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Womanly Webs

In-Laws and Violence

Invocation for Naná Buruku
eldest female orixá, mother of all,
tied to sea depths, mud, and good deaths.

Proprietária de um cajado
Salpicada de vermelho,
sua roupa parece coberta de sangue.
Orixá que obriga os Fon a falar Nagô.
Minha mãe foi inicialmente do país Bariba
figua parada que mata de repente.
Ela mata uma cabra sem utilizar a faca.

Owner of a cane
Splattered with red,
her clothes seem to be covered in blood.
Orishá who obliges the Fon to speak Nagô.
My mother was initially of the Bariba nation.
Still water that slays without warning.
She kills a goat without using a knife.

PIERRE VERGER
“Orixás da Bahia”

THE FIRST VIOLENCE I EVER witnessed wrack Zizi's body was rendered not by her husband, Jorginho, but by his mother. The formidable Dona Alegrina issued this psychological lashing in the form of a mere glance in Zizi's direction, across a courtyard, from twenty-five yards away.

That afternoon I'd been talking to Zizi and her friend Diana, the new

next-door neighbor who inhabited the room next to mine and Tim's. Diana seemed to be in her late thirties; she had lovely olive skin, wispy black hair that was *liso* (smooth), and very nice, sexy clothes, appropriate for her work as a nightclub singer. Zizi was her buddy from down below, a mother who I knew was somehow part of Dona Alegrina's family. Zizi washed Diana's clothes for pay and helped her hang the lingerie and sheer blouses on the line.

It was Diana's lover who had shocked us a few days before by flinging the sharp knife he'd wrestled from her grip onto our table, ordering us to "keep it away from her!" When I'd returned the knife a few hours later she had looked at me ruefully, keeping silent. Today, though, she wondered aloud to Zizi and me how many more times in her life knives would slash their way into her romances.

Diana pointed to a deep scar on her neck I hadn't noticed before. With her jaw slightly clenched from an anger that seemed permanently lodged there, she told me, "This one was from my last love affair." That time, the knife had been taken in hand by her ex-lover's wife, who in a jealous rage had lunged at her neck, trying to damage her throat and destroy the singing voice by which she earned her livelihood. Though the wife missed her larynx, Diana had spent ten days in the hospital. Her lover had never even come to visit. But Zizi had, Diana added, with an appreciative glance at Zizi.

Diana's tallying of knife wounds was not yet over; this was actually the *third* blade in her romantic history, she told us. All her "bad luck with men" seemed to end with knives. The first knife had killed the "one true love" of her life, her only fiancé, in a bar fight when she was eighteen. Just before, oddly enough, they had agreed that if one of them died they would come back and take the other with him or her. Diana, who said she didn't like Candomblé, nonetheless once went to a *fiesta* (celebration), where she was told that her love was lingering about in her life, preventing her from loving again. Diana claimed to both believe and disbelieve this, seeming more comfortable than I could be with the contradiction.

I was easily drawn into Diana's reverie. For a change, I was hearing about how violence had stabbed its way, repeatedly, into just one person's life. I'd spent so many days before this, during the nine months I spent in the Salvador's women's *delegacia*, recording case after case of the city's daily harvest of violence. On a given day I might have heard ten to twenty cases, many of them involving crises coming to a head in the lives of bruised or bloodied women, most of whose faces I would never see again. By the time

I sat with Diana and Zizi, I still felt a little punch-drunk myself. The prospect of being able to talk to a few people more than once struck me as welcoming, even if the stories were still distressing to hear.

Suddenly, in the middle of one of Diana's sentences, Zizi whipped her body away from the ledge of Diana's balcony, where she had been watching the courtyard below. She flattened herself against the house wall with enough force to produce a thud. With stiffened shoulders, panicked and hiding, she told us in a conspiratorial whisper: "There she is, there's my *sogra* [mother-in law]."

It was the first time I'd actually seen the widow Dona Alegrina, reigning "matriarch" of the Alto do Mungongo, in the flesh.¹ Zizi was married to her third son, Jorginho, whom I had met along with various other members of the family in the neighborhood (see figure 5), but until now Dona Alegrina herself had remained elusive. She was heavysset, though not so bountiful as many older Bahian women, and gave the impression of resting uncomfortably on her feet, probably because of the telltale white bandage wrapped around one ankle. Dona Alegrina was lighter-skinned than her children whom I'd met (five lived in the Mungongo), her skin color suggesting perhaps more indigenous ancestry than her children had. Her son Zumbi later confirmed that she was "half *índio*." Her faded cotton dress, accompanied by a light sweater despite the heat of the day, somehow contradicted the expectations of grandeur I only then realized I'd held of her; from my first acquaintance with this community, I'd been hearing about Dona Alegrina, formidable *mãe de santo* of Candomblé.

Later, when I knew her better, Dona Alegrina would show me photographs of herself in ritual dress for a ceremony at her *terreiro* (temple), in which her elegant adornment more than fulfilled my expectations.

But now I asked Zizi why she was hiding.

"She hates me, and so I don't like her either, and we don't talk. Just 'Good day, good night,'" Zizi said.

I asked, "Does Dona Alegrina have any daughters-in-law that she *does* get along well with?" I'd already noticed that Aldagisa, wife of Valdinho, Dona Alegrina's eldest child, seemed to live cooped up in her tiny house, and that her husband was gone more nights than not. Zizi smiled wryly and said only one, who doesn't live here. She didn't get along well with any of the three daughters-in-law who lived in the Mungongo.

Zizi said that Dona Alegrina had never liked her, in all the years since she'd been with Alegrina's son, which was almost since she had left her family in São Felix. Though Zizi came to live with Jorginho at the Mungongo

Descendants of Lesbón

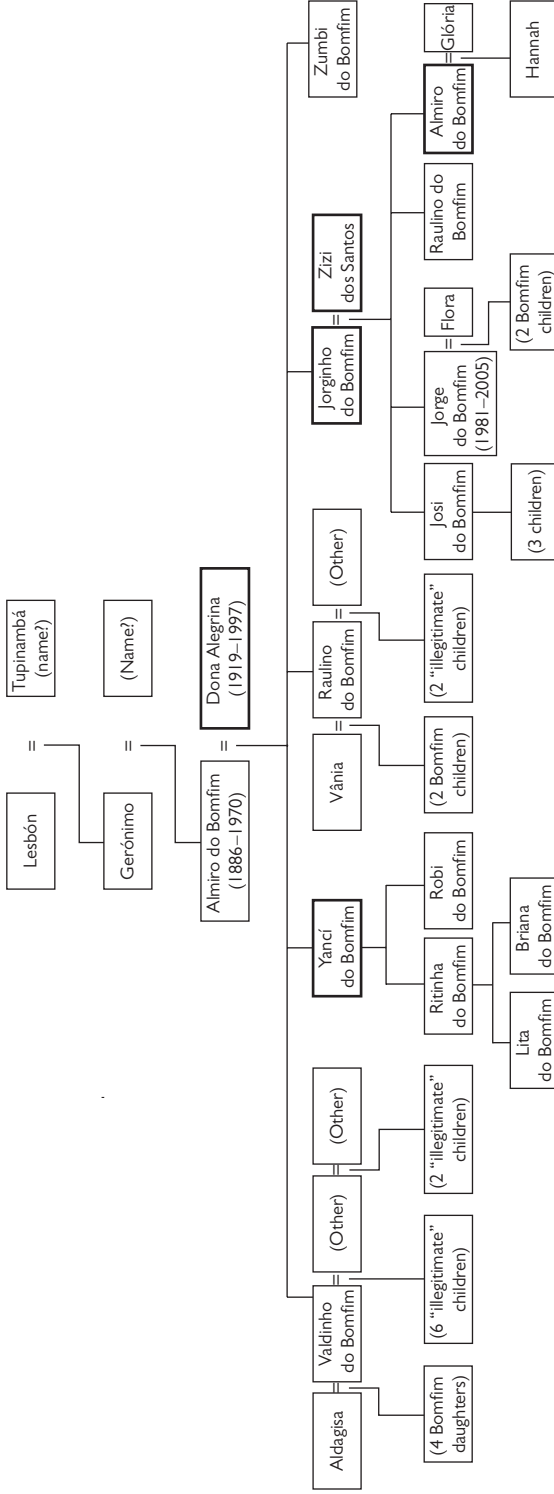


Figure 5. *Familia Bomfim*: Residents of the Alro do Mungongo.

at the age of eleven, she actually left home to work in Salvador at just seven, following her father's abandonment of her mother with eleven children. Zizi was the oldest girl, and so had to leave to find work; she was essentially fostered out to a lighter-skinned, more well-to-do family than her own, becoming a "created daughter," or *filha de criação*. Researchers have documented these Brazilian "daughters" as unpaid servants, often left uneducated and without access to family patrimony compared to their "siblings," the families' blood offspring (Twine 1998; Goldstein 2003; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Apparently, men of the Bomfim family regarded girls in such circumstances as appealing prospective partners: I could now count three generations (Dona Alegrina, daughter-in-law Zizi, and granddaughter-in-law Vani), each of whom had "escaped" (*fugiu*) to the Mungongo with Bomfim family men, all at ages well younger than twenty.

The day that Zizi revealed her problem with Dona Alegrina was also when she first intimated in my presence that Jorginho's philandering had led to explosive fights between them. I asked at the time if the arguments had gotten "rough" (*duro*), euphemistic for including physical violence. This was a question I became practiced at working up to asking women in the neighborhood, but of course I never felt comfortable posing it and never knew what reaction it might provoke. Zizi's neighbor Creuza, long-suffering from her husband's battering, had sighed heavily, sunk into a long silence, and eventually begun to weep silently. Cândida, another neighbor locked in chronic conflict with her husband, let out a raucous, barking laugh. Sônia, whose domineering husband scarcely allowed me to interview her and may have been listening from the next room, simply ignored the question, even though I'd asked in hushed tones, and quietly changed the subject.

For Zizi's part, she merely lowered her chin and looked at me with eyebrows raised and lips pursed, her silence seeming to answer loudly in the affirmative. Later, this would be more than confirmed through Yancí and others. Although Yancí detested the way all five of her brothers treated their wives, "poor Zizi" had it the worst; she was "really a case that could use some help."

The triangle of closely related women kin around which this chapter turns comprises Zizi, Dona Alegrina, and Yancí, Zizi's sister-in-law and Dona Alegrina's only daughter. Their histories, I found, displayed staggering differences in position, power, experience, and attitude regarding gendered violence. Jorginho, the husband, son, and brother through whom the women are related, does not come into focus until the next chapter. Begin-

ning with the women helps illuminate an oft-ignored aspect of violence against women: that conflict, victimization, and resistance may have as much to do with women's relationships to one another as with women's relationships to men.

Yanci, the daughter and sister-in-law, is accorded a prominent position for a work about domestic violence, considering that she was about as far from being victimized by male violence as any woman I met in Bahia. Where both Yanci's mother and her sister-in-law Zizi have been, in different ways, subject to what their family members consider "abuse" from their husbands, Yanci represents the significant number of women I met in Bahia who were bossy, brash, and indomitable. I intentionally cast Yanci as spokeswoman for all the "anti-victim" women I encountered, with the hope that her presence will keep readers aware that even in a book about wife-beating, most women are *not* victims of such violence, nor do many of them see themselves as vulnerable in this respect.

Listening to women from the Bomfim family talk about violence reveals a distinctively Afro-Brazilian ideology of female superiority. Many Bahian women's views of their own power and freedom cast the male privilege and dominance generally associated with to male-to-female violence in a paradoxical light. By showing how women like Dona Alegrina can be, at times, complicit in the abuse of women like Zizi, I seek to situate man-woman dyads in the context of larger kin and community networks that also influence and shape violent dynamics. By highlighting how some women instigate violent incidents, despite their greater vulnerability to serious injury when a conflict turns physical, I explore how gender-based partner violence need not always be about men securing or maintaining male domination. Rather, it may frequently reflect women questioning, rejecting, and rebelling against beliefs, norms, or behaviors that enforce their subjugation.

THE WIFELY WASHERWOMAN

Zizi and I exchanged our first shy hellos across a clothesline that extended along the short ledge where three "houses," the middle one ours, were constructed atop an older dwelling. The houses on the ledge began as one long room, which was then divided into three, with doors added to give each a separate entrance. Each residence consisted of one room, with water plumbed into a corner for a sink, shower head, and a "self-flush" toilet, meaning you filled a bucket and poured it in yourself. Raw wiring extended along the central beam of a common roof made of asbestos siding, to

which a single light bulb socket and plug had been wired for each house. From the *prazinha* (little plaza) below us a labyrinth of a half-dozen muddy paths, *ladeiras* (literally, ladders) snaked up the hillside in different directions, toward dozens of houses above. Most of these were humble, but a few were grandiose; all were fashioned in an improvised, one-room-at-a-time process that spanned many years. From the shelf where Tim and I lived, Zizi's chestnut-brown face could frequently be seen cresting the ledge as she climbed the muddy dirt path to visit Diana, whom Zizi declared her "only friend in the world."

In return for the cut-rate laundry services Zizi supplied Diana, Diana was helping Zizi with the arithmetic for her new mail-order business, for which Zizi seemed overwhelmingly grateful. Beyond the laundry and the mail-order business, informal sector activities of the sort many Mungongo women undertook to make ends meet, I came to realize that just getting out from under her mother-in-law's watchful eye was a relief for Zizi. I watched the two friends, struck by Zizi's small body, taut and muscular in its petiteness, with the wiry strength of an adolescent boy. She managed also to resemble a ballerina, in the way her long neck seemed carefully held above open, squared shoulders, collarbones defined under tightly drawn flesh.

Just as I watched them, Zizi and Diana watched the gringos who had moved in next door.² The first thing that the neighborhood found notable about us was that Tim could be seen as regularly as I could hanging up laundry on the line outside. Not only would he pin up his own, hand-washed clothing but also household linens like sheets and towels, and occasionally even clothes of mine. On top of the fact that he did too much laundry for a man, the children who came to gaze into the windows of our room reported back to their mothers that Tim (who had over ten years experience as a professional chef) was often seen *cooking!* Soon the children were reporting back to me what their mothers had said: If I wanted to take good care of my husband and keep him, he should not have to do laundry or cook. They seemed genuinely concerned to help me, generously reasoning that I must merely be misguided. Understandably, all the sitting around talking to people, the interviewing, didn't quite conform to their notions of work. Most people didn't see me sitting with an assistant, transcribing, or making field notes, because I closed the door first, as I didn't like to advertise having a computer; I suspect they wouldn't have counted it as work, either, if they had seen me. I was aware that I resembled one of those "bad" women, the type people described as setting themselves up for their hard-working partners' rage, and even deserving of violence.

I had never washed quantities of clothing by hand before, and as I hung out my less-than-spotless efforts I was keenly aware that I lacked critical skills for being a passable Mungongo woman. (In particular, the little speckles of blood found each morning on our bed sheets, only on whichever side I'd been sleeping, defied my scrubbing efforts. The mosquitoes seemed to prefer my blood to Tim's, and would become too engorged to fly away, getting crushed whenever I rolled over.)

Probably after being prompted by Zizi, Diana politely suggested that Zizi would be happy to help with our washing, as she took in clothing to augment the salary of her husband, Jorginho, who worked as a bus driver. Diana enthusiastically vouched for Zizi: "She's the best; I wouldn't let anyone else touch my clothes." We had thus far resisted hiring any domestic help in Brazil, but quickly decided to allow ourselves the luxury of a washerwoman. Besides, my domestic ineptitude would help me to get to know Zizi better. I began dropping off my clothes at her house.

One night, Zizi came to deliver Tim's laundry and pick up mine, her eighteen- and seven-year-old sons in tow as usual, along with a visiting twelve-year-old nephew. She stood respectfully in the front door, and I invited her several times to come in and sit before she accepted. She opted for the chair right next to the door rather than sitting on the covered tackboard mattress serving as a couch toward which I'd gestured, but her seven-year-old son Almiro was more courageous, tromping in and sitting in the center of the mattress. Upon sitting, Zizi began to explain, "I'd told Tim I'd get the clothes to him by Monday—"

"Yes, but he told me he hadn't been around all day Monday, so don't worry about it," I cut in, hoping to spare her the need to apologize.

But it became clear she had a story to tell. "See, Sarah, it's that I don't have an iron, and I usually borrow other people's. I borrow Diana's iron a lot, and she's cool, she never minds. But there are other people. . . . You know how sometimes you borrow something of someone's and then she needs it and asks for it back in a way with her face closed to you, almost like she's mad at you? I always feel bad, and I hate to have to be borrowing.

"So, that's what happened: on Monday I couldn't get an iron. But you know what? The next day my husband came home from work, and I saw a package on the table. I looked at it, and he said, 'Why don't you open it?' I did, and I got an iron for a present!" She finished with a victorious nod of her head. "These clothes of Tim's are the first ones I ever pressed with it!"

I asked, "Did you have one before, that broke or something?"

"No," she shook her head. "This is the first one I've ever had."

For ten years, Zizi had been washing people's clothes and, somehow, returning them ironed, without what was an essential tool of the trade, especially for Bahians, who almost uniformly iron even cotton T-shirts and jeans. "Was it your birthday or anything?"

"No, no, he just gave it to me. See, I didn't receive anything on Mother's Day, or my birthday, or for Christmas, so . . ." Zizi spoke without a sense of deprivation or self-pity; she was focused on how lucky she had indeed been today. She repeated the Brazilian equivalent of the saying in English "God helps those who help themselves" (*Deus ajuda a quem cedo madruga*; literally, "God helps those who rise with the sun").

I was moved by Zizi's sense of being "blessed," in circumstances that for many would appear only as a slight respite from hardship. I was also curious about her relationship to her husband. He had a full-time job as a bus driver, but apparently had not been in a position to help his wife obtain a piece of equipment essential to her trade before now.

By the time I returned to the Alto do Mungongo two years later, I had come to understand better how Zizi could have gone without an iron all those years. Zizi and Jorginho's bright and beguiling youngest child, Almiro, then nine, had been out of school for a year and a half, I learned. The incredible part was that Jorginho's employer, the bus company, would have paid Almiro's tuition to go to any reasonably priced private school in the city. Jorginho told me he had simply been "too busy" to get around to completing the necessary paperwork. Meanwhile, other family members assured me, Jorginho had been paying the tuition for his other woman, Gabriela, to attend English classes, which by any Bahian's measure are an expensive luxury. The allocation of resources between Jorginho's two "wives" was starting to add up. The concern I showed about Almiro's education led, perhaps, to my eventually being asked to "baptize" Almiro and become his *madrinha* (godmother). This connection helped me ensure, or at least attempt to, that he would never stay out of school for long again.

ROMANCING VIOLENCE

Finding time to hear more about Zizi, Jorginho, and his mother wasn't easy. Though Zizi never presented herself as less than willing to talk with me, she also seemed unable to free herself from household duties long enough to allow for an extended conversation. Instead, the conversations through which she unfolded her story of life with Jorginho came in snippets. The first of these came as Zizi cut onions, bell peppers, and hot *malagüeta* pep-

pers, along with a freshly caught red snapper, which she boned with a worn, rather dull knife.

According to Zizi, the principal reason for her problems with her mother-in-law was the same for her problems with Jorginho: it all revolved around Jorginho's extramarital involvements and Zizi's unwillingness to accept them.

"Fights between *marido e mulher* [husband and woman] happen," she explained, "even more so among the poor class, like me, generally because of other women [*mulheres na rua*]. I used to get jealous a lot. He did too, but he didn't demonstrate it as much. But at the very beginning our fights were about that, about some woman in the street, who many times would even come *here* looking for him. They didn't come here to the house, but they looked for him here in the neighborhood—that's what they told me. You know how neighbors are." I remembered repeatedly having been told that the only reason one would tell a woman that her husband was betraying her was because one wished her ill.

Zizi continued. "I cried, argued, said I was leaving him, everything. Then, with time, I started letting these fights alone, thinking more about my children . . ."

"And right after you married," I asked, "you said that you never accepted that he had other women, and that Dona Alegrina thought that you had to accept it?"

"She accepted it—she still accepts it. And not only me—it's the same with all her daughters-in-law—she still accepts it, and she gets along well with her sons' lovers," she said. Zizi spoke at length of the "*falta de moral*" (lack of morals) this presented, reminding me of what has been called the "amorality" (but not immorality) of Candomblé (Prandi 1991; Greenfield 1994).

"Why, do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know. I guess it's because she suffered so much with their father, so she wants to take it out on [*descontar*] us . . . She thinks that this is like the old days when women tolerated that kind of thing, but I'm not going to put up with it.

"That was my conflict with her. She suffered a lot with their father."

Zizi paused, as if considering whether to go on. What she said next turned out to be sensitive information, indeed. "Would you believe he even put another woman to live together with her, Sarah? He divided the house right in two, and put the other woman in one part and Dona Alegrina in the other! So, she was *revoltada* [disgusted, offended], and she didn't fight

like me. She stayed quiet all those years.” Only years after this conversation, after Dona Alegrina had passed away, would both Zizi and her sister-in-law Yanci confirm that Alegrina, the teenager who married the *pai de santo* in late maturity, had shouldered her own share of slaps and punches, especially in the early years.

But now Zizi took a slow breath, then continued. “He got old, went blind, and Dona Alegrina kept taking care of him, keeping all that resentment inside.

“Most of her daughters-in-law don’t care about this problem of hers. I, when I was younger, didn’t try to understand either, because of the way she treated us.”

Zizi lowered her voice and confided with intensity. “Often I think that if Dona Alegrina hadn’t entered in the middle of our fights, they wouldn’t have reached the level of aggression they did. But she got right in there. . . . At times we’d be arguing and she’d say, ‘Beat her!’” Zizi raised her voice to act it out. “‘That’s just what she deserves, to get beaten!’ And then I would turn on her: ‘No! It’s *a senhora* [you, formal] who deserves to be beaten!’” Despite her sense of who deserved what, Zizi always ended up taking the brunt of blows. Even if the fists and feet were Jorginho’s, she held her mother-in-law equally responsible.

Zizi summed up the way she was treated, in later conversations as well, as Dona Alegrina “*descontando*” on her daughters-in-law. Here *descontar* refers to “taking it out on someone,” but a more literal gloss could be “discounting,” as in debiting from someone else’s figurative “account.” She also used a phrase I heard from others: “paying in the same coin.” The coin, it was clear, could be conceived of as abuse, its different denominations ranging from verbal to psychological to economic to physical.

Ultimately, I identified several similarly quasi-economistic slang terms for “to beat” someone, including *dar conta* (to give account), *cobrar* (to charge; in Bahia, this was used most often as meaning to “nag,” to “demand,” or to “expect,” but could also mean to “beat,”);³ to *baixar* (or *meter*) *pau em* means to give a beating, but *pau* (literally wood; also a beating) has also served as slang for diverse principal units of currency: the *cruzeiro* (*novo*), the *cruzado* (*novo*) or since 1995, the *real*.⁴ Of special note is *dar porrada* for “to beat,” literally “to give semen,” where *porrada* derives from *porra*, or “penis.”

From the first time I heard such references, I wondered how such a political economy of abuse, wrongful force, or violence might work. Had Dona Alegrina, having advanced to widow-matriarch, somehow been able

to recoup for her own “account” what had once been wrongly debited, when her husband caused her suffering?

I was struck by how neatly Zizi’s description of her mother-in-law fit with women who have been called “token torturers” in anthropological literature. Typically an older woman, frequently a mother-in-law, a token torturer reproduces oppression and abuse, reinforcing the same patriarchal values used to subjugate her in her youth (Campbell 1999). She is a “token” in that she advances, by age and often widowhood, to be able to stand in for the same forces that socialized her into feminine constraint, thus serving as the ultimate hegemonic agent for patriarchy and working against a social category of people—women—to which she belongs. Whether or not the token torturer concept would prove helpful in understanding Zizi and Alegrina, I knew the situation would be unlikely to be that simple, neatly conforming to the model. Specifically, I was interested in what agency and resources Zizi could exercise to prevent the reproduction of such a cycle.

Zizi mused about how she came to sympathize, over time, with her mother-in-law. “Later, Sarah, I sought to change my life and my children’s lives; then I started to understand her problem also. I do know I’m not going to be that way with my daughters-in-law. I’m going to try to help, and I already told my sons: When you all get married I don’t want to see you mistreat your wives in front of me—I’ll grab a broom and you all will get it! That cracks them up.”

From where we sat, in the corner of the main room of their old *taipa* (lath and plaster) house, I could see that the room served multiple functions: kitchen, dining room, living room, and den, as well as being the place where everyone except Jorginho and Zizi would unroll a strip of foam rubber to sleep on at night (that is, the four children and, at this time, two nephews). Adjoining rooms seemed perpetually in construction, never quite yet usable, appearing given over to the encroaching tropical wet and vegetation. On a wooden, paint-chipped cabinet, an old television and stereo set had been optimistically placed; neither was working. The only other furniture in the room was a Formica table with some mismatched chairs. A newly captured monkey, about the size of a large man’s outspread hand, chattered furiously from atop its cage on the wall, broadcasting its resentment of the string around its neck. Household members and others looked in every few minutes, asking Zizi if she’d finished washing some article of laundry, or when lunch would be ready.

I noticed a simple shrine in the corner, to Cosme and Damião (Cosmos and Damian) and the *ibejis*—twin Catholic saints and twin spirits of

Candomblé, respectively. Not long after this, Cosme and Damião would become an embarrassing, annoyed-at-oneseif association for me. As I came to know Dona Alegrina and Yanci better, I gave Dona Alegrina a Cosme and Damião; she indirectly passed on a curt message about the work that receiving such a gift would make for them. Foolishly, I hadn't considered that if one gives an image of a saint as a gift for a *terreiro*, one obligates the recipients to "seat" it properly, which can be expensive and laborious.

Zizi saw me studying the shrine, and allowed that she liked Candomblé. But, she added, she thought it important to recognize its limitations. Dona Alegrina, after all, was considered a powerful *mãe de santo*, and Zizi was certain she had tried to use her sway—she had indeed "found *trabalhos*" (works, spells for the Candomblé *exus*, *orixás*, or other entities) intended to see her son with one of the women she preferred over Zizi. Despite Zizi's fear of Dona Alegrina's abilities, she could afford to view neither her mother-in-law nor Candomblé as all-powerful. So, she concentrated on their limitations.

This came up when Zizi mentioned Jorginho's other women coming, at times, to visit Dona Alegrina.

"You really think they do?" I asked. "Why would they?"

"To do malice. She never did accept me being with Jorginho, you know. So they would work with Dona Alegrina. Jorginho gave them her telephone number, and they called."

"You mean, to do a spell [*trabalho*, here meaning sorcery] to help the woman conquer [*conquistar*] Jorginho?"

"Exactly." Zizi nodded indignantly. "I've found my name several times on a piece of paper," as part of a *trabalho*, she assumed. "But I never got too concerned, because even though I like Candomblé and everything, I think that the first person above all else is God, and my faith is in God. A lot of women have done things, and she [Dona Alegrina] has done things, to see if he'd leave me. But she must have done it wrong, or they never worked. She would only do things to see if he'd leave me. She could have done a *trabalho* to see if we could stop fighting, but she never did *that*."

Zizi looked up from her fuming memory, suddenly seeming concerned that I would form the wrong impression. Despite all of the discord, her overall view of her relationship with Jorginho still resembled an epic romance, wherein lovers withstood opposition and adversity to be together. She recounted the beginnings of their volatile love, and how he already had "various other girls—I think he had eight. He told me that he had broken up with all eight of them, just to be with me. . . . Sometimes they would

come, wanting to beat me up, and I was younger and smaller. So, he said he was finished with all of them.

“But he went on as he was, going out with a woman and sleeping in the street. . . . I fell in love [*eu me apaixonei*]. They say that poor people don’t fall in love, but my case was different.”

I wasn’t sure who “they” were here, and again wished I’d realized buying a television to watch *telenovelas* would have been the most responsible thing for a fieldworker in Brazil to do.

“The majority of poor people are ignorant to think that way,” Zizi went on, “Because the way I felt when I saw him for the first time . . .”

Zizi got pregnant at the age of eleven. Jorginho brought her to meet his mother, and together Dona Alegrina and Zizi decided to terminate the pregnancy, over Jorginho’s objections. Dona Alegrina, who in the past had served as a *parteira* (midwife) for many births in the neighborhood, performed the abortion herself. After this first time—Zizi’s abortions would eventually total ten—Zizi became terribly ill: “almost paralytic.” She was convinced, nonetheless, that it was the right thing to do, “Because I was so young, and he was worried. We were in no circumstances to have a child. We didn’t have anywhere to live together; I slept on the beach behind the church, and he took care of me. From the breakfast that she—” Zizi nodded her head in the direction of Dona Alegrina’s house, “—gave him, he gave me half, and lunch as well. He wasn’t a bad person. He took care of me.”

From the beginning, Zizi’s feelings for Jorginho were marked with jealousy, but she reflected that if she could only reconcile herself to this, she might still be allowed her passion. After all, she would ask, “Aren’t infidelities and fights to be expected? But love is not.” Particularly for poor people like her, she again reminded me. “People think love is only for soap opera people from São Paulo.”

The first fight with physical aggression occurred in the beginning of the relationship, years before they legalized their marriage. Then and thereafter, she confessed laughingly, she was more likely to be the initial aggressor.

“I was very young,” she reminded me. “Anything could happen and I would cry. I fell in love too hard. I was a little child! I’d never had a boyfriend. The way he treated me right in the beginning, when I found out he was going out to get together with another woman, it seemed like—I don’t know—I got mad because I knew that he was betraying me and I wasn’t betraying him. I wasn’t that way, even when we were courting, I never even smiled at another guy. I was full of that insane, possessed [*alucinada*] passion, my first affair [*namoro*]. So when he came back home I fought, I cried,

I wanted to leave. I got aggressive and so he did too,” Zizi finished, laughing wryly at the memory.

“So was it something that you usually started?” I asked.

“Almost always. I went off on him [*eu ia em cima dele*]: I scratched him, everything; so he also got aggressive, and there you had a fight. Many times he didn’t even get to the point of beating me; he told me to quiet myself down. He’d get a switch from a guava tree, and with this little stick he’d hit my legs and say: ‘You’re going to quiet yourself. I’m raising you [*lbe criando*]. I’m your father,’ I don’t know what else.” Again, Zizi laughed.

“He said *that*?” I was incredulous.

“He did.”

“And you responded?”

“I said: ‘You’re not my father! My father’s in São Felix!’”

“But really, I never thought of hurting him, like to the point of him having to go to the hospital. And he even came to me to say, at one point, ‘Zizi, this jealousy of yours is going to hurt you [*lbe prejudicar*], someday. Because you are very aggressive: You attack me, you curse me—the one provoking these fights is you! Now, I am of the moment. So I could give you a slap, and hurt you or even kill you. Because I am man. I’m not even going to feel one of your slaps.’”

“He used to joke with me: ‘Where is your strong hand?’ He grabbed my arm: ‘Where is the arm to be hitting me? I’m stronger, Zizi. Let’s just end with that. Because this is getting ugly. Our children are getting older. We need love, to help each other and not do this anymore.’”

As involved as she became in telling me the story, I still thought Zizi seemed anxious: Was she feeling all right? It was her back, she told me. An old spinal injury. It was hurting more than usual this morning. Also, she hadn’t finished washing all the linen for the restaurant next door, and the woman had had a fit.

I asked how the injury had happened. “Well, it was in one of my fights with Jorginho, years ago.” Her voice changed, conveying a degree of shame about this admission, closer to the voices of Creuza and Sônia and other women who had been savagely battered and found it humiliating to say out loud. She was careful to assure me, “He didn’t really mean to hurt me.” At the same time, “But” she sighed, “my spine will never be the same.

“It happened because of the children,” she elaborated. “Because they didn’t want to go to school or study—he beat up on them too much. I didn’t want him beating them that way, so I went to get him off, and he kicked me to get me away from the kids and let him beat them. I lost my balance

there on the stairs, and I fell down below. When I fell he went running to help me, saying he was sorry. With time, I started to feel a pain in my spine, in my spinal column, in this bone,” she indicated a place below her ribs. “I used to always fall when I was straightening up the cupboard . . .” Zizi’s voice trailed off. She shook her head as if to dispel the image, then declared in a voice lowered with resolve, “I’m going to see if I can take it until my children don’t need me anymore.”

I remembered this statement with greater poignancy when later Josi, Zizi’s mentally deficient daughter who was judged incapable of raising babies alone when found slapping her first at three months old, went on to have four babies, against everyone’s objections. Zizi is raising three of them, and will be needed not only by her children but by her children’s children as well, for years to come.

AFTERNOON IN YANCÍ’S BAR

Invocation for Iansã (Oya-Yansan)

Oyá, courageous woman who, on waking, grasps her saber,

Oyá, wife of Shangô,

Oyá, whose husband is red,

Oyá, who dies bravely with her husband.

Oyá, wind of Death.

Oyá, whirlwind that shakes the trees of the leaves all about.

Oyá, who is the only one who can hold the horns of a buffalo.

PIERRE VERGER
“Orixás da Bahia”

Not long after, I heard about Jorginho’s violence from a different, and much less tolerant, perspective than Zizi’s.⁵ But Yancí, Jorginho’s only sister, and I did not start our chat about violence against women with Zizi; Yancí worked her way there slowly.

“Oh Sarah, you don’t have to go to the Delegacia da Mulher [Women’s Police Station] to hear about that,” Yancí declared dismissively when my research came up. “The stories I could tell you, things that happened right here, you wouldn’t believe.” She chewed raw coconut as she spoke, pausing to suck the fiber dry of milk and spit out the remaining roughage into a trash can beside her.

I sat on a wobbly wooden stool in her kitchen, helping peel potatoes for the midday meal and occasionally swatting at the tiny *murúim* fleas that

relentlessly bit my ankles. The fleas didn't seem to bother Yanci quite as much; she said she was used to them. I was capable of wincing, though, watching them settle greedily on the open sore, an uncontrolled ulcer, on her ankle. Like her mother Dona Alegrina, Yanci wore a white bandage around her ankle when she left the house. I had come to see these, which one saw throughout the city, as naggingly symbolic of the inadequate health care available to Salvador's poor. In addition to ulcerated varicose veins and infected sores, uncontrolled diabetes seemed particularly rampant. Given the amount of sugar nearly every Bahian piled into *café* morning, noon, and night, the legacy of the state's history of sugar cane still exacted dearly from descendants of the enslaved Africans brought to Brazil to produce it (Schwartz 1986; Mintz 1985).

Yanci was the mother of two adult children and newly a grandmother. Good-looking and still a vigorous woman in her late forties, Yanci had dark-cinnamon skin and an intelligent, inscrutable brow that set her apart. Her beauty is what some Afro-Bahians I'd interviewed would have called "the type of beauty that doesn't fall," usually in reference to themselves as a way to elide classifying themselves according to cruder "racial" or color categories when asked how they identify by "color" or "race." Such women felt it would be uncouth to actively declare themselves black, but were willing to point out that their darker skin is thought to hold up better under the tropical sun. Yanci shared none of the internalized racism, or presumptions of the interviewer's racism, that such euphemisms often implied—she declared herself "*negra*" without the slightest hesitation when surveyed. I attributed this at least in part to the distinctive history of her family; she never downplayed or seemed ashamed of her background, but in fact was keen to use it as cultural capital whenever possible. She called herself an independent businesswoman with similar pride, and generated a reasonably steady income, albeit modest, through the bar and other improvised, informal-economy enterprises.

Rei was Yanci's friend, sometime lover, and drinking companion. He was in his early thirties, and when working alongside Yanci in the bar he frequently called her his *patroa*—boss—for all to hear, seeming to enjoy the unusual implications of a young, attractive man willingly looking up to an older woman who is also his sexual partner.

I was now getting to know Yanci, Alegrina's only biological daughter, better every day, in part owing to my weakness for buying single cigarettes from her bar. I understood that Yanci had "had her head made," or been initiated into Candomblé, by her own mother. Still, compared to the

majority of *filhas-de-santo* (daughters-of-saint, Candomblé initiates), this didn't currently appear to be a central part of Yanci's identity—she had told me that she didn't want to be a “prisoner” of Candomblé, perhaps referring to the level of obligation to the “saints” one takes on when deeply involved. Too, perhaps her lukewarm interest simply resulted from the family *terreiro* growing less and less active as Dona Alegrina aged and struggled with health problems.

Most striking so far in conversations with Yanci was her indignation toward women victimized by men's violence. She dismissed men who are violent as no good, as “without shame” (*sem vergonha*). But she also saw their worthlessness as unremarkable, as natural: what can you expect? But the women who *put up with it*—these required commentary! Yanci declared that she would “never consider allowing” herself to be hit. She had absolutely no sympathy for women who did allow it more than once, insisting that if they stick around they “must like it” on some level.

This lack of sympathy for a chronically beaten woman fit into a belief system that many *baianas* elaborated for me about intrinsic gender difference and vast areas of behavior—moral, intellectual, emotional—where women are simply superior. Yanci easily and repeatedly launched into a litany of ways women outdo men. Her personal version of female superiority was most glaring in her conviction that she was so much more capable of raising her two children than their biological father that she never once considered registering them under “any man's name,” but gave them her own surname. Rei's role as her consort and junior further complemented Yanci's defiant profile. Overall, Yanci enacted her roles as mother, *companheira*, boss, daughter, businesswoman, and *filha-de-santo* as no one's subordinate.

Once, she explained to me how she cultivated her distaste for marriage. “I never wanted to marry because the men I had in my life, I always had more than they did, and what I've earned is not to give to them.” This would not be the last time I would hear her disparage men's insolvency, which she attributed to their “inability” to muster a work ethic.

Yanci's diatribes made me wonder if I weren't hearing an Afro-Bahian version of the ideology some observers of Latin American women have called Marianismo, or beliefs asserting that women hold specific, generally spiritual and moral, areas of superiority over men. Marianismo is an academic discourse initiated by Evelyn Stevens (1973a, 1973b), who adapted the term, liberally, from practices surrounding diverse devotional “cults” to the Virgin Mary in Catholic history. For Stevens, Marianismo of the Hispanophone Americas referred to covert female control of domestic domains (while

still allowing the man to *feel* sovereign), self-abnegation and self-sacrifice in the interests of offspring and other kin, and displays of moral fortitude and level-headedness that calm volatile men's temperaments (Stevens 1973b; see also Stevens 1973a). More recently, the conceptual employment of Marianismo has been sharply criticized: Ehlers (1991) and Navarro (2002) take Stevens to task, rejecting the elevation of Marianismo (by cultural actors and analysts such as Stevens alike) as false consciousness that reinforces women's economic subordination and that is not to be celebrated. Other critics, such as psychologists Mayo and Resnick, express concern with Marianismo as a learned behavior, whereby women internalize "the culture's expectations of them—to be passive and to accept unconditionally men's right to own them and men's legal right to discipline them through corporal punishment and emotional violence" (1996: 14). They conclude that this results in many Latin American women "act[ing] against themselves and limit[ing] the development of their expectations." In this sense, Marianismo is arguably an ideology that reproduces patriarchal hegemony among Latin American women, getting women to participate in their own oppression by enforcing "natural" differences.

Upon reflection, neither the romanticizing nor the falsification of Marianismo seemed to apply usefully to someone like Yancí, or to a multi-religious, Afro-Brazilian context. The fact that many *baianas* did actively profess a form of female superiority is probably the only significant parallel. In order to distinguish an Afro-Bahian ideology of female superiority, perhaps in Bahia such an ideology might be better conceived of as "*Iansã-ísmo*," (yan-saw-IZ-mo), for the Candomblé goddess Iansã. Iansã is the fierce controller of storms, taker of multiple lovers, and is subordinate to no man. Not incidentally, she is also the *orixá* that "owns" Yancí's "head," as well as being one of the three *orixás* with ties to her mother Alegrina. Far from the self-abnegation of various Virgin Marys and Marias, Iansã (Oyá Iansã) is renowned for leaving her husband-*orixá*, Ogum, for another more elegant, Xangô (Verger 1993: 220, 252). Afterward, Iansã and Ogum exchanged blows that splintered the universes of both men and women. Unlike the women Steven's critics find harmonized and hegemonized by Marianismo, Yancí is hardly self-abnegating, nor accepting of a behind-the-scenes form of power.

If Iansã illuminates much about a strong woman like Yancí, she is not the only model for powerful Bahian women. Surrounding her in the Mungongo and up and down the Avenida are women whose authoritativeness and leadership in their families, communities, and work networks were nour-

ished from endlessly diverse sources—Eliene, who organized the teenagers for trash picking and recycling, Mona and her tight circle of evangelicals, Creuza and her work through the Domestic Worker’s Union, or Sandra, the formidable Jehovah’s Witness mother of five who ruled absolutely at home, despite outwardly having ceded to husbandly leadership. In complicated and variable ways, each of these women could be understood as individuals as relatively immune to falling victim to male violence as Yancí herself is. At the same time, of course, merely because a woman possesses the passion and defiance of a Yancí does not prevent her from getting beat up by a man. If Yancí were to have her say, however, she would assert that someone truly “of” Iansã would never allow it to happen twice.

SICK LOVE (AMOR DOENTÍO)

Iemenjá Assabá—limps, constantly spins cotton, is willful and sometimes dangerous.

MIKELLE S. OMARI-TUNKARA
*Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual,
and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé*

Although formidable Bahian women like Yancí may abound in Bahia, of course not all *baianas* can be described in this way. In point of fact, the Yancís of Bahia construct themselves in opposition to “pitiful” women who permit themselves to become victims.⁶

That afternoon, Yancí told of women she has known whose entire sexuality was wrapped up in being beaten: “There are women accustomed to blows (*pancada*). They just get used to it. She’s beaten up one day, and ten days go by, and she’s getting it again. There are women who will only go to bed with beatings!” Yancí used the slang *porrada* for beating, which literally means “semen,” thus seeming to group together things that men visit upon women. “I know of several women like that,” she finished.

Yancí then recalled for me a story from when she was a young girl that encapsulated for her the idea of “sick love” (*amor doentío*), where passion and violence become fused. It concerned an elderly widow named Filomena, whose deceased husband had battered her bloody, day in and day out, for the duration of their marriage. Finally he got sick and died, and Filomena went into traditional mourning (*luto*), wearing all black.

“About two or three months had passed when it started,” Yancí narrated, putting on her reading glasses and sorting her receipts as she talked. “It

seemed like Filomena couldn't hold in her grief anymore. She went and got that same heavy mill sprocket [*pilão*] he used to beat her with. She hurled it up into the air while standing underneath, letting it crash down on her head and shoulders. All this time, she was wailing his name, 'Gilbeeeeerto! Aiiiiiii!', again and again, along with, 'Bate mais!' [Beat me more!]"

Filomena sobbed and ranted as she grew more and more bloody and bruised, but incredibly, did not die. "In a few days, she was out there doing it again! 'Gilbeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeerto!' Every three days or so. We would all go and watch—it got so it was kind of funny."

For Yanci, Filomena's story showed how victims could get so habituated to abuse that they become actively complicit, even recreating it themselves. Like many of her fellow Bahians, Yanci saw abuse and affective attachment as things that become linked, leading victims at times to collaborate to their own detriment. Because they accept the package, despite the agony of some parts, women in love with violent men are said to "like" (*gostar de*) violence.⁷

Yanci's notions of how a woman could "like" violence were not confined to eroticized masochism, however. Once a woman was pathetic enough to tolerate violence, Yanci found her to be so reprehensible as to actively warrant abuse. After repeatedly hearing other Bahians say things like, "Well, then, she must like being beaten; she *has* to like it," we began to ask nearly everyone we talked to about the expression, "All women like to be beaten." This was a shortened popularization of the author and playwright Nelson Rodrigues's much-quoted statement, "Not all women like to be beaten, only the normal ones. The neurotic ones fight back" (*Nem todas as mulheres gostam de apanhar, só as normais. As neuróticas reagem*; Rodrigues 1974). True to his famed pessimistic realism, Rodrigues's phrase implied a kinky, sexualized, and sado-masochistic connection between "liking" and "violence." When informants alluded to sexual connotations along the lines Rodrigues points toward, it was nearly always in association with this kind of habituation. In this context, Rodrigues saw women as "neurotic" because they both desired violence for erotic purposes, and also reacted against it.

However, I came to believe most Bahians understood the connection quite differently. Most commonly, they responded to this question by asserting it wasn't true, as in "They say women like to be beaten, but all I know is that *I* don't," or, from a man, "No, no one likes to be beaten; of course not." They could go on, though, to entertain the idea that a woman could be seen as "liking" being beaten, usually in the guise of one who tolerated an abusive situation and took no measures to change it.⁸ These contrasting conceptions of how oneself would experience fear and pain and

how someone else might do so echo the observations that Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) made in a related urban setting in northeast Brazil. In the Alto do Cruzeiro, hunger and malnutrition was an open secret, meaning that everyone knew it took an unacceptable toll, yet it was never viewed as the primary cause by the immediate family members of starving babies, overmedicated children and adults alike to quell hunger, or fetishistic obsessions about expensive, commoditized, and advertised foods out of the Cruzeiro's reach. In both cases, objective generalization and subjective particularism diverge in problematic ways, perhaps acting as defense mechanisms in the face of denials and trauma.

Affirming that the woman who sticks around for more amounted to liking being hit, Yancí declared: "She deserves to get beaten more! I'm in favor of men who beat." She went on to qualify how beatings might be deserved.

"I know many women who deserve to be beaten, and they *really* deserve to get it! Now, there are women that get beaten up unjustly, but these are the ones that should get themselves out of the situation."

"And the women who deserve it?" I asked.

"In the neighborhood we have one who's a good example. . . . The husband is a man that works; he's a real worker that provides everything she needs [*corresponde com tudo*] at home. He helps her, he takes her everywhere she wants to go; he's not lacking in any way, and she wants for nothing. Now tell me, with all that, couldn't this woman wash clothes, or clean house, or cook? If she can't help out her man, then she also can't just go around doing whatever she wants: This no-good [*descarada*] just stands in other people's doorways, gossiping."

I am again aware of how I can be found "gossiping in other people's doorways" far more than most. "And getting beaten would resolve this?" I wondered.

"To see if she can take shame [*toma vergonha*], Sarah!" Yancí entreated, her voice intense. "Let's say her man gets home, and he's revolted with this kind of thing. Well, then he needs to give her some smacks [*dar de pau*]! Because when he goes and complains to her—'Why didn't you do this or that?'—she gives him whatever answer she wants to: 'Oh, I was at so-and-so's house,' or 'Oh, I was gossiping with Fulano, Beltrano, and Ciclano,'" the Brazilian equivalent of Tom, Dick, and Harry.

"An analysis I do here in the Mungongo where I live, Sarah, is that the women here who are beaten are well deserving. Because her father and mother can't hit her anymore, so her husband beats her to set her back on track. But as soon as the woman won't accept this kind of deal, she only gets

beat up once.” Only upon such a refusal, it seemed, did a woman claim a kind of adulthood many women never reached. Yancí’s analysis also places the impetus for refusal directly at the feet of the individual, corroborating arguments that women’s emancipation relies on individualization, upon which citizen’s, women’s, and human rights all necessarily rest (Marques-Pereira and Raes 2005: 92).

“Because if he beats me,” she explained, “*one* time. Because, I’m like this: I’m with him. He says he *loves* me. Love is a word that doesn’t have any compensation. Love is just itself. Within love exists everything that is good. Within the love I know it’s so. . . . Love compensates for all. But why would he beat me? Because there is nothing, no love, nothing.”

“But then how can you be *in favor* of men who beat?” I persisted.

Yancí sighed. “Because, Sarah, then she has to take her punches.” Again, she used *porrada*—semen—to say “punches.”

“So, if I’m a man who provides everything for the home, and my wife doesn’t do her share, she deserves to be beaten?”

“Right,” Yancí nodded once, decisively. Then she held up a finger, qualifying, “But also, a woman who’s getting beat up and doesn’t leave is even worse than the man that’s beating her. She needs to make a change, or she deserves it twice as much.”

“But,” I countered, “don’t you think that some women aren’t in a position [*não tem condições*] to . . . ?”

Yancí was in no mood for such excuses. “We all have family, Sarah. Especially women have family: she has a sister, an aunt. And say you have two or three children. If you can’t be a civil servant, or work at Petrobrás [the local petrochemical complex] then you wash laundry, you set up a bar on the beach, you sell bananas and oranges, and you raise your children.”

For Yancí, the roles of men and women were distinct and complementary, requiring compliance on both parts. If the woman failed to fulfill expectations, she effectively forfeited her adulthood, and it then became appropriate for her male partner to resort to authoritarian measures, including corporal punishment. If a woman who was doing her part and was otherwise undeserving of abuse continued to put up with this, and didn’t leave, in Yancí’s eyes she was doubly deserving of beatings. In both cases, physical aggression took the form of punishment meted out at a man’s discretion. Because Yancí saw such a measure as a justified, legitimate enactment of authority on the part of the man, it ceased, in her view, to qualify as “violence,” or something wrong that merited intervention. Interpretations like Yancí’s are difficult to register in single-scale measures comparing

levels of tolerance or acceptability of violence against women in different societies, where Brazil may be misleadingly ranked as a society that does not disapprove (Counts, Brown, and Campbell 1999: 5).

The ghostly tale of Filomena's masochism was not the last Yancí had to tell.

"What about the lady with the hair?" Yancí asked rhetorically of Rei, who had been sitting in, listening. She continued, "That lady had hair that was so long, I'd never seen anything like it. And her man was the most jealous I've ever seen—and meaner than he was jealous. I thought I was going to get shot, and I was just a *moça* [maiden]! He grabbed that pretty wife of his and wrapped her long braid three times around his fist, like a dog's leash. He yanked her out of their house out into the *praça* right here in front. I thought her neck would break. His other hand had a revolver, and he was shooting at anyone who tried to get in the middle. . . .

"Then, Sarah, there was the one who lost her fingernails. She went to the beauty salon to get her hair done and her nails painted, to get ready for a party here. She put on a low-cut dress that showed her cleavage. When her husband came and saw how she looked, he took some shears and cut off all her hair, and tore the dress so it was ruined. Still not satisfied, he took some pliers and pulled off two of her fingernails! *É mole?*" Her finish literally meant: "Is it soft/weak?" by which Yancí means, "Can you believe it?"

I scarcely could.

Yancí continued on into other stories, stopping to sell the odd shot of *cachaça*, the liquor made from sugar, or single cigarette to the neighbors appearing in the doorway and tossing the crumpled bills into a small pile on the table. Despite the heaviness of the topic, she recounted the horrors she had witnessed with flourish, in an almost festive, dramatic tone, aided by occasional encouragement from Rei. She acted out the scenes in flamboyant motions, throwing her head back and laughing when the brutality surpassed belief, then gravely fixing me with her eyes, peering above her glasses, asking, "*É mole, Sarah?*"

Eventually, the stories grew closer to home, as Yancí arrived at the history of her younger brother, Jorginho, and his wife, Zizi. By now I'd realized everyone in the neighborhood seemed to treat the couple's violence as common knowledge, but I had never I been privy to the graphic description Yancí now shared with me.

"There's no kind of punishment Zizi hasn't gotten from Jorginho, Sarah—if you can even *think* of it, so could he, and he's used it on her. That woman has been beaten with a shovel, she's been beaten with a big belt, and whipped with a vine [*cipó*] until she *rebocou por dentro* [was plastered hard

from the inside]. You know that when they got together, Sarah, she was just a girl; her breasts hadn't even started to grow. Well, he never let them, with all this beating: You see how she doesn't have breasts today?" I thought Zizi did have breasts, just small ones, but said nothing. "Her sisters are small like her, but they have breasts. He just wouldn't let them grow. You know how she is supposed to be of Iemenjá?" Yancí asked me, referring to the *orixá* of the sea, fecundity, and fierce motherhood, renowned also for vanity and jealousy. "We say she is of Yemanjá Assaba, because that's the Iemenjá that limps, and is always working." She leaned forward and whispered the piece she found to be a cruel joke with a smirk, "But, Sarah, did you ever hear of an Iemenjá without breasts?" Iemenjá is typically depicted with enormous breasts, or with just one massive breast, such that she is self-conscious and unwilling to be touched.

Yancí continued to narrate Zizi's suffering. "Every single one of her pregnancies she was battered, Sarah! Kicks to the stomach! She lost more than one of them because of this, and that's why Josi," Zizi's oldest and only girl, then twenty-one, "is retarded, and why Jorge," the second oldest, "has problems too. Kicks to the stomach! She lost more babies than she ever gave birth to this way." Again I thought of the irony that, through Iemenjá, Zizi was tied to maternal fecundity in a way that, just as with her breasts' emergence, her actual life denied.

"Jorginho couldn't even let Zizi make herself pretty! You know how I used to do people's hair for a living? I remember one time I had straightened and permed Zizi's hair, and Jorginho came home and took one look at her and poured a bucket of water on her head, ruining her hair! And then, he tore the shirt she'd borrowed. He knew she only wanted to be pretty for him, but he couldn't let her.

"You don't know the things I did to help that girl. Once I was working in São Paulo, and I had a great job in the house of a very rich Japanese executive. I called Zizi and told her to get away from him, to come to São Paulo and I'd set her up. I was going to give her that great job! She wouldn't have had anything to worry about ever again, and she wouldn't be still living in that miserable hovel. Even Creuza," Yancí referred to the battered woman who went silent then wept when I asked if things got rough, who in the meantime had left her husband, "let us help her get away! But no. You can't help someone who doesn't want anything better for herself.

"He never let her work anyway. Just washing other people's clothes here at home. But every time she gets something else set up, he says no. And she can hardly wash clothes anymore; do you see how she is?"

In fact, I did. Right then Zizi was going through yet another “bad phase” with her spine, limping with more visible pain.

DONA ALEGRINA’S “IANSÃ-ÍSMO”

I was anxious to know what Dona Alegrina might have to say about such matters. However, speaking *with* Dona Alegrina at all for any length of time turned out not to be an easy matter.

A few times, I managed to gain audience in the old woman’s kitchen, usually when I was brought in by some family member. The first time I watched, fascinated, as Dona Alegrina gently force-fed rice to a favorite hen who’d fallen ill. The next time was when I so obviously delivered the statue of the twins to celebrate their approaching saint day. Each of these encounters involved a very brief exchange of small talk, and concluded with something like, “And now I am going to send Sarah on her way [*dispensar*]; I have things to do.” I might venture, “Would there possibly be a time I might be able to talk to the *senhora*”—I used the polite term of address—“with more calm?”

“I’ll call for you,” she would answer brusquely. She never did. I was intimidated, and thought it best to avoid being any more pushy than I already was.

One of the first substantive encounters with Dona Alegrina came when my research collaborators Carlos and Chico first contacted Jorginho to conduct the survey that preceded longer, one-on-one interviews. Because everyone in his small house was napping, Jorginho suggested that they do the survey next door in his mother’s house. The encounter did not get off to a good start, for as they entered, Jorginho announced that they would even have the honor of inaugurating his mother’s new dining room chairs. Even though she had said nothing, both interviewers perceived Dona Alegrina to be visibly annoyed (*chateada*) by this.

Dona Alegrina asked Carlos and Chico if this research “had any significance.” They answered that it had to do with conflicts in marriage. She responded, quite forcefully, “No one understands anything,” adding that it would be impossible to fulfill the objective of the research.

Dona Alegrina explained, “For example, we have four people here. Each one has a different heart and a different head: How can you understand what is happening inside?” Carlos responded, trying to be respectful and humble, that this was precisely why we felt we needed to try to seek out a little understanding. “Well, you might be able to understand a little, but

only a little. If you are talking to a person like me, no one will be able to understand, because I don't like to talk to anyone." The old woman then announced she would go and do her dishes, but in fact hovered about throughout the survey, interjecting at multiple points. (We attempted to interview people alone, but often this was not possible.)

Carlos asked Jorginho his age, and he responded that he was forty-two. Immediately, Dona Alegrina was upon him: "Forty-two? Who is forty-two? You are forty-three, boy!" Carlos and Chico felt aggression emanating from her and feared she would strike Jorginho. Dona Alegrina seemed to want to show them that she, at least, paid attention to such things.

Carlos and Chico were very concerned that "inaugurating the chairs" uninvited constituted a lack of respect or invasion of some sort, and expedited their work. They omitted questions of a personal nature and opted instead for those involving opinion, such as, "Some people say that a woman's life always has suffering. Is this true? More than men?" Jorginho paused, pensive, and Dona Alegrina supplied a response: "The correct answer is that they both suffer, the man and the woman." She gave an illustration, and Jorginho commented, "You suffered a lot with my father, didn't you *mãe*?" She agreed, but discounted it (*descontou*), and seemed irritated he had volunteered it.

"What has to be done to not suffer is this," she told them, putting her extended thumb to her upraised palm, and pivoting it about with an open-fingered, gathering sweep into a close fist. She asked each of the three men in turn if they knew what the gesture meant. No one did, not even Jorginho. "This is a *redução* [reduction]." She explained herself no further.

Jorginho was asked what he thought about the current gains (*conquistas*) for women in Brazilian society. Dona Alegrina spun about and vehemently took the floor: "Current? *Current*? No, always. She has *always* been superior to the man. Woman *allows* man to believe he is better, but beneath this she does what she wishes. He pretends he is not seeing, in order to keep going. For the relationship between a woman and man to do well, and for the good of the children, it helps for her to work and be strong herself."

Hearing this was my first indication that, like her daughter Yanci, Dona Alegrina subscribed to some version of an ideology of female superiority.

The rest of the interview with Jorginho continued without significant comment from Dona Alegrina: She only chortled when he recounted how a colleague at work saw his wife in the *rua* wearing a suspiciously new *biquini* when she hadn't said she was going to the beach. The man tore the *biquini* off, leaving her nude in the street, and slapped her. Dona Alegrina

laughed out loud when he told about the slap, but had no comment when Jorginho said the man had later been arrested for it.

At some point during Carlos and Chico's visit, they mentioned that they worked with me. (They would, of course, have told Jorginho when they requested the interview.) Dona Alegrina reportedly said, "Oh, with Sarah? I adore her." I was surprised to hear this, as I'd had a falling out with the friend through whom we had come to the Mungongo—soon after this, in fact, the friend would accuse me of having performed witchcraft against her, and say that Dona Alegrina had confirmed this—and she had told me that Dona Alegrina had told her I was not a person to be trusted. But maybe the friend was not to be believed; perhaps Dona Alegrina did not dislike or mistrust me after all?

Despite this realization, it was not until a month before I was to leave Brazil in 1994 that Dona Alegrina consented to sit down and talk with me one-on-one. One day, when I stammered out my request, she narrowed her eyes and peered at me. "What do you want to know?" By then I was sure that she seemed more comfortable with the idea of my approaching her in her capacity as *mãe de santo* than to ask her anything about her family life. I was, naturally, very curious to understand how she had managed when her husband brought his other family to live inside the Bomfim household, literally dividing the house in two. I said I wanted to ask her about the kinds of consultations she was asked for that involved conflicts between husbands and wives.¹⁰ She showed herself willing to be asked a question. I explained the project, that I was writing about what people in Brazil thought, and therefore liked to be able to quote people in their own words: Would she mind if I ran quickly to fetch my tape recorder?

Upon returning, I asked Dona Alegrina to tell me the kinds of people that came looking for help, and for what kinds of things.

"They are people," she said, settling more easily than I'd expected into interview mode, "people who feel bad. They [are people] who arrive at the conclusion the doctor can't help them. They come here and do a *consulta* [a *jogo dos búzios* consultation, the divination by multiple casts of cowry shells] to see what path we are going to give. If it's a person being con-founded by someone deceased, we'll do one thing. If it's something else, like an influence the person picked up on the road—maybe it's a dirty trick [*pulice*] from some [deceased] slave—our course of action is elsewhere." She proceeded to lay out categories of afflictions—from a slave, a saint, or an *orixá*—and the fundamentals about how one might deal with each.¹¹

Pointing at the door, she said, "Now, let me tell you about this girl who

just left,” referring to a young woman I’d seen go. “Because she was feeling bad, someone sent her here. When she arrived last week, I gave her a consultation, and look what I told her: It’s a persecution from a person who is desiring her husband. And what’s happening with her? It’s that this person went somewhere [*bateu para algum lugar*], and started to do something.” I understood she meant a *trabalho*: a work that enlisted a spirit to act.

“Now what happens?” she asked rhetorically. “The thing that the person did starts to infiltrate into her, the woman. She starts feeling a headache, and dizziness, soon she’s losing days at work. The doctor didn’t help, so someone eventually sent her to me. I throw the *búzios*, and do a *redução* to find out what it is.” I now began to better understand her use of this cognate of the English “reduction”: it means make a reading, an interpretation.

Dona Alegrina explained how a *mãe* or *pai de santo* of equal or greater strength could block such a work, returning the client to well-being.

I wanted to steer her toward domestic violence, and changed the subject. “Now, what if I come to the *senhora* and I say, “Shoot, Dona Alegrina, I’m sick with passion about Fulano. He’s married, but I think he’s not doing well with his wife.”

She didn’t need to pause to think. “But there’s a way to do it for him to stay with his wife and to like you also,” she said, holding up an index finger.

“There is?”

“There is, there is,” she affirmed, head nodding.

“And the *senhora* would help me with such a thing?”

No hesitation: “I would.”

“So, the *senhora* thinks that this wouldn’t be right, or wrong? . . . Like some people might say, ‘Oh! But that’s adultery!’?”

She seemed surprised I could be so misguided. “Adultery? I don’t think so.”

“It just depends on the happiness of each?” I guessed.

“I think so,” she answered, shifting to place a palm on each thigh, elbows in the air. “You see, I’m completely disconnected from this story of adultery. Because I’m a rather experienced [*bastante vivida*] person. I’ve already passed through all I had to pass through, to my very limit [*até o chão*] . . . very experienced.”

It was the first time Dona Alegrina made reference to her personal history. Given her reported assistance to Zizi’s rivals for Jorginho’s attentions, her suggestion that a *mulher da rua*’s (woman of the street’s) interests were not inherently antagonistic to those of her lover’s wife wasn’t wholly unexpected. Still, it was hard to reconcile her view with reports of her own suffering at being thrust into a polygynous “marriage” against her will.

“So, the *senhora* thinks Fulano can stay with me and also the *outra* and be happy?”

“I do and he can,” she answered.

“So, the *senhora* thinks that a man can do this—seek out a woman other than his wife—and the *senhora* wouldn’t have a problem helping each person find a solution, in a difficult situation?”

“It can happen,” she nodded. “No, there’s no such thing as a difficult situation. There’s such a thing as each person minding his own business. This is what I think.

“Do you know why? I’m going to explain to you what I think.” She leaned back, regarding me, one eye almost closed. “It has to do with love. There’s no such thing as love outside of the truth. Love is a very free thing. What do you think of love? It’s a spontaneous, free thing. And it is a thing with which condemnation does not exist.” Dona Alegrina reminded me of her daughter, Yanci, speaking of love as a force with its own agency, not to be bridled by external, moral strictures.

Her philosophical turn showed a softer side, and we grew quiet for what became an awkward interval. I mustered, “The people that come to you looking for help, as in such a case of love, is the majority women or men?”

“Men and women,” she answered.

But are there more of one than the other?”

“More women.”

“Now, if I were a man, and if I came to the *senhora* and I said, Dona Alegrina, I’m in love with her, but she’s with her husband. Are there a lot of men who do this? Trying to take her away [*tirar*]?”

Dona Alegrina nodded, just once.

“Now,” I continued, “would the *senhora* do it for him, for him to take her?”

I’d found a line she would not cross. “No,” she shook her head, “I don’t work to hurt [*prejudicar*] anyone. I prefer the truth. I like the clean path.” She went on to list the kinds of works she will do that do not cause harm: prescribing baths, linking a saint with an initiate, giving gifts to the sea.

I wondered if she privileged men’s involvement with multiple women over women’s, and later asked, “And in the case of a woman with two men? Some people call her loose or a slut [*uma piranha, uma galinha*]. What does the *senhora* think of that?”

“No, I disagree with this,” Dona Alegrina answered, shaking her head. “I don’t connect with this story of the *galinha*. I think life is . . . *normal* [normal, natural]. That each follows the path they want.” It seemed it was not the multiple-partnered woman’s sexuality that was the problem for the

mãe de santo, but one man trying to *prejudicar* another's interest. And a man's interest involved claims on a woman in a way that a woman's interest could not bind a man, apparently. Still, I was confused; these versions appeared structurally irreconcilable, contradictory.

The conversation moved into the stock questions we were asking all ritual specialists, about what is prescribed for couples' violence and fighting. Like her colleagues in Umbanda and Quimbanda houses, she described a work done to reconnect the couple to one another (*se ligam*) and entreat the aid of Oxalá, the *orixá* ruling peace and harmony, using clear oil and other white foods, along with baths.

Reflecting on our exchange later, it struck me that perhaps Dona Alegrina had indirectly revealed to me how she had dealt with the "suffering" and "abuse," the words her children used, of her husband's polygyny. She had done a *redução*, made an interpretation, and elected to let love take its course. She had kept a firm grasp on her belief that on some level she, as a woman, was morally superior to a man; she grew to tolerate, and probably accept, a "male" compulsion to seek sex from multiple partners. In making this shift, she apparently salvaged her own suffering and found reserves of fortitude to maintain her position of power with her husband and in her household, and even increase it considerably after his death. Years later, Yancí suggested it was Iansã who moved to the front, guiding her mother in how to gamble with love and death.

I've never been told much more of the story, though. Yancí insists that polygynous households were not unusual in the area back in her parents' day and that her mother and the "co-wife" actually got along fine. Given Yancí's brother's and nephew's current propensities to have long-term unions with more than one woman, I believed it. I do know that in Dona Alegrina's husband's last years, many of which the *babalorixá* Pai Almiro spent blind, Dona Alegrina was the woman at Almiro Sr.'s side, for she outlived the *outra*. Whether Dona Alegrina had additional lovers, before or after she was widowed, I never heard.

Dona Alegrina's notion of her own triumph hinged, again, on her acceptance that human desire and impulse, as well as love's own free force, could not be controlled by abstract moral imperatives, such as those against adultery. Dona Alegrina's agentive love recalls what has been called the amoral or a-ethical ideology of those involved in Candomblé—the rejection of Judeo-Christian "good" and "bad," along with guilt—and the particular strain of individualism that marks the faith (Prandi 1991; Greenfield 1994). Mintz's (1974) observations of related forms of distinct individualism

among Afro-Caribbeans run a similar course, suggesting that these forms derive from shared historical processes, most notably involving rapid cultural loss through enslavement and the forcible, accelerated, and improvised recreation of culture.

This brief encounter had afforded me further information with which to try to understand how Dona Alegrina could condone and participate in Jorginho's violence against Zizi. Dona Alegrina's problem with her daughter-in-law, according to Zizi, was that Zizi could not accept Jorginho having other women. Or, perhaps more precisely, Dona Alegrina could not accept Zizi getting so upset about this. Perhaps it was Zizi's agonizing against love's courses, losing her dignity, and seeming to cast herself even further into the role of victim that Dona Alegrina so disparaged. Did Dona Alegrina find fault with Zizi's inability, or unwillingness, to perceive the "truth" of Jorginho's desire for other women? Did Dona Alegrina see Zizi as lacking conviction about the ultimate "truth" of Zizi and Jorginho's love, thereby weakening it, or weakening herself? I wondered if what had won Dona Alegrina's condemnation for Zizi was Zizi's inability to perceive her own power and preserve it. Did Zizi only have to make a choice, to do a *redação*, and cease to suffer? Was this what led Dona Alegrina to *descontar*—to deduct or discount—from Zizi, to make her "pay in the same coin" (*pagar na mesma moeda*) that she herself had paid as a younger woman? The "coin," then, would comprise *abusos*—in Brazilian Portuguese, the word is often pluralized and refers both to harm and to inconsiderate impositions—writ large, so that the physical abuse in Zizi's past converted into the same currency as the psychological, emotional, and economic abuse Dona Alegrina suffered years before. Was allowing suffering to make oneself stronger at the crux of Dona Alegrina's female superiority, her own version of a *Iansã-ismo baiano*?

The women of the Bomfim family, I began to perceive, plot out three quite different positions with regard to relative powerlessness (Zizi and the other daughters-in-law) and to relative authority and might (Yancí and Dona Alegrina, in distinct ways). Far from seeing Zizi's victimization against a backdrop of undifferentiated Brazilian women, all oppressed and subjugated by men, I was coming to see my *comadre* Zizi's subaltern position as equally produced by other women, principally Dona Alegrina. Dona Alegrina's position had shifted over her life course: she suffered as the victim as a young wife, and as aged widow exercised considerable power over others. Her wisdom and reconciliation in old age reminded me that she was a "mount" of Naná Bukuru (the "owner" of Dona Alegrina's

“head”), ancient *ur*-mother of the saints; her passionate tenacity for holding out and winning the domestic battle invoke Iansã, one of two saints in her triangle that “stood behind.” Like Lizabete, the Umbanda participant who was “of” Iemenjá but for whom Iansã had temporarily “come to the front” when her husband began to beat and abuse her, Alegrina’s Iansã had moved up in crisis, whereas Naná Buruku resumed her lead later in life. Whatever the case, it appeared that ultimately the saints and spirits Dona Alegrina had enlisted to her aid had done right by her, for she now seemed “normal,” just fine.

Dona Alegrina and I were unable to pursue these conversations further. The next time I was in Bahia, she was ailing and secluded; she passed away two years later, right before *carnaval*.

YANCÍ’S YASMÍN

Yancí raised her only daughter, Ritinha, to be still more feisty than she was, if such were possible. These three generations of mothers and daughters, Dona Alegrina, Yancí, and Ritinha, were related by blood (consanguines); the latter are their mother’s only daughters.¹² Their consanguinity seemed to be tied to their sovereign positions in their extended families; by this I mean that blood-relatedness held significance for them and was how they transmitted strong structural advantages and shared attitudes of insubordination, including what I have been calling Iansã-ísmo, through generations. This level of self-command, however, did not extend to the Bomfins’s female in-laws (affines). The qualities and positioning that the grandmother-mother-and-daughter shared sharply contrasted those of Zizi and the other sisters-in-law. Zizi and the other wives of Yancí’s brothers lived lives that Yancí deplored; she equally faulted her brothers for causing problems and her sisters-in-law for putting up with them.

Yancí drew upon on the marriages of her six brothers whenever she wanted to illustrate how bad married life could get. “Their behavior is horrible, with their women, every one of them. It’s awful.

“I really don’t know what makes them this way,” she confessed, shaking her head. “I sit here watching. This brother that lives around the corner—Valdinho. When he got that girl she was a woman who was *formada*.” Here, *formada* (literally, “formed”) meant she had finished high school, a prestigious distinction in this neighborhood. Yancí went on, “And Aldagisa was beautiful, with that long hair . . . But just look at the trash she is now, Sarah! A woman who doesn’t work because he won’t allow it, who doesn’t go any-

where because he won't let her. She doesn't go to a party because he won't let her. And she disgraces herself in the cup," drinking like an alcoholic.

"Now, that Valdinho has women like the plague; he's got children everywhere that's a place in the world. He took after my father. . . . Aldagisa's husband has more than *fifteen* children!" I knew only four of these to be with Aldagisa.

Yancí then shared, not without irony, that she was considered the "black sheep of the family," and that she was not intimate with any of her sisters-in-law, who viewed her as wayward and dangerous. "I'm lost," she said, in mocking lament. The contrast between what a single businesswoman could do versus a "respectable" stay-at-home married woman was palpable. "They're married, Sarah, so in no time, I'll be having a bad influence on them. So, my brothers would want to bully me like they do with their wives—but not with me. With me the story is another one."

Because of her lack of tolerance for women who put up with controlling men, Yancí was not one to respect the adage that no one should *meter a col-her* (get involved) in a fight between husband and wife. The question, she said, was whether a woman was willing to *tomar providência* (to take action) to remove herself from the situation. If a woman wanted to resist being controlled, Yancí would consider involving herself on the woman's behalf.

I had already been told of her multiple interventions on Zizi's behalf; it was only when Yancí became convinced that Zizi "did not want to help herself" that she adopted a condemning attitude. Then again, Yancí enlisted the aid of several local women to help Creuza, the mother of four who had been battered frequently and severely by her husband, make the final break from him. Unfortunately for Creuza, the price of her escape was leaving all four of her children behind, and now another woman has been their *mãe* for more than five years.

Yancí was careful to clarify that the interventions she would involve herself in, often in the name of the whole family and even of the entire community, were not always to help rescue a woman from battering by a man. As an example she told me why my next door neighbor, Diana, the nightclub singer whose story began this chapter, had moved out some weeks ago. She had left without warning in less than an hour after beginning packing; no one seemed to want to talk about her.

Yancí began by saying there was a long history of the family uniting to remove trouble-makers from the neighborhood. In Diana's case, they were certain that "there was going to be a death there. We felt there was going to be a bigger problem, so we sent her on her way."

Seeing that I was surprised, she asked, “Do you think she left because she wanted to? She left because we threw her out. You see, she was *amigada* [in an informal union] with a married man. The couple lives here, in the back. The woman, the wife, had already gone various times to attack Diana.”

Remembering the scar on Diana’s throat, I asked, “Is this the same one who . . . ?” I pointed to my own throat.

Yancí shook her head. “No, Sarah, this is another man, already! After she got better from the stabbing she got involved with another one—worse than the first one. Now, the woman swore she was going to kill Diana, so before this could happen, we sent her to the fires of hell [*pros infernos*]. Go live in the *infernos*, you’re better off there, and leave us in peace here.”

I now understood how Zizi had lost her “only friend in the world.” For months after Diana had moved to a distant neighborhood, Zizi remained heartsick, and quite open with me about her loneliness. She said that she’d had no friends here before Diana moved to the Mungongo, and that the mistreatment she had received from everyone else had caused her to start to “lose her mind” (*perder o juízo*), but that Diana had treated her well and kept her sane.

My sympathy deepened sharply when Zizi told me that just as the scandal that would lead to Diana’s eviction from the neighborhood was erupting, Diana had blamed Zizi and stopped speaking with her. Zizi had inadvertently passed on information about Diana’s affair to an adult niece—Alegrina’s granddaughter Sonia—whom Zizi assumed had already heard. Sonia, who had never gotten along well with Diana or Zizi and who several Mungongo residents saw as something of a malicious gossip, went straight to Diana with this news. Presumably she wanted to show Diana how disloyal her friend Zizi was. Zizi mourned that Diana never allowed her to present her case.

When I returned to the Alto do Mungongo for two months in 1995, Yancí and I grew still closer. She acted as something of a local “sponsor” for the focus group research I conducted, providing a house in which I could stay and hold the groups.¹³ As I became increasingly impressed by this woman approaching her fiftieth year, I sought to better understand how she viewed herself, and how she maintained her position as a woman refusing victimhood in a social and economic climate where so many women found themselves trapped, subjugated, and dependent.

One day Yancí and I were talking about changes in gender roles in Brazil. She offered an insightful analysis of how things had begun to change for women, beginning in the 1960s. Back then, they were “not allowed” to wear

shorts, low-cut blouses, or revealing clothes, or even to comb their hair into an attractive style. They did not see themselves as having any choice in the matter.

Yanci then added, “You know, Sarah, after the interviews you did with me and everybody back then, I got to thinking, and I arrived at a new analysis. Woman has conquered a lot of space [*conquistou muito espaço*] that used to be occupied by men. And women are more responsible, and they know better how to make do for themselves, selling this, sewing that, washing this.”

As an example, she counted out for me all of the things her pregnant daughter Ritinha had managed to purchase (a refrigerator, a television, a bed, a phone, the crib, and much of the layette) through her work as a manicurist. She’d broken up with her partner, Danino, upon learning he’d had a vasectomy years earlier and withheld this information; Ritinha had tried to conceive for some time before finding out. She left Danino and quickly became pregnant by another man, with whom she never intended to cohabit. Yanci concluded that Ritinha would provide an excellent life for her daughter. (All of the Bomfim women seemed to assume, without testing, that the baby would be a girl. It turned out they were right.)

“Now, in this time, what does Danino [Yanci referred to Ritinha’s ex-] have to show for himself? If I could only *show* you, Sarah, how many men in this neighborhood are unemployed and lazy, while their women work! Now, do you know why so many of these men want to take it out on their women, by beating or bullying them? Envy. That’s what I think: it’s pure envy, because the woman shows herself to be stronger [*ter mais força*], and he doesn’t believe in himself.”

I saw her point, and in fact it jibed perfectly with our analysis that much conflict between women and men reflected women’s gains and men’s use of violence as a compensatory response to their failing power. Still, I asked how Yanci could reconcile her observation with the statistic that had appeared in the paper that morning: Brazilian women earn just forty-three *centavos* for every one *real* (the new currency, indexed to the dollar, introduced earlier that year) earned by men.¹⁴ Yanci allowed that women might earn less for every hour they work, but argued that poor women, especially, worked so much more that they easily made up the difference. She felt that a major motivation for this female work ethic was women’s awareness that they, in the final measure, were the ones who would ensure a life for their children: “*Negão não está ligado*” (The guy—more precisely, the big black guy—is not connected, doesn’t care).

Yancí went on to share, in detail, her plans for beginning to save for her old age. First, she would divide her house, the vacant one where I was staying, into two. As a house with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a sitting room (neighbors described it as a “*palácio*” in terms of the surrounding neighborhood), it was far too big and expensive for her to rent out as it was: “No one can afford to pay one hundred and fifty *reais*,” about \$125.00 at the time, “which is what I would have to charge.” But, divided in two, she could charge a hundred for each per month. Put a hundred of this away each month, and in ten months—she dramatically counted it out on her fingers—she would have arrived at the sum of a thousand *reais*! Yancí nodded at me, tapping her temple to indicate that the machinery within was always at work.

Alongside her economic enterprising, Yancí had developed her own, materialist critique of consumerist values and of people aspiring to ever-upward mobility. She commented on how, in a national society with such extreme differentials of wealth and class polarization as Brazil, the consumerist fetishism—Taussig’s 1986 [1980] term, but effectively what she described—thrust incessantly upon Brazilians through television and other mass media could not avoid making the masses feel excluded, magnifying their sense of relative deprivation.¹⁵ She often remarked that she viewed those who chased after status symbols, who were caught up in conspicuous consumption, as involved in a futile quest.

“My goal,” she told me, “is to live well within *my* world. Within *my* world,” she repeated. In practical terms, this meant that she refused to shop at the new *supermercado*, full of endless choices, that had sprung up across the *avenida* and threatened to put small-scale merchants at the local open-air market out of business. She said, “This place is a village [*aldeia*], Sarah. My great *grandfather* was here! I never needed a supermarket here.”

Yancí shunned the city’s luxurious malls, as well as its chic neighborhoods. (She and I avoided revisiting the racist and classist way she’d been treated once, when she and Rei went to an apartment in Graça, an exclusive, “noble” neighborhood area, to pick up a box of gifts I had sent through someone arriving from the United States. Her fears that they would be treated as thieves for their dark-skinned, humbly dressed appearances were realized.) Possibly it was not only a penchant for tranquility and simplicity in values that underlay her resolution to “live well within her world”; it also reflected her awareness of, and some degree of reconciliation to, the limited possibilities for one born to her station in life in Brazil.

I took solace in the idea of Yancí, living well within her world. It offered

hope that the relative autonomy and power of Afro-Bahian women that so intrigued me held some ultimate value for them, subjectively but also factually. Such an idea could always permit a false consciousness, underwriting woman's participation in their own oppression, or be a mere "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1985) protesting domination but not really disrupting it. Still, for Yancí, her mother, and her daughter, the belief in female superiority seemed to serve them as a genuine ideological resource, a form of sociocultural capital, aiding their survival and, at times, their success and prosperity.

With time, though, I faced the fact that the self-assured and satisfied way in which Yancí presented herself to me was far from being seamless or without inner conflict. She was not always as comfortable with her own identity as she might have me believe. She revealed this one night by introducing me to her "real" self, Dona Yasmín. I had wondered if this were her given or baptismal name because I'd heard it before—Yasmín—perhaps her mother had called her this, or Rei. But that evening Yasmín arrived, in the form of Yancí's alter-ego.

It was a Saturday night, and I arrived back at the Alto do Mungongo late. I was concerned, once again, to see that Yancí and Rei lacked patrons in the bar. This had been happening a lot lately. Men from the comparatively middle-class focus group that convened in the nearby housing development told me that they no longer frequented Yancí's bar like they used to, because of the persistent brawls that broke out—they mentioned at least one shooting—along with the "*grosseria*" (rudeness, coarseness) of Yancí herself.

Yancí shared her side: problems involving drugs had been brewing around a gang of men she called the local "*máfia*," and so she had simply called the police, and asked them to make periodic appearances at the bar. Her clientele felt betrayed, she thought, and that was why they'd stopped coming. Naturally, the longer the bar remained empty, the greater became Yancí's perplexity around financial matters.

Yancí's morose mood seemed to trigger her decision to invoke Yasmín. Six years ago, she explained, she had been obligated to abandon the high life she had sustained for twenty-two years. "I am known around this entire city. Everywhere I'd go, they would part the crowd to let me by. Aaaa! Princesa Yasmín! No one knows me as Yancí. They don't know who Yancí is." It was not just among the *povo* (the masses) that she circulated, no—it was among the "elite of the elite." They all recognized her, all knew her to be a person of quality (*gente fina*).

I asked what had changed. Why had she left off with the life of Princesa

Yasmín? She explained that as her mother's only daughter, she had no choice. Her mother was ailing and getting weaker. Who would take care of the house, and the *terreiro*? Although Yancí and all her brothers had had their "heads made" (*cabeças feitas*) in Candomblé as *filhos de santo* (daughters and sons of the Orixás), Yancí limited her involvement with the activities of the sect, and did not intend to pursue its more demanding obligations when her mother passed on. But meanwhile, who would look after things, with her mother sick? Her brothers? She snorted to show just how ridiculous she found such a proposition.

No, she had abandoned her existence as Yasmín six years ago for her mother's sake. But now, it was time to go back. Yancí began to rummage around in the space curtained off at the back of the bar where she slept. She produced a tangled mass of necklaces and bracelets, along with a box filled with rings and earrings. I had no idea of the elegance of who she truly was, she told me. She produced pictures for me to see how she "really" wore her hair, made up her face, and wore stockings with high heels. "I have always worn this *mannequin* (dress size)—a perfect 42! Even though I am older, I still have the body I had." She spoke of perfumes, of sipping expensive scotch, of going everywhere by car. "This old black woman you see, Sarah, these clothes I wear around here, it's just that I don't want to get all dirty." Yasmín was a woman who knew and understood quality, and the Yancí that I knew just a temporary lapse from long-standing glory.

Yancí told me of an encounter that morning that was obviously still bothering her. She had gone to the bank, where she bumped into a gentleman from her Yasmín days. "Ah, Dona Yasmín," he had said, pleased to see her. But at the same time, his eyes had flicked down, scanning the clothes Yancí wore, taking in the undone hair and nails. Perhaps he also took in the gauze bandage Yancí was wearing around her ankle, just like the ones her mother wore in increasingly wider swathes. Yancí's varicose veins were ulcerating again, only this time the wound never seemed to close. "All that is *ilusão* (illusion)," Yancí said. "He sees a tired, poor old black woman. But I'm tired of *her*. Yasmín is coming back." She shooed away a fly that had landed on the now-uncovered wound, scratching at the skin surrounding it.

In the last days before my return to the United States, Yancí and I set about planning a huge bingo party, which I had promised all of the participants in the focus-group research—over fifty men and women and five researchers. At the end of each group, all participants had received two bingo cards (bingo bashes were all the rage in Salvador at the time). The bingo cards would serve as tickets for free drink and food at the party.¹⁶ The

bingo cards also positioned those who came and played bingo to win prizes, which included a large, portable tape player, a blender and other household appliances, a travel bag, and many smaller prizes.

Yanci was particularly excited about the party as a way to jump-start business at the bar again. It was to her advantage that I would supply the capital to stock her refrigerators' dwindling reserves of beer and soda too, much of which we hoped could also be sold to those without tickets and after the party was over. She also announced that the party would be the occasion of the much-anticipated return of Yasmín.

The party was a tremendous success. Attendance exceeded our expectations and many invisible boundaries in the neighborhood were crossed: strict Evangelicals came into Yanci's bar, which they normally wouldn't do, because it was also a *terreiro* of Candomblé, and therefore dangerous. Apparently, my *gringa* presence provided a temporary whitewash. Members of the Bomfim family who had not been speaking for months could be seen cavorting together that night. (Disaster was narrowly averted, I later learned, when both the wife and the mistress of Yanci's brother Raulino turned up, along with their respective children. The air must have been tense enough to shatter when the mistress's boy asked, "Where's my father?" in front of the wife. But the wife called to her oldest daughter, and said, "Marisia, I'd like to introduce you to your brother." Meanwhile, the phone was kept unplugged for the entire party so that none of Raulino's *other* women would call.)

After the grand prizes had been awarded and the party began to wind down (around 2 A.M.), my main research collaborators, Carlos and Meire, and I each took the microphone from the bingo master of ceremonies to express our gratitude to the community and the focus-group participants. I finished by thanking Yanci, the party's hostess and the local "sponsor" of my research, for providing the space in which the work could be carried out.

Yanci took her cue, and strode to the front to stand before the microphone, where she delivered a spirited addition. "I have proved to *everyone* here that I have *força* [strength], and that I can do whatever it is that I set out to do. People here don't want to recognize this or appreciate me. But you all *know* that it's true, and you've all *seen* what I've given this neighborhood. I am a woman of *força* [strength], *that many of you men would like to be!*"

Yanci was shouting now, indignant in her moment of vindication. She ended her speech with this crescendo, and abruptly stamped away. Later,

Carlos told me that he had heard the young men who were present snicker, saying that Yancí misspoke: Yancí may have the *força* that many a man would like to *have*, but of course she was not a *woman* that many men would like to *be*: No man would want to be a woman.

We cleaned up after the party, and the sun was dawning when Yancí, Rei, and I walked Meire and her partner Fátima to the bus stop and waited with them. As we walked wearily home, Yancí looked at me and said sadly, “Yasmín never arrived.”

AGENCY, RESOURCES, AND SLAPS SUSPENDED

In this chapter I have tried, as much as possible, to let the mother/daughter/in-law triangle of Dona Alegrina, Yancí, and Zizi unfold in their own voices. The three women, I have suggested, occupy strikingly different positionalities with respect to women’s relationships to male violence. The central theme, of course, is how well women deal with Bahian men’s inevitable philandering and polygyny, but behind these issues lie more important questions about how women deal with men’s greater freedoms, privilege, and power. If they allow themselves to be dragged down by it, sacrificing their dignity and perhaps even being beaten in the course of the embattlement, they tip themselves toward victimization. Against this criterion Zizi most resembles a woman subordinated, victimized by abuse, and under others’ control. Dona Alegrina suffered “abuse” as a younger woman, psychologically, economically, and verbally, but was able through her *redução* of the situation to cast herself as a slow, patient winner, letting love take its course. For her part, Yancí utterly defies any linkage between being a woman and submitting to victimization or oppression.

At the same time, I have tried to show that it is not quite this simple. The different roles that the Bomfim women take on are interrelated; each is implicated in the construction of the other. Moreover, none of the women are wholly subordinated *or* sovereign. Even Yancí reveals that, on some level, she has difficulty with the degree to which she is a captive of circumstances beyond her control—being the only daughter of a *mãe de santo* of an aging, family *terreiro* and navigating the generalized poverty, racism, and sexism as they manifest in Bahia. In compensation, she creates an alter-ego, Yasmín, who, more so even than Yancí, is the anti-victim supreme. And yet, Yasmín is such a heavily produced, labor-intensive personage to pull off that it is not always possible, in real life, for her to make an appearance.

Just as Yancí is not always able to set the course of her own life, Zizi has

never been absolutely subjugated. The violence in her marriage was often instigated by her, in protest of Jorginho's behaviors with other women, and on several occasions she physically attacked Gabriela, who appeared to be becoming Jorginho's second wife. Cases like Zizi's remind us that there is less violence in societies and social contexts where women are rigidly socialized not to "talk back" or to question men. In refusing to meekly accept Jorginho's compulsion and prerogatives for "other" women, Zizi's shows herself to be resistant and rebellious, so much so that she wins her mother-in-law's wrath and complicity in Jorginho's physical attacks, aimed at keeping Zizi in line.

But Zizi's ultimate rejection of victimhood, her most decisive victories, involved her use of the Salvador's women's police station, the Delegacia da Mulher, to gain an edge at two critical moments. She never even had to step foot in the building.

The first turning point came following the final time she was actually battered by Jorginho, when she was pregnant with Almiro, in the very year the DM was created, 1987. He kicked her in the thighs repeatedly, the imprint and the gravel from his boot leaving a lasting impression; she escaped into the bush (*mato*), hiding for the afternoon. She finally went back home, her legs hugely swollen (the pregnancy was quite advanced), and began to make a compress for them. Jorginho entered and sneered, "Oh, here you are," preparing to beat her once again. Raulino, Almiro's older brother who would have been under ten at the time, tried to intervene: "Don't, *pai, mãe* is really sick."

That didn't stop Jorginho from coming. Zizi, holding up her hands expecting blows, blurted quickly, her voice panicked, "You touch me and I'm going straight to the Delegacia da Mulher! I'm not kidding so don't even try it!"

"You don't even know where it is," he snorted, derisively. But, astonishingly, he walked away.

"A few weeks later we were driving around and I pointed out to him where it was. 'How did you know that?' he asked me. 'I don't need anyone to teach me,'" Zizi told him.

Years later, when Zizi became my comadre and I her son's *madrinha* (godmother), she had succeeded in avoiding being truly battered by Jorginho again. Still, he would occasionally hit her, and she was getting sick of it.

One day Zizi ran to my house with an excited, and somehow also frightened, look on her face. She said she had seen a bite mark on Jorginho's shoulder and knew it must be from his other woman, Gabriela. She con-

fronted him, and he swore the bite was from another man, that he'd been bitten in a barroom brawl. Zizi would not believe it and would not let the issue drop. When Jorginho raised his hand to hit her, however, she was ready: "I still know where that women's *delegacia* is"—for Zizi knew it had recently been relocated—"and if you touch me you will too!"

Jorginho's hand remained in the air, suspended. From what I've been told, it has never fallen on Zizi's body in violence since that moment. Zizi had managed to avert a slap meant for her face, with mere words—words that issued a threat Jorginho found plausible.

Zizi triumphantly added that she had spent the two days before this fight reading through the transcript of her interview with me. Many interviewees were impressed to have a twenty-page or so document, all in their own words, placed in their hands, especially those who were semi-literate or illiterate. Zizi told me that reading hers had made her think—leading to her once again using the Delegacia da Mulher as a threat.

RESOURCES AND RESISTANCE

Zizi may not have been positioned to draw on *Iansã-ismo*, a cultural model of an indomitable woman, in the way her mother- and sister-in-law were able to do. Nonetheless, she was quite capable of availing herself of other resources—such as the specialized women's police protection—that had not been available during most of the time she had suffered at Jorginho's hand.

Focusing in this chapter on three women, Zizi, Yanci, and Alegrina, is not meant to suggest that any one of their experiences or profiles represent fundamental types of Bahian women. My material offers examples of mothers- and daughters-in-law who, unlike Alegrina and Zizi, bound together against husbands' violence, for example, where marriage was stronger than blood, and hence my objective is not to suggest that affines are always, already fundamentally more antagonistic than consanguines. Although for the Bomfins it is natural to turn to *orixá* imagery to help culturally contextualize their gendered conflicts, for the family across the little plaza, or another up a muddy *ladeira*, or the one down the avenue in the apartment complex, or the other by the sewage canal, it might be equally natural to ground a family's story in Catholicism, Espiritism, Evangelism, or non-religious icons, such as those from social movements. Bahians in Salvador are far too variable for the Bomfins to be representative in any fundamental sense.

The point of taking the Bomfim family as a focal point, then, serves to highlight the stark differences women can occupy within the same families, and how their interrelatedness constructs and magnifies these differences. These differential positions, in turn, shape how advantageously an individual woman can draw upon resources—ideological and cultural, such as proto-feminist *Iansã-ísmo*, or immediate and practical, such as the women's *delegacias*. In the final reckoning, regardless of the social or religious orientation of a given Bahian family, no woman negotiating conflict is an essential, a priori winner *or* loser, victor *or* victim. Rather, as in the case of Zizi, Yancí, and Alegrina, the lot of each woman would depend upon the resources available to her, and her calculation of her potential to succeed if she elects to use them.