tablecloth.* in The Essential Neruda. Mark Eisner (Ed.). San Fransisco: City Lights.
- Nestlé, Marion.  
2002 *Food Politics: How The Food Industry Influences Nutrition And Health.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Norge, Jerome W., Randy F. Kandel and Gretel H. Peltó.  
1980 *Nutritional Anthropology: Contemporary Approaches to Diet & Culture.* New York: Redgrave publishing Company.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.  
2001 *OECD Economic Surveys: Brazil.* Paris: Organization for the Economic Co-operation and Development.

- Passariello, P.  
1990 *Anomalies, Analogies and Sacred Profanities: Mary Douglas on Food and Culture 1957 – 1989*. Food and Foodways, 4(1): 53–71.
- Piletti Nelson and Piletti Claudino.  
2002 *História & Vida Integrada: Os Conteúdos de História Geral e História do Brasil Integrados*. São Paulo: Editora Atica.
- Poletto, Ivo.  
2005 *Brasil: Oportunidades Perdidas: Meus Dois Anos no Governo Lula*. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond.
- Pottier, Johan.  
1999 *Anthropology of Food: The Social Dynamics of Food Security*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press; Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Rabinow, Paul.  
1977 *Reflections of Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramos, Graciliano.  
1972 *Vidas Secas*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina.
- Read, Merrill S.  
1977 *Malnutrition and Human Performance*. in Malnutrition, Behavior and Social Organization. Lawrence S. Greene, (Ed.). New York: American Press.
- Rebhun, Linda-Anne.  
1999 *The Heart is an Unknown Country: Love in the Changing Economy of the Northeast Brazil*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Reutlinger, S.  
1987 *Food Security, Trade and Aid*. in Food Policy. J.P. Gittinger, J. Leslie and C. Hoisington (Eds.). Baltimore, MD.: John Hopkins University.
- Rola, Claudio Antero.  
2002 *Lá Em Nós*. Fortaleza, Ceará: Gráfica Sérgio Ltda.
- Russell, Sharman Apt.  
2005 *Hunger: An Unnatural History*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.
- Rylko-Bauer, Barbara, Merrill Singer and John Van Willigen.  
2006 *Reclaiming Applied Anthropology: Its Past, Present, and Future*. American Anthropologist, Vol. 108, Issue 1: 178-190.



- Sachs, W.  
1992 *The Development Dictionary*. London: Zed Books.
- Safa, Helen Icken.  
1974 *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*. New York; Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Samura, Sorious.  
2004 *Living with Hunger: Surviving Hunger*. An Insight News Television Production for Discovery/Times. In association with CNNI, Channel Four (UK), CBC and Twee Vandaag. Directed by Charlotte Metcalf, DVD Documentary, 50 minutes.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy.  
1992 *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life*. Berkeley; Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Scott, James, C.  
1998 *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Select Committee on Hunger.  
1990 *Food Security in the United States Committee Report*. US House of Representatives.
- Sen, Amartya.  
1999 *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.
- 1982 *The Right Not to be Hungry*. in Contemporary Philosophy, Vol. 2. G. Floistad (Ed.). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- 1981 *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shellenberger, Michael and Kevin Danaher.  
1995 *Fighting for the Soul of Brazil*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Sheriff, Robin E.  
2000 *Exposing Silence as Cultural Censorship: A Brazilian Case*. American Anthropologist, Vol. 102, No. 1: 114-132.
- Silva, José Graziano da, Walter Belik and Maya Takagi.  
2001 *Projeto Fome Zero*. São Paulo: Instituto Cidadania. Internet source: <http://www.icidadania.org.br>. (April 2005)

- Slaatte, Howard A.  
 1968 *The Pertinence of the Paradox: The Dialectics of Reason-in-Existence*. New York: Humanity Press.
- Stoller, Paul.  
 1994 *Ethnographies as Text /Ethnographers as Griots*. American Ethnologist, May, Vol. 21, No. 2: 353-366.
- Studach, Lisa.  
 2005 *Review: Laughter out of Place*. The Australian Journal of Anthropology. Book Reviews Volume 16, No. 2: 259-260.
- Tierney, Patrick.  
 2000 *Darkness In El Dorado: How Scientists And Journalists Devastated The Amazon*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Turnbull, Colin M.  
 1972 *The Mountain People*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Van Esterik, P.  
 1999 *Right to Food; Right to Feed; Right to be Fed: The Intersection of Women's Rights and the Right to Food*. Agriculture and Human Values, 16: 225-32.
- Watts, M.J. and Bohle, H.G.  
 1993 *The Space of Vulnerability: The Causal Structure of Hunger and Famine*. Progress in Human Geography, 17: 43-67.
- Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, A Merriam-Webster*.  
 1981 Toronto: Thomas Allen & Son Limited; Springfield Mass: G. & C. Merriam Company.
- Weismantel, Mary J.  
 1988 *Food Gender and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Wilk, Richard R.  
 1999 "Real Belizean Food": *Building Local Identity in the Transnational Caribbean*. American Anthropologist, 101(2): 244-255.
- Wood, Roy C.  
 1995 *The Sociology of the Meal*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Wright, Robin.  
 1995 *Hunger in the World: An Overview*. in Hunger. San Diego: Greenhaven Press Inc.

## **Annex 1: Glossary**

Abraço – hug  
Açúcares e doces – sugar and sweets  
Agreste - semi-fertile lands  
Água – water  
Água encanada – running water  
Alimentação equilibrada – balanced nutrition  
Almoço – lunch  
Amor - love  
Aqui - here  
Arroz –rice  
Assaltado – murdered  
Assim – thus, like, like so  
Bacia – a large deep silver bowl  
Baião de doce – mixture of rice and beans  
Bairro(s) – neighborhood (s)  
Biscoitos integrais – whole wheat crackers  
Brasil – Brazil  
Brigamos – fighting / arguing  
Bulacha - a type of whole-wheat biscuit  
Caatinga - scrubby shrub  
Caboclos – a mixture of white, Indians and runaway slaves  
Cachaça - sugar cane based alcohol  
Café de manhã – breakfast  
Carne cozida – boiled meat  
Carne de gado - bovine meat  
Carne de porco - pork meat  
Carne de sol - sundried beef or beef jerky  
Canadense - Canadian  
Cansada - tired  
Capela – chapel  
Casa – house  
Casa de farinha – flour making house  
Casa paroquial – parish house, presbytery  
Cheiro-verde - shallots  
Cidadão – citizen  
Coisa - thing  
Com - with  
Comer – to eat  
Como - how  
Conformidade – conformity  
Cultura - culture  
Dela – her, of her

Demais – too much  
Descansar – to rest  
Desnutrição – malnutrition  
Deus – God  
E - is  
Ele/ela – him/her  
Ensino médio - preparatory studies  
Então - then  
Está – is  
Estranha – stranger  
Eu – I  
Farinha - flour  
Farinha de mandioca – manioc flour  
Farofo – manioc flour mixed with olive oil  
Favelas - shantytown or slum  
Fazer – to do  
Federative - federal  
Feijão – beans  
Felicidade – happiness  
Festa - party  
Festinha – small party  
Ficar – to be with  
Flagelados - dispossessed peasants of the Northeast  
Floricultura – culture of flowers  
Fome – hunger  
Forró – local dancing parties  
Fossa – pit  
Frango - chicken  
Fraquesa – weakness  
Frita - fried  
Fundação Antunes – Antunes Foundation  
Gado – bovine  
Gente – people  
Inveja – envy  
Janta - dinner  
Jeito – way, way of being  
Juazeiros - small green bushes  
Lagoa – small lake  
Leguminosas – dry beans, pulses and roots  
Macarrão – macaroni/spaghetti like noodle  
Mãe - mother  
Mata Atlântica - forest  
Mata fome – kill hunger, subdue hunger  
Matar – to kill  
Melhor - better  
Mentalidade - mentality

Mercandinho -small market  
 Mercado de carne – meat market  
 Merenda – light snack  
 Mesmo(a) - same  
 Meu – my  
 Minha - my  
 Motoristas - taxi driver  
 Muito - much  
 Mulher – woman  
 Mulher da casa – woman of the house  
 Na casa – in the house  
 Namorado - boyfriend  
 Não – no/not  
 Na rua – in the street  
 Nordeste – Northeast  
 Nordestinhos – people who inhabit the *Nordeste*  
 Nos – we  
 Novelas – television soap opera  
 Oleos e gorduras – fats and oil  
 Outro (a) (s) – other (s)  
 Ovos – eggs  
 Pai – father  
 Para – for/to  
 Paroquial – Parish  
 Peixe - fish  
 Pesquisadora – researcher  
 Por – for or because  
 Posseiro – owner  
 Praça (para aqui) – over here  
 Prefeitura - city council  
 Preparou (preparar) – to prepare  
 Projeto Fome Zero (PFZ) – Hunger Zero Project  
 Pronto – ready  
 Puera natural– natural dust  
 Quer – to want  
 Renda -artisanal clothing  
 República – republic  
 Responsabilidade - responsibility  
 Rio do Trairi – Trairi River  
 Roça, capina – field, work in the field  
 São - are  
 São João Batista – Saint John the Baptist  
 Sei (ser) - to know  
 “Sei lá” – who knows  
 Serra – mountainous area  
 Sertanejo – inhabitants of the Sertão

Sertão – backlands  
Siesta – nap, rest  
Simplesmente -simply  
Situação - situation  
Somos – are  
Sopa – soup/broth  
Sou – I am  
Subalimentação – undernutrition  
Também - also  
Tapioca - flavorless starchy ingredient produced from treated and dried manioc root  
Tem (ter) – to be  
Tradições - traditions  
Trairiense – citizen of Trairi  
“Vai com Deus” – Go with God  
Vehnam – to come  
Vem – to come  
Vergonha – shame  
Vou (ir) – to go  
Zona da mata – forest zone

## **Annex 2:** ***Recenseamento***

Nome, Sobrenome e\ou endereço (descrição da casa – outra maneira para identificar a casa :

---

1. # total das pessoas que moram na casa [   ]

2. # homen (s) [   ]      # mulher (es) [   ]

3. # das ciranças (gente que tem menor de 17 anos)

    # homen(s) [   ]      # mulher (es) [   ]

4. # das pessoas que moram na casa mas não tem uma relação direta de sangue com outras pessoas da família. [   ]

5. Idade:	Homen	Mulher	Homen	Mulher
0-3	[   ]	[   ]	4-10	[   ]
11-17	[   ]	[   ]	18-29	[   ]
30-39	[   ]	[   ]	40-49	[   ]
50-59	[   ]	[   ]	60-69	[   ]
70-79	[   ]	[   ]	80 +	[   ]

6. # das gentes que moram na casa que tem um trabalho no lado de fora da casa (no exterior da casa – necessario sair da casa para fazer seu trabalho):

	Homen	Mulher
6a. Semana toda	[   ]	[   ]
6b. Temporário	[   ]	[   ]

7. # das pessoas que assistem\freqüentam a escola:

	Homen	Mulher
7a. Semana toda	[   ]	[   ]
7b. Temporário	[   ]	[   ]

8. # das pessoas que ficam na casa  
(não tem trabalho; não vai\assitir a escola):

	Homen	Mulher
	[   ]	[   ]

9a. Salário da casa, dinheiro total que a casa receber ou ganha por mês em BR:

0-39	[ ]	40-99	[ ]
100-150	[ ]	151-199	[ ]
200-299	[ ]	300-399	[ ]
400-499	[ ]	500-599	[ ]
600 +	[ ]		

9b. A família recebi um salário ou assistência do governo (pagar dinheiro a casa dele/dela)? (bolsa família ou outra bolsa)

Sim [ ] Não [ ]

9c. Sim, quanto voce recebe? \_\_\_\_\_ Por semana [ ] Por mês [ ]

9d. Voce recebi o dinheiro do governo porque voce tem criança(s)? (por exemplo: bolsa da escola)

Sim [ ] Não [ ]

9e. Sim, quanto você recebi por cada criança? \_\_\_\_\_ \ por mês

10. A família e proprietário da casa? Sim [ ] Não: [ ]

11. Na casa: tem quanto(s) quarto(s) para dormir? [ ]

	Sim	Não		Sim	Não
12. Energia Eletrica	[ ]	[ ]	13. Rede Publica	[ ]	[ ]
14. Poco	[ ]	[ ]	15. Agua quente	[ ]	[ ]
16. Geladeira	[ ]	[ ]	17. Fogão	[ ]	[ ]
18. Maquina de lavar roupas	[ ]	[ ]	19. Carro	[ ]	[ ]
20. Televisão	[ ]	[ ]	21. Telefone	[ ]	[ ]
22. Telefone Cellular	[ ]	[ ]	23. Computador	[ ]	[ ]
24. First Aid kit	[ ]	[ ]			

25. Quantos par de sapatos você tem?

25a. Homen/pai da casa [ ]

25b. Mulher / mãe da casa [ ]

25c. Criança mas velha da casa [ ]

25d. Criança mas moça [ ]

26. A família e proprietário de otros pertenses, posses, bens? Sim [ ] Não [ ]  
(por exemplo, otra terra)

27a. Voce tem ou e proprietário dos animais? Sim [ ] Não [ ]



27b. Sim, qual tipo de animal?

Galinha	[ ]	27c. Quantos (#)	[ ]
Vaca(s)	[ ]		[ ]
Porco	[ ]		[ ]
Otro (as)	[ ]		[ ]

: \_\_\_\_\_

28a. Você tem um jardim?

Sim [ ]

Não [ ]

28b. Si não, você tem acesso ao jardim de uma outra pessoa? Sim [ ] Não [ ]

29a. Tem uma possoa que mora na casa que faz renda ou otro tipo de trabalho artesanal?

Sim [ ] Não [ ]

29b. Sim, você vende este artesanato para ajudar no salário/dinheiro da casa?

Sim [ ] Não [ ]

30. Você acha que sua familia está feliz?

Sim [ ]

Não [ ]





**13. Quantos vezes por mês você encontra fome ou desnutrição ou subalimentação?**

- a) menos de 5 dias por mês
- b) uma semana por mês
- c) 15 dias por mês
- d) mais de 15 dias por mês
- e) nem uma vez

**14. Qual é sua explicação para a situação de fome no Trairi?**

- a) preguiça
- b) falta de emprego
- c) falta de dinheiro
- d) falta da organização da prefeitura
- e) falta da assistência social
- f) combinação de todas respostas

**15. Em sua opinião, quais são as doenças causadas por falta de alimentos?**

- a) fraquesa
- b) doenças intestinais
- c) febre
- d) diarreia
- e) combinação de todas respostas

**16. Quando você encontra uma situação de fome, em que você vai confiar para essa situação passar?**

- a) Deus
- b) membro da família
- c) colegas
- d) governo
- e) em si próprio

**17. Quais os alimentos ingeridos diariamente?**

- a) arroz
- b) feijão
- c) macarão
- d) carne, peixe ou frango
- e) verduras: \_\_\_\_\_
- f) frutas: \_\_\_\_\_
- g) a, b, d
- h) a, b, c, d
- i) a, b, c, d, e.
- j) todas respostas

**18. O que você faria si não tivesse o suficiente de comida para todas as pessoas da casa?**

- a) comia todo
- b) daria para seu marido
- c) daria para seus filhos
- d) daria só um pouco para seu marido e o resto para as crianças
- e) comia um pouco e daria o resto para as crianças
- f) comeria você e seu marido e deixaria as crianças com fome

**19. Com quem você se preocupa mais?**

- a) com você
- b) seu marido
- c) seus filhos
- d) seu marido e seus filhos

**20. Qual a dificuldade maior em seu ponto de vista e de sua vida?**

- a) falta de água encanada
- b) falta de amor
- c) falta de oportunidade
- d) fome
- e) desnutrição
- f) falta de fé em Deus
- g) d, e
- h) b,c,d
- i) c, d
- j) c,e
- k) c, e, f
- l) c, d, f