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Narratives of *Luta*: The Manoeuvres of Migrant Women Workers in the Brazilian
Northeast

Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisan

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthropology) at
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ABSTRACT

Narratives of *luta*:
The Manoeuvres of Migrant Women Workers in the Brazilian Northeast

Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisan

This thesis is an ethnographic study of migrant women working in factories in the Brazilian Northeast. It explores the local ramifications of globalization in the everyday lives of migrant women. It is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in the industrializing town of Cascavel, a town reflecting regional and state patterns of rapid industrialization and intrastate migration led primarily by women.

This thesis departs from the dominant view of women-as-victims that prevails in most of the scholarly literature on women in the global labour force, in order to present a deeper understanding of migrant women's experience. Thus, in this thesis, I emphasize women's narratives because I consider they provide the ground to reflect on the significance migration and work carry from their standpoint, avoiding any simplistic explanation of their lives.

Overall, women's narratives reveal the improvements they have experienced in their lives in the transition from agriculture to factory work, as women have achieved a level of economic independence and decision-making that has no precedent in the history of the region. Yet their narratives also capture their everyday struggle (*luta*): migrant women make use of different defensive tactics and manoeuvres to make a living, enhance their social position and achieve personal goals. In spite of their creative attempts, however, their situation remains precarious and they still face class and gender inequality. Thus, I argue that women's struggle (*luta*) has paradoxical implications, improving their lives yet positioning them in a persistent state of battle.

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Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisan

In memory of Marie-Rose, who echoed the women depicted in this thesis with her own “luta”. Her ability to face the difficult circumstances of her life with strength, humour and optimism, and her capacity to make the best of any situation have inspired me in the different stages of this research and will continue to be a driving force in my future projects. To her courage, her passion for life and her humility...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <u>LIST OF FIGURES</u> | X |
| <u>INTRODUCTION TO “NARRATIVES OF <i>LUTA</i>”</u> | 1 |
| MY QUEST | 1 |
| ORGANIZATION OF THE DIFFERENT CHAPTERS | 6 |
| WHY THIS ETHNOGRAPHY? | 9 |
| <u>CHAPTER 1: GROUNDING THE <i>LUTA</i>: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION</u> | 12 |
| REFLECTING ON GLOBALIZATION | 13 |
| WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL LABOUR FORCE: A MONOLITHIC PORTRAIT | 14 |
| CONTESTING THE ‘WOMEN-AS-VICTIMS’ PARADIGM | 18 |
| DISSONANT VOICES | 20 |
| BETWEEN AND BETWIXT AGENCY AND STRUCTURE | 24 |
| NARRATIVES OF <i>LUTAS</i> : ADAPTATION AND TRANSFORMATION AT ONCE | 27 |
| ‘RESISTING RESISTANCE’ | 31 |
| FROM RESISTANCE TO <i>JEITO</i> | 33 |
| GROUNDING THE <i>LUTA</i> | 36 |
| <u>CHAPTER 2: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SETTING</u> | 38 |
| THE CHOSEN FIELD SITE | 40 |
| WHY THE BRAZILIAN <i>NORDESTE</i> ? | 40 |
| BRAZIL: A HISTORY OF POWER | 43 |
| COLONIAL BRAZIL | 44 |
| A LONG JOURNEY TOWARD A FRAGILE DEMOCRACY | 47 |
| THE NORTHEAST: BEHIND THE DROUGHT | 52 |
| CEARÁ: BEHIND MODERNIZATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT | 55 |
| CASCABEL: REFLECTING REGIONAL PATTERNS | 63 |
| THE METHODOLOGIST AT WORK | 73 |
| AN “OLD-FASHIONED” ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENQUIRY | 73 |
| A FEMINIST APPROACH TO THE FIELD | 77 |
| INQUIRING ABOUT WOMEN’S WORK AND MIGRATION | 79 |
| INHABITING THE TOWN OF CASCAVEL: THE MUNDANE AS A SITE OF APPRENTICESHIP | 82 |
| TESTIFYING TO WOMEN’S ASPIRATIONS | 86 |
| PARTAKING IN THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS | 87 |
| ANALYZING DISCOURSES IN THE FIELD | 90 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| CHAPTER 3: FROM A ROÇA TO A FÁBRICA | 93 |
| THE <i>LUTA NA ROÇA</i> | 94 |
| <i>NA FÁBRICA</i> : AN IMPROVEMENT COMPARED TO LIFE <i>NA ROÇA</i> | 106 |
| A <i>LUTA</i> FOR ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE | 108 |
| A <i>LUTA</i> AGAINST ABUSIVE RELATIONS | 109 |
| THE <i>LUTA</i> OF MARLUCIA | 111 |
| MARLUCIA'S NARRATIVE: THE <i>LUTA NA FÁBRICA</i> | 119 |
| CHAPTER 4: THE DEFENSIVE <i>LUTA</i> | 122 |
| THE <i>CASA, RUA</i> AND <i>ROÇA</i> : MARKING SOCIAL RELATIONS AND FRAMING WOMEN'S MANOEUVRES | 123 |
| WHEN GENDER MATTERS FOR WOMEN'S MANOEUVRES | 126 |
| A <i>LUTA EM EQUIPE</i> AND LUCIA'S <i>JEITO</i> | 127 |
| WOMEN'S MANOEUVRES IN FLEXIBLE HOUSEHOLDS | 135 |
| <i>DAR UM JEITO</i> WITH A PATRON: THE DEFENSIVE <i>LUTA</i> OF SOCORRO | 140 |
| THE DEFENSIVE <i>LUTA</i> IN A SHIFTING ECONOMY: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS | 143 |
| CHAPTER 5: THE <i>LUTA</i> MUST GO ON | 147 |
| NOVA'S LIFE HISTORY: AN ONGOING NEGOTIATION | 148 |
| NOVA: THE NARRATIVE OF A <i>VITORIOSA</i> ? | 153 |
| THE <i>LUTA</i> : CAPTURING WOMEN'S LIVES | 156 |
| POST-FIELD REFLECTIONS | 159 |
| AT THE CORE OF THIS THESIS: WOMEN'S <i>LUTA</i> | 159 |
| AND NOW? | 163 |
| EPILOGUE | 165 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 171 |
| APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE | 181 |
| GLOSSARY | 183 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|-----|
| FIGURE 1: MAP OF BRAZILIAN STATES AND REGIONS | 42 |
| FIGURE 2: MAP OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF THE STATE OF CEARÁ | 56 |
| FIGURE 3: MAP OF THE MICRO-REGIONS OF THE STATE OF CEARÁ, INCLUDING THE MUNICIPALITY OF CASCVEL | 57 |
| FIGURE 4: MAP OF THE MUNICIPALITY AND TOWN OF CASCVEL | 64 |
| FIGURE 5: VIEW INSIDE THE CASHEW FACTORY | 67 |
| FIGURE 6: WOMEN SORTING CASHEW | 68 |
| FIGURE 7: MARIA, SELLING CLOTHES AT THE LOCAL MARKET | 69 |
| FIGURE 8: CANDEIA SELLING FOOD AT THE <i>MERCADO DA COMIDA</i> | 70 |
| FIGURE 9: WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN <i>MOVA-BRASIL</i> | 87 |
| FIGURE 10: THE HOUSE OF A NEIGHBOUR DURING THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS | 89 |
| FIGURE 11: THE <i>ENGENHO</i> (MILL) IN ENEIDA'S NATIVE COMMUNITY | 95 |
| FIGURE 12: DONA ENEIDA'S HUSBAND IN HIS PLOTS OF LAND | 96 |
| FIGURE 13: A VIEW INSIDE THE <i>ENGENHO</i> | 97 |
| FIGURE 14: ANOTHER VIEW INSIDE THE <i>ENGENHO</i> | 97 |
| FIGURE 15: DONA ENEIDA <i>NA ROÇA</i> | 98 |
| FIGURE 16: A WOMAN DOING A TYPE OF <i>RENDA</i> | 99 |
| FIGURE 17: WOMEN GRATING MANIOC IN THE <i>CASA DE FARINHA</i> | 100 |
| FIGURE 18: A WOMAN WORKING <i>NA ROÇA</i> | 101 |
| FIGURE 19: CÍ MAKING NETS | 118 |
| FIGURE 20: MARLUCIA WITH HER TWO DAUGHTERS, A NIECE AND CÍ | 119 |
| FIGURE 21: LUCIA (ON THE LEFT) WITH ONE OF HER FRIENDS, NEIGHBOURS AND CO-WORKERS. | 131 |
| FIGURE 22: NOVA'S HOUSE AND SMALL BUSINESS, WHERE WE CONGREGATED IN THE EVENINGS | 152 |

INTRODUCTION TO “NARRATIVES OF *LUTA*”

This thesis explores the complex and sometimes contradictory implications of export-led development in an industrializing town in the Brazilian Northeast. It derives from an interest to understand the ways in which the economic restructuring resulting from globalization is negotiated in that part of the world, especially given the particular history of Brazil, a country marked by huge inequality since the time of colonization and slavery up to the present day. In recent years, the topic of globalization has become one of the most salient themes of current research in the social sciences, as its repercussions impress on the economic, political, social, cultural, educational, and familial spheres of life. Yet to approach it ethnographically presents an interesting challenge for anthropologists: how to link what might appear to be a phenomenon detached from the mundane with the lived experience of the day-to-day?

My quest

This thesis is an attempt to partake in the endeavour of documenting the local ramifications of globalization and its effects on the everyday lives of ‘ordinary’ people. As such, this thesis focuses on migrant women working in export-processing industries as a window into the way global processes are locally experienced, using their migration trajectories and work choices as key to understand globalization from a local perspective. It aims at countering the ‘women-as-victims’ paradigm, the dominant view in the scholarly literature, in order to present a much more complex analysis and understanding of the implications of women’s choices regarding work and migration. Several studies have documented women working in export-processing industries, capturing the

essentially exploitative nature of such work (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Labrecque 2001; Safa 1995). These studies portray these women as stereotypically passive, exploited, vulnerable, illiterate, young, unmarried, as being the victims of a capitalist system that erases their capacity to be creating their own opportunities or as being compelled by their parents or husbands to work in these industries. Although anthropologists now recognize the interaction and dynamic tension between agency and structure, the literature on women in export-processing industries still tends to depict women as passive in the global economy.

This thesis, then, seeks to produce a more balanced understanding of the processes at work, taking into consideration the complex intersections between global forces and local responses, dominant ideology and alternative discourses, and migrant women's subjectivity and agency. Without denying the exploitative nature of the work in the export sector, this thesis tries to shed light on a neglected aspect of these studies, namely, women's negotiation of the economic, political, cultural and social forces constraining them. Instead of considering these women exclusively in terms of their subjection to global economic changes –as is the case in most of the literature on women, migration, globalization and export-processing industries– this thesis presents them as partakers in the negotiation of dominant relations and global processes.

Central to this research, therefore, is a quest for understanding the way people located at the margin –in this case working class migrant women– understand, negotiate and resist the power-driven relations and structures in which they find themselves. What are the responses deployed by these women when facing economic restructuring, in a country marked by a long history of social inequality and hierarchical relations? As most

of the social relations in Brazil have evolved around a double ethic of *paternalismo*¹ (patronage) and reciprocity (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Da Matta 1995), what are the strategies enacted to adjust to economic restructuring? Are the patron ties still strategic in order to maximize one's situation, or does the new economy favour other types of ties? How do migrant women make sense of, respond to, and resist the complex set of power relations –namely the gender and class driven relations– in which they are embedded? In which ways and to what extent are relations of domination maintained, reproduced and sometimes challenged or contested by migrant working women? In short, this thesis is a quest toward understanding how women negotiate the impacts of economic restructuring given the situation they are caught in.

This thesis is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in the Brazilian Northeast, in the industrializing town of Cascavel. Situated in the state of Ceará, the town has grown significantly over the past three decades due to intrastate migration led primarily by women attracted by wage work opportunities in the cashew, leather, shoe and garment factories. A market town until a first factory producing cashews for export was established in the early 1970s, Cascavel thereafter experienced significant transformations, beginning with the establishment of several garment factories producing for the domestic market. Then, following the state emphasis on export-led development beginning in the 1980s, the town attracted national and multinational factories producing shoes, clothing and leather for both the domestic market and exportation. Reflecting regional and state patterns, the town of Cascavel turned into an industrial town within

¹ There is an important body of scholarly literature on patron-client relationship in Brazil and elsewhere in the world, and amongst these studies, several debate the nature and ethic of these relations. Because this thesis is primarily concerned with women's tactics (thus with their use of patron ties) rather than with the assessment of patron-client relationships as good or bad, this thesis does not review these debates.

less than 30 years, with women as the cornerstone of this rapid industrialization. Hence, the town of Cascavel offers a privileged window into the changes brought by the export-led industrialization and economic restructuring it created, as these occurred recently and are still very palpable.

During the period of fieldwork undertaken between May and October 2004, I conducted 80 interviews with migrant women in the town of Cascavel, revealing how significant their work and migration choices were and still are in their daily lives. Contrary to the widespread interpretation in the literature on women working in export-processing industries (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Labrecque 2001; Safa 1995), women in Cascavel do not tend to portray themselves as victims, despite their conditions of poverty. Instead, their narratives capture the centrality of their struggle (*luta*) and how they do not accept passively the new economic restructuring nor the old patron ties and patriarchal relations. Yet their narratives also reveal that they do not organize collectively and strategically to challenge their class position or unequal gender relations. Rather, these women struggle individually to find ways of surviving and improving their situation. As such, despite women's attempts, their individual struggles do not reverse the order of things set for them.

Therefore, the argument to be developed in this thesis is that women do offer a critique of the dominant relations in which they are embedded, being rather creative in the means deployed, but at the same time allowing for the maintenance of the status quo. Overall, migrant women working in the export sector make choices, feel their life has improved because of their migration and work choices, and consider they are doing well compared to what they experienced in their childhood or in the rural interior where they

were, for the most part, born. These women continue nonetheless to experience economic insecurity, male abuse, poverty, harsh working conditions, illness, and so on. The research findings suggest that the level of education of the younger generation of women is declining, that domestic violence and male abuse are still dramatically present and that young women are more likely to experience instability in their employment. Women still are at the bottom of very unequal class relations, and they still depend on the good will of friends, kin or patron ties to get by. Yet, even if the process of industrialization in the Northeast of Brazil is not bringing a halt to the harsh inequality in which people are enmeshed (the opposite might be more accurate) and even if women's creative strategies do not result in radical changes, women's narratives emphasize their fights (*luta*) to get by and their victories, not their losses.

Hence, following these six months of research in the Northeast of Brazil, an important challenge remains: how is it possible to reconcile women's discourses of success with the hardship of their lives? The issue, here, is to convey women's sense of victory without denying the unequal positions in which they are caught and the domination they experience (such as the exploitation in factories, class or gender inequality or male abuse). In other words, it is difficult to balance between women's attempts to bring some changes in their lives versus the powerful structures in which they continue to find themselves despite their actions. This challenging project is what will be undertaken throughout this thesis by focussing on women's "narratives of *luta*," narratives emphasizing the intersection, dynamic tension and complementarity existing between their struggle (and their success) and the hardship of their lives. These narratives

of *luta* offer a relevant glimpse into the experience of migration and work, as they allow considering the experience of labour migration from women's standpoint.

Indeed, the word *luta* in Brazilian Portuguese conveys both a sense of fight and a sense of struggle and thus, denotes the potential for women, both to adapt to their conditions and to transform their lives, as they gain greater control over their lives. Thus, the concept allows exploring the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings of women's narratives. By choosing to present women's narratives of *luta*, my hope is to show women's battle to get by and to acknowledge both their agency and the difficult positions in which they persistently find themselves. If women's attempts cannot transform radically their conditions, their efforts make a difference in their personal situation on a daily basis and hence deserve careful consideration. With this thesis, my hope is to echo women's daily concerns and to capture the centrality of their *luta* in their lives.

Organization of the different chapters

My persistence to consider the women I interviewed at the complex intersection between agency and structure and my unwillingness to argue for one or the other is palpable even in the organization of the different chapters composing this thesis. Chapter 1 introduces the key concepts and depicts the theoretical grounding to understand women's narratives of *luta* and experience of migration and work in a context of globalization. In this first chapter, I criticize the dominant scholarly literature on the topic of women, work, migration and globalization, which tends to simplify the experience of labour migration, to victimize women and to obscure the lived experience of migration

and factory work. Rather, I propose to consider women's grounded experience in all its complexity, drawing on anthropological studies locating migration and factory work at the dynamic intersection of agency and structure. In this chapter, I insist on re-directing the analysis to women's standpoint, and I propose that an emphasis on their narratives provides the ground to grasp the meanings migration and work carry for women.

In Chapter 2, I present the ethnographic field setting, which includes both the field site and the methodology used to gather the data. Thus, this chapter is divided into two distinct parts, the first exploring the history of Brazil, a history of power providing significant insights to understand the economy of present-day Cascavel. This section incorporates a historical dimension and a political economy approach, key to understand contemporary social hierarchies in Brazil. Thus, the larger historical, economic, political and social context of Brazil, the Northeast region, the state of Ceará and finally the town of Cascavel are deeply explored. In the second part of this chapter, the methodological approach used in the chosen field site is presented. It includes a reflection on the relevance and validity of carrying out ethnographic field research, and it draws on a feminist approach to the field, to then turn to an exploration of the different methods used in the field.

The narratives of migrant women constitute the core of the following three chapters. In Chapter 3, different narratives of migrant women working in factories shed light on the significance the shift from the *roça* (rural economy) to the *fábrica* (factory) carries for them. Overall, women's narratives capture the extent to which their lives have drastically improved in this shift. By migrating and having access to factory work (thus wage work), not only have these women broken with the insecurity of producing food

and their confinement to the domestic sphere, they also have achieved an important level of economic independence and decision-making that has no precedent. This means, for these women, the possibility to fulfil themselves in ways they could not imagine in a not-so-remote past, including owning their house and freeing themselves from abusive relations with men (by separating or refusing to marry).

Yet women's narratives also convey a sense of their everyday struggle (*luta*) to make a living, achieve their personal goals and enhance their social position, their situation still being precarious and chaotic in spite of the improvement from the *roça* (rural economy) to the *fábrica* (factory). Chapter 4, then, describes women's defensive *luta* to persistent class and gender inequality, exploring different manoeuvres and defensive tactics (*jeitos*) women make use of to get by. This chapter aims at balancing women's improvements by considering the still very unequal position in which they are enmeshed and their ensuing *luta*.

The last chapter presents the narrative of Nova, a woman involved in a persistent *luta* who, in spite of her difficulties, chooses to portray herself as *vitoriosa* (victorious). Because her narrative captures finely the complexity and ambiguity of a migrant woman's life in Cascavel –these *batalhadoras na luta* (fighters in the struggle)– her story is presented in this thesis. The aim is to convey what it means to live continuously in a state of *luta* whilst considering oneself as *vitoriosa*. Finally, this thesis concludes with some considerations on the future of the migrant women.

Why this ethnography?

As suggested by Tiano (1994), the field of study of women working in export-processing industries is quite recent, thus, despite the importance of the literature on the topic, there is a rather 'stereotypical characterization' of women working in export-processing industries. This partial depiction leans toward the reduction of their experience to a global standardized identity. This ethnography seeks to go beyond this characterization by presenting different narratives of *luta*, because such narratives allow exploring women's negotiation of the changes brought by economic restructuring whilst taking their own possibilities to manoeuvre as a starting point. As such, this thesis aims at providing a more dynamic understanding of the processes at work, taking into account the local norms, the historical context, the local structure of the economy as well as women's agency. By investigating women's narratives of *luta*, this ethnography contributes to the endeavour of demystifying the common portrayal of women as victims prevailing in the scholarly literature on women in the global labour force (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Labrecque 2001; Safa 1995). Thus, instead of focusing on the ways globalization impacts on these women from here (the West) to there (the rest), this ethnography intends to situate the way globalization is locally constructed and experienced from their own perspective.

In addition, although this ethnography does not represent all migrant women or all export workers, it does reflect one possible way globalization is enacted locally. This thesis, then, mirrors central issues in the study of gender and migration in a context of globalization. A close analysis of the lives of the women forming the core of this thesis does reveal an instance of how globalization is mediated locally and, as such, it

illuminates our understanding of the dialectic between local experience and global processes. By providing insights into the implications of globalization into the everyday life of migrant women in the industrial town of Cascavel, this thesis collaborates in the endeavour of understanding how this phenomenon might be locally interpreted.

Notably, this ethnography aims at presenting another aspect of Brazil that is not well known in the anthropological literature dedicated to the country. So far, anthropologists have been fascinated by the indigenous people inhabiting the Amazons (Nugent 1993; Harris 2000), by the exotic Carnival celebrations (Da Matta 1991), by the peculiarity of the transvestites (Kulick 1997), by the issues of race (Twine 1998; Warren 2001), by religion (Landes 1994) by the violence of the major cities (Caldeira 2000; Goldstein 2003), by the street children (Hecht 1998; Scheper-Hughes 1998) by the hunger of the Northeast (Scheper-Hughes 1992) but little is known of “ordinary” working people –of their mundane, daily struggle. Along these lines, Jane Collins, who studied the role of agribusiness firms in the constitution of a labour regime in the São Francisco Valley in Brazil, suggests that “the more complex history of the responses of working families, and of the ways these shape outcomes in this region of Brazil, has yet to be written.” (Collins 1993:56). By concentrating on the everyday *lutas* of migrant working women, this ethnography participates in the endeavour of documenting other arenas less popular in the ethnographic literature on Brazil.

Yet, the ethnographic enterprise is not a straightforward process and the project of “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) has been greatly criticized with the post-modern turn in social sciences. Questions of authority and textual representation lead to a questioning of the way we write about ‘others’, to a sense of paralysis within the

discipline of anthropology, and to a general abandonment of the study of less privileged groups for a focus on elite cultures and transnational social movements (Goldstein 2003).

However, it is not because the anthropological project is fraught with difficulties in regard to the ethical and political implications of what we write that we have to abandon the project of writing about people that are in a disadvantaged position. If the process of representing inevitably alters meanings, it remains nonetheless that there is a palpable material reality, which needs to be explored, interpreted and rendered meaningful. As argued by Phillips,

We live in a time when we very much need to link our theory to real life. A critical social science cannot afford to move away from empirical studies, not because they are essential to challenge neoliberal arguments but because they are essential to those for whom we do research: marginalized people who are otherwise denied important information about their lives (and the lives of others), but who must assume the costs of how social relations are currently being organized. [Phillips 1998a: 196]

Thus I am inclined toward what Scheper-Hughes (1992) called “good enough ethnography” (1992: 28) believing that the project of writing an honest, transparent, fair and loyal depiction of less privileged groups is not only feasible, but also necessary. This ethnography is an attempt to represent in a “good enough” way, with loyalty, without fallacies and with the aim, to paraphrase Phillips (1995: 35), that my understanding of difference will make a difference...

CHAPTER 1: GROUNDING THE *LUTA*: A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

This thesis has, at its core, women's narratives of *luta* and their negotiations of power relations –that is their struggles to make a living, enhance their social position and achieve personal goals. It challenges the dominant view in the scholarly literature on women in the global labour force, the women-as-victims paradigm, to produce an ethnography encompassing both a political economy analysis and women's understanding of their lives. Hence, this ethnography of migrant working women oscillates between different theoretical approaches –a tension felt in the following parts of this thesis. The challenge, here, is to find a theoretical terrain recognizing women's complex and ambiguous experiences whilst not denying the global structures framing their lives. There is, indeed, no straightforward explanation of women's *lutas* or of the ramifications of processes of globalization in their everyday lives.

Consequently, this thesis proposes an approach to women's narratives of *luta* that is inspired by different theoretical perspectives, including a political economic and a discourse-oriented perspective. These approaches are often framed in opposition to one another within the discipline of anthropology; for instance, Lem and Leach propose an anthropology “that addresse[s] domination, exploitation, class, structure, social process, political economy, and the production of culture” in response to what they perceive to be a hegemonic emphasis on “discourse, voice, self, identity, and narrative” (Lem and Leach 2002:3). The difficulty posed by reconciling these two approaches might have to do with an old tension that exists between materialist and idealist approaches in the discipline. Yet, despite the tension, this thesis proposes to ground the *luta* within both approaches, by voicing the lived experiences of women –through the narratives of their *lutas*– and by

exploring the social processes, structures and dominant relations in which their *lutas* take place. “Grounding the *luta*”, then, suggests entering into an exploration of significant bodies of literature dedicated to the study of gender, migration and work; to agency and structure; and finally to resistance. The following section reviews this body of literature and provides relevant theoretical reflections to understand and analyze women’s narratives of *luta*.

Reflecting on globalization

Before turning to a theoretical exploration of what grounds the *luta*, a note on globalization is needed, as the concept has come to denote an all-encompassing phenomenon and thus “the question of what globalization means (...) and what exactly has been globalized” (Phillips 1998b: xviii) requires some clarification. In this thesis, globalization implies essentially the process by which regional economies have become increasingly interconnected. It translates, in the context of this study, into an emphasis on the global labour force and export-led development –on the ways in which working women in the Brazilian Northeast engage with these phenomena.

It must be noted that this thesis is not a study of globalization in abstract and detached terms nor does it claim that its effects are everywhere the same. Instead, this thesis is an exploration of its local ramifications –and as such, it does not pretend to resolve the scholarly debates surrounding the phenomenon. Still, this thesis seeks to participate in the endeavour of documenting extensively the lived and daily implications of globalization on particular settings. Along the lines of the anthropologist Lynne Phillips, I consider, too, that “ even when new production sites such as free trade zones

transform the working lives of Latin Americans, this accomplishment by no means produces a functional, predictable refitting of people's ideas about how their lives ought to be lived" (1998b: xviii). This thesis, with its emphasis on the way women engage with factory work in the Brazilian Northeast, is part of the effort to produce finely detailed ethnographic studies of global phenomena.

Women in the global labour force: a monolithic portrait

In the last few decades, the process of globalization has given rise to an important body of literature dedicated to gender, especially to the gender inequalities in the global labour force². In most of this literature, the gendered nature of the global economy is understood as closely tied to the gendered nature of institutions, social relations and ideologies as capitalist-driven interests take advantage of existing gender hierarchies. As proposed by Mills, "in varied and often locally specific ways international capital relies on gendered ideologies and social relations to recruit and discipline workers, to reproduce and cheapen segmented labour forces within and across national borders" (Mills 2003:42). Capital accumulation, in this view, relies primarily on the exploitation of gender inequality –though these studies recognize, for the most part, the intersection of gender with ethnicity, race, class and age.

This interest in gender inequality has led to the production of several studies dedicated to transnational migration, with an emphasis on domestic workers (for e.g. Constable 1997; Groves and Chang 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001) and on export-processing industries (for e.g. Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Safa 1995;

² For an extended overview of the literature on gender and the global labour force, see Mills 2003.

Lee 1998; Mills 1999; Labrecque 2001; Freeman 2000, 2001; Salzinger 2003;) The latter studies emphasize the way gender hierarchies and ideologies are produced and re-produced to create a feminized labour force that is disciplined, inexpensive, and flexible, and involves meticulous types of work. A consistent pattern of desired qualities (manual dexterity, for instance) are identified by the factories' owners and thereafter feminized, sometimes even ethnicized (Labrecque 2002). In addition, several studies in different locations –for instance in Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983) and Malaysia (Ong 1987)– have identified a pattern of gendered divisions of labour within the factory itself, in which women occupy the lowest positions and men, the decision-making, managerial and highest positions. An important part of this literature also explores the ways the devaluation of the labour force (based on gender, ethnicity and age) serves the interests of multinational factories whilst reinforcing patriarchal structures and hierarchical power relations (Labrecque 2001; 2002).

Notably, this literature points to an emerging phenomenon, not that the trend is new (women formed part of the labour force in the industrial revolution in England) but the magnitude to which it is taking place is striking. This trend, as described by Mills:

is now commonplace in countries and communities where a generation ago, female employment outside agriculture was often limited to small-scale vending, domestic service, or prostitution. From Mexico to Java, from Bangladesh to Guam, women work for low wages producing T-shirts, televisions, and computers chips –items that will be sold not in their own communities but rather will be shipped to the high-consumption economies of North America or Western Europe. [Mills 1999: 8-9]

Undeniably, this pattern significantly shapes our era, and its repercussions are felt everywhere –as new factories open, others close, as new forms of labour are created, others are neglected, and so on. In some parts of the world, subsistence agriculture has given way to export-led industrialization; in others, the environment has been affected by the lack of regulation, making these places more attractive to factory owners; and in other

locations, workers have been laid off, in massive numbers, when their factory is displaced to a better location according to the logic of comparative advantage. This is happening in all corners of the globe on an unparalleled scale.

So far, it is this aspect –the unprecedented magnitude that the global labour force takes– that is emphasized in the literature surveyed here. Unquestionably, the global labour force and its dramatic implications require careful analysis, and this enterprise, already undertaken, is more than welcome, relevant and necessary. Yet this endeavour, until recently, has been confined to the production of a monolithic portrait –a standardized global identity which tends to stereotype and simplify women’s experiences in the global labour force.

Indeed, as suggested by Tiano (1994: 3) the literature on export-processing industries, for the most part, portrays women as victims, passive, docile, exploitable and vulnerable (because they need to earn money) illiterate or uneducated, young and unmarried. Women are seen as forced by their economic situation to take on these jobs, and it is generally assumed that the work in export-processing industries contrasts drastically with women’s traditional work. Because of their traditional role as housewife and mother in rural societies, it is assumed that women do not stay in the work force for more than couple of years. There is, in most of these studies, an assumption that globalization operates from here (the West) to there (the rest), in a kind of homogenized way, on people with static and homogenous cultures.

Along these lines, in her study of the development of *maquiladoras* in the Yucatan, the anthropologist Marie-France Labrecque contends that the history of capitalist development is something happening in localities “[qui] ont des histoires

millénaires et leurs populations sont, du moins sur certains plans, particulièrement homogènes” (2001: 101). One key critique of this kind of “capitalist-centered view” is expressed by Ortner (1994), in relation to this position, but her critique can be applied to the feminist branch of this approach: “we do not get the history *of* that society, but the impact of (our) history *on* that society” (1994:143). Obviously, globalization is not a process working evenly, happening suddenly on previously harmonious and homogenous communities detached from the rest of the world, as the interdependence of regional economies and cultural borrowing trace back at least to the Middle Ages (Wolf 1982).

If it remains critical to analyze carefully the global implications of export-led development, it is as crucial to dedicate further attention to the ways such processes are locally experienced, taking as a standpoint the local, situated, historical and cultural perspectives of the people studied. As suggested by Mills (1999), “if young women in Thailand or elsewhere appeal to urban and industrial employers as a presumably quiescent and inexpensive labour force, this tells us neither why women themselves take up wage work nor how they construct their experience of it” (1999: 9). Thus, by creating a standardized global identity, the dominant literature obscures the grounded and lived experiences of the women forming part of this global labour force. Furthermore, this women-as-victims paradigm has several important flaws, such as its static, ahistorical approach, a lack of consideration of local norms and contexts, a lack of knowledge of the local labour market, and a lack of consideration of women’s agency.

Contesting the 'women-as-victims' paradigm

It seems, then, that the literature on women working in export processing industries is rather limited. Perhaps this is due, as suggested by Tiano (1994), to the emerging nature of this field of study. Yet, it seems rather curious that feminist anthropologists reproduce similar mistakes made by their counterparts following the second wave of feminist thinking and the emergence of the political economy approach, which assumed the universal exploitation of women in the so-called developing world. During that period, anthropologists came to recognise the effects of global forces upon the communities they were studying, emphasizing the consequences of capitalism in societies previously conceived as isolated and ahistorical. For their part, feminist anthropologists became concerned with the implications of women's participation in economic activities. Numerous studies were produced under the aegis of women and development studies, most of which depicted women as oppressed by their integration into economic activities (Boserup 1970; Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Nash & Safa 1976).

In response to this dominant literature, other feminist anthropologists have argued that women's participation in the work force might be rather advantageous for a woman's position within her community and household (e.g. Cole 1991). These studies provided a more nuanced interpretation of women's work, using a life history approach and analyzing personal narratives which allowed the consideration of multiple responses of women to realities previously perceived as experienced uniformly by *woman* all over the world. Quite significantly, these studies provided the ground to consider women as agents (rather than solely passive and exploitable victims), agents not evenly positioned in terms of class, race, age, status and so on. Finally, these studies paved the way for an

anthropology that considers local norms, local contexts and local histories as well as multiple experiences and subject-positions. However, these insights were forgotten along the way in the studies of women in the global labour force.

Hence, the literature on women working in export-processing industries fails to consider the way women might engage creatively in finding ways of coping with economic restructuring. This raises critical issues in the context of Brazil, where domestic work, a low-paid type of employment associated with servitude, is challenged and resisted by work in factories. In effect, in Rio de Janeiro, Goldstein found that domestic work is not favoured among younger generations, as “young women are instead choosing to work in the industrial areas nearby, in most cases, for much better pay. While such jobs were not seen as ideal, for they rarely pay more than one to two minimum wages, they were viewed more positively by this generation than the prospect of domestic work” (2003: 96).

Similarly, in her study of women’s responses to cyclical drought in the Brazilian Northeast, Branco argues that women actively seek diverse ways to cope with the severe drought, one of them being labour migration from rural communities to urban settings. She insists on the potential for transformations embodied in this process, considering that “by migrating and having access to wage labour (...) women are exposed to a new set of knowledge and power relations and engage in a process of transformation that may attempt to construct a ‘new’ self”(Branco 2000: 23). It seems, then, that in the context of Brazil, migration and work in export-processing industries might represent an alternative to other ways of making a living, such as domestic labour or agricultural work.

The intention, here, is not to deny the well-documented exploitative nature of the work in export-processing industries, or of misrepresenting women's negotiations of harsh conditions as free choice. Rather, the aim is to overcome the women-as-victims paradigm while considering the ways women negotiate the powerful constraints in which they are enmeshed. I am inclined toward a complex, and perhaps ambiguous and contradictory, vision of gender and work, agreeing with Mills, that:

Of particular interest are the findings of many scholars, which state that gender meanings, relations, and identities do more than merely sustain existing structures of power in global labour relations; these complex dimensions of gender also constitute a dynamic cultural terrain wherein forms of domination may be contested, reworked, and even potentially transformed [Mills 2003: 42].

Dissonant voices

There are, in the literature on women working in export-processing industries, some dissonant voices. Many of these come from those using the "integration thesis", an approach that considers it is liberating for women to partake in the global labour force. For instance, Linda Lim (1990), an economist, endorses this perspective and proposes that one important flaw in the dominant literature is methodological, as the data collected does not consider women's work in factories over an extended period of time. She argues that a focus on a greater time period would lead to the discovery that indeed, women's wages have increased, and that they are well adapted to their working conditions, a claim that stands on shaky ground –since in several locations, to begin with Cascavel (the town where this research was conducted) wages and working conditions in factories represent the bottom line –workers continue to earn the minimum wage throughout their working lives– even after more than thirty-five years of factory work, when the first factory was established.

In *Patriarchy on the Line*, the sociologist Susan Tiano (1994) criticizes Lim's reading, arguing that the idea of women's improvement is highly questionable. The problem, according to her, is not methodological, but rather, "the conventional characterization of women's responses to their jobs ignores the range of creative strategies they formulate in confronting the challenges of their employment experiences" (1994: 4). For Tiano, it is imperative to revisit the stereotypical image that is part of much of the literature on women working in export-processing industries, because of the risk of reifying the paradigm and wrongly concluding that it can be generalized in time and space. She refuses any simple explanation and instead engages in the difficult task of reconciling the women-as-victims paradigm (or exploitation thesis) with the integration thesis.

According to her, these two perspectives diverge essentially for their ideological reading of women's work in export-processing industries: according to the integration thesis, the work in factories is 'better-than-nothing' while for the exploitation thesis, this relativist stance is unacceptable, and it is, in this view, "not enough" to work in export-processing industries. Thus even if the proponents of the exploitation thesis consider work in factories as an alternative to other work opportunities, they "prefer to evaluate export-processing jobs in terms of absolute standards of human fulfillment and economic well-being" (Tiano 1994: 47). Because the debate is rather ideological –not empirical– Tiano is able to draw on both approaches –on the incentives of working in export-processing industries (salary, benefits, economic independence, resistance to patriarchal relations) and on the factors accounting for the creation of an exploitable workforce (relations of production, patriarchal family, forms of patronage, and so on). Tiano, then,

contributes to the expansion of the framework, though she is still engaged in establishing a global “portrait of women maquila workers” (1994: 2) which culminates in the elaboration of a model of women’s consciousness in maquila employment, a model measuring and quantifying autonomy, gender solidarity and class solidarity (1994: 199). These limitations permeate her analysis and render it difficult to draw on her approach as it reduces women’s experiences to a global model –though her insight on reconciling the two approaches remains significant.

The anthropologist Mary Beth Mills (1999), in her study of Thai women, justly criticizes the catchy expressions like the “Global Assembly Line” or “The International Division of Labour” and their underlying models used to portray women arguing that “one risks losing sight of the people and the lives that underlie aggregate models” (1999: 9). Mills proposes that we consider the experience of migration and work as a significant field of practice with the potential to reconfigure and contest one’s sense of place in the world. She recognizes the significance of global factors and she understands factory work as tied to economic difficulty yet she also considers women workers as active partakers in the process of export-led industrialization –seeing them neither as victims nor as totally free. Indeed, she argues that

Changes are not simply imposed from without but may be actively received and engaged by people on the ground. Young rural-urban labor migration in Thailand cannot simply be explained as an economic response to uneven development, although this is not an irrelevant factor. It is also, and just as important, a dynamic field of social practice and cultural production through which people constitute, rework, and at least potentially contest understanding about themselves, their relationships with others, and their places in the wider world. [Mills 1999: 6]

In addition, Mills underscores the meanings migrant women and their relatives derive from labour migration, as women’s trajectory –from rural Thailand characterized by “age-hierarchy” (1999: 21) to the chaotic Bangkok city – induces new meanings,

values and images. Indeed, migrating to work in a global factory is not only the consequence of economic scarcity and household pressure in rural Thailand, it reflects the desire to be modern –a Thai modernity, producing contradictory images. Pressured to contribute to their rural household and attracted by the symbols of modernity (for instance, commodities and entertainment), migrant women workers develop new identities in the urban context. They experience new forms of being –such as more autonomy– which might be difficult to reconcile with traditional norms when they return to their native communities.

The considerations suggested by Mills redirect the general standpoint on the experiences of women by recognizing that there are multiple structures affecting women’s patterns of migration and work. Not only multinational and international capital place constraints on women, local political economies, gender ideologies, social hierarchies, cultural norms and so on contribute to the conditions in which migrant women are enmeshed. By emphasizing women’s experiences, Mills’ work also marks a sharp break with the women-as-victims paradigm, revealing the potential for cultural change and what she refers to as “newly imagined identities”.

Her analysis is more complex than the model proposed by Tiano (1994), as Mills considers the cultural context as a critical site of production deserving our attention as such, transcending the debates between integration and exploitation. Her focus resides in the lived experiences of Thai women, not in the abstract elaboration of a meaningless model that simplifies the experiences of women. Rather critical, Mills’ perspective suggests the possibility for an analysis at the intersection of agency and structure, in which the cornerstone is the lived experience of migrant women.

Between and betwixt agency and structure

Drawing on the notions of agency and structure, this thesis seeks to overcome simple explanations that argue for either the women-as-victims paradigm or the integration thesis, or for an aggregated model simplifying women's experience. Since the early reflections surrounding these notions, the understandings of agency and structure – and especially of the tension existing between these two concepts – have shifted significantly³. From Giddens (1979) to Cohen (1994), agency and structure undertook different colors and tones –varying extensively between human actions as the products of structure (Giddens 1979) and individuals as self-driven and 'creators of culture' (Cohen 1994). Agency and structure might also be read as practice and habitus, notions elaborated by Bourdieu (1978) in his theory of practice. In this theory, habitus structures the kind of practice enacted by people, practices invested by sign, codes and behaviours that are naturalized as pertaining to a specific group or class –the habitus.

Agency and structure might also be understood as domination and resistance. For instance, Bourgois (1995) links the concept with the oppositional culture he found amongst drug dealers in East Harlem in New York City. According to him, they respond to global political economic structure by positioning themselves at the margins to keep their personal dignity (or *respeto*) intact –selling drugs and participating in gangsterism. Another interpretation equates agency with meaning-making and structure with discourses of power (Ortner 1999). In this sense, Ortner proposes to consider agency at the intersection of power in the foucauldian sense (power everywhere) and à la Geertz

³ The literature on agency and structure is quite ample and this review is rather limited in focus. The aim is to provide the significant theoretical shifts and the ground under which the narratives of *luta* are analyzed in this thesis.

(power in symbols and meanings). She argues that agency resides in the way people reconstruct meanings when facing power, considering “there is life beyond the most totalizing discourse, and there are ways of rearranging the world beneath and beyond the discursive frame” (1999: 146) of those in privileged power positions.

These days, the concept of agency might ring hollow, as the notion represents different understandings of human actions: agency might be equated with practice, resistance or meaning-making amongst other things and thus, has become an all-encompassing concept. Agency, indeed, has become a catchy term that in its extreme form of “free” individuals without constraints sustains the neo-liberal agenda. Agency might be rather pernicious if used to purport ideas about “equal opportunity” for everyone, which suggests that if you work hard, you will achieve social mobility. It might encourage what Bourgois refers to as the blame-the victim theory, which means blaming people for their own misery (2000 [1995]: 317) whilst capitalism (amongst other things) oppresses specific groups of people, already located at the margins.

Following a similar argument, Lopez (1994) challenges the ideology of choice, on the basis that it is a fallacy to consider people as exclusively free when making choices. In her view, a focus on individual choice is problematic because it tends to obscure the broader institutions and ideologies that restrict the kind of alternatives possible. She proposes instead to revisit the ideology of choice, in a way that recognizes the dialectical dimension of agency and constraint. This means to consider not only the possible alternatives available to people when making a decision, but also the social, economic and political contexts that imbue their process of decision-making. For her, “all decisions are socially constrained and mediated when individuals confront them as active agents”

(1994:159) and she insists that we address agency in situations embedded in profound constraints.

Drawing her research on Puerto Rican women's reproductive choices in New York City, she argues that despite a severe history of coercion and restriction deriving from the sociopolitical context in which these women are located, Puerto Rican women do make decisions with regard to their reproductive choices. In this undertaking, she also explores the interplay between resistance and oppression, arguing that both intersect in ways that are complex and contextual. For instance, a woman may choose sterilization to resist forced maternity, while sterilization is often the exclusive reproductive option imposed on Puerto Rican women, both by state agents and cultural norms. In this example, it is possible to grasp a sense of what Lopez means when she argues that if Puerto Rican women are severely constrained in their reproductive choices, they also "may use sterilization as an element of resistance to forge some social space for themselves" (1994:168).

In this context, women are not free agents having the possibility to choose from among different reproductive options, yet they enact some form of agency. Lopez's analysis of the dialectical relation between agency and constraint provides important insights for a deeper understanding of migrant women working in export factories in the Brazilian Northeast. Certainly, these women are located betwixt and between agency and constraint, as the Puerto Rican women in New York City are in terms of their reproductive choice. Neither free agents nor victims, they sometimes resist, sometimes comply and at times, participate in their own oppression. Lopez's vision is echoed by Lancaster in relation to power and machismo in Nicaragua, when he affirms that "people

lived in –but they also at every turn resisted- the power that guided their lives. They capitulated to some power relations, accommodated others, and redefined yet others” (Lancaster 1992: xix).

Thus, despite the potential problems embedded in the concept of agency, it is still a useful concept to work with, especially in light of the tendency to victimize women in most of the studies on globalization, migration and work. The notion of agency provides the ground to counter the women-as-victims paradigm without turning to simplistic explanations maintaining women are either integrated economically (Lim 1990) or part of a global identity reduced to a standardized model (Tiano 1994). However, if agency still represents a valid concept, in this thesis agency does not imply that people are exclusively self-driven or free agents. Rather, agency is part of the complex, relational and dialectical tension existing between the way people engage with their world and the constraints they face at different levels (global-local; ideological-institutional; economic, social, cultural, political, familial). Agency exists in interrelation with structure –not in binary opposition.

Narratives of *lutas*: adaptation and transformation at once

Hence, there is no simple path toward a more complex analysis of migrant women working in export-processing industries, that would shift the focus away from the debates between women-as-victims versus women-as-integrated. Yet nevertheless, the endeavour is worth attempting. Indeed, there are some insightful studies in both the feminist and anthropological literature on women and work that depart from the dominant view (which tends to victimize women) without simplifying their experiences. In effect,

at the end of the 1980s, the Personal Narratives Group (1989) composed of critical feminists proposed that we consider carefully women's personal narratives to give value to women's subjective experiences and understandings of their lives. The group considers that "personal narratives are particularly rich sources because, attentively interpreted, they illuminate both the logic of individual courses of action and the effects of systems-level constraints within which those courses evolve" (1989: 6).

Some critical feminist anthropologists shared this concern for further attention to women's subjective experience, which translated into an emphasis on women's life stories. Among these, Sally Cole (1991), intended in the ethnography *Women of the Praia*, to situate the analysis of women's work between their agency and the structures constraining them. For Cole, most of the feminist studies on women, work and economic development at that time were rather problematic, given their exclusive emphasis on the political economy and the global structures of development. The ensuing literature, she continued, produced a 'victims of development' framework in which the experiences and understandings of women were absent. For these reasons, Cole embarked upon the endeavour of documenting women's life stories in a rural fishing community in Portugal, allowing her to grasp the complexities of their lives as hard workers. In addition, women's own definitions of themselves emerged from their stories, which allowed Cole access to the space where they do deploy their agency. As she explained:

My purpose in presenting women's stories is to enable women themselves to describe the circumstances of their lives and to provide women the opportunity to present themselves and their lives as they would want them presented. The life stories give us as outsiders access to women's subjective experiences and present women as social actors constructing their lives in ways that empower them and employing strategies to achieve goals they define within their particular historical and social contexts. [Cole 1991: 40]

In more recent years, some feminist anthropologists interested in women's subjective experiences, drawing on this important legacy, made insightful analyses in which a woman's standpoint constitutes the core of the study. In this vein, in a study of post-Soviet women who migrated to work in the sex industry in Istanbul, anthropologist Alexia Bloch proposed to "draw attention to *women's narratives* in order to move the analysis away from identifying voluntary migrants vs. victims of trafficking, and instead more carefully consider women's lives and their interpretations of their new labour practices" (Bloch 2003: 153, emphasis added). Bloch refutes the stereotypical image of women as victims of trafficking by concentrating on women's narratives, deepening the understandings of women's experiences of sex work. These narratives reveal women's aspirations, dreams and attempts to achieve personal goals, and include mainly their dreams of romance, the incentives of economic gain and independence, and the glamour associated with being a sex entertainer. By considering carefully women's narratives, Bloch recognizes the complex position of being a post-Soviet migrant and sex worker in Istanbul, and shifts the focal point of attention from an exclusive attention on the negative dimensions of being a sex worker to women's lived experiences.

Because I consider women able to articulate their own responses to the constraints in which they are enmeshed, I follow the Personal Narratives Group (1989), Cole (1991) and Bloch (2003) and I embark upon the project of presenting women's narratives. I choose to speak of "narratives of *luta*" to emphasize that migrant women working in export-processing industries are agents, even though they do not share the same power as people positioned differently. In this way, I hope to redirect the analysis of women-as-victims and deepen our understandings of migrant women's experiences.

In this thesis, then, in addition to positing women as active agents, I present their narratives of *luta*. In these narratives, the women I encountered elaborate on their decision to migrate and work in a factory, on their attempts to make a living, and on their aspirations and efforts to achieve personal goals. These women, despite their difficulties, choose to emphasize their struggles to get by –not their losses or miseries. They insist that in the move from *a roça* (the rural economy) to *a fábrica* (the factory), their lives have drastically improved, because they now have access to the town's services (such as education, water, and hospitals), because they are more *independente* (independent), because they earn a stable income and receive labour rights and benefits, and because they consider paid work as a means to refuse abusive relations with men (which may mean the choice not to marry or to re-marry after a separation).

Their narratives also capture the everyday means they deploy to get by: ties of *ajuda* (help) with neighbours, relatives, or friends; circulating their children amongst different households; diversification of their ways of making money (including selling goods such as clothes, beauty products or a local type of popsicle at night from their home or sewing custom orders at home); pooling their income with other household members; exchanging sex for food; agreeing to vote for a candidate in exchange for gifts of food, house construction materials and sometimes money; organizing the division of labour in their household around various types of teams (husband-wife, mother-daughter, mother-son, sister-sister) and so on.

The women I encountered in Cascavel, despite their incredible creativity and capacity to manoeuvre within their changing economic circumstances, nonetheless continue to find themselves caught in a very unequal position. In this thesis, I document

how, by being so creative and by constantly seeking ways to adjust, for example, to the arrival of a newborn or of an elderly person in need of care, a loss of income or job, or a husband not contributing to the household expenses and/or domestic chores, these women participate, somehow, in the reproduction of their own domination. The challenge, here, is to understand their *lutas* at this complex and sometimes ambiguous intersection between resistance and oppression. Neither organized collectively to transform their lives nor passively experiencing severe constraints, these women find ways of resolving their problems, on a daily basis. Yet in this way, women absorb economic restructuring and adjust to their new constraints. *A luta*, therefore, is at once both adaptation and transformation.

‘Resisting resistance’⁴

Is it possible, then, to consider their practices as resistance? This inevitable question raises several theoretical issues, as the notion of resistance is at the locus of important debates in the discipline of anthropology. In effect, resistance –previously associated with social movements and grand transformations such as revolutions– has now shifted into the mundane, the everyday. Among others, James C. Scott (1985; 1990) and Michel de Certeau (1984) paved the way to an attention to mundane practices and tactics, contributing to a careful understanding of the everyday as a site of resistance. Although less obvious, these authors argue there are ways of enacting resistance even in the worst oppressive positions. These “weapons of the weak”, as James C. Scott calls them, are inscribed in cultural forms and practices, and set in specific historical contexts.

⁴ This expression is borrowed from the title of an article written by Michael F. Brown (1996) “On Resisting Resistance.” *American Anthropologist* 98 (4) 729-749.

For Scott, these spaces of resistance constitute “hidden transcripts”, a term he uses to contrast with “public transcripts”. As he explains:

If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript, I shall use the term hidden transcript to characterize discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond direct observation by power holders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict or inflect what appears in the public transcript [1990:4-5].

These hidden transcripts, then, derive directly from power relations. As weapons of the weak, they infuse with subtlety the mundane and the everyday. Scott’s approach to resistance became an important paradigm in the discipline of anthropology and continues to inspire many in this field today. For instance, Goldstein (2003) in the ethnography *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*, argues that humour might be a “weapon of the weak”, a means through which the powerless deploy “forms of resistance that ‘insinuate’ a critique of power” (2003: 7) and that are less apparent than public protest. In her research in a Rio shantytown, Goldstein discovers that people and more specifically women, experience multiple forms of domination, that intersect and interplay together, in ways that render it difficult, if not impossible, to escape them. According to her, if these people are unable to organize consistently (a privilege of the middle and upper classes) in grand social movements such as the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*), through laughter they do reveal the “fault lines in social relations”(2003:35). Despite the fact that humor is a depoliticized space far from rebellion, it provides a glimpse of how social hierarchies are experienced, understood, and negotiated at the level of the quotidian. As such, laughter creates discursive spaces that “speak[s] bitter ‘truths to power’” (2003:8), especially as regards to race, class, gender, sexuality and violence.

Yet this new attention to mundane forms of resistance poses the risk of romanticizing resistance by turning human suffering into a heroic act, a potential risk well-identified in the literature on resistance (for e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992; Groves and Chang 1999; Abu-Lughod 1990; Goldstein 2003). Therefore, a key question in researching migrant women working in export-processing industries is whether it is possible to conceive of their actions as a site of resistance strategically defined, without attributing inaccurate meanings to their actions. As Abu-Lughod asks in relation to Bedouin women:

How might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of ways the power of those who control so much of their lives, without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience –something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics– or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided? [1990:47]

For Sherry Ortner, too, the mundane is problematic, as “the question of what is or is not resistance became much more complicated” (1995: 175) The problem, for her, relies on the difficulty to differentiate between resistance and survival strategy, as some acts (such as the robbery of a rich by a poor man) are not clearly defined. In the same vein, Groves and Chang in their enquiry into Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, ask “how can one distinguish between deference as strategic resistance, and deference as forced compliance?” (1999: 237)

From resistance to *jeito*

In the ethnography *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) avoids a romantic reading of the people she depicts, and helps resolve the problem embedded in the use of notion of resistance, by drawing useful distinctions between resistance/resilience and

strategy/tactic. Researching infant mortality in Alto de Cruzeiro, a shantytown in Northeast Brazil, she finds disturbing practices of “letting go” of children, suffering more from chronic hunger than from what is locally affirmed, sickness. Scheper-Hughes enters into the difficult task of explaining such practices, and argues that maternal thinking and practices are closely tied to the violence of the everyday in which people –and more crudely women– find themselves, which include, among other things, a hostile environment, deprivation, hunger, expectation of high infant mortality, and ties of dependency and patronage. In this context, she argues that the goal of the people in the Alto “is not *resistance* but simply *existence*” (1992:533). Therefore, to speak of resistance would be misleading, because of the severe constraints in which these people are embedded. Scheper-Hughes prefers to envision their actions in term of resilience –a term that accentuates their subjection to social and economic constraints but also leaves space to explore what people do (instead of assuming their passivity).

In her reflection on the meanings of maternal practices in the Alto (such as letting children go), Scheper-Hughes draws heavily on Michel de Certeau and his insightful distinction between tactic and strategy which represent different levels of opposition. Strategy pertains to the realm of consciousness, organization, and collective action, and implies the knowledge of what has to be targeted. In addition, it requires a locus of power not available to people in the Alto. Thus, to strategize necessitates a form of power that is lacking to Alto people, as they are embedded in extreme circumstances that restrict their capacity to organize themselves in a collective way.

Yet, people in the Alto do engage in practices of opposition, through tactics, which are everyday, defensive, individual and survival actions people in non-autonomous

position display. As explained by Scheper-Hughes, tactics are “manoeuvres in enemy territory”⁵:

Tactics are not autonomous acts; they are defined in the absence of real power (...). Tactics are defensive and individual, not aggressive and collective, practices. They should not be confused or conflated with the domain of ‘resistance’ as James Scott (1985) and his colleagues (see Collburn 1989) and even de Certeau have done from time to time. Although tactics might temporarily divert the more organized power plays of the *patrão* [patron] and planter class of the Northeast, they do not challenge the definition of the political economy. [1992, 472]

In the case of the people in the Alto, Scheper-Hughes contends, it is by using *jeito* that people get by, *jeito* referring to the daily improvisation and trickery people use to making a living and enhance their situation. A *jeito* is, in Scheper-Hughes’ words “a quick solution to a problem or a way out a dilemma” (1992: 472). Often, these solutions take the form of alliances with patrons, or for women, with lovers because of the material benefits they might provide. *Jeito*, then, is a defensive act against harsh inequality and poverty, using existing class-gender-race differentiations for getting by.

Roberto da Matta, the Brazilian anthropologist, identifies *jeito* as a “national social navigation” (1989:101-102), referring to the different ways people manoeuvre within the system to turn the law to their advantage and make use of the bureaucracy. If he does not equate *jeito* with a tactic of the lower class, his analysis nonetheless reveals the connotation *jeito* carries in Brazil. In effect, using *jeito* appropriately is a desired ability because with one’s *jeito*, it becomes possible to make one’s way through the highly bureaucratized and corrupt institutions, to succeed in transcending the law and to defend oneself against class, race or gender inequality.

The notion of *jeito* –more specifically in the sense of tactics– echoes the tension found in women’s narratives of *luta* which suggest that women do not organize

⁵ Sally Cole coined this expression during a personal conversation.

collectively to resist the power relations in which they find themselves but who attempt to make a living and improve their personal life. In this sense, *jeito* is their arm to struggle with –it is their ‘weapon of the weak’ (Scott 1985). During the months I spent in Cascavel, *jeito* was a term constantly used by women when facing a difficult situation or a problem they were trying to resolve. The expression “*vou dar um jeito*” (meaning “I will find a way”) surfaced frequently in casual conversations –revealing the way people manage to deal with the specific constraints of their lives. Women’s experiences in Cascavel speak more to the notion of *jeito* than to the concept of resistance, because *jeito* coincides with the kind of practices encountered in the field, and because it is the way women frame their own actions. In addition, the concept of *jeito* allows us to surpass debates about compliance and resistance, because *jeito* points simply to the way people live their life.

Grounding the *luta*

In this thesis, I argue that an emphasis on women’s narratives provides the ground to understand the significance migration and work carry for women. Along the lines of Bloch (2003), Cole (1991), Lopez (1994) and Mills (1999), the choice of presenting women’s narratives is driven by the aim, on the one hand of deepening our understandings of migrant women and, on the other hand, of recognizing women’s agency without denying the power relations and constraints in which they are embedded. In this way, women’s narratives reveal not only what they consider as considerable improvements from *a roça* (the rural economy) to *a fábrica* (the factory) but just as significantly, their efforts to make their way, that is their *jeitos* to secure their households.

Because their attempts are neither strategic nor organized collectively but rather individual and defensive, women are not always successful, yet the *luta* must go on. If, as it will become apparent in Chapter 3, women struggle hard to secure their jobs in the factory, they also fight against hierarchies and power relations engaging in a defensive *luta*, a topic that will be explored in Chapter 4.

I think, like Branco, that “it is important to acknowledge women’s attempts to deal with problems posed by the reality of their life circumstances, even if the measures in which they engage may not be sufficient to solve the (...) problem” (2000:44). It is the endeavour I embark upon in this thesis by emphasizing women’s narratives of *luta*. First, however, it is crucial to contextualize women’s *luta* within the history and political economy of Cascavel –an interior town in the state of Ceará, in the Brazilian Northeast– and also in relation to the methodological approach informing this thesis.

CHAPTER 2: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD SETTING

Even though I make no claims to a privileged scientific neutrality, I do try to offer a fair and true description and analysis of events and relationships as I have perceived and sometimes participated in them. By showing, as I go along, the ways that I work in the field, offering glimpses behind the scenes, I hope to give the reader a deeper appreciation of the way in which ethnographic 'facts' are built up in the course of everyday participation in the life of the community. In this way, the reader should be in a better position to evaluate claims made and the conclusions drawn. [Scheper-Hughes 1992: 25]

It is in and through the *ethnographic context* that meanings will become clear.
[Goldstein 2003:44, emphasis added]

This chapter is dedicated to an exploration of both the setting where this research was conducted and the methodology used to gather the data in the chosen field site. The aim is to contextualize this thesis within the specificities of the ethnographic setting, at this particular moment in history, and as mediated by the kind of encounters I experienced, relationships I developed and approaches I privileged. Meaning-making and the production of knowledge is the product of historical, political, economic, social, cultural as well as personal circumstances. As a result, this thesis cannot escape the colors, textures and strictures of its time, place and social location. By acknowledging the *how* about the *where* of this research, this chapter seeks to situate the conclusions drawn in this thesis, with the same kind of intentions that drive Nancy Scheper-Hughes in the ethnography *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. I believe, like her, in the project of offering “fair and true description and analysis of events and relationships” (1992:25) at the same time that “I make no claims to a privileged scientific neutrality” (1992: 25). Thus, rather than seeking to present a “partial” truth, as the postmodernists would suggest, or a “total” truth as the proponents of a scientific objectivism would prefer, I propose instead a “situated” truth, one that claims its full validity yet within a specific context.

In order to achieve such endeavour and to avoid what Sherry Ortner refers to as “ethnographic thinness” (1995), I consider the thickness of the ethnographic context as crucial. I think that the value of anthropological research resides precisely in the importance of localized –and thick– description to understand global phenomena. As suggested by anthropologist Donna Goldstein (2003),

Speaking about political and economic structures in the abstract detaches the collective reality of the process from the fact that such structures and processes are produced and reproduced, enacted and resisted by the lived experience of people. To come to a better understanding of these structures and processes, thick description is still quite useful and is one of anthropology’s greatest strengths. [Goldstein 2003:44]

Consequently, I offer in this chapter thick description of my ethnographic field setting.

The following lines firstly present the ethnographic context in the diverse ways it informs this thesis and then, turn to an exploration of my methodological approach to the field. With this deep depiction of the ethnographic field setting, then and only then it becomes possible to consider women’s narratives of *luta* and their meanings, and to evaluate the validity of my argument.

THE CHOSEN FIELD SITE

We begin, then, with the context, the '600,000 squares miles of suffering', as Josué de Castro (1969) described them, that constitute the pockmarked face of the Brazilian Northeast. Land of sugar and sweetness but also of leather and darkness, O Nordeste is, as Roger Bastide noted, *a terra de contrastes* (...) its widespread affliction still justifies Brazilian intellectuals' wry description of their country as 'Bel-India' –half (the Southeast) Belgium and half (O Nordeste) India. [Scheper-Hughes 1992: 31]

Why the Brazilian *Nordeste*?

Between May and October 2004, I conducted field research in Cascavel, a newly industrializing town in the Brazilian Northeast attracting migrant women from the surrounding rural interior to work in the export food processing industries and textile factories. I was interested in that part of the world because I hoped to participate in the endeavour of investigating the ways globalization impresses on a neglected and impoverished region –the Northeast– within an economically growing yet disparate nation. In effect, to this day, Brazil remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, despite that its national GDP steadily increased over the course of the last decades and despite that Brazil is considered amongst the ten wealthiest economies in the world (Monclair 2001).

Brazil, *a terra de contrastes* (the land of contrasts) strikes by the huge regional disparities that parallel the social and economic inequality in the country as a whole. The country of continental length –it is the fifth largest in the world– is divided into five distinct regions⁶: the agricultural South, the industrialized Southeast (or Center-South), the inaccessible Centre West, the Amazonian North and the arid Northeast. Yet most of the economic development has concentrated in the southern regions, while the Northeast still drastically lags behind⁷.

⁶ See figure 1

⁷ With a GDP of 0.369, the lowest in Brazil, the Northeast represents not even half of the national GDP of 0.763 (IBGE & IPECE, 2005).

Its population of more than 170 million is unevenly distributed over the 27 states (including the federal district) comprising the country. With a population of 37 million, the state of São Paulo alone comprises 22 percent of the population of the country although it occupies a much smaller territory (IPEA 2000). “The Center-South is so densely populated in comparison with the rest of Brazil that geographers use the term *hyperconcentrated* to describe it” (Levine and Crocitti 1999:4). This hyperconcentration results from the rapid industrialization of the Southeast as promoted by military governments for most of the 20th century.

Brazil is *a terra de contrastes* not only for the regional disparities, but also for the huge discrepancies existing between the richest and poorest segment of the population – the descendants of African slaves, women, and landless peasants. The United Nations ranked Brazil the worst country in Latin America and the seventh worst over one hundred seventy-seven countries, as regards to the concentration and unequal distribution of resources (IBGE & IPECE 2005:75; UNDP 2005). Brazil then, is one of the most unequal nations in the world, *O Nordeste*, where this research was conducted, being one of the most impoverished regions in all Latin America.

A glimpse into the history of the last 500 years provides some key to grasp the roots of these huge disparities and inequalities and helps considering critically the implications of the current export-led development occurring in the state of Ceará, in the Brazilian Northeast.

Figure 1: Map of Brazilian states and regions ⁸



⁸ Sources: <http://www.brasil.gov.br/informe.htm>

Brazil: a history of power

Brazilian society has proved to be varied yet remarkably integrated, not on egalitarian but on hierarchical terms. The culture inculcates a sense of intimacy along with a sense of distance, thus allowing the elite to dominate society with little fear of challenge. Our main task is to ask how this society emerged and what keeps it from becoming more open and egalitarian –which has been the declared aim of national leaders at least since the proclamation of the Republic in 1889. [Skidmore 1999: xiii]

Without reference to class, one would assume that meanings are shared across classes. Without reference to history, one would not be able to see how relationships developed over time. [Goldstein 2003:47]

In *Europe and the People without History*, anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982) urges us to consider the present (and especially the people we study) as constituted by a history of power. Cultural forms and social relations, he contends, should not be detached from the global political economy and historical context in which they take place, because for more than 500 years, our world has been interconnected and interrelated. It is crucial, according to him, “to delineate the general processes at work in mercantile and capitalist development, while at the same time following their effects on the micro-populations studied by the ethnohistorians and anthropologists.” (1982: 23). In order to achieve such an endeavour, Wolf proposes to regard “these processes and their effects [as] historical, but in the sense of history as an analytic account of development of material relations moving simultaneously on the level of the encompassing system and on the micro-level ” (1982:23). In other words, Wolf argues for a global political economy approach to our localized study, a history of “material relations.”

In the same vein, in the context of the complex class relations in Brazil, anthropologist Donna Goldstein considers it impossible to understand her ethnography of a Rio shantytown without at least a glimpse into the political economy of Brazil. She argues that “one cannot comprehend the enormity of inequality in Brazil without having a sense of how capitalist expansion and imperialism have worked in historically patterned

ways” (2003: 46). Because class relations are historically constituted, she proposes an approach to ethnography that incorporates an historical dimension and a political economy analysis. In this way, it becomes possible to understand the roots of contemporary social hierarchies in Brazil and to uncover the larger contexts in which these hierarchies continue to take place.

Following Wolf and Goldstein, my intent here is to depict the larger context in which the protagonists of this thesis manoeuvre, an enterprise essential to have a sense of the organization of social relations and their implications for migrant working women in Cascavel. The following lines explore briefly the history of Brazil drawing on a global and historical political economy approach.

Colonial Brazil

The starting point of this account is the accidental “discovery” of Brazil in 1500 by Pedro Álvares Cabral, a turning point in the history of this territory previously inhabited by an estimated three to five million indigenous peoples⁹ (Smith 2002), organized in different groups and speaking more than a hundred different languages (Skidmore 1999). When they first sailed into Brazil, the Portuguese were interested in the exploitation of the territory rather than in settling or colonizing the land, and therefore turned rapidly to the extraction of the sole valuable product they found, a local dyewood –*pau brasil* or brazilwood, from which the land derived its name (after being firstly named the Island of the Holy Cross by Cabral, a name less evocative of the land). This

⁹ There are different estimations of the number of indigenous people in Brazil at the time the Portuguese sailed, ranging from 500 000 to 8 million (see Skidmore 1999: 14); the estimate by Smith appears to represent a reasonable mean.

first emphasis on the exportation of one product symbolizes the following pattern in Brazilian economic history, as the efforts subsequently centered on a single staple product for export (Smith 2002).

As a response to the increasing competition for colonial expansion, by the 1530s, the Portuguese crown established a system of captaincy (grants of land based on a feudal system) which translated into more permanent settlements than the earlier trading posts. Small communities established along the coast, but the settlements grew slowly as the long journey to Brazil, the lack of economic incentive and the apparent wilderness of the land did not motivate many Portuguese to settle.

During the same period, the Portuguese initiated the development of sugar mills and plantations; sugar rapidly replaced the brazilwood (and its modest profit) and required large numbers of workers. The Portuguese firstly resorted to the indigenous people through compulsory labour, forcing them to work in the sugar plantations and *engenhos* (mills). However, the Portuguese faced several difficulties: unlike their counterparts in Spanish Latin America, the indigenous people in Brazil were hunter-gatherers, not societies organized around stable agriculture. In addition, they were not used to the social hierarchy found in the Inca or Aztec societies. Consequently, the Portuguese could not exploit their knowledge of cultivation nor take over their chiefs to impose obedience and discipline. The indigenous people inhabiting Brazil, then, resisted forced labour and retreated into the less accessible parts of the land: the rain forests and the semi-arid interiors of the *sertão*¹⁰. They were also particularly vulnerable to diseases like smallpox and measles, and their population drastically declined following the Portuguese arrival (Skidmore 1999; Smith 2002).

Because of their failure to use the indigenous people of Brazil to meet their labour needs in the sugar plantations and mills, the Portuguese turned to the massive importation of African slaves. As early as 1538, African slaves provided the labour that was essential for the success of the Brazilian sugar industry. Over the course of three centuries, more than three million African slaves were imported to work in the heart of colonial Brazil – the Northeast– until the abolition of slavery in 1888, making Brazil the biggest importer of slave in the world. This massive slave economy made it possible for Brazil to become the world leader in the sugar industry: it was the largest producer and exporter in the 17th century (Goldstein 2003; Smith 2002).

A mining boom in the early 18th century when gold and diamonds were discovered in the state of Minas Gerais (General Mines) supplanted the sugar industry and therefore shifted the economic development from the Northeast plantations and mills to the gold and diamond mines in the interior Center-South. As suggested by Smith, the rush “displayed the pattern of ‘boom and bust’ that has been such a feature of Brazilian economic development” (2002:25). The mining industry –like the sugar plantations and mills in the Northeast– relied on the forced labour of African slaves. Brazil became a leading exporter of gold but only for a short period, as the production declined from the 1780s on (Smith 2002).

By the late eighteenth century, Brazil developed coffee plantations, principally in the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais. While coffee is not indigenous to the country, Brazil became a major producer and exporter of coffee to the point that the country nowadays evokes coffee in the popular imagination. As suggested by Smith (2002: 113) coffee was not only ‘king’ in Brazil where in late nineteenth century its profit

¹⁰ Literally *sertão* means “backlands” but refers to the semi-arid zones in the interior of the Northeast

represented more than two thirds of the total earnings derived from export; but worldwide, as Brazil produced 80% of the total amount of coffee throughout the 20th century. Coffee has since experienced a decline the Brazilian government has attempted to redress, unsuccessfully.

In short, during the colonial period, Brazil did not diversify its economy, preferring to concentrate on the exportation of a core product on a cyclical basis. Meanwhile, the feudal system of land –the captaincies– remained, rooting the subsequent unequal distribution of land and resources, still very palpable today. The early years of colonial Brazil testified to the emergence of what the historian Joseph Smith refers to as a “colonial oligarchy”. In the colonial oligarchy, *senhores de engenho* (mills owners) and *fazendeiros* (landowners) occupied the privileged position: “these were financially wealthy individuals who owned extensive sugar plantations and landed estates (*fazendas*), employed retainers and controlled large numbers of slaves. In their particular localities they were not only the leaders of society but also possessed considerable political and economic power over the local community” (Smith 2002:30). In addition, they reproduced patriarchal relations inherited from Portugal, with women considered subordinated to men’s authority.

A long journey toward a fragile democracy

First administered as a colony, Brazil became the seat of Portuguese government in 1808 when the prince regent Dom João VI and the royal family fled Portugal and the threat posed by Napoleon’s army. The prince regent elevated Brazil to the status of kingdom, implying that Brazil and Portugal were henceforth on equal terms. When his

return to Portugal was possible, the prince regent Dom João left his son Dom Pedro I behind, who proclaimed the independence of Brazil a year later –in 1822– because the kingdom status of Brazil was threatened by the Portuguese parliament. This was an important precedent: for the first time, a colony separated itself from a colonial power while being ruled by a member of the royal family (Goldstein 2003; Smith 2002). Brazil became an independent monarchy, not an independent republic like its counterparts in Latin America. Thus, the independence of Brazil did not transform drastically the way the country was run, especially as Dom Pedro I sought continuity, not change, when he proclaimed the independence of the country. When the constitution was established in 1824, only adult males with property or income had the right to vote; women and slaves were therefore excluded despite a rhetoric of individual freedom (Smith 2002:44).

Hence, the Brazilian elite still dominated within the “slavocracy”, as labelled by Smith (2002:57). The elite dictated local politics but also broader economic policies, such as the dominant Manchester liberalism. The doctrine prescribes the production of what a country could best produce and the trading of those products cheaper to buy than to produce. As during the colonial period, Brazil concentrated on the exportation of primary goods and on the importation of transformed products, which had the implication of keeping the country from industrializing (Goldstein 2003; Skidmore 1999).

The Brazilian elite also promoted the preservation of a slave economy, despite the abolitionist movement, using drastic means to keep the slavocracy intact. In addition to physical violence, an accepted social hierarchy prevented massive rebellions. As Skidmore explained:

Incarceration or physical punishment were only the most dramatic forms of control in this society. More insidious was the socialization of the young into an automatic acceptance of the social hierarchy and their place in it. Monarchy combined with slavery created an atmosphere of deference that was powerfully transmitted to the non-elites. The inclusion of this attitude of subservience that must be shown toward any superior was by and large successful in convincing non-elites there was no way to change their world. [Skidmore 1999:39]

Thus, monarchy and slavery combined together profoundly affected social hierarchies – and their maintenance– and constituted a powerful mixture with broader implications for the present-day relative acceptance of inequality in the country.

Brazil was the last colony to abolish slavery in the world in 1888. The next year, following a military coup, the monarchy became a federal republic. Despite the abolition of slavery, the Brazilian elite managed to maintain its economic and political privilege in place within the new republic. Economically, the landed oligarchy was not dismantled, and politically, only two percent of the population (the elite) elected the first civilian president in 1894.

Notably, the beginning of the 20th century testified to significant transformations in Brazil: immigrants from Europe and Japan populated the southern regions; the government diversified its economy, initiating the industrialization of the country; São Paulo became an important industrial center and the capital, Rio de Janeiro, a market for imported goods and a city of civil servants; and finally, a pattern of internal migration from the North to the South began. During the first years of the republic, whiteness was celebrated by the Brazilian elite under the aegis of scientific racism as advocated in Europe and North America. In their association of whiteness with modernity, the elite with the aid of sociologists and anthropologists¹¹, sought to re-define miscegenation or

¹¹ See Gilberto Freyre (1966) who romanticized racial relations in Brazil –especially between the white masters of the plantations and the black slaves and Artur Ramos (1946) who essentialized blackness.

the mixture of races as the erasure of blackness from Brazil, a project that failed but rooted contemporary racism (Goldstein 2003; Skidmore 1999; Smith 2002).

In 1930, Getulio Vargas was installed as the president by the military, setting the stage for a long period of military dictatorship –until 1985. Vargas governed with a “combination of demagoguery, populism, nationalism and social reform, while banning political parties, imprisoning political opponents, and censoring the press” (Goldstein 2003:53). When in 1954, he committed suicide, a new president –Juscelino Kubitschek, famous for his promise of bringing fifty years of development in five years– was elected, bringing a fragile democracy back. Kubitschek (1956-1961) initiated several projects – such as the building from scratch of a new capital, Brasilia, the development of the automobile industry and the construction of roads– at the same time setting the stage for the subsequent debt crisis through his heavy spending (Smith 2002).

In 1961, President Goulart was elected, but was overthrown by a coup in 1964 because of his close association with the left, a coup receiving the congratulations of the United States, worried at that time by the spread of communism. In the subsequent twenty-one years, a series of military governments succeeded, until the period of *abertura* (political opening) beginning in 1985.

During most of the period of military dictatorships (1930-1985), the state emphasized import-substitution and production for the domestic market, with the development of oil refineries, iron and steel, chemicals and pharmaceutical industries in the Southeast, especially in the state of São Paulo. Despite a boom in the early years of this massive industrialization, such emphasis had several implications in subsequent years. It deprived other regions like the Northeast of economic development while it

created rapid urbanization, overpopulation and unemployment leading to the sprawling of shantytowns and to increasing criminality, violence and poverty.

Paradoxically, during the worst period of repression of the military dictatorship, Brazil experienced the so-called “economic miracle” –referring to the 10 percent rise in national GDP between 1967 and 1973. At the same time, Brazil received the financial support of the United States to develop further its agro-industry in the Southeast. Yet the “miracle” masked regional concentration in the Southeast in addition to a disparate distribution of the income gains, monopolized by the richest 5% of the population (Bulmer-Thomas 2003: 316 n.12). As suggested by the Brazilian historian Aírton de Farias “the economy prospered with the so-called “Economic Miracle”, benefiting above all the multinationals, the elites and segments of the middle class; to the people, as usual, not much”(2004: 420, my translation). Rapidly, the economic miracle ceded to recurrent economic crisis: in addition to the unemployment in the urban industrial centers of the south, a strict schedule to repay international debt combined with high inflation rates asphyxiated the country.

The challenges faced by the government, then, following the transition to democracy in 1985 were enormous. Fernando Collor de Mello (1989-1992) and his successor after a scandal of corruption, Fernando Enrique Cardoso (1992-2002) were unable to implement a program of agrarian reform and to re-balance the huge economic and social inequalities still very present. Rather, the democratic opening translated into liberalization, privatization, increasing inflation and indebtedness (Farias 2004). The Brazilian elite is still privileged, in various forms, and whether Luís Ignacio da Silva –the current President known as “Lula”– will succeed in bringing a halt to the economic and

social problems of the country (including criminality, hunger, corruption, impunity, social inequality, and so on) remains unknown.

The Northeast: behind the drought

The Northeast is (...) notable for the effectiveness with which its politicians have represented the region's interests (historically synonymous with the landowners' interests) [Skidmore 1999:4].

The Northeast¹² includes nine states, covers a territory representing 18 percent of Brazil, and has a population of more than 49 million, ranking the second largest after the Southeast (IBGE & IPECE 2005:29). Once the heart of colonial Brazil, the region has experienced economic decline since the 19th century for several reasons. Nowadays, the Northeast is considered “the largest pocket of misery in the Americas” (Skidmore 1999:4), and a conventional explanation for this is the semi-arid climate and the resulting cyclical droughts hitting the region. The drought carries several connotations, but for many *nordestinos* (northeasterners) the term captures the roots of their problems.

For some, the drought explains why the government favoured the industrialization of the south, depriving their region from capital investment while leading to a pattern of out-migration. For others, the drought serves the interests of the local politicians and the elite who use the drought as a means to justify the persistent poverty without having to reform the landed oligarchy or the structure of the local political economy. In this way, the elite strategically maintain cheap labour and their ability to secure votes in exchange for individual favours in time of drought. The *industria da seca* (industry of the drought) describes this practice of taking advantage of the drought to maintain patron ties of dependency and land oligarchy (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 100).

Clearly, blaming exclusively the drought to explain the poverty of the Northeast would be misleading, especially as the majority of people in the region are landless peasants working on *fazendas* (large estates) held by the elite (Scheper-Hughes 1992). In her study entitled *Women of the Drought* in the Brazilian Northeast, Adélia de Melo Branco justly points to the fallacies of such a reductive view: “the situation [of the drought] is aggravated by monopolization of ownership, concentrated access to and utilization of land (the concentration of land is higher year after year), and by the absence of an adequate agricultural policy to assure the commercialization of agricultural products” (2000: 75). The impoverishment of the Northeast, then, is not the exclusive product of periodic droughts, it is also rooted in the political economy and in the history of social relations as they developed over time.

The most flourishing region in the 17th century had focused on the exportation of a single crop as the sole motor of its economic development. Thus the Northeast was particularly vulnerable to changes in the world economy, and was unable to compete with the Caribbean, Cuba, the United States and Europe, when these countries developed sugar production (Smith 1999: 67). The sugar industry declined while the region did not adopt a diversified economy. During the same period, coffee production in the Southeast started to become successful and a rubber boom temporarily re-directed capital investment in the Amazon. From the end of the 19th century on, the *nordestinos* massively migrated in part due to periodic drought but particularly driven by the “economic dynamism” of these regions (Greenfield 1999:101). In the following century, the industrialization of the Southeast attracted migrants from the Northeast, pushed away by the landed oligarchy, periodic droughts, lack of economic development in favour of

¹² See figure 1 in blue.

the southern regions, and consequent lack of work opportunity outside agricultural production. Over the years, the prospect of having a “better life” led to a general pattern of migration from north to south, over large distances, with men as the primary migrants.

Hence, the monoculture of sugar proved to be rather detrimental for the economy of the region, but as Scheper-Hughes contends, it is a combination of key elements that led to the dramatic impoverishment of the region: “the social, political, agrarian, health problems of the Northeast extend back to the earliest days of colonization, when the complex formed by the interactions among *latifúndio*, *monocultura*, and *paternalismo* was first established” (1992:32). It means, then, that not only the focus on a single crop for export was economically risky (*monocultura*), but also that the feudal system of land ownership (*latifúndio*) along with the sugar plantation economy and slavery, resulted in a strong legacy of patronage (*paternalismo*) and political power held in the hand of oligarchies.

The Northeast is now at a turning point in its history. While the state emphasized import-substitution and the industrialization of the Southeast during the military dictatorship (1930-1985), the transition to democracy has been accompanied by a politic of *abertura* (openness), by a shift from an economy centered on import substitution to an export oriented economy and by the stagnation of the southern industries. These changes within the Brazilian economy have coincided with broader global changes on a world scale often refer to as globalization.¹³ As a result of these important transformations, new export-processing industries have developed in the Northeast, transforming some regional

¹³ This process cannot easily be defined here, since there are multiples interpretations of the phenomenon, but mainly, it refers to the connections and linkages existing between the Brazilian economic and political situation and the flows of goods, services and ideas that occurred on a large scale. See chapter 1 for a discussion of the concept as intended in this thesis.

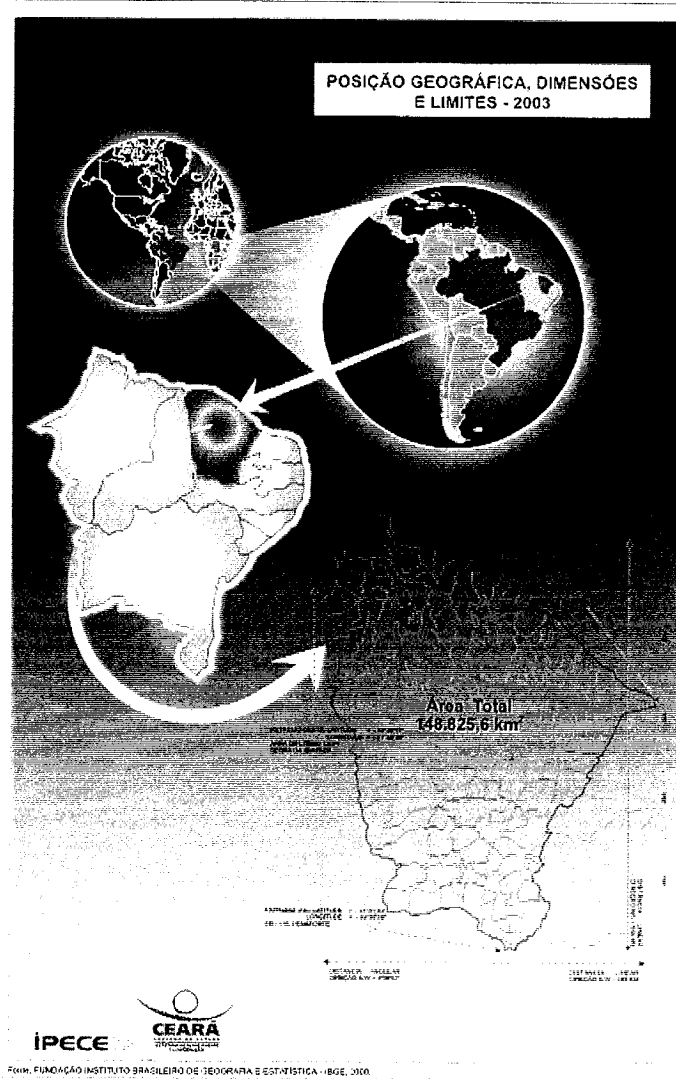
towns in the Northeast into development magnets and creating a shift from the north-south migration led primarily by men to a pattern of intraregional migration with women as the primary migrants. The town of Cascavel, in the state of Ceará, where this research was conducted, is one of these towns.

Ceará: behind modernization and economic development

Situated in the northern part of Brazil¹⁴ the state of Ceará embodies several of the trends distinctive of the Northeast –although the recent democratic opening in the state coincided with government initiatives setting Ceará apart from its northeastern neighbours. Indeed, rapid economic growth made Ceará famous for its economic progress and modernization. The state became a model for the rest of Brazil (and even outside), with its success story depicted in national as well as international newspapers. Titles evocative of its progress, equating Ceará with “an island of fantasy” or “a paradise of modernity and prosperity” contributed to spread the idea of Ceará as a land of progress and modernity (Farias 2004: 472). The historians Levine and Crocitti emphasize this distinctiveness of Ceará: “the Northern states –Pará, Maranhão, Piauí and Ceará– have long suffered from overpopulation, lack of industry, and fierce domination by landed oligarchy, although Ceará, in recent years, has made great economic strides under a dynamic state government” (1999: 3). While Ceará made incredible advancement, especially regarding the rise in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income, behind the façade of economic success lies a hidden history: that of unequal distribution, persistent poverty and oligarchy.

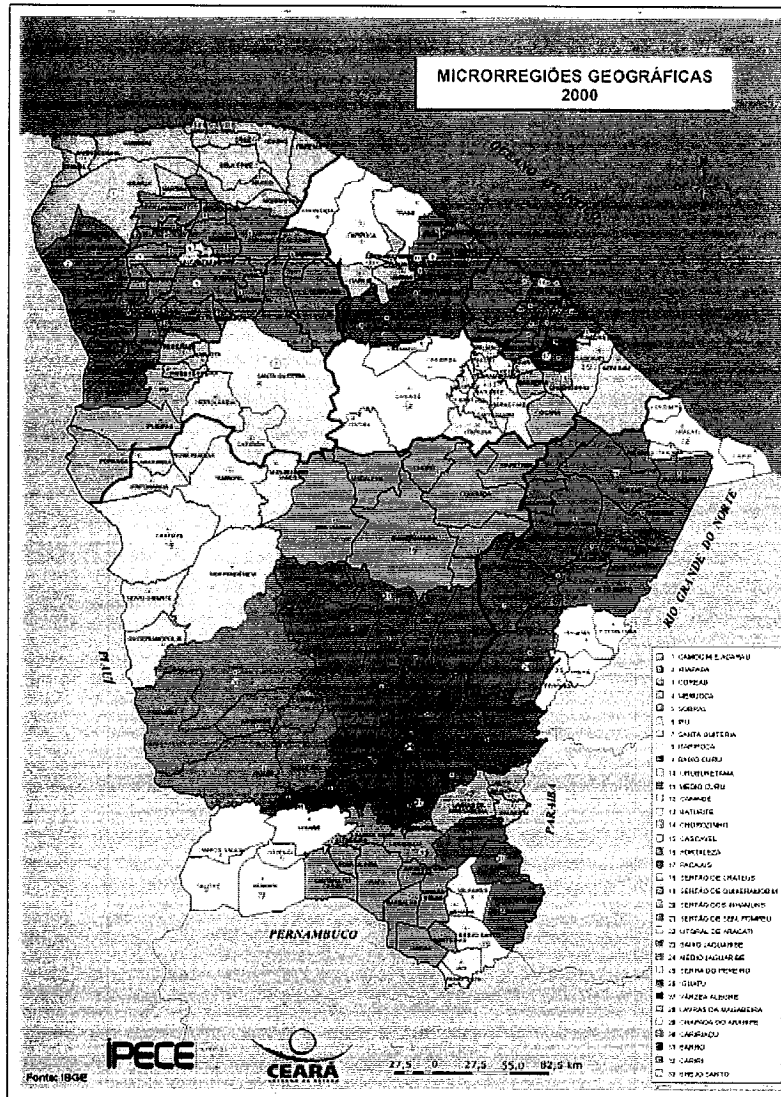
¹⁴ See figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Map¹⁵ of the geographical position of the state of Ceará



¹⁵ Source: www.iplance.ce.gov.br

Figure 3: Map of the micro-regions of the state of Ceará, including the municipality of Cascavel¹⁶



¹⁶ Source: www.iplance.ce.gov.br

The state of Ceará was for long considered one of the poorest in the Northeast, a region dramatically impoverished as discussed previously. Similar to its northeastern counterparts, the state of Ceará has experienced severe difficulties due to major cyclical drought: the largest proportion of its land forms part of the semi-arid *sertão*. Because of its harsh soils unfavourable to sugar cultivation, the economy of Ceará rested for centuries on the production of cotton and cattle-raising. Yet the local landed oligarchy had difficulties to secure the production of its main crop, cotton, due to the poor quality of its lands. Thus, the dominance of the elite in Ceará was fragile, unlike the entrenched oligarchy in the states of Pernambuco and Bahia, areas favourable to sugar plantations. Consequently, under the military regime and inspired by the national context of industrial development, the elite in Ceará chose to “stimulate the industrialization *cearense* with the intention of strengthening the state economy and consolidating the dominant class” (Farias 2004:456, my translation). The first step toward the industrialization of the state was launched.

At end of the military dictatorship in 1985, under a rhetoric of change, o *governo da mudança* (the government of change) composed of a new generation of businessmen referred to as *a geração Cambeba* (generation Cambeba¹⁷) came into power for a period of 16 years (1987-2002) with the project of modernizing the administration *cearense*. The advertised aim was “the accumulation and capitalist extension of Ceará” to counter the inherited clientelism and state interventionism of the military regime. Yet the capitalist accumulation favoured only the bourgeoisie in power and created a new oligarchy: the “urban-industrial oligarchy”, much stronger than the traditional landed

¹⁷ Named after the neighbourhood where the first politician of this homogenous group –Tasso Ribeiro Jeressei –came to exercise power.

oligarchy (Farias 2004:466). *O governo da mudança*, at first in favour of agrarian reform, shifted its discourse toward a more capitalist aim: increasing agro-industrial production – which benefited the emerging industrial elite. The repression of the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (MST) ensued, and the land reform never occurred.

In addition, the *geração Cambéba* created a modern form of clientelism under the aegis of democratic participation, sponsoring the creation of several organizations purporting its dominant ideology in exchange for financial resources. For instance, the workers of the *Secretaria de Ação Social* (Office of Social Action), who visited people in their houses even in the remote interiors “retransmitted the official ideology to the popular milieu” (Farias 2004:467, my translation). This strategy shifted the traditional *troca de favor* (exchange of favours) between landlords and peasants to a more bureaucratized form of exchange. Still, several of the traditional oligarchies especially in the interior of the state were involved in this *troca de favor*.

Undeniably, *o governo da mudança* significantly transformed Ceará with its capitalist model of development and its sudden economic growth. Accordingly, between 1985 and 1998, while the GDP increased at an annual rate of 2.4 percent in Brazil and 2.7 percent in the Northeast, it increased by 3.5 percent in Ceará, a significant difference. Ceará is now considered a leading state in Brazil, ranking tenth of the 27 states in the national GDP. The motor of this economic growth is principally *a industria*, which in the three last decades expanded considerably as hundreds of industries established massively in Ceará, driven by state incentives (including a fiscal exemption of 75 percent for up to

15 years)¹⁸. Hence, the participation of the sector of industry to the state GDP passed from 19 percent in 1970 to almost 40 percent in 2000, indicating rapid industrialization. Ceará's main export since 2003 is shoes, which supplanted the cashew nut, a product locally grown (cashews occupied the first rank in export for several years). After these products leather ranks third. Significant of the recent changes in Ceará, 62 percent of the state exportation comes from industrial (rather than agricultural) products (Farias 2004:479-480; IPECE 2004a: 109, 119, 122).

Notably, this economic growth does not translate into a major redistribution of resources within the state or at the national level. The Gini index¹⁹, which measures the concentration of resources, has improved, dropping to 0.598 in 1999 (it was 0.607 in 1992) but still ranking Ceará third in Brazil, whereas Brazil ranks amongst the worst in the world²⁰. Thus, the state of Ceará is considered amongst the worst in terms of intrastate concentration of resources within a country considered amongst the worst in the world.

The distribution of resources in Ceará contrasts with the idea of successful economic progress. The image difficulty stands when we consider that in 2001, 38 percent of the population in Ceará survived without a stable income and an additional 34 percent received less than one minimum salary. In addition, such "progress" is not palpable in the amount of income gained: the household income per capita²¹ in 1999 was

¹⁸ In effect, between 1995 and 2000, 350 national and foreign industries established creating 86 thousands direct jobs spread over 75 municipalities (including the town of Cascavel where this research was conducted) (Farias 2004: 480).

¹⁹ The GINI index measures inequality over the entire distribution of income or consumption. A value of zero = perfect equality and a value of 100 = perfect inequality.

²⁰ Brazil ranks seventh of 177 countries with a Gini index of 0.591 (IBGE & IPECE 2005:75; UNDP 2005).

²¹ The household per capita income (or *renda domiciliar per capita*) is the total income of a given household divided by the number of members in the household.

65.8 *reais* in Ceará, slightly lower than in the Northeast (67.9 *reais*) and drastically lower than the national means of 128.6 *reais* (Farias 2004: 480; IPLANCE & SEPLAN 2002:74)²². The image of economic progress is also aggravated by a huge debt of 4827 billions *reais* in 2002 which means an increase of 132 percent in the last five years (Farias 2004:480-481; IBGE & IPECE 2005: 75; UNDP 2005).

Finally, Ceará continues to face several social problems despite the “economic progress”, including sprawling shantytowns, hunger, child prostitution, homelessness, corruption, and so on. Assaults, robbery, homicide, sequestration along with *crime de pistoleiro* (gun crimes), especially in the periphery of the state capital and in the interior of the state constitute persistent problems. In addition, both the proportion of female headed-households and the dependency of the members of a household on the head of household’s salary have increased (Farias 2004; IPLANCE & SEPLAN 2002:29-35).

Quite significantly, the state emphasis on export-led industrialization means the drastic diminution of agricultural production. Whereas cotton constituted an important crop throughout its history, without adequate state support cotton is now imported. As noted by the historian *cearense* Airton de Farias, “agriculture in Ceará is in its terminal stage: the state imports various agricultural products –even manioc flour!– that could be produced here” (2004:481, my translation). In effect, the main imports in the state are, in order of importance for the value, cotton, petrol and its derivatives, and milk. Agriculture contributes only 6.1% to the GDP, compared to 55.9 % for service and 38.1% for industry. (IPECE, 2004a: 101-103, 123).

²² In Brazil, the poverty line is established at 68 *reais* –thus the household per capita in Ceará is inferior to the Brazilian poverty line (IPLANCE & SEPLAN 2002:84, note to table 3).

The industrialization of Ceará also resulted in rapid urbanization: in 1950, 25 percent of the population lived in rural areas, and between 1970 and 2000, the proportion of people living in urban zones passed from 40 to more than 70 percent. While out-migration to the Southeast and the North has constituted the historic response to the problems of drought, landlessness and poverty until fairly recently, intrastate rural-urban migration became in the 1980s the primary type of migration in the state of Ceará, with a predominance of women as migrants. (IPLANCE & SEPLAN 2002: 50). Notably, the majority of the urban population is spread into the different major cities²³ of the state instead of being concentrated exclusively in the state capital of Fortaleza: from the 7 783 157 inhabitants populating the state, 5 889 557 live in urban zones, with roughly 2 million living in the capital (IPECE 2004b).

Ceará, previously an agriculture-based state, has turned into an industrial, urban and export-led state. In addition, in recent years, tourism has become a significant economic activity as greatly emphasized by the state since 1995 when tourism “received special treatment from the government as a structured action” (IPECE, 2004a: 127, my translation). Ceará –*a terra da luz* (the land of light) as advertised by the state government– is turning into an important destination for tourism: it is famous for its beaches including the dunes and *jangadas* (small boats used for fishing), for its typical dance (the *forró*) and for its craftwork, especially embroidery and lace-making. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of tourists passing through the state capital of Fortaleza

²³ According to IPECE (2004a), there are 18 municipalities outside those of the metropolitan regions of the capital Fortaleza having a population over than 50 000 inhabitants. Cascavel, the town where this research was conducted, is part of these municipalities.

drastically increased: national tourism doubled while international tourism quadrupled²⁴. Yet despite the state claimed “structured action”, without the appropriate infrastructure and development policies, Ceará is increasingly turning into a place for mass tourism (benefiting foreigners who have established businesses along the coast) and a privileged destination of global sexual tourism, especially since the tsunami, which has redirected the flow of tourists (including sex tourists) from Thailand to new destinations including Ceará (Lima 2005; IPECE 2004a: 128).

In short, since the democratic opening of the country, the state has become increasingly linked with the global economy, concentrating on export-led industrialization and recently, on tourism to achieve a prosperous economy. With the new state government, elected in 2002, little has changed and so far, the same economic and social policies as adopted by the *geração Cambéba* continue.

Cascavel: reflecting regional patterns

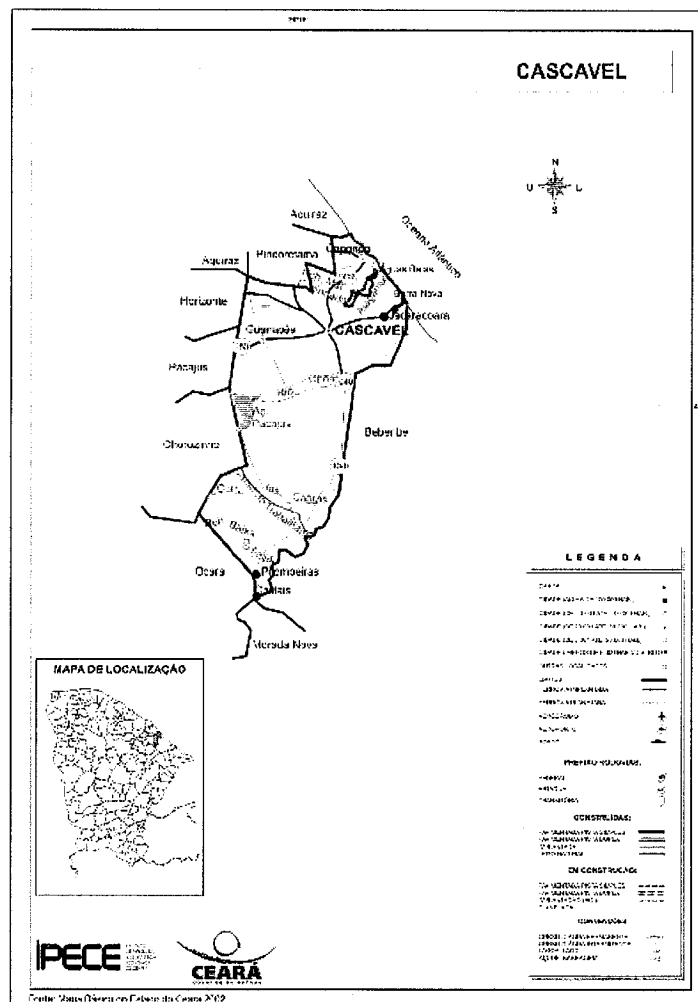
Situated in the state of Ceará, the town of Cascavel²⁵ where this research was conducted, reflects several of the trends occurring in the state on a larger-scale. Targeting export-led industrialization as its main source of economic growth, the town is characterized by a pattern of intraregional migration, led primarily by women. A market town until 1969, Cascavel began its path toward industrialization for export with a cashew factory, which remained the main employer until the textile sector grew in the eighties. Nowadays, the town attracts migrants –and mainly women from the

²⁴ In 1996, 773 247 national tourists passed by Fortaleza, whereas in 2002, this number increased to 1 629 422; in 1996, 40 209 international tourists by the state capital while they were 189 992 in 2002. (IPECE 2004a: 128).

²⁵ See figure 4.

surroundings rural communities– to work in the cashew, leather or shoe factories or in the several formal and informal garment factories.

Figure 4: Map of the municipality and town of Cascavel²⁶



²⁶ Source: www.iplance.ce.gov.br

Historically, the town of Cascavel emerged as an important point of commerce because of its privileged location at the juncture of the *sertão* (semi-arid backland), the coastal communities of the Atlantic littoral and the state capital (located 60 km from Cascavel). Originally, indigenous people populated the land of Cascavel, but by 1696 they were disseminated –either to the Amazon or assimilated as workers on *fazendas* (large estates). Those who thereafter populated the region were “peasants, traders, missionaries, *sertanejos* [inhabitants of the semi-arid backland], merchants, travelling salesman (*caixeiros-viajantes*), cowboys, adventurers, mixed, black, and people from different origins and points of the colony” (Bessa et al 2001:23, my translation). Indeed, Cascavel attracted migration because of the favorability of its lands to cultivation: in addition to being close to the coast, four rivers cross its surrounding territory. The dominant phenotype emerging from this mixed population is the *caboclo*, (a mixture of peoples of indigenous and European descent and runaway and freed slaves).

In 1833, the town of Cascavel was officially created, deriving its name from a local *fazenda* (large estate, farm). For several decades, the town concentrated on agricultural production (especially manioc) and cattle raising (Bessa et al. 2001:23). In 1950, its main economic activity was agriculture with the production of sugarcane, manioc, cotton, corn, bean, banana and mango (IBGE 1959). By the 1970, 61.7 percent of the active population worked in agriculture and only 19.4 percent of all the active population were women (SEPLAN 1980:31). Therefore, opportunities to earn income for women were rather limited and most of them dedicated themselves to housework, child care and seasonal help in the agriculture. In addition, women developed several types of

craftwork (including lacework, embroidery, crochet, straw hats and straw bags) which they sold at the Saturday market (*feira*).

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Cascavel, paralleling the state and regional pattern, experienced out-migration to the southern regions of Brazil and to the Amazon (during the rubber boom). Its municipal government maintained historical patterns of control over the local economy and chose not to emphasize the development of social services and local infrastructure, a tendency still prevailing. In addition, the concentration of land in Cascavel mirrored –and still does!– the state and regional landed oligarchy²⁷. According to Bessa et al. “this excessive concentration of possession of land is a factor explaining both the decline in the agricultural production in the municipality in the last decades, and the pattern of premature ‘*desruralização*’ [movement out from the rural zone]”(Bessa et al. 2001: 177, my translation).

When Cascaju²⁸, the cashew factory, opened on December 13, 1969, the town lacked economic opportunity outside low-paid agricultural work. Despite the rather patriarchal division of labour (men work outside home; women were *donas de casa* - housewives) the cashew factory –which offered employment primarily to women– was more than welcome in the community. Thus, the possibility of having a stable income led several households to favour women’s paid employment. Consequently, in the first week after the factory opened, more than 270 women came to apply for jobs, and at the end of the first year the cashew factory employed 400 people, 70 percent of whom were women. During the next four years this number almost tripled with 1100 employees in

²⁷ In 1985, seven landlords shared 38 percent of the lands occupying the municipal territory; in 1997, using a different methodology, this number rose to 1.8 percent of the owners occupying 54.7 percent of the land (Bessa et al 2001:176).

²⁸ See figures 5 and 6.

1974. By 2004, when this research was conducted, the cashew factory employed 1600 employees of which 70 percent were women.²⁹

Figure 5: View inside the cashew factory³⁰



Until fairly recently, the export factory, Cascaju, was the single largest employer in town –employing primarily women –but in 1999 a multinational leather factory, Bermas, was established. The leather factory, co-owned by Italians and Brazilians employed a total of 1250 people with men and women roughly equally employed. Yet it is distanced from the town although located within the municipality as it was established between Cascavel and another important town. Thus, its workforce is not exclusively made of the people from the town. Another major sector of employment is the textile sector, but it is difficult to ascertain the number of women employed in this sector as there are several informal factories employing between 3 and 300 employees,

²⁹ According to the director of the Sistema Nacional de Empleo do Ceará, SINE-CE, October 3rd, 2004.

³⁰ Source: www.cascaju.com.br

with an approximation of 90-95% of those employed being women³¹. According to the municipal data, there were in 2000, 34 garment factories employing 1250 people. Finally, a last major factory in town is a shoe factory, employing 350 people, primarily women.

Figure 6: Women sorting cashew³²



Outside the work in factories, the main economic activities in Cascavel concentrate on services (there are several shops in the center of the town) and on commerce –the town’s Saturday outdoor market is the second largest in the state. Several men and women are involved in the retailing of a variety of products: clothes, shoes, bikinis, underwear, dishes, beauty products, hammocks, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, craftwork and so on. The informal economy is very significant and is expanding. It includes self-employed women selling meals (especially for lunchtime) and snacks at the *mercado da comida*³³, (food market) adjacent to the *feira*, the outdoor market. In

³¹ According to the director of the Sistema Nacional de Emprego do Ceará, SINE-CE, October 3rd, 2004.

³² Source: www.cascaju.com.br

³³ See figure 8.

addition, several people own *lanchonetas* (small restaurants) and *barzinhos* (small bars); others resell clothes from their home or at the market³⁴; some make a local type of popsicles, *dindin*, for sale; many women do custom sewing in their homes; others continue to produce the traditional piecework of lace-making, embroidery, and crochet learned in their native communities while some men make nets for fishing; some men offers transportation to school or to the surrounding communities; and finally many men work informally as construction workers. Indeed, for men, outside the informal economy, work opportunities are rather limited, being mainly restricted to the municipality, bus company or mototaxi association.

Figure 7: Maria, selling clothes at the local market³⁵



Thus, women's participation in the formal labour force has historically surpassed the participation of men, as women were and still are primarily employed in factories – although this situation is less polarized since the establishment of the leather company in

³⁴ See figure 7

1999. Notably, the jobs in the cashew factory emerged as the first formal employment in Cascavel and in the surrounding communities; consequently, women were the driving force of the subsequent urbanization and migration trends. Still, women's work continues to be essential to most households in Cascavel, especially given that formal employment entitles them to the *carteira assinada* (a small book recording their work history and profession) which means a stable income of a minimum salary and includes workers rights and social benefits.

Figure 8: Candeia selling food at the *mercado da comida*



The town of Cascavel, then, is industrial, even more so than the state as a whole: in 2003, its GDP comprises 55.9 percent for the industry sector (compared to 38.1 percent for the state); 35.8 percent for the service sector; and 8.4 percent for agriculture with sugarcane, manioc, cotton, beans, coconuts, cashews and mango amongst others as

³⁵ All photographs were taken by the author between May and October 2004, except when mentioned.

the main products. Its main exports are, in order of importance: cashews, leather and shoes, reflecting the state's three main exports, though shoes recently supplanted cashews and leather in the state GDP. Cascavel, like Ceará, has experienced rapid economic growth in recent years: its GDP increased of 80% between 1996 and 2000 (IPECE 2004a: 105; Bessa et al. 2001:178).

Again mirroring state patterns, the industrialization of Cascavel led to rapid urbanization. The proportion of the population living in urban zones increased from 23.1 percent in 1960 to 83.06 in 2004, the population inhabiting the town more than doubling in the last 30 years³⁶. Most of this urbanization is led by women migrating from the neighbourhood areas, reflecting the intrastate rural-urban migration characterizing the state of Ceará. In effect, in 1996, as much as 89.6 percent of the population growth in Cascavel was due to in-migration, that is to migration from the surrounding communities (IPECE&SEPLAN 2004; IPLANCE&SEPLAN 2000; IBGE 1961).

Growing rapidly, the town is expanding without the capacity to adjust and to offer the same services –especially with regards to sanitation, education and health– to all *cascavelense* (inhabitants of Cascavel). In addition, despite economic growth, the town remains poor and economic inequality intensified during the 1990s. In 2001, 29 percent of the population lived with less than a minimum salary and as much as 84.89 percent with less than two minimum salaries (IPLANCE 2002). Whereas the official minimum wage had quadrupled since 1994 passing from 64 *reais* to 260 *reais* in 2004 (the equivalent of 80\$ US) real income after inflation has not. Thus, similar to the Northeast

³⁶ The population of the municipality passed from 39 305 in 1970 to 60 000 in 2004 (during these years, the town of Pindoretama separated with a population of 12 440). The town of Cascavel passed from 14 827 to 36 000 inhabitants for the same period (SEPLAN 1980:31; IPLANCE 2001:125; IBGE 1992 and estimated by the municipality 2004).

and Ceará, economic inequality in Cascavel has deepened with rapid industrialization.

As is becoming apparent, the town of Cascavel mirrors significant state and regional trends, and as such, provides a pertinent space to interrogate the ways global processes are locally configured and experienced on a daily basis. Its pattern of migration led primarily by women, in the context of a growing yet disparate economy demands that we consider carefully the implications of export-led development, especially for those susceptible to being the most affected by global trends and economic restructuring – namely migrant working women. Rapid economic development often created unexpected outcomes –and it is through local and deep analysis that it becomes possible to approach critically these complex outcomes for migrant women.

THE METHODOLOGIST AT WORK

An “old-fashioned” anthropological enquiry

While I am entirely sympathetic to the poststructuralist critiques of colonialist anthropology, especially their pursuit of unmasking the power relations embedded in knowledge-producing systems, I am skeptical about criticisms that suggest we (anthropologists) give up attempting to “give voice” to others –that, indeed, it is pure arrogance and conceit that drives us to attempts such projects. (...) Despite its acknowledged representational dangers, I would hate for all of us to abandon our work with less privileged groups and, in the spurious hope of avoiding the pitfalls of writing about those groups, devote ourselves only to the study of elites, or cosmopolitan intellectuals, or transnational social movements. [Goldstein 2003:43]

From May 14 to October 23 2004, I conducted field research in the interior town of Cascavel, where I carried out an “old-fashioned”³⁷ anthropological enquiry using several of the traditional tools of the ethnographer, including interviews and participant-observation. Despite the emergence of new (and welcome) ways of conducting anthropological research (such as internet-based) I continue to believe, like the anthropologist Donna Goldstein, in the relevance and validity of conducting the “old-fashioned” type of anthropological research with less privileged groups of people. Perhaps my stance would be different if I had not experienced a setting like Cascavel, where it appears not only justifiable to pursue field research, but a necessary project because of the relevance my topic carried for the women I interviewed. By volunteering their free time to conduct interviews, by telling me long, rich and detailed narratives of their life histories, by constantly commenting on the importance of paying attention to their life and work³⁸, by showing me their workplaces, traditional piecework, houses and native communities, by introducing me to their relatives and friends, by inviting me to

³⁷ I borrow the expression from Donna Goldstein (2003:1).

³⁸ The women I interviewed regularly commented that they were willing to participate in the research, because they thought that “*a vida da mulher mudou muito*” (the life of women changed a lot) or that “*aqui, a mulher é muita batalhadora, ela trabalha muito*” (here, a woman is a fighter, she works a lot). They thought it is was important to pay attention to their new forms of work as these brought several changes in their lives.

share a meal with them despite their limited financial resources, by thanking me (!) after the interview for having listened to their stories, by letting me observe the daily negotiations in their household and finally by allowing me to enter deeply into the personal sphere of their life, these women did not simply consent to partake in my research. They actively engaged in the process because the topic of my research resonated with their daily concerns.

The approval and interest of the women I interviewed for my research was a condition to pursue my project, because I believe in an anthropology that is ingrained in people's daily life and concerns. Indeed, I consider that our primary responsibility, as anthropologists, is the channelling of what is of importance for those we study and learn from, as opposed to pursuing narrowly our research interests. As a result, the validity of the ethnographic enterprise resides at the intersection between our research interests and the concerns or interests of the people we study.

By "channelling", I do not want to suggest that through my writing I am giving a voice to the voiceless, although I consider my thesis a channel through which migrant women workers in Cascavel can be represented. Rather, I designed this research project with my own agenda, thus in this thesis it is my voice (even if representing women's voice) and I felt there is no way to avoid this, despite all our efforts to democratize and decolonize our texts. I also think that to qualify women in Cascavel as "voiceless" would be misleading, because most of these women have a strong ability to narrate and even dramatize daily events or personal stories. As part of an oral culture, these women have cultivated an impressive memory and a talent to captivate their audience. For instance, at night, they would gather and exchange gossip or comments about stories, events or news

in a cacophony of loud voices. As such, the women I came to know over the course of my fieldwork undeniably had a voice within their own community (with friends, household or family members, co-workers, partner, sometimes politicians and so on) and had several channels to express it. It would be a fallacy to consider these women as voiceless.

Yet, although these women are not voiceless, the political arena appears rather deaf to their voices: their concerns and interest do not surface into the local scene and, nationally, the complexity and particularity of their lives in the Northeast is obscured by the more dominant preoccupations of the Southern regions (including São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro). Besides, the women I interviewed in Cascavel form part of an oral culture, a culture that has not been documented, recorded and reflected on by scholars, including anthropologists. In effect, few anthropological studies focus on people from the Northeast region (with the exception of the state of Pernambuco³⁹) and the topic of “ordinary” working women has not captured the imagination of anthropologists (these women are not transnational migrants, transvestites, indigenous peoples from the Amazon, poor urban shantytown dwellers or Carnival performers, the different kinds of groups of people that currently attract the attention of anthropologists in Brazil).

In this context, it appears even more crucial to look carefully into the lives of the migrant women I interviewed. Indeed, I consider that their mundane lives testify to the local implications of globalization in the ways it is lived and experienced daily. I felt responsible –as an apprentice anthropologist– to write about these women, not only because the themes of my research appear relevant to them but also, and perhaps more so because their continuing *lutas* (struggles) to get by and to adjust to economic

³⁹ See Scheper-Hughes (1992) and Branco (2000).

restructuring deserve that we apply our mind to understanding the meanings and implications their constant *lutas* have. In addition to their usual *lutas*, these women are facing changing circumstances (an elderly relative or a newborn to take care of, a member of their household suddenly laid off, a separation and so on) and are persistently trying to find new ways to deal with these changes, in a context of economic restructuring and rather recent democratic opening. To have a glimpse into the ways these women manoeuvre on a daily basis, it is necessary to share time with them over an extended period of time (through the old-fashioned type of anthropological research). To participate in quotidian life is still, in my view, the privileged way we can continue to bear witness to the lives of the people we study –in my case, to testify to women’s *lutas*.

Like Goldstein,

I believe it is still possible to capture something distinct about the lives of others and to represent those lives in a respectful and careful manner so that in the cases where there is less chance for groups of people to speak and be heard, somebody might act as a scribe or witness. This notion might ring hollow or seem old-fashioned or trite. Such witnessing, bearing the burden of simply seeing and acknowledging and writing about whatever it is you have seen, is a profoundly political and important act. Perhaps only ‘youthful’ anthropologists (read ‘naïve’ by their more staid elder) are reckless enough to continue to take up such idealistic projects (although many of them will now do so in a multisited fashion); regardless of whether this is viewed as a strength or a weakness, doing away with them completely would be a mistake. [2003: 43]

Without pretending to be the voice of the women I interview, I share Goldstein’s view that as anthropologists, we bear the responsibility of writing about what we witness. As a result, to partake in the everyday lives of people over an extended period of time appears crucial to pursue. I think, therefore, that we should not abandon our traditional methods of enquiry in a changing world. Rather, I prefer to envision diverse methods suited for diverse ends.

A feminist approach to the field

We need an analysis that illustrates the plurality of experiences yet explains why one woman's experience can parallel that of another. [Lamphere & al, 1993:3]

Feminist anthropologists, as scientists, continue to believe that some theoretical universalizing is necessary. [Cole 1995: 196]

An important legacy of the postmodern critiques regarding the questions of authority and representation is the emphasis on the plurality of experiences, on the deconstruction of fixed identities, on the fragmentation of the self, on the partiality of truth, in short, on the potential fallacy of our categorisations. While such analysis revealed possible dangers (such as essentialism) in our representations, there are some latent risks with this emphasis: it might detract our attention from addressing the ways specific categories like gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, and so on structure the kinds of choice people have and it might obscure how global and local processes affect specific groups of people. Because being a woman continues to make a difference in term of access to resources, level of education, political power, decision-making, poverty, violence, to name but a few, I embrace a feminist approach. I am, as suggested by Cole:

Aware of the danger of universalizing and essentializing women's experience, nonetheless [I] believe that we need to continue to use categories such as women and gender and that dismantling these categories in favour of difference and multiplicity is also dismantling and undermining movements to end the oppression of women in their diverse and multiple forms. [1995: 199]

My aim, here, is not to enter into a deep theoretical discussion regarding feminism(s). Rather, by acknowledging my allegiance, I seek to recognize the ways my feminist stance permeates my methodology. I am concerned about the practical implications of doing research, because my methodological approach derives from a feminist perspective that considers "the possible power relations involved in doing research by, about, and for women" (Zavella 1997: 43). My methodology, then, is infused

by a certain version of what is ethical in the process of carrying out research, believing in the possibilities to conduct research that is more collaborative and less exploitative.

Therefore, in the course of my fieldwork, I recognized women's knowledge, agency and capacity to critically engage with their world. As such, I pursued further the arenas of discussion emphasized by them, I dialogued with these women about the topics of importance to them, I recorded their stories and I privileged their own understanding of the world in which they find themselves. This preoccupation for a research grounded in women's concerns and interests is palpable in the organization of this thesis around the theme of women's narratives of *luta* (see especially chapters 3, 4 and 5). This choice allows considering carefully women's articulation of their lives. Indeed, recording and writing about women's stories constitutes a practical means of democratizing anthropological research. As suggested by Cole,

Recording women's stories enabled me to hear about the diversity of women's experience in Vila Chã and to recognize the existence of multiple subject-positions generated under even the very particular social, economic, and historical conditions of a small village in rural Portugal (...) I also saw the systematic recording of women's stories as an effort to conduct research on more democratic terms and hoped that the women's words would keep me from arbitrarily imposing any totalizing schemes [1995: 189].

In the context of the changing economy in Cascavel, paying attention to women's experience appears crucial, given that women are primarily employed in the export sector and that women are often the main income earner in their household. Therefore, to privilege their narratives contributes to the endeavour of ascertaining the implications these new forms of labour have for them, their household and the community, in a way that allows considering the plurality of their experiences while shedding light on commonalities and patterns.

Inquiring about women's work and migration

I gathered my data using mainly formal interviews with migrant workers and owners of factories, but using also participant-observation, informal discussions, visits to factories, and visits to the communities where the migrant were born. I conducted a total of 80 formal interviews with migrant workers, using a questionnaire covering several aspects of women's life, including their family, work and migration history, their household structure, division of labour and income, the reasons for migrating, and their perception of the main changes in women's lives following the economic restructuring in the region. The questionnaire provided quantitative and qualitative data in addition to allowing me to record women's narratives.⁴⁰

In order to meet migrant women, I used the snowball technique (one person introducing me to another and so on). I developed several key relationships from which emerged different networks, allowing me to document different generations of migrant women working in different sectors of employment, including the textile sector (both formal and informal factories) the export-processing cashew factory, the shoe factory, the *mercado da comida* (informal food market), the domestic service and government jobs. In addition, I interviewed self-employed women who performed a great variety of activities from doing manicures to selling *dindin* (a local type of popsicle) to owning a *lanchoneta* (small restaurant).⁴¹

⁴⁰ For further information regarding the questions asked, see the interview questionnaire attached in the appendix to this thesis.

⁴¹ 26% of the women interviewed worked in the export sector whilst half of the women worked in textile factories, both formal and informal, the rest being self-employed, unemployed or employed in services. Half of the women interviewed were older than 40, thus they remember the shift following the export-led development and the establishment of the first factory in town.

In addition, I visited factories, where I interviewed the managers and where I was sometimes allowed to interview some of the migrant female employees. Often, I would interview these women during the period of lunchtime or after work, leaving little time for in-depth discussion. Thus I favoured the snowball technique, as it became obvious that the interviews with women I was introduced to by a friend turned out –in most of the cases– to be richer and deeper than those conducted inside factories. Of the 80 interviews I did, 21 were conducted at women’s workplaces while 59 were done at my house or at the women’s houses.

In general, the women I encountered in Cascavel liked to talk about their lives, volunteered eagerly to participate in my research, and considered their life as worth considering carefully. What was supposedly a one-hour interview turned out to be, in most cases, a 4 to 5 hour conversation in which women depicted their life histories, their childhood, the drought (*seca*) they experienced, the difficulties faced in the agricultural work, the hunger they experienced regularly in their childhood, the changes brought by their migration into a town with more facilities such as school, electricity, hospitals, and the economic independence that has arisen from their work in the export sector. The openness of these women as well as their ability to tell their stories certainly shaped the kind of research I was able to conduct.

The questionnaire was not administered in the same way to all women as I allowed some flexibility to emphasize aspects they considered important in their narratives. Yet I made sure we covered all questions of the interview questionnaire. In cases where I forgot some information I would return to the women’s houses, which

allowed me to observe key aspects of their daily life that provided further deepness to the information gathered during the interviews.

Because I interviewed women using different networks of people instead of predetermined groups of women representing the demographic data of the town or the characteristics of the workforce, the sample of women in my research cannot be considered as representative. However, because I sought to diversify my encounters, because I interviewed women aged between 26 and 67 working in different sectors, and because I interviewed a significant number of women (80), the women in my sample comprise a great variety of backgrounds, migration trajectories, work histories, household types, social positions and so on. As a result, I do believe it is possible to draw some patterns from these 80 interviews.

The interviews I conducted in Cascavel formed part of both my master's thesis and a broader research project on "Gender, Migration and Work in Northeast Brazil" under the supervision of Professor Sally Cole at Concordia University⁴². Collaborating in this project and especially exchanging with Prof. Cole coloured my fieldwork in different ways, as I developed a deep approach to my topic and a rigorous methodology allowing me to conduct 80 formal interviews during my first fieldwork. As well, my entry into the field was greatly facilitated by the preceding network of contacts Prof. Cole established within the community. Thus, being *a estudante da Sarah* (the student of Sarah or Sally) certainly framed the kinds of encounters and relationships I developed. By being introduced in this way, not only did I create key contacts in the very first days of my

⁴² This broader research is conducted under the Initiatives in the New Economy (INE) Collaborative SSHRCC-funded interdisciplinary research team, TARGET (Team for Advanced Research on Globalization, Education and Technology) based at the University of British Columbia. Prof. Thomas

fieldwork, but I was easily accepted and respected as a researcher. Finally, through Prof. Cole's network, I rented a house from a migrant family, who became central in the pursuit of my fieldwork: as a single woman living alone –a rarity in Cascavel– this family provided me protection and safety by keeping an eye on me, in addition to becoming my closest ties in town.

Inhabiting the town of Cascavel: the mundane as a site of apprenticeship

There is something particularly engaging in the act of participating, as if by doing the same activities of those we study, an intimacy is slowly created; the sharing of common activities creates a form of engagement not possible with only observation, interviews, or a household survey. Through participant-observation, it is possible to enter into deeper levels of meanings, to gain access to implicit knowledge, to enter into what people do (but not always say!) to become familiar with local understandings and to question the taken-for-granted assumptions. In the context of my research, the everyday life of migrant women appears as the very site to understand the ways they negotiate with economic restructuring. First, because it is within their specific locations that it is possible to gain a deeper access into the social contexts that constrain women's possibilities for decision-making, and second, because it is within these social spaces that women creatively engage in negotiation with these forces.

As a result, I spent a period of six months observing the life of migrant women working in export-processing industries, living in their neighbourhood and sharing with them their everyday lives. By following them from home to work, by testifying to their

Lemieux of the Department of Economics at UBC is the principal investigator. Financial support for this M.A. research was provided by TARGET.

daily routine, by seeing their workplaces, by entering the intimate worlds of their family relations, friendships, household structure, gender roles, and so on, it became possible to achieve a deeper level of understanding of their lives. The on-going discussions and casual conversations I had with these women inform this thesis in crucial ways.

I spent the whole period of my field research in the town of Cascavel, living in a rented house located in a neighbourhood populated mainly by the first generation of migrants who moved into town in the 1970s following the opening of Cascaju (the cashew factory). I came to know many of the inhabitants of my *bairro* (neighbourhood), especially the women who gathered at night in front of their houses, with whom I shared the daily gossip about neighbours, politicians or local events. These informal discussions were quite informative as regards to the local gender ideology, the economic changes faced by some women, the pressure of consuming modern goods (like cellular phones), the household dynamics, the local politics and so on.

The house I rented was located in the courtyard of a migrant family who had moved into town in 1977 attracted by the work opportunity at Cascaju. During the time I was there, a total of nine people lived next door, including the woman who rented me her house and her two children. I developed a close relationship with Dona Eneida⁴³, a 60-year-old mother who was the *dona de casa* (housewife) and Lucia, her 41-year-old unmarried daughter who worked in the cashew factory in addition to co-managing the household with Dona Eneida. Both of them rapidly became central figures in my field

⁴³ I have decided to keep women's real name in this thesis, because it was their volition. In effect, to have their names and stories in this thesis, in Canada and with "*a Eva*" (me) implies for the women I interviewed that their lives are important. Although the ethical guidelines in the discipline prescribe that we preserve the anonymity of our informants, in this case I consider it would have been an offence to these women to change their names, as I would not honor the different stories they agreed to tell and because they wanted me to use their real names.

research, not only because they sought to help me in various ways, but also because their daily negotiations became crucial in understanding local tensions, dynamics, discourses and ideologies.

Dona Eneida understood quickly the aim of my research and often provided me with some valid and critical observations, especially regarding the changes in women's lives over the last decades. She brought me twice to her native community, where she introduced me to the *casa de farinha*, (where people manually produced manioc flour) and *engenho* (the mills where people produced *rapadura*, a local type of brown sugar) and to the piece of land her husband still cultivates for their household consumption⁴⁴. Dona Eneida would sometimes tell me “write that down in your notebook”, would bring me an article to read or would bring to my attention some events reported in the *telejornal* (tv news). She would often draw comparisons between her life in town and her life in the rural interior where she grew up and married, or would contrast changes in generations. Thus, my daily interactions with Dona Eneida helped to deepen my analysis of the changes brought by economic restructuring, as she clearly understood the kind of information I needed to gather. In other words, Eneida had an “ethnographic” eye and was a skilled observer.

Her daughter Lucia too helped me with my research, but at a different level. She introduced me to several migrant women, most of them migrants from the surrounding rural communities who worked with her in the cashew factory. Through her networks of friends, I met a considerable number of women I would not otherwise have met. Besides this significant help, Lucia made use of my research to enhance her own social status within her community, as she introduced me to several of her middle class friends,

organized parties (*festas*) at her house for us to be together, and diversified the occasions for being together. Lucia also attempted to decide with whom, outside of her networks of friends and colleagues, I would conduct an interview or develop a friendship. Her intentions were transparent: to be closely connected with me –a foreigner– meant she could engage with the middle class. Lucia, therefore, in addition to helping me significantly with my research, was able to make her own use out of it (an ability to manoeuvre within her webs of relations, as explored in Chapter 4). This point is crucial because it is often wrongly assumed that the anthropologist is exclusively in a position of power over the people studied. It is perhaps more accurate to conceive power relations in the field as shifting according to the context and people presented. Consequently, the outcome of my field research is the product of several negotiations.

Lucia also contributed to my broader understanding of the lives of migrant working women, as her life testifies to the complexity embedded in the study of migration and work. As both an export migrant worker and an unmarried daughter dedicating herself to the co-management of her mother's household, the 41-year-old woman constantly negotiated her decisions in relations to what happened in the household. Her demanding role contrasted with that of one of her younger unmarried sisters, Ana (31 years old), who also worked but did not contribute neither her income to the household expenses or her time to domestic chores. It is Lucia who washed Ana Maria's clothes, prepared her meals or cleaned her dishes. Through the daily observations of these household relations, and through Lucia's willingness to share her views on this topic, I became aware of the importance of paying attention to the negotiations within the

⁴⁴ See figures 11 to 15 and 17.

household –not only between men and women, but also between different generations of people or between conflicting interests.

Testifying to women's aspirations

I also participated in a literacy project for illiterate adults, MOVA-Brasil⁴⁵, where several migrant women I interviewed (in addition to other *cascavelense*) attended the daily classes during the week at night. I took part in the project on a weekly basis, where I developed significant links with migrant women, allowing me to access a space where migrant women workers were actively seeking to improve their situation. The project, inspired by liberation theology à la Paulo Freire, not only serves as an alphabetisation tool, but also implies *conscientização* (consciousness raising) on issues as varied as wage management, pollution, nutrition, mental health, relations with neighbours and so on. The topics discussed in the classes were grounded in the daily life of the participants and these latter were actively involved in the learning process through various activities.

For several of the women I came to know through this project, to partake into MOVA-Brasil made them feel empowered. These women chose to come after their workday even though they had domestic chores waiting for them and children to care for (indeed, these women would often bring their children to night school at MOVA- Brasil as they had nobody to take care of them and no money to hire a babysitter). Some of them even considered attempting formal schooling at night while others were worried that the project might not be continued for the following year. To partake in this project provided me with another aspect of women's daily life, namely women's education and consciousness raising. As such, I was able to testify that these migrant women are not

only driven by economic survival. They have other goals in their lives, goals they attempt to achieve alongside other basic needs. It is therefore crucial to include these goals in my analysis, as these are as central to women as are their attempts to make a living.

Figure 9: Women participating in MOVA-Brasil



Partaking in the municipal elections

Finally, I also participated in some local political events as I was in Cascavel during the political campaign and municipal elections of October 3rd, 2004. By being there during the elections, I was able to testify to the extent to which the political is infused into the very personal and everyday practices of many people in Cascavel⁴⁶. Indeed, several of the women I came to know make use of their political ties and consider

⁴⁵ See figure 9.

⁴⁶ See figure 10.

it part of the role of a politician to help them and give them favours in exchange for their votes. For instance, when my closest neighbour Lucia broke her feet, she needed transportation to the state capital hospital (60 km from Cascavel) and immediately phoned her favourite *vereador* (municipal councillor) –William, who drove her in, waited there with her, attended the consultation with her and drove her back to Cascavel. While I accompanied them and questioned Lucia about the nature of their relation, she explained to me William was a family friend and that he volunteers to help her household and relatives whenever needed. Amongst other things, William gave some bricks to one of her sisters when she was building her house and bought the beer for 30 people at another sister's birthday party.

For Lucia and her relatives, these favours were simply part of what a *vereador* should do to help his electors. When I suggested that, in exchange, she and her relatives would vote for him, she agreed saying her household and relatives usually support William in the elections: “he is our municipal councillor (*o nosso vereador*)”. Yet she insisted that their votes had not been bought, which would have meant for her accepting money from him in exchange for their votes. “I have never been bribed to vote in a particular way, never”, she said, marking a line between accepting money and receiving favours. In fact, while she condemned the people who took money, she considered the exchanges of favours and votes with William as the appropriate ties linking politicians with the people, a view shared by most of the people in Cascavel. For example, when I asked some friends who they will vote for to be the future mayor, Mariangela, Janete and Marlucia told me their favourite candidate was Paulo Cesar because he never refused to help someone who knocks at his door and to give whatever is needed (medicines, tiles,

cement or food). The question, then, when it is election time is not who the better candidate is but rather who is going to help the most.



Figure 10: The house of a neighbour during the municipal elections

As a result, during the political campaign, some politicians attempted to seduce the voters by giving them *tijolo* (tile), *cesta básica* (literally means food basket, includes

dried food such as rice, beans, oil, coffee, flour, sugar), cement, bricks, even money or by organizing a party or outdoor musical shows with local popular music bands. By attending the *comício* (public discourse by the politicians), *passeata* (car parade) *caminhata* (walk) and shows, I entered into the ways people understand the issues surrounding elections, conceived the political arena and defined their allegiances, and I testified to the significance these ties hold in the life of the migrant working women. As will become clear in this thesis, patronage is still a defining feature of social relations in the region, and as such, it still framed the ways women manoeuvre to get by and negotiate with the new economy.

Analyzing discourses in the field

Besides an approach grounded in women's articulation of their *luta*, I also used discourse analysis, focussing on women's narratives of their migration and work experiences. The aim is to highlight the regimes of representation and truths, that is the knowledge these discourses produce as regards to what is right and wrong for a working migrant woman in an industrial city like Cascavel. For Foucault (1978), discourses, enacted through language, are systems of knowledge that produce a sense of what is right or wrong, true or not, normal or not, serving the interest of a particular group or class, in a specific historical context. Thus, discourses impact on ways of thinking about specific topics and on ways of representing a specific group, creating meanings to which people are subjected. These meanings are what Foucault labelled 'regime of truth', producing real consequences in the lives of people, despite the fact that these discourses may not necessarily be true. The apparatus created by the development discourse (Escobar 1995)

or the sexual prescriptions during the process of colonization deriving from an attempt to maintain arbitrary boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized (Stoler 1989) are examples that clearly demonstrated how discourses govern social interactions, and help maintaining specific interests, power relations and social structures. Thus, discourses are imbued with power, and therefore, the regimes of representations enacted through discourse have different implications for people according to their positions, which subjected them to the meanings, rules and power of discourses, what Foucault refers to as the 'subject-position'.

In Brazil, class relations are organized around an ethic of patronage and dependency, and in Cascavel, these class relations are reworked under the shifting relations brought by the new economy and the process of globalization. It is also crucial to consider the local conception of modernity, consumption and the ways people articulated the 'logic' of economic development, given their local realities, which are infused by the process of globalization. Finally, local gender ideology prescribes different norms for men and women and a close attention to these prescriptions helps understanding the implications these have in shaping what is locally acceptable in regard to women's roles, what are the opportunities women have given local gender expectations and in what ways these arenas are accepted, mediated and challenged.

My endeavour is embedded in the idea, borrowed from Nanda, of "paying attention not just to the discursive constitution of experience and subjectivity but also to the materiality of discourse. Materiality of discourse simply means that a culture's stories about what is just and equitable affects (and is affected by) the distribution of resources and power to its members." (1997: 19) This implies that dominant discourses affect the

distribution of power and privilege within societies. Thus, my approach to women's narratives of *luta* is to interpret them in critical terms as discourse. This means that I do not content myself with their voices –I seek to understand the meanings of their narratives, and sometimes the underlying forces infusing their narratives. If women presents the shift from the *roça* (rural economy) to the *fábrica* (factory) in positive terms, it remains crucial to explore in which context these narratives take place because they are embedded in a history of power (as explained in the first section of this chapter). It is the endeavour to which I turn in the following three chapters, which focus on women's narratives and their meanings.

CHAPTER 3: FROM A ROÇA TO A FÁBRICA

In this thesis, I argue that an emphasis on women's narratives of *luta* allows considering women's experiences of migration and work in export factories in a way that transcends the women-as-victims paradigm without denying the severe constraints in which women find themselves enmeshed. In this way, I consider women's narratives as central to our understandings of migration and work, experiences that sharply marked these women. In effect, from *a roça* (the rural economy) to *a fábrica* (the factory), women's life drastically changed, and their narratives capture the considerable implications migration and paid work carry for them, their household and their community, especially given that the first factory was established only 35 years ago. These transformations, then, are relatively recent and still very palpable.

Overall, from the hardship of the agricultural work in the *roça* to the repetitive underpaid work in the *fábrica*, migrant women in Cascavel consider that their lives have improved –sometimes, radically. By having access to paid work, not only have these women put a halt to the insecurity generated by growing food in a land of drought and patron ties, they have also achieved a level of economic independence allowing them to refuse abusive relations, especially with men. They struggled hard in the *roça* –and they still do in the *fábrica*– but they insist, in their narratives, in depicting their victories. Generally, they consider they succeeded in at least one regard –they enhanced their situation, and are way better off in their present jobs than they would be if they had not migrated to work in an export factory.

In this chapter, I draw on different narratives to explore key aspects marking the experiences of women and their *lutas* in a context of migration and export-led

development. The aim is to convey a sense of what women mean when they constantly remark that “*a vida da mulher mudou, e muito*” meaning that women’s lives not only changed, but transformed significantly from their childhood to the present day, and from the work in the *roça* to the work in the *fábrica*. The shift is significant –and informs their understandings of their present-day lives.

The *luta na roça*

The women I interviewed are, for the most part, natives from surrounding rural interiors⁴⁷ located within the municipality of Cascavel. There, most of the women were confined to domestic work and childcare, having little opportunity for paid work prior to migrating. Most of them depended on the work of their husband *na roça*, who grew mainly manioc, corn and beans, the produce often not sufficient to feed the whole family. Indeed, most of the time, the land did not pertain to them. As a result, these sharecroppers had to give half of their production to their landowner, such as described by Maria, a 54-year-old worker in a textile factory: “*fazia de meio: dava metade para o dono*” (we divided in the middle, giving half to the owner). One woman, Candeia, remembers her father who worked in the *roça*, and who produced “beans, manioc, corn, cashews, potatoes, coco” amongst other things. As she explains: “the land was not ours so it was part [of the production] for the owner, the other part for us. We sold [fruit], but it was little, fruit didn’t have the same value as today.”

⁴⁷ Indeed, 86.3 % women migrated from within the municipality and another 9.5% from elsewhere within the state. Only one woman is born outside Ceará. Because it simplifies the analysis of my data, the percentages used in this thesis are based on the total number of interviews conducted under the aegis of the broader research project, on “Gender, Migration and Work in Northeast Brazil” under the supervision of Professor Sally Cole at Concordia University. This means that the percentages are based on a total of 95 interviews (a number including the 80 interviews I conducted).



Figure 11: The *engenho* (mill) in Eneida's native community⁴⁸

The life *na roça* was hard and the ways of making a living rather limited. Most people produced “*só para comer*” (only to eat), thus for subsistence instead of for selling. Some were day labourers on *fazenda* (large farms) whilst others owned small plots of land. In any case, they faced periodic drought – *a seca*, leading some of them to migrate to the Amazon or the South during most of the 20th century, others to experience hunger. During my stay in Cascavel, I accompanied Dona Eneida (the *dona de casa* or the head in the migrant family who rented me a house in their courtyard) to her native community. There, her husband still works the land, producing sugarcane and manioc and commuting everyday from Cascavel to *a roça*. Dona Eneida took me to the *casa de farinha* (literally ‘flour house’, where they produced manioc flour) and the *engenho* (where they manually process sugarcane) and then we visited her husband's plot of land.

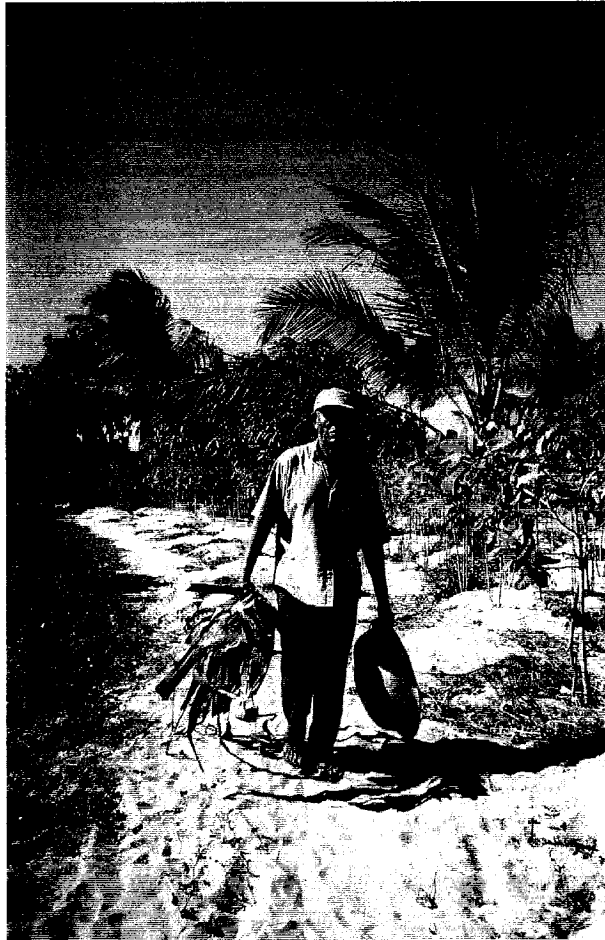


Figure 12: Dona Eneida's husband in his plots of land

While we watched him working, Dona Eneida commented on the hardship of the work *na roça*:

The work in the *agricultura* is *grosseiro* (rough) and tires one. It's difficult, very difficult. The people working here don't have security, y'know? There is no *segurança do trabalhador* (work insurance). Only when you'll retire. What if you get sick?

O Nordeste also is *seco* (dry). In 1970, it was *seco, seco, seco, seco*. So it's difficult for the people who plant. The majority don't want this life [pointing to her husband]. The majority goes into *as fábricas p'ra trabalhar* (the factories to work). Young people, they want to work in *fábrica* because there the work is different. There the people have their *direitozinhos* (small rights): 4 months of *seguro de desempregado* (employment insurance). Here there's no security at all. So people leave [*a roça*] for that reason. *A agricultura* is very low paid work and the government, you know, *não ajuda* (doesn't help).

⁴⁸ Photograph by Sally Cole, May 2004.

Figure 13: A view inside the *engenho*⁴⁹

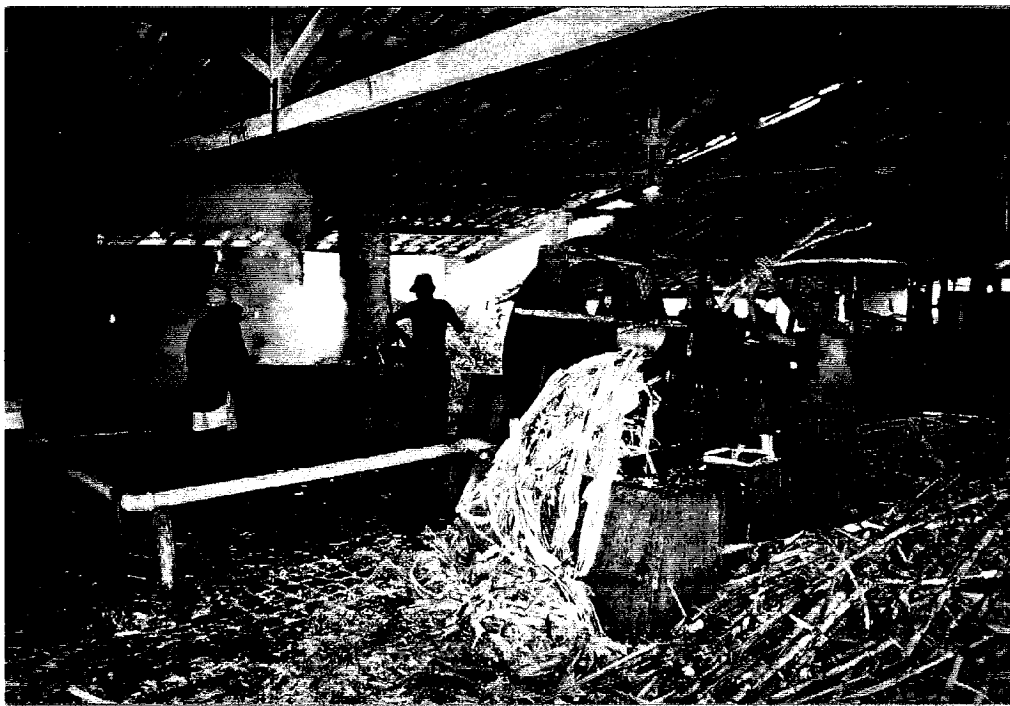


Figure 14: Another view inside the *engenho*⁵⁰



⁴⁹ Photograph by Sally Cole, May 2004.

⁵⁰ Photograph by Sally Cole, May 2004.

Figure 15: Dona Eneida na roça



As several narratives highlight, some women were, as children, sent away to the state capital, Fortaleza, to a relative's house to study, others to work as domestics, whilst several women circulated amongst different households in their community –to the point they were informally adopted by an aunt, a grandparent, or even a patron. At times, they maintained ties with their families, helping them even after being adopted. Simone, a 35-year-old migrant working in the textile sector, narrated:

I was born in Camori [an interior]. When I was six, my parents *me deram* (gave me) to another family *por causa das condições* (because of their financial conditions). They stayed there, passing through *bastante dificuldade* (a lot of hardship). I lived with my aunt but I always returned to visit my parents during the weekend. I always went there, always. I didn't want to leave them. I never liked to leave them, *não era minha vontade, de jeito nenhum* (it was not my will, in anyway). I had to stop my study, *largar tudo* (drop everything) to help them. *Fui batalhar p'ra fora* (I battled outside home). All the money for them, until my father retired.

In this context of scarcity, the households *na roça* were rather flexible –as they had to accommodate to what was possible to ensure their household survival. Women participated in some economic activities in their spare time –when not caring for children or occupied with the preparation of meals and domestic chores. They developed different types of craftwork, and depending on their origin and interest, some women did *bordado*, *labirinto* (embroidery) *ponto de cruz* (needle point) *renda* (lace-making), and “*trabalho de palha*” making hats, bags, brooms with a the dry leaf (*palha*) of a local palm tree –a *carnaúba*.

Figure 16: A woman doing a type of *renda*⁵¹



Other women worked seasonally in the *colheita* (harvest), whilst some worked twice a year in the *casa de farinha* following the time of harvest where they produced manioc flour and *goma* (extracted from manioc and serving to prepare a local snack, *tapioca*). Some women had animals they cared for, including chicken, pigs and goats. In addition, in some instances, women even sewed or embroidered *na máquina* (sewing machine) for regular clients.

Figure 17: Women grating manioc in the *casa de farinha*



Several women remember with details their childhood, especially the periods of drought, the difficulty to secure food and the work they performed to help their household to make a living. Most of them participated in domestic chores, in childcare, in harvest, *na roça*, doing *renda* or *labirinto* and sometimes fishing in the river nearby as early as six or seven years old. *Na roça*, it was difficult to attend school, given the labour they had to contribute to their household but also given the limited possibilities to study

⁵¹ Photograph by Sally Cole, May 2004.

in their community, as they either had no school or schools with only four grades. A constant remark, when referring to the *roça*, was “*lá, na roça era muito ruim*” (“there, in the agriculture, it was bad”), and women would often stress, amongst other things, the lack of services and infrastructure as a difficult aspect of their daily lives, and thus as a push factor in their decisions to migrate.



Figure 18: A woman working *na roça*⁵²

For instance, Narcisa, a 44-year-old worker in the cashew factory, contends that she migrated because “there, in the interior, things were very difficult. We didn’t have school, hospital, not even water.” Others point to the lack of food as an important factor

⁵² Photograph by Sally Cole, May 2004.

leading to their decision to leave the rural areas. Eronilde, who migrated along with her parents and currently works in the cashew factory, explained they all moved into Cascavel “because in the *sertão*, we lacked everything. We had no water, no electricity, no food. Only beans and manioc to eat was not enough”. Rather frequently, the women would simply justify their choice of migrating by saying “because there, life was hard”, “because there *não tinha condições* (we didn’t have financial conditions or conveniences to help with domestic chores like water and electricity)” or “*na roça não dava*” meaning that in the rural areas, they were unable to produce enough to support the household.

Notably, not all the women interviewed migrated from the interior. Indeed, some women also moved from the surrounding fishing communities as Cascavel is quite close to the Atlantic coast (12 km). In most cases, the situation of these women echoes that of the women coming from rural interiors in the sense that in both cases, women were restricted to the domestic sphere and performed some craftwork whilst men engaged in paid work (in this case, in fishing). The women from the *praia* (beach) migrated also because “*lá era muito ruim*” (there it was hard) but they escaped different situations, including a violent father (in the case of Marlucia), exploitation of their labour by relatives (in the case of Nova), prostitution and tourism (in the case of Rita).

Being a migrant from the *roça* or from the *praia*, however, does not impact on the incentives for migrating to Cascavel. On the whole, women were attracted by Cascavel primarily because of the possibility to work in the cashew factory and because of the town’s facilities and services –including hospitals, schools, *energia* (electricity), water, and shops. The prospect of earning a stable income in a factory was very significant in women’s narratives, most of them mentioning the possibility to gain their own money as

a driving force to move into town –it was, as pointed out by many women, the very first factory in the region, thus the very first opportunity for women to work. As Francesca, a 39-year-old woman working in a small garment factory explained: “I came here because it is easier for work. In the interior it is *a roça* (agriculture) and that’s it. There are no options.”

Fatima, for her part, remembers the time when the factory was built and her strong desire to work there –she was 14 years old. As a teenager, she dreamed of a different life from that of her mother “I saw my mother *sacrificarse* (sacrifice herself) for her children. I wanted a different life, I wanted to work and study.” For younger women moving into Cascavel today, the same reasons are invoked when explaining their decisions to migrate.

Several women evoke, in the early years of Cascaju, the cashew factory, the harsh working conditions –yet they thought it was worth enduring burning their hands with the corrosive oil of the cashew nuts or being (under) paid according to their production (instead of receiving a fixed minimum salary). For them, it was better than what was possible in earlier times. Some were so willing to work at Cascaju that they even walked daily to and from their native community to the factory for several years until they finally decided to migrate permanently into town. Maria do Carmen, a 54-year-old migrant, who was close to retirement when I interviewed her in August 2004, narrates the significance her work bears in her life and the efforts she made to remain employed, including migrating on a daily basis and burning her hands:

In 1969, Cascaju opened and *mudou a vida da gente* (it changed our life). I entered there in 1972, we walked to and from the factory each day. [At that time] I lived with my parents and I helped them. *Minha vida foi tudo lá* (All my life was there). At first, we worked for production [thus paid according to what was produced]. I removed the nuts, but it was raw, *eu não aguantava* (I couldn’t take it), I was unable to sleep at night because I was all burnt as the nut was raw. Cascaju changed a lot. Before it was

manual, the work was very *puxado* [demanding]. But by now it's an engine cutting the nuts. It's already another process.

After commuting on a daily basis, Maria do Carmen moved permanently into town renting a house with a man she had encountered in the cashew factory. After seven years, he died, leaving her alone to care for four children, the oldest being six years old. Her daughter remembers how her mother, lacking support to care for her children and unable to pay for someone, chose to remain in the factory in spite of the implications it had for her children:

At six years old, I took care of the others, I stayed alone. I remember my mother leaving for work, very early. I didn't know how to cook. She prepared food for us and *trancava porta* (locked the door). During the weekend, *ela ia ensinar a fazer almoço* (she taught me how to cook the noon meal).

Women accepted severe constraints, then, to work in the factory because paid work represented an important means to ensure the survival of their household. Of course, the factories establishing in the region made use of their vulnerability to exploit their labour –leading to the detriment of their health or of their children's security. Some women were unable to stand the corrosive oil burning their hands and lost their jobs in the factory. Other had to leave to care for a newborn in the absence of any childcare. At other times, women were laid off following several absences at work because they were caring for sick relatives. Still, these practices take place nowadays as the factories in Cascavel can rely on a pool of women willing to work in a factory.

The work *na fábrica*, then, emerged in a context of scarcity and patriarchy generated by the local class dynamic and gender ideology. Yet contrary to a widespread interpretation in the dominant literature on women working in export-processing industries, the women in Cascavel rarely mention their husband's opposition to their

entry into the labour force, nor were they constrained by their authoritarian parents to take on these jobs to help secure the economic well-being of their households. Rather, these women emphasize migration as the result of their own decisions or of joint decisions between themselves and their husbands. Of the 80 interviews, only three women mentioned having experienced reticence on the part of their husband to enter into the labour force, in one instance a reticence her husband rapidly left aside as he realized the importance of her economic contribution to the household. In another case, a woman said she remained unemployed for ten years until she finally separated from her husband who had refused to allow her to work outside the home because he thought she would be adulterous. Fátima, now 31 years old and recently hired in a textile factory, comments on her experience:

Sometimes, I think it's better to remain alone. At least there is *não abuso do homem* (no abuse from a man). I didn't work until we separated. I spent a difficult time. Then, *batalhei para conseguir trabalho, batalhei até conseguir* (I battled to get work, I battled until I succeeded)

Her story echoes similar situations of other women in the community, such as my neighbour Marly. Her husband refuses to allow her to work outside the home; he even stopped her from selling clothes from her house, claiming she had too many contacts with people (thus that she could learn more about his infidelities).

If patriarchal ideas about the proper place of a woman still infused gender ideology in Cascavel, women's paid work is generally easily accepted, especially because the women who have pioneered paid work and who continue to enter into the labour force simply participate in the effort of making a living in a context where any additional income contributed to the household was and is still welcomed. In her study of women's responses to the drought, the Brazilian anthropologist Adélia de Melo Branco reaches a

similar conclusion when she affirms that “in the case of the semi-arid *Sertão*, a society afflicted by disaster, the entry of women into wage labour, especially outside the area is not only welcomed but supported by the men” (Branco, 2000: 34). Of course, the pioneering women had to face several challenges –such as finding a way to reconcile their work in the *fábrica* with their previous role as a *dona de casa* (housewife) –a challenge women are still struggling with as there is no daycare in the town and as men rarely take on domestic work or childcare.

Na fábrica: an improvement compared to life na roça

Our life grew along with the town (*a vida da gente cresceu junto com a cidade*). [Fatima, 49 years old, works in the cashew factory since she is 17]

Before, a woman would not work, today, she goes to *a luta*, and *não é dependente do marido* (she is no longer dependent on her husband). [Anatalia, 40 years old, textile worker]

In their narratives, almost all the women maintain their life has improved because of their migration to Cascavel and work in a factory. According to them, working in a factory is an improvement compared to what was possible for them *na roça* even though their work is far from ideal. In their narratives, women prefer to highlight the several benefits they derive from their work instead of evoking the difficult and exploitative aspects of their work. Countless times, women did not mention anything about the constant loud noise they have to endure everyday in the cashew factory or the pain they have in their legs from working several hours standing in the textile factory. Instead, they would point out the improvements, for instance, that they now have earplugs to wear at work in Cascaju (although I visited the factory with earplugs and had a headache after fifteen minutes because of the intensity of the noise –I rarely have headaches). Narcisa,

who worked in the cashew factory since its beginning, explains these improvements: “Before, in Cascaju, it was more difficult. Now, we use *protetor* (earplugs). Before, we worked until 10 at night, not anymore. The work was more difficult before.”

It is perhaps this facet I had the most difficulty to integrate in these pages – because I thought women would be much more critical of their working conditions. I had to listen to several of their narratives to understand that for some women, their *luta* resides precisely in their work –as it is through their labour in the export sector they liberated themselves from other oppressive relations and especially from a legacy of patriarchy and landed oligarchy. In chorus, these women repeated that their work in the factory equated with *liberdade* (freedom) and *independencia* (independence) –and some would accept severe constraints to keep their jobs. It is important to remain critical of women’s narratives and of what lies beyond these narratives, but it is as critical to consider carefully their narratives. If women frame their work as a considerable improvement in their lives, this has to be taken seriously. Although they are not always successful, women are conscious of their gain and their shifting position of power because they earn money. Thus, they would, as they often said, “*batalhar*” to keep their jobs in the export factory. For some, the *fábrica* is the locus of their *lutas* against a patriarchal and paternalistic society. Because they know and remember quite clearly their previous lives *na roça* or *na praia*, women consider themselves as *vitoriosa* (victorious), even though they may still find themselves in very unequal and difficult positions.

***A luta* for economic independence**

Hence, in their narratives, most migrant women insist on presenting the benefits they derive from working in factories, such as a fixed salary, the possibility to contribute to a pension plan and retire earlier than with the government plan and so on. They consider their economic independence as critical to the way they conduct their lives nowadays, a welcome change most of the women mention during the interview at one point or another. For the first time in the region's history, women massively earned a salary which they were unable to do before. Many women would express the significance earning money held for them by emphasizing how they like to decide what to buy without having to ask for money from their husband. For instance, Edioma considers that "with work, a woman doesn't remain depending on a man. She becomes independent and has more freedom. Before, it was the father or the husband who decided, but now, [women] don't have to ask, they have the freedom to buy [what they want]."

Several women insisted on the centrality of their earnings for their households—in many cases, they sustain their whole household or they represent the main income. Maria de Lourdes, recently retired from the cashew factory, considers that: "a woman's life changed a lot as she has more freedom. At first, she didn't have this freedom of doing everything she wants. Today, there are even women working to sustain their family!" Similarly, reflecting on the changes in women's lives, Fatima, a former worker in the cashew factory, maintains that:

A vida da mulher mudou muito, (a woman's life changed a lot) because a woman today is liberated, she lives by herself, on her own. Before, she only lived on her husband's [income]. She depended on him for everything and was confined in the house and in the kitchen. The housework at that time was very humiliating. Today, she can survive without her husband. She evolved a lot. It is very hard to depend only on a man, to always have to ask for money. Today, if you want to buy something, you can buy what you want, without depending on a man's money. Today, men depend on

women because today it is easier for women to get a job than it is for men. In several places, you can see a woman working while the man is unemployed.

Fatima's view echoes with the town's statistics, which suggest that there are fewer work opportunities in Cascavel for men than for women, at least in the formal sector.⁵³

***A luta* against abusive relations**

Having the possibility to be independent economically gives women the option of refusing to marry, to have children or to live with an abusive husband. The research findings suggest that indeed, marriage is declining, that separation is increasing and that more women choose to remain single –a shifting pattern⁵⁴. In their narratives, women often link paid work with the possibility to refuse violence, like Maria do Carmen (the widow who migrated daily and left her children alone):

Before, a woman's life was very difficult, today women do not accept *o sofrimento* (the suffering) of earlier times. Now, we suffer less because we work. My mother, she suffered a great deal at the hand of my father. I think that if she had had *um trabalho* (a job) she would not have suffered so much.

Some women even live alone –but they are still marginal in the community. One of them, Julia, a 23-year-old seamstress, explained to me her choice of living alone whilst we sat on the street in the front of her house –she had no chair, no couch, indeed nothing to sit on in her rented house, preferring to make her way alone (and with less material goods) than with someone she does not like.

⁵³ According to the director of the *Sistema Nacional de Emprego do Ceará, SINE-CE*, October 3rd, 2004. See in Chapter 2 Pp. 67-68 for detailed information.

⁵⁴ Whilst marriage and nuclear households dominate in the interior (*na roça*) as women depend economically on a male partner, in Cascavel following export-led development there is a diversity of household types –only 39% of the women lives in nuclear household whereas 28% lives in extended and as much as 33% in a woman-headed household. Similarly, less than half of the women interviewed were in their first marriage (42%), whilst 21% were separated or divorced, 17% were unmarried, and 9% remarried.

It is better alone than *mal acompanhada* (“badly accompanied”). I see my friends suffering a lot. Women assume all the responsibilities, and men don’t help, men get everything handed to them on a silver platter (*é tudo na mão com os homens*) for them a woman is *uma escrava* (a slave).

Thus, for Julia, earning a stable income in a textile factory is a means to refuse what she considers as unequal gender relations, her income allowing her to imagine this possibility, a “newly imagined” one as Mills (1999) would contend. Indeed, Julia expresses the newness of her own choice, emphasizing that in the past, “a woman had no choice. She could not remain unmarried. She had to marry.”

In the same vein, Joziene, a 27-year-old woman working in the cashew factory, considers that “these days, women are more independent than men, these latter even depend on women. Women now work much harder than men.” Joziene, a single woman, hopes to remain unmarried; because being with a man involves, as she emphasized “*uma luta*” she does not want to carry. She dreams of becoming *uma religiosa* (a nun) and spends her night at one of the Evangelical churches in the town.

Anatalia, a textile worker now in her forties, summarizes a view shared by some of the women who refused to remarry after a separation or who choose to remain single: “I don’t need a husband if it’s just to support him: a husband who goes out, drinks and *namora* [has love affairs]”.

For their part, married women would often insist on the new possibility earning an income offers them a locus of power not available before and even for some of their counterparts in the interior or in town but not working outside the home. Elizir, a widow and former worker in the cashew factory, considers that:

Today, there are more people who separate because the woman *não aguenta* (doesn’t endure) anymore what she endured before. Women are *independente*, at least the majority. Some aren’t because they don’t have *o coragem de lutar* (the courage to struggle). *Lutar, lutar*, and work, find work.

As such, their narratives reveal that to resist might be for some women to work in the cashew factory to get some independence from patriarchal relations or from the control a mother or a husband might want to have in their lives. They might be exploited in their work, but they use their work to free themselves from oppressive relations. In other words, women might be restricted to take on exploitative jobs because of a lack of opportunity, yet through wage work, they contest the relations they consider unfair.

The *luta* of Marlucia

The work in the factory, as it is becoming apparent, represents a significant space of *luta* for several women given their difficult situation –at the intersection of patron ties and patriarchal relations. For Marlucia, a 43-year-old migrant, her work *na fábrica* means considerable things to her, as she herself said “Cascaju is everything in my life (*é tudo, tudo, tudo na minha vida*). Indeed, she thinks that “without Cascaju, I would be nothing” (*acho que sem na Cascaju, eu não era nada*) and therefore she directs her efforts toward keeping her job in the factory even though this requires sacrifices. Marlucia, like many other women interviewed, chose to emphasize her *lutas* and her victories. “*Consegui*” she told me during our interview, meaning “I succeeded” a claim challenging the women-as-victims paradigm that dominates in the literature on women in the global labour force.

Born in Morro Branco, a fishing community outside the municipality of Cascavel, her migration trajectories marked a contrast with other women –she moved farther than most of them and represents the minority born in the *praia*. She fled her house at 24 years old –tired of enduring the physical violence her father perpetrated against her mother –

driven by the aim of working in the cashew factory, Cascaju. Since then, and now the married mother of two adolescent girls, she has remained employed in the factory. She hopes to work there until *aposentar* (retirement) and would struggle hard to achieve that because her work is “everything in her life”.

Marlucia’s narrative as presented in the following lines testifies to the importance work bears for many women –not so long ago paid work was not part of the identity a woman would forge for herself. Thus, as suggested by Mills (1999), migration and work provide “newly imagined identities” –a woman might be a factory worker, not only a *dona de casa* (housewife) in this new context. Although I find it hard to conceive Marlucia as someone who *consegui*,⁵⁵ I acknowledge her voice here and the extent to which her work *na Cascaju* improved her life, especially given that I developed a close tie with her and can testify to Marlucia’s *lutas* to keep her job.

I formally interviewed Marlucia in her native community twice whilst I had countless informal conversations with her on her life, aspirations, dreams, on her work *na fábrica*, on her fear of being *demitida* (laid off), on her relations with her husband, on the local politics, on the changes in women’s lives and so on. The following draws extensively on the second interview I conducted in Morro Branco, while she was doing *labirinto* (embroidery). Her mother Maria and her friend and co-worker in the *fábrica*, Liduina, were present.

I was born *no Choró* (communities established along the Rio Choró) but I consider myself native to Morro Branco, because I came here just after I was born. [When I was young] *eu brincava* (I played) and at about eight years old, I started to work doing what I am actually making –*labirinto*. I also helped my mother in the house. Every day, I searched for water down at the beach and I took care of my

⁵⁵ Marlucia and her husband earn barely what they need for their basic expenses, which means food, electricity, water and school fees. Hers is amongst the poorest households I visited and received government subsidies as a low-income household.

brothers and sisters. I was the second eldest daughter but my older sister was *preguiçosa* (lazy). So I helped my mother a lot. During the week, I stayed home so that we could sell this [piecework of *labirinto*] even though at that time, it didn't pay a lot of money to do that. I took care of the house and my mother had a *barraca* (stand) [to sell our embroidery] down at the beach. I stayed home taking care of the children so that she could go [sell the embroidery]. When we were young, we passed through a lot of difficulties, really. Sometimes, we had fish but we didn't have enough money to buy flour. It was difficult, really difficult. Then I worked [as a domestic worker] in a *casa de família* (private house) and finally I went to work *na Cascaju* where I am still working, I'm *auxiliar de produção* [in the production, classifying the cashew nuts].

I left because I wanted to work. I left also because I revolted against my father as he was very violent with my mother. I moved for that reason too. Still, my father fights with her for no reason. I heard they [the cashew factory] were calling women to work. When I left to work *na Cascaju*, we were three friends together –me plus two others. I went there, *me inscrevi e fui chamada* (I gave my name and I was called). But when we got there, I was the only one to stay, both of them left [the factory] after five months and returned to Morro Branco. It was at that time I met Cí. I married him and stayed there, I built *minha casinha* (small house). I'm still working there until now. This coming Thursday, I'll complete nineteen years of work *na Cascaju*. Only twice I've been laid off [because of a turndown in the production]. The first time for a year, the second for less than a year.

When I moved, they [my parents] didn't want me to but I had already reached the age of majority so I left. They didn't want me to leave but I wanted to go, I wanted to work. So I moved, *graças a Deus* (thank God). Until now, I'm not repentant of having left, not at all. I think I did a good thing because if I had not left, I would not have what I have today, especially *uma casa, uma família* (a house, a family). I could have had a family but I would be depending on my father and my mother. Today, I'm not, *graças a Deus*, I'm not. I have my house, my things. I don't plan to come back to live here, no, only to depend on them, no!

Eu gosto de meu trabalho (I like my work). I like to work in Cascaju. I don't think it is *ruim* (bad). I like it, yes! I really like it. *Não acho ruim de jeito nenhum* (I don't think it is bad, in any way). I like to have *minhas amigas* (my friends). I think that if I had to leave [the factory] I would miss it. I think that if I had to leave Cascaju I would remain *estressada* (stressed). I have money, and everything that I want to buy I buy it because I have my money. I don't need to ask anybody. If I want to eat something, I don't have to ... [ask for money]. Cí helps me, but to have my own [money] is better, isn't it? *Eu gosto trabalhar* (I like to work) *Ave Maria*, all my life I liked to work, all my life, all my life. Since I'm young! *Nunca gostei de depender de ninguém* (I never liked to depend on anyone).

My house was done with the money from Cascaju, everything I have inside my house was done with the money from Cascaju. *Tudo, tudo, tudo, tudo, tudo, tudo, tudo!* (everything). Not to say that I received nothing for my house, I did get *o barro* (the clay). Was it only *o barro* that Mauricio gave me? Well, everything else was with the money from Cascaju. *Tijolo e tudo*, (tile and everything). *Tudo tudo tudo tudo*. What I have in my house I got it with the money from Cascaju. I had *nada, nada, nada, nada* (nothing). When I moved from Morro Branco, I brought only an old oven and a *bujão* (gas container) my mother gave me.

Today, *graças a Deus*, I'm not rich but I've enough to live. But everything happened because of Cascaju. *É tudo, tudo, tudo na minha vida*. (It is everything in my life). I think that without Cascaju I would be nothing. I think my life would be *um fracasso* (a failure). I would remain *em casa* (in the house). I don't know if I would have work [as a *domestica*] in a *casa de família* (private house), but I would not like that, not at all. It doesn't pay well, and you work a lot. Here [in Morro Branco], I would work a week to do this [piecework of *labirinto*] and gain fifteen *reais*. In Cascaju, I make ten *reais* a day. So this is why *deixei isso aqui pela Cascaju* (I left this here for Cascaju). The work in the factory is better. Outside Cascaju I don't know what else I can do. For me *era ruim se eu sai da Cascaju, muito ruim* (it would be bad if I left Cascaju, very bad).

When I enquired about how she would assess her working conditions, MarluCIA simply mentioned “*são boas, eu gosto*” (they're good, I like them). I had to insist and inquire further to get her to talk more. Overall, she finds Cascaju a good place to work, and she did not complain about her salary being the same – *o salário mínimo* (the minimum salary)– even though she had worked there for 19 years. Her main benefits, as a worker in the formal economy, are the rights deriving from the *carteira assinada* [work record, entitling workers to rights and benefits]. For her, it means mainly to have access to a retirement pension plan: “If you stayed there [in the factory] until you reach the age to retire you retire. It is the right we have with the *carteira assinada*”.

For MarluCIA, as for several women interviewed, the working conditions in her factory are much better these days than they were when she started to work. It is not, in her view, a bad place to work.

There is *muito barulho* (a lot of noise), yes. But we use earplugs. And it is hot, *agora não* (at the moment, it's not). Already they've put in a ventilator. By now, the working conditions are better, they're improving a lot: we pass the day sitting, we have the right to drink water, we have the right to go to the bathroom. It's not bad, no. I don't think it's bad, not at all. Before it was [bad]. We had to work standing. We didn't have a ventilator. Now it's not like that, now it's better.

Não é boa mas também não é ruim não (The factory isn't good, but isn't bad either). The problem with Cascaju is that it doesn't *da valor* (give value) to its employees. *Eu me considero uma boa funcionaria* (I consider myself a good employee). But [Cascaju] *não valoriza* (doesn't value), *não valoriza*. We don't have the value we deserve (*o valor que merece*). I don't think it is bad. There are enterprises worse than Cascaju. But for the workers like us already *antigua* (senior), for us the good workers

who give *boa produção* (good production) to Cascaju, we should at least receive a *cesta básica* (food basket). Before, we received it but they cut it. It helped a lot. When I'm saying they are not giving value to us it's because of this, we deserve a *cesta básica*. In the *confeções* (garment factories) they give it, in Bermas [the leather factory] they give it, in these other factories they give it. [In Cascaju] they don't give value [to our work]. They don't give a single thing. During *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) they only gave us a little candy.

A empresa cresça (the enterprise grows) and doesn't give *the valor a gente merecia* (the value we deserve). *Tudo de si para eles* (Giving everything of oneself to them). I barely miss days of work, I go to work sick, I go with headache. Because I've got *labyrinthite* (a disease causing equilibrium problem and dizziness). I go even though I'm dizzy. I spend the whole day working because I like my work. I don't like to miss. I give everything for Cascaju. Some people, you know, they want to give up but after they do, they're repentant because Cascaju it's the only factory in Cascavel that pays the worker on the right day.

Marlucia approaches her work with a legacy of patron-client relationships, in which ties of dependency are central. Thus, she accepts the inequality embedded in her position of factory worker, making her patron wealthier through her labour. In exchange, she expects some favours involved in patron ties such as gifts and food. She is critical of the absence of such ties –but not of her working conditions, her salary, and her position within the local economy. Indeed, for her, patronage is an appropriate form the powerful should use in their relations with the powerless. Commenting on the last result of the municipal elections, she expresses her disappointment at not seeing her candidate elected. In her view, Tino, the actual mayor, would not help the town's citizens because when people line up in front of his house, he doesn't help them:

Graças a deus, I never needed his help! Paulo Cesar [my favourite candidate] *ajuda, e como ajuda!* (he helps, and a lot!). Everything pertains to him, he gave land for everybody to live, and he even gave *tijolo* (tile). Paulo Cesar is the *prefeito de pobre* (mayor of the poor) and Tino, the *prefeito de rico* (mayor of the rich). Paulo Cesar is giving *cesta básica* and fifty *reais* to people who helped him during the campaign.

In Cascavel as in the rest of Brazil, democracy is rather recent and is moulded on a strong legacy of patron-client relationships. Democracy is still fragile and embedded in ideas about personal gains and exchange of favours –not in idealistic goals for the

development of the city and the well-being of its citizens. Infused by this legacy, Marlucia evaluates wage work according to a logic of hierarchical relations of dependency. Not that she is not critical; instead, she has another way of assessing her patron's responsibilities toward her.

When the interview was held, in early October 2004, rumour of massive lay offs circulated in the town of Cascavel. Like many other women, Marlucia was worried about losing her job –especially given the new criteria to hire established recently in the factory. When the factory first opened, no schooling was required. However, during the last few years, the cashew factory –like most of the factories in town– has revisited its selection process and now demands a minimum level of education, the *primeiro grau* which is equivalent to primary school. Marlucia, like many women hired 20 years ago, did not complete her primary level of education and was worried about being laid off. In addition, the cashew factory now requires that all its employees learn some sanitary procedures regarding the production of cashews that is required for international certification. The managers in the factory gave them three sheets of information which the workers had to memorize and threatened to fire any employee unable to answer these questions. This put an additional pressure on Marlucia, who spent her night learning the codes and procedures to avoid a lay off. As she continued:

Now it is more demanding. Before it was not like that. You need to study. If you don't study you don't get hired at Cascaju anymore. Those of us who are *analfabeto* (illiterate) have to study, because if not, we won't work anymore in Cascaju. Before, no. Today we even need a medical exam. Now if you've got something wrong you don't get hired anymore. It's more complicated.

They are *demitindo* (laying off). Yesterday many people were laid off. Three sheets to read and they would go *na esteira* [in the sorting shelf] questioning us because we have to learn. We can even lose our job, you know even lose our job. We have to know the answers. Now, anyone who works has to know everything: the different categories of nuts, the types of material [used to process the cashew], the mission of Cascaju, the food policies because the cashews go for *exportação* (export).

All that so that they'll receive *o registro* [an international certification]. Even if I'm *analfabeto* (illiterate), I have to show my interest because those who don't *vai pr'a fora* (will be laid off). In any case, they say they would fire anyone who is *analfabeto* if she/he doesn't want to study. They give the opportunity to study, you know, they pay for the school of your choice. But some people don't want to. I think these people would be laid off by the *firma* (firm).

Sitting behind Marlucia during the interview, her mother interjected in Marlucia's narration, enquiring whether Marlucia would study or not, and a discussion on that matter ensued between Marlucia and her friend and co-worker Liduina.

Dona Maria, Marlucia's mother: Will you study?

Marlucia: *Si foi precisa vou.* (If I have to I will).

Liduina: *Eu vou sair* (I will get out).

Marie-Eve: Are you afraid of losing your job?

Marlucia: Yes, I am. If they say either you study or you are laid off, I'll study.

Liduina: I'm not! *Eu não vou me machucar* (I won't harm myself).

Marlucia: I will! I was studying until last July.

Liduina: I'll stay home, I will take care of my mother.

Marlucia: I will study because I have six more years [of work] before I'll retire. So I won't lose it [the retirement pension] no! *Eu sei que é ruim e sacrificoso* (I know it is difficult and that I'll have to make sacrifices) but I prefer to study.

Marlucia is perhaps more worried than her friend actually is because she has no other income to rely on: she is the main income earner in her household, whilst Liduina might count on her mother's pension if she were laid off. As she said: "the main income is mine. When the work is good for Cí –he works with fishing materials– he gains more than me. But now, *'ta parado* (he is not working) now it is only my income." Marlucia, if laid off, would have to wait until she reaches 60 years old to have the right to retire with the government pension. She could continue to pay her actual pension plan –while now she has to contribute 20 *reais* a month, if laid off she would have to put an additional 30 *reais* (what the enterprise actually puts now) a total amount she knows she would not be able to pay every month during the next 17 years (to reach 60 years old) without being employed and relying on her husband's earnings.

Marlucia's situation is not uncommon in Cascavel, as quite often, women provide the stable and main income to their households. Yet in her case, her husband's contribution is quite significant, as he partakes in the domestic chores and childcare – a situation not often encountered in the town. His mother worked in Cascaju and he grew up taking care of his siblings. He agreed to leave his work as a fisherman 150 km away from Cascavel, in Praia Redonda, to take care of the children after their second daughter was born. He now works at home making fishing nets, which provides him with the possibility to carry on with the domestic chores and childcare while he is making money (by making nets). His contribution to the work of the household allows Marlucia the possibility of securing her job – whilst other women have had to give up their factory jobs to take care of their children.

It's he who takes care of everything. He cooks everyday. I'll call you to come to see! He cleans dishes, he washes clothes, he sweeps out, *faz tudo* (he does everything). *Ele é bom* (He's good). He helps me a lot. He has some *defeitos* (defects), but *da p'ra levar* (I can live with him).

Figure 19: Cí making nets



Marlucia chose to put up with her husband's liking for partying and *festas* (including drinking alcohol and *namorar* with other women) because of his contributions

to the domestic work of the household. Nowadays, “*ele é mais calmo*” which means that Cí is less inclined toward partying –only once a week.

Overall, Marlucia thinks that she succeeded with her life (*consegui*). She hopes to work in the cashew factory until she will *aposentar* (retire) and dreams of a better house than her unfinished and small house. “The dream of my life is to have *minha casinha bem boazinha* (my little house well done) because now it’s very plain, simple. When I leave Cascaju to retire [I will receive an important amount of money] and I’ll arrange the house the way I would like it”. Marlucia hopes her daughters would have a good life too. “I dream to see my daughters *realizadas* (accomplished), *trabalhando* (working) and *servidores* (obliging)”.

Figure 20: Marlucia with her two daughters, a niece and Cí



Marlucia’s narrative: The *luta na fábrica*

Marlucia is not an anomaly in Cascavel. Rather, her narrative fairly represents the migrant women of her generation, who build their understandings of their participation in the labour force along with a strong legacy of patriarchy and patron-client relationships.

She considers her work in Cascaju as “everything in her life” and thinks she would be nothing without her work, above all because it provides her with a stable income –an income she has used to build her house and which sustains her family. Not only has it allowed her to become economically independent, it freed her from an abusive father. Besides, she likes her work *na fábrica* and considers her life better than what would be possible for her if she had chosen to stay in Morro Branco where she would likely be a domestic worker or be doing *labirinto* –the few work opportunities for women there. It is in this sense, then, that Marlucia affirms “*consegui*” (I succeeded).

Hence her work *na fábrica* embodies the improvements she experiences in her life, and therefore, her *luta* to secure her household takes place *na fábrica*. Unlike her friend Liduina, Marlucia would rather sacrifice and return to study at night after her work shift than lose her job at the factory because of the importance being independent means to her and because of the significance of her work in ensuring the security of her household.

Marlucia’s narrative offers an entry into the way migrant women in Cascavel conceive their migration trajectories and work experiences. If their decisions are undeniably set within certain limited possibilities, a careful attention to their narratives reveals how migrant women in Cascavel are not passive victims –they do deploy some agency. As maintained by Mary Beth Mills

claims for the imagination as a fundamentally new component in human social creativity should not be overdrawn; nevertheless, experiences of modernity for many people (...) are informed by the availability of newly imagined (and imaginable) identities and social relations (...) women’s rural-urban labor migration is closely tied to the production of such ‘imagined’ possibilities’ [Mills 1999: 15]

Working in a factory in Cascavel, migrant women like Marlucia imagine new possibilities. Indeed, the work *na fábrica* has opened a new realm for what is now possible and even acceptable for a woman (to be part of the labour force) and as such, to work in a factory implies a redefinition of women's identity. In Cascavel, being a factory worker embodies not only the physical action of working, it denotes women's *luta* for their *liberdade* and *independencia*. It symbolizes a significant shift in local views about the proper place of a woman and it means, for women, their potential to free themselves of oppressive relations –even though they might not be successful and still find themselves in rather precarious situations. Women prefer to insist on their victories and daily struggle to make a living rather than on the exploitative aspect of their work, perhaps because they hope their persistent *lutas* will bring lasting changes.

CHAPTER 4: THE DEFENSIVE *LUTA*

In the preceding chapter, women's narratives have shed light on the way the experience of migration and work in export-processing industries signifies an important shift in the personal lives of these women. Their narratives capture what they consider as important accomplishments: "*Conseguir*", they would say, meaning "I succeeded", to assess their own lives, in spite of the harsh working conditions, of poverty or of the gender and class inequality still constraining social relations in Cascavel. If, for most of the women I interviewed, the shift from *a roça* to *a fábrica* was welcome, their situation is far from being secure. Their situation necessitates that they draw on traditional forms of relations, such as patron ties, in conjunction with new types of relations introduced by capitalist development. Women's narratives reveal not only their *vitorias* (victories) in the move from the *roça* to the *fábrica* but, as importantly, their attempts to manoeuvre within the webs of relations they are embedded in as a means to enhance their social position, achieve personal goals and make a living.

This chapter presents another side of women's narratives – their tactics enacted to get by, as a means to nuance the benefits of factory work and to critically consider the spaces that "speak bitter 'truths to power'" as suggested by Goldstein (2003: 8). If women's life has improved in the transition to *a fábrica*, their present-day situation remains for the most part rather chaotic as paid work does not imply necessarily the end of their oppression. Hence women's narratives capture the defensive *luta* they deploy by finding quick solutions (or *jeitos*) to their daily concerns (for instance, keeping their jobs in the factory despite having a grandchild to take care of, meeting the needs of their household in spite of a temporary downturn at their factory, or caring for a brother

joining their household after a separation, amongst other concerns). To have a glimpse into women's tactics, however, it is critical to consider what shape their defensive *luta* takes. For migrant women in Cascavel, not only their gender matters in setting the possible tactics they deploy, but their history as migrants from the *roça* also frames their defensive *luta*.

The *casa*, *rua* and *roça*: marking social relations and framing women's manoeuvres

Na roça, where the majority of migrant women originated, *paternalismo* (patronage) with former landowners and reciprocity with relatives and neighbours defined most of the social relations. Yet in the town of Cascavel, the marking of social class is not as sharp as *na roça*, nor the role of everyone as clearly defined. Indeed, in the shifting economy of Cascavel, new forms of relations are introduced as the town is witness to an emerging middle class –composed mainly of owners of factories or merchants. These tensions between the “plantation economy and the new bourgeois economy of a modernizing, industrializing interior town” (Scheper-Hughes 1992:86) are well-identified in the anthropological literature dedicated to Brazil (Freyre 1966; da Matta 1987; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

For the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta, these tensions are reflected in the coexistence, in Brazil, of a dialectical relationship between hierarchy and democracy, mediated through two moral realms, the *casa* (house) and the *rua* (street). The *casa*, once the domain of slavery, still represents the realm of patriarchy and patronage in which *who you are* depends on kin and patron-client ties and is mediated by one's age and gender. Whereas the *casa* represents the realm of the “somebody” (and hierarchy), da Matta

(1987) argues the *rua* symbolizes the realm of the “nobody”, meaning that one loses one’s social position and its connections and thus is treated like anyone else, like an individual. In the democratic space of the *rua*, da Matta continues, Brazilians manoeuvre using their *jeitos* (ability to make their way) because they cannot reconcile being “one like anyone else” when they have already been a “somebody”. This means that for those in power and able to manoeuvre using their social position and connections, being treated like any other person is not acceptable.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), in her ethnography of infant mortality in Northeast Brazil, nuances da Matta’s reading and affirms there is another moral space – the *mata* (forest), a realm of reciprocity based on mutual recognition. For her, if the tension between the *casa* and the *rua* remains, she considers migrants from the *mata* neither as the “somebody” of the house nor as the “nobody” of the street –the migrants being neither powerful patrons nor free and equal like everyone else in a modern town (1992: 90). The tension for the migrants, she maintains, is to negotiate between a double ethic inherited from the *mata* where the ethic of patronage and the ethic of mutual recognition guided their actions. If these ethics are transformed in an industrializing town, both remain crucial in the intimate and everyday life of these migrants as in their daily life, they draw on ties of dependency with their new bosses and ties of reciprocity with their co-workers and neighbours to get by.

Similarly, migrant women from the *roça* find themselves at the conjunction of shifting relations, as well as shifting moralities in a town like Cascavel: they oscillate between being a “somebody” and a “nobody” (da Matta 1987) as well as between ties of reciprocity and dependency (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Their reliance on relationships –

hierarchical ties with patrons or reciprocal relations with their friends and relatives— are sometimes at odds with the types of relations introduced by capitalist-driven development, in which individual interest dominates and *who you are* does not have precedence, at least in theory.

If this gives place to several ways of manoeuvring for migrant women working in factories, their daily tactics are nonetheless framed within complex, ambiguous and shifting relations. For the women who have experienced both the *roça* and the town, it is not always obvious what *luta* to adopt given these significant changes. Still expecting the good will of their boss, neighbours and relatives, migrant women in Cascavel are not always able to secure their situation by relying on these ties. Patrons might not be as helpful in an industrializing town as they were in the *roça* in time of illness or hunger — especially given that many patrons pertain to the middle class and are thus often struggling to secure their own positions. Relatives too, might not always reciprocate as rather frequently they do not contribute to the household income, using their earnings to meet their own consumer needs.

Therefore, the defensive *luta* of migrant women is difficult, but they nevertheless work their *jeitos*. As explained in Chapter 1, this means they find ways of resolving their daily concerns manoeuvring into the different webs of relations in which they find themselves enmeshed. In these manoeuvres, some women are more successful than others and some historical defensive *lutas*, if not challenging class and gender inequality nonetheless make a difference in women's lives, and hence deserve careful consideration here.

When gender matters for women's manoeuvres

To this complex mixture of shifting moralities, I would add another moral realm: the domain of patriarchy –inherited from the *roça* which prescribes different roles for men and women and confines women to domestic chores and childcare. In effect, despite the improvement in comparison to their life *na roça*, migrant women in Cascavel find themselves caught in a legacy of patriarchal relations. If their work outside home is generally accepted, they still have to bear the same responsibilities as before they migrated. Thus, they still are at grips with several different roles that are even harder to achieve in town: women are mothers, helpers in their community, housewives, provide care for children and sick people amongst their relatives, are responsible to look after the elderly and the unmarried or separated men in their family and are expected to perform the household domestic chores. Besides these more traditional roles, women in Cascavel are quite frequently the main income earner in their household, a recent change following their entry into the labour force and the lack of employment opportunities for men, especially as many men have abandoned agricultural work. If women's role has shifted toward paid work, men rarely assume more responsibilities within the house with the domestic chores and child care. An unintended consequence of women's migration, then, is their increasing burden.

In this context, women recognize the significance a husband might make in their ability to negotiate with their daily constraints. As explained in Chapter 3, Marluvia was able to keep her job in the cashew factory because her husband was willing to take on the responsibility of caring for their children, staying home and preparing the noon meal in

addition to performing the household domestic chores. Not all women in Cascavel, however, have the possibility to rely on their husband as patriarchal relations persist.

A luta em equipe and Lucia's jeito

As discussed in the preceding chapter, women are not passive when confronted with the lack of participation of men or when facing abusive relations. In effect, their narratives capture their manoeuvres to confront the lack of participation of men in the household division of labour. Some women choose celibacy as a way to avoid becoming care giver, mother and housewife –and thus are able to remain paid workers. Other women opt to delay having children to make sure their union will work well. Whilst marriage is declining and separation increasing, women's narratives also shed light on the formation of new household teams struggling to get by: instead of the traditional wife-husband unit, new types of *equipe* (team) emerge as a significant tactic to counter the lack of participation of husbands in the household division of labour: mother-daughter, sister-sister and in some instances, even mother-son work together. The *equipe* is *o jeito* deployed by Lucia with her mother, Eneida, my closest ties in Cascavel –it is their defensive *luta* against patriarchal relations and persistent poverty.

As the house I rented was located in their courtyard, I was able to testify to the numerous means Lucia deploys on a daily basis to form a team with her mother. In effect, Lucia was struggling hard –and thinking a lot, trying to manoeuvre and *dar um jeito* (find a way) within her networks of friends, relatives and politicians to secure and even enhance their household position within the local economy. As she once exclaimed: “I

feel like I am administering a country in my head. *Eu me 'tou sentindo Lula* (I feel like Lula, the president)”.

The 41-year-old woman refused to marry when she was in her mid-twenties, making the conscious choice to remain at home to help her mother as she witnessed her father’s inability to help –instead, he was spending all the household income losing important amounts of money, lending money to his unreliable friends. At this point, Lucia, the eldest daughter, realized her mother would not get by alone, as Dona Eneida had nine children to sustain and meeting their daily needs was rather difficult following migration. As Lucia explained: “By now, I would be married, I would have a good situation. But I had to choose: either I married or *ajudava a minha família* (I helped my family). From thereon, Lucia became a significant contributor to her mother’s household, firstly, by working in the textile sector, then in the cashew factory where she has been formally employed for more than ten years. Lucia also shares with her mother the daily domestic chores, including food preparation, laundry and house cleaning. She makes sure there is always one or the other home to cook and care for the rest of the household members (including Lucia’s father, brother, sister and nephew). In addition, Lucia took on the responsibility of managing the household income, avoiding further loss of money by her father and using his full pension to meet their basic needs (such as food and utilities).

This means Lucia spends her weekdays working at the cashew factory and her night and weekend working at home, a situation contrasting with her siblings. Indeed, by choosing to form a team with her mother, Lucia assumes several of the tasks associated with mothering despite the fact that she has no child. For instance, it is she who will stay

home at night and during the weekend to take care of her sister's two children (living next door). In addition, Lucia frequently helps her brothers and sisters to secure their financial situation, sometimes lending them money and at night, preparing food for her sister to sell in her food kiosk the following day.

Lucia, then, made the decision to dedicate herself, including her time and income, to help her mother passing through a difficult period. As such, it is a defensive *luta* substituting for the absence of the husband-wife team in her household –not the kind of life she had imagined for herself. Indeed, Lucia often complained about her sisters who are freer than she is, contrasting their consumption of material goods and their entertainment with her confinement in her mother's house and her rational management of the household income. Countless times, she qualified herself as “*uma escrava*” (a slave), half joking but revealing the power-laden relation involved in her position, a position of subservience toward some other household members –including her younger sister who works in a textile factory but does not contribute either her salary or her time to the household. Lucia, by choosing to form a team with her mother, has deployed a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985) not necessarily to her own advantage though attempting to make the best out of her mother's difficult situation.

Nowadays, Lucia and Eneida still co-manage the household together but their situation has improved. So far, they have been rather successful in securing their economic position compared to their neighbours, having a finished house they have renovated (with a dining room, a kitchen, a living room, two bathrooms and four bedrooms – few houses are so big) and counting on a significant stable amount of money every month, receiving two old age pensions (from Lucia's parents) and a minimum

salary (from Lucia's work in the cashew factory). Part of their success has to do with Lucia's ability to *dar um jeito*, that is her ability to make use of her ties and manoeuvre into the system to turn it to her own advantage.

In effect, Lucia learned quickly to make use of ties of *ajuda* (help) to get along as she saw her family facing severe difficulties following their migration in Cascavel, in 1977: they had no relatives in town and her mother had resigned from her job in the cashew factory because of the corrosive oil burning her hands. Over the years, Lucia developed an important network of friends (especially migrants) based on the legacy of mutual reciprocity practised in the *roça*, where people helped each other in a context of drought and scarcity. Now that her household is doing well, Lucia is recognized in the neighbourhood as a generous woman, who lends money, provides meals to any neighbour or friend dropping by her house (feeding regularly some women heads of household), gives clothes to poorer neighbours, helps the unemployed to find jobs and encourages her self-employed friends (buying cakes from one, asking another to sew for her). Several of the women I interviewed, whom I met through Lucia's network, commented on Lucia's generosity, often saying "*ela é muita boa*" (she is a very good person) or "*me ajudou muito*" (she helped me a lot).

Lucia has also built ties with politicians, especially her favourite *vereador* (municipal councillor), William, who helps her and her family in several ways (including accompanying her to the hospital when she broke her foot or giving construction material to help build her sister's house amongst other things). Lucia understood quickly the importance of patron ties in a town like Cascavel, where, in the aftermath of a military dictatorship and patronage, politicians (not the landowners as in the *roça*) are the

powerful. Indeed, in Cascavel, being elected *vereador* (municipal councillor) constitutes the easiest and fastest way of enhancing one's economic position and the exchange of favours for votes still constitutes the privileged means most politicians rely on to be elected.

Figure 21: Lucia (on the left) with one of her friends, neighbours and co-workers.



Because Lucia is recognized in her neighbourhood as a woman who provides help for the needy, she represents, for the local politicians, a significant tie to secure votes. Hence, Lucia's defensive *luta* relies extensively on her relation with William, her *vereador*, as it allows not only securing her household, but as importantly, establishing her own network of ties of dependency. Thus Lucia makes use of her *vereador* William to solidify her ties of *ajuda* (help) with her neighbours, sometimes acting like a *patroa* (patron). She identifies to William the people in need in her neighbourhood and he

secures his votes by providing these people with food, construction materials or money. In this exchange, Lucia not only naïvely helps her neighbours, she deploys her *jeito* and makes use of these relations to enhance her own social position, especially given that she aspires to make her way toward the middle class. Thus her help is rather instrumental.

Lucia, then, struggles to ensure her household will continue to play a major role in the neighbourhood, engaging in ties of reciprocity but sometimes approaching the role of a *patroa*. Indeed, the line between friendship and patron-client relationships has become rather thin due to the emerging middle class in the industrializing town of Cascavel, the contrast between classes being less sharp. Unable to afford a domestic worker, the first symbol denoting a middle class status in town, Lucia relies on some of the women she helps regularly to perform sporadic domestic chores when she needs it, for instance, serving food and doing dishes, when she is having a *festa* (party). By developing significant ties of *ajuda*, Lucia has worked her *jeito* both along vertical lines with patrons and horizontal lines with friends and neighbours. Yet the core of her *luta* centers on the team she forms with her mother, not on her individual needs. As such, Lucia's decision to form a mother-daughter team was crucial to ensure her mother's household would get by, and still is.

In effect, although their team is working rather well, sometimes Lucia and Eneida face important challenges disturbing their daily routine. In these instances, Lucia would think a lot and *dar um jeito* (find a way) to get out of trouble. During my third week in town, I witnessed an event which perturbed significantly the mother-daughter team: a *fugia* (the flight) of Marly, Lucia's sister-in-law. Marly, living next door, ran away one morning, leaving her husband and their two sons (they were five and six years old, one of

whom is sick and required constant visits to the doctor in the state capital). Marly *fugiu* because she knew Pedro, her husband, had an affair with a woman for the past four years, and was tired of enduring his *mentiras* (lies) and of being confined at home. As she later explained to justify her behaviour: “while Pedro is enjoying himself, I am the *escrava* (slave)”. The 21-year-old woman had never completed high school nor worked outside the home. She quit school when pregnant with her first child, at 14 years old, and then married Pedro, Lucia’s brother. Marly felt she had few options and took an extreme form to avoid being locked in her housewife’s role.

When the surprise of the *fugia* of Marly passed, the daily responsibilities she carried on needed to be re-assigned. Pedro, her husband, spent his time on the phone with the local authorities or any person suspected of having helped Marly to run away, trying to re-locate her. Unable or unwilling to cook and clean, he would simply hang around, sometimes making comments on the event, expressing his own amazement at the unexpected flight of his wife. Yet the most affected on a daily basis by Marly’s *fugia* were Lucia and her mother Eneida. They immediately took on the responsibility of caring for Pedro and the two children, Lucia taking the afternoon and the rest of the week off from her work at the cashew factory. Lucia and Eneida divided the domestic chores between the two of them, having two households to take care of, a situation they were unable to carry on for a long period of time given that Lucia would have to return to work as soon as possible. Apparently, Pedro was unable to care for himself or his children, and his new situation was impacting on his mother and sister.

On the second night following Marly’s departure, Eneida, Lucia’s mother, told me she would not continue this way for very long: “I hope she’ll come back, because *sou eu*

que pago (it's me who is paying) [for Marly's departure]. It's *uma luta* I am unable to carry on. Pedro needs a woman around him, we'll have to find a babysitter for the kids.

This is very difficult to find". "Or else" continued Lucia while doing Pedro's ironing:

we will have to organize a [match-making] party for him like we did for [my other brother] Danielo. After his wife left him, Danielo came to live here. But he was so demanding, my mother and I got tired of him, especially of ironing. Because of his work [as a bus driver] he needed all his clothes washed and ironed. I had the idea [of organizing a party] to help him find another *escrava* (slave) to take care of him. We will have to do the same for Pedro, because the woman he's seeing would refuse to do all the jobs Marly was doing in the house, she will never agree to be Pedro's wife. She will never accept to work as an *escrava* (slave). She is a *vagabunda* (bad girl).

In the end, Lucia did not have to organize a party to find a new partner for her brother, because Marly came back home one week after she ran away. Yet the story reveals the *jeito* Lucia would have deployed in this situation: arranging a new woman for her brother as a means to avoid caring for an additional man and two children. Indeed, as we discover through the story of Marly's escape, Lucia, in her attempt to control her workload and that of her mother, did organize a match-making party for another brother, finding a new "*escrava*" for him. In that way, she might free herself and her mother from caring for him, yet this responsibility now impacts on another woman. Thus Lucia perpetuates some of the local gender inequality, choosing to find another wife to her brother instead of challenging the patriarchal division of labour within her household.

Hence, Lucia manoeuvres in the shadow of power, using other women to free herself and her mother from more work –still fitting within the dominant local expectations of what is and is not appropriate for a woman in Cascavel. Her *jeito* is defensive, not offensive, and does not contribute to contest the gender inequality in her household. Rather, her defensive *luta* allows her and her mother to escape the burden of additional work –even though it might fall on the shoulders of another woman. Yet it is

important to consider Lucia's manoeuvres, because, as suggested by Hoodfar, it is "difficult to challenge the world from a powerless and subjugated position, [thus] so many women try to manipulate their circumstances from *within* a culture and a legal system, and [also] breaking all the cultural norms can be very painful and not necessarily advantageous" (Hoodfar 1997: 5).

Replacing the traditional conjugal unit, the daughter-mother team of Lucia and Eneida consists of a significant defensive tactic to counter the lack of participation of men in the household division of labour, even though it is not an overt form of opposition. Indeed, Lucia and Eneida make their way rather successfully, being amongst the wealthier (and most supported by a powerful patron) of the poorer households. It remains, nonetheless, a substitute and a defence and as such, it is fragile and does sometimes perpetuate unequal relations.

Women's manoeuvres in flexible households

In Cascavel, not all women have the possibility to form a new team when confronted with the lack of participation of men. Several women find themselves alone to assume the responsibilities of their households⁵⁶. This is a difficult task, as their work *na fábrica* whilst better than *na roça*, does not always provide enough money to meet the needs of the whole family and presents several challenges for childcare. In Chapter 3, we saw how Maria do Carmen, a widow, left her children alone during the day (the eldest being six years old) in order to keep her job in the cashew factory.

⁵⁶ In the sample of migrant women interviewed between May and October 2004, 33% of them were heads of household and this number does not include the married women unable to count on their husbands for financial help or for their labour in the household.

Another significant solution to the issue of childcare is inherited from the ties of reciprocity in the *roça* where children circulated amongst different households and were adopted by the most secure households. Thus many migrant women would *deixar* (leave temporarily) or *dar* (give) their child in periods of crisis, a defensive tactic to make sure someone cared for their children. Sometimes, a child would come back to their mother after passing a period of time away –a period of five years in the rural interior with a grandmother, for instance. In another case, a woman, overwhelmed by her daily *luta*, would *deixar* her child with a sister-in-law for a couple of days, but would never come back.

Similarly, in the context of an emerging town populated mostly by migrants from the surroundings forests, Scheper-Hughes found that “money, food, medicines, and relatives (but most especially children) circulate continually in a ring of exchange that links the *mata* [forest] to the *rua* [street] and the impoverished households of the Alto to one another” (1992:99). In Cascavel, the practice of adoption and the circulation of children are rather common: almost half of the women interviewed (46% of them) have practiced one or the other, either taking or leaving a child. As argued by Scheper-Hughes, “flexibility is a prerequisite of survival” (1992: 477) and the circulation of children is one instance of household flexibility to absorb new members and leave out others, drawing on ties of reciprocity.

In a context of scarcity in which men are not always reliable, most households in Cascavel are also flexible in terms of arrangements between men and women –men entering and leaving women’s life. As argued by Tobias Hecht (1998), in Northeast Brazil, the household works as a *motherdom* –thus, the woman represents the central

character around which the other members revolved whereas the man appears rather detachable. Quite frequently, men in Cascavel father children with several women and women have children from different unions. In this context of flexibility, migrant women assess their husband by saying either “*ele me ajuda muito*” (he helps me a lot) or “*não presta*” (he doesn’t serve) and some would even leave a husband who does not help financially or within the house. Still some other women work their *jeitos* trying to find a lover who will provide them with material benefits, especially food in exchange for sex – a practice locally accepted and seen in a different light than prostitution, locally condemned. These relations retain the form of formalized companionship between a man and a woman, but the relations might end once the material benefits are withdrawn. This is *o jeito* of Aleuda – a defence against the difficulty posed by finding a reliable man.

One afternoon, Aleuda joined the women gathered in Eneida and Lucia’s kitchen, who were discussing *negros* (black men) and the racism of some people in town. Interrupting Lucia, Aleuda asserted strongly: “I don’t like *negros*”, to which Lucia immediately replied “but your *namorado é bem negro, não é?* (but your lover is rather black, isn’t he?)”. Aleuda answered that indeed, yes her lover was rather black, that “*não gosto dele* (I don’t like him) I even don’t like making love to him, you know. I think he is *feio* (ugly). But *me ajuda* (he helps me), *me ajuda bastante* (he helps me quite a lot), he gives me money.”

Aleuda is 52 years old and has worked in the cashew factory for 20 years. She had a first husband with whom she had three children but he had affairs, drank a lot, sometimes beat her and never worked nor helped her thus she finally left him. Yet she experienced a hard time alone with three young children to care for, at this time being

also unemployed. She had followed her first husband to his native community living within his parent's house, and was suddenly left without anything: "I had nothing, not even *uma rede* (a hammock)".

Aleuda sent her younger daughter to live with some relatives in São Paulo and she moved to Cascavel to work the night shift in a garment industry until she finally started working in the cashew factory. She then had a second husband, yet he left her for a younger woman, thus Aleuda prefers her arrangement with João, who lives partially with her in exchange for food and material goods. Working as a construction worker outside Cascavel, he comes to visit her mostly during the weekend and holidays. João makes good money but he has ten other children in another union to sustain thus most of his income goes to them. He does manage to save some of his salary for Aleuda, in addition to helping her whenever she needs his help to renovate or fix something in her house. Aleuda accepts his presence in her house in exchange for his material support, and would terminate their relationship if there were not these benefits.

Aleuda is not alone in this situation, but most women would work their *jeito* with more subtlety –marrying formally for economic reasons or accepting their husband's extra-marital affairs because of the material benefits involved in their union. Other women still engage in sporadic contacts with their ex-lovers, who have to bring food (especially meat) whenever they come to visit them. Still enjoying the company of their ex-partners, these women prefer these arrangements to the daily responsibility of caring for the men (which often means being home whenever men are there to ensure their needs are fulfilled). There is also a common practice inherited from the plantation where in the time of slavery landowners would take a slave to meet their sexual needs. In

present-day Cascavel, a *patrão* (patron) and sometimes a *patroa* (women patron) would take a much younger partner whom they provide with material benefits in exchange for sexual relations –often under formal companionship. Drawing on these patterns, poor migrant women in Cascavel assess their husbands in terms of their economic contribution and some like Aleuda engage with men only if a clear exchange of food and sex defines the relation.

Some women also make use of their lover for security or protection for themselves and their children as the households headed by women are often the target of insult and threat by neighbours. Maria, for her part, decided to form a new union shortly after she left her husband who had been particularly violent. Beating her regularly, he had almost killed her daughter, strangling her, thus Maria had decided to leave him. As he constantly appeared at her door after their separation, Maria found a quick way to resolve the situation –a *jeito*. Thus, although she was not ready to embark on another formal union, she has a new partner. Whereas he does not help her financially (he has another family to sustain) he offers her physical protection against an abusive ex-husband.

The exchange of sex for food, material goods, and protection found in Cascavel resonates with the findings made by Scheper-Hughes, in another town populated by migrants from the surrounding rural communities, in Northeast Brazil. There, she argues, they “work their *jeitos* vertically through alliances with the rich and powerful and laterally through instrumental friendship and sexual relations. Consequently, personalities are often necessarily ‘shallow’, and they may follow a trail of gifts and favors. Love is often conflated with material favors” (1992: 475). Yet, to exchange food or protection for sex is not the ideal, it is a defensive tactic in a context of scarcity and patriarchy.

Dar um jeito with a patron: the defensive luta of Socorro

In Cascavel, patron ties are still fundamental to women's manoeuvres, as discussed previously. Some women try to make their way relying on these ties of dependency to turn them to their own advantage. It is *o jeito da Socorro*, a woman using mainly *vereadores* (municipal councillors) and the emerging patrons in town –the owners of factories– to secure her situation. I remember her waiting three hours in front of Lucia's house to meet with William, Lucia's friend and municipal councillor. It was during the period of elections, and Socorro thought she might get a job through him, being recently laid off from a small textile factory. It was not her first attempt to make use of patron ties to resolve a difficult situation. Indeed, the 53-year-old woman had left her rural community to work in Cascavel using her ties with a woman *vereadora*, who had come to her house to request votes. Meeting her in the town's hospital, Socorro had deployed her *jeito* and succeeded in getting a job with the woman, who owned a textile factory in Cascavel. As Socorro narrates:

After I married, I stayed in the interior [where I grew up] and I continued to do *renda* (lace-making) and to work *na roça*. But there was *uma seca* (a drought) in the 1970s, the work *na roça* remained difficult after that so I stopped [working *na roça*]. I was hired *numa fazenda* (large farm). My work was the same but I worked for others. While working, a thorn entered in my arm, and I went to the hospital [in the town of Cascavel]. There, I saw *uma vereadora*, Ana Maria, who had come to my house *p'ra pedir voto* (to ask for votes). I recognized her. She invited me to her house, and there she hired me to work as a *costureira* (seamstress) to work in her own *confeção* (garment factory). During the first years, I lived there, *almoçava, jantava, dormia, fazia tudo lá* (I took my noon and supper meal there, I slept there, I was doing everything there). My children and husband had stayed there [in the *roça*], my aunt was taking care of my children. I divided *o pouco dinheiro* (the little money) I had between my aunt and me, then, I did my house.

Socorro worked five years for Ana Maria until she bought a piece of land and constructed her own house. While her husband remained in the interior visiting her only during the weekend, her children joined her after having been raised by their aunt in the

interior. Socorro worked for Ana Maria a total of nine years, until her *patroa* died. She spent a difficult period, having to work as a domestic for different households and washing clothes, until she was hired in Cascaju, the cashew factory. She worked there for ten years until she was laid off because of her frequent absences from work. Her aunt, whom she considers her mother because “*foi ela que me cresceu*” (it’s she who raised me) was dying in the town’s hospital and Socorro took too many days off without the consent of the factory’s manager (three consecutive days) and was fired. It was in 2002, four months following the death of her husband who committed suicide. Socorro had a hard time having to cope with two deaths in addition to losing the benefits associated with formal employment. She never found any other formal employment but rather had different short term low-paid jobs. In some periods when she had not enough food, Socorro remembers knocking at the door of some *vereadores* –often successfully to meet her household’s most urgent need: food. She remembers a difficult time, when her brother, having mental health problems and being aggressive, came to live with her along with his children. Socorro relied extensively on the good will of municipal councillors to feed all of them as her modest salary did not cover all the expenses.

When I first met her in July 2004, she had recently been hired by a small factory after experiencing a long period of unstable jobs: domestic worker, seamstress and even babysitter. In addition, she had washed clothes by hand and sewed at home for particular clients, having previously bought a sewing machine for her personal needs. Her situation was still very precarious and her new job, not secure: “when the sales are low, I am not working” she explained. In effect, since she had started working, five months ago, she had already been unemployed for one and a half months. When two months later I

encountered her in front of Lucia's house waiting for her friend's *vereador*, she was definitively laid off and was taking advantage of the period of the upcoming election to request a job from William, a request that fell on deaf ears, as I witnessed her subsequent attempts to find a job in a textile factory. Meanwhile, Socorro manoeuvres into the intricate Brazilian bureaucracy to receive a widow's pension. So far, more than two years after her husband's death, her case has not been resolved. Thus Socorro works at home, sewing custom orders but having difficulty meeting her needs and those of her adult daughter who still lives with her.

For the women who have experienced both the *roça* and the town, it is not always obvious what defensive *luta* to adopt. Some women, like Socorro, choose to emphasize patron ties in spite of the increasing difficulty posed by life in an industrializing town to secure their situation relying mainly on such ties. Perhaps Socorro, like Marlucia (see Chapter 3) still expected her former employer, the cashew factory, to act as a *patrão* thinking her absence from work would be in the end, considered justifiable. Yet the cashew factory too experiences shifting moralities in a context of increasing competition. Whereas in earlier times it acted much in the line of a *patrão*, today the factory pursues capitalist-driven interests and emphasizes the imperative of production.

Socorro was relatively successful with her first *patroa* in securing her situation yet all the nine years she spent working for her are not considered formal work. This means she was not entitled to any rights, insurance, or pension plan during these years and was left unprotected when her *patroa* died. Socorro will have to wait until she reaches 60 years of age to be eligible for the government pension which means an additional seven years. Her manoeuvres to secure factory work being unsuccessful, Socorro attempts to

diversify her source of cash income by being self-employed whilst trying to get a widow's pension.

Her situation resonates with the tactics deployed by other migrant women in Cascavel. Some of them, even if employed formally in a factory, need to supplement their income and often rely on the growing informal sector. Louci, a single mother working in the cashew factory during the day, makes *vasouras de palha* (straw brooms) at night which she sells on Saturdays at the local *feira* (outdoor market). Creusa, also a single mother working in the cashew factory during the weekday, makes and sells *dindin* (local popsicles) from her home every night and during the weekend. Maria, another single mother, works formally in a textile factory and used to sell clothes at the *feira* and beauty products at night door-to-door.

The defensive *luta* in a shifting economy: some concluding remarks

As we have seen, some defensive *lutas* and daily tactics might work in some contexts, but not in others, especially given these are weapons of the weak, that is defensive tactics that are not intended to challenge gender and class inequality but rather, that aim at finding ways of manoeuvring to resolve difficult situations, on the spot (in other words, *dar um jeito*). These include finding food when too many relatives joined one's household as in the case of Socorro, or finding a new wife for a brother to avoid taking over the responsibility of caring for him and his children and thus avoiding a possible loss of job as in Lucia's case.

Ties of reciprocity and dependency are still crucial in the town of Cascavel –these secure Lucia and her mother's position in the local economy and help Socorro meeting

urgent needs in a time of crisis. Yet, in a shifting economy, these ties are not always reliable, as the story of Socorro illustrates with her failure to secure her situation in the long-run. Even reciprocity is not always the rule, as the practice of pooling income together is not necessarily the norm in most households in Cascavel –at least it is not the norm in Lucia’s household.

Indeed, in the context of an industrializing town like Cascavel, some women work not only to ensure their security or the viability of their households, they are also increasingly brought into the global labour force for consumption –buying clothes, shoes and cellular phones, partying at night, eating pizza on the main avenue or going shopping in the state capital. If these women tend to be younger, influenced by images of global youth culture, the pressure to consume permeates most households. Consumption is a marker of social class and modern identity and several people, in spite of their difficulty to meet their monthly payments, would invest in a DVD player or a cellular phone. In addition, some young people tend to live within their parents’ households and to work for themselves. For instance, when I asked a 28-year-old woman why she was working in a textile factory, she answered “I needed my own *liberdade* in relation to money”. Her salary serves her own consumption –including beer, clothes, shoes, cellular phone and so on, in much the same way as Lucia’s sister. Not all women are positioned in this rather privileged situation, but by being economically independent, women form part of a web of global relations in which consumption is king. They conceive of themselves as freer because they are able to pay for things whereas they might be subjected to capitalism –or, as one migrant woman once exclaim: “today we’re not dependent on men, we’re dependent on work!” Thus, from the *roça* to the *fábrica* migrant women experience

tensions, contradictions and ambiguities, and their tactics might not, in the long run, always work.

Besides these tensions from the *roça* to the *fábrica*, women's narratives also shed light on the difficulty women faced in reconciling their different roles, in a shifting economic context. Most women have difficulty in securing their jobs because of the other responsibilities they carry on, outside the factory. Indeed, if Lucia was able to keep her job in June 2004 when she missed a week at the cashew factory to care for her brother's household following the flight of his wife, she might not be able to do so in a time of downturn. Socorro was laid off from the same factory after missing three days to care for her sick aunt.

Because of their responsibilities, several women in Cascavel find themselves caught in a very vulnerable situation –like Socorro, unable to secure her formal employment in the cashew factory (losing the benefits of the *carteira assinada*) and unable to rely on a patron to secure her situation. To make a living, some women accept working in low-paid informal factories (which may experience several downturns in production in one year) and thus are unprotected by the law and receive less than a minimum wage, moving from one factory to the next. Their situations are chaotic, as they never know from one day to the next if they will still have their jobs. Given the shifting moralities in Cascavel, they are unsure about the spaces in which to deploy their *jeito* – with patron, with friends, with relatives or should they struggle only for themselves, secure their own position, without caring for the others, in a self-driven fashion? Perhaps all at once?

As suggested by Scheper-Hughes,

The tension involved in the 'double ethic' of a modern individualism versus a feudal and familistic personalism in Brazil have not been resolved. Instead, the ethics and the rules of democracy and hierarchy coexist in perpetual conflict and contradiction, lending themselves to the common perception of Brazilian social life as chaotic, disorderly, divided, anarchistic –as anything other than the 'order and progress' of its national standard. [Scheper-Hughes 1992:87]

For migrant women in Cascavel located in this double ethic and contradictory moralities, the chaos of social relations obscures the ground of their battle. Yet their *luta* must go on. And thus their *luta* goes on. In spite of the difficult position in which women find themselves, in spite of the chaos of social relations, in spite of their job instability and their vulnerability to exploitation, women in Cascavel continue to *batalhar* (fight) and to be the *guerreiras* (warriors) and *batalhadoras na luta* (fighters in the struggle) as women say. In the next chapter, this everlasting struggle is finely captured through the narrative of Dona Nova, a woman involved in a persistent *luta*, who prefers to envision herself as *vitoriosa* despite the never-ending battle she has to carry on.

CHAPTER 5: THE *LUTA* MUST GO ON

“I won’t tell you my story” Dona Nova once said on a night I had joined her and other neighbouring women at their usual meeting spot in front of Dona Nova’s house. These women would gather there at night after dinner to gossip about other neighbours or local politicians and merchants. Dona Nova had a small business in which she was selling home-made cakes, cookies, cigarettes, gum, peanuts, chocolates and some other snacks. She lived close to my house and I regularly spent my nights with her and her gossiping friends. I was initially introduced into this circle by Lucia, my closest neighbour and the co-manager of her household with her mother. As explained in chapter 2, Lucia was a woman particularly involved in my research, and she always sought to help me find new women to interview.

Yet that night, instead of the typical rumours, the women assembled in front of Dona Nova’s house were pressuring Nova to tell me her story. I had already interviewed them all, except Nova, and my neighbour Lucia –in her willingness to help me– was particularly passionate and insistent. She said to Nova: “You will enjoy it [the interview], you just have to talk about your life, it’s easy. I would like to do it again, I felt so good afterward!” But Dona Nova was not convinced and replied “I suffered too much, I won’t tell *minha vida* (my life).” Concerned that Dona Nova would continue to feel pressured by her friends, I closed the discussion on the issue, telling her simply that I interview only people truly willing to tell their stories, not people who felt obliged to. And I never brought up again the topic in our following discussions.

After this particular night, I continued to partake in these gatherings. With Dona Nova, the topic of telling her story never came up again in the conversations until, two

weeks prior to the end of my fieldwork, Dona Nova enquired –for the first time– about my work. She asked if I still had time to conduct an interview before my departure, and I thought she meant she wanted to introduce me to one of her friends. But to my surprise, she added: “I want to tell you my story, even though it is difficult to remember my past, even though I might cry, I would like that you bring my story there [to Canada]”. Why, I wondered, has she changed her mind? “So that people there [in Canada] would know” was her reply.

Because Nova’s narrative captures the contradictions of women’s *luta*, and to honour the persistent struggle she made the decision to tell, her narrative is presented here. The aim is to convey the sense of fight and the sense of battle women’s life carries, thus to explore what is involved by living constantly in a state of *luta* and considering oneself as *vitoriosa*. In this way, the narrative of Nova illustrates the kind of life migrant women in Cascavel have experienced and still endure, and reveal that despite women’s creative strategies to get by, they still find themselves in a position of inequality.

Nova’s life history: an ongoing negotiation

Born in the fishing community of Praia Redonda (150 km South East of Cascavel), Dona Nova migrated to the interior town of Cascavel to live with her mother who had abandoned her at an early age. In her childhood, Nova spent her time as a domestic, working for her relatives from the time she was 7 until she married at 14. She never attended school.

As her story will illustrate, the 45-year-old woman never resigned herself to her partners’ or employers’ control: twice separated by her own volition, she also moved into

the local workforce on account of what she perceived as improvement, moving from the export sector to the garment industry to owning a small business. Her life history conveys her willingness to change her life, although her attempts to achieve this were, for the most part, unsuccessful.

We were abandoned by my mother. She left [Praia Redonda] with another man, leaving my father with six children, the youngest being only three months old. When my mother left I was three years old. All my brothers and sisters were dispersed amongst my uncles and aunts, except me. I stayed with my father, until I was seven. My father had married again and his new wife fought a lot with me. She beat me, so I decided to leave the house, I was going from one relative's house to another, and finally stayed with one of my cousins, her husband, a fisherman, and their children. In addition to taking care of the house and children I had to work: I was doing *labirinto* (a type of lace-making).

During the following years, we had no contact with my mother, I knew nothing about her. Then, after nine years, she requested my youngest sister move back with her, but my aunt, who had taken care of her since she was three months old, refused. *Eu peguei*, (literally means 'I caught' but here means 'I took the opportunity') and I came to live with my mother. But my life got worse than it was! I lived as a *prisoneira* (prisoner). I was an *escrava* (slave). My mother did not allow me to leave the house: I had to care for her five children, all by myself. I had no friends, not a single one... It was very hard for me."

At 14 years old, I ran away with a young man who soon after became my husband. When I ran away, I went to his father's house, I lived there ten months. Then, I built a *quartinho* (small room) for us in the back of the courtyard. At 18 years old, I decided to leave him, because he was drinking and stealing. When he got caught for a robbery, I left him. I left Cascavel for some months, because he was looking for me. I spent some time with my sister in Fortim [municipality of Aracati], then, I had to come back to work again.

Meanwhile, Dona Nova had given birth to two boys and had started working in the cashew factory, Cascaju. She worked in the factory for a period of 19 years (from 15 to 34 years old) however, because the factory often closed temporarily when the production slowed down or even stopped, she actually worked a total of 16 years. She decided to quit the factory, thinking that she would have more stability outside the cashew factory.

I left because it always happened that from time to time, Cascaju lacked cashews, it always closed temporarily and then they call us back [to work]. The last time, they

called me back twice, but I already worked in Teresinha [a garment industry]. I liked it better there [in Teresinha]. Today I regret it because I would be close to retirement if I had stayed in Cascaju.

Dona Nova worked for Teresinha, a small home-based garment factory, for eight and a half years, six and a half of which were spent as *carteira assinada* which means formally registered (thus including rights and benefits). When she started to work, Dona Nova did not know how to sew. It was her employer, Teresinha, who taught the newly employed women basic sewing skills.

During the years she worked for Teresinha, Dona Nova worked extra hours without pay and without complaining, while taking on higher responsibilities for the same salary, the monthly minimum wage. She finally resigned from her work in Teresinha's factory, when the minimum wage for seamstresses got higher but her own salary remained the same. It was only the workers formally employed and registered as seamstresses in their *carteira de trabalho* (work record) who had the right to benefit from this national increase in the minimum wage.

I ended up not working anymore, because one day, she [Teresinha] annoyed me. She gave the *aumento* (increase in wage) to the seamstresses, so she had to register me as a seamstress [in order for me to receive the increase]. I was in charge of the production, of the finishing touches. I deserved to gain more, to increase my wage. It was a pay increase of 15 reais (the equivalent of 4,60 US\$). She thought I did not deserve this *aumento*. She said she would not give it to me, because I was not sewing, I was in charge of the finishing touches. So she did not register me as a seamstress. I was so upset, I thought it was so bad that I quit. And I lost all my rights.

She [Teresinha] did not want to lay me off: she never found another person, she had to hire three people to do the job I was doing. She even came here [to Nova's house] to ask me to go back but I refused. I was really annoyed: I brought work back home at night but she did not recognize my work. I remained angry (*fiquei com rava*) for this reason. I stopped working there two years ago.

Since then, Dona Nova has never tried to find another job in the garment industry for several reasons. She considers the kind of work in this sector or in the cashew factory as very *puxado* (demanding). She is one of the rare women who were particularly critical

of the work in factories, highlighting how these companies exploit people to make money: “I decided to stop working in *confecção* (garment industry) because I have backache. There, the work is demanding, they use people to make money”. She partly attributes her health problems, especially her back problems, to her work in the cashew factory and in the textile sector. “As a child, I carried very heavy things. I think it is for this reason [I have pain in my spinal column]. I carried a lot of water on my head. Also, I worked for a long period in Cascaju and with sewing machines. It’s all that.”

Because she did not want to work in another factory, Nova started to sell *dindin*, a local type of popsicles. Three months ago, she opened a small business⁵⁷ in the front part of her house, selling mainly small snacks and tidbits in addition to home-made cakes and *dindin*. At around the same time, she also asked her partner, whom she was involved with for 18 years, to leave, tired of having to cope with his dual life. When Nova first started seeing him, he was living with his wife and children. During the first ten years of their relationship during which they had one child, he continued to support his wife and children and tried to maintain relationships with both women: “During ten years, he lived with them [his other family], then he came here. He returned back there again. I requested him to leave because it was not working anymore (*não deu certo mais não*).” Although he helped her with the money he gained as a *taxista* (taxi driver) his help was limited as he had another family to sustain. Indeed, it is Nova who was able to save enough money to buy a car for him so that he could become a *taxista*, one of the few male employment options in the town of Cascavel.

⁵⁷ See figure 22.

Figure 22: Nova's house and small business, where we congregated in the evenings⁵⁸



Dona Nova, now a single mother, lives with her two younger children, an adult daughter working in the textile sector and an adolescent man studying. She is the sole income contributor to the household, even though her daughter works in a garment factory. What her daughter gains serves for her own consumption (clothes, shoes, parties), despite Nova's financial difficulties. Nova plans to continue with her business, "until it works" (*até quando da certo*) and would stop only if "better things show up". For the moment, she would like to extend her business and make more money, by buying a refrigerator so she can offer soft drinks. So far, her gains are limited: with her home-made cake, she barely makes 2 *reais* per day (0,62 \$ US) if she sells it all, and this does not include what she spends on cooking propane. The cake is her most lucrative item.

⁵⁸ From the left to the right Dona Eneida, Nova, Susanna, Lucia's brother, Lucia, and Lucia niece

Reflecting on her life, Nova expresses how she struggled hard alone to get by:

Although my dream in life was to study, I never had this opportunity in my life, just working to live. I had to work, how could I be studying? It was always the work and the *luta de casa*⁵⁹.

I would never put up with a bad man (*nunca aguantei do homem*). This is why I worked my whole life. I can't understand these women who accept abusive or lazy men because they do not have the *coragem* (courage) to confront their life. Some women are afraid of dying of hunger; they don't have the courage to work. I am not like them. If it did not work out well with a man, he would quickly leave (*vai se embora logo*) I have two arms and two legs to work.

You know, my house is mine and I got it with the greatest sacrifices in the world. Today, I don't know how I did it. All my life, I have only earned one minimum salary. I never received the help of anybody. It is only with my salary, and not buying clothes for myself, that I succeeded to do so. I even wore the clothes others gave to me. I never bought anything on credit, and I didn't buy things for myself –people here buy too many things. I thought the most important thing was to get my house. Now I have it to live in. And I don't pay rent. We can live without clothes. A house is the most important thing.

Never in my whole life have I received the help of a *vereador* (municipal councillor) or of anybody else. I saved money, spending more than ten years in this *arrumação* (arrangement) of saving money to get my house, not buying anything. I think I am *vitoriosa* (victorious).

Nova: the narrative of a *vitoriosa*?

The story of Dona Nova is an instance of how women in Cascavel struggle hard to get by. Despite her struggles, she chooses to portray herself as *vitoriosa* –like many other migrant women– a label I found difficult to associate with her, as I can testify to the hardship of her life and the daily difficulties she had in getting enough money to buy food or clothes. If she echoes the narratives of most women with her strong ability to elaborate creative strategies to negotiate her changing life conditions, she also mirrors the limited possibilities and choices available to them.

⁵⁹ The *luta de casa* is literally the house fight, but means the housework, or a shortened way of saying not only housework but all the social relations as well.

Yet her story is not common: abandoned at an early age by her mother, Nova grew up in a fishing community, not in the rural interior, as most migrant workers did. Rather isolated in her childhood, she attempted to escape her adoptive family and the work she carried out there, only to find herself caught up in a more difficult situation with her own mother. Locked in the house, she tried to escape her domestic tasks by running away and marrying, yet with a man who did not fit with her expectations of an ideal partner.

Her work history, too, is quite unusual. Dona Nova refused to take part in what many women of her generation consider as important advantages of working in a cashew factory (the social benefits, the regular work shift, the employment insurance, the minimum wage and so on) because she thought she would do better in the textile sector. In addition, she refused to submit herself to her textile employer's control, and decided to quit her job in a garment factory, feeling that she deserved to get some recognition and a higher salary. In the factory, women get neither pay increases nor advancement, only when the national minimum wage increases by law does their salary increase. Yet few women would position themselves in the vulnerable situation Nova is actually in order to contest the exploitation of their labour by factory owners. Instead, several women would comment on their feeling of being compelled to remain in these jobs by saying, like Lucia, "I work in a *fábrica* because there is no other *opção* (opportunity)". And yet Nova did refuse to remain at the mercy of her employers.

Nova has made significant choices in her life which contrast with the choices made by her counterparts – leaving two children behind in the interior, refusing to embark into relations of dependency, with patrons, politicians and partners and choosing

not to consume like so many of her neighbours, being rather critical of material consumption. In her refusal to submit herself to abusive or exploitative relations, she becomes *vitoriosa* (victorious) because she counters the dominant prescriptions surrounding the organization of social relations in the Brazilian Northeast. Her resistance to the power-driven relations and the local labour market in which she found herself took the form of an individual struggle to change her life, it is her *luta*. Nova's *luta*, then, is neither within the *fábrica* like Marlucia nor through manoeuvres through her webs of relations (especially with patrons) like Lucia and Socorro.

Yet, despite her critical stance and choices, she is not doing well. Her situation is chaotic and precarious, and from one day to the next, Nova is unsure about her ability to secure the economic viability of her household. Her meagre earnings barely sustain her household, whereas she is particularly cautious with her spending. Self-employed, she works continuously and has no day off, because she will lose a significant amount of money if she does not open her shop for a day. Indeed, she has no free time during her days as she is busy trying to make a living and often expressed her tiredness of having to stand the whole day without being able to rely for some periods on her daughter. So far, Nova has not succeeded in achieving her personal goals –still dreaming of returning to school and wanting to further secure her financial situation.

Like the combative and independent Bui who refuses to rely on patron ties in the ethnography *Death without Weeping* by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), Nova hopes to secure her financial situation counting mostly on herself, not even on her children:

[Bui] seems buffeted by fate, her life a tangle of events over which she is powerless. And yet Bui projects an image of strength and hardiness, if not resilience. (...) She wants no long-term contracts, no dependent relations with a husband or a 'boss', good or bad, *bom patrão ou mau*. (...) The advice she gives her own teenage daughters as they go out to make their way on their

own is 'Don't trust anyone more than yourself'. (...) Bui will not steal or 'trick' others into sharing with her against their will. [Scheper-Hughes 1992: 464-465]

Yet Bui "unbossed and unbought" (1992: 451) is not doing well, perhaps as suggested by Scheper-Hughes, "it may be just these same endearing traits that have contributed to Bui's permanent state of risk and misery. If so, this is 'bad news' for women, indeed" (1992: 451). In a similar way to Bui, with her refusal to rely on ties of *ajuda* because of the relations of dependency involved, Nova puts herself in a vulnerable position. She is perhaps *vitoriosa* because of her independence and resistance to power relations (with patrons, politicians and factory owners) yet like Bui, Nova might at any moment pass again through difficult episodes.

Nova's story parallels that of other women in this never-ending battle, a *luta* that must go on. Countless times, women commented on their everlasting *luta*, taking a reflexive stance on their life. For instance, Eronilde, 44 years old, a single mother of two daughters and working in the cashew factory for 20 years, remarked when we concluded the interview: "*Batalhei* (I fought) to allow my daughter to study, and I will *ficar assim batalhando* (remain like that fighting)". Or Dona Eneida, the mother of Lucia, my closest ties in town and my neighbour, once told me: "I'm tired now, but I don't have *descanso* (rest) in my life, I never rest. I have to carry on with my *luta*." Thus, that their "*luta* must go on" means that women have struggled hard and still have to, Nova being an example of this, as her everyday life is rather insecure and chaotic.

The *luta*: capturing women's lives

By emphasizing both their improvements from the *roça* to the *fábrica* and their everlasting *luta*, women's narratives point to the intricacy and ambiguity of their lives,

posing a challenge to theorizing the everyday. Neither exploited as suggested by the dominant paradigm in the scholarly literature on women in the global labour force (Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Labrecque 2001; Safa 1995) nor fully integrated economically as others contend (Lim 1990), migrant women in Cascavel deploy different *lutas* to make a living, enhance their social position and achieve personal goals. Their *luta* manifests itself in different spaces –within the *fábrica* (for Marlucia), within their webs of relations using defensive tactics (it is the *jeito* of Lucia) or relying on themselves (such as Nova). Yet their *luta* does not imply the end of poverty, patriarchy or patronage –rather these are transformed, and at times, challenged. Sometimes, women even participate in the reproduction of their own domination –in part because their *luta* takes the form of an individual, defensive and disorganized struggle. This is the case with Lucia, who perpetuates gender inequality to free herself from more work and with Marlucia (see chapter 3) who accepts patronage and class inequality as legitimate aspects of relations of production. Women’s *luta*, then, is paradoxical, creating the effect of improving women’s life whereas positioning them in a persistent state of battle.

Thus, the shifting economic situation in Cascavel brings contradictory implications, as captured by women’s narratives. If almost all women insist on saying their life has improved from the *roça* to the *fábrica*, paid work does not result in the end of women’s oppression. In effect, their financial situation is far from being secure and women take on an increasing burden whereas men often withdraw from their responsibilities. In addition, one woman out of four in their narratives also revealed being the victim of male abuse⁶⁰ (without being asked) which reveals the significant incidence

⁶⁰ Male abuse implies physical and verbal violence as well as the exploitation of women’s work for their own consumption of alcohol.

of male abuse. The *luta* must go on because patriarchy, patronage and poverty persist, because social inequality is increasing in Cascavel, because ties of dependency nourish and support huge class discrepancies, and because migrant women still find themselves enmeshed in a struggle to find ways of ensuring the economic viability of their household.

When we ended the interview, Nova told me “I have to go back to *a luta*”, which could mean her housework, her business, or simply, her life. I kept wondering why she chose to depict herself as *vitoriosa* despite the hardship of her life, and finally found an answer in *a luta*, a metaphor for work and life revealing both the sense of fight and the sense of struggle embedded in Nova’s and more generally in women’s lives. Her *luta* must go on in spite of the fact that Nova considers herself *vitoriosa*, as she is enmeshed in an everlasting struggle –a battle to have more autonomy and independence, and a fight against patriarchy, gender inequality, patronage, exploitation in the factory and finally, persistent poverty.

POST-FIELD REFLECTIONS

At a turning point in their history, migrant women in Cascavel experience a level of economic independence and decision-making that has no precedent. From the *roça* to the *fábrica*, their lives have drastically improved –freeing them from the insecurity of having to rely on their husbands to make a living and breaking with the unequal relations with the local landed oligarchy. By working in a factory, women have gained access to a stable income, and in some cases, they even benefit from the rights and insurances associated with formal employment in Brazil. This implies, according to women’s narratives, the end of their dependence on men. Accordingly, women insist in their narratives on their newly gained *independencia* and *liberdade* resulting from their work in the factory, which marks a sharp break with their earlier conditions in the rural interior, where they were, for the most part, confined to the domestic chores and child care. Therefore, migration and factory work represent, for the majority of these women, unparalleled changes and radical improvements –a contrast with the widespread interpretation in the scholarly literature on women in the global labour force which depicts women mostly as victims.

At the core of this thesis: women’s *luta*

In this thesis, I have presented women’s narratives of *luta* which counter the women-as-victims paradigm without denying the severe constraints in which women find themselves. I have chosen to consider carefully women’s narratives as a way to avoid any simplistic or reductive explanation of women’s life –aware of the limits posed by most of the scholarly literature on globalization and women’s work which ignores women’s

standpoint, experience and reasons for entering the labour force. In the preceding chapters, I have maintained that an emphasis on women's narratives reveals the space where women do deploy some agency and creativity. In effect, in their narratives, women shed light both on their achievement in moving from the *roça* to the *fábrica* and on their daily defensive *lutas* to make a living, achieve personal goals and enhance their social position.

As argued in Chapter 3, an important implication of migration and factory work is women's financial independence and the ensuing possibility of resisting oppressive relations –especially male abuse. From *a roça* to *a fábrica*, women tell a story of *luta* in which the work in the factory represents much more than exploitation. Indeed, factory work has allowed several women to leave violent men or to refuse to marry in a context of patriarchal relations. Women consider the shift as fundamental to what is possible for them –although they still might experience abuse, violence, and poverty. For some women, their work has liberated them from a harsh life they would not have liked to have – as in the case of Marlucia, her narrative illuminating how her work had freed her from a life in a fishing community that she did not want to endure. For Marlucia, indeed, her work in the cashew factory represents “everything in her life” as she insisted on emphasizing in her narrative, meaning that without her work, she could not be independent from her parents, own her house or have as much power of decision-making in her household.

Hence, as we discovered in this thesis, women now imagine other possibilities for themselves because of their work in a factory, a significant cultural transformation hidden in the dominant scholarly literature on women in the global labour force. As summarized

by Eronilde, a migrant factory worker separated from her husband and having two daughters, women experience newly imagined identities:

I think women now are more *independente*, they don't need to depend on their husband. Women have *direitos* (rights). And if the man is not *satisfeito* (satisfied) the woman has the possibility to say: "*Vai embora* (go away)!" Before, a woman lacked the *coragem* (courage) to do that ... or she lacked *as condições* (the financial conditions)!

Mary Beth Mills (1999) in her study of Thai women in the global labour force, reaches a similar conclusion and argues that in spite of the constraints posed by globalization and international capital, Thai women in the global labour force construct newly imagined possibilities by migrating and working in export-processing industries. As she suggested: "Young women view these urban experiences as a source of deep personal transformation: 'We're not like our mothers'. Living on their own and earning their own money, female migrants (...) face choices and make decisions about themselves and their futures in ways that no previous generation of women (...) have shared" (Mills 1999:165). It is fundamental to recognize this significant shift, one important aim of this thesis.

Yet as was maintained in these pages, women's narratives reveal not only what they assess as considerable improvements in their life in the shift from the *roça* to the *fábrica* but as importantly, they capture their attempts to find their own ways, including their manoeuvres, defensive *luta* and *jeitos*. In effect, women's narratives convey the daily *luta* they deploy –relying on a legacy of patronage and on ties of reciprocity with their neighbours, friends and relatives. In the shifting economic context of an industrializing town such as Cascavel, new moralities are introduced with an emerging middle class constituted mainly by politicians and factory owners.

As argued in Chapter 4, women manoeuvre their way to get by, being rather creative, with Lucia forming a team with her mother to counter the lack of participation of men in her household, with Socorro relying on patron ties, or with Aleuda exchanging sex for food. Yet somehow, women allow the maintenance of the status quo. By being so “absorbent” and by opting for a defensive and individual *luta*, migrant women often perpetuate the conditions of their oppression. Their attempts represent quick responses to daily concerns, thus women’s defensive *lutas* might not be successful in the long-run because these individual tactics do not constitute an organized and strategic *luta*. Indeed, in Cascavel, there is no movement leaning toward a collective struggle to claim more rights for factory worker, to halt violence against women, or to redistribute the lands—as is the case in other locations, even in other parts of Brazil.⁶¹ Similarly, Mills contends that, in the case of migrant women factory workers in Thailand: “to the extent that their efforts were oriented toward individual assertions of identity and personal autonomy, they tended to obscure and even diminish avenues for collective or organized forms of opposition and critique. Yet this does not make women’s efforts to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose any less important to acknowledge or understand” (Mills 1999:169). This thesis has partaken in this endeavour. It has considered carefully the space where women deploy agency and creativity which has allowed assessing the spaces that “speak bitter truths to power” (Goldstein 2003: 8) and those that participate in perpetuating power relations (especially patronage, patriarchy and class inequality).

The *luta* of migrant women, then, must go on—their financial situation remaining for the most part, precarious. As maintained in Chapter 5, some women, like Nova,

⁶¹ There are different organized social movements in Brazil, amongst these, the *Movimento dos Sem Terra*, and significant women’s movements (see Alvarez 1990) but these are not present in Cascavel.

experience a persistent *luta* in its extreme form, being unsure about what the next day would bring –yet Nova portrays herself as *vitoriosa*. Because of the incredible capacity of women like Nova to carry on with their life and because of their sense of dignity, I wrote these pages. What else can be done, if not at least to write about what I witnessed –the repetitive and incessant *luta* of women *batalhadoras* (fighters)?

And now?

As long as patron-client relationships and corruption persist in defining the political arena in Cascavel, Ceará, the Northeast and Brazil, as long as the new bourgeoisie in Cascavel benefit from the legacy of the plantation economy, as long as patriarchy and gender inequality persist and as long as the huge discrepancy between the richer and poorer segments of the population increases, a situation in Brazil some authors label as social apartheid (Buarque 1992) would remain intact.

The export-led development occurring in the town of Cascavel is not likely to bring a halt to these social and economic inequalities, to the contrary. By establishing in the most impoverished region of all Latin America, the owners of factories are not driven by an altruistic intention of providing work to the unemployed. Rather, in so doing, they create a vulnerable workforce, which then loses its potential to rely on a rich and diversified land to ensure its subsistence –a land of mountains, sea, rivers and lagoons (not solely of drought!) thus a land producing an important variety of fruits, vegetables, fishes and meats. In a study of maquila worker in Guatemala, the anthropologist Liliana Goldín considers that “maquilas constitute a new source of dependency. The dominant element is not the landowner or the intermediary; it is the manager and the new employers, regardless of nationality, a *new patrón*. It is the deskilling of the rural people

and with that, the creation of larger source of low paid labor” (2001:49). In the same vein, the factories in Cascavel represent a new form of dependency which draws on older patterns of patronage and patriarchy.

If women’s lives have positively changed with the advent of factory work, it is toward and against everybody, not as the result of an intended state policy or government initiative. Thus migrant women persist in their struggle because there are no structured actions sustaining women’s *luta*. To implement durable changes in women’s lives, the participation of all levels of government is critical, indeed. Perhaps an important first step, for the town of Cascavel, would be to create daycare allowing women to keep their jobs when having young children to care for.

In addition, it might be critical to rapidly formalize the textile sector, which, if not producing for international markets, does rely on the shift brought by multinational factories, counting on a large malleable workforce. It is in this sector of employment that the working conditions are the harshest, as several local employers make use of the pool of labour available to exploit the workers –employing most of them illegally. Living in front of my house, Virginia, in her early twenties, had trouble to keep her job in the textile factories, being employed in three different places during the six months I spent in Cascavel. In one of these, she had to work the regular shift (equivalent to eight hours per day) in addition to spend her night from five until ten –working six days a week and not even being paid the minimum wage. “It was very *puxado* (demanding) work” she commented after being fired because “*dormia no trabalho*” (was sleeping at work) which meant she did not sew rapidly enough. Several women employed in textile factories experience similar conditions and *humiliações* (humiliations) by the factory owners, such

as being blamed for mistakes in the production they were not responsible for, or their work being destroyed because of minor imperfections. When hired in these factories, women have to pass through a period called the “*experiência*” (experience) doing the same job as the other employees but being paid less. In some cases, their work is formalized but this varies greatly according to the different factories –some women had to wait five years; other never had this possibility whereas in some instances, it might take less than two years to have the *carteira do trabalho* (formal work record). To secure the situation of migrant women, it is critical to formalize these factories (most of them being owned by local people) and to allow for wages increases independent of government required increases in minimum salary.

Epilogue

The situation for migrant women in Cascavel is at a turning point –as is, indeed, the overall situation in the country with a leftist party elected two years ago. It is difficult to assess what we will be the future of these *guerreiras* (warriors) and *batalhadoras na luta* (fighters in the battle) as it is to evaluate the future of Brazil as a whole. If the country is considered one of the next world economic leaders, this will not automatically translate into a reduction of poverty and social inequalities.

In May 2005, exactly one year after my first entry into the field and six months following my return from Brazil, I returned to Cascavel. I was conducting one-month of field research with Prof. Sally Cole⁶² on strategies to secure the economic viability of

⁶² This research project was a follow-up of the first series of interviews conducted between May 2004 and October 2004 under the aegis of a broader research project conducted under the Initiatives in the New Economy (INE) Collaborative SSHRCC-funded interdisciplinary research team, TARGET (Team for Advanced Research on Globalization, Education and Technology) based at the University of British

households. In the course of this research, we visited several of the women I had interviewed between May and October 2004, interviewing eight of them, in addition to some of their husband -amongst these women: Marlucia (see chapter 3), Lucia (see chapter 4) and Nova (see chapter 5) all experiencing significant changes in their lives. Indeed, to my surprise, migrant women's discourse had radically changed. "We're facing *uma crise econômica* (an economic crisis)" was a running commentary during this second field trip –marking a contrast with the hopeful narratives of women I had listened to just a few months before.

The optimism of Marlucia had vanished, and the first night I saw her, she seemed rather tired and worried. "I'm studying at night, now" was the first thing she told me. I understood, then, she was pressured to do so by her employer, the cashew factory. Three days later, Marlucia was temporarily laid off for a period of five months due to a downturn in production whilst her friend Liduina, who had refused to return to study, had been permanently fired. Indeed, a total of 350 women were laid off whereas 143 women like Marlucia had signed a special agreement protecting their job⁶³ and all the benefits associated with formal employment –including the pension plan. Eligible for employment insurance for the entire period of her lay off, Marlucia was not losing any privilege or money –only her salary would be delayed. Yet Marlucia felt increasingly insecure regarding her job in the cashew factory and continued to attend school at night after being temporarily laid off.

Columbia. Prof. Thomas Lemieux of the Department of Economics at UBC is the principal investigator. Financial support for this M.A. research was provided by TARGET.

⁶³ According to the director of the *Sistema Nacional de Emprego do Ceará, SINE-CE*, May 18, 2005.

In the following days, Marlucia found ways of negotiating with her increasing feeling of insecurity. In effect, while I was there, she insisted that her husband contribute to a pension plan for fishermen (less expensive than her own plan, costing *6reais/month*). Thinking about an eventual lay off, Marlucia knew it would be difficult for her to pay 50 *reais* a month to keep her own pension plan until retirement (currently she pays 20 *reais* and her employer, the balance). As part of her manoeuvres to secure the economic viability of her household, Marlucia also took on her husband's domestic chores and the preparation of the noon meal freeing him to make more nets, as it was the peak season for him. In this way, she helps him to make more money, allowing them to pay for their bills in spite of her delay to receive her employment insurance payment. Marlucia was also planning to learn how to make nets, recognizing there an opportunity to make additional money.

Lucia, too, was studying at night, adding to her already busy day another task. She was not laid off, but felt, like Marlucia, rather insecure regarding her job. Lucia would have liked to take at least a day off to accompany us in our research, yet with the climate of insecurity within the cashew factory, she preferred not to. During the first week we spent in Cascavel, from one day to the next, Lucia did not know whether she would keep her job or not. Because she has been injured in the preceding months, she was entitled to a special right thus the factory could not fire her for a determined period of time. Nonetheless, Lucia feared her turn could come shortly due to her frequent absences from work for her injury but also to assume her household responsibilities as we saw in Chapter 4.

Similarly, most migrant women working in garment factories emphasized the *crise econômica* and several of them experienced a difficult period, working one day but not the other, never knowing what to expect. Susanna, a 53-year-old woman, living with her two children and a grandson, experienced such instability. She has been hired in a garment factory three months prior to my arrival in town, but she was laid off during the second week of my stay. Her daughter had been fired from the leather factory, Bermas, at the same period Susanna got her job. Quite uncommonly, it is Susanna's son who had acted as the main income earner in her household for the past month after being hired in Bermas (after being unemployed for more than two years). In spite of his crucial help, Susanna had difficulty to meet her monthly bills and everyday, she walked to a different garment factory, hoping to find work even if only for a day or two. To add to a rather harsh period, her daughter had decided to bring her father (Susanna's ex-husband) back home from the Amazon and into Susanna's house, after more than 15 years of separation. Ill and paralyzed, he represented for Susanna an additional burden she would have liked to refuse but she complied with her daughter's will, especially given a dominant local prescription surrounding the obligations one has toward one's father. Thus, in her daily life, Susanna had to cope both with an ex-husband who had never helped her in time of scarcity, who drank a lot and who had even beaten her, and with a search for work in small factories in need of day seamstresses. And yet, Susanna kept her sense of humour, her calm, and her capacity to continue to carry on with her everyday *luta* –a strong woman, indeed.

If I had interviewed the migrant women at this particular moment in their life histories, their narratives would have captured their precarious situation and financial

insecurity to a much larger extent than they did the previous year. I realized, by returning to the field, the limits posed by short-term studies in assessing the implications of significant transformations such as labour migration and export-led development. Thus, I consider it is critical to pursue our enquiry into people's lives in the long-term, a responsibility we bear, as social researchers, toward the people we study.

While writing these lines, the future of Marlucia, Lucia, Susanna and several other women remains critical, chaotic and precarious. Perhaps the cashew factory, as the rumours go, will close because of the increasing competition in the international market leaving an important part of the population (and especially women) without work. Perhaps not, and Marlucia will make her way in the cashew factory until retirement. In any case, Marlucia is manoeuvring, recognizing the opportunity the local economy offers to her and her household.

Indeed, during the month I spent in Cascavel in May 2005, migrant women have continued to deploy their manoeuvres to make a living, enhance their social position and achieve personal goals. They still were the *batalhadoras na luta*, even though the battle they had to face was much stronger –as in the case of Susanna. And yet I wondered, while I was in Cascavel, would their efforts bring some positive changes, in a near future? Witnessing Nova's success with her business, I find in her *luta* the inspiration to keep a certain optimism.

In effect, when I left Cascavel in October 2004, after my first period of fieldwork, I told everyone I would try to come back within the next five years (not thinking I would return so quickly to Cascavel). Nova had told me “when you'll be back, Eva, I'll have a refrigerator [to sell soft drinks]”. On my first day in town (but only six months after I had

left Cascavel) I encountered Nova, as usual, in front of her house where she sold her candies, cakes, and other tidbits. Smiling to me, she said “I told you, Eva: I did buy my refrigerator!” We laugh, both surprised by the rapidity with which things in our life were happening.

During the next couple of days, I discovered Nova not only had bought a new refrigerator, but a small stove too and she was becoming rather famous in the neighbourhood for her grilled sandwiches. Of all the women I met in Cascavel, I thought Nova was one of the most vulnerable and in the least secure situation. By being there six months later, I witnessed the outcome of her persistent *luta*. I left Cascavel still hopeful that women’s *luta* would make, in the end, a difference.

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Web sites (for the maps/pictures of cashew factory)

www.brasil.gov.br/informe.htm

www.iplance.ce.gov.br

www.cascaju.com.br

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Date of interview:
Introduced by whom:
Place of the interview:
People presented:

A. Personal Data

1. Name:
2. Sex:
3. Age:
4. Place of birth:
5. Where did you grow up?
6. Current address or Neighbourhood:
7. Years of Schooling:
8. Marital Status:
9. First marriage? Age?:
10. With whom living during first marriage:
11. Number and ages of children:

B. Family History

1. Father's Place of Birth:
2. Mother's Place of Birth:
3. Number of Years of Schooling of Father:
4. Number of Years of Schooling of Mother:
5. How long parents live in community where you were born:
6. What was father's employment?
7. What was mother's employment?
8. Did either of your parents ever migrated? If yes, when? Where to?
9. Did any of your grandparents ever migrate? If yes, when, where to?

C. Migration History

1. With whom were you living at that time?
2. Occupation at that time?
3. Why did you migrate?
4. What year did you first leave your home community?
5. Where did you go?
6. What job obtained there?
7. How long did you live and work there?
8. Subsequent destination?
9. When, why, what kind of work for each destination?

D. Employment History

1. Approximate date of arrival in Cascavel?
2. Why Cascavel (for production or reproduction?)
3. Current employer in Cascavel?
4. How did you find current employer?
5. How many years have you worked for this employer?
6. Current job title and responsibilities?
7. Hours?
8. Only paid employment at the present time?
9. If not, other kinds of job/ source of income:
10. Previous job in Cascavel?
11. How long plan to remain in Cascavel?
12. If plan to leave Cascavel in the future, why, where?

E Household Structure and Composition

1. Who live in the house and attached household?
2. How many people are pooling their income (and jobs) to support the household?
3. Network of non-cash support?

F. Leisure**G. Main changes in women's life****H. Social class/material conditions****I. Additional information**

GLOSSARY

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>a</i> | the |
| <i>abertura</i> | political or economic opening |
| <i>abuso</i> | abuse |
| <i>acho</i> | I think, I find |
| <i>agora</i> | now, at the moment |
| <i>agricultura</i> | agriculture |
| <i>aguantar</i> | stand, endure |
| <i>aguantava/ei</i> | endured |
| <i>ajuda</i> | help |
| <i>ajudou/ava</i> | helped |
| <i>almoçava</i> | ate the noon meal |
| <i>almoço</i> | noon meal |
| <i>amiga(s)</i> | friend(s) |
| <i>analfabeto</i> | illiterate |
| <i>antigua</i> | old, senior |
| <i>aposentar</i> | retirement, to retire |
| <i>aqui</i> | here |
| <i>arrumação</i> | arrangement |
| <i>até</i> | until |
| <i>aumento</i> | increase (in wage) |
| <i>auxiliar de produção</i> | worker in the production section of a factory |
| | |
| <i>bairro</i> | neighbourhood |
| <i>barraca</i> | stand, stall |
| <i>barro</i> | clay |
| <i>barulho</i> | noise |
| <i>barzinho</i> | small bar |
| <i>bastante</i> | enough, a lot, sufficiently |
| <i>batalhadora(s)</i> | fighter(s) (fem.) |
| <i>batalhando</i> | fighting, struggling |
| <i>batalhar/ei</i> | battle, fight, struggle/battled, fought, struggled |
| <i>bem</i> | well |
| <i>Bermas</i> | name of the leather factory |
| <i>boa(s)</i> | good |
| <i>boazinha</i> | good |
| <i>bom</i> | good |
| <i>bordado</i> | embroidery |
| <i>brincava</i> | played (used to play) |
| <i>bujão</i> | gas container |
| | |
| <i>caboclo</i> | the descendants of intermarried indigenous peoples with runaway and freed slaves and peoples of European descent. |
| <i>calmo</i> | calm |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>caminhata</i> | walk |
| <i>carnaúba</i> | local palm tree |
| <i>carteira assinada</i> | work record –when signed guarantees worker rights and insurances |
| <i>carteira de trabalho</i> | formal work record see <i>carteira assinada</i> |
| <i>casa</i> | house |
| <i>casa de família</i> | private house |
| <i>casa de farinha</i> | where manioc flour is manually produced |
| <i>Cascaju</i> | name of the cashew factory |
| <i>cascavelense</i> | inhabitants of Cascavel |
| <i>casinha</i> | small house |
| <i>cearense</i> | inhabitants of Ceará |
| <i>cesta básica</i> | food basket including dried food such as rice, beans, coffee, flour and sometimes given by employers as part of compensation |
| | package |
| <i>chamada</i> | called (fem.) |
| <i>Choró</i> | communities established by <i>caboclos</i> along the Rio Choró –of indigenous descent |
| <i>cidade</i> | town, city |
| <i>colheita</i> | harvest |
| <i>com</i> | with |
| <i>comer</i> | eat |
| <i>comício</i> | public discourse by politicians in period of elections |
| <i>condição/ões</i> | condition/s, often implies the financial conditions |
| <i>confecção/ções</i> | garment factory/ies |
| <i>conscientização</i> | consciousness raising |
| <i>consegui/ir</i> | I succeeded/succeed |
| <i>considero</i> | I consider |
| <i>coragem</i> | courage |
| <i>costureira</i> | seamstress |
| <i>cresça</i> | (he-she-it) grows |
| <i>cresceu</i> | (he-she-it) grew |
| <i>crime de pistoleiro</i> | gun crime |
| <i>crise</i> | crisis |
| <i>da/dar/dava</i> | gives/to give/used to give |
| <i>dar um jeito</i> | find a way |
| <i>defeito</i> | defects |
| <i>deixar/ei</i> | leave, I left |
| <i>de jeito nenhum</i> | in anyway, not at all |
| <i>demitida/indo</i> | laid off, laying off |
| <i>dependente</i> | dependent |
| <i>depende</i> | depend |
| <i>descanso</i> | rest |
| <i>desempregado</i> | unemployed |
| <i>desruralização</i> | movement out from the rural zones |
| <i>dificuldade</i> | hardship |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| <i>dindin</i> | local type of home-made popsicles |
| <i>dinheiro</i> | money |
| <i>direito</i> | right |
| <i>direitozinho</i> | small right |
| <i>domestica</i> | domestic worker |
| <i>dona de casa</i> | housewife |
| <i>dono</i> | owner |
| <i>dormia</i> | slept (imp.) |
| | |
| <i>e</i> | and |
| <i>é</i> | is |
| <i>econômica</i> | economic |
| <i>ela</i> | she |
| <i>elas</i> | they (for women) |
| <i>ele</i> | he |
| <i>eles</i> | they (for men) |
| <i>em</i> | in |
| <i>empresa</i> | enterprise |
| <i>energia</i> | electricity |
| <i>engenho</i> | mills |
| <i>ensinar</i> | teach |
| <i>equipe</i> | team |
| <i>era</i> | was |
| <i>escrava</i> | slave |
| <i>esteira</i> | sorting shelf |
| <i>estressada</i> | stressed |
| <i>estudante</i> | student |
| <i>eu</i> | I |
| <i>experiência</i> | experience |
| <i>exportação</i> | export |
| | |
| <i>fábrica</i> | factory |
| <i>família</i> | family |
| <i>fazenda</i> | large estate, plantation |
| <i>fazendeiro(s)</i> | owners of a <i>fazenda(s)</i> |
| <i>faz</i> | does |
| <i>fazer</i> | do |
| <i>fazia</i> | did |
| <i>feio</i> | ugly |
| <i>feira</i> | market |
| <i>festa</i> | party |
| <i>ficar assim</i> | remain like that |
| <i>firma</i> | firm |
| <i>foi/fui</i> | it-she-he was/I was |
| <i>fora</i> | outside |
| <i>forró</i> | typical local dance (fast-paced two step) |

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>fracasso</i> | failure |
| <i>fugia</i> | flight, running away |
| <i>fugiu</i> | (he-she) ran away |
| <i>funcionaria</i> | employee |
| <i>geração Cambéba</i> | refers to a generation of politicians in Ceará in the 1960s and 1970s |
| <i>gente (a)</i> | the people, us/we |
| <i>goma</i> | extracted from manioc, serves to prepare a local snack, <i>tapioca</i> |
| <i>gosto/ei</i> | I like/liked |
| <i>governo da mudança</i> | the government of changes, refers to the <i>geração Cambéba</i> |
| <i>graças a Deus</i> | thank God |
| <i>grosseiro</i> | rude |
| <i>guerreira(s)</i> | warrior(s) |
| <i>homem</i> | man |
| <i>homens</i> | men |
| <i>humiliações</i> | humiliations |
| <i>ia</i> | (he-she-it) was going, went |
| <i>independência</i> | independence |
| <i>independente</i> | independent |
| <i>indústria</i> | industry |
| <i>indústria da seca</i> | drought industry |
| <i>inscrevi</i> | inscribe |
| <i>isso</i> | this |
| <i>jangada</i> | small boat used for fishing |
| <i>jantava</i> | ate the supper |
| <i>jeito</i> | defensive tactics, trick, quick solution to get by |
| <i>junto</i> | along |
| <i>lá</i> | there |
| <i>labirintite</i> | a disease causing problems of equilibrium and dizziness |
| <i>labirinto</i> | embroidery |
| <i>lanchoneta</i> | small restaurant |
| <i>largar</i> | drop |
| <i>latifúndio</i> | large landed estate |
| <i>liberdade</i> | freedom |
| <i>luta</i> | struggle, fight, battle |
| <i>luta de casa</i> | housework, all the social relations related to housework |
| <i>lutar</i> | struggle, fight |
| <i>machucar</i> | harm |
| <i>mais</i> | more |
| <i>mal acompanhada</i> | badly accompanied |
| <i>máquina</i> | sewing machine |

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>marido</i> | husband |
| <i>mas</i> | but |
| <i>mata</i> | forest |
| <i>me</i> | me, myself |
| <i>me deram</i> | they gave me |
| <i>meio</i> | middle |
| <i>mentira(s)</i> | lie(s) |
| <i>mercado da comida</i> | informal food market |
| <i>merece/ia</i> | deserves/deserved |
| <i>metade</i> | half |
| <i>minha</i> | my, mine |
| <i>mudou</i> | (it-he-she) changed |
| <i>muito/a</i> | a lot, much, many |
| <i>mulher</i> | woman |
| <i>mulheres</i> | women |
| <i>monocultura</i> | single cash crop farming |
| | |
| <i>na</i> | in |
| <i>nada</i> | nothing |
| <i>namora/ar</i> | has/having love affairs |
| <i>namorado</i> | lover |
| <i>não</i> | no |
| <i>não presta</i> | does not serve, is no good |
| <i>negro</i> | black |
| <i>ninguém</i> | no one, nobody |
| <i>Nordeste</i> | Northeast |
| <i>nordestino</i> | northeasterner |
| <i>nosso</i> | ours |
| <i>numa</i> | in a |
| <i>nunca</i> | never |
| | |
| <i>opção</i> | opportunity |
| | |
| <i>pago</i> | I pay |
| <i>palha</i> | straw |
| <i>para/p'ra</i> | for |
| <i>parado</i> | stopped |
| <i>passeata</i> | car parade |
| <i>paternalismo</i> | paternalism, patronage |
| <i>patrão</i> | patron (men) |
| <i>patroa</i> | patron (women) |
| <i>pedir</i> | ask |
| <i>peguei</i> | I caught, I took the opportunity |
| <i>pela</i> | for |
| <i>pobre</i> | poor |
| <i>ponto de cruz</i> | needle point |

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>por causa</i> | because of, due to |
| <i>porta</i> | door |
| <i>pouco</i> | little |
| <i>praia</i> | beach |
| <i>prefeito</i> | mayor |
| <i>preguiçosa</i> | lazy |
| <i>primeiro grau</i> | primary school, primary level of education |
| <i>prisioneira</i> | prisoner |
| <i>produção</i> | production |
| <i>protetor</i> | earplugs |
| <i>puxado</i> | demanding |
| | |
| <i>quartinho</i> | small room |
| | |
| <i>rapadura</i> | local type of brown sugar |
| <i>real/reais</i> | Brazilian currency |
| <i>realizada</i> | accomplished |
| <i>rede</i> | hammock |
| <i>registro</i> | certification |
| <i>religiosa</i> | nun |
| <i>renda</i> | lace-making |
| <i>rico</i> | rich |
| <i>roça</i> | rural economy, agriculture |
| <i>rua</i> | street |
| <i>ruim</i> | bad, hard |
| | |
| <i>sacrificarse</i> | sacrifice oneself |
| <i>sacrificoso</i> | requiring that one makes sacrifices |
| <i>sai</i> | left, gets out |
| <i>sair</i> | getting out |
| <i>salário mínimo</i> | minimum wage |
| <i>são</i> | they are |
| <i>satisfeito</i> | satisfied |
| <i>se</i> | if |
| <i>seca</i> | drought |
| <i>seco</i> | dry |
| <i>seguro/ança</i> | insurance |
| <i>sei</i> | I know |
| <i>sem</i> | without |
| <i>Semana Santa</i> | Holy Week |
| <i>senhores de engenho</i> | mill owners |
| <i>sentido</i> | feeling |
| <i>sertão</i> | backlands, semi-arid zones in the interior of the Northeast region |
| <i>servidores</i> | obliging |
| <i>si</i> | oneself |
| <i>si foi precisa vou</i> | if I have to I will |

| | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>só</i> | only, solely |
| <i>sofrimento</i> | suffering |
| <i>'ta/'to</i> | he-she-it's / I'm |
| <i>tapioca</i> | local snack made with <i>goma</i> |
| <i>taxista</i> | taxi driver |
| <i>telejornal</i> | tv news |
| <i>terra da luz</i> | land of light |
| <i>terra de contrastes</i> | land of contrasts |
| <i>tijolo</i> | tile |
| <i>trabalho</i> | work, job |
| <i>trabalhador</i> | worker |
| <i>trabalhando</i> | working |
| <i>trabalhar</i> | work |
| <i>trancava</i> | locked |
| <i>troca de favours</i> | exchange of favours |
| <i>tudo</i> | everything, all |
| <i>um/uma</i> | one, a |
| <i>vagabunda</i> | vagabond |
| <i>vai/vou</i> | goes/go, future tense (use as "will") |
| <i>vai embora</i> | go away |
| <i>valor</i> | value |
| <i>valoriza</i> | give value |
| <i>vasoura</i> | broom |
| <i>vereador/a</i> | municipal councillor |
| <i>vida</i> | life |
| <i>vitoria(s)</i> | victory(ies) |
| <i>vitoriosa</i> | victorious |
| <i>vontade</i> | will, volition |
| <i>voto</i> | vote |